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Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers, (La Bataille de Waterloo), 1975, ICA, London

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Abstract

This essay seeks to examine Marcel Broodthaers' last exhibition *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers, (La Bataille de Waterloo)* 1975, ICA, London, in the light of two seminal essays in the field of aesthetics and political theory. It starts by looking at Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer', which introduces issues of artistic intentionality, political commitment and its relation to the aesthetic quality of an artwork. It then goes on to address 'The Politics of Aesthetics' by Jacques Rancière, which incorporates the notion of the 'distribution (or partition) of the sensible' as its main analytical tool. Finally, this essay introduces Jacques Derrida's notion of 'undecidability', as employed by Rancière, in order to set an appropriate theoretical context in which to consider *Décor's* aesthetic and critical currency.

Fig. 1: Broodthaers, Marcel, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*, as it was originally installed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. © DACS. Photo: Maria Gilessen

Fig. 2: Broodthaers, Marcel, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*, as it was originally installed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975.
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They drew rafters

inside the A's and on top of the T's

They made images

They told us we were children,

They kept us from reading the texts,

since there is not a line which does not condemn them.

-Marcel Broodthaers, *Untitled,* 1962

Marcel Broodthaers (Belgium, 1924–1976) presented *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* at the ICA, London, in June 1975, shortly after the end of the Vietnam war. This exhibition was the culmination of his career as an artist and the last one before his death in 1976. It was realised after an invitation by Barry Barker, who was the ICA director at the time, to inaugurate London's new ICA. Consequently, *Décor: A Conquest* took place in two adjoining rooms, staged as a nineteenth and a twentieth-century period room, respectively. Most of the objects on display were rented on the occasion of the exhibition from a movie props company or borrowed from a London furniture store and returned there after the exhibition ended. More specifically, the nineteenth-century room contained two canons, several grass mats, six potted palm trees, two chairs, two silver candelabras, one stuffed python, a ball of dried flowers, one nineteenth-century pistol, a colour poster of a cowboy film, two wooden barrels labelled *Gin* and *Rum*, one plastic crab and lobster engaged in a game of cards, and four light reflectors. The displays in the twentieth-century room included a parasol, a garden table with plastic chairs, a jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo after a painting by W. Heath, a number of guns on shelves and cases and one light reflector. Both rooms had windows with a view over Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament.

At the time of the exhibition, in June 1975, the annual parade of the 'Trooping of the Colours' was taking place in front of Buckingham Palace. This event formed an integral part of *Décor: A Conquest* as part of the film *La Bataille de Waterloo*, which was first shown in public at the Tate Gallery in 1976. The film includes shots inside the exhibition that alternate with views of the parade and the buildings outside—most of them sites of political power. Interrelating frames include the hands of an actress shown assembling and then hastily disassembling a jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo.

The nineteenth-century room presented a rather rigid geometrical arrangement of the heteroclite objects listed above, many of which were positioned in pairs and

rested on Astroturf mats. In place of the traditional base, the mats designated a separate space for the objects, playing with their status as autonomous, aesthetic objects, while at the same time their rather sloppy appearance seemed to parody any such attempts. On another level, these rugs also seem to mimic the decorative conventions of bourgeois interiors. Several among the objects, such as the pistol, the two wooden barrels and the two silver plated candelabras were positioned on pedestals, echoing the display settings of the nineteenth-century museum. The adjoining twentieth-century room, with its centrally placed garden table, parasol and white garden chairs, was more casually arranged as a site of leisure while also mimicking the more spare display conventions of twentieth-century galleries. The two glass vitrines hung on one wall displayed seventeen assorted guns and a framed print with a diagram of instructions on how to load the guns, while fiffteen Vietnam semi-automatic rifles rested on top of them. The striking contrast between the garden furniture and the guns pointed to the curious relationship between leisure and war, drawing parallels between the spectacle of war in the nineteenth century and today's experience of war through the mass media. On top of the garden table in the centre of the room, rested a half-assembled jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo, the same one shown in the film.

In addition to this arrangement, the exhibition included several light reflectors with coloured gelatines placed in both rooms. The reflectors questioned the objects' status as 'art', turning them into set-design objects, revealing, in fact, their 'real' condition as film props. The transition between two systems of representation, (gallery and film set), shifted the status of the objects from autonomous, aesthetic ones to film props, commodity objects and back again. In a text that appears in the catalogue of *Décor: A Conquest,* Maria Gilissen writes that the exhibition was 'dealing with the relationship between "war and comfort"'.[1] Indeed, it seems that the subject of Broodthaers' assemblage of objects is the shifting relations between these two systems: 'I don't so much organise objects and ideas as organise encounters of different functions that all refer to the same

world . . .' Broodthaers says.[2] In effect, the exhibition serves to demonstrate set conventions and perceptions, not only to expose them as culturally constructed, but most crucially, as the artist suggests, 'to make a dent in the falsity inherent in culture'.[3] I suggest that by suspending the work between different systems, the artist marks a certain 'undecidability' of the object to inhabit either the aesthetic or the commodity realm a situation that is both *Décor's* subject-matter and its fundamental structural element. This very notion of 'undecidability', which I will discuss in relation to Rancière's 'distribution' or 'partition of the sensible', rests in the centre of *Décor: A Conquest*.

In a short text entitled 'To be *bien pensant*. . . or not to be. To be blind', Marcel Broodthaers reflects on the nature of Art, expressing his doubt as to whether art can have any political agency, whatesoever: 'I doubt, in fact, that we can give a serious definition of Art, unless we examine the question in terms of a constant, I mean the transformation of art into merchantise. . . . We could justify [art] as affirmation and at the same time carve out for it a dubious existence . . . One fact is certain: commentaries on Art are the result of shifts in the economy. It seems doubtful to us that such commentaries can be described as political'.[4] Here, Broodthaers puts into question art as a practice *and* its surrounding discourses, namely art criticism. When he talks about 'commentaries on Art' he casts a critical eye on art and its interpretation, as a system. It seems, then, that for Broodthaers, it is necessary that an artwork should acknowledge, reflect upon and internalise in its very structure any such critical commentaries.

In the essay 'The Author as Producer', Walter Benjamin introduces issues of artistic intentionality by commenting on the relation between political commitment on the part of the artist/author and its relation to the formal quality of the artwork.[5] Benjamin's main thesis is that a politically-engaged artist should establish the work's position *within* the relations of production, rather than in its attitude *toward* them, by incorporating the new technological developments that inevitably change its form. Besides that, Benjamin insists that the author/artist should

reflect upon these conditions of production, as an intrinsic part of his work. The artistic value of the work is then determined not only on the basis of its 'correct' political tendency, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition, but on its formal and technical qualities. One of the key issues at stake here is the relationship between political commitment and artistic technique that establishes the position of the artwork within the production apparatus. Finally, Benjamin's analysis stresses the significance of the relationship between form and content, requiring that the two collapse together for the artwork to fulfil its revolutionary function.

However, this collapse between form and content, as advocated by Benjamin and practiced by Broodthaers, does not account for a total appropriation of the aesthetic object by the sphere of commerce,that Broodthaers maintains when he reflects on the 'transformation of art into merchantise'.[6] It is for this purpose that I employ in my analysis Rancière's 'partition of the sensible', for it incorporates the notion of a fundamental 'undecidability' insofar as it signifies both dividing *and* sharing. This peculiar position that develops in Broodthaers' work as a series of negations maintains a distance that further sustains this rather paradoxical situation. Referring to a body of work that Broodthaers produced in the form of open letters under the collective title 'industrial poems', Benjamin Buchloh observes: 'At first glance, they seem to link Broodthaers's work with that fundamental assumption of modernist thought . . . that an inextricable dialectic links the advancement of the artistic forms of a society to the advancement of its technical means, and that the transformation of the hierarchical structures of a social totality necessitates the transformation of aesthetic hierarchies'.[7] However, Buchloh continues, Broodthaers 'no longer permitted the naive incorporation, within his work, of those structures attesting to the impact of industrial modes of production upon artistic practice. And further, he criticized the way a seemingly progressive and provocative structural simplification of the work betrays, precisely, the dominance of technology's rationalism and instrumentality'.[8] At the same time, according to Buchloh, we do not 'see him deploying artistic strategies

which, qua strategies, materials, or mode of distribution, would already constitute an assault on the separateness of the aesthetic in favor of an explicitly political conception of art production'.[9] Broodthaers' work, thus, maintains an intentionally ambivalent position that neither seeks to advocate the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, nor promote its total collapse into the realm of the commodity and the everyday. Its hermetic disposition, rather that closing the work down, opens it up, preventing it from becoming overtly didactic, literalist and reductive.

Productive alienation

In 'The Author as Producer', Benjamin draws on the work by the German writer Bertolt Brecht as a paradigmatic case where form and content successfully collapse. I seek to demonstrate, however, that in doing so the work incorporates within its very structure the notion of a critical distance. Brecht's project to liberate the means of production by applying the technical innovations of the new media (radio and cinema, for example) aimed to overturn the conventions of theatre. To achieve that, Brecht broke the narrative continuity that created an illusion of reality in theatre in order to reveal the very illusion of theatre as another reality. By using interruption (pauses, laughter, etc.) as a confrontational device, the author sought to bring the audience back to themselves and to the reality of their own life. In one scene, for example, a stranger enters the stage in the middle of a family row which causes the action to suddenly stop and suspend in mid-air.[10] This interruption device introduces a different viewpoint, one from *outside* (a stranger's viewpoint), thus distancing the spectator and the actors from the event in order to disclose the absurdity of the situation. According to Benjamin, interruption is not used by Brecht as a stimulant, but it assumes an organising function; not only does it act upon the structure of the theatrical apparatus but most importantly, it has the ability to act upon and transform the structure of the viewer's perception. Moreover, Brecht applies the technique of montage (cutting, interruption) to perform a contradictory movement: to eliminate the distance between life and theatre by allowing elements of reality to enter onto the theatrical stage and, at the same time, by breaking this distance, to introduce another distance, a stranger's viewpoint that allows the spectator to see into the

conventions of his own life from *outside.* According to Brecht himself, this double dislocation aims to expose the living conditions of modern man and to reveal his reality as 'a reduced man kept on ice in a cold world'.[11]

Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers plays on the concept of alienation, but realises it in a different manner: 'There is no spectacular disjunction in *Décor: A Conquest*—no Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt',[12] Rachel Haidu argues in an article that appeared in *Artforum* on the occasion of the exhibition's restaging at Michael Werner Gallery, New York, in 2007. The distancing effect in Brecht which prevents the passive immersion of the audience in the conventions of theatrical narrative—thereby allowing the viewer to become a critical observer—Ifunctions in *Décor* in a more subtle but rather complex way. To begin with, *Décor* presents itself at once as a film set[13] and as an art exhibition. This double function introduces a series of elaborate shifts between different representational systems and modes of perception, setting up analogies between 'the interior of a nation (homeland), bourgeois interiors, and museum interiors . . . turning decoration—superfluity and formalism—into work'.[14] *Décor* falls between these different systems of representation (film-set, exhibition etc.) to leave the viewer trapped in an empty space (empty of signification). Broodthaers is concerned above all with our placement, as viewing subjects 'boxed in by those strangely symmetrical arrangements or faced with the curiously abandoned picnic table, puzzle, and gun collection'.[15] Our place in the overall arrangement becomes increasingly awkward: 'There is nowhere to go', Haidu writes, 'and the carefully stage-managed atmosphere leaves us nothing to feel'.[16] The effect of alienation in *Décor*, the distancing of the viewer, results from our constant displacement as subjects. A subjectal displacement that comes, in turn, from an increasingly complex, fragmented perspective.

However, in a paradoxical contrast to the position described above, Cerith Wyn Evans attests of his experience of *Décor* when he was beginning his own career

as an artist, remarking that this effect can also be quite liberating. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Wyn Evans explained:

> I felt I had discovered something very exhilarating, and part of that exhilaration came from thinking that this work was somehow forbidden, unsanctioned, not allowed. It was one of those feelings, partly shock in a sense, because it seemed very stimulating that the pieces didn't add up, that there was room to move, or if there were connections, they were weak connections. I didn't feel as if I was losing out on the experience of the piece by not being able to source all of the references; it was a kind of liberation, a newfound sense of freedom. The decor felt like a set, a stage setting, as if you had walked in by accident through the wrong door onto someone else's stage. [To] find an encounter with something that you don't actually expect, and so consequently you are somehow refigured or remodeled against the backdrop of another; somehow you find yourself in a scenario that isn't of your own writing. It wasn't sculpture, because it was too much like window-dressing, but it wasn't window-dressing either, nor theatre. It felt more like a decor, a setting.[17]

I suggest that in *Décor* this ambivalent position occupied by the spectator marks the moment when politics happens, charecterised by a deep ambiguity between entrapment and a moment full of possibility.

The strategy of fragmentation and displacement adopted in *Décor* breaks down both the continuity of space and the unity of the viewer's perspective. As I suggested above, this strategy of interruption of a preconceived order or an imposed narrative is employed in a more complex and subtle way than in Brecht. Instead of a visible, spectacular interruption of a given narrative, *Décor* plays on the idea of constructing different narratives and the constant suspension of this process as one representational system repeatedly collapses into another. For

example, the disparate objects that are brought together in the exhibition, function both as aesthetic *and* commodity objects. In this twofold movement, their identity as aesthetic objects is suspended, not only because of their obvious status as readymades, but also in their subsequent use as film props for the shooting of the film *La Bataille de Waterloo*. Broodthaers' strategy of placing his objects on a threshold between commodity and art, exhibition and film set, interior and exterior, seeks to expose the hidden narratives embedded in different systems and spheres of perception (history, politics, aesthetics), thereby disclosing their 'truth' as constructed. The artist carefully and systematically dismantles these systems to the point where he only displays their sheer banality.

This complex operation that shifts the object between different spheres of perception, ultimately complicates the viewer's position in the relation between interior and exterior. In 2006, Cerith Wyn Evans presented the exhibition *Take my eyes and through them see you*, at the ICA, as a kind of homage to Broodthaers' *Décor: A Conquest*. Wyn Evans observed that this ambivalent position between inside and outside, the place and the view that interested him in *Décor*, 'creates the possibility of placing oneself symbolically in either space, [but also] creates space for negotiation between these binary opposites'.[18] However, things become more complicated with *Décor* insofar as Broodthaers constructs the work within a system of recursive negations. As soon as the possibility to get outside a system of representation arises (with the shots outside the gallery windows, for example), it is instantaneously suspended to reveal 'reality' as yet another representation, one that forms part of a historical or institutional narrative. In *Décor* there is never an outside, as in the work of Brecht. Furthermore, here none of the suggested narratives seem to make sense; in every step, there is a negation of meaning. The different systems of representation thus constantly expand and collapse into each other to leave the viewer in a paradoxical position, distanced from *and* trapped in them at the same time. Throughout this process, the various fields of forces that are in play are

rendered more visible, disclosing the power relations that are specific to these systems. Broodthaers' work thus alludes to the limits of representational systems to demonstrate the spectator's entrapment in them.

Fiction

Indeed, as Broodthaers observes with regards to an earlier work consisting of several plastic plaques with engraved text on them, for him, it is exactly this negative attitude that constitutes the artistic endeavour: '[The plaques] are intended to be read on a double level—each one involved in a negative attitude which seems to me specific to the stance of the artist: not to place the message completely on one side alone, neither image nor text. That is, the refusal to deliver a clear message—as if this role were not incumbent upon the artist, and by extension upon all producers with an economic interest'.[19] In this elaborate demonstration of the limits of representation, Broodthaers' use of commodity objects devoid of historical context ensures that they remain fictional objects; that is, objects that tell us a story about society. As the artist explains in 'Ten thousand francs reward', describing an earlier exhibition staged at the Mönchengladbach museum:

> You can see in the Mönchengladbach museum a cardboard box, a clock, a mirror, a pipe, also a mask and a smoke bomb, and one or two other objects I can't recall at this point, accompanied by the expression Fig. 1 or Fig. 2 or Fig. 0 painted on the display surface beneath or to the side of each object. If we are to believe what the inscription says, then the object takes on an illustrative character referring to a kind of novel about society. These objects, the mirror and the pipe submitted to an identical numbering system . . . become interchangeable elements on the stage of a theatre. Their destiny is ruined. Here I obtain the desired encounter between different functions.[20]

With the suspension of narrative, furthermore, the artist problematises the process of meaning-making and their purported exposure of the rhetorics of each discourse—whether aesthetic, political or historical—seeking to reveal them as fictional constructs. By effecting a relation between fictional voices and institutional authority he effectively reveals the constructed character of power relations.

In *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss considers Broodthaers' practice within the context of a 'differential specificity' (a term she coined to draw a distinction—and to suggest an alternative position—between the modernist notion of medium specificity and contemporary installation art that embraces different mediums effectively rendering this notion redundant) as evincing that 'the master medium for Broodthaers [is] fiction'.[21] Krauss insists that what is important for this artist is the revelatory potential of the medium, that is, of fiction. Indeed, as Broodthaers suggests, 'fiction allows us to grasp reality and at the same time what it hides'.[22] Fiction offers, thus, not only the possibility of grasping reality, but it also grants us an insight into specific structures of experience and exposes them as constructed or self-illusory. As Krauss argues: 'It was just this structure of a spatial "behind" or layering that was for him a metaphor for the condition of absence that is at the heart of fiction'.[23]

The distribution of the sensible
In his essay, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', Jacques Rancière argues that art is not political as a result of its political commitment, the message it carries or its ability to represent socio-political structures. It is political because of the very *distance* it maintains from such functions. The notion of *distance* appears, then, as a determining factor in the evaluation of artworks as politically effective, a function that—here Rancière seems to agree with Benjamin—is the ultimate criterion for the evaluation of art. In this essay, Rancière deals with the intrinsic relation between aesthetics and politics by introducing his key concept of the 'distribution

of the sensible'.[24] For Rancière, politics is 'the framing of a specific sphere of experience', that is, the capacity of the human subject to discuss issues of justice in a public sphere.[25] He stresses, however, that the 'distribution of the sensible' designates not individual subjects or objects, but a sphere of experience. The 'distribution of the sensible', thus, marks the (re)distribution of power in the social field of contradicting forces and the ability of human subjects to 'make themselves visible' in the common space of politics.[26] As mentioned above, the act of redistributing the sensible pertains to the sphere of experience and thus, has the ability to transform structures of perception. As such, according to Rancière, it marks the sphere of aesthetics as much as the field of politics.

Later in his essay, the author goes on to discuss the central argument, between two different strategies, that has defined artistic practices since the eighteenth century: one that establishes the autonomy of the aesthetic domain versus another that advocates the collapse between art and life. The modernist approach, Rancière writes, supports the notion that 'art empowers collective life to the extent that it creates a remote and empty space dedicated to individual meditation',[27] while, the opposing view corroborates the merging between art and life, due to 'forms of social life and techniques of reproduction [that] made it definitely impossible to maintain the boundary between artistic production and technological reproduction, high art and low art, autonomous artworks and forms of commodity culture'.[28] To support his final thesis, Rancière challenges both positions as inadequate, arguing instead for a 'third position' that puts forth the notion of 'undecidability' that seeks to maintain the tension between the two. This tension, then, between 'two politics of aesthetics' becomes the decisive factor that assigns the aesthetic domain with its political agency. 'This third way', Rancière argues, 'is made possible by continuously playing on the boundary and the absence of boundary between art and non-art'[29] therefore making apparent the possibility to exist in both places at once, or in the gaps created between them. Moreover, the notion of 'undecidability' the author incorporates here as a tool to negotiate the distance between the two realms of the sensible, marks the

possibility for an active negotiation (or re-negotiation) of the spaces where power resides.

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, Broodthaers doubts that art may have any political agency. In 'To be *bien pensant*. . .', the short text written in 1975, the artist muses: 'I choose to consider Art as a useless labor, apolitical and of little moral significance',[30] only to immediately express that it would give him 'some kind of pleasure' to be proved wrong. *Décor* was staged the same year the above text was written and reflects a similar 'undecidability'. Although it seems, at first, to confirm such claims for art's complete absorption in the sphere of commerce, with its blatant use of retail commodities that pose as aesthetic objects, *Décor* shifts among so many different spheres (aesthetics, economy, politics, history, technology, media), performing so many manoeuvres, that it frustrates any attempt at a straight-forward reading. The display, for instance, of weapons in vitrines highlights the relation between war and leisure, implicating at the same time the role of institutions, such as museums, and their technologies—such as exhibitions—in the constrution of history, while avoiding to talk about war and violence in an overtly direct and didactic manner. The intended ambiguity of Broodthaers' work seems to comply with Rancière's views on the subject. According to the author of 'The Politics of Aesthetics', the shift that Brecht performed between 'allegory and the debunking of allegory . . . the connection and the disconnection between art and [life], politics and [life]',[31] which opens up the possibility that existing in two places at once is the only possibility for art to be revolutionary. This collision between two politics of aesthetics, two different systems of perceiving and understanding the world, opens up the possibility to disclose 'some secret of power and violence'.[32]

According to Rancière, 'artistic practices take part in the partition of the perceptible insofar as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular'.[33] In *Décor,* Broodthaers

complicates the network of relationships between different systems of representation that frame forms of power: 'Proposing his film sets as exhibitions enabled Broodthaers to work between modes of production rather than merely in them, allowing the critical object to fall into the gaps between projection and set, event and object, critical method and subject of analysis',[34] Haidu writes. The artist systematically unfixes the relationship between sign and signifier to let his artworks, as well as the other signifying systems he implicates in *Décor*, become dismantled or left in suspension. For example, the succession of the two rooms that are staged in accord to nineteenth and twentieth-century conventions mimics the museological conventions that present a linear succession of history, only to immediately break down the historical continuity from century to century with the use of film (montage).[35]

Rancière writes about the 'two politics of aesthetics': 'Art is political, in the aesthetical regime of art, inasmuch as its objects belong to a separate sphere. And it is political inasmuch as its objects have no specific difference with the objects of the other spheres'.[36] It would be safe to infer that *Décor* occupies this paradoxical position in an exemplary manner. The rented props that are exhibited as artworks are in fact commodity objects, hence they fully and beyond any doubt belong to the sphere of commerce—while the display of weapons highlight the intricate relations between war, commodity, art and economy. On the other hand, though, by virtue of their display in the context of an art exhibition, these objects also belong to the aesthetic sphere. But as soon as their function as aesthetic objects is confirmed it is altogether negated by their subsequent transition in the realm of the film set through their actual use as film props. They thus simultaneously occupy equally valid positions in different realms of experience, without establishing a dominant hierarchy between them.

As I have argued so far, Broodthaers' work tests the object's withdrawal in the sphere of aesthetic discourse by layering different systems of representation on top of each other, while at the same time dismantling them. In this double act, he

not only questions the process of meaning-making, but exposes the hidden structures of these systems while also reflecting upon the viewer's position within them. The constant transition, however, of the object between these in turns present and withdrawn systems renders the very process of aesthetiscisation visible. This operation asserts the 'separateness' of an aesthetic domain which, according to Rancière, renders it political by virtue of the very distance it maintains, while at the same time allows it to collapse into the commodity realm. Broodthaers' strategy of 'borrow[ing] elements from different spheres of experience"[37] and negotiating their relation resembles Brecht's strategy that served as 'a kind of archetype of political art in the XXth century [because of] the way he negotiated the relation between the opposites, blending the scholastic forms of political teaching with the enjoyments of the musical or the cabaret . . ."[38]

Buchloh notes that Broodthaers's investigations of the art object constitute:

> a continuous reflection on [its] status under the universal reign of commodity production, once the object had lost the credibility of its modernist, utopian dimension. For Broodthaers the work of art no longer operated in terms of its inherited—quintessentially modernist—dialectic: to be simultaneously the exemplary object of all commodity production and the exceptional object which denied and resisted the universality of that reign. Instead, in the final subsumption of artistic production under the reign of the culture industry . . . the work could now only engage in the destruction of that dialectic.[39]

In effect, Broodthaers' enquiry addresses the emergence of 'aesthetic production as one industry among others in the culture of the spectacle',[40] and can be interpreted as a critique of art's reluctance to recognise this condition.

As I mentioned earlier, the paradoxical position that *Décor* occupies can be approached through the strategic notion of 'undecidability' that Rancière considers as the necessary condition to maintain the tension between the two 'politics of aesthetics'. This concept has been introduced in post-structuralist theory by Jacques Derrida, for whom an important 'undecidable' is the idea of *différance*, which refers to the deferred thing, the displaced meaning that always lies elsewhere. The value of *différance* in discourse is to make us aware that meaning within a language structure can never be fixed. Adopting the strategies of fragmentation and the erasure of meaning, Broodthaers employs a series of linguistic devices, such as allegory, irony, metaphor and metonymy, to create an impenetrable distance between the object (artwork) and the subject of analogy and at the same time to altogether eliminate this distance. To perform such a complicated act, the artist uses fiction as a tool that belongs to the realm of the 'undecidable' in order to effectively demonstrate the gap between the signifier and signified and to make evident the fact that meaning can never be secured within any language structure (set of cultural practices, representation systems etc.).

Décor exemplifies the notion of the 'undecidable' through its function as fiction on several levels. First of all, it seeks to question and overturn conventions in the realm of aesthetics by employing two paradigms from the domain of art history. It incorporates the history of the Duchampian readymade—the affirmation 'this is art'—to overturn it by way of Magritte's negation: 'this is not a pipe'. As Thierry de Duve observes, Broodthaers' work challenges the convention established through the concept of the readymade—namely, the notion that the objects exhibited in art museums have already been judged and accepted as art. In *Décor*, Broodthaers proclaims, 'this is not a work of art', in much the same manner he did in his fictional museums. Although in *Décor* he does not directly place a carved inscription reading 'this is not a work of art' in metallic plaques in front of the displayed objects, the implied presence of the pronouncement is as distinct. At the same time, by filming the exhibition, he complicates the relation

between image and object, echoing Magritte's problematisation of this relation. On a second level, *Décor* challenges conventions within the realm of art institutions and the construction of art history through its ironic take on the institution of the retrospective exhibition. Its self-mocking title *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers (La Bataille de Waterloo)* echoes Napoleon's historical defeat in Waterloo and addresses issues of institutional power as well as brings attention to the process of constructing artistic legacies. On a third level, as I hope to have demonstrated throughout this essay, *Décor* complicates the position of the art object within the commodity realm, allowing it to circulate between different domains of experience. Broodthaers' main project is to emancipate art from illusion: 'Art is a prisoner of its phantasms and its function as magic',[41] he writes in 1975; Buchloh supports this disillusionment when he argues that Broodthaers' project is to demonstrate 'the mythical nature of artistic production [which is] the target of his analytic and mythoclastic project after 1968'.[42]

To conclude, I argued in this essay that *Décor: A Conquest* employs the strategies of fragmentation and erasure to problematise communication and the generation of meaning. To do so, the artist brings disparate objects from commodity culture together and displays them in such a way as to suggest the construction of certain narratives which are then immediately cancelled. The negation of meaning, effected as the objects fall into the gaps between different systems of representation (museum exhibition and film, for example), not only confuses the limits of these systems, but also succeeds in alienating the spectator in a lasting, yet productive, manner. What is important here is that Broodthaers systematically refuses to adopt a political rhetoric of resistance, of direct opposition. Instead, his work finds its force through the 'suspension of the political', which, as Buchloh remarks, the artist 'perceives to be the necessary condition of the process of aestheticization'.[43] This suspension occurs at the moment of the transition from one system of representation to another, but also in the tension between two disparate discourses. By expanding and collapsing

the limits of the aesthetic sphere, the artist causes the aesthetic object to fall into the gap between two 'politics of aesthetics', as Rancière would support. Finally, I hope to have shown that it is exactly this act of 'undecidability' that is employed as a tool to negotiate the very distance the aesthetic object maintains from the sphere of politics, that invests *Décor: A Conquest* with its critical agency.

[1] Maria Gilissen, 'Décor' in *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* (New York: Michael Werner Gallery, 2007): 35.
[2] Marcel Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward' (after an interview with Irmeline Lebeer), in *October* 42, *Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, Fall 1987: 41.
[3] Ibid: 40.
[4] Broodthaers, 'To be *bien piensant*… or not to be. To be Blind' in *October* 42: 35.
[5] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in Benjamin, *Understanding of Brech* (London: Verso, 1998).
[6] Broodthaers, 'To be *bien piensant*… or not to be. To be Blind': 35.
[7] Benjamin Buchloh, 'Open Letters, Industrial Poems', in *October* 42: 68.
[8] Ibid*.*
[9] Ibid: 69.
[10] Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer': 100.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Rachel Haidu, 'Set Piece-Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers' in *Artforum*, Summer, 2007: 436.
[13] Ibid*. Décor* in French also means film set.
[14] Ibid*.*
[15] Ibid: 439.
[16] Ibid*.*
[17] Hans Ulrich Obrist 'Interview with Cerith Wyn Evans', in *Hans-Ulrich Obrist Interviews,* volume 1 (Milan: Charta, 2003): 940.
[18] From a conversation between Cerith Wyn Evans, and Jens Hoffmann, Rob Bowman, 'Bringing the Wounded Back to the Battlefield', in *Take my Eyes and Though Them See You*, exhibition pamphlet (London: ICA, 2006): unpaginated.
[19] Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward': 42.
[20] Ibid: 43.
[21] Rosalind Krauss, *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000): 47.
[22] Ibid*.*
[23] Ibid*.*
[24] Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics' at http://theater.kein.org/node/99
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid*.*
[33] Ibid.
[34] Haidu, 'Set Piece-Décor': 439.
[35] Ibid*.*
[36] Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics'.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Buchloh, 'Open Letters. Industrial Poems': 72.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Broodthaers, 'To be *bien pensant*…or not to be. To be blind': 35.

[42] Buchloh, 'Open Letters, Industrial Poems': 90.

[43] Ibid: 88.

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Ideological Conceptualism and Latin America: Politics, Neoprimitivism and Consumption

Zanna Gilbert

Abstract

This article explores some of the limitations and effects resulting from the application of the term 'ideological conceptualism' to work by artists from Latin America. The first part of the essay examines some of the flaws inherent in the concept itself, as well as the genesis of its use by Mari Carmen Ramírez and latterly, Luis Camnitzer. The implications of these flaws are explored in relation to the work of Felipe Ehrenberg and the ideas of Jacques Rancière. The second part of the article which considers how the term 'ideological conceptualism' can feed into the consumption of alterity and the commodification of politicised practice. Finally it is suggested that the effect of using the term ideological conceptualism may constitute a redeployment of primtivism in its contemporary context.

In recent years critics have proposed a reading of conceptual art from Latin America since the 1960s in which politics is a defining characteristic. An ideological tendency was first defined by Simón Marchán Fiz in the early 1970s, while Lucy Lippard promoted the idea of a politicised conceptual art.[1] However, the term 'ideological conceptualism' has recently been posited to redefine the perception of Latin American art internationally. This recognition of a specifically Latin American conceptualism promotes the under-acknowledged contribution of artists of the region to modernism and conceptual art.[2] The purpose of this article is to examine the context and framework of the ideological label as well as the possible ramifications for the study and exhibition of art from Latin America. Although I have many sympathies with the ideas expounded in the approach, my aim is to examine the limitations of approaching art from Latin America, and perhaps any artistic practice, in this way. The first part of this article will examine the understanding of politics central to the term 'ideological conceptualism', considering Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* and the problem of separating the analysis of form and content. In the second part of the article, I

will look at the implications for academia, curators and Latin America as a geopolitical entity.

Before beginning an analysis of ideological conceptualism it is necessary to be aware of the distinction made between 'conceptual art' and 'conceptualism' that was made in the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin.* The exhibition's organisers, Jane Farver, Luis Camnitzer and Rachel Weiss, proposed that *conceptual art* denoted 'an essentially formalist practice that developed in the wake of minimalism' whereas *conceptualism* 'broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception'. This approach contends that conceptualism, more so than New York-based conceptual art, was concerned with ideas and the ideological. As outlined in the *Global Conceptualism* catalogue, conceptualism denotes the global uptake of conceptual practice from conceptual art to an international and more socio-political form of practice.[3] This understanding of conceptual practice is central to the thesis surrounding ideological conceptualism because it contends that artists from outside the mainstream practiced a less formal, more idiosyncratic form of art that broke from the minimalist inheritance of New York-based artists seen to epitomise Joseph Kosuth's 'art as idea as idea'. In 1993, Ramirez claimed that:

> As with any movement originating in the periphery, the work of Latin American political-conceptual artists. . . engages in a pattern of mutual influence and response. It is both grounded in and different from the legacy of North American Conceptualism in that it represents a transformation of it and also anticipated in many ways the forms of ideological conceptualism developed in the late 70s and 80s by feminist and other politically engaged artists in North America and Europe.

In this version of events, Euro-North American conceptual art was not 'political' until the 1980s. However, Ramirez's account obscures the wealth of activism in the late 1960s as well as artists' engagement with the Vietnam War and the student protests of 1968.

The idea of 'markers' or 'outstanding features' of Latin American conceptualism were proposed by artist and critic Luis Camnitzer and Mari Carmen Ramírez in 2007 and 2004 respectively. [4] Ramírez has been promoting the idea of Latin America as a locus of politicised conceptual art since 1993. In that year her article 'Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America' reinterpreted Marchán Fiz's 1972 propositions mentioned above.[5] Interestingly, Fiz's thesis concerned Argentina and Spain rather than Latin America; Ramirez's analysis denies this original Euro-Latin American focus by constructing European and North American art as diametrically opposed to art from Latin America. More of the groundwork for the recent identification of Camnitzer's designation of 'markers' and Ramirez's 'outstanding features' was laid in Ramírez's and Camnitzer's involvement in the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* mentioned above.[6]

If these critics point to artists' negotiations with the political as the distinguishing feature of Latin American conceptualism, this characterisation rests mainly upon the production of art under dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1990s but stems back to the artistic practice stimulated by the Mexican Revolution. Andrea Giunta has documented the rise of debate around art and politics in Argentina in her book *Avant-Garde, Internationalism & Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties*. Giunta notes that the Vietnam War, the Cuban Revolution and anti-Americanism also had a profound affect on the visual arts in many Latin American countries.[7] Some activists used aesthetic means to challenge, subvert or attack the status quo. The Tucumán Arde group, for example, were artist-activists promoting social change and confronting the neoliberal policies of the Argentinean government with direct action, exhibitions and the alternative distribution of information during the Onganía dictatorship.[8] Many other artists and groups could be cited here and it is certainly clear that the work created by artists in countries afflicted by dictatorships was often a direct engagement with the political realities of the time and therefore take an ideological stance.

