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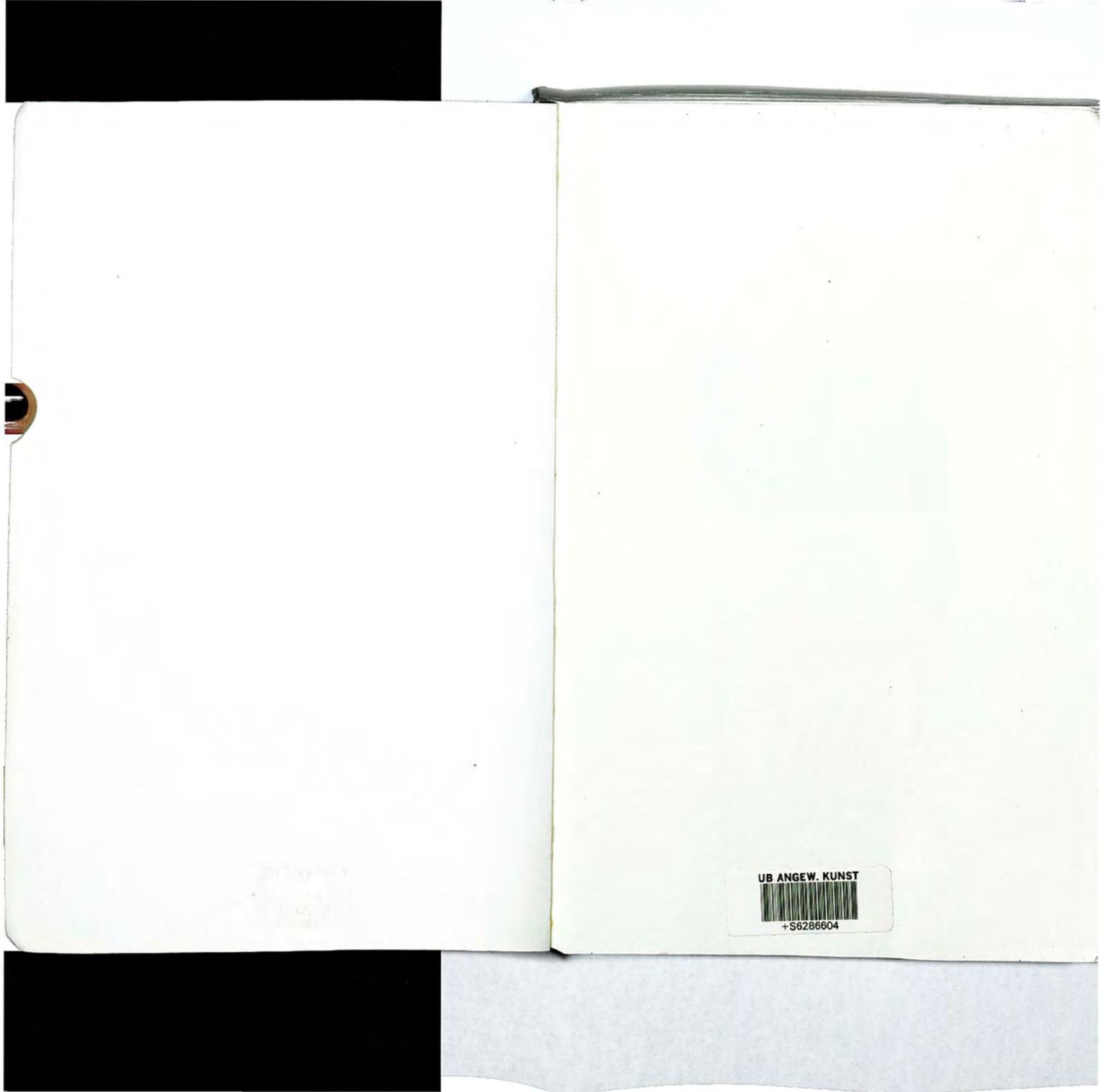
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Video Green

Chris Kraus

*Los Angeles Art
and The Triumph of Nothingness*

Kraus
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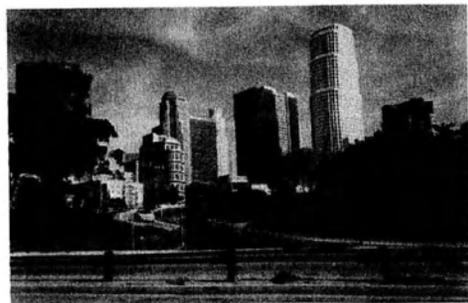


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SEMIOTEXT(E) ACTIVE AGENTS SERIES

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FÜR ANGEWANDTE KUNST WIEN

**Los Angeles Art
and The Triumph of Nothingness**

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Preface

These essays were written over several years after moving to LA from New York City. Teaching at Art Center College of Design, I was fortunate to be at the center of an expanding local art scene that, during the mid 1990s, was fast becoming international. Finding it impossible to separate the careers and works of individual artists from the politics and values of the art world at large, I was trying, in these pieces, to understand it.

I'm deeply grateful to Susan Kandel, under whose editorship of *Artext* magazine I wrote early versions of most of these pieces in a column called "Torpor," and to Paul Foss, *Artext's* publisher. Thanks also to Eileen Sommerman and Rosemary Heather, editors of *C Magazine International*, where "Torpor" continued. I am forever indebted to Richard Hertz, who, as MFA Chair, created the eclectic, visionary program that prevailed at Art Center for many years, and to the artist Sabina Ott, who made my life in LA possible. I learned a great deal from many Art Center students, including Daniel Marlos, Pam Strugar, Zhenya Gershman, Shirley Tse, Ivan Morley, Mariah Corrigan, Jonathan Herder, April Durham, Sarah Matsuda, Shannon Durbin, David Hullfish Bailey and Christie Fields. Thanks to editors Anthony Kiendl (Banff Centre), Greg Burke (Govett-Brewster) and Ariana Speyer (*Index*) for their astute comments and questions and to Mathias Viegner for making Kathy Acker's notebooks available. I'm grateful to Mark Von Schlegell, Charlie Finch, Julie Becker, the late Giovanni Intra, Tessa Laird, Hedi El Kholi and Jonathan Williams for our conversations about art and everything. Thanks to Jonathan Williams and Daniel Marlos for fabulous images, to Jenifer Borum for her insightful editing and finally to David Farrar and Sylvère Lotringer for their constant support, love and friendship.

Video Green



Art Collection

Part 1: Thursday, April 9, 2003, Palm Springs, California

My father shows me the six or seven rare books in his collection. Produced in the late 16th and 17th centuries in London and published by the Cambridge University Press, the books are various editions of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. My father celebrates the dawn of secularism during the Elizabethan age. No more Latin, no more mindless following of the pope, whose authority surpassed the monarchy. In order to become a world power, England needed its own state religion, buttressed by a media-wing the monarchy could control. Founded by a charter issued by King Henry VIII in 1534, Cambridge University Press published the Church of England's liturgy. Its Chancellor also acted as a censor for all publications in the realm. Not unlike the Moscow Press established by Vladimir Lenin, it functioned as an institutional propaganda wing that brought new ideologies to the masses.

Bound in calf and vellum, with spines strengthened by a set of horizontal struts fashioned from meshed twine and embedded underneath the leather, the books, of course, are very old. The pages have that pungent, mildewy smell of things left too long in a damp basement. They are whisper-thin and graying at the edges. *Everything falls apart...* Over four centuries of use and curiosity, the

pages have come loose and have been collected, reassembled and then sewn back together. The earliest of these books are set in a heavy Saxon gothic typeface. Crude and deliberate. A type that wasn't going anywhere. A type that summons up a world of fear and faith and ignorance, of plagues and herbal cures, seasons, weather, straw mattresses and ox carts. A cosmogony in which one might actually seek out a book of common prayer, where "common" means not ordinary but "collective." This commonality held the promise of lifting the individual from the squalor of the village into a larger and more radiant consciousness: a nation. *World without end, Amen.*

There is a fetishism attached to objects in this kind of amateur collecting. A naive experience of substance and the material world. The object forms a link between the collector and its origins. The prairie child holds a conch shell to her ear to hear the ocean roar. There is a tactile thrill, embroidered by imagination. This imagination requires a certain literacy—*history is like the ocean*—an accumulation of references, dreams and stories unleashed by contact with the object. In this sense, the object simply functions as trigger to the *real* collection, which is totally internal.

Researching millennial flying saucer cults, I visited the rare book room of the New York Public Library and requested a broadside pamphlet about the sighting of the Divine Virgin Mary by two children in an English Midlands village circa 1425. Folded like an accordion, the pamphlet was retrieved from the basement of the library and presented on a tray covered in burgundy-crushed velvet. Outside it was 1999, but here inside the high-ceilinged windowless paneled room was proof that a band of lunatics once roamed the English countryside prophesizing salvation through the world's first flying saucer, the Divine Virgin Mary. *It is written that she will first show herself to children*, the pamphlet claims.

Similarly, in William Gibson's book *Count Zero* (1986), the missing unnamed Joseph Cornell box functions as the ultimate collector's fetish. The box is totally erotic: the innocent embodiment of a world that lives outside itself. The collector Josef Virek deploys all his resources to locate it. And finally, he does. But the box is unrecoverably adrift in hyperspace and cannot be possessed. In this most modernist of sci-fi novels, the work of art is utterly implacable. It can only be perceived within its own universe, on its own terms. To view the box, Virek must launch himself into hyperspace: a destination from which, like death, there is no return. And Virek does.

In 1992, William Gibson's collaborative performance with artist Dennis Ashbaugh at The Kitchen in New York explored this confluence of objecthood and vanishment in slightly different terms. Simulcast to several cities, *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* (1992) was the public reading of a Gibson text inscribed by Ashbaugh onto a vacuum-sealed magnetic disk. This text was programmed to erase itself within minutes of exposure to the air. Words disappeared no sooner than they were spoken.

Agrippa's disappearing text may well have been inspired by the curatorial strategy for exhibiting the cave paintings at Lascaux in central France. Discovered in 1940 in Dordogne, these Paleolithic drawings were open to the public until archeologists noted their deterioration through exposure to the air, in 1955. In 1963, the caves were closed. Visitors are led, instead, through Lascaux II, a perfect simulation of the original artwork and environment, in a nearby town. Were the real caves to remain unsealed, the paintings that had survived for 17,000 years due to the hermetic seal created by a geologic accident would disappear within a single human lifetime.

Collecting, in its most primitive form, implies a deep belief in the primacy and mystery of the object, as if the object was a

wild thing. As if it had a meaning and a weight that was inherent, primary, that overrode attempts to classify it. As if the object didn't function best as a blank slate waiting to be written on by curatorial practice and art criticism.

Clearly, this kind of primitive collecting is totally irrelevant to the object's pre-emptive emptiness and the infinite exchangeability of meaning in the contemporary art world. I am not talking about the role of commerce in the production, valuing, acquisition and collection of art objects. Commerce was what the early 20th century dadaists rebelled against with their glossolalic rants and collages fashioned out of newsprint, trash and magazines. Sitting out the First World War in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Sophie Tauber and Hans Arp were horrified by the commodification of the "object" in Great European Art and the military's commodification of human life. But as Lenin (who sometimes dropped by the Cabaret to play chess) might have told them, the dadaist anti-objects would eventually become commodifiable art treasures: collected, traded, bought and sold. *The art world mirrors the larger one, rather than providing an alternative to it.* (Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 1999). Commerce defined the abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s, and pop art seemed like so much fun a decade later because so many glamorous and interesting people bought it. After the brief lapse into *arte povera* and process art during the 1970s, commerce came back with a bang with the "return to painting" in the 1980s, and there it stayed.

Art and commerce have always been two sides of the same coin and to oppose them would be false. Instead, I am talking about a shift that has taken place during the past ten years in how art objects reach the market, how they are defined and how we read them. The professionalization of art production—congruent with specialization in other post-capitalist industries—has meant that the only art that will ever reach the market now is art that is

produced by graduates of art schools. The life of the artist matters very little. What life? The lives of successful younger artists are practically identical. There's very little margin in the contemporary art world for fucking up with accidents or unforeseen surprises. In the business world, lapses in employment history automatically eliminate middle managers, IT specialists and lawyers from the fast track. Similarly, the successful artist goes to college after high school, gets an undergraduate degree and then enrolls in a high-profile MFA Studio Art program. Upon completing this degree, the artist gets a gallery and sets up a studio.

Equal opportunity for white and Asian artists of both genders has ushered in a massive uniformity. It's best, of course, for the artist to be heterosexual and better to be monogamously settled in a couple. This guards against messy leaks of subjectivity which might compromise the work and throw it back into the realm of the "object," which, as we all supposedly agree, was a 1980s excess that has long since been discredited. If imagery of a sexual subculture is to be deployed, as in the work of Art Center graduate Dean Sameshima, it's important that any undercurrents of desire be cooled off and distanced by conflating homoerotic porn with the consumer-beauty-porn of fashion print ads. Through this conflation, the viewer is led into that most desired state of neocorporate neoconceptualism: the empty space of ambiguity, which is completely different from the messy space of contradiction. "Ambiguity," wrote Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza, seeing it all two hundred years ago, "is the kingdom of the night."

The critics Dave Hickey, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and David Pagel, in their championing of "beauty," as if it were opposed to "criticality," are the new police of anti-meaning. During the mid-1990s and beyond, "criticality" (code word for the unschooled, the race and gender conscious, those driven to make art that references conditions in the social world, instead of other art) became the evil

empire that lurked outside the Los Angeles art world. All three rail against the influence of “academe,” with its emphasis on “history,” upon contemporary art production. Since all three are themselves employed within the art departments of academic institutions (The University of Nevada, Art Center College of Design and Claremont College, respectively), I think they are referring, more specifically, to the pernicious hybrid discipline known as “cultural studies,” which since the 1970s, has used feminisms, historiography, queer and postcolonial theories as lenses through which to view one’s own experience of the world.