Nevertheless, though many artists were clearly concerned with political questions in their work, there are a number of problems with the application of the 'ideological' label. In attempting to distinguish what defines Latin American conceptualism from other avant-garde movements, Luis Camnitzer points to a political subject matter and ideological basis as its foremost element, downplaying formal experimentation. [9] The work of experimental Brazilian artists such as Cildo Meireles has been understood in this way. However, Meireles affirms his commitment to a complete aesthetic experience rather than foregrounding what he calls the 'pamphletarian' message of a work, saying: 'For me the art object must be, despite everything else, instantly seductive'. [10] His comment points to one of the main problems of the interpretation—the idea that artworks can be understood through one primary element undermines the way that an artwork can function in a number of ways. Guy Brett's description of the relationship between politics, form and aesthetics in Rasheed Araeen's work is worth quoting at length for what it says about the inability to separate these realms:

> Equally strong in his work have been a current of political criticism, of clearly aimed polemic in matters of social urgency and an abstract dimension, an enjoyment of the elusiveness and mobility of form, open to ambivalence and imaginative projection . . . Perhaps his refusal to separate them definitively is indicative of Araeen's conviction that political content does not lie in iconography, in the image per se, but operating as something broader: relationships, arrangements, configurations. Conversely, in Araeen's view, ostensibly, 'aesthetic' or 'abstract' forms are not without social implications.[11]

It is the very quality of ambiguity and interplay between form and idea that can be lost with the application of the 'ideological' to art practice. It also points to the confusion created by applying the traditional categories of form, medium and subject matter to conceptual art. Ramírez and Camnitzer carry out the debate on the terrain of high-modernism in order to refute mainstream art history, but conceptual practice and postmodernism has done much to negate

the categorisations of formalism and anti-formalism, abstraction and conceptualism.

One of the main problems found in these attempts to define Latin American conceptualism is their reliance on limited models of the ideological and its relationship to aesthetic experience. In her essay 'A Highly Topical Utopia', Ramírez rightly recognises the contribution of artists of the region to the international avant-garde. Nevertheless, while she notes an 'irreverent formalism and syncretism', she insists that artists inhabited the 'extra-artistic' realm and pursued 'non-aesthetic aims'.[12] The problem with this conception of the political (as 'non-aesthetic') is illustrated by Rancière's notion of the 'distribution of the sensible'. If we follow Rancière's contention that politics concerns the very construction of the social space and the exclusion and inclusion of particular ways of being, a more fundamental issue is addressed by artists in reformulating and questioning subjectivities. He states that: 'the "aesthetical knot" is always tied up before you can identify art or politics'.[13] Rancière discerns a tension between two opposite politics, one that demands art to be political and one that demands its autonomy. He suggests that a critical art reflects neither of these approaches but a 'third way' which:

> must keep something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience toward the *reconfiguration of collective life* and something of the *tension that withdraws the power of aesthetic sensibility from other spheres of experience*. It must borrow from the zones of *indistinction of art and life the connections that provoke political intelligibility*. And it must borrow from the separateness of art works the sense of *sensory foreignness that enhances political energies*.[14]

So Rancière proposes this third way as a collapse of the distinction between art and life as well as ways of acting on reality through aesthetic experience. Ramírez's understanding of ideological conceptualism is one that confines art and politics to separate realms, despite the fact that this is precisely what artists intended to challenge.

These critical conceptions of politics in relation to Latin American art show themselves to be somewhat limited when we consider what works like Felipe Ehrenberg's *La Poubelle: It's a Kind of Disease* were trying to achieve. *La Poubelle* (the French word for dustbin) documents the mounting rubbish during the London dustbin workers' strike in 1970. Ehrenberg sprayed the peripheries of the piles of rubbish in the streets of London. As the strike continued the rubbish expanded onto the pavements, squares and roads throughout the city. Ehrenberg documented what he called the 'way we can get used to anything', recording peoples' nonchalant progress through the increasingly disordered streets. Throughout the film, amidst a dystopian soundscape, Ehrenberg debates the role of art, stating that it is 'anything that breaks your programmations, that jolts you, pushes you, catalyses you, outside a mode of behaviour'. Ehrenberg insisted the film was not a work of art but a process of understanding both the strike and the role of art. As he commented later: 'after using many rolls of film and lots of spray paint, the strike was settled. . . what we exhibited was not art but our capacity of comprehension'.[15] Rather than a didactic revelation of social reality, *La Poubelle* interrogated the possibility of knowing, experiencing and imagining. Later Ehrenberg further elucidated his ideas, saying:

> Creation and art are two completely different concepts for me. Creation is organic, it is internal matter. Art is a historic definition— a solidifying element. The trash should point to a way out of this ossification, and therefore I'm in agreement with not converting this into an artistic activity but into an activity, into an act of creation, but not into an art work.[16]

Ehrenberg's symbiosis of creative and social outcomes illuminates why the strike can neither be consigned to the 'non-aesthetic realm' nor the work to the artistic one. When Ehrenberg states on film that 'any creation achieves its own autonomy' it is a reflection on considering the strike itself a creation.

Ehrenberg's career problematises both the notions of a coherent Latin American conceptualism and the arbitrary separation of art from other realms of experience, as well as the division suggested between subject matter and form. Felipe Ehrenberg's *Telegraphic Works* provide a paradigm for understanding how he conceived challenging these divisions through creativity. The works were telegrams that were far removed from the brief and impersonal messages usually communicated through this medium. The statement:

LET'S CONVERT/ALL/THE/SYSTEMS/IN TO/POETRY/
AND/VISIONS/AND/LET THEM REMEMBER/THAT/CREATION/
IS ENERGY/WHILE/ART/MEANS/POWER/
I REPEAT/THE POWER/END/OF/MESSAGE
/FELIPE/

Ehrenberg's call to 'convert all the systems in to poetry' is at once a promotion of the use of technological systems for art, and an appropriation of a system usually used for the efficient communication of information for business. However, more significantly, the brief message hails the opportunity for art to infiltrate the real. Jacques Rancière's concept of aesthetic revolution, according to Peter Hallward, signifies a 'regime in which everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner.'[17] Thus the first aspect of the utopian role of the art work is to question the autonomy of art and to strive for, in Rancière's words, 'the endless confusion of art and non-art'.[18] Rancière's notion of the political designates all arenas of reality as aesthetic constructions of what is rendered sensible, or conversely, insensible—the visible and the invisible, the perceptible and the imperceptible. In this way, particular regimes such as politics and art come to be separated. Arguably, by separating the realms of aesthetics and politics, Ramírez merely reinforces the idea of art as autonomous. In Rancière's view, politics and aesthetics are inseparable and this might also render the composite term 'ideological conceptualism' null as a term with which to frame or interpret the project it describes.

In a slightly different approach to ideological conceptualism, Luis Camnitzer attempts to define his distinction between 'periphery' and 'mainstream' in his recent book *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didatics of Liberation*.[19] In the chapter 'Markers of Latin American Conceptualism', Camnitzer asserts that 'mainstream' conceptual strategies such as an elimination of visuality, heightened awareness of context and mapping of the linguistic model onto the perceptual model were also used by Latin American conceptualists but, he states, 'without formalist rigour'.[20] Camnitzer gives primacy to the politicisation of subject matter and relegates form. However, the interaction of subject matter and the formal qualities of the artwork create what Rancière would describe as *aesthetic revolution*: 'configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity'.[21] Thus a utopian claim of the artwork is to restructure experience in a way that attempts to change the experience of reality. The Uruguayan visual poet and mail artist Clemente Padín, who was imprisoned by the dictatorship in his own country for over two years, argues along these lines:

> When a dictatorship is established, the first to be imprisoned are the poets, why? Because they compel people to choose, to elect between diverse options and this mode of action transmits itself to all human behaviour. You can't impose rules on a person accustomed to choice.[22]

So if Padín is motivated by a belief in the ability of poetic practice to mobilise resistance he also keeps faith in the effect that art may have on consciousness, which is often invoked by an interaction between an artwork's *form*—which may be objectual, process-based or conceptual—and its subject matter.

Having looked in some detail at some of the assumptions and limitations of the label 'ideological conceptualism', I will in the second part of this article look at the possible ramifications of the use of this label for art from Latin America. Taking a macro and sociological perspective I will consider how this term

interacts with postcolonial thought and global consumption in relation to exhibition-making. The term 'Latin American' art itself has been the subject of much debate, resulting in the increasing rejection of the use of this term due to its totalising and essentialising effect upon a region that is deeply heterogeneous. However, it is necessary to point out that there is a clear difference between denoting Latin American *art* and Latin American *conceptualism*; this move can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim the definition of Latin America art from the variant labels of 'colourful, exotic and vital' that have often accompanied exhibitions and studies of the art of the region.[23] It might be seen as an attempt at 'strategic essentialism', using Gayatri Spivak's designation, an attempt to harness essentialist and reductionist categories to the strategic advantage of the postcolonial region, in order to counter the dominant categories of the West.[24]

A combination of factors makes this question an interesting one for the study and exhibition of art from Latin America. Oswald de Andrade's metaphor of *anthropophagy*, the 'swallowing up' of the alien ('But they who came were not crusaders. They were fugitives from a civilization that we are eating, because we are strong and vengeful as a Jabuti'[25]) was the Brazilian response to European modernism and colonialism. Andrade's rejection of a European 'canned consciousness' heralded a Brazilian, perhaps Latin American, manifestation that was a more powerful hybrid. So the proposal that Latin American conceptual art is in some ways more interesting and sophisticated due to the context that has produced it follows a similar empowering narrative. But as Gerardo Mosquera has noted it is important to consider 'who swallows whom'.[26] The concept of anthropophagy does not entail a complete release from the constrictive dialogue of coloniser and colonised. Similarly, the notion of political conceptualism defines art from Latin America in relation to the mainstream, but this definition may be in danger of becoming a new version of 'the fantastic'.

In her article, 'Beyond the "Fantastic", Framing Identity in US Exhibitions of Latin American Art', Mari Carmen Ramírez criticises a spate of 1980s US exhibitions that presented Latin American cultural stereotypes and implied that

art from Latin America was secondary to Euro-American modernism. A central tenet of Ramírez's article is that exhibitions 'are privileged vehicles for the representation of individual and collective identities'.[27] Ramírez argues that the exoticisation of the 'other' in these US exhibitions is indicative of wider cultural and political processes, commenting that: 'At stake is not only the question of whether the image of the Latin American or Latino "other" that emerges from these shows truly engages the cultural constituencies that it aims to represent but also how museums and the art establishment at large respond to the cultural demands of an increasingly influential community.'[28] Ramírez argues that a variety of factors—power imbalances; inadequate understanding of Latin American art and artists; poor holding in collections of Latin American art; a lack of availability of scholarly information in English and a poor network of information exchange—has helped to entrench an easily stereotyped and marketable image of Latin American and Latino art in the United States that does not account for the heterogeneity of the continent.[29] Primarily Ramírez is arguing against the characterisation of art from Latin America as reflecting 'the irrational, the primitive and the unconscious' but also against an all-defining and essentialist notion of the continent's art production.

As we have seen, as an alternative to the above mischaracterisations of Latin American art the idea of ideological conceptualism has been promoted and become a new establishment history. This term carves out an alternative understanding of conceptual practice as it was developed by artists in Latin America, one that is perhaps similarly problematic. The genesis of this particular identification of Latin American conceptual art with politics must be seen in the context of Luis Camnitzer's and Mari Carmen Ramírez's experiences living in the United States. When Camnitzer set up the New York Graphic Workshop in 1966 with Liliana Porter and José Guillermo Castillo, the art scene was dominated by formalist conceptions of art—from Greenberg's abstract modernism to minimalist artwork that Camnitzer clearly felt little sympathy with. Camnitzer's early writings show an understandable preoccupation with the austere formalism prevalent in 1960s New York as he had emigrated from Uruguay to the city in 1963. Camnitzer's complex

interaction with the art world in New York seems to have contributed to his assertions on the importance of subject matter over form in statements such as, 'Form became a pure and secondary product of content, inevitably existing for presentation, but without really influencing it.'[30] Ramírez's position also emerges from the context of living and working in the United States. Thus the two main proponents of the idea of ideological conceptualism have developed a theory in opposition to, but still defined by the tenets of the US art world.

That Camnitzer's and Ramírez's ideas stem from this very particular context is important because it makes the notion of ideological conceptualism a reactive historiographical label rather than one that has emerged from artists themselves—indeed, as we have seen, Cildo Miereles rejects the idea of his art as primarily ideological. So the idea of ideological conceptualism exists as a discourse in direct opposition to Euro-American modernism since the 1960s. It also promotes a distinct and self-defined discourse to the neo-colonialist othering that was prevalent in the dominant centres of the art world. While we must take into account the fact that the notion of ideological conceptualism acts as a deliberate counter with which both to defend and promote art from Latin America, we must also consider its possible negative effects. Any label can become essentialising and a willingness to self-denominate can be even more powerful. As a result a new 'fantastic' is being developed which only replaces the former stereotype. Admittedly this version may be more accurate; the exchange of one essentialist notion for another, however, cannot be seen as a positive development.

As I mentioned earlier this may be seen as an example of 'strategic essentialism'—an acknowledgement that essentialist constructions can be useful at points to counter dogmatic positions—but the issue here is whether artists are now expected to perform to the stereotype of the political artist in order to be considered authentically Latin American. Is there a new stereotype developing that characterises Latin America as violent, revolutionary, melancholic and politically unstable? It is not difficult to see how these characteristics might act as an 'other' to the supposedly democratic and politically stable West. The consumption of violence and social unrest is

perhaps clearer when we consider the international success of the Brazilian films *City of God*, *Carangiru* and *Elite Squad* while other accomplished Brazilian films went unnoticed outside of the country. What these films have in common is the portrayal of extreme violence and corruption, although this says less about the films than about their consumption in the global marketplace. They fulfil a notion of Brazil that also functions as a commodity: violent, poor and vital.

In her analysis of the use of the tem conceptualism as a historiographic construct, Olga Fernandez points out that the process whereby 'the canonical value of the origin is inverted: instead of peripheral practices imitating formally the original ones, Latin American political practices are seen as genuine.'[31] In this would suggest that Fernandez's argument can be extended to suggest that this constitutes a redeployment of the primitive as a category in Latin American art. According to Ramírez the 1980s exhibitions forced artists 'to stage "authenticity", and to insist on the configuration of a particular cultural image, as a means of opposing external, often dominating alternatives'[32] but arguably the term ideological conceptualism may have a similar effect. While Ramírez is right to reject the primitive or ethic notion of a Latin America that is culturally fixed, a neoprimtive stereotype may be taking its place.

Ideological conceptualism is also easily consumed. In a reversal of anthropophagy, where Brazilian modernists consumed and subverted European modernism to its own ends, ideological conceptualism is easily subsumed into the rampant consumption of alterity in Europe and America. As Gerardo Mosquera points out:

> The new fascination of the centres for alterity, specific to the 'global' fad has permitted greater circulation and legitimisation of art from the peripheries. But all too often only those works that explicitly manifest difference or satisfy expectations of exoticism are legitimated.[33]

In his essay 'Desconquistas (políticas) y redescubrimentos (estéticos): Geopolítica del arte periférico en la víspera de los bicentenarios de América Latina', Joaquín Barriendos argues that *new internationalism* in contemporary art has led to aesthetic homogenisation and resulted in 'the banalisation of the conflict of alterity, its aestheticisation as a fetish in a world in which the peripheral, the hybrid and the subaltern have become obscenely everyday'.[34] If, as Mosquera claims, 'art from Latin America is now being recognised more and more as a participant in a general practice that does not necessarily show its context, and that on occasion refers to art itself'[35] then might the political conceptualism label contest this aspect of *new internationalism*? In this case both homogenisation and distinction can lead to a reductive view of art production.

Perhaps the best way to negotiate this terrain of totalising definitions is to deny them at each turn, as Mosquera writes, the risk is of converting Latin American art into the 'the perfect alterity to the mainstream'.[36] Although it acts as a tool for the promotion for under-recognised artists this essentialist approach can only lead to reductive evaluations and serve to obscure heterogeneity. The effect of the term ideological conceptualism is more easily understood when Gerardo Mosquera discusses what he considers to be the contribution of artists from Latin America to the global development of conceptualism: 'Many artists have used post-conceptual resources in order to integrate the aesthetic, the social, the cultural, the historic, and the religious not in a direct or anecdotal way but rather within the very analysis of art's semiotic resources.'[37] This statement does not foreground one characteristic to the effect of over-riding others, and acknowledges that innovations exist at the formal level rather than only the political.

The attempt to differentiate Latin American conceptualism is one that asserts that artworks created in this geopolitical sphere developed a distinct art that is not only different, but is in fact richer, than many of their so-called 'mainstream' counterparts. This interpretation, though in some ways correct, relies on a variety of assumptions. The limited understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics leads to a division of form and

subject matter on the grounds of rejecting high-modernism but is ultimately indebted to it. If we would not describe Latin American conceptualism as formalist neither should we consider it 'politicist'—a focus on political subject matter that obscures the total effect of art works and the utopian intentions of artists. In relation to Rancière's ideas I argue that this critique, while trying to promote the cause of Latin American art, undermines the project of those artists who refute such prescribed boundaries as aesthetic or non-aesthetic realms. In fact, if anything it is the fusion of radical form *with* radical content that distinguishes Latin American conceptualism, rather than a precedence of subject matter *over* form. Ideological conceptualism may offer an alternative definition, but it is one that still essentialises Latin America as a melancholic, violent and politically unstable region, the perfect 'other' of the supposedly stable and democratic West.

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2 See Jane Farver (ed), Global *Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s -1980s* (Queens Museum of Art, 1999).
3 Foreword by Farver, Camnitzer, and Weiss in Farver, *Global Conceptualism*: VII-XI.
4 Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didatics of Liberation* (University of Texas Press, 2007), Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'A Highly Topical Utopia', in Ramírez (ed), *Inverted Utopias* (Yale University Press, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, New Haven; Houston, 2004). Much of the groundwork for the ideas was laid in Ramírez's and Camnitzer's involvement in the exhibition and catalogue Global *Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s -1980s.*
5 Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts:MIT Press,1993).
6 Farver, J et al, ibid.
7 Andrea Giunta, Avant-*Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the 1960s* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2007): 259.
8 See Chapter 7 of Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation* for a discussion of this issue.
9 Camnitzer:156.
10 Cildo Meireles, quoted on the Tate website; Tate Modern, Past Exhibitions, Cildo Meireles. Available at: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cildomeireles/rooms/room7.shtm
11 Guy Brett, *A Carnival of Perception: selected writings on art, Institute of International Visual Arts* (London, 2004): 244.
12 Ramírez, 'A Highly Topical Utopia': 2.
13 Jacques Rancière,'The Politics of Aesthetics', 2007: 2. Downloaded on 05/11/08, available at: http://theater.kein.org/node/99
14 Rancière: 4.
15 Issa María Benítez Dueñas 'Reconstructing Emptiness and Recovering Space: The Conceptual Ehrenberg.' in Fernando Llanos, *Felipe Ehrenberg: 50 años : Manchuria, visión periférica* (Diamantina : Río Negro Producciones, UANL, Facultad de Artes Visuales, Mexico, 2007): 25.
16 Quoted by Dueñas: 26.
17 Paul Hallward and Jacques Rancière, 'Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Routledge, 8:2, August 2003: 205. Downloaded May 2008 at: http://abahlali.org/files/rancierehallward 2.pdf.

18 Ibid: 205.
19 Camnitzer: 24.
20 Camnitzer: 160.
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22 Padin interviewed by Leão, 2003 cited by Pianowski, Fabiane, 'Arte Postal Arte', *Merz Mail*: 2. Downloaded 20/09/09, available at: http://www.merzmail.net/artepostalarte.htm
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24 Strategic essentialism is described as 'a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' in Donna Landry, and Gerald MacLean, (eds), *The Spivak Reader, Selected Works of Gayati Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge, 1996): 214.
25 Oswald De Andrade, 'Anthropophagite Manifesto', Originally published in Revista de Antropofagia, May 1928, São Paulo; Brazil. Trans. A Pedrosa and V Cordeiro. Downloaded 19/09/09, available at: http://www.391.org/manifestos/1928anthropophagite.htm
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27 Ramírez, 'Beyond the Fantastic': 60.
28 Ibid: 60.
29 Ibid: 61.
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31 Olga Fernandez, 'Conceptualism, a Historic Necessity for Latin American Art?', presented at the International Research Forum for Transnational Latin America, 6-9 November 2009, unpublished.
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33 Mosquera: 26.
34 Joaquin Barriendos, 'Desconquistas (políticas) y redescubrimentos (estéticos): Geopolítica del arte periférico en la víspera de los bicentenarios de América Latina' desbordes numero 0 , January 2009. Available at: http://des-bordes.net/des-bordes/joaquin_barriendos.php, downloaded 03/12/09 (the translation is mine).
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Shadows of Femininity: Women, Surrealism and the Gothic

Kimberley Marwood

Abstract

This paper addresses the literary influence of the Gothic on the Surrealists. It is particularly concerned with how the Gothic mode is employed and manipulated with regards to gender and sexuality by the women associated with the movement. Steered through a discussion of the work of Valentine Penrose my readings draw on both Queer theory and Feminist theory. Through contemplating Penrose's poetic collection *Dons des Feminines* (1951) in relation to Hélène Cixous' *Sorties* (1975) - specifically her concept of the 'gift' and the 'feminine', I aim to position Penrose's practice in relation to feminist discourse, establishing a continuum from the female Surrealists through to post-modern feminist writing. Furthermore, by interrogating the role of the Gothic in the work of the female Surrealists I aim to expand the parameters of Surrealism - further locating Surrealist legacies in contemporary art practices.

> *- Roland, be sure there is something else than all these horrors! I cannot tell you what inner joy the human heart in the midst of the most terrific sorrows can still contain*
>
> *Valentine Penrose* [1]

In his 1938 survey of Gothic fiction *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel,* critic Montague Summers lambasted attempts by authors aligned with Surrealism to appropriate the Gothic form. His main criticisms were levelled at André Breton and those who were officially bound up with the movement*,* yet Summers punctuates his tirade by deriding several poetic works by writers more loosely affiliated with the surrealist project, amongst which he cites the work of French poet Valentine Penrose. With reference to a poem taken from Penrose's 1935 collection *Herbe à la lune,*[2] Summers describes her work as 'gross meaningless jargon, without sense, suggestion, music, symbolism or beauty'.[3] Summers argued that Penrose's interpretation of the Gothic offered nothing new or interesting—a criticism which reiterated aspersions at the movement's inception that it was the tail-end of Romanticism.[4] As Hugh Sykes Davies put it in 1936, 'critics of Surrealism are in the habit of suggesting that

our movement is nothing more than the fag-end of romanticism, romanticism at its last gasp.'[5] Indeed, this particular viewpoint was later propagated by critic Clement Greenberg who characterised Surrealism as retrospective—arguing that 'its very horrors are nostalgic and day dreamy, having associations with a more pleasant seeming past.'[6] Throughout the course of this paper I aim to contest such impressions of Surrealism's engagement with Romanticism and earlier narrative modes, arguing that Surrealism's evocation of the Gothic was not merely a recycling of conventions but an active development and continuation of the genre.

Although Surrealism's literary lineage and its relationship to the Gothic has always been apparent, the extent of this connection remains a largely neglected area of scholarship, with existing studies of the two modes restricted to excursus on the male Surrealists. The female Surrealists, however, much like their male counterparts, were similarly influenced by the Gothic mode. For the Surrealist woman the Gothic often presented a method of mediation or separation from the real. Dawn Ades, has attempted to articulate the appeal of the genre for women—with reference to Dorothea Tanning, Ades notes how Tanning employed the Gothic as one of the 'imaginary dimensions' she adopted to enforce distance from her own mirror image.[7] Whitney Chadwick has similarly described how Tanning 'escaped to a private world of fantasy nourished by her reading of Carroll, Andersen, Wilde, Radcliffe, and other nineteenth-century authors.'[8] Such observations establish the Gothic as a site of fantasy and imagination for the female Surrealist. I wish to extend this notion of the Gothic as a fantasy space and propose that the Gothic, for the Surrealist woman, regularly operates as a locus of sexual exploration, an imaginary sphere in which to test out and explore unconscious desires and personal anxieties pertaining to both gender and sexuality. Indeed much of the Gothic's appeal was that it presented both authors and readers with a realm of escapism within which they could inscribe their intimate, often repressed desires; where anything considered different, such as homosexuality, could be personified in monstrous others and ghostly apparitions.

This particular aspect of the Gothic is brilliantly exploited in Valentine Penrose's practice. In her collage and poetry piece, *Dons des Feminines* of 1951, it is clearly discernible from Penrose's text that a relationship exists between two women; Maria Elona and Rubia, yet that relationship is never affirmed. Drawing on Gothic conventions—such as concealment and revelation, throughout Penrose's poetry her gothic heroines never become 'consistently present'.[9] In her study *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle has addressed the phantasmagorical association between ghosts and lesbians, claiming that Gothic writers such as Henry James wrote in an 'effort to derealise the threat of lesbianism by associating it with the apparitional.'[10] Penrose's often phantasmagoric treatment of lesbianism is evident in her collage compositions in which her heroines elide temporal and geographical determinacy. Moreover, Penrose's poetics reveal a similar disregard for narrative continuity, space and time; through verbal assemblages and metaphorical combinations, she conjures lexical shadows and silhouettes, in which meaning lurks and flickers. Borrowing from a characteristically Gothic repertoire of textual tropes and motifs, *Dons des Feminines* is laden with such examples:

> Let us go to the frontiers where the sun is icy
> Where we can no longer enter the passage.
> Future events will be disconcerting or certain
> They speak they wander
> Nothing was ever so haunted. Farewell my beloved
> Your clamouring woman belongs to the landscape
> Farewell Rubia.

Through oxymoronic metaphorical constructs, such as sun and ice, Penrose constructs concepts, which, just as soon as they are established, melt away. This poetic 'phantasmagoria' is further compounded in her disregard for formal poetic stylistics.[11] In much the same way as the intricate narratives of Gothic fiction build suspense in order to haunt the reader, such hauntings can similarly be elicited through the poetic form. Daneen Wardrop has proposed that where the haunts of fiction occur largely at the level of narrative structure,

'the haunts of poetry occur on a traditional level of language slippage: appearance and disappearance of syntax, and exacerbated lexicon and punctuation.'[12] Penrose's disregard for syntactical arrangement certainly conforms to this model, yet her radical poetic experimentation concomitantly marks her as an artist who engaged with the techniques and motivations of the Surrealist movement. Reminiscent of the Surrealist flow of automatic writing, her verbal and stylistic elasticity bewitches the reader, exhibiting a lexical fluidity which also resonates with a queer rhetoric.

Dons des Feminines is situated at the nexus of the Surreal, the Gothic, and the lesbian or queer—it is a poetic work which openly declares, 'I am what I am.'[13] Indeed, themes of lesbianism and female companionship underscore much of Penrose's work, and her relationships with other women who operated in the orbit of Surrealism have often been subject to speculation. With reference to the close friendship between Valentine and Max Ernst's wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche, Antony Penrose (Roland Penrose's son), observed:

> It seems that to Valentine the love of a woman was more deeply satisfying for her at every level. It was hardly surprising that this should be so. She was so intensely connected to the plane of female mysticism she had little use or understanding of deep intimacy with a man.[14]

Most significantly it is her relationship with Alice Rahon (Paalen), wife of Wolfgang Paalen, which has been subject to the most scrutiny. Vincent Gille describes how, in 1936, Valentine left Roland and went to India:

> There she was joined by Alice Paalen (who had just had a brief liaison with Picasso) and for several months the two women had an affair. This is evidenced in their respective poetry collections, *Sorts de la Lune* by Valentine Penrose (1937) and *Sablier Couché* by Alice Paalen (1938). Love affairs between women were not all that rare within the various surrealist groups.[15]

Gille's observation is prompted by Georgiana Colvile's readings in which she explores the relationship between the two women. Colvile convincingly communicates a textual relationship between the two women by deconstructing and juxtaposing the two writers' lyrics to create a dialogue between the poetry. In what she terms 'mutually mirroring verses', Colvile manufactures a dialogical interplay between Penrose and Rahon.[16]

As Gille outlines, relationships between women within Surrealism were not altogether unheard of, and despite Surrealism's condemnation and intolerance of male homosexual relationships, this homophobia did not extend to the lesbian encounter. In fact, relationships between women were often fetishised—and in some cases manufactured by the male Surrealist. Man Ray's 1937photographs of Nusch and Ady Fidelin, for example, are sexually charged compositions which rest on the slippage between friendship and lesbianism.

Images of female friendship with sexual overtones, however, were not entirely restricted to the male Surrealists. In Leonor Fini's illustrations for Sheridan Le Fanu's Gothic novel *Carmilla* (1872), Fini places the two protagonists in a similarly provocative pose. Her compositions tease out the underlying lesbianism in the text, in which a female vampire preys on her female victim. In Picasso's frontispiece for Penrose's *Dons des Feminines,* he similarly forgoes any ambiguity and uncertainty, opting to render the relationship between the two female protagonists as sexual. Placed on what is clearly delineated as a bed, with pillow, valance and crumpled sheets, which all operate to frame the bodies in the composition, entangled limbs and naked torsos create a highly eroticised image in which two women are intertwined. In Picasso's image nothing exists beyond their bodily union. In reducing the connection between the two central characters to a purely physical bond, he effectively eliminates any of the textual complexity and equivocality that Penrose establishes.

For Penrose the lesbianism does not constitute the primary drive of the narrative, or feature as the central theme of the image. Her visual representations are not sexually explicit; rather she chooses to adorn her women in restrictive Victorian costume, with any further suggestion of physical intimacy sheathed under a blanket or behind a curtain. Parodying Max Ernst's misogynistic collage compositions and rejecting his male/female sadomasochistic strategies, her images insist, by contrast, on a focus on exclusively female relationships based on equality and exchange. Indeed, Karen Humphreys argues that Penrose's visuals are contrived as a direct response to Ernst's project and that her collage work suggests 'a corrective gesture in relation to Ernst's bound and beaten women.'[17]

Both Ernst and Penrose combine facets of Surrealist practice—collage and found imagery, with nineteenth-century Victoriana, giving their visual compositions a distinctly Gothic complexion. Penrose's monochrome imagery, as Roy Edwards has suggested, can be seen as 'an homage to […] Gustav Doré's woodcuts', exhibiting a tacit tribute to early Nineteenth Century Romanticism and the English Gothic novel through the emulation of their aesthetic principles.[18] Ernst similarly took the Gothic as a motivating influence for his images, as Marina Warner has described with reference to his collage-novel *Une Semaine de Bonté*: Ernst, 'adopts with glee penny-dreadful commonplaces of women mauled, ravaged, and possessed by various winged and monstrous hybrids'.[19] The penny-dreadfuls to which Warner alludes were often reprints or rewrites of Gothic thrillers, whose salacious content was rabidly consumed in weekly instalments, with nothing of the subtleties and intricate narrative development of the Gothic novel.

Their employment of the collage medium itself reveals a deeper correspondence with the Gothic mode. The basic formula of the Surrealist collage, which Penrose and Ernst follow, can actually be ascribed to the Romantics—specifically to Isadore Ducasse. The Surrealists adapted Le Comte de Lautréamont's phrase, 'as beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella' as the premise for the formulation of their written and visual practice; celebrating the juxtaposition of

unlikely and unnatural forms and objects.[20] The lexical collages Lautréamont offered provided the Surrealists with a methodology, which they applied to both the literary and visual arts. Penrose explicitly engages with this process, but where Lautréamont and Ernst's reconfigurations are fabricated around phallic dominance, the sexual incarceration of the female, and the active/passive binary of the male/female configuration in Penrose's images alternatively establish an egalitarian female economy of exchange.

The juxtaposition of Penrose's collage and poetry in *Dons des Feminines* arguably bridges the often theoretical incompatibility of Queer theory and Feminist theory. Where queer writers often 'explore the deconstruction and fluidity of transient identities and feminists explore the materiality of the body and the things done to women's bodies such as rape and violence', Penrose's experimentation arguably resolves this separation.[21] Her collage attempts to remediate the physical abuse to women propagated by Ernst, whilst her poetic fluidity constitutes a style of writing which prefigures an idiosyncratically French brand of post-structuralist writing—those which centre around flights and passages, creating a sense of movement which places emphasis upon the role of the subject as a process, rather than being fixed by various social structures:

> I dream. Youth is beyond the rain she arrives.
> But walking the long-drawn embankments
> Made to fly a hundred times in love on skimming water you shall
>   speak to me.
> Put back the dream you wake me only you.
>
> Under the eaves swallows glitter
> Not yet the moment before dawn it is just leaving their town.

Connections between the female surrealists and French feminists have previously been established by Katharine Conley in *Automatic Woman: the representation of woman in surrealism.* Conley argues that Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine,* which set out to create a new language of the body, was

much like the Surrealists' espousal of automatic writing as something which was thought capable of releasing the unconscious and unlocking desire.[22] Penrose's work also exhibits intimate connections to the work of Cixous. *Dons des Feminines* roughly translates as Gifts of the Feminine. The 'Gifts' and the 'Feminine' in Penrose's title are prefigurative of the concepts of the 'Gift' and the 'Feminine', which are central to Cixous' work. As Abigail Bray articulates, these terms are connected to what Cixous understands as the 'feminine libidinal economy.'[23] An economy which is centered around 'liberating a repressed female desire—about circulating that desire within language—and about recognising and encouraging an economy which moves beyond the strictures of phallocentric law.'[24] In such an exclusively female economy neither participant is constituted as the giver or receiver and the active/passive binary usually associated with heterosexual coupling is no longer appropriate.

Penrose's text, in addition to the striking similarity of the work's title to Cixous' concepts, arguably exhibits this libidinal exchange. In addition, flowers and fauna figure greatly throughout Penrose's practice—evocative of both the Victorian pastime of floriography and of French poetic floral symbolism. Bray has delineated how flowers are significant in the construction of Cixous' theory, contending that '[f]lowers are also metaphors for the materiality of the gift, for a feminine libidinal economy in which the gift circulates without debt.'[25] The literal giving of gifts in *Dons des Feminines* is made manifest through references to 'nosegays' and the weaving of a sensuous floral tapestry between the principle characters of the piece, Rubia and Maria Elona: '[m]y nosegay is passed on I reclaim it'. This exchange of gifts is similarly played out in the romantic trysts of the female protagonists in an earlier piece entitled *Martha's Opera* (1945) in which Penrose takes the ritual exchange of gifts, and of flowers particularly, usually passed between a man and woman and displaces it, thereby exposing the falsity of chivalric heterosexual courtship rituals which have been inscribed throughout male culture: 'Here, Emily, is a gipsy's rose. Grown under my balcony, I have held it in my mantilla veil, close by the heart of your Rubia.'

Written in 1945, *Martha's Opera* precedes the poetic work *Dons des Feminines* and is integral to interpretation of the latter work, as there is an apparent narrative continuity between the two. Reading *Martha's Opera* confirms any ambiguities between the characters Maria Elona and Rubia in *Dons des Feminines*, as the earlier characters Rubia and Emily that feature in *Martha's Opera* are unmistakably embroiled in a love affair:

> I glanced at that pure bed of youth where for so many months I have lain down to dream of you. And I prepared to rejoin you, for our brief caresses. Au revoir as soon as I can, I love you.
>
> Your Emily

Constructed in the epistolary mode—that of letter writing, which has often been associated with femininity because of its intimate, confessional and secretive nature, the narrative of *Martha's Opera* is communicated through an exchange of letters between two women, Emily and Rubia, and it is through this correspondence that their lesbianism becomes apparent. Georgiana Colvile has described the piece as a 'petit roman épistolaire néo-gothique', [26] whilst Renée Hubert noted how Penrose 'presents a fragmented horror story concluding with the death of almost all of the participants,'[27] further reinforcing the proposition presented here that Penrose employs the narrative frameworks of both Romanticism and the Gothic, their techniques and conventions, in order to contemplate issues of femininity and homosexuality.

From *The Bloody Countess* to *The Bloody Chamber*

The Gothic, Surreal and the Lesbian recur as themes in Penrose's major literary work *La Comtesse sanglante* of 1962, later published in English as *The Bloody Countess* in 1970. The novel is a semi-historical account of the life of Erzsébet Bathory, a character described by Georgiana Colvile as a 'héroine gothique'.[28] The novel has an idiosyncratic style; a combination of fact, fiction, fairytale, alchemy, astrology, Surrealism and the Gothic—prompting Karen Humphreys to suggest that the work produces the 'effect of a collage narrative' through weaving 'together poetic imagery, archival

documentation, and creative mythology.'[29] This rich intertextuality, however, led to later complications when Penrose attempted to have the English translation published. In a letter to Roland Penrose, dealing on Valentine's behalf, from George Weidenfeld and Nicholson Limited, the company representative explains that the publishing house was unable to print the novel as several members of staff thought the work 'was in many ways altogether too unpleasant'.[30] In a letter to John Calder from Roland Penrose, Roland conveys that several publishers have 'taken a general line that the book is not easily published here because of the subject matter and the author's "amoral approach"'.[31] Despite initial difficulties pertaining to the content of the novel, the work was finally approved by Calder and Boyars, with Calder asserting on acceptance that, 'I certainly see no moral objections to publishing the work.'[32] Despite the lack of moral disapprobation, concerns regarding the content of the text were not altogether resolved as the publishers set out to radically modify Penrose's original manuscript. A selection of such editorial impingements can be identified in a letter to Valentine from Marion Boyars who suggests reorganising the text:

> [I]n such a way that it reads more like a historical document than it does at the moment. As you know as the book stands at the moment there is no particular sequence of events, and when reading it we found ourselves slightly confused. We therefore thought it might be an idea to rearrange certain paragraphs so that the book reads more smoothly in terms of historical events. This makes the book perhaps a little more of a historical narrative, and it would be easier for the reader to follow the story all the way through.[33]

Favouring a traditional narrative progression, Boyars also expresses the need to 'curtail some of the mystic suppositions and allusions which have a tendency to yank the reader away from a superbly interesting and well told story into a completely different realm of thought.'[34] Yet what arguably gives *The Bloody Countess* its overall affect are the very narrative dislocations and melding of genres that the publishers attempted to eradicate.

Penrose's depiction of Bathory, beyond that of documenting her violent crimes and her tortuous act of sadism, is an account of how her criminality and actions are both linked to and perhaps motivated by her lesbianism:

> The ill-starred Countess had another secret which revealed her nature at its most profound, one she owed to her heredity and to her stars, a secret always spoken of in whispers but never definitely confirmed; something she may have admitted to herself or ignored; an equivocal tendency which didn't trouble her, or again, a right she accorded herself alone with all other rights. She was thought to have been amongst other things, a lesbian.[35]

From the outset Penrose sets out to depict Bathory's unfettered and indulgent sexual exploits—going so far as to establish Bathory as 'the female Gilles de Rais'.[36] Georges Bataille states in his study *Tear of Eros* that Bathory was indeed seen as the feminine equivalent of the famed murderous psychopath, and postulates that if the Marquis de Sade 'had known of the existence of Erszébet Bathory, there is not the slightest doubt that Sade would have felt the fiercest exaltation. . . . Erszébet Bathory would have made him howl like a wild beast.'[37] Penrose cements this comparison throughout the course of the novel; aware of connections between de Rais and Bluebeard, Penrose similarly aligns Bathory with a fairytale figure, drawing on the alabaster skin of Snow White as representative of the virginal pallor of the girls which Bathory preys on and vampirically drains of blood in order to preserve her own beauty and youth. Assimilating Bathory with the Evil Queen from Snow White, Penrose writes:

> Erszébet would gaze in her mirror at the intractable set of her forehead, at her sinuous lips, her aquiline nose and her immense black eyes. She was in love with love, she wanted to hear that she was beautiful, the most beautiful of all.[38]

The role of the magic mirror in the fairytale text is further adapted by Penrose:

she lived in front of her great gloomy mirror, the famous mirror for which she herself had drawn the model, and which was made in the form of a *pretzl* (a figure of eight), to allow her to slip her arms through it and remain leaning there without getting tired throughout the long hours, by day and by night, she spent in contemplating her own image. This was the only door she ever opened, the door into herself.[39]

Throughout the novel Penrose 'transforms myth, reconstructs it, recreates it'— delighting in the construction of a character who is sexually predatory, resists female subordination, rejects the institution of marriage, and denies her maternal urges.[40] Significantly, Penrose's fairytale allusions to Snow White and Bluebeard anticipates the emergence of female writers, such as Angela Carter, who sought to modify phallocentric narratives which often repressed women, such as fairytales and the Gothic.

Contemporary Hauntings

Tracing developments in feminist avant-garde practice from Surrealism through to postmodernism, Susan Suleiman has charted the literary trajectory from Surrealism to contemporary Gothicism—a lineage which inevitably incorporates the writings of Angela Carter. [41] Carter's works are postmodern feminist re-writings, works of fiction which often entail a re-writing of myth, fairytale and other traditionally male dominated forms. Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) is a collection of short stories which rework many traditional fairytale narratives; the title story 'The Bloody Chamber'*,* for example, makes allusions to Charles Perrault's *Bluebeard* (1697). Throughout *The Bloody Chamber* Carter stages a critique of the institution of marriage, redressing the power relationships between men and women, specifically with reference to sexual relationships. Many of the themes Carter incorporates, such as sadomasochism and victimhood, the grotesque, the body and gender are similarly identifiable in 'The Bloody Countess'*.*

Arguably Penrose's engagement with the Gothic provided an early realisation of a feminist discourse which was to emerge in the 1970s, a 'postmodern gothic', such as that of Carter's, in which the Gothic mode was reanimated and combined with feminist concerns. Throughout the course of this paper I have aimed to illustrate how Penrose pioneeringly pre-empted several modes of feminist practice; her poetic collection *Dons des Feminines* exhibiting the female libidinal economy and celebration of femininity which Cixous was to espouse two decades later, through to the feminist amalgamation of the Gothic and Surreal in the work of Angela Carter. The alignment of Cixous and Penrose offers a new way to read her work in the context of both French avant-garde literature and feminism. Moreover, adopting French feminist discourse as a reading strategy is key to installing Penrose in a legacy of feminist engagement and intervention within patriarchal modes of discourse. In her study *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Natalya Lusty has similarly identified a continuum between the works of Surrealism and feminism arguing that the problems of contemporary feminism are not dissimilar to the work of Carrington or Cahun. Crucially, Lusty claims to be attempting to 'map the continuity between both the past and the present, not simply in terms of how the present revisits the past, for example in terms of Sherman's engagement with Surrealism, but how the past pre-empts the present.'[42]

In line with Lusty's model, it may be argued that through incorporating the Gothic into their practice, Surrealist women, such as Penrose established a stylistic lexicon which was subsequently adopted by women artists, throughout Surrealism and beyond. For example, working in the 1970s, Francesca Woodman melded the Surreal and the Gothic in her ethereal black and white images. In *From Space* (1975-1976) Woodman stages Charlotte Perkins Gilman's hysterical visions in *The Yellow Wallpaper*[43]*:* 'I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wall-paper till I felt creepy. The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.'[44] Woodman enacts this delusion, presenting herself naked as an unidentifiable female figure pressed up against a wall with wallpaper obscuring her face and lower abdomen, merging with the patterned fragments on the walls and fusing her figure with the fabric of the building.

Recent work, such as that produced by Sarah Metcalf, an active member of the Leeds Surrealist Group, is similarly evocative of this Surrealist adaptation of the Gothic. Her collage *Ghost Train* was constructed as a 'contribution to a collective game around the image of a ghost train.'[45] The medieval complexion of *Ghost Train*, reminiscent of Penrose's compositions, also exhibits associations with Gothic literature. The large helmet in the foreground of the composition is suggestive of the 'enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for a human being' which takes the central premise of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Tale* (1764), a novel which incidentally held profound significance for the Surrealists.[46]
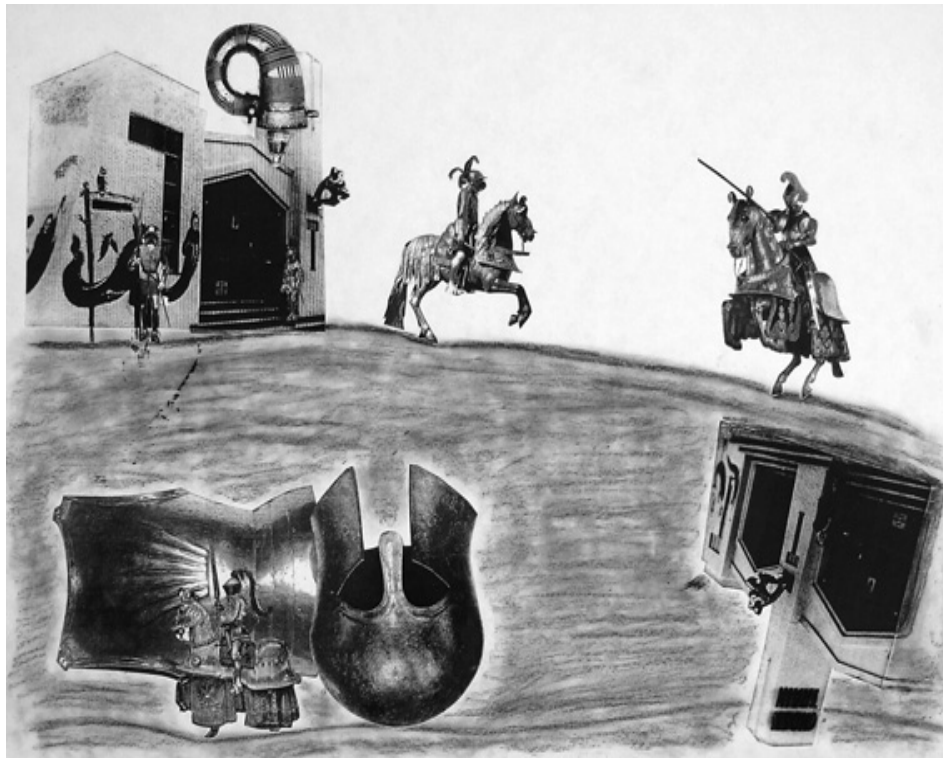
Sarah Metcalf, Contribution to collective game, 'Ghost Train'.

Similarly, photographer Anna Gaskell 'often takes a literary starting point to explore the imaginary potential of the surreal.'[47] Taking influence from the spectral writings of Edgar Allen Poe and Henry James, her collection *Half Life* (2003) is loosely based on Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1948). An earlier series, *Resemblance* (2001) takes ETA Hoffman's novel *The Sandman* and

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as prompts. Combining literary influences with a surrealistic impulse, Gaskell monopolises on the psychological resonances that both the Surreal and Gothic contain and amalgamates the two to create profoundly disturbing and haunting compositions. Gaskell's practice serves to illustrate how the confluence of the two modes provides the ideal artistic mechanism for the exploration of the unconscious and sexual desires.

In exploring the dark side of Surrealism and its correspondences to, and development of the Gothic, these contemporary women artists are following a tradition initiated by artists such as Valentine Penrose. Moreover, the continuing success of such thematic and stylistic experimentation with both the Gothic and Surreal serves to illustrate how the coalescence of the two modes creates a space in which to negotiate the intricacies of the female erotic imaginary, female companionship and sexual difference; a space which is exclusively feminine, a space in which to cast a 'shadow of femininity'.[48]

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[1] Valentine Penrose, Letter addressed to Roland Penrose on 27th September 1939, Box 714, Roland Penrose Archive, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

[2] Valentine Penrose, *Herbe à la Lune* (Paris: Editions GLM, 1935): 57.

[3] Montague Summers, 'Surrealism and the Gothic Novel' in *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune Press, 1938): 390.

[4] André Breton's retort was to declare Surrealism as the 'prehensile tail of Romanticism' in his lecture 'What is Surrealism?' in *André Breton: What is Surrealism? Selected Writings,* edited and introduced by Franklin Rosemont, (London: Pluto Press, 1978): 132.

[5] Hugh Sykes Davies, 'Surrealism at this Time and Place', in Herbert Read, (ed.) *Surrealism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936): 167-168.

[6] Clement Greenberg, 'Surrealism', *The Nation* (12 and 19 August 1944). Reprinted in *Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944,* vol. 1 of *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. by John O'Brien (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986): 229.

[7] Dawn Ades, 'Orbits of the Savage Moon: Surrealism and the representation of the female subject in post-war Paris', in Whitney Chadwick (ed.) *Mirror Images: women, surrealism and self-representation*, Catalogue of an exhibition held at List Visual Arts Center (Cambridge, Mass.), 9 April - 28 June 1998; Miami Art Museum, Miami, 18 September - 29 November 1998; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 8 January - 20 April 1999: 109.

[8] See Whitney Chadwick, 'The Muse as Artists' in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985): 93. See also Whitney Chadwick, 'Cycles of Narrative Fantasy', in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*: 221.

[9] Renée Hubert, 'Lesbianism and Matriarchy: Valentine and Roland Penrose' in *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Partnership* (University of Nebraska Press; Lincoln & London, 1994): 95-96.

[10] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, c1993)

[11] Paul Eluard, 'Preface to Dons des Feminines', reprinted and translated in Roy Edwards, (ed.), *Poems and Narrations,* (Carcanet Press and Elephant Trust, 1977): 69.

[12] Daneen Wardrop, *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: goblin with a gauge* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996): XV.

[13] Paul Eluard: 69.

[14] Antony Penrose, *Roland Penrose: the friendly surrealist/ a memoir by Antony Penrose* (Munich; London: Prestel; Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2001): 63.

[15] Vincent Gille, 'Lives and Loves' in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. by Jennifer Mundy, (Princeton, N.J.] : Princeton University Press ; London : Tate Publishing Ltd , 2001): 136-171 (p.162)

[16] Georgiana Colvile, 'Through an Hour-glass Lightly: Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon-Paalen' Accessed at mlpa.nottingham.ac.uk/archive/00000035/01/Rec_Colvile.pdf 02/12/08 [Also in R. King and B. McGuirk, *Reconceptions: Reading Modern French Poetry* (University of Nottingham, 1986): 81 – 112.]

[17] See Karen Humphreys, 'Collages Communicants: Visual Representation in the Collage-Albums of Max Ernst and Valentine Penrose' in *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Vol.10, No.4, December 2006, pp.377 – 387: 378.

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[19] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and their tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995): 383.

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[27] Hubert: 93.

[28] Colvile: 16.

[29] Karen Humphreys, *Collages* Communicants: 379.

[30] Letterhead - New Bond Street London dated 26th April 1962. Box 473, Roland Penrose Archive, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

[31] Letter dated 9th Jan 1965/3. Box 473, Roland Penrose Archive, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

[32] Response to Roland on 11th Jan 1963. Box 473, Roland Penrose Archive, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

[33] Letter dated 20 January 1969 from Marion Boyars of Calder and Boyars Ltd. Box 473 Roland Penrose Archive, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Valentine Penrose, *The Bloody Countess,* (Solar Books, 2006): 20.

[36] Ibid: 5.

[37] George Bataille, 'Gilles de Rais and Erszabet Bathory' in *Tears of Eros*, (City Lights Books, 1989):139.

[38] Penrose, *The Bloody Countess*: 53.

[39] Ibid: 20.

[40] Karen Humphreys, 'The Poetics of Transgression in Valentine Penrose's *La Comtesse Sanglante*' *The French Review*, 2003, Vol. 76: 749.

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[42] Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Ashgate, 2007): 6.

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[45] Sarah Metcalf, Correspondence with the Author (August 2009).
[46] Horace Walpole, *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (Longman, 2007): 18.
[47] 'Anna Gaskell: Half Life', White Cube Gallery 12 Dec 25 Jan 2003 Available on the World Wide Web at: http://www.whitecube.com/exhibitions/halflife/ [Accessed July 2009]
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Strategies of Ambiguity in Rembrandt's *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, c. 1631

Michelle Moseley-Christian

Abstract

Rembrandt van Rijn's etching known as *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* c. 1631, is one of the artist's earliest and most controversial etchings, complicated by the obscure and thus far unidentified theme of the image. This study reconsiders longstanding questions concerning the identity of the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a possible likeness of Rembrandt's later wife Saskia, within a discussion that broadens the current evidence on seventeenth-century Dutch artistic practices in using models to negotiate socially fraught depictions of recognizable women depicted nude. The study further considers the ambiguity of the subject as Rembrandt's early professional strategy to construct a deeply personal image with public appeal.

Fig. 1: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound,* (second state), c. 1631 © Trustees of the British Museum. 177 x 160 mm, etching.

Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606-1669) etching known as *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* (c. 1631), depicts a corpulent, unclothed female figure seated in a minimally described outdoor setting (fig. 1).[1] The image is one of Rembrandt's earliest and most controversial etchings. Critical reception and interpretation of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* has been complicated by the obscure and thus far unidentified theme of the image, prompting a series of unresolved attempts to identify the figure. The etching's intransigent subject is closely tied to the enigmatic nude woman, the obscure visual context, and an absence of iconography and attributes, making it difficult to relate the figure to traditional subjects associated with the female nude. There is no clear iconographic anchor to classical figures, such as Diana, Bathsheba, or Venus. Based on these elusive visual cues, some scholarship has determined that the work simply has 'no subject.'[2] Others suggest that the print was to be paired with a contemporary etching identified as the goddess Diana (c. 1631), a figure who possesses a similarly rotund form.[3] If regarded as one of a pair it has been suggested that the figure depicted in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* may best be understood as a nymph, or perhaps a pendant figure of a like classical subject—Bathsheba, Susanna, or Venus. While questioning the identity of the figure and the subject of the print, scholars have also commented on a likeness between the seated woman depicted in the etching and Rembrandt's future wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh (1612-1642), whom he met in 1631 during his first year in Amsterdam, and later married in 1634.[4]

Investigating the implications of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a representation of Saskia presents problematic interpretive issues, based on the social disapprobation attendant upon women who posed nude in the seventeenth century.[5] Recent scholarship on the social perception of artists' models in the early modern Netherlands further suggests that women who posed nude were typically prostitutes or other women of low social regard.[6] The idea that a respectable, middle-class woman such as Saskia would allow herself to be displayed unclothed in an image that was sold to the public is often quickly

dismissed. However, visual and textual evidence from the seventeenth century Netherlands demonstrates that, in some cases, the depiction of identifiable women posing nude involves a more nuanced negotiation between the artist's creative processes, publicity practices, and the complex use of studio models in seventeenth-century Dutch imagery. Women of respectable origins as well as those of high rank, whose reputations were dependent on their good social and moral standing, were sometimes depicted partially unclothed in imagery. The question remains as to how a woman might be portrayed thus and still retain social respectability. Rembrandt's resolution to this problematic intersection of public and private in one of his earliest commercial etchings may also give an indication of his working methods for images of this type that follow later in his career.

This study will reconsider longstanding questions concerning the identity of the ungainly figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a possible likeness of Saskia. In doing so, this essay will reframe Rembrandt's calculated use of an equivocal subject and figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound,* an image that appears to reference Saskia, within the context of seventeenth century Dutch artists' creative and practical use of models in constructing the female nude. The seeming likeness to Saskia can be reconciled with the nude form if *Naked Woman Seated on an Mound* is interpreted as a depiction of a desirable physical type that is not necessarily intended to be a literal portrait of Saskia, but rather a figure that evokes the features of Saskia as an exemplar of a feminine ideal. One may assume that women with general features similar to Saskia had significant personal appeal to the artist, because such women reappear in a number of Rembrandt's paintings and prints throughout the scope of his career. Rembrandt's successful negotiation of the delicate boundary between portrait likeness and anonymous model in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is an approach that is invested in the print's overarching strategy of ambiguity. The female figure evokes the likeness of Saskia yet is generalised in order to stimulate wide-ranging viewer appeal.

While the woman in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is an ideation derived from Saskia, the visual multivalence of a nude form without clear contextual or iconographic cues further allows the viewer to forge associations between the figure and any one of a number of nudes: Venus, Bathsheba, a genre theme of a pastoral peasant, among others, thus lending the greatest commercial potential to his design.[7] Within the functional context of Saskia's relationship to the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, this essay will align Rembrandt's intentional ambiguity in the etching with the artist's emerging career ambitions during the 1630s. The visual and narrative ambiguity evidenced in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as a work dated to the artist's first year as an independent businessman indicates that Rembrandt's sophisticated commercial strategies of vigorous self-promotion developed much earlier than studies of his workshop practice have thus far recognised, and were applied to his prints as well as paintings.[8]

Models and sitters in Rembrandt's imagery

The figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is one of a number of unidentified women in Rembrandt's imagery, a consistent feature in the artist's *oeuvre* that contributes to the complex topography of his paintings, prints and drawings. The likenesses of numerous unidentified figures in Rembrandt's paintings and prints have traditionally been identified as 'portraits' of members of the artist's circle of family and friends. Until recently, for example, Rembrandt's images of an old woman reading, such as *The Prophetess Anna* (known as 'Rembrandt's Mother', 1631; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), have been nostalgically perceived as meditative portraits of his own mother.[9] Depictions of young women with individualised features have often been identified as Rembrandt's wife Saskia van Uylenburgh, and his later companions whom he did not marry, Geertje Dirckx, and Hendrickje Stoeffels. Discerning with some degree of accuracy which of these family members may appear in particular paintings, prints and drawings has been a central focus of Rembrandt scholarship from the

eighteenth century, and is an issue that has often been clouded by romanticised notions of the artist's life.[10]

To nineteenth-century observers, Saskia seemed to permeate a number of Rembrandt's early images. For over a century, these images were considered (and some still are) to be outright portraits of Saskia, despite the general lack of portrait conventions in many of the images.[11] Scholars first suggested Saskia might be the figure depicted in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* in the nineteenth century, an attribution based on the likeness of the woman in the etching to similar female figures in numerous paintings and prints made by Rembrandt before his wife's untimely death in 1642.[12] A central reason that scholars have suggested the *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* may represent Saskia is not only related to the unclothed figure's individualised facial features that are similar to other images of Saskia, but that Saskia (or a woman with strikingly similar features to known images of Saskia) seems to make a consistent reappearance throughout Rembrandt's early oeuvre at the time the artist met and married her, about the time *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was produced. The approximate date of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, c. 1631, was the year that Rembrandt permanently moved to Amsterdam from Leiden and began working in the studio of Hendrick van Uylenbergh, Saskia's guardian.[13]

Attributing identities to individual figures within Rembrandt's paintings and prints in order to establish the images as portraits has long interested historians of Dutch art, however, few distinctions have been made between the role of model and sitter in his or other seventeenth-century Netherlandish artists' works.[14] Models can be understood as figures whose likenesses, accurate or loosely based, are used by the artist as a direct template or as a source of inspiration for visually constructed figures. The presence of an anonymous model ostensibly does not affect the viewer's response to the subject of the picture, nor does it always lend meaning to the work as the viewer in intended to absorb it. A sitter,

however, is a recognisable figure whose presence in some way drives the meaning of the work.[15] When an identifiable figure is included in an image that is not intended as a traditional portrait construct, giving an image portrait-like qualities, the difficulty lies in determining whether that figure is intended to be recognised or not by the viewing audience. It is uncertain whether the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, if it represents Saskia, would have been recognised by anyone but a small, exclusive circle, or perhaps by anyone other than the artist himself. An investigation of the figure's identity is necessary not only because it raises larger issues of strategic ambiguity and creativity in Rembrandt's early work, but also because questions of the figure's identity inform an understanding of the print for twentieth and twenty-first centuries viewers.

The relationship between painters and their models has been regarded through a romanticised lens as a titillating exchange between the virile male artist and his inspirational muse, enlivening the reality of what was typically a practical and often mundane domestic or commercial partnership.[16] In studies exploring the studio mechanics of seventeenth-century Dutch art, public perception of models has only recently been more deeply investigated in terms of the social stigma such positions held for women who posed nude.[17] There was no professional collective of painters' models in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, giving way to the widespread assumption that candidates were either gleaned from artist's acquaintances, or if a nude figure was required, from brothels and other low-life contexts.

The role of an unclothed model in Dutch painting becomes more problematic when the figure is recognisable to viewers, raising the question of whether the figure is intended to be merely an anonymous placeholder as a model or whether the figure takes on aspects of the traditional role of a sitter as an individual whose likeness is intended to be known. In this manner, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* inhabits the realm of an image that functions more as a conceptual, rather than literal portrait. The print functions as a conglomerate of a figure with facial

features evoking Saskia's likeness, combined with a nude body that is most likely a model or a creative construction *uit de geest* (from the imagination), and not Saskia herself. In *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt blurs the boundary between the role of model and sitter to achieve a work that had an intensely personal meaning to the artist by rendering a figure with decidedly Saskia-like features while remaining ambiguous enough in subject to stimulate wide public appeal. Indeed, it is Rembrandt's skillful negotiation between these binary oppositions of public and private that make this print intriguing.

One of the more complex interpretive aspects of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as it relates to Saskia and current perceptions of the print is the unclothed figure and its attendant titular description as 'naked' as opposed to 'nude'. The first recorded mention of the etching is found in Bartsch's catalogue of Rembrandt's prints from 1797, where he lists the work descriptively as 'Une Nue Femme sur la butte', or *A Nude Woman on a Mound*.[18] Divisions in meanings of 'naked' versus 'nude' have been defined primarily by twentieth-century art critics to distinguish between the natural body and the artistically refined idealised human form, most notably by Kenneth Clark, whose influential *Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* declares the aesthetic superiority of idealised nudes done in the classical manner.[19] 'Nakedness' thus introduces a less refined tone to the work, predicated on the intimation of a more sexualised, earthy female type. As Ruth Barcan describes, 'Nakedness is imperfect and individual; the nude is ideal and universal. Nakedness is nature; nudity, culture.'[20] It is the naturalism of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound,* her textured flesh arranged in folds, lines and gathers, that has elicited vociferous and universal condemnation from a number of critics ranging from Andries Pels and Gerard de Lairesse to Kenneth Clark in historical and modern criticism of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*.[21]

The modern distinction between "naked" and "nude" did not exist in seventeenth-century Dutch culture. The term *naakt,* equivalent to "naked" was sometimes used in documents and inventories of paintings to describe the unclothed human

form.[22] Rembrandt's *Naked Woman* is perhaps unsettling because her nakedness implies a measure of eroticism, overtly displayed.[23] It is the unvarnished naturalism of the fleshy nude that has driven predominately critical response to *Naked Woman Seated on A Mound*, a trend that began in the late seventeenth century and continues through most contemporary discourse.[24] Among Rembrandt's nudes, it is *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* that has been singled out as especially offensive.

Critical and interpretive assessment of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was first documented in 1681 in a verse by Dutch poet Andries Pels describing the woman in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as 'no Greek Venus.' This comment, published less than two decades after Rembrandt's death, established a clear pattern for later critical dismissal of the figure that was often in reaction to the physical form rather than interpretive in content.[25] Therefore, since Rembrandt consistently returned to a certain type of female figure akin to *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* in numerous paintings and prints for the duration of his career, these forms may represent the artist's ideal feminine form, if not a variation on a more general northern ideal.[26]

Identity and the problem of nakedness
The problematic relationship between the unclothed figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* with Saskia stem from Rembrandt's often discussed social and professional ambitions and attendant social and moral pressures facing respectable women of the seventeenth-century. If *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* indeed represents Saskia's likeness, it seems unlikely that the shrewdly business-minded and upwardly mobile artist choose to display his betrothed as a nude. Because, however, recognisable women did sometimes appear partially nude in imagery, under what circumstances might a respectable female pose unclothed? In examining the broader range of Rembrandt's imagery, it is also evident that he placed recognizable figures in visual contexts that were less than

favorable, indicating a tendency of the artist to picture those in his intimate circle in pictorial imagery potentially fraught with social complications.

Consensus on the low opinion of the nude model in Dutch society relies on a small number of extant documents taken from legal disputes that refer to models as prostitutes or women of questionable reputation.[27] These cases have given rise to the idea that nude images made after life must have been made using only women of low social status. The lack of extant documents on other sources for artists' models has resulted in a generalisation of all nude models as women of morally questionable position. Although prostitutes or other women in difficult social positions were available as nude models, a closer examination of artists' variable studio practices reveals alternate approaches in which a nude body, such as in Rembrandt's Naked *Woman Seated on a Mound* could be constructed from a multiplicity of sources that were not solely dependent on the availability of prostitutes to act as models.

A number of pragmatic concerns involved in the production of paintings and prints encourage a more nuanced understanding of women who posed for artists and the shades of social acceptability associated with this act. The practice of keeping a *schilderkamer*, or studio located in an artist's home,[28] alongside his family makes suspect the notion that all artists would have brought prostitutes as models into this environment. While artists did use women from the fringes of society as models, this does not preclude the use of reputable women as nudes, or more accurately, as inspiration or as a point of departure for nude figures in imagery. The likeness of Saskia's face combined with an unclothed model's body resolves the difficulty in determining the identity of the figure pictured in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, if the form is a composite drawn together from disparate sources. While the face of the figure, as art historians have commented, is remarkably like other known images of Saskia, the body could have been borrowed from that of an anonymous model, or based on the preferred female body type ubiquitous in northern European imagery.

The Dutch, Flemish, and German tradition of naturalistic nudes that fall outside of the classically idealised tradition may be seen in early fifteenth century examples, among them Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck's full-bellied nude Eve from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432 (Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent). The recurring northern feminine physical type of heavy body, large belly and breasts, may be seen in a number of sixteenth-century prints including Hans Sebald Beham's ribald *Bathing Women*, 1548 (fig. 2; London, British Museum),[29] and numerous images by Lucas van Leyden,[30] artists whose works were collected by Rembrandt.

Fig. 2: Hans Sebald Beham after Bartel Beham, *Bathing Women*, 1548. © Trustees of the British Museum. 83 x 57 mm, engraving.

An exemplar of the seventeenth-century corpulent nudes that are iconic in northern European imagery and in Rembrandt's prints from the 1630s can be located in Willem Buytewech's *Bathsheba Receiving David's Message*, from 1615 (London, British Museum; fig. 3).[31]

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Fig. 3: Willem Buytewech, *Bathsheba Receiving David's Message*, ca. 1615, © Trustees of the British Museum. 172 x 156 mm, etching.

Buytewech's *Bathsheba* is strikingly similar to *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* in both composition and in the type of large nude shown seated on a drape in a gardenscape. Like *Naked Woman*, Bathsheba twists to one side on her cloth-covered seat, with the left side of her body cast in shadow. Despite Buytewech's large nude as one of many corpulent northern female subjects predating *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, it is only Rembrandt's figure that critics have focused on as a work considered both curious and grotesque. Also unlike Rembrandt's *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound,* Buytewech's nude is easily identifiable as the biblical figure Bathsheba. Buytewech's Bathsheba is accompanied by familiar iconographic staging; the old woman who tends to her as she bathes, and in the tradition of Bathsheba imagery inherited form the middle ages, the small figure of David is visible in the distance as a voyeur. In sharp contrast, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is removed from any such thematic narrative context.