Hickey hazily defines “the therapeutic institution” as the great spoiler of the faux-populism he’s devised. The fact that Hickey is by far the most readable, original and compelling critic of contemporary art makes his arguments virtually indisputable. No mere academic drudge, Hickey cobs together a theory of transcendent “beauty” from the most unlikely mix of beaux-art aestheticism, 19th century romanticism, car culture, Vegas showgirls and punk rock. In this way, Hickey has largely succeeded in driving out his enemies, “the feminists,” from any meaningful participation in discourses about contemporary art. He champions the work of Robert Mapplethorpe for its “Baroque vernacular of beauty that predated, and clearly, outperformed the puritanical canon of visual appeal espoused by the therapeutic institution.” (*The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, 1993). While Hickey does not name any particular institution, he is likely talking about the content-centric art programs at UC Irvine and CalArts. Hickey sees the 19th century emergence of social-scientific theories as aestheticism’s fall from grace: a time when “Under the auspices of Herder and Hegel, Darwin, Marx and Freud, new regimes of correct interpretation were instituted, and ... works of art were recruited to do for their new bosses the same job they once did for their old ones. Paintings that previously argued for the glorious primacy of

church, state and patrimony now served in circular arguments as both symptom and proof of natural selection, the historical necessity of the class struggle, and the validity of oedipal rage.” (“Buying the World” in *Daedalus*, 2002)

Unlike Pagel, bound by his role as daily art critic for the *LA Times* to write about particular contemporary artists, Hickey and Gilbert-Rolfe are careful not to further legitimize their quarry by identifying them. Except for obvious whipping boys like Hans Haacke and Leon Golub, adversaries are referred to as “PC feminists,” “leftists,” “ideologues” and “academics.” Instead, dinosaurs of Historical World Thought are either championed (like Kant and Ruskin) or identified (like Hegel) as these “leftist’s” proxies, and attacked. Writing in *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (1999), Gilbert-Rolfe argues that our culture is “devoutly preoccupied with the—ideological, historical and sexual (that is, political)—cultural ambitions reflected and expressed in the conversion of Benjamin, Duchamp and Foucault into a unified instrument of redemption (and administration). ... The discourse in charge of contemporary art world discourses is a new original but not disinterested application of Hegel, which has substituted for the art object and the aesthetic a cultural object meant and judged as an articulation ... of the spirit of the age.” In keeping with this zealous a-historicism, Gilbert-Rolfe declines to say just *what* this master-discourse is, *where* it appears, or *who* put it there.

Pagel, for his part, writing in the *LA Times*, upholds a cheerful banner of visual “standards” and neoformalism. Blissfully free of philosophical referents, his dislike of institutional critique, gender and identity politics is generally articulated along the lines of *Fuck Art/Let’s Dance*. He praises the rehabilitation of the “scathingly critical eye” Louise Lawler wielded in her early works, in favor of her new “stunning” photographs at Richard Telles Gallery. These photos force viewers to reconsider the idea that “art functions primarily

as a critique—whether of earlier styles, its institutional context or current social ills ... A critique of nothing but ugliness, her captivating photographs begin to do their work by transforming a small part of the world into something that is beautiful to behold." Conversely, he chides Andrea Zittel's *Charts and Graphs* installation at Regan Projects for its "subjective, self-absorbed" intent and lack of visual interest. This work, he says, amounts to nothing more "... than a bit of diaristic autobiography dressed up in the garb of mediocre social science." (*LA Times*, 2/18/2000).

Together, the three function as a Homeland Security force to keep aestheticism, as they have come to define it, safe and clean.

When collectors pay ten thousand dollars for a David Corty landscape, they aren't purchasing a pleasant watercolour painting of a night sky wrapped around a hill. Other, more naive artists have done these paintings more consistently, and may have even done them "better." What collectors are acquiring is an attitude, a gesture that Corty manifests through his anachronistic choice of subject matter. The real "meaning" of the work has very little to do with the images depicted in his paintings—night skies wrapped around a hill—or their execution. Rather, the "meaning" (and the value) of the work lies in the fact that Corty, a recent graduate of UCLA'S MFA art program, would defiantly loop backwards to tradition by rendering something as anachronistic as a landscape, in the quaint medium of water-color. After all, he has all art history's image-bank to choose from.

Similarly when Art Center MFA graduate Andy Alexander spray paints the words "Fuck the Police" on the corridor walls of his installation, *I Long For The Long Arm Of The Law* (2000), the piece is not relegated to the realm of the "political." "Political" artworks, after all, are "the most hopelessly self-referential of all art forms ... Where the work of art as such ... exists to manufacture ambiguity,

the political one seeks to resolve it." (Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986–1993*, 1995.) Instead, he is praised in a review published in *Artext* for his "subtle aestheticism," which enacts "a dilation and contraction between psychological and social domains." Andy Alexander is an intelligent and enthusiastic younger artist. His dad was once the mayor of Beverly Hills. Interviewed by Andrew Hultkrans in the notorious *Surf and Turf* article that proclaimed the dominance of Southern California art schools (*Artforum*, Summer 1998), Alexander expresses his enthusiasm for art school as a place that "teaches you certain ways of looking at things, a way of being critical about culture that is incredibly imperative, especially right now." Like most young artists in these programs, Alexander maintains a certain optimism about art, that it might be a chance to do something good in the world.

Yet if a black or Chicano artist working outside the institution were to mount an installation featuring the words "Fuck the Police," I think it would be reviewed very differently, if at all. Such an installation would be seen to be mired in the identity politics and didacticism that, in the 1990s, became the scourge of the LA art world. Writing in the *LA Times* in 1996, critic David Pagel dismissed two decades of West Indian-born artist/filmmaker Isaac Julien's work exhibited at the Margot Leavin Gallery as "myopic and opportunistic." "This conservative exhibition," Pagel wrote, "contends that the social group the artist belongs to is more important than the work he makes ... Art as self-expression went out in the 1950s," Pagel triumphantly concludes, "even though this show tries to deny it. ... Marketing research puts people into categories; art only begins when categories start to break down."

Whereas modernism believed the artist's life held all the magic keys to reading works of art, neoconceptualism has cooled this off and corporatized it. The artist's own biography doesn't matter

much at all. What life? The blander the better. The life experience of the artist, if channeled into the artwork, can only impede art's neocorporate, neoconceptual purpose. It is the biography of the *institution* that we want to read.

In *The Collector's Shit Project* (1993), the artist-curator Todd Alden invited numerous curators, collectors and well-known contemporary artists to "donate" samples of their shit. Each specimen was canned, signed by the artist, numbered and given a certificate of authenticity in a very limited edition (1 of 1). *Collector's Shit* responds, with some conceptual wit, to the prolonged buzz that radiated for a decade in the art world about "the abject," a condition described by Julia Kristeva in 1982 in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. But, looking backwards, Alden's project also gave a referential nod to Nouveau-Realist artist Piero Manzoni, who had done the *same* project (*Merda d'Artista*) in Italy, in 1961. Displayed in brightly colored cans and stacked up festively like a supermarket display, *Merda d'Artista* was Manzoni's scathing critique of post-war consumerism: a public offering of his shit. Manzoni's work, like that of his contemporary Nouveau Realists in Italy and France, was soon to be subsumed by New York-based Pop Art, in which the same imagery was used with cheerful irony, without any of the rage. Pop Art was essentially a big Fuck You to abstract expressionism. Using consumerist iconography, it principally addressed things happening in the art world, and was surprisingly unconcerned with the movement of consumerism in the culture then, at large.

The Manzoni link and its attendant history, didn't figure very much into Alden's 1993 reprise. It was all about "abjection," and was remarkably successful. Lots of big collectors sent him lots of shit. Those who didn't, sent him letters, which would be exhibited as well. And then he had the luck to have the exhibition cancelled by its slated venue, the Crozier Warehouse. Crozier is the storage

facility for New York's blue-chip galleries. When the manager learned the actual content of the Alden exhibition, he was suitably appalled. "You cannot," he wrote in a letter to the artist, which would later be exhibited, "have an exhibition of excrement." Eventually, the whole thing was shown at Art Matters Foundation in New York. Alden, a recent graduate of the Whitney Studio Art Program, took *abjection* very seriously. At that moment, the Whitney Program was promulgating two things: figuring out what Kristeva really meant by "the abject," and institutional critique. "My inability to represent the abject," he told Sylvère Lotringer in an interview years later (*More & Less*, 2000) "was figured through some kind of a semiotic configuration, by presenting it in a can in which excrement is signified through language, and not, through, you know..."

"Shit?" asked Lotringer.

We are witnessing a daily life that's so contemptible and trite that pornography becomes its only appropriate rejoinder.

Part 2: Argument

Tracing the professionalization of the art world in his book *Art Subjects* (1999) Howard Singerman describes the way that institutional decisions were made during the 1950s to separate art programs from the humanities faculties so that they would be experiential, practice-based. Deeply influenced by the impact of Charles Olsen's experiment at Black Mountain, Yale and Harvard implemented new MFA studio art programs based on practice and studio critique. This was a mixed blessing. Providing a more realistic training for artists than two more years of art history, the institutionalized peer-group formation of MFA studio programs also meant two years of institutionalized hazing. As Jack Goldstein recalled, during the 1970s heyday of CalArts conceptualism very

few *negative* comments were ever uttered by faculty about student work. Approval was connoted by a slight nod of the head. You either got the nod, or not.

I remember watching a harrowing videotape of one Art Center MFA student, in which he "volunteered" to be trussed like a chicken and hung from the ceiling like a piñata for a friend's project. This project formed part of the friend's "mini-review." The student in question already had three strikes against him. He was highly intelligent, with a non-art undergraduate degree from a prestigious Ivy League university; he was a formerly religious Jew; he was hoping to use his social and spiritual concerns as a basis for the art he made at school, and later. His agreement to play chicken was a desperate last bid to get in on the fun and be part of the crowd. I remember watching the then-Provost and a then-Graduate Advisor circle around this living "piñata" for half an hour, poking and prodding, making disparaging comments about its construction and physique, flicking cigarette ash on its papier-mâché shroud.

Nobody wants to be uncool. Still, this two-year hazing process is essential to the development of value in the by-nature-elusive parameters of neoconceptual art. Without it, who would know *which* cibachrome photos of urban signage, *which* videotapes of socks tossing around a dryer, *which* neominimalist monochrome paintings are negligible and which are destined to be art?

Until recently, there was absolutely no chance of developing an art career in Los Angeles without attending one of several high-profile MFA studio art programs. New York has always had a multiplicity of art worlds, each with its own stars and punishments and rewards. The game there has traditionally revolved around watching who from the alternative/experimental gallery scenes will succeed in "crossing over" from Williamsburg to Chelsea and beyond. In LA, alternative spaces like Hollywood's Zero One Gallery, Highways,

the Santa Monica performance venue and even the more upscale but non-profit LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) have been dead-end ghettos where no one, least of all ambitious students, from the art world goes. Curiously, this situation has begun to change with the gentrification of LA's downtown and northeast neighborhoods. Under-capitalized art spaces have opened up in Chinatown, downtown LA and Echo Park, frequented by relative "civilians": residents who work in art-tangential fields like film and fashion, web-marketing, community organizing and law.

However, the complete hegemony of LA's MFA programs within the city's art world has been seen to be a plus. As gallerist Andrea Rosen remarked to Andrew Hultkrans (*Artforum*, Summer 1998) "What makes LA so great is that the school program is actually a vital part of the community. A big part of being in the art community in LA is being a teacher." And as Giovanni Intra wrote about the founding of his and Steve Hanson's China Art Objects Gallery in 1999, "the notion of the alternative space, which abstained from financial dealing, had become redundant ... its coordinates ... were disoriented by LA's post-graduate school environment from which professionally enthusiastic twenty-eight year olds emerged from a boot-camp-like education with an eighty thousand dollar student debt. The graduate schools in LA were incredible environments, intellectually speaking, with brilliant students and teachers; underneath this was a layer of pure financial terror substratified with humorous and cunning levels of industrial espionage, competitiveness, and the frequently desperate encroachment of dealers, curators and critics whose vocation mandated an enthusiasm for young art." ("LA Politics" in *Circles. Individuelle Sozialisation und Netzwerkarbeit*, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, 2002)

Writing in *Spin* magazine in 1997, Dennis Cooper drew parallels between the energy, sincerity and ambitions of young artists working in UCLA's graduate art program and the alternative music scene. And

within the larger context of conglomeratized culture, visual art is perhaps the last remaining medium where it is still possible to build a viable career without the backing of corporate-global marketing. Compared to the hegemony of Fox, Clear Channel and Time/Warner, the dominance of several art schools and their ideologies within the art world seems incredibly benign.

Still. It is bizarre that here, in America's second largest city, contemporary art should have come to be so isolated and estranged from the experience of the city as a whole.

Part 3. Magic

Real estate lawyer and maverick political activist David Farrar points outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of his corner office on the 36th floor of the Arco Towers at the downtown LA skyline. "That's my building," Farrar says, nodding to the towers occupied by Citicorp. "And that one, and that one, and that one."

Farrar is a short squat man in a navy suit who habitually wears bow-ties in this city where everyday is "casual-dress Friday" so that people can more easily identify, and then remember him. I met him on an airplane and we decided to be friends. "Hi, I'm the guy with the bow-tie you met last week at Harvey's fund-raiser," he'll open on the phone, to the Speaker of the State Assembly or the developer Eli Broad or Madeline Janise-Aparaisio, leader of the Los Angeles Coalition for Economic Justice.

In the two weeks since we've met, he's taken me on several walking tours of "his" LA. "His" LA consists mostly of the projects he's helped implement. So far we've been to Union Station, an 'intramodal transit hub' of interlocking walkways, garden space, public art and upscale restaurants, which was previously a rundown train station surrounded by some dusty, trash-strewn vacant lots.

We've visited the LA Vets Westside Residence Hall near LAX, a model homeless shelter housed in a high-rise dormitory that Farrar and his colleagues saved from demolition. Here, formerly homeless veterans rent rooms for modest rents and work at entry-level jobs around the airport. The property was bought by LA Vets for less than what its demolition would have cost. Farrar is a fan of "More Than Shelter": the idea that subsidized low-income housing has to offer something more than just housing. And at LA Vets, residents attend 12-step meetings and take high-school equivalency, business and computer classes in meeting rooms converted for these purposes.