Although the use of studio lay figures has been only recently reinvestigated in any depth as part of studio practice in depicting the human figure in seventeenth-century Dutch art,[32] the probable use of models or stock body types for the unclothed portions of figures in portraits of respectable Dutch women has been overlooked. Seventeenth-century legal documents refer to just such a case in which the head and body of a painted figure are taken from different sources. In 1676, Geertuijt de Haes filed a legal complaint against Lodewijk van der Helst, a dispute based on De Haes' claim that the artist had painted her in the nude as the figure of Venus. Testimony in defense of Van der Helst stated that he had 'painted her face and hands from life, but that the body was created from his imagination.'[33] In the same manner of production Eric Jan Sluijter's recent assessment of Rembrandt's canon of nudes, in fact, finds the body of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* to be plausibly an invention 'uit de geest' (from the artist's imagination).[34] Visual precedents for the general figure type seen in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* are found in the robust, even rotund, bodies long visible in imagery produced throughout Germany and the Low Countries.

The use of models for the bodies of partially unclothed female sitters in portraits is a practice that was likely used in numerous images of elite women appearing bare-breasted in seventeenth-century historiated portraits.[35] Marie de' Medici, the Queen of France, is depicted in historiated portrait form with bared breasts three times within the series of twenty-four paintings she commissioned from Rubens between 1621-25, to decorate her Luxembourg Palace in Paris. This type of image of the bare-breasted Queen is exemplified by her *Portrait of Marie de' Medici as Bellona*, c. 1622-25 (Louvre, Paris), although it seems unlikely that the Queen of France would have sat partially nude for Rubens' allegorical portrait. Further instances of this type can be seen in paintings of elite Dutch women such as Gerard van Honthorst's, *Daughters of Johan van Roade as the Three Graces*, 1645 (Museum Slot Zuylen, Oud-Zuilen), whose portraits include one of the young women of with a bared breast.[36]

The exposed body of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* emphasises breasts and protruding belly as the most prominent physical features of the figure. Bared breasts, among other connotations, historically evoke references to mercy, charity and humility. Though bared breasts probably did have had sexual inferences in most images, the conflated qualities of virtue and sexuality symbolised by exposed breasts—as just one example—have a lengthy visual history within religious imagery, such as the type represented by the *Madonna lactans* and personifications of *caritas*.[37] The focus on bared breasts and abdomen as distinctive features of the female figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* evoke a quasi-allegorical figure of fertility, although not one found in Dutch emblem books or Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (first published in the northern Netherlands in 1644), and allude to a the ideal of a fruitful feminine form.

The practice of combining disparate sources to create a conglomerate human figure that represents an ideal female type certainly had implications for artistic skill and talent. The exercise challenged the artist to develop a form selected from a model and the artist's own skill, requiring aesthetic acumen in the selective process and imagination to join these features with forms *uit de geest*. In this way, the artistic process of aesthetic judgment and selection recalls the skill of Zeuxis, the ancient Greek painter who is reputed to have constructed the perfect female form by combining the most appealing features of five beautiful women. Later Rembrandt invoked direct parallels between himself and Zeuxis as masters of artistic process of aesthetic selection at the end of his career with the *Self Portrait as Zeuxis* (1662, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum).[38] *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is a visual construction, I argue, that is predicated on such selective processes, a formulation that also allows the image to permeate the distinction between Saskia-like portrait and nude from the historical/ allegorical tradition. Rembrandt's decision to produce this image in print form further comments on artistic ability. The artist's skilled handling of the engraving

technique is emphasised by strong shadowy contrasts and the display of surface texture in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*.

Rembrandt's women and the feminine ideal

Naked Woman Seated on a Mound was printed in two states and copied by Wenceslas Hollar in 1635, indicating that it was a popular image with a receptive audience at the time Rembrandt made it.[39] The exposed body of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* emphasises breasts and protruding belly as the most prominent physical features of the figure. Thus, among other multivalent meanings, *Naked Woman on a Mound* emphasises the propagatory potential of Saskia in particular and women in general, evoking the promise of fertility and ripeness in depicting the full-bodied woman sitting in proximity to the earth. If *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was indeed intended as a pendant nymph or attendant to the Diana etching, the association of that classical theme with fertility and pregnancy would be skillfully evoked in the undulating belly and pendulous breasts of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*. Moreover, A surge in the publication of instructive prints and literature on reproduction and bodily processes in the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflects a keen scientific and cultural interest in female reproduction, an interest also evoked by images of fertile female bodies such as *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*.[40]

Naked Woman Seated on a Mound, printed in two states and copied, was likely in such high demand because images of sexually 'coy young women' were a longstanding and popular theme in northern Europe imagery.[41] The figure looks assertively at the viewer, an action that personalises (and sexualises) the figure, and according to Eric Jan Sluijter, removes the naked woman as subject from the remote position of a merely being a passive artist's model.[42] The body seated on the drape calls attention to uncovered flesh. The nude is adorned only with one visible earring, giving the impression of the figure as having recently been dressed. Her long hair is loose and free-flowing, mimicking the cloth drape and

furthering the casual impression of intimacy. The erotic and sexual appeal of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* expands on associations with fertility that stem from the northern European feminine prototype, in which the figure depicted in the print possesses a rounded belly and breasts that suggests fecundity.

In *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt presents the viewer with an image that alludes to the power and potential of a woman's body as a source of generation. Indeed, in addition to the practice of using Saskia's face along with a model's body as an ideal type in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt also produced two paintings of Saskia shortly after their marriage depicting his wife in the guise of the goddess of fertility. As Rembrandt's new wife, Saskia appears as Flora first in 1634 (St. Petersburg, Hermitage). The artist quickly produced another image of Flora in *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume* (Saskia as Flora), 1635 (fig. 4; National Gallery, London).

Fig. 4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saskia van Uylenburgh in Arcadian Costume* (Saskia as Flora), 1635. © The National Gallery, London. 123.5 x 97.5 cm, oil on canvas.

Both images of Saskia as Flora emphasise the protruding abdomen of each of the figures using her voluminous garments, in a manner similar to the bulging stomach of the female in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*. Both Flora pictures are approximate to the attributed date for *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*. Saskia therefore appears as a vehicle for an ideal notion of beauty and fertility within a range of his paintings and prints, based on the artist's personal preference and the pervasive northern feminine type. Rembrandt seems so captivated by this corporeal female body, its sensuality and creative power, that he revisited the form and pose again, modified in *Bathsheba* (Paris, Louvre), from 1654, a painting that has been widely interpreted by art historians as a representation of his domestic companion at the time, Hendrickje Stoffels.[43]

While the Dutch practice of combining the nude body of a model with different physical features can explain the use of an identifiable woman as a facet of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, it remains to be seen why Rembrandt might incorporate Saskia into this particular image. Rembrandt's use of Saskia as a point of departure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* appears to be part of a larger pictorial practice shifting toward ambiguity or blurred categories (history, genre, portraiture) in subject begun by the newly independent artist in the 1630s, and the nude print represents one of the earliest examples of this pictorial approach in his commercial oeuvre. In addition to *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Saskia's features, as well as Rembrandt's, have been noted separately in a number of paintings that are generally not considered to be portraits and were made during the later 1630s. In terms of social acceptability, these figures depict the recognisable Rembrandt and Saskia in an unusual series of historical roles that may be perceived as unflattering or even villainous. Take, for example, *Samson Threatening His Father-in-Law,* from circa 1635 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Berlin), in which Rembrandt has been identified as the aggressive figure of Samson. The likeness of Saskia is thought to have been included as the treacherous Delilah in *The Blinding of Samson*, 1636 (Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main). Continuing with the dramatic biblical theme, Rembrandt's

wife perhaps appears again as the bride in *Samson's Wedding Feast,* 1638 (fig. 5; Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden).[44]

Fig. 5: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Samson's Wedding Feast,* 1638. Photographer, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, 175 x 126 cm, oil on canvas.

A painting that is largely accepted as a double-portrait of Rembrandt and his first wife Saskia, identified as *The Prodigal Son,* 1636 (Fig. 6; Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden), depicts the two in the unflattering role of tavern-dwellers.[45]

Fig. 6: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Prodigal Son,* 1636. Photographer, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, 161 x 131 cm oil on canvas.

For an ambitious couple such as Rembrandt and Saskia, some scholars assert that the implication of moral aberrance in *The Prodigal Son* would have been detrimental to their social and financial goal of achieving a state of middle class social respectability.[46] Arguments refuting the relationship of the figure in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* to Saskia in particular overlook Rembrandt's use of his own likeness as well as Saskia's as figures that are glaringly unvirtuous. The implications of the low-life double-portrait where Rembrandt depicts his wife in the socially unacceptable role of a tavern harlot are especially notable in this context. The artist appears to have had no compunction in placing both himself

and his wife not only as the tortured, duplicitous and sexually charged biblical figures of Samson and Delilah, but also as a whore and as a drunkard.

Fig 7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Beggar Seated on a Bank*, 1630 © Trustees of the British Museum. 116 x 70 mm, etching.

Moreover, Rembrandt's own features appear in a number of less than favorable social contexts, including as a figure amongst the mob participating in the stoning of St. Stephen, 1625 (Lyon, Musée des Beaux Arts), and as a filthy, shouting beggar (fig. 7; London, British Museum).[47] While likenesses of known women in socially suspect roles was not the standard for portraiture, other examples of well-regarded women with a public profile cast in socially compromising situations are known: James Welu considers the female tippler in *Carousing Couple*, 1630 (Louvre, Paris) a self-portrait of Judith Leyster.[48] *Naked Woman on a Mound* is an image that encompasses Rembrandt's ideal of beauty and femininity, combining Saskia-like features and the repetition of this body type in a number of Rembrandt's nudes, much in the same way that voluptuous, fair-haired women with features recalling Isabella Brandt and Hélène Fourment

appear repeatedly in Rubens' paintings, though they are not necessarily literal portraits of Isabella and Hélène.[49]

Conclusion: Marketing ambiguity in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*

Using widely distributed prints as vehicles to promote name-recognition was a strategy that provided more long-term benefits than merely the financial aspects of print selling. The painting workshop practice of the master has been presented in terms of creating a reputation designed to disperse his name, all with the aim of increasing fame. With *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* as an earlier exemplar, it appears that this practice extended to, or perhaps even began with, his early prints. The popularity of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* underscores the chasm between types of images that appealed to the buying public and those seen as worthy of acclaim by art critics, who criticised the naked figure. The image thus targets both elite print enthusiasts and members of a viewing public who would have been able to read the image from the point of view of broadly diverging contexts. The visual subtlety of Rembrandt's unclothed subject would have allowed viewers to elicit multivalent interpretations from the picture. In a printed work, the lack of a clearly identifiable figure, setting or subject might have stimulated interest from a potentially wider buying audience, making the print more marketable and therefore more profitable for the artist. The calculated liminal quality of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* becomes more apparent when considered within the avocation of print collecting during the seventeenth century, a practice that experienced a significant increase in popularity at this time.[50]

Printed works on paper had once been more casually regarded, but by the seventeenth century they were perceived as objects of individual value that gained esteem for the artist who produced them and the collector who possessed them. As an artist and a collector, Rembrandt was familiar with market demand. Prints might be sold to dealers, individual patrons, or distributed to the public at fairs, among a variety of other ways of disseminating the images. Rembrandt

himself acquired large numbers of prints at auction. The motive for Rembrandt's collecting and purchasing habits were the subject of much speculation in critical commentary. In 1637, he bought forty lots of prints, demonstrating his own interest as a collector.[51] In a well-known anecdote, Rembrandt reportedly paid the large sum of 1400 guilders at auction for fourteen engravings by printmaker Lucas van Leyden.[52] Seventeenth-century Italian critic Filipo Baldinucci also claimed that Rembrandt bought impressions of his own prints back at auction as a way to increase their desirability and price.[53] At the time of his later insolvency, the 1656 inventory of Rembrandt's possessions recorded thirty-four albums of prints.[54]

Graphic works have often been characterised as a reliable source of artists' incomes. The ambiguous subject in *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* carries no rigidly fixed, specific iconographic meaning in order for Rembrandt to reap more profit from a wider audience. For a growing audience of select print connoisseurs, the passion for collecting all available states of a print was something Rembrandt must have used to his advantage. Rembrandt's practice of issuing prints with multiple states, some with only minute changes (as is the case with the two states of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*), can be viewed as a deliberate manipulation of the market similar to his well-known strategies to stoke demand for his paintings.[55] His student, Samuel van Hoogstraten, commented in his 1678 edition of *Inleiding tot de Hoogeschool der Schilderkunst* (Introduction to the Great School of Painting) on the fervor with which Rembrandt's prints were collected: 'the passion [for Rembrandt's prints] was so great at that time, that people would not be taken for true connoisseurs who did not have the Juno with and without the crown, the Joseph with the white face and the brown face and other such things.'[56] *Naked Woman Seated on Mound* was issued in two states, indicating the popularity of the image. Art critics' disdain for Rembrandt's nude had no apparent impact on public reception of the image. As a further testament to its appeal, *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* was copied in 1635 by Bohemian printmaker Wenceslas Hollar.[57]

Seventeenth-century connoisseurs were concerned with acquiring individual impressions, states, and different papers as part of collecting Rembrandt's works. Even as early as 1649, a handbook was published to instruct collectors on how to distinguish between Rembrandt's original impressions and copies of his prints, which were already produced in large numbers by other artists.[58] In addition to the print as a financial venture, Rembrandt's conscious construction of *Naked Woman Seated on Mound* for the widest possible appeal would have accomplished an additional goal of making Rembrandt's name known to a public audience. Having recently moved to Amsterdam in 1631, Rembrandt faced a much more urban, cosmopolitan and competitive atmosphere than in Leiden.

As works that are defined by their production in multiples, their typically affordable prices, their portability, and most importantly, their growing status as objects of connoisseurship in the seventeenth century, prints provided an ideal mode of advertisement for an ambitious, emerging artist such as Rembrandt during his first year in Amsterdam. As for the curious female figure in the etching, Saskia's features subtly evoked in the face of *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, combined with a generic body representing the northern feminine ideal, converge to emphasize qualities about Saskia herself that Rembrandt probably found highly desirable. *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* speaks to Rembrandt's perception of Saskia's beauty and potential fecundity, all worthy virtues for an early modern woman and wife. With these appealing qualities, she represents an ideal woman and an ideal partner in their forthcoming marriage. *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* is ultimately characteristic of Rembrandt's work in that the seemingly simple image encapsulates a deeply personal sentiment for the artist, couched within an iconographically ambiguous format that would stimulate appeal among a scope of potential buyers.

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[1] See Ruth Barcan. *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (New York: Berg, 2004) and Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal For,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). The current title likely comes from the catalogue description in Bartsch. See Adam von Bartsch**,** *Catalogue Raisonné de*

toutes les Estampes qui forment l'oeuvre de Rembrandt et ceux de ses Principaux Imitateurs (A. Danz, 1880): no. 189; F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Engravings and Woodcuts 1450-1700,* v. 9 (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1949): 73; Hollstein v. 18, 96.

[2] '…it [*Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*] has come to be understood as having no subject.' Holm Bevers and Barbara Welzel, *Rembrandt: The Master and His Workshop* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): cat. no. 6.

[3] See Volker Manuth, "'As stark naked as one could possibly be painted…': The Reputation of the Female Model in the Age of Rembrandt," *Rembrandt's Women*, Julia Lloyd Williams (ed.) (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 2001), 47-48. Albert Blankert (ed.) *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1997), 390, cat. no. 99.

[4] The earliest is Alfred von Wurzbach, 'Ein dekaliertes Porträt der Saskia' *Zeitscrift für bilende Kunst* 11 (1876): 287.

[6] For a discussion of Rembrandt's images that have variously identified as Saskia, see Stephanie Dickey, 'Rembrandt and Saskia: Art, Commerce, and the Poetics of Portraiture', *Rethinking Rembrandt* Alan Chong and Michael Zell (eds.) (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2002): 17-47.

[6] See Manuth, 47-50.

[7] For a discussion of ambuiguity as a wider strategy in the sixteenth-century printmaking tradition, see Jan Van der Stok, "Ambiguous Intentions, Multiple Interpretations: An 'other' Look at Printed Images from the Sixteenth Century" *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2001): 19-29.

[8] Ernst van de Wetering, 'Multiple Functions of Rembrandt's Self-Portraits', *Rembrandt by Himself*, Christopher White (ed.) (London: National Gallery, 1999): 35.

[9] Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar, 'Rembrandt in Leiden: his Town, Workshop and Models', Christiaan Vogelaar in *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality* (Leiden: Waanders, 2005): 26-27.

[10] David R. Smith suggests that family members were so often depicted because they elicited Rembrandt's artistic empathy in various ways. David R. Smith, 'Rembrandt's Early Double Portraits and the Dutch Conversation Piece', *Art Bulletin* 64 (1982): 259-60

[11] Images of this type include *Saskia in Profile*, 1632 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm); *Bust of a Young Woman Smiling* (Saskia van Uylenurgh?), 1633 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden); *Saskia in a Red Hat*, c. 1633-42 (Germaldegalerie, Alte Meister Staatliche, Kustsammlungen, Kassel); *Saskia van Uylenburgh, Wife of the Artist*, 1638-40 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.); *Saskia with a Red Flower*, 1641 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden), among others.

[12] Volker Manuth, "'As stark naked as one could possibly be painted…': the reputation of the nude model in the age of Rembrandt" in Williams: 48.

[13] Julia Lloyd Williams, *Rembrandt's Women (*ed.) (New York: Prestel, 2001): 11,15.

[14] See, for example, Dickey, 2002, 21-28; Alison McNeil Kettering's brief discussion of Gesina ter Borch in 'Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin', in *Looking at Seventeenth-century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, Wayne Franits (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997):104-106; Vogelaar and Korevaar, 20-28.

[15] According to Madlyn Kahr, images that recall recognizable family members of artists directly draw some meaning from those likenesses. 'Some scholars have observed – I think correctly – a resemblance to Rembrandt himself in Samson in the scene with the father–in-law, and such a resemblance could also not be meaningless'. Madlyn Kahr, 'Rembrandt and Delilah', *Art Bulletin* 52 no. 2 (1973): 244-45.252.

[16] Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 62-67.

[17] See Manuth, 44-48.

[18] Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue Raisonné de Toutes les Estampes Qui Forment l'Oeuvre de Rembrandt (*Vienna: A. Blumauer, 1797): 170-71;B198. 'Une feme nue trés grasse, don't la tête est vue de face, le corps dirigé vers la droit de l'estampe. Elle est assise sur une elevation de terre couverte d'un drap. Elle s'appuye de son bras droit sur la butte, qui lui sert de siege, et s'accoude de l'autre sur une partie plus élévée de cette meme butte, où l'on voit sa chemise. On ne trouve ce morceau que très difficilment d'une belle épreuve.'; Hollstein also refers to the print

as 'Naked Woman Seated on a Mound,' see F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Engravings and Woodcuts 1450-1700*, v. 9 (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1949): 73; Hollstein v. 18, 96.

[19] Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: a Study in Ideal Form*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

[20] Ruth Barcan, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (New York: Berg, 2004): 33; For the etymology of "naked" and "nude," see Barcan 32.

[21] See Clark and Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics, 1630-1730* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1953): 83.

[22] Schott, 86.

[23] Barcan 36; Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 393.

[24] Erik Hinterding, Ger Luijten and Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Rembrandt As Printmaker* (Amsterdam: Waanders Publishers, 2000): 101.

[25] Andreas Pels, *Gebruik en misbruik des toneels* (Amsterdam: Albert Magnus,1681). "'Als hij een' naakte vrouw, gelijk 't somtijds gebeurende,/ Zou schild'ren, tot model geen Griekse Venus keurde:/ Maar eer een' waschter, of turftreedster uit een' schuur,/ Zijn dwaaling noemende navolging van Natuur,/ Al't ander ydele verziering. Slappe borsten'/ Verwrongen handen, ja de neepen vans de worsten/ Des rijglifs in de buik, des kousebands om't been./'t Moest al gevolgd zijn, of natuur was niet tevreen."

[26] Elizabeth Schott's dissertation argues that Rembrandt's female figures do not subscribe to a consistent physical type during his career, based on her own measurements of proportion. For my purposes, rather than specific body measurements, I am citing the general tendency of Rembrandt's female figures to appear broad-hipped, full-bellied, heavy and naturalistic in form; specifically, not idealised in the classical tradition. See Elizabeth Ann Schott, 'Representing the Body in the Seventeenth-century Netherlands: Rembrandt's Nudes Reconsidered', (Ph.D. diss, University of California, Berkeley, 2000), 74-75.113.

[27] Manuth, 47; Blankert notes that models were often recognised in paintings, but claims that was a dishonorable association because models were often prostitutes. Several primary sources referring to artists using prostitutes as models are cited. Albert Blankert, 'Excursus: Perfectly Beautiful and Stark Naked' in *Dutch Classicism* (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen Rotterdam, 2000): 18.

[28] Alpers, 65-66.

[29] F.W.H Hollstein, German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts ca. 1400-1700, v. 3 (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1954): 1; 208 ii; an engraving copied after a composition by Bartel Beham.

[30] F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450-1700*, v. 10 (Amsterdam, 1949): 60.

[31] Hollstein, IV, 54, 55.

[32] H. Perry Chapman, 'The Wooden Body: Representing the Manikin in Dutch Artists' Studios', *Lichaam en lichamelijkheid in de Nederlandse kunst* in *Nederlands Kunsthistorische Jaarboek* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008): 189-215.

[33] Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventar, urkunden zur Geschichte der Holländischen kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts,* v. 2 (Den Haag, 1916): 416. '…hy haar tronie en handen naar 't leven had geschildert, dog dat hy het lichaem uyt de geest daarby had gevoegd…'

[34] Sluijter: 274-5.

[35] Klaske Muizelaar and Derek Philips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age: Paintings and People in Historical Persepctive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 149.

[36] Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997): 25, 97; Muizelaar and Phillips describe breasts as 'fetishized' in seventeenth-century Dutch art, and cite their sexual connotations: 148.

[37] For a discussion of the *Madonna lactans* as a theme in late medieval Italian art, see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); see also Muizelaar and Phillips, chapter 4 note 86, David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 324,; Eric Jan Sluijter, *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age*, (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2000): 14-15.

[38] See Albert Blankert, ‚Rembrandt, Zeuxis and Ideal Beauty', *Album Amicorum J. G. van Gelder*, ed. J. Bruyn, et al., (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973).

[39] The whereabouts of the copperplate for *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound* are currently unknown. See Erik Hinterding, Ger Luijten and Martin Royalton-Kisch, eds. *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000): 357.

[40] See Karin Leonard, ‚Vermeer's Pregnant Women: On Human Generation and Pictorial Representation', *Art History* 25 no. 3 (2002): 296 and Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 17.

[41] Clifford Ackley, et. al., *Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003): 86.

[42] Sluijter: 274.

[43] See Svetlana Alpers, 'The Painter and the Model': 147-158, and Margaret D. Carroll, 'Uriah's Gaze: 159-75, in 'Not Bathsheba', *Rembrandt's Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter*, Ann Jensen Adams, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[40] Kahr: 244-45.

[45] For the range of literature, see, for example, Gerard Knuttel, *Rembrandt, de meester en zijn werk*. Amsterdam, 1956; Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt, Life and Work,* Rev. ed. London, 1964; Ingvar Bergstrom, 'Rembrandt's Double Portrait of Himself and Saskia at the Dresden Gallery: A Tradition Transformed', *Nederlands Kunsthistorische Jaarboek* 17 (1966): 143-69; Kahr, 252-58; Christian Tümpel, 'Ikonographische Beitrage zu Rembrandt; zur Deutung und Interpretation seiner Historien', *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 13 (1968): 116-26; Annelise Mayer-Meintschel, 'Rembrandt und Saskia im Gleichnis vom verloren Sohn', *Jahrbuch Staatliche Kunstsammlungen*, Dresden, (1970/71): 44-54.

[46] Simon Schama, 1999, 380-82; One might also consider Gesina Ter Borch who was the probable model for the young woman in Gerard Ter Borch's so-called *Paternal Admonition,* 1654-55 (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin).

[47] H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-century Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 11. B174.

[48] James Welu, et. al. *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (New York, 1993): 46-47.

[49] Representations of Rubens' wives evoked by the artist's particular depictions of women have been explored in: Nancy T. Grummond, 'Helena Fourment and Rubens, Venus and Apelles', *Southeastern College Art Conference Review*, 9 no. 1(1976): 27-28; Albert Shug, '"Helenen in Jedem Weibe" – Helene Fourment und ein besonderer Poträttypus im Spätwerk von Peter Paul Rubens', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 46 (1985): 119-164.

[50] William W. Robinson, '"This Passion for Prints" Collecting and Connoisseurship in Northern Europe during the Seventeenth century', *Printmaking in the Age of Rembrandt*, Clifford Ackley (ed.) (Boston, 1981): xxvii.

[51] Ibid., xxxiv.

[52] Ibid., xliii, note 96.

[53] Paul Crenshaw, *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art Market in Seventeeth-Century Netherlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 36-37.

[54] Ibid., xxxv; Rembrandt collected prints in albums categorised by artist: reproductive prints after Bruegel, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and Rubens were kept along with impressions by Lucas, Carracci, Goltzius and others. Rembrandt also kept albums of subjects including costume, landscape, exotic subjects and erotic prints. Richard Field, et.al., *Sets and Series: Prints from the Low Countries* (New Haven, 1984): 6.

[55] Van de Wetering, 34-5.

[56] Arnold Houbraken, *Inleiding tot de Hoogeschool der Schilderkunst* I, 1678, reprint Holland: (Davaco, 1969): 271.

[57] Williams: 79.

[58] Abraham Bosse, *Sentiments sur la distinction des diverses manieres de peintures,, desseins & gravures, & des originaux d'avec leurs copies*, Paris, 1649, p.82-85, cited in Eric Hinterding, 'The

History of Rembrandt's Copperplates, with a Catalogue of Those that Survive', *Simiolus* 22 no. 4 (1993): 264.

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Dada, MAVO and the Japanese Avant-Garde: A prologue to the introduction of Surrealism to Japan

Majella Munro

Abstract

This paper examines Dada influence on the 1920s avant-garde in Japan, considered as a prehistory to the introduction of Surrealism. This paper has two aims. The first is to justify a reading of Japanese Surrealist radicalism in terms of artistic, rather than social, revolt, by tracing anti-academic tendencies within the Japanese avant-garde from its inception. A lack of political radicalism in Japanese Surrealism is usually explained through claims that the wartime state was ideologically repressive and inhibited the kind of free, critical expression supposedly found in French Surrealist work. By looking at avant-garde production from the very early twenties, it is possible to chart the waning of interest in socio-political concerns to before the outbreak of the China (1937-41) or Pacific wars (1941-45), undermining the premise that an interest in artistic rather than political radicalism was a particular feature of the late thirties and early forties. The second aim is to explain the art historical quotation deployed by some Japanese Dadaists and Surrealists as part of a trend within the Japanese avant-garde, not as a misunderstanding or corruption of modernist ideals, as it is usually held to be.[1] By examining ways in which Japanese Dadaists blended their production with the iconographies and philosophies of Zen Buddhism, this paper creates a framework in which a turn to tradition and art historical precedent can be reconciled with innovative modernist practice.

Introduction

In histories of French Surrealism, the continuities and conflicts which allowed Surrealism to develop from the remnants of Dada are familiar and well documented, yet in the Japanese case Dada is rarely considered as an antecedent to Surrealism. It is the reasons for and consequences of this neglect that this paper seeks to uncover. Dada is not considered to have flourished in Japan until after the Second World War. Whilst this omission of the pre-war movement may have connections to Occupation ideologies following Japan's defeat—ideologies which claimed that there could be no free, avant-garde expression until General Douglas MacArthur's administration brought liberal democracy to the troubled country—it is also undeniably true that the pre- and post-war Japanese Dada movements were

radically different in scope, organisation and measure. The jubilant experimentations of post-war Neo-Dada, Gutai and Japanese Fluxus participants achieved critical acclaim internationally; in marked contrast to a very limited interest in Japanese Dada during the 1920s, on the part of both contemporary practitioners and later scholars.

The reasons for the limited take-up of Dada are interesting in themselves. Partly, the rapid introduction of Surrealism by 1926 overshadowed interest in Dada whilst it was still a burgeoning movement in Japan, where the earliest Dada experiments dated from 1921. Additionally, while plenty of avant-garde groups were interested in Dada, this was subsumed by and melded with other imported western avant-garde currents; including, most notably, Constructivism, which entered Japan alongside Dada. Junzaburo Nishiwaki (1894-1982), the poet who introduced Surrealism to Japan, defined the term 'Surrealism' by explaining that 'This rather inclusive name subsumes members of what used to be called cubism or dada [...]',[2] therefore justifying tracing a lineage between Dada and Surrealism, and also revealing much about Dada's existence as a hybrid cubo-futurist avant-garde movement in Japan. One such hybrid group, MAVO, a futurist-constructivist-dadaist collective, will form the basis of this paper, whilst the oeuvre of Takahashi Shinkichi (1901-87), the only pre-war Japanese practitioner to openly affiliate his work with an orthodox, Tzara-esqu Dadaism, will form a point of comparison.[3]

The Dadaist elements of both MAVO and Shinkichi's works are overlooked. In the case of MAVO, this is due to their combination of styles and their dislike of aesthetic orthodoxy, making their practice resistant to definition as Dadaist. Meanwhile, Shinkichi's 'archaicism' (by which I mean his interest in traditional tropes and Buddhist beliefs) is felt to debase the modernism of his Dadaist practice. These aspects—the blending with Constructivism, and an interest in traditional culture—could give both Shinkichi and MAVO's work the appearance of lying outside the scope of Dada, but this would depend on conceptualising a Dadaist orthodoxy, a scholarly construct which would in itself be unsympathetic to the character of the movement. Amalgamation with

Constructivism was not specific to Japan, but was common to the avant-garde internationally, as Dawn Ades has argued in connection with the work of Hans Richter and other European Dada-Constructivists.[4] In fact, not only do these two instances of synthesis fail to detract from the avant-garde impact of MAVO and Shinkichi's work, but it is within these apparent deviations that their most significant legacies for Surrealism can be found. Anti-academic practice, stylistic plurality and archaicism are the respective contributions of MAVO and Shinkichi to Japanese Surrealism. While there was no Dada movement as such in Japan for Surrealism to derive from, as it did in France, interest in Dada nonetheless exerted influence. Shūzō Takiguchi, the leading theorist of the Japanese Surrealist movement, described Dada and Surrealism as having a successive relationship. There were also some common practitioners, including the poet Kitasono Katsue (1902-78), who had produced a Dadaist-Anarchist magazine, *Ge Girrigigam Prr Gimgem*, before affiliating his poetics to Surrealism. According to the scholar Toshiharu Omuka,[5] *Ge Girrigigam Prr Gimgem* represented a metaphysical, non-radical Dada which was an important influence on the political development of Surrealism in Japan.[6] Thus the less anarchic, less activist, less politically engaged character of Japanese Surrealism relative to other Surrealist movements internationally may not be due to the historical context of totalitarianism, but could be the legacy of the aestheticised Dada which was its immediate predecessor.[7] Omuka's observations provide a starting point for enquiry into the immediate artistic contexts of Japanese Surrealism, restoring the role of cultural context in a discourse which has been overshadowed by political concerns.

Discounting neglect of Japanese interest, the historiography of Dada as a whole does have particular strengths and subtleties that make it an excellent model for art-historical discussions of avant-gardism as a trans-national phenomenon. A commitment to avoiding orthodoxy gave Dada an aesthetic fluidity and an egalitarian aspect that allowed it not only to be absorbed by other styles (as it was in the case of the hybrid constructivism of MAVO) but also to spread internationally without hierarchy or bias.[8] Movements emerged in Germany, France and Switzerland, operating as distinct and independent, but also as a trans-national collective, giving it a very different character to

that imposed on the international spread of Surrealism by scholars, where the French movement is given a hegemonic precedence. These qualities make Dada's history difficult to recount, but also mean Dada serves as a better model for the dissemination of an international avant-garde movement in a way that is fractured, contentious and nuanced than the monolithic scholarly construct that is the history of Surrealism.

Shinkichi and Zen

In the Japanese case, this lack of codification allowed Dada to be understood in terms of, and synthesised with, indigenous cultural practices, most specifically Zen. There was good coverage of the emergence of Dada in Europe in Japanese news media and art journals from 1920, most of which linked it to Zen from the outset,[9] and it was through such news reports that Dada first came to Shinkichi's attention. Aside from the link to Zen, there were other aspects of Japanese pre-modern art which had similarities to Dada. For Ko Won, the only scholar to examine the connection of Zen and Dada (in not only the Japanese but also the European cases), Dada is 'the decentralization of logical mind into "nonsensical" humour, paving the way to the movement of the absurd and automatism'.[10] But the use of nonsense, humour, and obscure language, accepted as Dadaist techniques, were familiar features of pre-modern popular culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as were changes in poetry which Won takes as evidence of the advent of modernism (such as the abandonment of syllable structures, and the use of vernacular language).[11] Aside from these legacies, Zen is without doubt the most important domestic element informing Dada in Japan. While MAVO had their first exhibition in July 1923 at a Buddhist temple,[12] Shinkichi became a novice monk in the Shingon sect in 1921. Based on his readings of Shinkichi's work, Won claims that:

> Shinkichi [...] attributed the inception of Dada in Japan to the Buddhist background of certain Japanese and not to the chaotic and revolutionary milieu following the earthquake of 1923.[13]

This not only points to an integration with the existing cultural context, but also provides an alternative narrative of the inception of avant-garde experimentation. In most discourse on the Japanese avant-garde, the trauma of the Great Kanto Earthquake, in which nearly 150,000 people died, is used as an equivalent to the trauma of the Great War which provided a political backdrop to the emergence of a critical avant-garde in Europe, projecting a similarity of context onto the Japanese case. By dismissing citation of the earthquake, and instead looking at ways in which Japanese culture was ready and able to accept avant-garde movements, Shinkichi provides opportunity to re-evaluate avant-gardism in terms of art-historical and cultural development, avoiding parallelism and allowing scope for the history of avant-gardism in Japan to be discussed on its own terms. Indeed, Shinkichi's own Dada experiments predated Kanto by two years.

Shinkichi's Dadaist practice was, by his own admission, philosophically Buddhistic.[14] His very first avant-garde poem *Assertion is Dadaist,* whilst being recognisably Dadaist in its construction and typographical layout, also explores Buddhist concepts and makes explicit reference to Buddha. Indeed, the influence of Dada on Zen Buddhists may have been reciprocal. Shinkichi's 1970 text *Revival of Dada*[15] claims that 'Dada is not at all modern. It is more in the nature of a return to an almost Buddhist religion of indifference',[16] following Tristan Tzara's (1896-1963) 1922 description of Dada as a 'return to a religion of quasi-Buddhistic indifference'.[17] Despite having given Zen a facilitating function in regard to Dada, for Shinkichi, Zen retained primacy as the movement of greatest importance and longevity. Dada was 'nothing other than a rudimentary version of Zen',[18] a realisation that led to Shinkichi's abandonment of Dadaist practice in 1926.[19]

Zen Buddhism fostered its own tradition of art practice which was an anti-aesthetic form of active meditation. The production of paintings based on economically rendered, monochromatic abstract forms; most usually the circle—the fundamental iconographic symbol of Zen art—was a way of distilling the activities of the conscious mind into a single gesture, an automatic process which sought to bypass the concerns of consciousness.

Japanese avant-gardists such as Akira Kanayama (b.1924) were still producing abstracts based on the Zen circle in the late 1960s, thereby evidencing the continuity of a pre-modern abstraction within modernist practice.

Zen paintings are not made with artistic considerations in mind, but are the representational distillation of hours of thought and meditation. The paintings have unfinished, spontaneous and improvisational qualities, and, having emerged from the practise of calligraphy, rather than from painting proper, the tradition has an interdisciplinary origin, the goal of which was to subvert the conventions of verbal meaning. In Zen painting, therefore, automatic, anti-art and deconstructive elements are employed; all of which are techniques that are not only common to the practice of Dada and Surrealism, but which are in fact the core ideas of these two movements. While Zen painting may seem to present the apotheosis of values which are quintessentially and traditionally Japanese, Zen was in fact a counter-cultural movement in both China and Japan, as Stephen Addiss has pointed out.[20] Zen was distinct from the official Confucian ideologies used to keep civic order during the Edo period in Japan (1603-1868), and was separate to the Shinto system of ancestor worship on which the Japanese Emperors based their divinity and their rule. Zen art was similarly an anti-establishment, anti-academic tradition, existing outside the mainstream of Japanese painting, being produced without patronage and unavailable for purchase through the art market.[21]

Despite these clear legacies for the avant-garde in existing Zen practice, the absorption of pre-modern referents by Surrealism is criticised by scholars. Tsuruoka Yoshihisa, one of the earliest Japanese scholars to examine Japanese Surrealism, complained that in place of French radicalism the Japanese retreated into premodern sentimentality,[22] while William Gardner sees 'aestheticist orientalism' within the Japanese avant-garde as 'complicit with Japanese imperialism',[23] making art-historical quotation tantamount to collaboration with fascism—an assessment which seems overdetermined and over-dramatic. Shinkichi's own hybrid output is received problematically because his Zen elements are opaque to Dada scholars, while his Dadaist

aspects are of little interest to Zen poets and practitioners.[24] Neglect of Shinkichi's status as a hybrid practitioner has therefore emerged from scholarly reception. One common cause of hostility to the incorporation of pre-modern culture is a belief that a work which is archaising cannot simultaneously be modernist; but the example of Surrealism, where the use of antique images by Max Ernst and Valentine Penrose amongst others is not seen as problematic, but is praised and understood dialectically, easily refutes complaints that a work cannot be both modern and historicising.

This refutation, while implicitly accepted in discourse on French Surrealism, is not applied to Japanese production. Hiroshi Nara, writing on the problematic development of modernism in the Japanese art world, has complained that 'what sells to the Western public is events that typify Japan's inability to modernize itself (from American perspectives) and its astonishing and incongruent cohabitation of elements from the past with twenty-first century artifacts [...]'[25] an idea which continues to inform Western perceptions of Japan and which is even self-consciously deployed by the Japanese. Tensions over whether reference to tradition is the antithesis of modernity or the lynchpin of national identity were not, therefore, specific to the early twentieth-century Japanese art world, but were the remnants of the self-conscious Western-orientated modernisation of the late nineteenth century, and continue to be of concern within Japanese geo-politics today. My argument is that this tension is not only the central problem of Japanese modernity, but is also that which makes the modern in Japan recognisably Japanese.

Hiroshi counters a binary opposition of tradition and modernity by arguing that Japanese culture has always been synthetic. From the absorption of Buddhism from China to the western-orientated modernisation of the nineteenth century, Japanese culture has frequently and enthusiastically responded to foreign cultures whilst also maintaining a distinct national identity. Hiroshi explains that 'at each stage when a [foreign] influence was brought in, the Japanese indigenised it by finding a place for it in their system of beliefs'.[26] Pioneering scholar of Japanese Surrealism Miryam Sas, who

sought to chart properly the influences of French Surrealism on its Japanese counterpart, understood the transmutations of Surrealism in Japan in terms of 'misprision'; that is, as a selective misunderstanding of the aims of the movement on the part of the Japanese. While Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', which she cites may be an excellent tool for analysing artistic development within cultures, its usefulness for discussing exchange across cultures is questionable. In applying a model of synthetic indigenisation, I am advancing on Sas's misprision by re-presenting the transformation of Surrealist ideas not in terms of misreading, but as a response to cultural context. It should also be noted that the incorporation of elements from earlier art-historical epochs and styles is not unique to Japan but common to Surrealism internationally, and was also found in the French movement. Tensions between traditional and modern, national and international, are common to twentieth-century modern states, and were explored in a variety of regional Surrealist movements, precluding an interest in 'archaicism' from being cited as evidence of a failed modernity or a derailed avant-garde.

As Vêra Línhartová, a leading scholar of Japanese Surrealism, has observed, the Surrealist interest in universal values led to a disinterest in developing a codified aesthetic program,[27] a disinterest which may be a legacy of Dada. Surrealism thus had the flexibility to assimilate cultural referents, allowing Surrealist painting to expand its visual vocabulary as it spread across the globe. Rather than representing a dissolution of Surrealist ideas, this incorporation is responsible for the remarkable aesthetic diversity of the movement. Just as the English Surrealist group had done in citing the English tradition of Romantic Literature as an influence on their practice, Japanese Surrealists sought indigenous antecedents for their production. However, this quest for synthesis with domestic culture had particular urgency in the Japanese case. In 1910, Kotarō Takamura (1883-1956) published his highly influential essay *Midori no Taiyo (Green Sun)*.[28] In a critical response to the strong dependence of modern Japanese art on Western styles, Kotarō posed the question of whether it was possible to be an international modernist without compromising one's Japanese identity. Takiguchi similarly urged the Surrealists to be equally mindful of both 'the ethnic purity and specificity of

Japanese art' and 'the historical turn in world art',[29] and this discriminating, nativising reception of Western avant-gardes can be read as a response to Kotarō's seminal writings, rather than to state demands, as Yoshihisa would have it.

Yet there are some issues arising from the assimilation of the avant-garde in different cultural and political contexts which cannot easily be dismissed, and there are specific features of the Japanese case which dissipate the radicalism (whether political or purely formal) movements such as Dada expounded in the West. I have identified one key issue which I wish to use to shape this discussion: if Dada and Surrealism adopted a counter-position to European culture, and the Japanese Imperialistic state during the Second World War was critical of European culture, is the Europeanised avant-garde in Japan coming into line with state interests? Would such an alignment preclude this practice from being designated avant-garde? How can a critical position be negotiated between state nationalism and a desire to produce innovative and nationally distinctive, rather than derivatively Europeanised, work?

The most significant characteristics of Dada—a denial of meaning, of existence and a dislike of post-enlightenment European culture—do not have the same critical currency in Japan as they do in the West, since their acceptance as part of the Zen tradition make them unremarkable rather than controversial. In fact, these differences in radicalism and reception were not specific to Dadaism in Japan. The impact that context has on reception becomes most apparent when looking at the various possible understandings of the term 'Dada'. In 1923 Takanori Kinoshita (1894-1973) and the Russian futurist David Burlick (1882-1967) co-authored the book *What is Futurism? Answer*, in which they claimed that Dada, which means 'childish wilfulness' in Japanese, has the same value and function as a child's drawings, being purely formalistic and without agenda: a stance which drastically undermines Dadaist radicalism.[30] For Makoto Ueda, confusion over the meaning of the word Dada had a huge developmental impact on Shinkichi, showing him that 'a word meaning "a wooden horse" in French can mean "yes" in Rumanian,

that things seeming meaningless on the surface can be meaningful in another sphere';[31] this resonated with his own practice of Zen deconstruction. The problem I wish to address, therefore, is how specific cultural differences undermine the radicalism of an imported avant-garde in Japan. Since the work of Shinkichi was non-radical and synthetic, it is necessary to examine the work of MAVO in order to uncover whether Dada could take a radical political position within Japan.

MAVO Radicalism

MAVO was a small but significant group of around five practitioners, and had a strongly Dadaist inflection through the presence of the leader and codifier of the group, Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-77). Murayama had spent time in Berlin in the very early 1920s, where he became interested in both Dada and Constructivism. Whilst Constructivism undeniably played a more important role in the aesthetics of MAVO production, the first MAVO manifesto of 1923 expressed a similar interest in affirmation and negation as Shinkichi's Dada, and revealed the influence of Dada's anarchism and linguistic ambiguity, describing the group as a 'negative entity'. In August 1923, MAVO expanded on this anarchism by staging protests at the Nikaten exhibition. Nikaten was an alternative exhibition to the official academy, where avant-gardists showed their work. The MAVO protest was tenuously premised on the mistaken selection of a work by Sumiya Iwane, a painter affiliated to the MAVO group, on the belief that it was painted by a Western artist, and the subsequent embarrassment of the author when the mistake was uncovered and he was asked to remove the work.[32] The protest disproportionately escalated into an attempt to vandalise the exhibition hall. The police were called and they tried to halt the protest on the basis that it contravened the Peace Preservation Law, the same legislation used to detain political subversives and the Surrealists later in the 1930s and 40s. Social critique was an important part of the MAVO project.[33] Aside from their exhibition protests and their dislike of the academy, MAVO took part in decoration and construction projects in the barracks and slum houses that had been quickly erected following the earthquake to house the dispossessed, integrating art, life and social action in a way that challenged the academy.

For their social concerns and anarchist spirit, MAVO were frequently persecuted and arrested. Masamu Yanase (1900-45), a MAVO member who also worked as a satirical cartoonist, was frequently investigated and imprisoned. Yanase produced anti-military sketches immediately after the Kanto earthquake, bringing him under suspicion, and was imprisoned in 1933 after having made contact with the Comintern whilst in Shanghai, making him guilty of political subversion against the Japanese state. However, it is important to remember that this imprisonment, and Yanase's affiliation with formal political activism, post-dated the dissolution of MAVO; by the time these events unfolded, Yanase was instead an active member of the Proletarian Artist's League, an organisation which appropriated politically-minded Japanese avant-gardists, divorcing them from their artistic groups, movements and contexts. Thus, as artists left their collectives and joined the League, this created a vacuum of political participation in the rest of the avant-garde.

Despite the anti-establishment and social interventions of MAVO, which are important achievements for the development of the avant-garde in Japan, they failed to make anything uniquely Japanese. Murayama had complained of the 1923 Conscious Constructivist exhibition, Tokyo that it was filled with 'dry copies of French art',[34] yet, as Gennifer Weisenfeld, the only Western scholar to have written on MAVO, has observed: '[...] Murayama did not create any of the stylistic idioms he employed; he and the other Mavoists instead adapted current ideas selectively'[35] resulting in a mish-mashed Dada-Constructivism which resists historical or geographical positioning, thereby achieving a derivative internationalism in contrast to the recognisably Japanese innovations of the Surrealists. Thus it is in activism, rather than in aesthetics, that MAVO made their greatest contribution to Japanese avant-gardism, but their activism was not entirely unproblematic either, and some MAVO members became disillusioned with its radicalism. July 1924 saw the publication of the first issue of MAVO magazine, in advertising material for which they threatened that: 'MAVO is a group of completely blue criminals [...] Lazily, like pigs, like weeds, like the trembling emotions of sexual desire, we

are the last bombs that rain down on all the intellectual criminals (including the bourgeoisie cliques) who swim in this world'[36]—a statement which seems to resonate with Breton's later description of the perfect Surrealist act as firing at random into a crowd.[37] It was this kind of violent tone that led MAVO into trouble with the police, just as the anti-militarism and violent anti-clericalism of the French Surrealists would later do. MAVO's strongly revolutionary stance, now committed to print, alienated members including Kamenosuke Ogata and Shuzo Ooura, both of whom withdrew in 1924 after the publication of the third issue,[38] which failed to pass censors not only because of its violence and repeated reference to bombs, but also due to the firecracker attached to the front cover.[39] Tensions between artistic and political radicalism amongst MAVO members was a feature that can not only be found in the later Surrealist movement, but also in contemporary European Dada. From the time of the Barrès trial (1921), Breton's use of Dada for ideological purposes had been divisive and was perceived as misguided by Tzara.[40] Like Tzara, Shinkichi complained that 'Dada in Japan was misunderstood by certain communists and anarchists who felt it should have served as a driving force for revolution and slaughter',[41] which conflicted with his interests in negation and Zen. For Shinkichi, disillusionment with political radicalism was instrumental in the secession of Surrealism from Dada,[42] presenting Surrealism as a less politicised, less destructive movement than Dada. Thus, avant-gardists in Japan were becoming disillusioned with attempts to link artistic practice with political interventions from 1924, pre-dating the disillusionment of French Surrealists with political radicalism by eight years.[43]

Weisenfeld's work on MAVO offers an excellent analysis of political complications in the discussion of Japanese Dada. She notes that the expectation that Japanese Dadaism will be politically radical arises from a conflation of the European and Japanese contexts, and overlooks the fact that Dada was not a monolith.[44] Historiographical issues such as these have also affected the reception of Surrealism. Dada's destruction enjoyed a mixed reception in Japan. Whilst some, such as the littérateur Chōtarō Kawasaki, saw it as having political valency; others, including the painter Zennosuke Tamamura (1893-1951), whose own practice sought to forge an avant-garde

from the techniques and motifs used in pre-modern Japanese painting, and who was the financial backer for the Dadaist periodical *GGPG*,[45] saw Dada's radicalism as an aesthetic gesture.[46] Thus during the supposedly liberal 1920s the relevancy of the political contents of imported Western movements was already being questioned, proving that an apolitical, aesthetic stance was not adopted by avant-gardists solely as a way of circumnavigating the demands of a repressive state during the Second World War. Indeed, the split between Shinkichi's aestheticised, Tzara-influenced practice, and the radicalism of the Berlin-orientated Mavoists, proves that in both the European and Japanese cases, avant-gardists could chose to pursue 'radicalism' in either political or formalist directions, undermining claims that the absence of politics from the oeuvres of particular Japanese avant-gardists represents a failure to understand the nature of the avant-garde.

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[1] Peter Bürger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): xv, defines modernism by means of its opposition to traditional praxis. Scholars of modernism in Japan, such as William Gardner and Tsuruoka Yoshihisa, have taken a similar stance in claiming that the use of art-historical precedent marked a recourse to traditional or nationalist values, symptomatic of acquiescence to wartime ideologies, and against the spirit of modernist experimentation (op. cit. notes 22 and 23).

[2] Hosea Hirata, *The Poetry and Poetics of Nishiwaki Junzaburō: Modernism in Translation* (New Jersey: Princteon University Press, 1993): 9.

[3] Aside from Shinkichi, Jun Tsuji and Yoshiyuki Eisuke were also active Dadaists and collaborated with Shinkichi in publications, conferences, and the running of a Cafe Dada in Tokyo, based on the Cabaret Voltaire. See Rudolf Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada* (London: Phaidon, 2006) for a full account.

[4] See Dawn Ades, 'Dada-Constructivism', in Richard Hertz and Norman M. Klein, eds, *Twentieth Century Art History: Urbanism, Politics, and Mass Culture* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990): 70-80.

[5] Toshiharu Omuka, 'Tada Dada (Devotedly Dada) For the Stage: the Japanese Movement 1920-1925', in Stephen Foster (ed.), *Crisis in the Arts, volume 4: The Eastern Dada Orbit*: 223-310, 276.

[6] Ibid: 276.

[7] Ibid: 276.

[8] John Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: Kitasono Katue* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999): 28

[9] See Ko Won, *Buddhist Elements in Dada: A Comparison of Tristan Tzara, Takahashi Shinkichi, and Their Fellow Poets* (New York: New York University Press, 1977): 16; and Toshiharu Omuka, 'Tada Dada'.

[10] Won: 4.

[11] Ibid: 5.

[12] Ibid: 65.

[13] Ibid: 88.

[14] Ibid: 85.

[15] Shinkichi's 'Revival of Dada; in *Dada to Zen* (1971), quoted in ibid: 84.

[16] Won: 84.

[17] Tzara 1922 lecture on Dada, quoted in Won: v.

[18] Quoted in Won: 84.

[19] Ueda: 339.

[20] Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Monks 1600-1925* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc,1989): 8.

[21] Ibid: 8.

[22] Tsuruoka Yoshihisa, *The Discovery of Surrealism*, 1979, quoted in Culver, Annika A., *"Between Distant Realities": The Japanese Avant-Garde, Surrealism, and the Colonies, 1924-1943*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007: 3.

[23] William Gardner, *Advertising Tower: Japanese Modernism and Modernity in the 1920s* (London: Harvard University Press, 2006): 69.

[24] Takashi Ikemoto, 'Introduction', in *AFTERIMAGES: Zen Poems of Shinkichi Takahashi*, trans. Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto (London: London Magazine Editions, 1971): 13-26, 22.

[25] Hiroshi Nara, 'Introduction', in Hiroshi, ed., *Inexorable Modernity: Japan's Grappling with Modernity in the Arts* (Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2007): 1-13, 1.

[26] Ibid: 12.

[27] Linhartová, Věra, "Notes en marge de l'exposition", *Nihon no Shureriarisumu 1925-1945*, ex cat (Nagoya City Art Museum, 1990): 14-15.

[28] Takamura Kotarō, 'Midori no Taiyō', first published in *Subaru,* 2-4, April, 1910, pp. 23-9, reproduced in Kotarō, *A Brief History of Imbecility*, trans. Hiroaki Sato (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992): 180-6.

[29] Shūzō Takiguchi, *Document IV,* February 1941, quoted in John Clark, *Surrealism in Japan*, (Monash Asia Institute, 1997): 15.

[30] Quoted in Omuka: 251.

[31] Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Poets and the Nature of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press): 339.

[32] Gennifer Weisenfeld, *MAVO: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1905-1931* (London: University of California Press, 2002): 77.

[33] Ibid: 1-2.

[34] Ibid: 37.

[35] Ibid: 138.

[36] Announcement flyer for MAVO magazine, 1924, quoted in Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada*: 272.

[37] Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1929.

[38] Weisenfeld: 97.

[39] Ibid: 97.

[40] Durozoi: 24.

[41] Won: 87.

[42] Ibid: 88.

[43] This citation of the disillusionment of French Surrealists with Communism to the early 1930s is based on Louis Aragon's departure from the Surrealist movement in 1932, on the basis that he no longer felt Surrealism and Communism were compatible interests, and Breton's expulsion from the French Communist Party in 1933.

[44] Weisenfeld: 159.

[45] Solt: 30.

[46] Omuka: 231.

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Cy Twombly: Writing after Writing

Abigail Susik

Abstract

This paper theoretically explores the work of Cy Twombly by analyzing a web of interrelated texts by authors such as Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, Stéphane Mallarmé, Rosalind Krauss, and others. By focusing on the reception history of Twombly, as well as the larger critical discourse to which this reception owes much of its tenor, Twombly's work is revealed as an unexpected locus for contemporary theoretical debates concerning the nature of writing. Through an analysis of paintings such as *Olympia* (1957) and *Herodiade* (1960), Twombly articulates the act of scripting as one of indolence rather than violence.

Foreword

Perhaps it is appropriate that when I set out thinking about the paintings of Cy Twombly some time ago, I was quickly routed into a labyrinth of literature that kept me busy reading as opposed to actually looking at the paintings. The fundamentally intertextual and poetic nature of Twombly's works resulted in a domino-effect of prose-heavy reception from the start of his career in the post-war period. So it was nothing new that I was caught up in this series of distractions—arrested at first, like nearly everyone else in the past few decades, by the illuminating commentary of Roland Barthes in particular. Yet, the more I followed the trail of texts to their various detours and destinations, the farther I travelled away from the point where I had started: Twombly's enigmatic paintings—to the extent that nothing quite conclusive had been gained in my analysis of Twombly, it seemed.

Was this errant path an effect of the profoundly inter-communicative tendency of the Twombly reception itself, and the sheer abstraction of the question that kept coming to my mind regarding the phenomenological nature of human mark-making? Or, was it more intimately related to the status of Twombly's paintings as a curious form of *writing after writing*—so that my activity of cumulative

reading and text-chasing became, in fact, rather fitting to Twombly's own elusive processes?

Within the voluminous literature, which has expanded greatly over the last decade, I found myself drawn primarily to Francophone strain of the dialogue on Twombly. Barthes's meta-reading of Twombly led me to consider his historical allusions to Georges Bataille and Stéphane Mallarmé, which in turn invited a review of Rosalind Krauss's important art historical account of Twombly, and finally a glimpse at Jacques Derrida's related philosophical mediations on Mallarmé. These various types of texts—critical, poetic, philosophical—relevant to Twombly both directly and indirectly—seemed to feed into one another in a way that was circular and overwhelming, to the extent than any traditional account of these simultaneous parallels appeared ungainly if not impossible. My analysis, therefore, became peripatetic; purely associative, reception upon reception. Twombly referenced Mallarmé, which led Barthes to reference Mallarmé and Bataille, which led Krauss to a related set of references, and so on, vectorially.

Moreover, the tidal drift that these texts inspired out and away from my initial object of study in Twombly appeared to be inevitable and seismic. Eventually, I conceded to this innately dispersed character of my analytical experience, chalked it up to my inability (for whatever reason) to confront the paintings directly, as well as (more apologetically to myself) the intensely deinstrumentalized position of the paintings themselves (as works that staunchly refused to perform). In the end, rather than a summarizing conclusion, I was left with a simple one-to-one comparison: Twombly vs. Mallarmé; the excess of writing. Following is a record of that critical endeavor, in order of its consecutive, though not necessarily progressive, unfolding.

1. Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', 1979

One suspects from its pulsatory succession of ideas and raw language that Roland Barthes wrote 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper' first, and then composed the more philosophically constrained 'The Wisdom of Art' as his polished, professional response to the Whitney Museum's commission for a catalogue essay.[1] Indeed, Barthes confesses the nascent quality of his thoughts in 'Works on Paper'—an effortless schema of observation which adeptly fits the casually delinquent feel of Twombly's works themselves. His meandering exploration of a Cy Twombly monograph produces sketchy contemplations, each turn of the page offering another blurry optic through which to speculate about TW—Barthes's appropriately cryptic shorthand abbreviation for Twombly.[2]

Yet, over the course of Barthes's desultory meditation, 'Works on Paper', two names are conspicuously summoned and stand out from the casual string of associations woven there: Georges Bataille, in allusion, and Stéphane Mallarmé, in appellation. Rarely linked in critical literature before the past three decades, these names appear in harmonious conjunction in Barthes's 1979 essay via the accompaniment of Twombly as mediator. There, Barthes constructs an intricate web of theoretical innuendo that serves as a support structure for this trans-temporal triumvirate.

The allusion to Bataille appears first in the essay, within the section labeled 'Writing'. Stating that Twombly's painterly gesture is 'the surplus of an action', Barthes chooses to evoke the excessive rather than transgressive ethos of Bataillian Materialism in relation to his thesis that Twombly merely *alludes* to the act of writing in his paintings: '…writing no longer abides anywhere, it is absolutely in excess. Is it not at this extreme limit that "art" really begins, or the "text"—all that man does "for nothing," his perversion, his expenditure?'[3] Barthes is evoking Bataille's crucial essay of 1933, 'The Notion of Expenditure', and its later development into the three volume collection of essays, *The Accursed*

Share.[4] Through this comparison of Twombly's quasi-scriptural mark-making with Bataille's concept of an anti-utilitarian expenditure, Barthes suggests that if Twombly's gestural marks can be labeled linguistic at all, they stem from a useless language that exceeds all instrumentalization.

The reference to Bataille is striking and follows a passage wherein Barthes delicately begins to construct a discourse around excess, evoking surplus and inexhaustibility—but at the same time continually returning to words grouped around the signified 'loss': 'negligence', 'displacement', 'destruction', 'futility', 'uselessness'. . .

Of course excess and loss are the two sides of the Janus-faced process of Bataillian expenditure: the orgiastic, anti-cathartic, anti-utilitarian release is necessarily followed by a state of total exhaustion. Such 'limitless loss'[5] can be said to be the only 'aim', if any, of non-productive expenditure. However, what Barthes is seemingly at pains to communicate in 'Works on Paper' is that Twombly's work does not indicate a drive toward the ejaculatory celebration of destruction that is the excessive act itself, but rather, it avoids the present time of the 'act' altogether, inhabiting instead the timeless zone of the ruptured afterward. This is why, for Barthes, Twombly only *alludes* to the physical act of writing: his scriptural gestures result in 'displaced' garble, 'careless, lazy, indifferent' as a pair of pants left on the floor after coitus—a quintessentially *used* remainder of language.[6] Twombly can be said to engage in non-productive expenditure, indeed—but it is a languishing expenditure, begun at the plane of depletion and concluded at another, identical plain of depletion (resulting, paradoxically, in a surplus of depletion). The excessive-transgressive act itself, as an archetypal violence, is implied only in memory: hence the inherently tautological structure of Twombly's line, the absentminded attenuation of a proto-verbal glyph or the compulsive, knee-jerk repetition of a lolling curve. Barthes's assessment, voiced several places in the essay: nowhere is violence apparent, *indolence* is Twombly's mode.[7]

Twombly's inscriptions cannot be violent, Barthes says, because they inhabit a space that is already transgressed at a meta-level. 'No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface: everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal.'[8] Thus the act of the graffito, the key to Twombly's contemporary reception as a canny transgressor of the metaphysical Modernist pictorial space, is instead configured as a traumatic repetition of originary acts of destruction and desublimation.[9] 'We know that what constitutes graffiti is in fact neither the inscription nor its message but the wall, the background, the surface (desktop); it is because the background exists fully, as an object which has already *lived*. . .'[10] The Modernist abstract canvas, so often seen as 'mirror' or 'window' of the artist's privileged subjectivity by its idealist proponents, clouds over in Barthes's reading of Twombly and becomes 'notebook page', 'wall' or 'tabletop,' spaces which suggest instead the opacity of the subject to itself and others. As the literal and theoretical background for Twombly's inscriptions, the Modernist canvas, recognized as both material and virtual surface, the ultimate metaphysical space—has previously been defaced, literally and metaphorically, by Pollock, Dubuffet, de Kooning, and so on. Any intrusion upon that surface is in belated excess of a presumed prehistoric *Ur*-transgression of unitary being.[11] Therefore, among his contemporaries, Twombly in particular revels in the leveled and wasted playing-field that results in the aftermath of the violent creative act.

Barthes more obligingly ascribes the formulation of the artistic act as violent to the likes of the symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, framing the poet's late nineteenth-century experiments on language as an 'attack' which sought to 'deconstruct the sentence.'[12] Mallarmé appears in Barthes's essay following the overt allusion to Bataillian excess—again, boldly suggesting a direct genealogical relationship between the poet and André Breton's 'excrement philosopher'.[13] Barthes here draws upon one of the several deeply entrenched theoretical tropes that surround a century of scholarly discourse on Mallarmé: the sullying of the white page as the essential act of transgression. In his 1895 essay 'The Book: A

Spiritual Instrument', Mallarmé rhapsodized that the page of poetic conception is a leaf from the folded pages of the mythic Book, a 'pure space' of unblemished narcissism.[14] The reader, however, necessarily assumes a sacrificial role in the violent cutting of the Book's pages with a paper knife, 'the virginal foldings of the Book are unfortunately exposed to the kind of sacrifice which caused the crimson-edged tomes of ancient times to bleed.'[15] The reader's reluctantly destructive relationship to the folded page is made doubly disconcerting by the two-faced vulnerability of the virginal page which harbors castrating powers in its enveloping space. The desire of the reader to interject into the space of the page is quickly truncated by overwhelming performance anxiety (castration) and fear of absence (penis envy).[16] The 'intricate organism' that is the Book multiplies virtual folds where physical ones lack: 'the folds will have a mark which remains intact.' With requisite fiery aplomb, Mallarmé juxtaposes his notion of the metaphysically virtual page—as a physical space with its own being—with the lowly newspaper folio, a degraded construct for Mallarmé because it lacks the mysterious folds created by a book's binding, and therefore also the mythical status of the Book. Opening and closing with a mere evening breeze, the newspaper in its textual harlotry exposes its enfolded contents publicly to any willing reader.

Mallarmé's belief in the sacrificial role of the poet corresponds directly to Bataille's declaration that poetry itself is close in meaning to sacrifice.[17] To be sure, there are fruitful lines of thought in the parallels shared between Bataille's statement that poetry is, 'synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss'—and Mallarmé's ubiquitous cry of 'nothingness'. Here, the entwinement of the two names is enough to suggest that Mallarmé's 'nothingness' might be reinterpreted as an expression of the loss catalysed by the expenditure of artistic creation, an expenditure that Bataille differentiates from other forms of non-productive expenditure as specifically symbolic.[18]

Yet, the pertinent question for philosophers of the twentieth century was not so much whether Mallarmé reveled in the artist's transgression of a mythic, sacrificial space of creation. Mallarmé's writings readily indicate that he played the part of both the celebrant and the mournful elegist of the metaphysical matrix at different times. Rather, the question was whether Mallarmé deplored the inevitable depletion and dissolution of the mythic page and the poetic word into the machinations of mass-produced journalistic language. Such overproduction of the printed word resulted in the eradication of the myth of a transgress-able poetic space. The whiteness of the page that threatens to swallow the poetic word like a shipwreck is transformed into a bottomless palimpsest, an abyss of excessive language, which absorbs and camouflages any new marks or creations.

As a result of these equations, in the hands of Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism claimed Mallarmé for the camp of negative theology, labeling him a victim of 'nausea' who nostalgically lamented the death of god and myth. In sharp contrast, writers such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Phillipe Sollers and Maurice Blanchot adopted Mallarmé's disseminated poetics as an example of revolutionary and proto-Deconstructionist practice—the willful overthrow of unitary meaning.[19]

In 'Works on Paper,' Barthes not surprisingly accedes to Derrida, Kristeva, and Sollers that Mallarmé's project was a linguistically revolutionary one, seeking to deconstruct the notion of a transcendental language and a metaphysical arena of creation. However, at the same time Barthes aligns Mallarmé with his assessment of Twombly's art as indolent rather than violent. This is a crucial distinction:

> Mallarmé wanted to deconstruct the sentence, that time-honored (for France) vehicle of ideology. In passing, in loitering (one might say), TW deconstructs writing. To deconstruct does not at all mean to make

unrecognizable; in Mallarmé's texts, the French language is acknowledged, it functions—in fragments, it is true. In TW's "graphisms," writing, too, is recognized; it proceeds, it presents itself as writing. Yet the letters formed no longer participate in any graphic code, just as Mallarmé's large syntagmas no longer participate in any rhetorical code—not even that of destruction.[20]

In other words, Barthes implies that Mallarmé was not so much gleefully destroying the integrity of the sentence, the page, or the mythic word—as he was capitalizing upon—and thereby further catalyzing—the already dilapidated structure and evacuated signification of language, itself the inevitable result of the impact of technological commerce upon linguistic communication.

Thus, in such a reading, deconstructive act is rendered, rather anticlimactically for some audiences perhaps—indolent. It is a gradual deformation, rather than decisive destruction as such. Excessiveness enters here not as a post-transgressive state, then, but as a supplementary process by which change (as deformation) occurs as a constant, additive motion.

Barthes does not attempt to align Twombly's economy of loss with a specific reading of Mallarmé's politics of the poetic. Instead, he renders Twombly's apparent recognition of the post-transgressive state neither as jubilatory nor as nostalgic, '. . . neither a violent art nor an icy one, but rather, to my taste, by TW's, unclassifiable. . .'[21] Yet, Barthes seems to need to codify what he sees as the inexplicable neutrality of Twombly's work. Toward the end of 'Works on Paper,' he proceeds to give some definition to Twombly's apparent lack of conscious or unconscious desire for aggression in the aesthetic act by invoking Zen Buddhism, pertinent for Barthes because of the playful way in which Twombly approaches the painterly gesture, the 'elegance' with which he intersperses white space with his marks: his *rarus*. This insertion of the notion of

the indifferent Zen mastery of the line clashes noticeably with the awkward 'dysgraphia'[22] that Barthes confesses seeing again and again in Twombly's graphic mien—the listless impotence that prevents his insistent attempts, gestures and markings from becoming wholly word or picture. Rather disappointingly, then, it could be argued, Barthes shies away from the stark negativity and frankly anti-humanistic implications of Twombly's habitation of such a broken, dysfunctional artistic zone.

Nevertheless, Barthes's emphasis on the qualities of play and elegance—elsewhere phrased in the essay as the airy quality of Twombly's tenuous line and the spontaneous nature of his markings—serve to reinforce his overall thesis that for Twombly the aesthetic mark is both non-motivated and non-violent. For Barthes, then, Twombly's indolence is ultimately read as a lyrical dandyism, excessive listlessness that approaches decadence in its insistence upon the temporal status of an 'afterwards' of cultural consumption.