"More Than Housing" is an idea Farrar helped pioneer while serving as Special Counsel to the Century Freeway Housing Project. With half a billion dollars of federal highway transit funds mandated to CalTrans to replace housing units destroyed by the building of the freeway, Farrar and his "team" tried to put the money to some good, by building low-income residential housing complexes that included afterschool tutoring programs, community centers and day-care. Twenty years later, the buildings remain unvandalized and thriving. Century Freeway Housing worked so well, it was established as a separate entity when the freeway was complete. The corporation continues to finance new affordable housing.

"Team" is an essential word in Farrar's operational vocabulary. Though he knows very little about sports, he sees each deal as a race to get the ball across the finish line against the blockages of powerful opponents. In 1998, Farrar's legal "team" represented the City of LA in developing the Staples Center sports arena. The Staples Center, home to the Los Angeles Lakers, was the first major sports facility to be built in an American city in which city government refused to subsidize the billionaire owners and developers. During the 18 month negotiations, Farrar had a friend call him every Sunday night to brief him about weekend sports highlights so he wouldn't be excluded from Monday morning chats with team owners and their

attorneys. Presently, he's representing the County of Los Angeles in negotiations with an oil company and a bevy of real estate owners and developers to convert the Baldwin Hills oil fields to "shared use" with a golf course and a nature preserve.

To David Farrar, Los Angeles is a kind of magic. He grew up in the Appalachian town of Clifton Forge in a section called the Roxbury Hollow, where it's almost always dark because the hills are clumped around it like the gap-toothed smiles of its inhabitants. The child of a railway worker and a legal secretary, Farrar couldn't afford to fix his teeth 'til he was 30, but he knew immediately upon arriving at the University of Virginia (where he attended college and law school on full scholarships) that his future probably wouldn't be very bright in the patrician legal echelons of Washington DC or Manhattan.

In LA, people notice his bow tie before they pick up on his fading Appalachian accent. He found that in LA, it was possible to do "anything at all" so long as you were willing to "roll up your sleeves and pick up a shovel."

LA City Council Member Jan Perry echoes Farrar's sentiment. Raised in a middle-class black Cleveland family, she transferred to USC from Case Western Reserve when she was 19 years old, because "In Cleveland, you really had to know people, or be from a particular type of family to get ahead. I felt that LA provided a great opportunity for someone like myself. I felt I'd get a decent job, live in decent housing, go where I wanted to go, and be friends with all sorts of people," she told the *LA Downtown News*.

In 1999, a group of 70 undocumented Thai garment workers were awarded a \$1.2 million final settlement in their suit against the El Monte sweatshop that had once employed them. Members of the group arrived there years ago, unable to speak English and were held as virtual prisoners with guards, behind barbed wire. Since initiating the suit, members of the group have become nurses, fashion students and beauticians. Some have teamed up with Latino worker-activists.

In LA, it's possible to buy influence with a City Council member with a campaign contribution of just \$10,000. It only costs half a million bucks to get a piece of legislation passed in Sacramento. Graft is equal opportunity, and a noted City Council member known to have a propensity for gambling likes to take his bribes in the form of bets placed on his behalf at the Santa Anita racetrack.

Luis Gargonza grew up in a one-room shack without water or electricity in Michoacan. When he was 14, he caught a bus to Tijuana, swam across the Tijuana-San Diego channel and joined his brother in LA. Illiterate in Spanish, he worked odd jobs but learned to read and write in English. Now in his 40s, he drives a white Ford 250 pick-up truck and owns a gas station.

Born in Mexico City, Miguel Sanchez crossed the border through the desert. He worked in a south-central LA printing plant for fifteen years, saved \$25,000 and opened a café and gallery in Echo Park.

Part 4 : Thurman, New York, January 2003

Universal Reality has its own

Zip code: 12839

This is all it is. Write to me. Here.

William Bronk

Hudson Falls, a small town bordering the southern Adirondacks in upstate New York, is the kind of place where memories of high school days revolve around getting stoned on angel dust and watching the sunrise from a hill above the city dump. My friend, Mark Babson, told me this. He took me there one Sunday afternoon and showed me all his secret places. And yes, tucked into an elbow of

the upper Hudson River, it is a very nice dump ... although the entire site was capped three years ago after a report came out declaring it the third most polluted landfill in the whole United States. Still, it's pretty. The dirt they dump-trucked in to cover up the toxic waste is covered now with grass.

Mark was born and raised in Hudson Falls, a town that now is little more than a collection of abandoned factories and wood-frame homes with scabby yards. When the Clinton-era EPA tried to make General Electric, the town's primary employer, clean up the PCB's they'd dumped there in Hudson River, the whole town rallied to GE's support.

Why, they argued, "stir up" all those toxins? Mark (and every other local teenager who could read above a third-grade level) was paid handsomely by GE to gather signatures for a "grass roots" petition to "save" the river. When the company's 4-year and \$60 million campaign proved unsuccessful, they shut down the plant and moved away.

"Drunks, welfare cases, and old people," Mark says, summing up Hudson Falls' recent demographics. When I suggest there could be money to be made by fixing up the town's once-glorious Georgian brick colonials, Mark shrugs and sighs: "You can't sell a pizza with artichoke hearts here."

I moved back to the tiny town of Thurman (population 832) last June. Thurman is not too far from Hudson Falls, but New York City is 225 miles away. After living in LA for seven years, I missed the winter and thought perhaps I'd become a regional writer of upstate New York.

Five months later this was seeming like it might not be a very good idea. Winter came on fast: by mid-October, everyone was burning wood and putting studded snow tires on their trucks. If anything, the area was more depressed than ever. The southern Adirondacks—which I'd remembered as charmingly sleepy—now

seemed ravaged and bereft. Throughout the region, the Grand Union supermarkets had been replaced by a filthy low-end grocery chain called Tops that specialized in week-old produce. In Corinth, the last remaining paper mill was about to close. The pre-Wal-Mart Ames department stores had just filed for bankruptcy, so now you had to drive a 50 mile round-trip to just pick up a corkscrew. Old-timers who'd logged the land with horses had mostly all died; now their descendents ruled the Thurman woods with giant skidders, four-wheeler ATVs and snowmobiles.

I was spending too much time cruising websites for computer sex (which is the only kind sex you'll have if you live up here alone); driving around the countryside listening to *Frank Sinatra Classic Hits* and weeping. The old Cole Porter songs evoked a world of specificity, where lovers were remembered for the hats they wore, the way they held a fork, their smile, rather than forgotten through the infinitely exchangeable signifiers of computer sex and porn.

*My story is much too sad to be told
But practically everything leaves me totally cold
The only exception I know is the case
When I'm out on a quiet spree
Fighting vainly the old ennui
And I suddenly turn and see
Your fabulous face*

It was around this time I met Mark Babson. Mark, at 22, was a veteran of several failed attempts at college. He was fixing up my kitchen after the vegans and their seven household animals who'd lived there in my absence, trashed it. I met Mark at The Java Shop, the region's solitary promise of a better life that opened in Glens Falls that summer, 20 miles away. Some high-school friends of Mark's had started it with the proceeds of some precocious

stock-market speculation. Featuring a cooled off 1970s décor, the place had magazines you might actually want to read. With his full set of teeth and deadpan wit, Mark had his pick of ex-urban female clients in the region. He'd quoted on a job for another single woman in her 40s who'd moved back from California, but when she was bludgeoned and dismembered later on that winter by a local boyfriend, we both felt lucky he'd picked me.

While Mark clanged and banged around the kitchen, I was working or not working on my book and meeting prospective sex partners on the computer. Fantasy is like a drug. What hooks you in is not the sex but the illusion of delicious intimacy. In Thurman, I was alone so much my shoulders started bunching up. I'd lived there and taught workshops at the local school ten years ago, but now nothing was the same. George Mosher, who'd entertained the local kids with his talking dog and chickens that laid colored eggs, was dead. George had lived in Thurman all his life; walked ten miles through the woods during the Depression to a job in Stony Creek. Mrs. Rounds, who'd kept the most amazing garden of perennials around her tiny woodframe house, was in the Glens Falls Nursing Home. Across the road, Old Vern had passed on his proprietorship of Baker's Garage to his son Young Vern, president of the Southern Adirondack Snowmobilers Club. Unblanketed by a sediment of local culture, everything in Thurman seemed generic, bleak and empty. It was just another dying town. It seemed important, then, to find someone I could talk to. *My crooked teeth, your comprehension.*

Dear Martin, I wrote to someone I'd just met on the computer. Yes. I'm a writer; I've had this house upstate for many years & have just come back to it after being in LA where I taught writing in a grad program for 7 years. I like going to the gym & library, equally; am abt 5'5" quite thin jewish ashkenazy rodent features streaky hair ex punk rocker from NY. Have been playing BDSM on

& off for abt 5 years ... discovered it in LA as something erotic & a way of having more than casual sex but less than terminal romance with others.

Martin wrote back right away. *In my private life I have enjoyed a mix of vanilla and D/s relationships over several years. I was married for 18 years when my wife died a year ago August. She was a lovely woman with whom I enjoyed a wide range of pleasures. During that period, I also enjoyed other relationships with submissive partners. I explored it deeply, during a period of separation, and we reunited with this as a central element of a then delicious sex life. She was diagnosed with colon cancer four years ago. It was a graceful passing.*

Presently I live with a 12-year-old daughter, who is very much the central character in my life. I'm actively involved with two partners, including a quite vanilla relationship with a local partner, and a pleasure slave who lives in Toronto, with whom I spend weekends about once a month. I've recently returned to Bondage.com after a long absence, hoping I might find a partner who moves me deeply ...

More than casual sex but less than terminal romance. Nicely said. Actually, everything you've said about yourself is appealing. I think I've detailed in my profile that I lean toward the stylish, romantic types of encounters ... it is the erotic intensity of BDSM sex that draws me most strongly.

I spent the night with him in Binghamton 180 miles away. We talked and kissed and didn't do S/m at all and Martin seemed to find this beautiful. He said: "I feel you need my tenderness more now than my dominance." He said: "There's no such thing as a hierarchy of needs." In the morning over coffee, we talked about upstate New York's 19th century utopians and reformers, and Martin said the most intelligent, perceptive things. He said he'd like to be my writing muse and gave me several gifts before I left: his dead wife's plastic travel mug, an ice scraper and a book of stories by Irish gothic writer Sheridan Le Fanu.

I'd like to know, he emailed me a few days later, what sort of relationship with me you might find to be most thrilling. It should be nothing less than thrilling. And then: In a world of people miserably searching for The One, two hearts soar at the prospect of finding A One. What a joy to start a relationship this way.

Martin had a responsible job that didn't interest him in Binghamton, a place he didn't want to live. But he was passionate about his couch. It was a leopard-plush Victorian divan, fabricated for a popular gothic horror movie. He'd bought it over e-bay from an Australian art director, and then re-edited the movie's DVD on his computer, highlighting scenes that showed his couch. Seen against the limitations of his situation, Martin's enthusiasms seemed so moving. He'd had a drinking problem in his 20s. Like so many alcoholics, he had more sensitivity and intelligence than he'd found a way to use in life. So when Martin emailed again asking if I'd like to "share an encounter" with him and his Toronto girlfriend, I was touched.

Back in Thurman, Mark loaned me a small strange book written by a teacher at the local community college, the art historian Sheldon Hurst. The book—which was actually an art catalogue—was called *The William Bronk Collection: It Becomes Our Life* (2000). It was compiled to document the eclectic art collection bequeathed to the school by poet William Bronk. Winner of the American Book Award in 1978, Bronk lived nearly all his life alone in the big yellow house in Hudson Falls where he was born. He donated his art collection to the school two years before his death, in 1999. Mark remembered Bronk very well, though not for his poetry. Mark remembered William Bronk as the nice old guy whose family owned Bronk Coal and Lumber. He could always count on Bronk to buy a case or two of fruit for the Hudson Falls High band fruit drive.

It Becomes Our Life presents a handful of Bronk's poems laid out opposite reproductions of selected works of art from his collection. The poems are shockingly direct reports of Bronk's agnostic mysticism and the pleasures that he found in visual abstraction. Intellectually elegant, annealed and raw, the poems are tiny arguments for the power of intangibility, mounted with a gravelly kind of pragmatism. In *Astonishment*, Bronk writes: "It was perhaps not intended that we should speak,/ in art, of transcendent values, assuming of course/intention by anyone or anything./ Unnecessary assumption: transcendence cares/nothing about intention whether or not. ..." The accompanying art is an eclectic mix of paintings, lithographs and sculptures by the poet's friends—"minor" 20th century artists whose work eluded major movements, categories. While by themselves, the images might seem unremarkable, each of the accompanying poems draws out the subtext of the work. It's as if Bronk saw the same thing that the artist saw and was writing *through* the painting.

Hurst, who'd been a close friend of Bronk's, draws out the metaphysical nature of the poems in his introductory essay. He sees Bronk's sophisticated yet direct poetics as a consequence of simple receptivity. "Bronk surrounded himself with art in his home," Hurst writes. "For him the words *look* and *listen*, *see* and *hear*, were the very basis of an artistic sensibility of openness." Hurst's text was remarkably original and felt for *any* art historian, let alone for one who teaches at community college. It was extraordinary. Produced entirely in the region, there was nothing "regional" about this book at all.

The second time Martin and I met was at the Binghamton Embassy Suites Hotel on a December afternoon before the holidays. This time, he brought a digital video camera and some "adult" accoutrements for me to practice with, in preparation for our

"encounter" with his Toronto "pleasure slave," whose name was Catherine. There is an image from that afternoon he emailed to me later. Discreetly titled "Jpg.Still," it's now in the trash file of my computer.

"I think it might be possible," I'd giggled to him then, "for us to have a *discrete* relationship. In the categorical sense." I felt so sorry for all the other online perverts who frequently misspelled the word "discreet," when what they really meant was, *undisclosed*. The Jpg image had that silvery radiance of a gelatin print, of early black and white photography. We spent the evening at his house, and when we were on the famous couch, Martin made his first remark about my clumsiness. I'd have to change my hair, he said, and also wear a lot more make-up.