Yet, something of the negativity of Twombly's 'dysgraphia' in Barthes's essay stubbornly lingers on and begs to be addressed. Barthes calls the languid, neither-nor state of indolence a 'tactical' move on Twombly's part because it 'allows him to avoid the platitude of graphic codes, without yielding to the conformism of destructions. . .'[23] This suggests that it is the transgressive act itself that has come to function as myth, in that it longingly imagines the existence of an idealized space which can and should be desublimated. The apotheosis of pure space and thus transgression to the distant plane of myth leaves behind only a 'perverse palimpsest',[24] upon which all signification, imagistic or phonetic, appears as superimposed excess upon a pre-existing residue of primal transgressions.

2. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Herodiade,' 1864-7 [25]

Twombly was reading Mallarmé 'seriously' by the winter of 1957 according to a letter he wrote to Eleanor Ward of the Stable Gallery in New York shortly after his

departure for Rome that year.[26] In an essay that Twombly published in the Italian journal, *L'Esperienza* in August-September 1957, Twombly meditates upon the significance of the monochromatic white canvas and evokes the 'symbolic whiteness of Mallarmé.'[27] Ironically however, Twombly's first and only painting to refer overtly and without question to Mallarmé is the pivotal *Herodiade* (1960) (fig.1), the earliest example of the artist's shift from the predominate use of white house paint to the application of heavy-hued oil-paint onto the canvas with his hands.
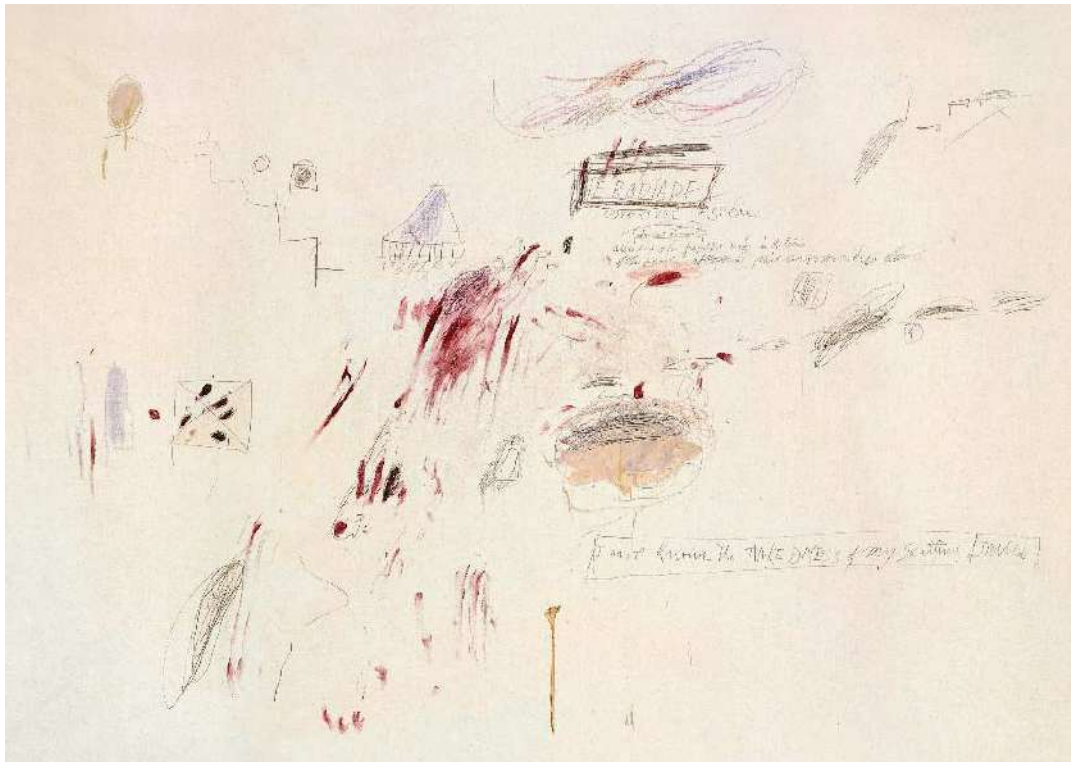

Fig 1: Cy Twombly, Herodiade, 1960 Oil paint, lead pencil, wax crayon, and oil based house paint on canvas, 200 x 281.9 cm © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Other indirect references to Mallarmé bookend the production of *Herodiade*. For instance, the now-missing painting *What Wing can be held?* of 1960 queries in response to Mallarmé's plea in 'Another Fan' (1884), 'Learn by a subtle lie / To keep my wing in your hand.' [28] Additionally, *The First* and *Second Part of the Return from Parnassus* (1961) are paintings that might be thought of as referring to Mallarmé's relationship with the poets involved in the journal *Parnasse*

Contemporain.[29] Studious observers could no doubt locate further correlations, such as Twombly's two monochromatic paintings, *Treatise on the Veil* of 1968 and 1970. However, overt signs of the intensity that may have existed within Twombly's engagement with the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé are apparent only in *Herodiade*, wherein Twombly suddenly breaks free of his previous artistic paradigms to address the canvas aggressively with his hands.

As is common in many of Twombly's paintings referring to mythic characters, the title 'Herodiade' is inscribed onto the canvas in graphite and set off with a surrounding box. Beneath this inscription, the phrases, 'Overture + scène,' and 'Incantation' are written, providing rare clues from Twombly about the nature of his interest in the poem—a literary engagement that Richard Leeman terms, 'very extensive.'[30] Initially, for Mallarmé, 'Herodiade' was intended to be a multi-act play with an accompanying score, but all that survives of this project is the poem—in reality just a fragment of the failed manuscript. Twombly emphasizes the status of the poem as a working manuscript in his painting by reactivating Mallarmé's strophes in his own cursive and then submitting them to a process of correction and erasure. Twombly quotes from the poem, adding personal emphasis with capital letters and drawn boxes, 'I have known the NAKEDNESS of my scattered dreams.' Twombly then freely associates in his own voice, with words based upon Mallarméan themes: 'abolished (her?) frightful wings in the tears / of the pool abolished (. . .) that mirrors her dreams.' Sewing together the theme of wings from Mallarmé's poems written on ladies' fans with the abolishment of chance and necessity from 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (1895) and Herodiade's obsession with mirror-reflection, Twombly creates an unusual, amalgamate document of Mallarméan poetics.

Twombly also reasserts the original scenic structure of *Herodiade* by engaging in a theatrical evocation of synesthetic motifs from the poem: namely, he evokes the preoccupation with touch in the poem. Although *Herodiade* blanches in comparison with the bombastic arenas of color filling the *Ferragosto* series (I-V)

(fig.2) a year later, it is in *Herodiade* that the somatic immediacy of Twombly's painterly index first takes on blazing significance as color. Contrary to analyses seeking to explicate Twombly's earlier monochromatic white canvases as painterly fulfillments of Mallarmé's concepts of 'absence' and 'the blank page'[31]—Twombly states instead with *Herodiade* that it is the presence of the corporeal and theatrical that he reads within Mallarmé's poetry. Indeed, along with the explicitly sexual and violent account of rape in 'L'Après-Midi d'un Faune' (1865), Mallarmé's other dramaturgic poem—the characterization of the tragedian Herodiade, with her 'blond torrent' of 'hair' and the 'indolence' of her robes,[32] is a testament to Mallarmé's preoccupation with the insertion of the body and its excessive physicality into the white space of the page.

Fig 2: Cy Twombly, *Farragosto IV*, 1961, Oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 165.5 x 200.4 cm, © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

The poem's scenario is as follows. Herodiade, in a flurry of anguished lust, pleads with her elderly nurse to help her battle the 'sparse dream' of terror, ice,

shadows and nothingness that plagues her in her virginity. She stares into a speculum in horror at the contrast between the unmanageable presence of her physical beauty and the 'futile mystery' of her being, which she narcissistically wishes to keep for herself rather than divulge to future lovers.[33] She is the epitome of somatic excess, a putrid femininity that promulgates itself, fiercely shunning the penetration/insemination paradigm of transgression: 'I love the horror of being virgin and wish / To love amid the dread my hair makes me feel, / So that, at night, withdrawn into my bed, reptile / Inviolate I feel in my useless flesh. . .'[34] It is sexual touch that Herodiade both desperately craves and feverishly abhors, a paradox that drives her at the close of the poem to indeterminate convulsions of either self-induced orgasm or death.

Twombly's painting seems to rehearse the field of semantics around the possibility of enacting this desired yet repulsed touch upon the surface of the canvas, applying first tentative fingertips, then progressing to light caresses, and finally advancing to lavish, gestural invasiveness.[35] Shadows of graphite flit across the dirty-white ground, tracing scrawls, illegible symbols, numerical graphs and crossed-out boxes. The wispy lines of these shapes, however, render them merely semi-present. They are seemingly preliminary attempts at tactility, or perhaps afterthoughts thereof—so fully do the smears of red dominate the painting in their contrasting immediacy.

The power that Twombly's handprints have over the written and drawn symbols in *Herodiade* results from the proximity of the referent to the index—the close sensory relationship of the actual hand to the trace of that hand—as compared with the mirage-like status of the referent with regard to the symbols and quasi-symbols represented. However, even at the introductory stage of Twombly's exploration of the bodily index in *Herodiade*, it is arguable that much more than the simple fact of Twombly's physical engagement with the canvas, the trace of his body, is suggested by his gestural practices. While the entrance of the body and specifically the artist's body into the artwork is certainly a landmark in itself,

representing a shift away from optical Modernism in postwar American art, Twombly seems to take the body's presence in a painting and stretch it to its most extreme signifying limits. Twombly's index not only represents his body, but also its intimate desires, idiosyncrasies, repulsions, and myriad associations beyond the corporeal. The index is here in excess of its traditional deictic abilities, and we read a language of touch that surpasses the question of the physical presence of a referent.

3. Rosalind E. Krauss, chapter six, *The Optical Unconscious*

Rosalind Krauss's genealogical tracing of the paintings of Cy Twombly to the all-over canvases of Jackson Pollock in chapter six of *The Optical Unconscious* has laid the foundation for many subsequent analyses of Twombly's work.[36] Within this essay, Twombly is reconfigured as one of several inheritors of Pollock's legacy of transgression against the Greenbergian credo of the 'presence' of being in the Modernist pictorial space—he is posed as a victim of what Harold Bloom has identified as the 'anxiety of influence'. Although like Roland Barthes in his essay 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', Krauss positions the theories of Georges Bataille as a ground for interpretation of the art of Twombly, her thesis stands in direct opposition to that of Barthes. As opposed to lyrical indolence, it is violence and transgression that are the catch-words in Krauss's analysis of Twombly.

In Twombly's 'strong misreading' of Pollock's gestural process, to use Bloom's specific terminology of anxious influence, the spatial field of abstract Modernist painting is not the only construct violated. The transcendental notion of the pure, present time of the creative event is also irreparably eradicated. Pollock achieves this twofold destruction of Greenbergian conceptions of the unity of Modernist time and space by demonstrating the indexical nature of the painterly mark, its status as mere clue or trace of a divided subjectivity that exists outside of an identifiable present, past or future. For Krauss, Pollock's imposition of the

indexical mark onto the sublimated Modernist canvas is inarguably an act of violence, the reenactment of the archetypal severing of the subject from its subjectivity and reality. This species of index serves as a type of reminder on two levels: it recalls the ephemeral physical presence of the body, and it insists upon the destruction of a unitary conception of being.

In turn, Twombly's affliction of influence urges him to carry the transgressive mark of Pollock to the excessive states of formlessness and scatological rendering, translatable in Bataillian terminology to *informe* and *basesse*. Whereas Pollock's inscription of the movements of his body in paint remains abstract, apart from the occasional appearance of readymade forms such as a palm print or a cigarette butt, Twombly's mode of notating his somatic specificity on the canvas is neither fully abstract nor figurative. In the paintings pre-1960, sloping lines morph into letters, never forming solid word-images—while dispersed geometric shapes almost take on properties of represented objects. However, in the post-1960 production, blobs of color suggesting figurative symbols such as phalli and stray breasts teeter on the unrecognizable, the formless. Thus, Twombly's reading of Pollock's indexical mark liquefies the rigid binary of abstraction and figuration, forming an alternate category for the artistic mark: that of the indeterminate and unmotivated.

More drastic than the introduction of pseudo-figuration into the Modernist paradigm, Krauss analyses Twombly's violent engagement with the materiality of the canvas and the corporeal connotations of paint as indexes of the scatological, abject urges of the divided subject. Undeniably, the bare fact of Twombly's early practice of building up a stucco-like surface of gesso and house paint and slicing lascivious words into it—his assault of the fabric of the canvas with sharp pen-points and pencil lead, and his later application of luridly hued oil paint that recalls the consistency of blood and excrement—are in themselves the most convincing arguments for Krauss's reading of Twombly's radical transgression of the Modernist pictorial space. The sexual connotations conjured

by Pollock's flinging of paint with the hard end of the brush pale in comparison to the smorgasbord of grotesqueries that Twombly so often proffers up in his work.

However, as Krauss herself has repeatedly shown, the Bataillian concepts of transgression, formlessness, baseness, and excess are semantically linked. Scatology and formlessness can be grouped under the heading *excessive indolence* as readily as they can beneath *transgressive violence*. They are characteristic of both the transgressive act and the resultant economy of loss. Thus, as read within the structure of influence proposed by Krauss, Twombly is portrayed as reenacting, celebrating and completing the violent act that was initially carried out by Pollock, and so appears as an imitator of the original source of transgression of a supposedly 'purely' optical space. His repossession of Pollock's abandoned canvas is the claiming of an already-polluted zone, wherein opticality has transmogrified into tactility, and the corporeal presence of the artist/viewer has asserted itself beforehand.

In this sense, it can be said that Twombly is tracing Pollock's trace, mimicking his index repeatedly, in excess of transgression, in order to reform it as his own. This is surrealist automatic writing rendered as a physiologically impulsive *after-writing*—the repetitive muscular twitch of an alert but disengaged regurgitation of both asemic and semantic textual drives—what Benjamin Buchloh has called the 'libidinal compulsion of the pictorial mark-making process'.[37] This is the essence of the act of writing as a convulsive human habit, wherein the search for meaning is placed in abeyance in the face of the somatic reflex.[38] Thus, from the outset it can be concluded that for Twombly the indexical mark is not a radical invasion of his own subjectivity and its temporal disjunction into the mythic aesthetic space, but represents instead the dross of previous subjectivities and bodies, the digestion process of cultural production. Twombly's compulsive mark recalls a whole history of indexical marks and transgressions against a conjectured mythic space. In a word, the bodily index is for Twombly a residue, left not as a product

of the individual body's presence, but as excess of bodily presence and corporeality in general.

The most prominent aspect of Krauss's reading of Twombly is that he interpreted Pollock's gestural strokes as indexical marks of bodily presence, and then reinterpreted the import of that indexical mark as graffiti sprayed across the aesthetic surface. This movement from indexical trace to the mark of the graffito is, as Krauss notes, not a seamless transfer, for Twombly shifts Pollock's index into the arena of graphic symbols with the introduction of the modes of graffiti. Such a bipartite formulation at once admits the indexical nature of the mark of the graffito (the physical presence of the graffito as the mark is made), but also the status of that mark's existence through time as written symbol that must be read in absence of the graffito. Krauss agrees that there is rift within the mark of the graffito:

> Thus even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over; entering the scene as a criminal, he understands that the mark he makes can only take the form of the clue. He delivers his mark over to a future that will be carried on without his presence, away from himself, dividing it from within into a before and an after.[39]

Enduring as image or linguistic sign, the mark of the graffito simultaneously represents the past presence of a subject who is now absent and the future presences of those who will 'read' the mark.

Graffiti is therefore, if we follow Krauss's lead, not a true index of the graffito. Instead, graffiti can be equated with writing in general, as writing (and by extension its counterparts drawing and painting) always *suggests* the indexical impression of the entity that made the mark, but at the same time remains bound in its secondary relationship to the phonetic sign and its signified. The written sign is already a trace, and is therefore not an index of any one body. The

surreptitious machinations of the graffito then cannot be defined as transgressive acts against a conception of unadulterated Being, for the space they impinge upon is not a mythic space of purity, and the mark that is left is not an insertion of a present subjectivity. The graffito does not mark so much as trace the trace of a pre-constituted subjectivity and signified: the name of a name.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1967

Krauss cites Jacques Derrida's concepts of *différance* and *trace* in her discussion of the disjointed temporality of the indexical mark of the graffito in *The Optical Unconscious*, suggesting her concordance with the notion that the mark of the graffito is a conflicted field with a problematic relation to the subject; part index, part symbol.[40] This understanding of the mark of the graffito as trace (constituted by difference) rather than index (resulting from the divided-presence of the subject) is pivotal in Krauss's analysis. For Twombly, the canvas is an always already transgressed field, and any mark upon it signals *différance* in excess of ur-transgression.

As elaborated within the larger proposition for a science of writing to be entitled 'grammatology,' Derrida proposes the motion of the trace, a never-ending deferral of meaning without origin, as a manifestation of the 'archetypal violence' that he has termed *différance* (the ur-difference).[41] The proposition of an originary violence as such precludes the possibility of unitary meaning, being or space. It does so by declaring that the subject is by nature vulnerable to the malaise of a fractured sensibility. Thus, *différance* destroys the metaphysical binary of absence and presence of being and establishes the impossibility of true transgression for lack of a 'transcendental signified.' Comparably, the trace, a nameless, formless, and timeless[42] machination resulting from archetypal *différance*, does not reenact the originary violence, but rather demonstrates in its motion of deferral the lack of any foundational unity or origin.

One of Derrida's main tasks in *Of Grammatology* is to argue against the grain of the history of philosophy and linguistics that it is not written language that inflicts violence upon 'innocent'[43] language by rupturing the signifier from the signified, but rather that language itself, both graphic and phonetic, is founded upon a violent separation of meaning from form. Writing is the prime example of the trace at work, for writing subjects language to a process of effacement which Derrida calls language *sous rature*—presence under erasure. In this process of cancellation, the word or *gramme* is nullified but left standing as a metaphorical ideogram for the slash of difference, incessantly filled and emptied with itinerant signifieds that lead nowhere.

5. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Olympia,' *Formless: A User's Guide*

Appended to Rosalind Krauss's discussion of Cy Twombly's painting *Olympia* (1957) (fig.3) in *Formless: A User's Guide* is an analysis of George Bataille's review of G. H. Luquet's book *L'Art Primitif*, and its exploration of the term *altération*.[44] In Bataille's critique of Luquet's thesis that primitive man made images of himself to reaffirm his subjectivity, alteration is employed in the argument that the mark— be it painted, carved or drawn— is at root sadistic in its violation of the integrity of surface and likewise the gestalt of the human body. Whereas Luquet hypothesized in his book that the destructive nature of the mark laid the grounds for naturalism, Bataille counters that all representations of the human body seek to deform. In such a system, sadism equals masochism, for it is the ruptured self that performs violence upon its own image, defacing the human form in order to efface subjectivity. This takes place in what Bataille calls a *series* of destructions— each successive mark is another slash to the unity of the gestalt.[45] Like the trace of the written word which carries signification off in several directions at once, alteration is the process by which the drawn mark deteriorates the appearance of the image, faithful to the archetypal violence of difference.
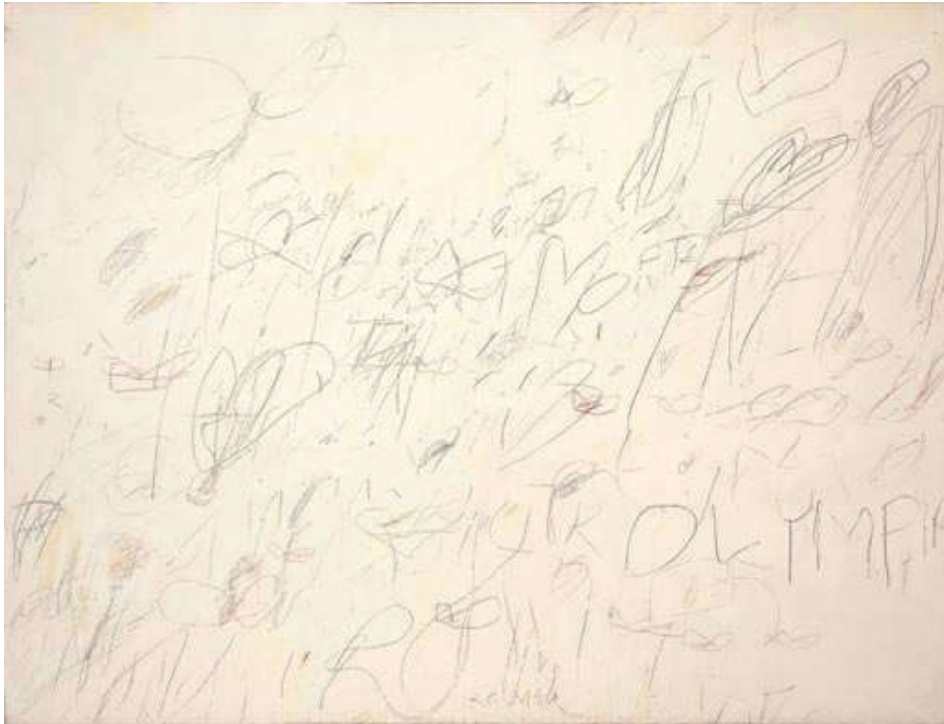
Fig 3: Cy Twombly, Olympia, 1957, Oil-based house paint, wax crayon, colored pencil and lead pencil on canvas, 200 x 264.5 cm, © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Interestingly, Bataille likened this piecemeal dissolution of the human body to the organic decomposition of a corpse—suggesting not so much the fracturing of the body's form as its gradual dissipation into other. This formulation aligns alteration with the continual motion of the trace rather than the more aggressive canceling out of language *sous rature*. Also significant for Bataille, the disappearance of the material form signaled the appearance of the immaterial form: the ghost. Hence the paradoxical nature of alteration that Krauss underlines in her essay, the simultaneous reversal of form and its renewal as other in a chain of supplementations and eradications.

Although Krauss extensively recounts Bataille's employment of the term alteration in the review of Luquet's book, her ultimate assessment of Twombly's mark-making process highlights the workings of 'negation' rather than the trace. Here negation exactly parallels the concept of language *sous rature* in that it cancels the legitimacy of a term without destroying the term altogether. Left

standing as an emptied matrix, the negated term is useless to convey cohesive meaning and yet totally excessive in its ability to assume other, itinerant significations at random. For Krauss, Twombly negates the disappearance of the subject position of the viewer in abstract Modernist painting, wherein the perpendicular axis of perspective is abandoned in favor of a transcendental, equalizing horizon—in other words, he negates a space already negated.[46] The 'presentness' of optical space becomes the 'presence' of bodily space as Twombly reinserts his performative subjectivity into the appropriated Modernist pictorial space. Twombly's looping lines, X-ings, and erasures—what Barthes fondly calls his 'gaucherie'— are read by Krauss as an aggressive deconstruction of the myth of Modernism, *sous rature*.

Krauss's example of this negation is Twombly's painting of 1957, *Olympia*. In this reading, the myth of Edouard Manet's painting as the birthplace of Modernism is one of a series of myths killed by the inscription 'morte' hovering near 'Olympia,' but is at the same time resurrected in a scatological correlation with Twombly's subjectivity— made present by the word 'fuck' scrawled adjacent to Olympia's name. In Krauss's reading the performative declaration 'fuck' negates at once 'Olympia' and 'morte,' for it denies the transcendence of 'Olympia' as a space of myth and the Modernist usurpation of that myth while refusing the equally transcendent 'death' of myth. Thus scrawled, 'Olympia' and 'morte,' negated but not deracinated, remain standing in place like tombstones. For Krauss, it is the blunt fact of Twombly's subjectivity that transgresses the field of symbolization again and again, negating myths with the slash of a broken pencil tip.

Yet, as Derrida argued in his explanation of writing as a manifestation of the deferring movement of the trace, all language, especially written language, can be said to be automatically *sous rature*. The inscription of names, moreover, is an action that particularly signals the difference between the signifier and signified, for a name is already an arbitrary and meaningless representation of the subject or entity it identifies.[47]

The same question, however, remains. Is Twombly's production characterized by a violence echoing the fractured sensibility of the subject *sous rature*, or can his art be declared indolent, completely in excess of the transgressed subject, a continuous *alteration* away from the stability of even a divided subjectivity?

6. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Le Livre'[48]

In 'The Double Session',[49] Jacques Derrida suggests that Mallarmé's page (as hymen) is never fully pierced, and that the writer never achieves the insemination of his or her essence within the page, but rather disseminates symbols interspersed with white space in a useless, surface-bound spray. Derrida spells it out clearly: the folded space of the page is infinitely more complex and significant than the puerile jottings suspended above it; no touch or penetration of the 'subject' stands a chance against such depthless and manifold layering. This is not a mythical conception of the page as infinite, but rather the dissolution of the mythical violence of writing and its empowered status, the very project that Derrida adopts in *Of Grammatology*. The violence of writing is the violence inherent in language itself, Derrida tells us.

Derrida draws widely from Mallarmé's poetry and prose to make his point in 'The Double Session,' but nowhere is the process of textual dissemination more delineated than in the random pile of Mallarmé's discarded papers that Jacques Sherer assembled together in 1957 and called *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé*.[50] Though fascinating to ruminate upon and revolutionarily 'experimental' in spatial format, Scherer's 'Livre' is the false fulfillment of Mallarmé's failed lifelong promise to produce a book of mythical proportions to serve as a 'counter-model to mass media.'[51] Almost everything that Mallarmé wrote was intended as a portion of this virtual book, envisioned as encompassing poetry, theater, music and art in a panoply of genres. In particular, 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (1895)—with its spatialization of the page and system of interwoven, non-linear

strands which prompt the reader's collaborative involvement—can be seen as the nearest approximation of Mallarmé's aspirations for the book (fig.4). At the same time, however, 'Un coup de dés' is the recognition of the ultimate failure of Mallarmé's project and the general defeat of the possibility of such a mythic construct by the powers of chance and necessity.
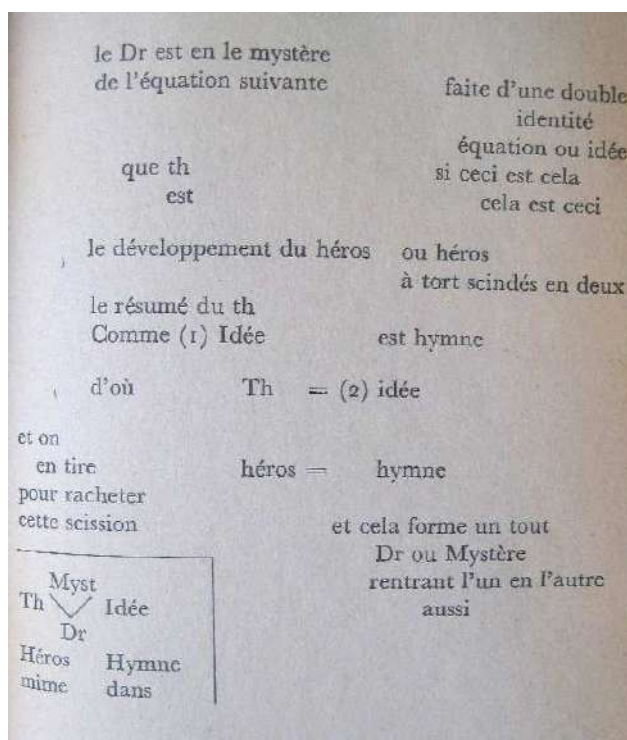

Fig 4: Detail of, Jacques Scherer, Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits (Paris: Gallimard, 1957): 4(A). Gallimard

Perusing Scherer's 'Livre' results in both numerous eurekas and disappointments. For the radically anti-narrative pages, rife with mathematical symbols and diagrams, represent nothing more than the desire of Mallarmé's posthumous audience to realize the myth of the book at all costs—even to the extent that genius is ascribed to the poet's banal notes for ticket prices, auditorium seating and publishing formats—a syntax of the occasional. Appropriately, all that is left of Mallarmé's mythic book is a disheveled manuscript, the epitome of the excess of writing: indolent waste language thrown across the page (fig.5).
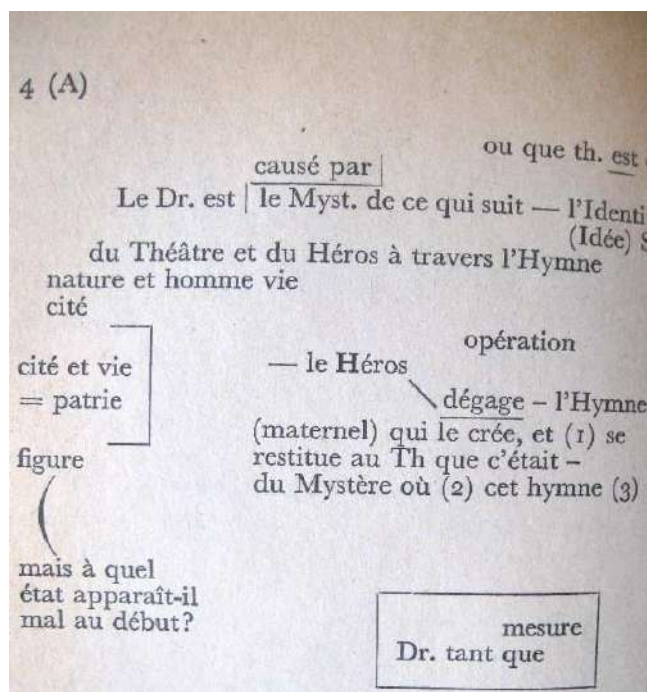
Fig 5 : Detail of, Jacques Scherer, Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits (Paris: Gallimard, 1957): 5(A). Gallimard.

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[1] Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', in *Cy Twombly: Paintings and Drawings 1954-1977*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979.

[2] Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper' and 'The Wisdom of Art,' in Richard Howard (trans.), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1985): 157-194. These two essays have been featured in many subsequent texts on Twombly, an extensive bibliographic record which I will refrain from detailing here.

[3] Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art,' *The Responsibility of Forms*: 160-161.

[4] 'The Notion of Expenditure' was first published in *La Critique Sociale* (1933). Here, it is taken from, Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, ed., trans. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985): 116-129. Also see, Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Robert Hurley, trans., 2 vols, (New York: Zone Books, 1991-1993).

[5] Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure,' *Visions of Excess*: 123.

[6] Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,' *The Responsibility of Forms*: 158.

[7] Richard Leeman has also commented upon Barthes's usage of 'indolence' in relation to Twombly in his excellent study, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005): 88. Also see pages 181-182 for further commentary on Barthes's Twombly essays. Perhaps it is of significance in relationship to Barthes's term 'indolence' that in a 2007 interview with Nicholas Serota in Rome, Twombly admitted the 'indulgent' nature of his work as well as his discomfort with that indulgence. 'History Behind the Thought,' *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, Nicholas Serota, ed. (London: Tate Publishing, 2008): 51, 53.

[8] Ibid: 162.

[9] The question of Twombly's mark as that of the graffito is contested by Twombly himself in the 2007 interview with Serota. Ibid: 53.

[10] Ibid: 167.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid: 161.

[13] André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1930) in Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (trans.), *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1972): 185.

[14] It might be useful here to suggest a parallel between Mallarmé's mythic page and the Modernist canvas as championed by Clement Greenberg in relation to the tradition of Metaphysics. In both formulations, the space of creation is rendered as the fulfillment of the promise of unitary being. However, in Mallarmé's theorization, it is not the artist as a privileged human who enables the existence of such a 'pure' space (as it is in Greenberg's); rather the artist is the 'unfortunate' harbinger of Neitzschean-Dionysian forces that disrupt the Apollonian space.

[15] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book: A Spiritual Instrument,' in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982): 83.

[16] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes such an observation in her discussion of Jacques Lacan's formulation of the signifier as a conglomerate of presence and absence. See her 'Translator's Preface' in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): lxv.

[17] Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure,' *Visions of Excess*: 120.

[18] Ibid., 120.

[19] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé: La Lucidité et sa face d'ombre* (1953), Ernest Sturm, trans. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); Jacques Derrida, 'La Double séance' in *Dissémination*, Barbara Johnson, trans. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981): 173-285; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For a condensed account of her interpretation of Mallarmé, see 'The Revolt of Mallarmé' in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century* (Madison: Associated University Presses, 1998): 31-52; Philippe Sollers, 'Literature and Totality' in *Writing and the Experience of Limits* (1968), Philip trans. Barnard and David Hayman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): 63-85; Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (1952), Ann Smock, trans. (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1982) : 38-48, See also, Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).

[20] Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,' *The Responsibility of Forms*: 161.

[21] Ibid: 166.

[22] Ibid 173.

[23] Ibid 173-174.

[24] Ibid 165.

[25] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Herodiade,' in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982): 21-33.

[26] Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: MoMA, 1994): 27. Leeman also details Twombly's preoccupation with Mallarmé throughout his text, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*.

[27] Quoted in Ibid: 27.

[28] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Another Fan,' in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982): 43. Cy Twombly's painting *School of Fontainbleu* (1960) also includes the phrase, '…how to hold a wing.' Leeman also mentions several other references to wings (and swans) in Twombly's oeuvre. *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*: 114.

[29] Twombly's painting *Study for Presence of a Myth* (1959) also includes the inscription 'Parnasse.' Leeman has suggested that the references to Parnassus in Twombly's work might also stem from the influences of Raphael and Baudelaire, variously. *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*: 91, 112.

[30] Ibid: 112.

[31] Heiner Bastian makes such an argument in his essay for *Cy Twombly: Poems to the Sea* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1990).

[32] 'Herodiade' in *Selected Poetry and Prose*: 21.

[33] Ibid: 27.

[34] Ibid: 31.

[35] In the 2007 interview with Serota, Twombly mentions his 'revulsion for the viscousness of the paint,' and makes a reference to a child drawing on a wall with excrement. 'History Behind the Thought,' *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, 50.

[36] Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Six,' in *The Optical Unconscious* (London: MIT Press, 1996): 243-308. Other essays by Krauss concerning Twombly include: 'Le Cours de latin,' in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 53 (Autumn 1995): 4-23; 'Qui a peur du Pollock de Greenberg?,' in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 45/46 (Autumn-Winter 1993): 159-172; and 'Cy's Up,' in *Artforum*, vol. 33, pt. 1 (September 1994) : 70-5. A recent article by John Bird assesses Krauss's contribution to the Twombly literature. Jon Bird, 'Indeterminacy and (Dis)order in the Work of Cy Twombly, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2007): 495-496. Her writing on Twombly is also discussed in passim in, *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons.*

[37] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Spero's Other Traditions' (1996), *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003): 436. If the surrealists introduced automatic writing into the realm of fine art and Freudian theory from the popular spiritualism of the nineteenth century, Twombly brought that semi-unconscious inscription into the future in the postwar period by rendering it almost totally, asemic, or non-semantic— thereby aligning it all the more closely with the increasingly automated production of mass-reproduced language. Today, such a corpus takes on even further significance given the current potential for a postliterate society as a result of the information age.

[38] I agree with Richard Shiff's physiological reading of Twombly's writing at large. However, with this particular point, my analysis stands in opposition Shiff's discussion of 'habit' in Twombly's hand as a way of returning to meaning. Shiff writes, 'This writing is distinctively personal and quite irregular, as if the habit of Twombly's hand was to escape habit. Why does he write? My guess is that handwriting concretizes and re-animates forces of intellect and emotion—hence ideas and feelings— that might otherwise evade his grasp.' Richard Shiff, 'Charm,' *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*: 26.

[39] Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Six,' in *The Optical Unconscious*: 260.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).

[42] Ibid: 66-67.

[43] Ibid: 37. Derrida writes, 'Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing. "Usurpation" has already always begun.' Also see p. 106.

[44] 'Olympia' by Rosalind E. Krauss, in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, Formless: A User's Guide (New York: Zone Books, 1997): 147-152. Bataille's review can be found in, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

[45] Georges Bataille, quoted in Briony Fer, '*Poussiere/Peinture*: Bataille on Painting,' in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 79.

[46] Rosalind Krauss, 'Olympia,' *Formless: A User's Guide*: 149-50.

[47] Jacques Derrida, 'The Battle of Proper Names,' *Of Grammatology*: 107-118.

[48] Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (eds), *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing* (New York: Granary Books, 2000): 134-5.

[49] Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session' (1969), in *Dissémination* (Chicago: University Press, 1981): 173-285.

[50] Jacques Scherer, *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

[51] Jean-François Chevrier, 'To 'whomever… !,'' *Art and Utopia: Limited Action* (Barcelona: MACBA, 2004): 16.

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On Becoming and Sites of Encounter in the work of Daniel Shoshan

Merav Yerushalmy

Abstract

This essay addresses the work of Daniel Shoshan—a contemporary artist living and working in Israel whose practices focus on issues of migration, the personal and the complex histories of Israel and Palestine. Embarking from Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's reworking of migration and the encounter of the I's and the non I's, the essay explores the inscription of memory and the traces of others—both Palestinian and Jews who have immigrated to Israel from Arab states, in the contemporary art discourse and peripheral (non) sites of Israel today. The essay argues that Shoshan's work and its reception highlight the intricate relations between subjectivity, the biographical and minimalist practices which are often sidelined in Israeli art history and elsewhere, and suggests that the juxtaposition of these issues and practices in Shoshan's work may allow us to reconsider not only the trajectories of art histories but also their relevance for our encounters with others within and outside the work of art.

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger distinguishes in her writings on migration between three types of displacements. There are those she refers to as *inverted exiles* in which the 'migration [is] towards an unknown [but] desired destination'; *returns* which indicate 'migrations towards a known destination'; and *exile*s which stand for 'movements of expulsion and casting out of a desired place'.[1] But for Ettinger migrations of any type are not only geo-political events but also encounters of the self and others—processes of identification and difference sited at the threshold of the I and the non-I(s). Much of Ettinger's work revolves around the rethinking of encounters and of subjectivity on psychoanalytic levels, inviting us, as Griselda Pollock writes 'to consider aspects of subjectivity as encounter[s] occurring at shared borderspaces between several partial-subjects, never entirely fused nor totally lost, but sharing and processing, within difference, elements of each unknown other'.[2] For Ettinger this conceptualisation of subjectivity-as-encounter seeks not to replace the constitution of the phallic logic of subjecthood-as-severance with a feminine or, as she refers to it, the 'matrixial' logic of the self-as-

encounter, but to coexist with it within an extended field of subjecthood. Such a reconfiguration of subjectivity, suggests Pollock, has ramifications which go beyond psychoanalytic thinking into political and social thought, allowing us to think of our encounters with others not only as complementing or threatening our subjectivity but as crucial aspects of subjectivity's very becoming. Ettinger's understanding of subjecthood, is also highly relevant for aesthetic practices and the encounters they facilitate between and amongst viewers and artworks, for it is in the border space of partial selves, neither severed nor fused in which aesthetic engagement, as well as subjectivity comes into being.

Ettinger is not alone in underlining the figure of the encounter in contemporary aesthetic practice. In recent years the art field has seen a substantial growth in curatorial, practice-based and theoretical approaches which focus on the encounter with others in their attempts to rethink contemporary art. These approaches take many and varied forms—ranging from the growing field of relational aesthetics, through Irit Rogoff's understanding of criticality as engagement, and the growing role played by Jean Luc Nancy's understanding of plurality as a being-in-common.[3] Like Ettinger, these writers and many others are often interested in the juxtaposition of subjectivity, aesthetics and political thought, and (to varying extents) question the theorisation of these issues in today's art.

This article wishes to contribute to this emerging field by locating it within specific historical and political contexts, and examining the encounters of I(s) and non I(s) and the articulation of shared borderspaces in the work of Daniel Shoshan—a contemporary artist living and working in Israel. Shoshan's work addresses issues of migration, encounter, subjectivity and exile, and is grounded in specific political and historical contexts—those of contemporary Israel as well as postminimalist practices and theory. Born in Israel in 1957 and exhibiting since 1984, Shoshan's recent work, titled *Intermittent Confessions* (2008), includes numerous geometric structures made of aluminium inlaid with black and white photographs of landscapes and bathers and installed quite densely in the gallery. The aluminium structures, which show clear affinity to minimalist and postminimalist art, encase the photographic prints often partially obscuring the images with vertical or horizontal bars—a recurring theme in Shoshan's work.[4]

Even without the bars, however, the images are almost impossible to view from a single aspect. Placed at different heights, both on the floor and on the wall, and facing different directions, they can be seen fully only if one moves through the crowded gallery space, turning, kneeling and even tiptoeing amongst the structures. This viewing process precludes the viewer from fully comprehending the exhibition at any one point, and stops the images from forming coherent series, turning the gallery into an incongruent array of sites.

The content of the imagery also remains partially obscure, at least at first glance, as the landscape photographs often depict nondescript sites marked by traces of forgotten ruins, signs and overgrown vegetation, and their relation to the images of the bathers is not immediately palpable. In two of the photographs, we see abandoned landscapes and empty lots marked off by wire fences and signs. Stating 'parking for locals' and 'parking for guests' respectively, the signs delineate the role of the empty lots, but also allude to the structuring processes at work within the landscape, underlining both the traces of human activity and the felt absence of human presence. This is not a 'natural' place which we are witnessing in all its natural glory, they seem to declare, but a layered and marked site, which distinguishes between visitors and locals, assigning them different loci and different roles.

Fig 1: Daniel Shoshan *Intermittent Confessions* – detail, "Parking for Guests"

The complexity of these and other landscape photographs in the installation intensifies once we learn that they have all been taken in Beit Shean—a small peripheral town situated not far from the Israel-Jordan border and which is also Shoshan's home town. Beit Shean is known in Israel for its extensive archaeological excavations which have uncovered Scythopolis—a large Roman-Byzantine city now located underneath the modern town. By the first half of the 20th century, however, Beit Shean, or Beisan as it was known then, was a much smaller Arab village of approximately 5,500 people, who in 1948 fled the village following the growing hostilities between the Arab and Jewish population at the end of the British Mandate in Palestine.[5] The village's buildings were confiscated and many demolished, those remaining serving to house Jewish Holocaust survivors from post-war Europe and from North Africa. One of these buildings can be seen in Shoshan's photograph *Parking for Guests* (Fig 1). Perched on a hill, the decrepit stone building, which once served as a local mosque and later as the local archaeological museum, now lies in ruins after being set alight a few years ago. The conspicuous hilltop location, as well as the cypress, date and palm trees, suggest that this was once a focal point for the communities that lived here, while the overgrown vegetation, the low angle from which the photograph is taken and the vertical bars across the image place the site beyond our reach—a place of memory and loss rather than one of communal activity.

Shoshan's work addresses his personal biography in a complex and seemingly paradoxical manner. For although Shoshan himself strongly conveys the crucial role growing up in Beit Shean has had on his life and art in personal conversations, and identifies himself in many respects as a Beit-Shean'er, the town itself is barely visible in his images, and its photographs could easily be attributed to any peripheral town in the Mediterranean or Middle-East.[6] In many ways, Beit Shean appears in Shoshan's work not only as a town geographically situated at the border of Israel and Jordan but as a borderspace in which traces of others and of self, of I(s) and non-I(s) are neither fused nor severed but shared, and emerge through complex and often fraught (and missed) encounters.

Shoshan's exploration of shared borderspaces continues with the images of bathers. Depicting men bathing in the sea, the photographs confront us with Shoshan's seven brothers. The subtle images are linked but varied. Some of the men photographed seem almost nude while others are fully clothed, some are entering the water while others are nearly submerged, and some are photographed at a distance while others still are depicted close up. But in none of the images are we given even the faintest clue as to the bathers' identity. As with the images of Beit Shean, Shoshan clearly communicates the importance of photographing his own brothers in personal conversations, relays the events surrounding the photographing event, and recounts familial anecdotes. But again, one may only learn of the subjects' identity and significance through the curatorial texts in the exhibition and catalogue.

The juxtaposition of minimalist forms such as Shoshan's aluminium structures with personal and biographical practices was not prevalent in the minimalist or postminimalist art and discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, both the art and discourse of the time often revolved around the de-personalisation of art making and viewing, what Hal Foster described as the 'sever[ing] of art... from the subjectivity of the artist' and the opening up of 'a new space of object/subject terms'.[7]

Anna Chave, whose essay "Biography and Minimalism' (2000) addresses the juxtaposition of minimalism and the personal, agrees with Foster that minimalist practices were often conceived as a-personal, but suggests that this is less a trait of the works themselves than of their critical reception—a reception which often worked to deny the crucial role biographical concerns played in minimalism. Discussing the work of Carl Andre, for example, Chave comments that

> as early as 1968 [Andre] prepared a self interview for the catalogue to his Mönchengladbach solo show, replete with Whitmanesque paean to his native Quincy, 'City of granite quarries and ship building yards great uncut blocks of stone acres of steel plates.' Yet Dan Graham would characterize Andre's art around the same time as 'disencumber[ed] . . . of the weight of personal and historically evolutionary determination'.[8]

Chave establishes in her essay a consistent link between the a-personal nature of some minimalist works such as Andre's—and their rapid canonisation within the field of minimalist art. These works, she suggests, stands in sharp contrast to the more 'personal' and 'biographical' minimalist works which were often produced by women, and which were deemed less original and of inferior aesthetic quality because of their biographical nature. The critical reception of minimalist art, argues Chave, depicted artworks made by women—such as Eva Hesse and Yvonne Rainer—as both self-centred and overly reliant on colleagues' input. At the same time, works produced by male artists such as Robert Morris, for example, who benefited greatly from his close personal relations with Rosalind Kraus and Yvonne Rainer, and also exhibited his nude body, were perceived as neither self-centred or derivative but as accomplished and 'non-personal'.

The differing and gender-based reception of minimalist works offered men and women operating within the field markedly different trajectories. For instance, regarding the work of Eva Hesse, Chave writes that

> a selective construction of history [one which omits the personal and relational aspects of an artist's work] was never available to Hesse, whose critical fortunes have all along been colored by attention to her biography. . . . The erasure of artistic subjectivity that seemed such a radical prospect to certain male artists in the 1960s could hardly portend the same for their female contemporaries, for whom erasure was almost a given.[9]

Since the late 1960s, various artists—amongst them quite a few women—have used minimalist practices to address personal and biographical concerns (perhaps the most notable is Mona Hatoum). Yet the juxtaposition of personal and minimalist practices continues to be an intriguing issue, and one which is highly relevant to Shoshan's work and the current field of Israeli art.

The theoretical discussion of the field of minimalist and postminimalist practices and discourse has been rather limited in Israel, and is only now beginning to attract more theoretical and curatorial attention.[10] A recent exhibition and catalogue on postminimalist art published by the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art is thus a

notable addition to the rather limited literature available, and sheds some light on how practices of minimalism and postminimalism are being conceptualised in today's art discourse.[11] Adi Englman who curated the exhibition and wrote one of the essays in the catalogue *Post-Minimalism: 'It is what it is': on the quest for content and sites of meaning*, elaborates the use of postminimalist practices in Israeli art both in the 1970s and today. Referring to the work of Robert Pincus-Witten, who first coined the term postminimalism in the early 1970s and who wrote about some of the Israeli artists included in the exhibition, Englman defines postminimalism as 'the artistic current which was, at once, the successor and the most pungent critic of "pure" American minimalism', thus highlighting postminimalism's break with the minimalist tradition and its rigid conceptualisation of the object and of objecthood, as well as its continuance of some of minimalism's most basic tenets.[12] 'Following the neo-avant-garde minimalist tradition which emerged and crystallised in the first half of that decade [the 1960s]' Englman continues, 'the postminimalist expressions too were based on a set of principal reservations and negations: negation of referential contents, negation of expression, negation of emotion, negation of image, negation of illusionism, negation of the subconscious, negation of the optical, and negation of the metaphysical'.[13]

According to Englman, then, Israeli postminimalism continued to shun referential content, imagery or expression, and focused on linguistically oriented practices, such as those found in Joshua Neustein's work, on 'concrete', process based and ephemeral practices such as those of Benni Efrat, and on the 'homemade' and 'amateurish' approaches of artists such as Pinchas Cohen-Gan. Englman's reading of postminimalist Israeli art could, of course, be challenged, and the referential contents of minimalist practices such as those of Nahum Tevet for example, may be elaborated.[14] But, as Englman is one of the very few researchers addressing the minimalist and postminimalist art field in Israel, her claims in which the canonisation of non-referential art is advanced while approaches which address the personal, the political and the historical within minimalism are marginalised, may have a substantial impact on the understanding and structuring of this field both historically and in the following years.

Taking these issues into account, it is interesting to examine Shoshan's reception in the Israeli art world. Reading the reviews and more scholarly accounts of his works, one is surprised by the scarcity of references to minimalist and postminimalism practices; it rapidly becomes evident that Shoshan's reception has been based less on the works' art historical contexts, and more on Shoshan's cultural identity as a Mizrachi Jew.[15]

Mizrachi, literally an 'eastern', is a term used to denote Jews whose family had immigrated to Israel from Arab speaking countries (such as Morocco, where Shoshan's family came from), and to differentiate their cultural identity from that of the Ashkenazi Jews, who originated in Eastern and Western Europe. Historically, Mizrachi Jews have been marginalised in the financial, political, social and cultural spheres in Israel in a myriad of ways, both explicit and implicit; and although in some respects the situation has improved in the last few decades (there are many more Mizrachi politicians for example, and some aspects of Mizrachi culture have become more widely acknowledged), the economic, social and cultural marginalisation of Mizrachi Jews in Israel continues.

The presence of Mizrachi culture, history and artists within the Israeli art world and art history also remains limited, and it is perhaps within these frameworks that the labelling of Shoshan's work as a 'Mizrachi' work of art—a work which for better or worse, attempts to come to terms with the identity of a Mizrachi artist living in 'western world' and engaging with 'western' art practices may be understood.[16]

Hagai Segev, the curator of *Intermittent Confessions* described Shoshan's identity and practice as follows:

> Shoshan examines the culture he is part of from two different, seemingly adversative perspectives: the eastern one (or should we call it Arab) and the western one, by which he had acquired his professional skills and from which he works as a professional artist.[17]

Segev's binary opposition of eastern vs. western culture and of personal identity vs. a professional one seems to be grounded in essentialised conceptualisations of both

identity and the art world, and overlooks the subtle and complex networks of meanings Shoshan's work performs through a sharing of always partial and partially unknown I(s) and non I(s). By employing what Ettinger describes as a patriarchal model of subjecthood in which differing subjectivities are either fused or severed, Segev limits his understanding of both the subjective and aesthetic encounter offered by Shoshan's works, providing us with an account that—although grounded in specific historical and political conditions—is less than productive.

Fig 2: *Intermittent Confessions* – detail, portrait

Consider, for example, an image of one of Shoshan's brothers depicted partially submerged in the sea (fig. 2). Wearing a head cover which attests to his religious adherence—an image which is still relatively uncommon in current art despite the significant portion of religious Jews in Israel—the photograph connotes the often more traditionally religious Mizrachi cultural practices and the Jewish custom of 'tvila', the ritualistic Jewish bathing. But as with all of Shoshan's images, this photograph does not simply refer to Jewish customs or Mizrachi identity, nor does it merely juxtapose them with the vast iconology of bathers evident throughout 'western' art history; rather it presents us with an image which is neither or both 'western' and 'eastern', minimalist and biographical, local and dislocated. Shoshan's image-structures not only embrace some of the dichotomies found in the discourse

of Israeli art and minimalism, but also, and more importantly, challenge the grounds in which these dichotomies are based. By dislocating the work from its immediate biographical grounds, yet constantly tracing it back to the local and the personal, Shoshan's works manages to precariously perform an identity which is at once singular and plural—indicative of its own histories and those of others.

The issues of Mizrachi Jews and their cultural and political identity can also be witnessed in Shoshan's images of Beit Shean, as the town is not only known for its ancient history and the role it played in the Israel-Palestine war of 1948, but more recently as the home town of David Levi—Beit Shean's former workers' union leader who became a member of parliament, a foreign minister and finally the Deputy Prime Minister. Levi was one of the most vocal politicians in Israel of the 1980s and 1990s who addressed, as well as personified, issues of Mizrachi culture and its marginalisation, and became a symbol (sometimes inadvertently) of the new and empowered Mizrachi identity in contemporary Israel—a symbol which invoked much ridicule as well as racism. But as with the images of the bathers, Shoshan's images of Beit Shean are always over-determined and are as much, or as little, a part of minimalist practices and 'western' art history as they are of Shoshan's biography and Israel's conflictual histories.

Going back to Griselda Pollock's account of Ettinger's work, which stresses its relevance not only for the psychoanalytic sphere but also for the aesthetic and political fields, we may now be in a better position to understand Shoshan's work more fully. Like much of Ettinger's work, Shoshan's aesthetic practices are highly reflexive, but not directly critical of either the art world or the fraught political sphere of Israel. Shoshan's work does not 'expose' the inherent lacuna in minimalist readings of the personal (as Chave does), nor does it overtly critique the systematic sidelining of Mizrachi culture and the obfuscation of Palestinian histories (as other contemporary artists in Israel and elsewhere do).[18] Indeed what Shoshan offers us is not so much a critique of existing conditions but an expansion of them. Like Ettinger, Shoshan expands the field of subjectivity by closely following the emergence of the self through its encounters with others and otherness, and like Ettinger his practices also seek to extend our understanding of aesthetic and political encounters, while contextualising them in the specific and highly complex sites of Beit Shean and Israel

more generally. Operating on subjective, aesthetic and political levels, Shoshan's work is thus able to offer us insights into the field of art in Israel and its reckoning with minimalist practices, as it explores the artist's own biography and that of Mizrachi and Palestinian others. It is in the juxtaposition of these differing levels of knowledge and experience that Shoshan's work is at its most productive juncture. For rather than simply presenting them for the viewer to analyse, or formulating them into a coherent structure, Shoshan's work allows us to witness the encounters through which they themselves become; encounters which are always incomplete and often perplexing, but which offer us an all too scarce chance to engage with others' otherness and our own.

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[1] Brachta Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'The Becoming Threshold of Matrixial Borderlines', in Robertson G. et al., *Travellers' Tales*, (London: Routledge 1994): 38.

[2] Griselda Pollock, 'Thinking the Feminine', in *Theory, Culture and Society*, (2004: vol. 21, no. 1): 7.

[3] Nicholas.Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002); Jean-Luc Nancy *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Paul Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

[4] The categories of minimalism and postminimalism have been and still are contested categories whose functions within and outside of the art world are complex—often denoting differing and incongruent concepts and practices. In my employment of the these terms here I have based my work on their wide spread reception since the mid 1960s, one which often categorises the work of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris as minimalist, and that of Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson, as well as Richard Serra and Gordon Matta-Clark as postminimalist. See a discussion of the genealogy of minimalism in James Meyer*, Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
See a discussion of postminimalism in Stephen Melville, "What Was Postminimalism", in: Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (eds.), *Art and Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003): 156-174. I myself have discussed the category of postminimalism and especially Robert Smithson's work in regard to Shoshan's practices in a previous version of this essay in Merav Yerushalmy, 'Displacement, Postminimalism and Memory in the Work of Daniel Shoshan', in *Daniel Shoshan: Intermittent Confessions*, (Tel Aviv: Council for the Arts, 2008).

[5] As with all historical literature addressing the Israel-Palestine War of 1948, there are widely conflicting accounts of what happened in Beisan and its immediate environs during the war and preceding hostilities. For further details see Geremy Forman, *The Transformation of the 'Emeq Yizre'el / Marj Ibn 'Amer and 'Emeq Beit Shean / Ghor Beisan: Changes in Population, Settlement and Land Tenure due to the Palestine War and the Establishment of the state of Israel*, M.A. thesis, (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2000); and Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); N. Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Depopulated Palestinian Villages in the Israeli-Zionist Discourse*, (Jerusalem: November books, 2008).

[6] Several conversations between the author of this essay and Daniel Shoshan were held in the first half of 2008.

[7] The quote is taken from Hal Foster's essay "The Crux of Minimalism", as it appears in Anna Chave 'Minimalism and Biography' in Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard (eds.), *Reclaiming Female Agency*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005): 387. The work of Anna Chave has come under much criticism in recent years, often for her essentialised, gender based reading of minimalist and postminimalist work. While I agree with some of this criticism, especially that of David Batchelor and

Briony Fer in regard to Chave's reading of Eva Hesse's work, my focus here lies not on Chave's reading of the content and rhetoric of the works discussed, but on her exploration of their reception— one which is clearly marked by the marginalisation of others and otherness, both in the case of Eva Hesse and in that of Daniel Shoshan. See: David Batchelor, *Minimalism*, (London: Tate Gallery Publishing): 64-76; and Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press,xxx): 109-131

[8] Chave, 'Minimalism and Biography': 396.

[9] Ibid: 392.

[10] One of the very few extensive publications dedicated to minimalism and postminimalism in Israel is a special issue of the *Midrasha* Journal:
Gilad Melzer (ed.), Minimalism/Maximalism, *HaMidrasha*, vol. 9, (June 2006).

[11] Lea Avital et al., *The Adler Collection and Israeli Post-Minimalism in the Seventies and in Contemporary Art*, (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Art, 2008).

[12] Ibid: 114.
Most of Pincus-Witten's essays on postminimalism have been collected in his book:
Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art 1966-1986*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

[13] Avital et al:114.

[14] See for example:
Dganit Brest and David Ginton, I Don't Have any Plans, Only Intuitions – a Conversation with Nahum Tevet, *HaMidrasha*, vol. 9, (June 2006): 192-217.

[15] See for example Stephanie Gautier, *Rashida—Installation*, (Jerusalem: Artists' House, 2004), in http://www.art.org.il/he/exhibition_info.php?id=58, accessed Dec. 2008; Hagai Segev, 'Daniel Shoshan, Incarcerating Culture or Setting it Free', *Tav Plus—a Journal for Music and Art*, vol. 8, (2006): 34-37; Osvaldo Romberg, *In Search on an Israeli Art*, (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation, 2006), in http://www.slought.org/content/11343, accessed Dec. 2008.

[16] See Sarah Hinski's discussion of Ashkenazi and Mizrachi identities within the Israeli field of art in Sarah Hinski, '"Eyes Wide Shut": on acquired whiteness in the Israeli Field of Art,' in Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman (eds.), *Coloniality and the Postcolonial Condition: Implications for Israeli Society*, (Jerusalem: Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2004): 257-285.

[17] Segev, 'Daniel Shoshan, Incarcerating Culture or Setting it Free': 34.

[18] See for example the discussion of mizrachi culture in Israel and the complex practices of its formulation and sidelining in contemporary culture in:
Tal Ben Zvi and Yigal Nizri, *Eastern Appearance / Mother Tongue*, (Ein Harod & Tel Aviv: Babel Publishing, 2002).

Merav Yerushalmy is a researcher and lecturer in the art history department at the Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Israel. Her work focuses on issues of migration, communality and documentation, and more generally in the (re)consideration of social and political engagement of (and within) contemporary art, as well as the complex relations of otherness and the common in both theory and practice. In her doctoral research undertaken at the University of Essex, she addressed developments in relational and participatory discourse and their relevance for understanding and facilitating contemporary photographic theories and practices. In her current research she is exploring issues of locality and historicity in the discourse of communality and migration, and focusing on the work of contemporary artists who address these issues in the particular contexts and histories of Israel and Palestine.

Charles Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

In this series of essays compiled over the last 20 years, Charles Harrison—who passed away in August 2009—takes on a variety of subjects focused upon the breakdown of Modernism and its subsequent aftermath. Harrison's position is deeply conflicted, and it is this ambivalence which animates his attempt to work through the problems generated by the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. In the end, it is not a problem which he can resolve, and it is for this reason that the collection deserves attention, quite apart from its evident quality and sophistication. The essays are written with Harrison's signature clarity, although the precision of his language does not always make for easy reading; occasionally his sentences threaten to buckle under their semantic weight.

Harrison's deep involvement in the breakdown of the Modernist narrative is not surprising; he was of course a member of the English collective Art & Language, whose works, and their self-titled journal, formed a not insignificant part in critiquing the untenable claims of High Modernism. However, as Alex Potts writes in the preface, the collection is 'far from being a celebration of the conceptual in late twentieth-century art or, for that matter, a simple deconstruction of modernism and account of its demise'.[1] The reason for this becomes apparent upon perusing the collection. It becomes clear that Harrison is deeply torn between the claims of Modernism and its antagonists. Harrison was well aware that by the late 1960s the claims for Modernist autonomy were increasingly taken for granted both by its critics and practitioners. On the other hand, he has come to be extremely sceptical about the postmodern critique of that project, which as Potts writes, he considers to be 'woefully blind to the aesthetic and ethical commitments implicit in the modernist project'.[2] Taking aim at the complacent relativism of many commentators and artists, Harrison claims at one stage that 'the collapse of the aspiration to improve the social world was not a license to be comfortable with the world as it was[.]'[3]

At times, Harrison's sympathy for Modernist criticism is evident. Clement Greenberg's name crops up frequently, and, perhaps more surprisingly, so does that of Clive Bell. One may wonder what Harrison is doing here; is this simply nostalgia, a desire for an earlier, imagined critical authority which now seems lost? Perhaps, but Harrison understands that Modernism has not been fully understood by many of its detractors, who fail to take seriously the commitments which it entails; commitments which cannot be easily dispensed with.

Aesthetically, Modernism held that the work of art consists of certain properties which mark its objects off from other phenomena. Following this, Harrison maintains that the autonomy of the art object is necessary if the objects under scrutiny are not to be simply illustrations of theoretical positions. A particularly waspish sentence from 'Feeling the Earth Move' claims that 'Over the past two decades the centre-stage of the art-world has been largely occupied by a species of academically supported Conceptualism in which Cultural Studies is practised at the level of the illustrative vignette'.[4] Harrison counters that works of art need to be understood as objects with a certain element of hermeneutic opacity; we need to pay attention to the object's specificity, and not simply claim it for one or another particular methodology, be it theoretical or socio-historical. Harrison claims that

> there is one point forcefully made by the writers of modernist criticism that deserves reiteration. That is that works of art are not necessarily interpretable by reference to social or historical events; they are events requiring interpretation in their own right.[5]

But Harrison is no aesthete; he insists that the work of art, embedded in determining socio-historical conditions, must necessarily embody those conditions in its very form; this being the imperative of Modernism as he understands it.

This problem of the artwork's autonomy is inevitably linked to the problem of aesthetic judgement. It is no coincidence that a crisis of criticism accompanied the crisis of Modernism in the 1960s. Criticism was said to be redundant; a function of socio-economic factors, an index of patriarchal prejudice, or simply an untenable claim for a spurious objectivity. However, the problem of judgement, however problematic its foundations may be, cannot be dispensed with so easily. In art historical terms, judgement is required to delineate the objects of study. How do we determine which artefacts or texts deserve attention? This problem is explored during the essay '"Englishness" and Modernism Revisited,' where Harrison explains his inability to write a sequel to his study *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (1981). He writes

> My conclusion was that a social history of English art might well be written, albeit not by me; but that there could be no viable study of the modern, whether in English art or in art at large, without some non-sociological grounds on which to determine what is and is not deserving of attention.[6]

Judgement as it was understood by Modernist critics entailed a certain level of disinterest. In the essay 'Complexity and Disinterest', which is one of the more forceful articulations of his commitment to Modernist principles, Harrison argues that a devaluation of the notion of disinterest is connected to a loss of complexity in the art object. In line with attacks on Kantian notions of disinterested judgment, Harrison makes the observation that 'disinterest has entirely lost its Kantian meaning. As the result of a kind of journalistic transformation, to say that one is disinterested is now understood as meaning that one is *un*interested'.[7] This devaluation, due in no small part to postmodernist critiques, has had unfortunate consequences in a wider sense, rendering us more susceptible to manipulative social practices; Harrison cites 'those of the businessman, the cultural manager, the media communicator or the political activist – and to these I would add the self-enchanted curator.'[8]

This resistance to the manipulations of our culture brings out more explicitly the ethical commitments to Modernism. There are two recurrent themes which

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accompany this commitment: realism and sentimentality. The former term is never fully elucidated, and indeed shifts depending upon the issue being discussed, but in the essay on Roger Hilton, Harrison refers to a condition of realism being 'a social and ethical difficulty . . . we confront in holding on to our desires and intuitions in face of the pervasive simplifications of our political and economic culture'.[9] This sounds very Greenbergian indeed; that is to say, the earlier Greenberg of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' if not the later Greenberg who stressed the aesthetic as an end in itself. More peculiar, however, is the use of the term 'sentimentality', which crops up in several places; most striking is his discussion of Institutional Critique. He claims that

> at the heart of the modernist enterprise, from its origins in the mid-nineteenth century until the early 1960s, lies a critique of sentimentality in all forms of representation. The power of the modernist aesthetic lies in its unresponsiveness to those questions of moral or political virtue that sentimental criticism has always tended to read out of art's figurative motifs.[10]

Institutional Critique, on the other hand, 'runs the risk of buying its effectiveness at the price of transparency – and thus of sentimentality in its interpretation if not its conception . . . Transparency is an illusion and a mystification.' I fully agree here with Harrison's scepticism *vis-à-vis* 'transparency' – a spurious managerial weasel word if ever there was one. Further, I share his doubts about the ability of Institutional Critique to live up to its name. A recent comment by Andrea Fraser crystallises this problem. Her claim that 'It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution,' leaves me puzzled as to whether or not the irony is intentional.[11]

However, Harrison's use of the term 'sentimentality' is less convincing, striking the reader as odd, if not anachronistic. The term made sense in terms of older modernist critiques, which had as their target academic painting and its clichéd 'figurative motifs.' The work of the likes of Hans Haacke, for instance, simply cannot be tackled at this level, for his work cannot be read in terms of the form-content divide which was at the heart of earlier modernist criticism.

Despite Harrison's debt to Modernist criticism, he seems to have had little faith in criticism itself to sustain Modernism's critical impulse. The essay 'Feeling the Earth Move' is perhaps the centre-piece to the collection. It refers to an encounter; not of a romantic nature, but an aesthetic one, when Harrison found himself face to face with Morris Louis's stripe painting *Red Go* (1962) in London during the late 1960s. Initially convinced of its aesthetic quality, a later visit to an exhibition at Andre Emmerich's in New York provided a rather different experience. In those plush gallery surroundings, Harrison felt that he 'could not see [the works] as art at all. Far from serving as vehicles and expressions of feeling, they had the aspect of wallpapered money[.]'[12] This moment crystallises the ambivalence Harrison feels between the aesthetic integrity of Modernism and its institutional complicities; elsewhere in the same essay, Harrison describes Louis's works as maintaining a certain indifference to those institutional complicities. This is not a problem he can adequately resolve, but the turn to practice is offered as a way of coping with this dilemma; a turn he considers more fruitful than the retreat of critics to the academy.[13]

Given this emphasis upon practice, Harrison's references to the work of Art & Language are frequent. One gets the feeling that there is something a little questionable here, as though Harrison is writing himself into the history with which he is engaged. And this suspicion is confirmed by works such as the *Portrait of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1979-80), which strike me as somewhat arch and overly self-conscious (not to mention aesthetically negligible). But other works, such as the concocted naivety of *Index: the Studio at 3 Wesley Place Painted by Mouth* (1982), are more successful, combining art historical references, self-deprecating humour, and no small degree of aesthetic success.

As has been noted above, the ambivalence which animates much of this collection is not one which can be satisfactorily resolved. How can one hold on to a certain degree of disinterest or aesthetic autonomy, without lapsing into redundant critical models? To be fair, it would be unfair to criticise

Harrison too harshly for failing to provide an adequate answer. Perhaps, given his emphasis upon the centrality of practice, he does not feel that the solution can be found by academics.[14]

But I think that the problem is deeper; that the period in the 1960s is still too close to us historically to be able to get to grips with what took place during that decade; whether, as Harrison writes, 'we witnessed a change in the historical character of our culture or merely a redirection of intellectual and artistic fashion'.[15] Currently, the prospect of a substantial shift in our political and cultural landscape seems the likely consequence of the current economic situation. Perhaps, as these changes take place, the transformations of the 1960s, which have been so formative for the artistic practice of the last few decades, may come more sharply into view as an object of historical study.