Bronk was born in 1918 on Pearl Street, Hudson Falls, in the same big yellow house he died in. He was the only son of the upstate New York branch of a colonial Dutch family who'd had an entire borough named for them: the Bronx. Bronk attended Dartmouth during the mid-1930s. He went to Harvard Graduate School; left after the first year. While still at Dartmouth, Bronk spent two summers at the Cummington School for the Arts, where he (already a young poet) fell in love with all the painters. They were so non-verbal, so intense, engaged in the passionate figuration that would later on be practiced at the New York Studio School: paintings full of blood and sweat, a kind of physical transference. Shirley Clarke painted the 19-year-old Bronk as a boho Goya Christ before she became a filmmaker. Herman Maril, Vincent Canadé and Clarke, who were all in residence at Cummington, became his lifelong friends. After Harvard, Bronk spent two years in the army and then returned to Hudson Falls, where he remained, managing the Bronk Coal and Lumber Yard on Parry Street.

As Bronk's friends tell it, Bronk's life in Hudson Falls had a kind of charmed Frank Capra quality. Days began with a walk from Pearl Street down to McCann's on Main, where he picked up the morning paper. He served on the advisory board of the Hudson Falls Public Library, and the ladies there all said "Good morning, Mr. Bronk," each time he entered. On Pearl Street, he was known as "Bill the Coal and Lumber Man" to all his neighbors. Meanwhile he was maintaining correspondences with Charles Olsen, Cid Corman and George Oppen, the great objectivist godfathers of his era. While guys outside hauled two-by-fours, Bronk stayed in the back office, curled over the big oak desk that had been his Dad's, writing deep dark metaphysical poetry. As his friend, the writer Paul Pines remarks, "Bill's interest in the lumber yard was minimal."

How did Bronk survive this? It seems he was ambivalent about his entirely self-willed obscurity. For years he was content to publish volume after volume with a friend's New Rochelle small press. When, at George and June Oppen's insistence, New Directions Press finally published his sixth book of poetry, Bronk remarked: "When *The World, the Worldless* (1964) came out, I felt naked. And then I realized no one was looking."

Biographically, Bronk is frequently compared to poet Wallace Stevens. Both attended Harvard; both worked full-time at non-literary jobs. Both waited until late in life to receive much recognition for their poetry. Stevens, who didn't publish his first book 'til he was 44, won a National Book Award when he was 60. Bronk won the American Book Award when he was 64 for his North Point Press book, *Life Supports: New and Collected Poems* (1981). But after that, he returned to publishing with Talisman House, a small New Jersey press run by the friend who now acts as his executor. Like Bronk, Stevens held a managerial job, working as an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut. But unlike

Stevens, Bronk was no great advocate of the work ethic. As Stevens, a great modernist, once said, "It gives a man character as a poet to have this daily contact with a job." Bronk had little interest in his identity as a "man," and even less in "character." "There is a sense in which the poem is just there and the poet simply writes it down," Bronk told a reporter from the *Albany Times Union* in 1982. "When the poem comes, it comes as a surprise, and I'm delighted."

*The way you wear your hat,
The way you sip your tea,
The memory of all that,
No, no! They can't take that away from me!*

Martin's house in Binghamton was a modestly upscale tract affair in one of those subdivisions named for things destroyed by its developer. Was it called Fox Run Meadows, Eagle's Nook or Beaver Hills? I don't remember. I met his daughter in the kitchen when I staggered downstairs from his room that morning. She seemed remarkably self-possessed for someone 12 years old who'd recently lost her mother. She had that unrepeatable omnipotence that comes at 12, when you're old enough to see the game for what it is but not yet old enough to be invested in it. My presence didn't seem to bother her at all. Martin'd put a lot of thought into single parenting. He'd explained to her that grown-ups, just like kids, like having *sleepovers*. He used his sex life as a medium for parental bonding, encouraging her to help him rank and rate the girlfriends. While these adult women came and went, *she* would always be there.

Wallace Stevens wrote that "imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos." Bronk, on the other hand, was quite at home with chaos. A fan of nihilist philosopher Arnold Schopenhauer, Bronk's poems loop back with shattering clarity to dazzling epiphanies of metaphysical wit, delivered *brut*, without any other flourish. His poems are very intimate, though they circle mostly around intangibility. Bronk examines light and form the way a small-town doctor checks for measles. Small town patrician that he was, Bronk's rigorous brand of dark ontology is delivered slyly in a deadpan drawl. In fact he has a great deal more in common with William Burroughs than he does with Wallace Stevens.

Bronk's "personal" (i.e., his sex) life remains a well-kept secret among the Glens Falls literary friends who survive him. They are quite *discreet* about this. Though Bronk stayed single, living alone among the artworks given to him by friends, he liked the company of women. He also liked the company of boys and men. During the late 1960s, Bronk made friends with Lorin French and Dan Leavy, two students at Hudson Falls High School. Leavy, French and several other anti-jocks became constant visitors at the house on Pearl Street. Through his influence, French and Leavy both went on to become professional artists, and many of their works are included in the collection.

Throughout the 1970s, Bronk went to New York a lot. He was a regular at Tin Angel, the Bowery bar Paul Pines then owned. William Burroughs lived across the street in a loft he called "the bunker," and poets like the young Eileen Myles busied tables. Paul Pines remembers Bronk as being "very elusive," at that time. Later, Pines sold the bar, moved to the Caribbean, got bored and moved to Hudson Falls. He remembers the long walks he and Bronk would take along the Hudson River canal towpath. They talked endlessly about poetry and personal stuff and culture. Bronk knew every

skeleton in every closet of each house along the way. He was a tremendous gossip and prized all the personal details of his neighbors' lives, although as Pines says, "His poems came from another place. He didn't use it."

Martin's disapproval of my hair and makeup really bothered me. I'd had the hair done in LA; it cost \$300. Was I supposed to look like someone from a local escort service? I'd put on the makeup (MAC) at the last thruway rest stop before Binghamton ... the locations of the rest stops, I'd researched this. That morning, when his daughter left for school, he said: "I note a certain ambivalence on your part about surrendering."

*I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood
I know I could, could always be good
To someone who'll watch over me*

*Although I may not be the man some girls think of as handsome
To her heart I'll carry the key*

*Won't you tell her please to
Put on some speed
Follow my lead
Oh how I need someone to watch over me*

Back home in Thurman I emailed Martin. No response. I left a voice-mail. Five days later he emailed me the video still with this note: *What music would you say went with images of a woman who pulls the chain attached to her nipples as she glides her lips up and down a lover's cock?*

And then I was ambivalent. I wasn't really all that interested in sex; would just as soon talk about poetry. I wondered, then, about

S/m and Pleasure Slavedom. Why couldn't my thoughts about William Bronk be just as pleasurable as a pair of lips around his cock?

In France, there is a formal/informal structure for the perpetuation of a dead artist's work known as the *Society of Friends*. Legally constituted as a non-profit LLC, the Societies des Amies gather up the writer's unpublished works and correspondences, diaries and notebooks. They elicit reminiscences and tributes among themselves and all the writer's other friends and colleagues. They collect notes taken by former students on the dead friend's lectures, and archive all the critical reviews that appeared during their friend's lifetime on his work. Then, they publish all this stuff in a limited edition known as the *Cahiers*, which may be drawn from in the future as the basis of new publications. Usually these friends are writers too, and they do this on a voluntary basis. The Societies exist to keep an artist's memory alive, and ensure that his/her work will be preserved and eventually transmitted to the future.

Why do the friends do this? It can only be that they believe, in some real way, the friend's life and work *belongs* to them ... that despite its singularity, the dead friend's work did not occur in isolation. It speaks for them because they shared a place in time. In this way, the writer's posthumous reputation is created by his friends through shared activity. This practice, of course, implies belief in continuity...

Four months after Bronk's death, before the house was sold, Sheldon Hurst, Paul Pines and Pines' son went over to document it with a video camera. Having been entrusted to preserve Bronk's art collection, Hurst wanted to be sure he'd remember which of the works had been hung over which desk or which sofa. The three of

them also wanted to remember their friend's home as it had been before he died. Hurst loaned me the tape. It looked like a crime scene video. Documenting the aftermath of an artistic life, Pine's camera roams over ... a half-read *New York Times* on the kitchen table ... a pair of reading glasses left carelessly beside it. Three floors of intricately ordered disarray: the house was obviously this man's brain center. Downstairs there is one desk for writing, another desk for typing letters. Bookshelves in most of the rooms, arranged by topic and theme. A special bookcase where Bronk kept the works of his friends ... a rotary phone, no computer.

Outside on the front porch, across from a ginkgo tree, is one of Loren French's large metal sculptures. It's spring. The ginkgo tree's blooming, and the back door of the house has blown open. Over the living room fireplace, Bronk had a framed charcoal drawing by his oldest friend, Eugene Canadé. A stunning painting by Herman Maril of a faceless man sitting at a modernist table with a large stuffed bird hangs above an old horsehair armchair. Upstairs, more works by Leavy, French and some of their friends have been taped up on some hideous palm-tree wallpaper.

Under Bronk's influence, these young local people became completely absorbed in the question, *why this and not that?*, which is probably the only artistic question that's worth asking. It's late afternoon and outside the sky is nearly drained of light. Bronk had a Chinese kitsch-tapestry of Chairman Mao hung up in his bathroom. Idiosyncratic and highly personal, Bronk's art collection, which is now spread out around the local community college campus, has absolutely nothing to say about art history or curatorial practice, but it tells everything about his belief in the force of artistic transmission.

Compiling the catalogue, Hurst has provided a tremendous service to those interested in Bronk's work by coupling 22 poems with reproductions of the artworks that inspired them. The collection spans many moods and three or four generations. It is both

professional and amateur, if "professionalism" is defined by participation in the gallery system.

Eugene Canadé (1914–2001), who Bronk met at Cummington, painted consistently throughout his life while working full-time in Paris for UNICEF. Son of 19th century genre painter Vincent Canadé, (whose works are also represented in Bronk's collection) Eugene dipped in and out nearly every significant style of 20th century painting. *Study for a Mural* is a foray in cubism; *Queensboro Bridge No. 4* is a social realist work; *Birch Sketch #2* represents that loose, mid-20th century figuration. The fact that Vincent and Eugene Canadé both saw painting as a vocation had tremendous influence on William Bronk. In *Life Supports*, he writes in dialogue with one of Vincent Canadé's self-portraits:

...But all

*Pop's heads look like him, each in its own way.
Practice in looking at painting show us how what
We see can be said to look: as painting looks.
And this is a reason for painting, to say it so,
To limn the real, limit, illumine it. ...*

On A Picture By Vincent Canadé

Bronk was fascinated by this vocational aspect of painting, and by its ability to give form to the intangible. This, of course, is an anachronistic way to see painting. The appropriationist possibilities of Vincent Canadé's *Washington Square at Night*, which looks for all the world like Edward Hopper, didn't interest him at all. Neither was he interested in "originality." Bronk looks through the naked birch trees in Canadé's *Birch Sketch #2*, (which to a different eye seems not unlike a hundred other figurative-impressionistic landscape sketches) and sees the difficulty of weather:

*I love the gentle days, the summertimes,
their mumbled messages, asking the ear
to bare itself to hear them better.*

*Yet,
other poems clothe me again
in their clarities when I stand in them
as in a weather. I try the way they look.*

Weathers We Live In

It is the discipline of observation that draws Bronk in. There is the world, and there is the painter, and the painting is what happens in the middle. Many of the paintings in the collection feature skies. This seems like no coincidence for a poet so obsessed with light and the proof it gives of immateriality.

Why is it that we think our lives can just be wonderful? Before my third trip to visit him in Binghamton, Martin emailed an instruction list. It was very programmatic and specific.

Sunday: I expect my daughter will be at home, and that we will, therefore, want to get personal time elsewhere. If you let me know when you expect to arrive, we can meet at the Embassy Suites Hotel. You'll have the option of dining with us at home, or on your own, if you prefer.

Dress: I'd like to see your whites. No need to shop for a white catsuit before I've seen the corset and stockings, though, of course, I'll be wanting to see you in one sometime soon. Your highest shoes, of course. A short skirt or tight dress would be nice. With skirts, I prefer blouses that button down the front.

Makeup: A tasteful glamour look is my preference, hence the reds, and the suggestion of liquid foundation, eyeliner, blush, etc. I'd like you to experiment with your hair, and will be interested in seeing what you do.

Scent: Isis prefers supplicants to come scented with rose, sandalwood, lotus and Myrrh. Any or all of these would be ideal.

Address: My Lord would be most appropriate.

This would be our last "rehearsal" prior to the threesome with his Toronto Pleasure Slave which was scheduled to happen after Christmas. He had great plans for this encounter, which would start off at the Binghamton Embassy Suites Hotel. He was laying in supplies, like new whips and purple latex double dildoes. But then again, a strap-on was another central element.

Suffice it to say, he'd written, I like it stylish but not stylized. If something turns me or my partner(s) on, I probably want to do it. C. has no need to exercise seniority, and no special position relative to you. So alpha, no alpha, you can shape how we play with Catherine to an appropriate degree. It's my responsibility to synthesize and direct, based on what I know. I suggested the idea of you fucking her from behind because it seemed to me that this was possible. Dominance shouldn't be an ego trip, it's more like leadership. There are great ego rewards, and great pleasures. But the greatest pleasure and success comes from creating the experience of optimal erotic excitement in total. Catherine is lovely in many ways, and is pleasingly devoted to me. I hold her in very very high regard, and see to her development and protection as my duty.

For our third meeting, Sunday, December 22, I was to drive to the Embassy Suites in Binghamton with several garment bags of clothing: road clothes for the 360 mile roundtrip; corset, garters, stockings; the slutty secretary clothes; and a subdued and tasteful outfit to change into later on when he'd take me out to dinner with his daughter. This was starting to feel a lot like working a double shift of cocktail waitressing or whoring. And then there was the clip-on hairpiece and the manicure; the bright red lipstick, liquid eyeliner and the dreadful hippie body oils with names like Jasmine, Sandalwood and Rose.

Late Tuesday night, December 17, my friend G. died suddenly and unexpectedly in a friend's room while he was visiting New York City. I was 225 miles away in Thurman, and all of Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoon, while I was shopping for the slutty outfit down in Saratoga, I was on the phone to friends in LA, New York, Chicago, London and Auckland, trying to figure out how to get G's body out of the Brooklyn morgue and back to his family in New Zealand. His friend Isobel, who he'd been staying with in New York, had a ticket to fly home to Auckland for the holidays that Sunday and she was beside herself, fielding 200 calls a day, trying to raise funds to pay a Brooklyn undertaker so the funeral parlor would "release" the body. Did I mention all this happened while I was trying to write a book about the Holocaust? For a while it seemed like there might be a wake on Sunday afternoon. In that case I'd drive down to Brooklyn so that Isobel could catch her plane.

On Thursday night I emailed Martin very cautiously. *Subject: possible change of plans. Dear Martin,* I wrote, *I may not be able to come to Binghamton this Sunday.* I wrote him how my friend had died, about the body and the wake and all of the confusion. But that I still looked forward very much to seeing him and would let him know how things resolved. He did not respond. On Friday afternoon, there was a decision not to transport the body until after the Christmas holidays, and so I emailed him again: *Sunday's clear. Arrangements, finally, circumvent NYC. See you at the Embassy at 1:30.* Meanwhile my friend's body was still at the morgue, I pictured this, a tag attached to his big toe, in Brooklyn.

For several years, a scene revolved around Bronk's house on Pearl Street. Bronk sold the lumberyard shortly after turning 60, in 1978. Paul Pines moved upstate from his island near Barbados, and there was Sheldon Hurst, and other friends who Hurst employed

part-time in the community college Humanities Department. Lorin French and Dan Leavy were there. Having established themselves as artists, they took advantage of the kinds of opportunities provided by arts councils and regional museums. Often, there were residencies and exchanges with other artists in Québec and Maine and Provincetown, and they liked to bring their new friends "home" to meet with Bronk on Pearl Street. Sometimes these visitors stayed for months, and their late-night conversations spilled over into collaborations.

The artist Jo Ann Lanneville from Three Rivers, Canada made an artist's book of prints responding to Bronk's poetry. Dan Leary made a woodcut called *The Light, The Trees* in answer to Bronk's work in *Life Supports*. All these works are part of Bronk's collection. The collection documents a kind of reciprocity that could only happen over time. For years, Bronk wrote poems evoked by looking at the paintings of Canadé, Maril and other visual art contemporaries. Later on, younger visual artists produced works inspired by their readings of these poems.

So while the works in Bronk's collection might seem disparate, they are actually parts of one large body created by a clusterfuck of influence. "I am a husband to my work," Bronk told the Albany *Times Union*, and the marriage did turn out to be prolific. Composed in many different styles, all the works in Bronk's collection share a concern with space and emptiness, light and darkness. Living alone with them so many years, Bronk wrote to them and straight through them.

*Once it had seemed
the objects mattered: the light was to see them by.
Examined, they yielded nothing, nothing real.
... In them, the light revealed itself, took shape.
Objects are nothing. There is only the light, the light!*

Bronk wrote in *Life Supports*, sitting in his living room beside a painting made by Canadé. Voluntarily exiled in this backwater Republican town, Bronk came home from the lumberyard to a world of luminous ideas. The paintings helped him to create his own imaginary realm, which was transmitted, then, to others.

It's only thanks to Hurst's work on *It Becomes Our Life* that it is possible to see this. His commentary in it is simultaneously modest and mind-blowing. As if addressing a roomful of community college students, he describes the full range of Bronk's intentions in the simplest terms. To look and to see. To appreciate paradox. To know what matters and not. Although my friend Mark dismisses the community college as "high school with a cigarette," when I visited Hurst there I was amazed to see so many people working hard for very little money to give people like Mark some kind of opportunity. It's possible to take two years of classes there for free and then transfer to a four-year university. Hurst was about to leave for Russia, where he'd talked some people into setting up an exchange program at the Hermitage. He'd be back after the semester break.

At the hotel that afternoon in Binghamton, Martin said a thing that puzzled me. He was planning to pass my contact info onto Catherine, and I said something about how great that was, his willingness to take that risk, to bring the two of us together. "What risk?" he asked. "Do you think there's *anything* the two of you could do to undermine me?" Later there was a strange dinner in a restaurant with his daughter, in which the two of them observed my efforts to engage with them, the couple. I thought about the girl's dead mother. There were no pictures of her in the display of family photographs the pair had mounted in the living room at home.

After the Christmas holidays, I emailed Martin I was having second thoughts about the "encounter" we had planned with

Catherine. I told him I was much more interested in *them* than catsuits, strap-ons, slutty secretary clothes or hairstyles.

He responded in the language of the office: *I think it's clear that you're seeking a broader focus to a relationship than I, and that the centrality of my focus on sex, and on a particular kind of sexual relationship (as I wish to define it) is not what you would prioritize. If I see this correctly, it appears we are likely to experience increasing conflict rather than increasing pleasure following our current course. This is regrettable, but I think, beyond argument or salvation. I never heard from him again.*

Cole Porter's songs are infinitely touching because they conjure up a world that's more "adult" than any website: a world in which "ennui" can rhyme with "see," and happiness can be savored against a backdrop of possible loss. A world in which "I get a kick though it's clear to me/You obviously don't adore me," and it's possible to love without being loved back in return. Witty and brave, they make it bearable to live among the ugly things because they give you hope.

Discovering Bronk's art collection proved that a life full of meaning can happen anywhere, even in this isolate town. The memory of Bronk's life and the devotion of his friends open the door to what poetry offers us: a world defiant of bureacroporn, where people exist and everything counts.



(1998)

Let's Call The Whole Thing Off

Having just come back to LA from a trip through Eastern Europe to Romania, I am obsessed with relativity. Yesterday at the art school where I teach, I watched Julia D'Agostino's hypnotic video, *Eden Between* (1998). The camera remained static for four takes and each take lasted two minutes. The centerpiece of the image was a rented trampoline. Cylclorama blue sky, sheared green hedges, attractive people of many and mixed races dressed in baggy hip-hop clothes bouncing singly and in pairs on the big trampoline. It blew my mind that the subject of the video was really "gesture": how the jumpers held themselves, their relationships to each other. *We are living in a place where young adults spend lazy afternoons jumping up and down like kindergartners*. I thought it was a fragment of the Benetton dream.

Recently, I've fallen back in touch with Dan Asher, a former friend from the East Village in the 1970s. For an extended time, Dan was living on the couch of the 400-square-foot apartment I shared on Second Avenue with my friend, Tom Yemm. Tom was studying post-Frankfurt School philosophy at the New School and I was working several shifts a week at the Wild West Topless Bar. I met Dan in the street and he didn't have a place to stay so I invited him to move in. Dan had just gotten back from Paris where he'd been sleeping by the Seine and photographing the Maurice Bejart

ballet. "I'd rather be with the bums, the clochards, they're more interesting than the jerk-offs who run the culture industry!" Dan would proclaim in his trademark nasal whine. It was one of those endless New York summers. Dan wore the baggy overcoat of a schizophrenic, which I just assumed he was. He was a truly original person and we had the most amazing conversations, but then he disappeared and for fifteen years I never heard from him again.

Two months ago, I met him at a party in West Hollywood. He was in LA on art business. Things change. Dan Asher is now an artist and an independent investor on the stock market. I'm a columnist, not a whore. Several years ago, Dan underwent tests that resulted in a diagnosis of autism. It's a condition that is rarely diagnosed and often misperceived as schizophrenia or attention deficit disorder. Dan's favorite definition of autism is *a heightened state of hyper-sanity*. This definition also pretty much describes the experience of viewing his work as well as his ideas about art-making. Since the early 1980s Dan has traveled constantly, both by choice and by design. Traipsing all around the world in his overcoat with still and video cameras, Dan has been a participant observer at the margins of the New World Order. Wherever he travels, he's drawn to "the bums, the clochards" because these are his kind. Autistics are said to have savant abilities, which may extend sometimes to art, sometimes to math, and his images function as seismographs of global culture. Anonymous and seemingly disinterested, his images catch the odd persistence of difference in nations where the speed of change has accelerated faster in a decade than a hundred years. He is no Alan Sekula, and his images offer no phony uplift, no poignant distance. Rather, he is a genius at delineating the particularities of dereliction, the odd individual behaviors of those left behind.

In Dan's videotape *Budapest* (1996), a fastidiously attired old man slowly and meticulously reads a newspaper at a crowded bus

stop. Wearing a starched white shirt and a black suit that looks like a frock coat, the man sits up very straight. There is an enormous formality to his posture and gestures. At first glance, the man seems oblivious to time. But as he folds back the page of his newspaper, you see he's inhabiting an entirely different timescape than the other pedestrians: a shard of 19th century decorum in the midst of diesel fumes. In Dan's *Barcelona* (1996) videotape, a homeless woman squats in a similarly crowded city street, folding and unfolding a plastic bag. She does this as if her life depended upon it, with great concentration and calm. Unlike Chantal Ackerman's rigorously interstitial movie *D'Est* (1993), Dan's videos are *selectively* interstitial. Documenting personal rituals and small significant events within the flow of detritus in changing urban centers, he's more like an anthropologist than an artist. Even as I write this, I'm wondering to what extent *D'Est's* formal rigor shields us from the implications of its content. The endless tracking shots of huddled crowds in terminals in *D'Est*, punctuated with the off-screen strain of violins, makes the decenteredness of these newly "liberated" countries into something existential and not circumstantial, and this (I think) is the dilemma surrounding everything our culture deems "great art."

The seeming amateurishness of Asher's videos, his hand-held cameras hovering over arbitrary rituals of the mad that passersby don't want to see, brings us face-to-face with the reality of daily life within the backwaters of what was once reputedly a world, but is now a global marketplace. His work is indefensible, without the rationale of compositional strategy or cinematic reference to support it. Therefore it functions as direct current, forcing viewers to adopt the same perceptual modality as the hyper-sane.

"Shit" is a favorite word among the Yugoslavian expatriate community in Paris, favored by both Bosnians and Serbs. I spent several days in Paris trying to get a visa into Belgrade, but since the

Serbian government has adopted a "reciprocal sanctions" policy against Americans, these efforts were to no avail. Stepping through the doors of the Yugoslav Embassy in the crummy 9th *arrondissement* of Paris is a step back fifty years. Everyone's busy puffing Kents, doing their best to keep up with the three-pack-a-day national quota. The war's about to start again, this time in the Albanian provinces. Zika Swirr, who is my host here, explains that the Albanians see the ongoing balkanization of the region as their opportunity to expunge the Serbs.

"More shit," Zika says, offering me a cigarette. "It will be shit." Zika is an importer of a rare strain of lingonberry found only in the forest regions south of Belgrade. Traditionally, these berries have been used as a flavoring ingredient in French jam. Berries, like every other fruit, are perishable. They're good for roughly ten days after picking, and then they rot. Since cargo flights from Yugoslavia to western Europe have been suspended, the berries must be transported by truck and van. Each shipment is an unpredictable race against the clock on rutted roads, past border guards with wildly fluctuating scales of bribes. Zika's constantly on the phone between the jam factories outside of Lille and Yugoslavia, whenever he can get a line. He does this from a tiny *deux-piece* apartment in Montmartre, and I see him as a kind of patriot: nearly any low-paid immigrant job would be easier and more lucrative than trucking berries through a war zone, yet he persists in doing this. Zika on Yugoslavia: "It was the most Western country of the East. And now, it's not the West, it's not the East. It's not a country any more." Spending time with him, I start to get a sense of what it might be like living in a war.

After our unsuccessful visit to the consulate, Zika takes me to the Yugoslavian Cultural Center. The Center looks and feels completely European. Zika's proud of its location, directly opposite the Pompidou. We wander through a multimedia exhibition by the artist Lana Vasiljevic. There is a photograph of Virginia Woolf

placed under 23 sheets of glass. There is a book placed on a wax pedestal, encased in wax. Zika seems pleased by the international tenor of this exhibition, though the only piece he responds to is the one called *Bloody Letter*. The catalogue essay waxes on about "inscribed representation" and the "fatal break with the imaginary ideal."

The work is totally generic and the sheer gap between it and my experience with Zika makes me think about the genre, from Gerhard Richter's paintings to Uta Barth's photographs, to the work of all their eager imitators, busily rubbing and obscuring and re-photographing recognizable pictures into blur until they're "art." Transmission by Romanian TV of the capture of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu during a public rally at the onset of the 1989 "revolution" was abruptly interrupted. The picture broke up into lines of dropout; the camera jerked, and offscreen voices rose above and underneath the muffle: it's impossible to know, ever, what went on. The ambient videos of Akerman and Asher plunge us directly into the blur that is Eastern European life, and it strikes me as hilariously perverse that Belgrade artists are now appropriating Western murk, where murk is used like Valium: a little something to take the edge of things and make them "art." One of Dan Asher's most subversive images is a decontextualized news photo of a Benetton-sponsored race car bursting into flames.

A Romanian artist who I'm interviewing asked me not to come at 6 p.m. but later, after dark, because, "I am not so good with the transition between day and night." We are trying to locate the particular anxiety that grips every visitor to Romania from the moment they arrive here. He says: "It is difficult to remember. It is also difficult to forget."



(1999)

Pay Attention

Yesterday, Yom Kippur eve, I went to a Zen retreat in Sagaponack, the achingly beautiful stretch of flat and grassy land near the ocean in Bridgehampton. The retreat began at 6 a.m. in the 18th century horse stables that have been exquisitely converted to a Zendo on the property of Roshi Peter Mathiesson. Before the sun came up, during the first round of sitting meditation, Roshi uttered several sentences about the need to "pay attention." In an open but deliberate voice, he said: "If you pay attention to the day there will be no difference between you and the day and the day will pay attention to you." His voice was steeped in the halting certainty that some men acquire at his age, which is approximately 70, as if there was no time lag anymore between his words and movement of his thought. And then he said something about "soft breezes." It was a perfect late-September day and everything proceeded as if within an internal sense of order. Sitting on a black cushion stuffed with futon batting, counting from one to ten, I observed the slow whooshing of a car passing outside on Bridge Lane. Its sound coursed through my body. I felt a little bit like Walter Benjamin tripping on hashish in Marseilles before the War ... so sensitized that, "I daren't move my hand across a page for fear the shadow might hurt it."