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[1] Alex Potts, 'Preface,' in Charles Harrison, *Art Since 1950: Art and its Criticism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009): vii.
[2] Potts, in Harrison, *Art Since 1950*: viii.
[3] Harrison: 87.
[4] Ibid: 146.
[5] Ibid: 139.
[6] Ibid: 104.
[7] Ibid: 226-27.
[8] Ibid: 229.
[9] Ibid: 87.
[10] Ibid: 153.
[11] Andrea Fraser, 'From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique,' *Artforum*. 44:1, (Sep. 2005): 105.
[12] Harrison: 130.
[13] With regard to the relations between criticism and academia, Harrison claims that 'little encouragement was to be drawn from the products of this convergence.' Harrison:145.
[14] Harrison notes that 'none of the major theorists of Modernism was an academic or art historian. All were either artists or practicing critics or both': 227.
[15] Harrison: 29.

Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin (DHM), October 3, 2009 – January 10, 2010. Curated by Stephanie Barron, LACMA, and Eckhart Gillen, Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH.

There was an awful lot of retrospective activity going on in Germany this summer—and, given that this is *Germany*, that's really saying something. My *Time Out* travel guide contained a short article about the politics of memorialisation in Berlin, which I read while seated on one of the concrete blocks that make up Peter Eisenmann's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (1998-2005) near Potsdamer Platz. In addition to listing the many memorial *faits accomplis*, there was also talk of future projects, to be realised 'if they can find space.' And while retrospection and the complicated feelings that come with it is practically demanded by the city's architectural features, this year's anniversaries—the fall of the Berlin Wall (20 years) and the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany (60 years)—were special occasions to look back: in relief, regret, anger, and as often as not, in confusion.

Comprised of some 300 objects made between 1945 and 1990 and divided into four chronological sections, *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures* attempts to tell two stories at once, without reducing them to one, disrupting familiar narratives of East vs. West, while resisting the temptation to put another in their place – admittedly, not an easy task. I saw the show in Nuremberg (between stops in Los Angeles and Berlin) at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, whose entranceway is lined with rows of columns on which are inscribed the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (made 1989-93, by the Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan), a fittingly meditative prelude to the overwhelming timeline that opened the show. Running from 1945 to 1990, it was intended to provide visitors with the necessary historical background in the style and speed appropriate to the Wikipedia age. Nevertheless, the sheer number of historical facts had a disorienting effect, which is—let's face it—probably the best state in which to

actually understand something of the art of the period, sensitive as it was to political events.

Works from the exhibition's first section, 1945-1949, revived pre-war expressionist styles that had been excluded by the fascist aesthetic programme. They also embraced abstraction, despite the tension between the doctrine of autonomous, transcendent abstraction and the need to represent the bleakness of contemporary reality. But, by going backwards as a way of going forwards, artists were doing things that had already been done. The resulting works, such as Hannah Höch's *Mourning Women* and Ernst Wilhelm Nay's *Daughter of Hecate I* (both 1945)—despite their use of expressionist and abstract vocabularies—seem strangely placid, as though these are not living artworks themselves, but exercises in the *making* of a certain kind of art, and thus a statement about potential freedoms rediscovered. But what the art of the immediate post-war period in both eastern and western zones shows, is that energy was channeled in another direction: not so much toward creating new, original, innovative work that could compete in quality and influence with either the earlier German avant-gardes or with emerging American formalism, but rather toward simply holding on, moving on, creating in any way possible. That anything was produced in 1945 *at all* is deeply moving, even today, because it makes plain the profound need for culture. Art is not made despite the trauma, destruction, horror, the loss of humanity, nor simply because of it, but *through it*, on its way from somewhere to somewhere else, moving historically, against all odds. And, perhaps, at a certain moment, when just enough people have ceased bombing, torturing, burning, killing in ways endlessly inventive and increasingly effective, a critical mass of absence is generated, and someone, somewhere, picks up a palette and brush.

Photographs of the immediate post-war period, like Richard Peter, Sr.'s documents of Dresden after the bombing of February 13 and 14, 1945, tear us violently away from debates of aesthetic principle and back into the most unreal

of realities: zero hour (*Stunde Null*). In some pictures the corpses appear continuous with the rubble, in closer shots, decaying bodies still seem, just barely, to hold expressions and gestures of resignation, despair or scorn. There are other visual tokens of Germany's loss, striking but extremely modest given the post-war reality: the bombed urban landscape a field of tattered architectural skeletons, the blank expressions of everyday citizens (a blankness intensified by the form of the ID photos, made in 1948 by Karl Heinz Mai). Photographers also inevitably discovered sculptural traces of the Third Reich's self-aggrandisement among the rubble, the lesson of Ozymandias compactly delivered by modern military means, rather than with the passage of time.

The second section, entitled 'Inventing Autonomy with the Cold War' shows the many directions German art took in the 1950s. In the liberal West, formalism became a sign of both anti-Nazi and anti-Communist aesthetics, with Abstract Expressionism making an appearance at the second *documenta* (1959). In the East, the line of socialist realism moved from hard to soft and back again, with artists finding ingenious ways of incorporating the demands of cultural administrators to create art that was both innovative and compliant (Werner Tübke), or clashing openly with authorities (Willi Sitte). Despite differences, exchange between East and West remained fluid until the Berlin Wall went up in 1961. In this connection, I found it interesting that the wall text for individual works listed only the artist's name, not where she/he was born or active, leaving me at a bit of a loss for interpreting the differences between East/West developments. Sometimes, works were immediately identifiable as products of the GDR, for example, Otto Nagel's socialist-realist "Young Bricklayer (Apprentice Wolfgang Plath)" (1953) (although the worker's white costume, hat, and frontal pose stubbornly reminds me of Watteau's *Gilles*). But most of the time, artists' affiliations were unclear. As an experiment, I asked a few German visitors whether Gerhard Altenbourg was an East- or West-German artist, and they were as ignorant as I. (Altenbourg, an artist of unclassifiable style, who mixed representational and abstract, surrealist and expressionist elements, was

active in the GDR and died in Meissen.) Whether the ordering of works and lack of notation was a deliberate ambiguity on the part of the curators or simply a confusing oversight I couldn't determine. Either way it points to that age-old dialectical problem of telling two stories as one, without doing violence to their differences either by declaring those differences absolute or non-existent. In any case, in this exhibition, to narrativise the in-between with perfect clarity would have been impossible.

The third section, dealing with the 1960s and 70s, is the most complex, and while being literate in neo-avangardism helped me here, so did the timeline mentioned earlier. Those decades saw repeated moments of rapprochement between the two Germanys alternating with moments of extreme tension. In 1961, the Berlin Wall was erected, terminating hopes for reunification. At the same time, there were conflicts *within* each state, with West German leftist resistance to rearmament and capitalism on one side, and on the other, censorship and economic restructuring. The West German artists gained international recognition, while in the GDR the artistic community became increasingly isolated.

For this reason while we are already familiar the splendid, imposing canvases of Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz and others, as well as the mystical-practical gestures of Joseph Beuys, the modest constructions of the Dresden artist Hermann Glöckner come as a counterpoint, even as a revelation. These humble artifacts, lovingly made from matchboxes, bits of wood, wire and old papers, in seclusion at his live-in studio, are only now enjoying their first exhibition. Here is a tin teapot from circa 1900, its bottom cut off and its cylinder stretched out to form an undulating plane. Set on its edge, its handle and spout both face the same side, like an ad-hoc shield for a very small, domestic warrior, or—suggestively—a section of a wall on small scale. There is a cubic construct of pillboxes, arranged in a chequered pattern of alternating heights, end to end, so that the red ink forms a solid band around its middle. And over here, a stack of

five pieces of firewood, unevenly cut. Despite the modesty of these little assemblages, they show an active, creative intelligence, a way of seeing the potential for creation in even the most pedestrian materials. It's as if these functional objects were just waiting for Glöckner's attention, to release them from their slavery to utility, reconfiguring them in such a way that would finally let me speak. Indeed, they tell secrets, but their voices are very, very small.

Finally, the show concludes with the art of the 80s, with the Neue Wilden, postmodernism and neo-expressionism. Though this work has been maligned by certain postmodern apologists as a "return" to figuration, painterly gesture, and authorial intent, it is helpful to revisit it in a specifically German context. While expressionism continued to provide a source of inspiration for a younger generation of artists, they also confronted the legacies of performance and conceptual art, and enduring taboos on Nazi imagery.

Here again, lesser known artists emerge triumphant from the shadows of the international masters of Düsseldorf. East German Sibylle Bergmann's photographs of grand Communist monuments (one of which is on the catalogue's cover) find a balance between humour, nostalgia and critique. In one, a statue of Engels hangs face-down from a rope, awaiting transportation; in another, a sculptural pair are severed from the chests up. The image of such large, stocky figures in spatio-temporal flux captures some of the uncertainty of the 80s. We can't tell whether these statues are being dismantled or erected. Bergmann's intimate fashion photographs were also on display this summer at c/o Berlin, and their lasting power as portraits of an age and the nameless individuals who lived it should be enough to rescue her from relative international obscurity.

The ongoing attempt to understand Germany's twentieth-century history is not merely a case of naval-gazing on the part of a country that has had to find ways of becoming nation without the unifying benefits of nationalism. It is a global project involving the perspectives of many international players, not the least of

which is the energetic entertainment industry. Kate Winslet's notorious comment on *Extras* ('I've noticed that if you do a film about the Holocaust, [you're] guaranteed an Oscar') went from a cynical joke of questionable taste to a depressing self-fulfilling prophecy, when she was later named Best Actress for her role as a former concentration camp guard in the film version of *The Reader*. For better or worse, the problem of Germany represents an ongoing drama of political and philosophical dimensions that reach as far and wide as modernity itself. My deliberate use of the term 'drama' should not be taken as a trivialisation of the reality of the Holocaust or the Cold War; in fact, I intend the opposite: to draw attention to the complex cultural efforts that go into making sense of history. These efforts dress the stage, create heroes, villains, and sometimes, catharsis.

That said, the exhibition *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, to its curators' credit, doesn't really do any of those things. Despite the exhibition's broad thematic concerns, the curators Stephanie Barron of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Eckhart Gillen, from Kulturprojekte Berlin, have successfully navigated the two main dangers that seem to attach themselves to a project of this kind, that is, the dual impulse to celebrate and criticise. One way the curators accomplish this is to present an enormous diversity of works, and to include several who are all but unknown. The exhibition revels in discoveries. If we assume we understand the art of divided Germany, the curators seem to suggest, we'll never really understand it.

It is interesting, in this context, to compare *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures* to another recent German art retrospective, *60 Jahre. 60 Werke* (May 1 – June 14 at the Martin Gropius-Bau, Berlin). This latter exhibition, beautifully installed and populated with work after work of fantastic quality and art historical significance, could have been subtitled 'Germany's greatest hits'. But, this being Germany, *60 Jahre. 60 Werke* rather than escaping criticism, actually invited it by excluding from the selection any hint of East-German artistic presence. 'The GDR remains a black hole' ran a headline in *Die Presse*. Siegfried Gohr, one of

the exhibition's co-curators, published a defense in *Die Zeit*, claiming that the art of the former GDR would be better housed in a museum of *history* than a museum of *art*. The decision to exclude East German artists from a show on West German art may have been technically correct if not politically enlightened (the GDR was absorbed into the West German state, adopting its constitution in 1989, a unidirectional process to which I heard the word 'annexed' applied by several German acquaintances). Still, Gohr's inflammatory op-ed seemed, in some quarters, merely to supply further evidence to support the initial accusations of reactionary cultural myopia.

Barron and Gillen's efforts, then, are welcome, because while the Second World War and the Holocaust have received sufficient treatment to carve out a way of moving forward without leaving the past behind, the division of Germany during the Cold War endures today in uncomfortable and perhaps even unjust ways. The economic, demographic and cultural symptoms were visible this past June to Nicholas Kulish, a *New York Times* foreign correspondent who criticised the positive picture painted by the German government. Kulish claimed that the so-called 'closing gap' between the Federal Republic and former GDR is actually 'a leveling down rather than up' due to the economic slow-down in the West as a result of the global recession. In the Eastern states, unemployment remains high, fertility low, and the population is declining. In this context the failure or refusal on the part of West German cultural authorities to recognise the former GDR's artistic history is frustrating and anachronistic. Rather than being stuck in the past what we need rather is distance from it, in order to get a better—or maybe, for now, just a different—perspective, somewhere between straightforward celebration and censure.

Alexandra Oliver

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Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings. Retrospective 1989-2009
Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts Lausanne, 19.09.2009-03.01.2010

Seated on gaudily patterned cushions, grappling with the headsets, we pause to read the text passing across the screen in colours and with a musical score we can identify, collectively, as '1970's'. Media images and archival footage from the same period, and from across continents and languages, follow each other in a frantic montage of music, text and image. Viewer responses to the associations prompted by this jumble of references are guided by the contemplation of temporality and history in the third-person account of a narrator quickly identified as the artist herself:

> Everywhere she goes she encounters echoes of the 1970s. The 1970s are in vogue now. Were they in vogue then? What could that mean? Are the 1990s in vogue now? This is the decade we are in and we are contemporary. It does seem popular to be contemporary, in step with the times.[1]

Engaging with Renée Green's installation *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996-1997), which occupies a prominent place in the current retrospective of her work at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts (MBA) Lausanne, we are confronted with a number of conceptual and formal strategies characteristic of the artist's practice, enabling us to focus on some of the qualities that have contributed to making Green an established figure on the international art circuit since the early 1990s. The concern with time as a shifting, constructed entity—a deeply cultural experience structured by the intersections of personal and public narratives—is one such element. Others include the reception of Green's work as an exemplary case for a 1990s return to conceptual practices of the 1970s, which the video *Partially Buried*— a disjunctive chronicle of the artist's search for Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), structured through a personal journey into the semantic space of her own childhood in Cleveland, Ohio—enacts but also addresses and questions. This mode of intervention in her own reception, the ease with which Green interweaves art historical and theoretical investigations in the arts and humanities with her practice as a visual artist, is a further characteristic of her work, and merges seamlessly with teaching and writing as the other cornerstones of her activity.[2]

Renée Green Partially Buried in Three Parts, 1996-1997. Installation, Mixed Media, dimensions variable (detail). Courtesy the artist, Free Agent Media and Elizabeth Dee Gallery New York

The video *Partially Buried* is an integral part of a multimedia installation with the same title, including photographs of the student protests at Kent State in May 1970, novels and newspaper articles of the time, fragments of rock purporting to be traces of the lost woodshed's foundations, as well as 1970s interior furnishings, music and record covers. The associations generated by the work extend further when viewed in combination with the other elements that make up *Partially Buried in Three Parts*. Among these are *Partially Buried Continued* (1997), combining a slideshow of her father's photographs from the Korean War with the artist's investigations into the aftermath of that war and the recent history of Kwangju, as well as *Übertragungen/Transfers* (1997) which explores the linguistic and cultural ruptures faced by immigrants from Germany to the United States. While the three parts explore certain common themes, and employ Smithson as well as Green's family history as linking elements, they each respond to different sites of production (New York, Kwangju, Cologne), thus emphasizing the artist's concern with subjective experience in the exploration of an expanded notion of site specificity extending, as we shall see, across her strikingly consistent artistic practice.

I would argue that the diverse notions of site specificity operative in Green's work, and the shifting installation formats arising from these, constitute the focus of the current exhibition at MBA, organized by curator Nicole Schweizer working closely

with Renée Green herself. Aware of the contexts in which major retrospectives of contemporary artists tend to take place, we might expect a chic architectural celebration of the contemporary—which is exactly what MBA would offer, had the inhabitants of Lausanne not narrowly voted against a project for a new museum building last year. As it is, the exhibition extends over a single floor in a wing of the Palais de Rumine, Lausanne's prime example of 19th century historicism, a rambling building containing a library and collections of zoology, geology, history, and archaeology besides fine art.

We might find in this strange, meandering location a resonance with Green's interests and working practices: the collision of seemingly disparate fields of knowledge extends an invitation to think laterally, to find alternative narratives to those of scientific categorization. However, the collections contained in the building do not function as a site for research, but frame an exhibition labelled as a 'conventional' retrospective. The question almost poses itself here, and is framed bluntly in the opening essay to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: 'what can a retrospective for Renée Green be?'[3] As we have noted, the rejection of linear narrative is central to her practice, and does not fit easily with the chronological approach implied by the tradition of the retrospective exhibition. If we regard the totality of Green's work to date as an 'archive', is it not tempting to find an exhibition format appropriate to the archival operations of her artistic practice? At the Vienna Secession in 1999, Green presented Between and Including, the exhibition which has come closest to providing a retrospective of her work to date[4]. For that show, the artist designed a 'maze' of intersecting architectural spaces, allowing the viewer to perceive the work as interrelated rather than discreet entities produced sequentially. The exhibition thus attempted to reinforce the conceptual structures of Green's practice through its spatial arrangement, and took on the character of an artistic gesture in its own right.

This 20-year retrospective takes a very different approach, partly because of the limitations imposed by the space at MBA. Despite its evocative location, the exhibition space essentially consists of a suite of rooms following one on the other, with no real possibility of moving between works without doubling back. This linear

staging must have put considerable pressure on the curator to find an arrangement to do justice to the complex relations between works. Schweizer has adopted a mixture between the chronological logic of a retrospective and a more thematic approach reflected in the titles assigned to the rooms in the viewer's guide. While the first and last rooms of the exhibition set the parameters of the earliest and latest works, the spaces in between often have a clear thematic coherence, while still maintaining something akin to a chronology. The effect is one of subtle shifts between themes and contexts of production.

The first room ('Colors, classifications and viewing arrangements') presents some of the work from 1990, which placed Green at the centre of the discussions around identity politics and the role of postcolonial theory for artistic production at the turn of the decade. Green's activity at this time was focused around her residency at the Studio Museum Harlem and her participation in the Whitney's Independent Study Program, both of which sharpened her sense for the intersections between theory, artistic production and cultural politics. The *Color* series and *Neutral/Natural* (both 1990) consist of large grey panels, specimen jars filled with pigment, labels and texts citing medical reports, diaries and travel journals. Both works now appear as rather pedestrian attempts at an artistic deconstruction of seemingly 'natural' systems of classification and vision, emerging directly from her theoretical interest in Foucauldian 'archaeology'. In the same sense, *Seen* 'is about' the status of the black female body in the western imagination and physically invites the viewer into a play of reflections on the gaze and the subject-object distinction by encouraging her to step onto an exhibition platform (possibly simultaneously a stage, a scaffold and an auction platform for slaves) where her shadow is projected onto a screen behind her. The viewer herself is engaged in an intimate act of looking through a hole in the centre of the floor, from which her gaze is returned in the image of an eye. *Seen* remains a compelling, focused experience, even as we are tempted to dismiss it as a theoretical and artistic relict of its time.

In retrospect, it is not hard to recognize how these types of works addressed a crux in the shift from 1980s practice to that of the 1990s, as a locus of the disjunctures that seemed to occur between different ways of comprehending artworks as social and

political sites. The discussion is (predictably) most starkly framed in the pages of the *October* journal—in whose pages Green featured regularly if ambiguously throughout the 1990s[5]—where there was perhaps a particular interest in staking out the political terrain of 80s postmodernism against the invasion of 'content' and 'subjectivity'. For Rosalind Krauss, the problem was to become centered on the question of the relationship between form and content. Commenting on the 1993 Whitney Biennial (in which Green's work *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) featured prominently) she criticizes the trend towards a politics based on 'identity' in terms of an instrumentalization of artistic form: 'form is one of convenience or accommodation—that this or that form will allow a particular idea to be communicated'.[6] With regard to Green, the interspersion of text with photographs and objects, and the attempt to find a formal system to support these associative links (between media and concepts) is striking in this early work and might draw our attention to the way this complex thinking through the relationship between 'form' and 'content' inflects Green's practice as a whole.

The palpable anxiety apparent in the pages of October in the early 1990s seems to be about the inflection of conceptual practises with a 'return' of the subject as the basis for forms of production and critique. As we move into the second room of the exhibition ('The circulation of ideas and forms: images and music') we encounter an instance of such critical intervention based on the personal experience of the artist-subject. *Idyll Pursuit* (1991) was one of Greens first projects to emerge directly from a residency outside the United States, and addressed the issues surrounding her stay as a 'visiting' artist in Venezuela by producing an installation bringing together colonial accounts and images exploring a utopian 'exotic' in South America, inserting her own image (taken during her stay) among these. This may be read as an early reflection on the practises of cultural exchange emerging in the 1990s and the ways in which such a practice appears to both counter and continue the colonial narrative; her condition as researcher and traveller within a particular context enabling rather than negating the validity of her conceptual interventions. The centrality of the artist as travelling, experiencing subject with a history and a situated relationship to the place she is working from has since become a commonplace of contemporary artistic vocabulary. From an art historical perspective, it is worthwhile considering it here in

the context of a retrospective linking it to the debates around identity, subjectivity and postcolonial theory that marked the New York art world in the early parts of the previous decade.

It is also an example of Green's foundational involvement in that expanded notion of site specificity which Miwon Kwon and James Meyer were to be instrumental in theorizing.[7] Green's engagement of Smithson's displacement of the site as 'non-site',[8] the possibility of reconfiguring the relation between the place of research and the place of exhibition, are key to understanding her artistic process and become more fully articulated in later works. The notion of 'site specificity' rapidly expands in Green's work to include other types of systems and media, and it does so in the social spaces offered by travel and commerce, accessed via the artist's own experience of living and working in other places (most notably Cologne, Vienna and Lisbon). Here, the concern with culture as 'contact zone', a term the artist herself adopted to describe her interest in the shifting, unstable, transformative nature of different forms of exchange,[9] emerges in the shape of researching her own cultural encounters and reference points. Music is the primary catalyst for her investigation of these issues. Here *Wavelinks* (2002), an exploration of progressive electronic music during the 1990s, approaches these concerns using one of Green's favored tropes, the video interview, divided into 7 full-length films investigating different aspects according to Green's personal interests and associations (e.g. *The Aural and the Visual*, *Activism & Sound*). This work is in various ways about sites—social networks for example, or the role material locations (laptops, performance spaces) play in the seemingly dematerialized practice of electronic music—and seems to demonstrate Nina Möntmann's thesis about the transformation of site specificity into a concern with 'social space'.[10]

The exhibition is structured noticeably around a number of theoretical concepts which Green herself has made operative for the reception of her work, including 'flows', 'transfers', 'connections' and 'contact zones' as ways to describe cultural activity and the relations between sites. This is notable with regard to the way her engagement with postcolonial critique is framed. Apart from the early works described above, the third room of the exhibition, entitled 'Staging the colonial past', contains her best

known work in this category, *Commemorative Toile* (1992), which she produced in response to the colonial history of fabric production in Nantes. On the opposite wall the implication of the European 19th century bourgeois interior in the colonial activity of travelling and collecting is traced in *Certain Miscellanies* (1995). Arranged between *Wavelinks* and *Partially Buried*, the two works demonstrate comparable concerns with the historical shape of cultural production (music, the interior), its connection to travel and (often deeply exploitative) forms of exchange.

Renée Green Wavelinks (2002-2004). Installation, 7 octagonal units, videos and sound, dimensions variable. Collection Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore

The dominant impression of the second room in this installation, however, rests with its formal and functional use of this large, central space. First, there is the high visual impact of the colourful banners with words and phrases stitched on fabric that are a trademark medium of Green's recent work, including *United Space of Conditioned Becoming* and *Climate paradoxes* (both 2007), suspended from ceiling and walls. Secondly, the room is divided by means of the pavilion-like structures that act as viewing cubicles for the 7 videos of *Wavelinks*, arranged circularly in the centre of the room, and the coloured benches of *Standardized Octagonal Units for Imagined and Existing Systems (Imagined Places A-Z)* (2002), originally designed for Documenta 11, scattered around these. Such heavily mediated viewing situations—platforms, boxes, benches, pavilions, cushions, plastic room dividers—structure our passage through the entire exhibition, and are supplemented by the aural stimulation provided

by distinct musical scores for each room. The sheer density of the material we are confronted with, the protagonists of narratives, the interviewees, the theoretical references and visual and acoustic correspondences, can be overwhelming and bring two kinds of pressures to bear on the viewer: that of being given the freedom to explore, and the constraints placed on time and attention. What are we meant to do with all this information? Is it possible to relate to the excess of images and associations by simply dipping in and out of individual works? Green herself, describing viewers as 'perceivers' on account of their physical and aural involvement, strives for a parallel between her own experience while researching her material and the viewers experience of it, a moment of 'imagining beyond one's capabilities'.[11] Her approach seems to differ from that of much contemporary work containing implicit demands of the viewer (how long will you stay? How much attention will you give me? What will you miss?) in the way it shapes and actively addresses these moments of decision making through the inclusion of heavily mediated spaces that function to counter the overwhelming impact of the material we are confronted with. Here the retrospective arrangement allows us to see clear continuities with the early works, which display a similar interest in the forms of presentation as well as the categorization of knowledge.

This role of the 'user interface' mediating access to the 'archive' is perhaps most evident in an aspect of her work barely touched on in this 'retrospective': the use she has consistently made of 'new media' and cultural technology as a site outside the gallery space—for example, her web-based project for *Import/Export Funk Office* (1994),[12] itself a development of an initial experiment with an interactive CD-ROM, or the ongoing project *Code: Survey.*[13] On the other hand, the exhibition prominently engages with Free Agent Media (FAM), an enterprise for various time-based projects and events. Instigated by Green in 1994, it archives and publishes the artist's own work as well as functioning as a distribution company for others. We might include this 'dream company . . . operating in the interstices of late capitalism',[14] among the projects demonstrating her concern with the contexts of cultural production and distribution, it's possible sites and technologies. FAM is semi-fictionalized, part metaphor, part active agent, part irony, part serious intent—and thus encapsulates

much of Green's differentiated approach and her amused, critical glances at the complexities of her own practice.

In the final rooms, this retrospective introduces another thread to its argument, centering on the theme of the fictional narrative and authorial voice. *Secret* (1993) has become one of Green's best-known works, and is often cited as an example of another emergent artistic genre of the 1990s, that of 'auto-ethnography'. Documenting her stay in an apartment at Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation in Firminy, she produced videos, sound recordings, and photographs narrating her experience and research from the critical distance of a third-person perspective, thus containing a moment of fictionalization as she engages with the implications of her position as artist working on a specific site, confronting its history and its current inhabitants.[15] Although the work falls chronologically at an early point in Green's career, here it is placed in a trajectory leading to Green's most recent work *Endless Dreams and Water Between* (2009), which seems to enact a shift from the artist as subject and protagonist within her own work to an increased interest in the role of the imagination in the construction of narrative.

Green has explored the notion of the 'imaginary' place in a number of works, from the fantasy place names whispered evocatively to the listener in *Elsewhere* (2002) to the impossibilities of returning to a place that is present only in memory and documentation in *Partially Buried* (1997). Here, however, she seems to enact a turn toward the fictional and literary, reflected in her engagement with the writings of Laura Riding and George Sand and a narrative centering on the epistolary exchange between four imaginary women, who also resemble the artist herself. This story is told in the shape of maps and drawings, often overlaid with text, the trademark banners, and a video combining slow, mesmerizing film footage of Majorca, Manhattan and San Francisco Bay with voiceovers of the four characters. Two further videos, 'Excess' and 'Stills' reflect on the artist's research process in a montage of text and image, and contribute a critical distance to the hypnotizing effect of the tales of travel, return and displacement enacted in the other parts of the installation.

Reneé Green Endless Dreams and Water Between (2009). Installation, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Free Agent Media and National Maritime Museum Greenwich

The work oscillates between the investigative and the poetic, and the artist herself occupies multiple positions, that of the researcher/journalist and explorer/reader. Placing it in a genealogy with earlier works that take the artist's own experience of working and living between places as the starting point for research allows us to trace gradual shifts in her practice—and thus the juxtaposition of *Secret* and *Endless Dreams and Water Between* is perhaps one of the most effective 'retrospective' moments in this exhibition, inviting us to reflect on both breaks and continuities in Green's practice over the past two decades. An interesting avenue to explore here, for example, would be her use of handwriting and spoken language in the exploration of the relationship between fiction and research.

While the act of writing is central to her recent work, Renée Green's practice as a producer of texts, as participant in theoretical debates and commentator on her own work, does not feature prominently in either the exhibition or the accompanying catalogue. However, the catalogue does reflect the extent to which Renée Green's adept handling of theory has influenced her critical reception. A striking example of this circular logic is appears early on, as contributor Elvan Zabunyan considers the question we began with, 'what can a retrospective of Renée Green be?' His answer is ultimately unsatisfactory:

> Finding the thread that can link the works made between 1989 and 2009 means thinking of the history of this practice as a visual artist and writer using the methodology she applies to her own research. Genealogy, as for Renée Green, will be one of the leads we follow in our critical approach[16]

Such continuity between interpretative and curatorial gestures and the artist's theoretical and procedural approach, a mirroring of the activity of production in the forms of reception, is characteristic for much writing on Green, including some of the contributions to the catalogue. It might be worth contemplating why a distancing gap between artistic practice and its reflection in critical writing seems to elude the discourse around Green's practice, particularly as a 'retrospective' might mark a point of increased art historical engagement with her work. We might ask ourselves why the artist's own vocabulary seems so effective, and whether it leaves us with gaps in our possible approaches. One such gap might be the recurrent question of how to frame an 'aesthetic' consideration of her work, an issue which Juliane Rebentisch raises compellingly in conversation with the artist,[17] while Gloria Sutton's essay on the 'formal operations' of Green's practice lacks a clear definition of its terms and never gets to the crux of what a 'formal' approach might mean in this context. Nora Alter's investigation of the role of sound—including music and voice—in Green's productions, however, opens up an interesting field of investigation, although it is unsatisfactorily short and leaves the reader with an irritating sense of incompleteness.

The catalogue above all has two functions: firstly, it expands on a small and (to my mind) tightly argued exhibition to provide a veritable 'archive' of Green's work that seems to aim at a comprehensiveness which the exhibition lacks. Sticking to the theme of the retrospective, it chronologically presents—in a series of high quality colour plates—a much vaster array of works than are assembled in the exhibition, which together with the excellent bibliography (with listings form English, French and German sources) and index of works makes it secondly into an indispensable research tool for anyone interested in delving further into Renée Green's complex production. It appears that the site of the exhibition has been expanded to include the

non-site of the catalogue, the shape of this retrospective finally taking on some of the characteristics of Green's work, after all.

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Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings. Retrospective 1989-2009. Edited by Nicole Schweizer, with contributions by Elvan Zabunyan, Kobena Mercer, Juliane Rebentisch, Renée Green, Catherine Quéloz, Gloria Sutton, Nora Alter and Diedrich Diederichsen. (Zürich: jrp ringier), English/French, 159pp. softcover, col., CHF 50.

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[1] From Renée Green, 'Partially Buried Version A: Reading Script', in *October* 80, Spring 1997: 40.

[2] Green was Professor at the Akademie für Bildende Künste in Vienna from 1997-2002, Distinguished Artist Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. 2003-2005, and is currently Professor and Dean of Graduate Studies at the San Francisco Art Institute.

[3] Elvan Zabunyan 'We Are Here', in *Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2009): 7

[4] Feb 10th to April 11th 1999, Secession Wien. A publication conceived as an artist-book was subsequently published based on the exhibition, see *Renée Green. Between and Including*, Giuliana Bruno, Michael Eng, Renée Green, Lynne Tillman, Joe Wood (Köln: DuMont 2001).

[5] The debate around Green's work is most visible in Hal Foster's essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer', originally published in October (see *The Return of the Real* [Cambridge: MIT Press 1996]: 171-203) and the artist's response to this, see Renée Green ,Der Künstler als Ethnograf?', in *Texte zur Kunst* 1997, c.7 no.27: 152-161.

[6] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh 'The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial', in *October* 66, Fall 1993: 7. She is referring to Green, but also significantly to Fred Wilson.

[7] Miwon Kwon 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity' [1997], in Erika Suderburg (ed.) *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 38-63; James Meyer 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity', in Suderburg (ed.) *Space, Site, Intervention:* 23-37.

[8] The term displacement to describe Smithson's notion (the artist defines it in terms of a 'dialectic') is Stephen Melville's; see Stephen Melville 'Robert Smithson, A Literalist of the Imagination', in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context* (Amsterdam: G and B Arts, 1996).

[9] Renée Green (ed.) *Negotiations in the Contact Zone* (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2003 [Symposium at the Drawing Centre New York, 1994]), term adapted from Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[10] Nina Möntmann *Kunst als Sozialer Raum. Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green* (Köln: Verlag Buchhandlung Walther König, 2002).

[11] 'From one Island to Another: Conversation between Juliane Rebentisch and Renée Green', in *Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings*: 77.

[12] http://www.uni-lueneburg.de/import_export/blacklabeled/intro.html

[13] http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist07/code_survey/intro.htm

[14] Green 'Free Agent Media'—Leaflet, included in the exhibition, notes taken in the exhibition.

[15] Part of the collective Project Unité, curated by Yves Aupetitallot, 1992-1993. For an incisive discussion of Green's auto-ethnographic strategies see Anke Kempkes 'Der Ärger mit dem Narzissmus von Künstlerinnen. Renée Greens "She" auf Exkursion', in *Texte zur Kunst*, vol.7, no. 28 1997: 94-105.

[16] Elvan Zabunyan 'We Are Here', in *Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings*: 7.

[17] Rebentisch is one of a younger generation of German writers on art to have taken up the issue of the viewer as political and social subject in the 'aesthetic' situation produced by installation art. Working from and through the Frankfurt school tradition, her writing provides an interesting pendant to Claire Bishop's confrontation of similar issues during the past decade. See her compelling if densely

written PhD dissertation published as Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003).