At 10 a.m. we took a work break. Because I had no special skills, a priestly-looking guy handed me a plastic bag and sent me

off to pick up trash along the roadside. There was a giddy kind of clarity, stepping out of the dimmed room and down Sagg Main to Sand Dune Lane—orange fritillary butterflies lighting in the coastal meadow grass, the sharp protuberance of banks of Montauk daises. In the past four hours all my senses had been heightened through a narrowing of focus, and I thought this must be something like the opposite of Tim Leary's psychedelic Millbrook. Two black workers in a clean white private sanitation truck crawled along behind me on Sagg Main while I vainly searched for trash. It was so very zen. The estate section of Bridgehampton must be among the worst places in America to search for empty cans and fast food wrappers. These guys, oblivious to the butterflies, had it covered.

"But why," conceptual artist Chris Burden asked his 27 year old graduate student, Jennifer Schlosberg, with faux-paternalist concern, "do you make yourself so scary?" Burden, as I'm sure you will recall, burst onto the international contemporary art scene when he convinced a friend to shoot him in the arm. The resulting artwork, *Shoot* (1971)—a few grainy photos and a terse description—ricocheted around the world, while Burden was himself an MFA student at UC Irvine. Burden famously went on to aim a gun, on-air, at an unsuspecting female TV talk host. So what, you have to ask yourself, could Schlosberg possibly have done that this venerable Dean of Shock and Body Art would find "scary"? Her idea was to invite her fellow art students and teachers at UCLA to her studio for a set of 45-minute duet portrait sessions. Her idea was, they could sit together one-on-one and draw each other's faces. It would be a way to get to know these people who she'd recently just met. Coming from an undergraduate dance program in Connecticut, Jennifer was ignorant of the values of the

contemporary art world, as if knowing how to draw had anything to do with art. She knew even less about the art world's mores. Sensing a toxic cloud of paranoia seeping through the walls of the much-vaunted downtown studios, she was trying to break through it in a proactive way. "I was trying to be friendly. It was like, you know, everyone is just a person," she said in her defense.

Only half her invit ees responded to her directly. As she walked the studio halls conversations stopped and doors closed fast. Speculation about her motives and identity mushroomed. Was Jennifer (who, in any other context but the art world, is a poised and confident young woman) simply an ungainly dork, desperate to make friends at any costs? Perhaps her agenda was more Machiavellian. Several of her classmates were launching international careers, her teachers showed with blue-chip galleries: was she trying to con them into giving her free drawings? Tormented by the rumors, Jennifer started writing. Documentation is the paranoid's favorite card.

During her first year in the program, Jennifer typed 425 single-spaced pages of what she called her "notes," recording in an alphabetized dossier, the history of her interactions with everyone at school. She compiled 78 folders on these colleagues who were friends, ex-friends, teachers, strangers, boyfriends. Rambling and infinitely digressive, the text reads something like *Remembrance of Things Past*, if Proust had spent his time at an American junior high school.

Of course the text became the work, and she eventually compiled these writings into a kind of artist's book. She calls it *78 Drawings of My Face*, and it is a brilliant chronicle of the very qualities that define contemporary LA art: ambition, exclusion and anxiety. The book is written in the vein of adolescent self-mutilation, except that Jennifer externalizes the pain of all the cross-wired contradictions that drive young women crazy. It's a project that's been approached before in 'zines, but Schlosberg does it with a

mania for precision that I've never witnessed in this genre. It is also the definitive case study of fear and loathing in the LA art world, set squarely in the place where it begins: high-profile graduate art programs, where careers are made not simply on the basis of attendance, but (like corporate and political careers), who you manage to make friends with.

Schlosberg is anxious to "tell all" about her boyfriend Jon Pestoni who makes her promise not to tell anybody in the program that they're having sex, supposedly to protect the feelings of his ex-girlfriend, Jennifer Borman. Unsparingly, she documents her nervous meetings in New York with Georgina Starr and Sharon Lockhart, two women about her age who've already built significant careers. But what wins you over is, the real subject of the book is Jennifer herself, and how she thinks, or thought, at 26. While many books have been written by people at the age of 26, there is very little literature that is *really* 26. Most people (I include myself) are much too busy at that age formulating who they think they ought to be to tell the less-than-perfect truth of what it feels like to be 26.

This, I think, is a tremendous breakthrough. But Schlosberg's work was not perceived that way. Her classmates asked: *How could she?* Chris Burden and the artist Charlie Ray both deemed her work "unethical." Faculty member Morgan Fisher refused, outright, to work with her. Burden then explained: "Artists have to do their own work. Art should not be based on social interactions."

Last year I edited *Airless Spaces* by Shulamith Firestone, a set of very short and barely fictionalized observations of the lives of deadbeats, suicides and losers who pass in and out of New York City's mental health and welfare institutions. In 1972, when she was 25, Firestone burst onto the scene of second-wave feminism with *The Dialectic of Sex*, her analytic, brilliant book which soon became a movement classic. Refusing a career as a professional feminist, Firestone's life began to take a series of odd turns, which led to 12

years shuttling in and out of New York City public mental hospitals. As a teenager, *Dialectic* was my favorite book, and I'd always wondered what had happened to Shulamith ... just as I'd often wondered why so many of the confrontational, conceptual female artists who were Burden's prominent contemporaries in 1971 have disappeared in middle-age to live around New Mexico in teepees, or become massage therapists and cranial-sacral healers. What makes rage become New Age? By all logic, these women now should be our leaders.

Schlosberg's chapter on "Chris Burden" offers several answers.

"In telling some men about the project," Schlosberg writes, "many have been horrified, citing the idea of betraying someone, of 'getting them in trouble,' maybe because of an affair they've had. And it was my fault, because I was 'exposing' them. No one ever asked me how I felt or why I was doing what they were assuming I was doing, which isn't necessarily what I have done ... I actually think I barely even mention affairs. But they do come up. And I think I have the right to feel what I feel, and they do too, and—I couldn't really think, myself, of anything I've done that I wouldn't want ever to be said. I mean, I'm human. What are we ashamed of? And what about it don't we want people to know? Now I know this is an extremely complicated issue ..."

"I thought this was always my job—to make people see something ugly inside. Take them to a place in themselves they didn't want to go, but had to ..." the late Heather Lewis wrote in her second book, *Notice*.

The artist Carol Irving was attacked at knifepoint in Providence, Rhode Island, while she was an undergraduate at Brown. She reported the incident and agreed to press charges. After the shock of the attack wore off, what disturbed her the most was the insidiousness of the police investigation. Though Irving was being trained for a career in foreign affairs, the experience led her to conceptual art. Shortly after the court case, she created the installation *PL-055989*,

which was her case number. "I looked at the questions asked of me after the incident and broke them down into five sets. The way the police asked questions was different from the judge, from the shrink, from my friends, from the grand jury ... One man on the grand jury kept trying to get me to talk about what it felt like to be stabbed. The questions were so much creepier than the story."

Fascinated by the power exerted within seemingly "neutral" questions, Irving mounted a piece called *Truth* (1998) two years later, in New York. This time, she deployed the 20th century's breakthrough machine of judicial control, the polygraph lie detector. With an instrument rented from a sleazy New Jersey private investigator, Irving administers polygraph tests to willing gallery viewers. Volunteers are invited to choose from one of five batteries of questions compiled by Irving herself. They're titled "Dirty," "Damaged," "Denial," "Sneaky," and "Guilty." The questions, like Irving's presence in a tailored navy blue suit, are ambiguous, insinuating, and titillating enough to elicit willing confessions. Part old-fashioned stewardess, part policewoman or warden, Irving fastens sensors with a cool institutional touch to the five primary pulse-points of her subject's bodies. She remains firm but welcoming, aware of the power of slight shades of emphasis. *Is age a barrier to intimacy?* she asks. *Are free elections possible? Do you feel free? Do you know who is responsible for your problems?* The subject's heart rate, his breath, the exusions of sweat beneath his skin, all trigger lines on the polygraph printout.

While participation in *Truth* is completely voluntary, many of Irving's subjects later accused her of violating them. Inverting questions of Foucauldian control, *Truth* is one hundred eighty degrees away from *78 Drawings*' obsessively transparent babble. *Truth* invites viewers to interact with a female presence that is maddeningly opaque. Irving wills herself to become a blank screen that others leap to project themselves onto. Perhaps because they are

female, it is both Irving and Schlosberg themselves and not their works, who are critiqued. Both artists have been described as "unethical" and "immoral." "It occurred to me," wrote a critic for the nation's leading left-wing journal of politics and culture in a letter to Irving, "that your intrusion into other people's lives was really quite prurient and manipulative ... a cheap stratagem for getting people to reveal themselves. Art," he concluded, echoing Chris Burden's dictum to Schlosberg, "is usually an act of self-expression."

What makes sophisticated contemporary artists and art theorists become essentialists? I think that "privacy" is to contemporary female art what "obscenity" was to male art and literature of the 1960s. The willingness of someone to use her life as primary material is still deeply disturbing, and even more so if she views her own experience at some remove. There is no problem with female confession providing it is made within a repentant therapeutic narrative. But to examine things coolly, to thrust experience out of one's own brain and put it on the table, is still too confrontational. Like the most canonical conceptual art, Schlosberg and Irving's work forges an interaction that implicates its viewers. It's the distancing of female experience that drives art critics crazy. Refusing the realm of abject memoir/confession, Schlosberg and Irving's projects presume to treat female experience universally.

Why did Chris Burden's female contemporaries retreat to teepees? Perhaps they were weary ... all this venom released upon those who set out to prove such a simple Heisenbergian point. Maybe they gave up and realized, as Hollis Frampton wrote in his exquisite 1974 essay on history, "As I sit writing this text, on one of the days of the only life I shall live, a fine April afternoon is passing outside my window."

"My art," declared Burden one year before, "is an examination of reality."



(1999)

Posthumous Lives

A conceptual artist I know in New York City keeps a card file of everyone important he's ever met. Each card contains the important person's name and contact information; the occasion of their meeting; a recollected transcript of their conversation. Additional information, such as sexual habits, recreational preferences, significant achievements, birthday, spouse's name (if applicable), may be added later as it becomes available. Through his diligence, this artist has succeeded in becoming a semi-artworld name. Meaning, value are completely arbitrary. I think the card file is this artist's greatest work.

"It's a real crap shoot," Carolee Schneemann says, about the chances that an artist's work many survive her. We're talking about her gorgeous installation piece, *Mortal Coils* (1993), a visual memorial to the lives of fifteen recently deceased artist friends. All exhibited widely in their lifetimes, but in the few ensuing years, the works of several of these people have already disappeared into the legal limbo-lands of estate battles, attics, garbage dumps and storage bins. Best known as a structuralist film and videomaker during the 1970s and 1980s, Paul Sharit's subliminally fast-cut "flicker films" prevised digital effects and MTV. As Schneemann notes, he made "these exquisite tiny mosaics of color that are orchestrated visually, like visual music. He was influential in taking

film back into the primacy of the frame." But when he died in Buffalo in 1993, Sharits was living virtually in the street and left no will and no executor. Five years later, Schneemann says, no one knows where his work is.

"It's important for artists to gain a certain cachet prior to their death," states Alison Gingeras, assistant curator at New York's Guggenheim Museum. "Certain mythologies are sealed by the fact that the artist died." Because, she says, "much critical speculation comes into being after their death. This whole aura develops around the reputation of the artist because of the way their life is narrativized by the person who takes over."

Posthumous life, of course, has got to be the most grandiose of all vain dreams. Still, the dead cannot keep card files, make phone calls, attend openings, or realign their work with every shift in curatorial discourse. Therefore, who they're represented by and how is of primary importance. I was in New York City so I decided to chat with someone who manages dead artists' careers.

A visit to the theater artist Penny Arcade is always a little like the moment in Fellini's *Roma* when Anna Magnani flings open her apartment door. Or else, it's like Veronique Vial's 1998 book of glamour portraits, *Women Before 10 a.m.* (it's always before 10 a.m. in Penny Arcade's apartment). Penny's premises have recently expanded to an additional floor of a Lower East Side walk-up building that is perennially on the verge of being condemned by the New York City Housing Authority. The new floor is where she keeps the artist Jack Smith's ashes. Outside the window on the fire escape are six of fourteen potted trees (the rest are on the rooftop) that Arcade inherited from the late photographer and Artist's Co-Op member Sheyla Baykal. Maintained by Baykal until her death in 1995, each pot contains the ashes of one of fourteen more dead artists.

Penny Arcade was a close friend of legendary camp artiste and theorist Jack Smith for decades in New York. When Jack died of

AIDS in 1989, she became his death mother. Smith asked her to protect his work, and it's in her loft that Jack's spirit of "aesthetic delirium" most vigorously lives on. Penny recalls that several days before Jack's death his hospital room was crammed with important visitors, including Allen Ginsberg, Ira Cohen and Agosto Machado. When Penny came in and started cleaning up around his bed, Jack crooned, "Oh! If only I had a mother like you my life wouldn't have been so miserable." Penny replied, "Everybody has a birth mother, Jack, but you can have a death mother, too. I'll be your death mother." "How is it that you know how to take such beautiful care of Jack?" Ginsberg asked her, leaning forward. "What I was doing," Penny recalls, "is acting. I'm a very good actress. I was pretending that all these tubes coming out of Jack were perfectly normal, thus dissipating the anxiety in the room which was not only about Jack's feelings about being in this condition in front of Allen Ginsberg, but Allen's anxiety about seeing it. I turned to Allen and said, 'It's because I love Jack,' and Jack got up, and with all the strength he had, he said to Allen: 'It's because I'm not a walking career like you!'"

We're drinking coffee in the yellow room up in the annex. Penny's recently quit smoking. We're passing back and forth the pickle jar containing some of Jack's remains. "People pick it up," she giggles, "and say, 'Oh, what's this?' and I say 'Oh, that's Jack,' and they freak. That's what you end up with after everything is gone: bone fragments. The skin burns up and what's left is chunky. But I like having him around. I like having Jack around.

"The idea of death," she says, "is very small and hard, but if somebody is holding your death with you, the death relaxes, it fluffs up and expands and reveals itself to you. We're all afraid of death. But ever since I was very young, I had this idea that your death is always with you. It's not something that shows up at the end of your life. We walk with our death, and when I've carried

somebody's death with him, that's a very special collaboration, because it's conceptually holding the idea of death and letting it expand. Death is a screen for your life to be projected onto in its entirety. It's very rich, like the plush velvet. It's thick, it's slow, luxurious, and Sheyla Baykal understood this very well."

In the year following Smith's death, Arcade made an extraordinary effort to preserve and maintain the Sistine chapel of the underground that was Jack Smith's apartment. "It was a room," she says, "that by its very construction would expand your consciousness and make you weep. The layering of paint, the tile, the Arab minarets around the bathtub ... Jack didn't believe in short cuts. The walls were imbued with living meaning that resonated whether he was there or not." None of Jack's former friends, she says, except for Jack himself, Baykal, Machado and the film critic J. Hoberman were able to see the value of maintaining Jack's apartment as a museum to his work and ideas. Some people were eager to grab Jack's \$250-per-month apartment lease within days of his death, even though it was a seven-story walk-up. But more extraordinarily, there was no interest among museums or art institutions at that time in becoming involved in this preservation. After eighteen months of single-handed curatorial effort, Arcade finally gave up, documenting the space herself and placing all removable parts in storage. When PS 1 mounted the 1997 *Jack Smith: Flaming Creature* retrospective of Smith's work, the exhibition filled eight galleries. All the material in the show was transported from the storage bins that Penny had maintained and paid for all those years, and her 800-square-foot loft.

Still, perhaps because Arcade is an artist, PS 1 curator Ed Leffingwell was loath to follow her advice regarding the contextualization of Smith's work. "They were looking for a hook," Arcade recalls, "and that hook seemed to be about beatniks, homosexuality and garbage." The show received mixed notices, didn't travel.

"Whereas I feel that Jack had five ideas, in the words of the poet René Ricard, five HUGE ideas, and the public wasn't guided towards them." But then the conversation shifts again before she tells me what they were.

We drink another cup of coffee and then we go outside. Penny takes me to a jewelry fabricator's storefront two blocks away on Essex Street. As she unlocks the padlock to the accordion gate outside the grimy plate-glass window and swaps greetings with a Chinese sweatshop foreman on the stoop, I realize she's a kind of unofficial mayor. It's in the backroom of this storefront, in boxes stacked on temporary shelves, that Arcade stores the prints and negatives that comprise three decades of Baykal's photographic work. The boxes were collected from the street. When Baykal died in 1995, there was no money left in her estate for professional conservation. Still, her legacy remains preserved so long as Penny keeps this up.

Penny opens up the boxes, and as we look at the large, gorgeously hand-printed black and white portraits, I feel as if I'm entering a secret history of the Lower East Side. Once a Ford Agency model, Baykal took pictures all her life. In 1968 she gave up modeling, went to Europe and joined the Artist's Co-Op, a group that produced environmental installations with her friend, the late Paul Thek. Back in New York, Baykal continued photographing the "flaming creatures," drag queens, runaways and burlesque stars who once were Smith's contemporaries, roaming Second Avenue before it was a feeding trough of upscale bistros, when it was still an outpost of the Lower East Side. The photographs are visually stunning. Everyone is dead now, but captured in their self-invented splendor at the height of rococo. There's performance artist Ethyl Eichenberger, playing the accordion in rhinestone shades. Eichenberger suicided so as not to be a burden on his friends before he died of AIDS. When his friend

Ron Vawter suggested they apply for grants to defray Ethel's medical expenses, he replied, "But Ron, I am a *drag queen*. They don't give grants to *drag queens*."

Baykal's images bring me back to a time I vaguely knew, one that has so far escaped professional art historicizing. Still, I worry about their future. Remembering Gingeras' comments about the importance of the artist's reputation being solidly in place before her death, I say, "But Penny, Sheyla Baykal was not an art star." "When you get down to the year 3050," Penny snaps back, "Sheyla Baykal led an artistic life. She did great work, she spent her entire lifetime developing and honing her aesthetic. That's what an art star is to me!"

As Schneemann says, it's a crap shoot.

(1999)

Pussy Orphanage

My husband Sylvère Lotringer recalls visiting Hannah Wilke at her Greene Street loft sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Her walls were lined with dozens of the delicate and witty chewing gum collages she is known for: tiny cunts floating over watercolor landscapes, over hard-edged photographs of cities, fields and trees. Hannah was the punk Magritte. *We are everywhere*, she teased. At that moment, Hannah functioned as the pariah of the art world, equally despised by minimalists and feminists, and no one wanted her collages. Sylvère found it very sad, a pussy orphanage, a ripening field of unharvested *femme-fleurs*. Yet in the six years following Hannah's death in 1993, these same collages have become valuable commodities, exhibited in permanent collections, collected, traded, bought and sold.

I've been curious about the way the work of certain artists changes over the years. How is it that something everyone dismissed as insignificant or mawkish or derivative in 1975 can become definitive and compelling in 1999? A compilation videotape made from Ana Mendieta's film work (1974–80) was exhibited at Galerie Lelong in New York this spring, in tandem with her sculpture *Anima* (1982) and a set of six photographs, *Volcanic Series No. 2* (1979). The volcanic images were created through a series of solo site performances in which Mendieta, alone



save for her camera, used her body to gouge spaces in the ground. She then replaced the earth with gunpowder.

In the videotape, a naked woman rambles through a landscape near the ocean, approaching places where she'll leave impressions of her body. She is very small, appearing sometimes like a pale smudge against the bleeding, early-Video Green landscape. Far from being a theatrical presentation of persona or of self, the video is a curious and riveting act of self-surveillance. Culminating in the careful pouring of a small container of red paint or blood into a shallow cavity excavated at the edge of the ocean, the tape is a highly clinical depiction of that most explosive subject-trope, "the body." As David Pagel noted in the *LA Times* following last year's exhibition of Mendieta's early photographs at Blum & Poe (Santa Monica), the predominant emotion in this work is "... cool detachment. Calm and unflappable, she has the presence of a doctor doing a practice examination on herself."

The film work and these photographs have never been exhibited as a series before. In fact, most of this early work was not exhibited during Mendieta's lifetime. The story of her work is as stranded and haunting as the images themselves. The videotape was carefully compiled from the artist's archives by her sister Raquelin Mendieta, who is executor of her estate, and Mary Sabbatino, director of Galerie Lelong. There were no bidding wars when Galerie Lelong began representing the estate in 1991; no other gallery wanted it. Mendieta exhibited briefly with the feminist co-op gallery AIR during the late 1970s, but had no commercial gallery representation while she was alive. As Lelong's assistant director Rebecca Lax diplomatically points out, "during Mendieta's lifetime, her work existed so ephemerally ... She wasn't involved in the commerce of her work, she was involved in making it."

Yet these films which once were virtually unexhibitible now seem intentional and charged. Rambling for 36 minutes towards a

low-tech, verité event, Mendieta's film work was contemporaneous with structuralist filmmaking, and yet different. With its casual lyricism and indifference towards the big structuralist questions of duration and phenomenologies, could Mendieta's work, like Wilke's, have been parodying the received ideas of their time? And yet there's something else, so willfully deliberate in her trajectory to the water's edge. What is it that changes our perceptions of this work? Does its authority accrue simply through what we know of Mendieta's early death? Is it the legitimacy bestowed upon the work through its presentation in the gallery? Or does it change because we get to see it, finally, in the context of her other work, the sculptures and the photographs of gunpowder silhouettes burned into the ground? Consider, too, that while video performances staged by artists such as Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman and Paul McCarthy were read as individual markers within singular careers, performances staged by female artists were read en masse as "feminist." For decades, artists like Mendieta, Wilke, Valie Export, Eleanor Antin existed only within the "feminism" constellation. Though they were no less intentional or consistently productive than the men, there were no meta-narratives told about their lives and work. And so they had no value ...

"There has been a big perceptual change," says Mary Sabbatino, "and not just from the idea of Mendieta as someone who was outside the art world's nexus of power. In her lifetime, the concerns and issues Mendieta dealt with weren't seen as being that important. Now they are." She attributes this change to a cultural shift that's brought more attention to female artists. Also, Sabbatino says, there's a generation of artists doing work around the body who have actively sought out precursors.

And yet in Mendieta's case, this perceptual shift could not have happened were it not for the dedicated, thoughtful management of her estate. In the six years following her death, Mendieta ran the

risk of moving from obscurity to the notoriety of feminist icon/victim. In 1988, writing in *Artforum*, Donald Kuspit pathologized her work as evidence of her "troubled sense of self. ... Her trouble had to do with her relationship to her mother ... Mendieta preferred to have narcissistic intercourse with Mother Earth than sexual intercourse with man." In 1990, Robert Katz's *Naked by the Window: The Troubled Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta* presented new post-trial evidence that challenged Andre's acquittal of murder charges following her death. In 1992, people chanted *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* in a protest staged outside the Soho Guggenheim to draw attention to the institution's failure to include more than one contemporary female artist in its inaugural exhibition. "There were a lot of weird, forced reads," recalls Timothy Blum of Blum & Poe gallery, who represent the Mendieta estate in Los Angeles. "People were going back into her work in time to see how she was going to die."

Poised to become a martyr of essentialist feminism, it was not until Galerie Lelong acquired the estate in 1991 that Mendieta's work began to be considered within the context of art criticism. At that time, catalogue essayist Mary Jane Jacob asked to look into the entire Mendieta archive and discovered thousands of unprinted slides that Mendieta took of her performances. The gallery decided to make and exhibit prints from these forgotten slides, and a completely new range of Mendieta's work was discovered.

When an artist dies before his or her time, who manages the estate and how, becomes vitally important. No one knows this better than Marisa Cardinale. Hired by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation in 1995 when the estate was at a low point of activity six years after the artist's death, Cardinale understood her task would be to look at Mapplethorpe's work through fresh eyes. The Jesse Helms scandal that erupted over the artist's 1989 retrospective had bestowed tremendous notoriety on his work.

Cardinale's job was to discover new contexts for it in the present. Uncertain how exactly she might do this, when she moved into the Foundation's offices on Wooster Street she discovered a bonanza. There, piled up in cardboard boxes on a shelf, were hundreds of Polaroids taken between 1973–74 which had never been promoted or exhibited.

"I couldn't believe it," Cardinale says. "It was a treasure chest." Taken during the years when Mapplethorpe was living with Patti Smith in Manhattan, the Polaroids were intended to be used in collages, an art form Mapplethorpe was pursuing at the time. Fast and casual, the Polaroids lack the majesty of his later photographic work, but have similar subject matter: friend's faces, his face, generals, S/m games, Patti. "Every single bit of Robert's work," she says, "exists here—everything that would later get developed. It's like a little trailer for his later work." Cardinale's first big move was to broaden the estate's exclusive representation by the Robert Miller Gallery to a wider range. She brought the Polaroids to the new galleries.

Recently, she's begun to represent the estate of the photographer Lisette Model. When Model died in New York City in 1983 at the age of 82, her career spanned half a century. Once a student of composer Arnold Schoenberg, Model began taking pictures when she lived in Paris in the 1920s. Throughout the 1940s, her elegant documentary images appeared regularly in magazines and she exhibited several times at MOMA. But in the decade following her death, Model's work had fallen out of public view. Model's original executor had been a partner in a small general law practice, and when he died the estate passed over to the other partners. Luckily, someone had the prescience to enlist the services of Cardinale, but when she arrived in 1988, Model's entire output was sealed in a dozen cardboard boxes stacked up behind the metal desk of a part-time legal secretary.

Within the boxes, Cardinale discovered a set of photographs that had never been appraised, much less exhibited: a box containing 55 images of Billie Holiday laid out in her coffin. Taken in the summer of 1959, the series includes tiny prints of various exposures and odd croppings. Printing from a single negative, Model zoomed in incrementally on Holiday's body, surrounded by gardenias in the coffin. Blurred and chilling, the images are completely different from the formally composed, sharp-focus humanistic portrait work Model was known for. Model printed the images so close they verge on dissolution. Discovering these images gave Cardinale some of what she needs to reimagine Model's work in the present.

Raqueline Mendieta, herself an artist, has represented the estate full time since Ana's death. "I'm overwhelmed," says Mary Sabbatino, "by the generosity and love it takes for one artist to do this for another." Meanwhile Penny Arcade guards Sheyla Baykal's photographs, piled up in boxes in the backroom of a Lower East Side jewelry workshop. Arcade continues to seek out venues for Baykal's work.

Altruism aside, how is it that any artist's work will come to survive for others in the future? Works of art, after all, are mute and can't speak for themselves.



(1999)

Deep Chaos

At the art school where I teach, there's a lot of talk about "multiple subjectivities." "You will never succeed as an artist, your work's too personal!" the smart pretty girl sneered at her dumbfounded classmate, and everyone agreed. While the word "personal" is generally used as a pejorative, *multiple* subjectivities—the knack of being everywhere and therefore nowhere in particular—are seen to be a very good thing. Everybody knows it's better to construct a narrative than tell a story, that it's okay now to be a girl, so long as you don't want to talk about it, and that lesbians emit an awful smell. I'm caught up in the haze of midsummer Los Angeles, the cosmetic edge we give to its preemptive emptiness. Things happen, but they never quite add up. I think it's something about the quality of attention, information endlessly transmitted but never received.

The two Los Angeles artists I want to write about, Christiana Glidden and Julie Becker, both work in an atmosphere of chaos. Chaos, of course, is a trope within art installations. It can be pretty and light, like the sculptural works of Jessica Stockholder and Sarah Sze, or it can be messy and dark, like the works of John Bock and Jason Rhoades. But the chaos Glidden and Becker make is consistently internal. "There is a chaos in the head," an East German skinhead told a reporter from the *New Yorker*, explaining why he set fire to a Turkish immigrant settlement. Both Glidden and

Becker create a kind of chaos that's sweetly familiar to those who lived through underground culture of the 70s. Except their chaos isn't anything like "scatter art" or "arte povera" and it's not collective, and it feels very new. Like Proust, whose sentences spiraled off into dozens of subordinate clauses because he was *trying to be clear*, the mess these women make is incidental and in some way contrary to their intentions. Both have created installations that attempt to marshal tangentially associative references, thoughts and parallel investigations into a single system. Such systems will always, gloriously, fail.

Christiana's recent China Art Objects exhibition, *Bitches Brew* (1999), is what they call a "narrative" installation. Except that Glidden is Scheherazade on speed. Upon entering the room the viewer is confronted with what seems to be a large, 1970s-era thrift store oil painting of the Arthurian princess Guinevere. In fact, the work was painted by the artist's mother, Pooka Glidden. Guinevere holds a rose that looks a little like a hot cross bun. Its inner petals are spread open in the shape of an expanded Celtic cross, the sort of emblem that medieval knights emblazoned on their shields. Guinevere is looking out at us—towards nothing—except that Glidden has positioned her directly opposite a painting of an orange poppy. But while Guinevere gazes at the poppy, someone's flung a can of black acrylic paint next to her on the gallery's white wall. Shades of Rauschenberg or Hermann Nitsch? But then again the black paint could be something like the water color paintings of Pat Steir, the way she borrowed all the earnest drips of Ab-Ex action painting until the paint turned into something else, more delicate and Japanese. Black dripping paint/black rain of Tokyo?

The black river-rain of paint spills down the gallery wall onto the floor into a puddle. The puddle turns into a pool, watched over by a stuffed dead cat. (Glidden swears she didn't kill the cat—she found it near the gallery already dead and took it to a taxidermist.)

This cat is crouching in a little grotto of some rocks, an empty beer can and a frog. And then the story spirals off into another set of stories in a more amphibian vein. Is this something about frogs? *The Frogs* is the title of the famous play by Aristophanes, and in it there were all these frogs croaking (get it?) near the River Styx when Dionysus rowed his boat across this gateway between life and death. Is it a coincidence that Dionysus ended up presiding over the Who's The Greatest Artist contest between Aeschylus and Euripides?

Glidden's frog is of the granite, garden-ornament doorstopper kind. She and I discuss the sexual significance of frogs. She recounts a fairy tale about a Frog Prince and a princess playing in her garden. "The princess has a golden ball, and when she loses it in a well, she cries. A frog appears and promises he'll retrieve the ball if she'll feed and kiss him. So she agrees. But when he gets the ball, the princess runs back home because she doesn't really want to be involved.

"That night the frog knocks at the castle and the king lets him in. All night long the princess is rude to him, but the king reminds her she must keep her word. When bedtime comes, he wants to kiss and sleep with her. Finally she acquiesces, and the frog turns into a prince."

I'm wondering whether frogs are more like penises or vaginas. For the next few minutes, Glidden and I discuss this. On the one hand, frogs are slimy. But then again, their skin is very thin, and when you touch it, it moves back and forth against these tiny bones. "But really," Glidden says, "this work is not very sexual. I think I became more interested in the death drive, in death. Sexuality is so blatant and open, and death is something that's not talked about. It's taboo."

So yes, there are frogs in the piece, but the piece is not about frogs. All around the gallery, references are strewn to works by Paul Thek and Robert Smithson, artists Glidden readily admits to having crushes on. She can't talk to them because they're dead.

Nor can she become them: both are modernist male myths; she's a young woman, still alive. Instead, she invokes them both in this live séance and then jams.

I look again at the puddle and rock pile. This part of the show is called *Pirate*. And yes ... about that dead cat? Didn't Paul Thek used taxidermied rabbits in his *Processions* (1973-78)? And if the puddle is the River Styx, aren't the rocks something like the *Spiral Jetty* boulders, Smithsonian's mythic monument to doom? To their memory, Glidden makes an offering of beer cans. They could be Cady Noland's beer cans from her breakthrough installation at the Whitney 1991 Biennial Glidden saw while still a teenager; or they could be Glidden's own.

And then everything connects, or else it doesn't. The poppy painting on the wall across from *Guinevere* was made by Glidden's grandmother, and it looks just like the poppy on the cover of the 1969 Miles Davis album, *Bitches Brew*. Because across the room there is a Budweiser beer sign (*Frog Sign* 1998) Glidden's fucked with, a cartoon frog belching on a lily pad with a bottle hanging from its mouth. "Take Some Back To Your Pad," the sign reads. On the bottle, Glidden's spray-painted the word *Bitch*, and I'm reminded of a line about psychosis from Fanny Howe's great novel, *Nod* (1996): "The truly mad are not content to merely tell stories. They have to act them out."

The mad are also fond of diagrams. Struggling to contain all these digressive references within a single installation, Glidden graphs out an exhibition "key," entitled *Hades Diagram* (1998). Julie Becker did the same thing in her amazingly accomplished debut installation, *Residents and Researchers* (1993-1996). After passing through several rooms and anterooms in which scale abruptly shifts from life to miniature, and an entire slice of 20th century urban history (the SRO hotel, and its attendant mysteries, dreams and squalor) is evoked, the viewer passes into what Becker

calls "the researcher's room." And here amid the files and grungy coffeepot, the cheap cassette recorders and the notebooks, the photographs of cats in alleys licking blood, are the schematic *diagrams*, in which Becker tries to synthesize her findings. Of course the diagrams only make things worse. Both artists' diagrams, executed with (it seems) sincere intent only make the chaos more intractable. They explain nothing but the artists' inability to translate a chaos that exists both in the world and in her head, into a systematic plan.

There is a truly frightening basement underneath the China Art Objects Gallery. You enter it by walking down a wooden staircase at the back end of the kitchen. Here, Glidden has installed a wax-acrylic body-cast of herself, lying on a kind of bier. The piece is obviously an homage to Paul Thek's famous *Death of a Hippie (The Tomb)* 1967, which, like a great deal of Thek's other installation work, was forgotten during the 1980s, placed in storage and then accidentally destroyed. Glidden's sculpture, entitled *Death of a replicant [sleeping]* (1998) is doubly chilling. She looks more Millais' *Ophelia* floating down the river than Paul Thek's bearded hippie. Reference and reality combine in Glidden's body poised for its journey down the River Styx. You wish her well.

Becker, in her current work, *Suburban Legend* (1999) continues her gargantuan attempts to systematize disparate landscapes, social facts, coincidence and incongruities. The chaos she and Glidden make is heartrending and very real: the consequence of trying to devise real-time systems out of things too hazy and complex to be caught within a single system. They are faltering and grasping at emotion, the place to which all systems lead.



(2000)

Emotional Technologies

Los Angeles, sometime in the late 1990s; I've been living here a year or two, and the landscape is an empty screen of white sky days. There's nothing here except for what you're able to project onto it. No information, stimulation. No digression. No references, associations, promises and so your own reality expands to fill the day. And this is freedom. Driving from the GlenFed bank to FedEx to the library to the type designer out in Pasadena, I have become an independent contractor of my own consciousness. There is no social web here, only single units, and 1 is more efficient. Los Angeles is a triumph of the New Age.

The only experience that comes close to the totalizing effect of theater now is sadomasochism. "It's so—theatrical," is about the worst thing you can say about anybody's work in the contemporary art world. Theatricality implies an embarrassing excess of presence, i.e., of sentiment. Because it's more advisable to be everywhere than somewhere, we like it better when the work is cool. And so S/m emerges as the most utopian effect of diaspora, because anyone who wants to can consent to play. Contained within itself, S/m does not rely on urbanist associative meaning-threads that were once described as "chemistry." It's portable, it's emotionally high-tech: the most time-efficient method of creating context and complicity between highly mobile units.

I am kneeling on the floor of the downstairs studio awaiting the arrival of a man I met over the telephone named Jeigh. For the past five weeks, Jeigh, a graduate of EST and a participant in the Men's Movement, has been training me to be a "woman." Jeigh's ideas are totally absurd, but as I've observed from being in the LA artworld, ideas and meaning are completely arbitrary. He tells me what to wear, what to do, what to say. While I wait, a bowl of ice cubes are melting on the wicker table by the window. I am very nervous now about those ice cubes. Forty minutes ago, Jeigh called from Santa Monica to say that he'd be leaving in 10 minutes. Tonight's the first time that he's ordered ice cubes. It's a hot September night and Santa Monica is 22 miles away. It's difficult to time this right, because if I go downstairs too soon the ice will melt, but he wants to find me kneeling in position the moment he walks in the door. My mind's already split in two: I'm halfway here, the other half of me is hovering about the 10 East freeway, following the likely progress of his car.

I've been kneeling here about 10 minutes in the sheer black blouse, the crotchless panties. I don't dare get up long enough to check my makeup. My back is straight, my palms and cunt are trembly. The motion sensor-light outside the house blinks on and then the door swings open. My eyes are lowered like he told me, looking only at the black jean legs below his waist. He shuts the door, I take the timing of his footsteps as the cue to speak the line he gave me. My voice comes someplace from the swirl between my downcast eyes and the tension of his footstep. *Modesy and fear commingling like a cocktail of two complementary drugs, NOW:* "My body is yours. You can do what you want with it." I'm speaking in a voice I never used before.

There is no experimental theater in sadomasochism. That's why I like it. Character is completely preordained and circumscribed. You're only either top or bottom. There isn't any room for

innovation in these roles. It's a bit like what Ezra Pound imagined the Noh drama of Japan to be, a paradox in which originality is attained only through compliance with tradition. Tonalities and gestures are completely set, and so exactitude is freedom. His black Levis, my slutty outfit, his black shoes. *S/m's* a double flip around the immanence of objects in the theater: the objects aren't blank and waiting to be filled with meaning by the actors. The objects here are meaning-cards, they hold all the information. He says, "Hold out your hands." "Yes Sir," I say, blood rushing to my face. He's given me a choice of two responses to his utterances, the second is: "I understand." He puts a collar round my neck and slaps me. Handcuffs, blindfolds, gags and whips. The objects tell us who we are and what to do. *S/m* is like the 16th-century improvisational theater of *commedia del' arte*: a stock repertoire of stories, bits and lines and gags. He chains my handcuffs to the door. I'm Columbine and he's Pierrrot.

The first thing she did when she moved into the house in Mt. Washington was install dark green shades to keep the light out. She'd become so sensitive to light. Birds woke her up at 6, followed by this grey seepage of pearlescent light through the two half-walls of windows where she slept. There was a feeling then that everything was hovering, and she needed to remain there long enough to remember what she'd dreamt. *Dreams steered her through the day and she needed the slight weight of morning vapor to protect her.* She was trying to become a writer. Since she'd never been especially creative, the only way that she could think to do this was to transcribe the pictures in her head. She found that sometimes in the darkened room, the pictures moved outside her head and into her entire body, and these, she realized, were the good times. This was what she sought. Sometimes the pictures

moved so fast that she could not keep up. Her temperature dropped, her breath got short. She needed to find words to delineate this thing that moved inside her body like a small, buried animal. She knew it would take a long time to get the animal out and sometimes she wondered if she'd die before she did this. It didn't matter that she was not particularly a good writer. If she could just remain within this state for the time it took her to transcribe it, the whole thing might work out.

Like everything about LA, this goal of filtering the light was difficult but not completely unattainable. She'd found a bin of dark green window shades at Virgil's Hardware Store in Glendale. Left over from the 1970s, they cost less than 20 bucks a piece. They were totally opaque, and had old-fashioned crochet pull-strings. She'd seen shades like this before in New York City and East Hampton. There, these kind of shades were custom-made, expensive and high-concept. But in LA, there were so many pockets of mid-century Americana left that had not been commandeered by style-masters. Things forgotten, parts of the city no one wanted. Oh, there were upscale malls and concentrations of conspicuous consumption, but in LA, wealth was blindingly direct. Wealth was manifested just by size and newness. Wealth did not insinuate itself by references to values of the past, symbolized by transom windows, onyx doorknobs, wide-plank Shaker floors. Whoever planned things here seemed quite happy with the things themselves. There was nothing there to break your heart and nothing gelled.

The house was her sanctuary and her brain center, an asbestos-shingled wreck teetering above a canyon on the slummier side of this mixed bohemian enclave shared by second-generation Okie immigrants and artsy types who valued the "authentic." Mr. Washington, they said, was "the Brentwood of the ghetto." Still, like every other LA neighborhood, it was zoned strictly "residential"

and there were no corner stores, no reason to walk anywhere unless you were dressed in spandex sweats and carrying three-pound dumbbells. The road outside her house led to a secondary service road, which in turn led to a four-lane service road next to the freeway. Here, on Figueroa, was the Lucky Supermarket, Mobil Gas, the Pic 'n' Save, interspersed with body shops and tire workshops, shacks and bungalows inhabited by the exclusively Latino poor. There were no trees along the streets, no, as the urban planners call it, "infill."

While Mt. Washington had the vague charm of Appalachia butted up against West Coast expat English Hinduism, there was no evidence that Figueroa Boulevard had ever existed any other way. That is, there were no tugs of memory. Back east she liked to move across the sprawl with x-ray eyes, conscious of 400 years of history. Driving on the 87 Thruway through northern Westchester County, the exit sign for "Spook Rock" always gave her chills because it made her think of lynchings. As a child in Bridgeport, gazing out the window of her parent's car, she pictured mail carriers hunkered down in horse carts on the Post Road between Boston and New York City. "Neither wind nor snow nor sleet," her dad intoned, as they passed the Dunkin' Donuts.

But as far as she could tell, Figueroa Boulevard and San Fernando Road had never been anything but a string of stores that doubled as a residential dumping ground for the poor. Many of these people gathered every morning at the five-point intersection on Avenue 35 in an unofficial shape-up for day labor. Men in scavenged clothes who pounded on car windows, flexed their muscles, shouting *I Work Good*, and *Hire Me*, which were probably the only English words that they knew. The first time that she witnessed this she caught her breath and sobbed, not believing it could be. At the opening of MOCA's Claes Oldenberg retrospective, she was amazed that there was not a single black person or Latino in the

moved so fast that she could not keep up. Her temperature dropped, her breath got short. She needed to find words to delineate this thing that moved inside her body like a small, buried animal. She knew it would take a long time to get the animal out and sometimes she wondered if she'd die before she did this. It didn't matter that she was not particularly a good writer. If she could just remain within this state for the time it took her to transcribe it, the whole thing might work out.

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The house was her sanctuary and her brain center, an asbestos-shingled wreck teetering above a canyon on the slummier side of this mixed bohemian enclave shared by second-generation Okie immigrants and artsy types who valued the "authentic." Mt. Washington, they said, was "the Brentwood of the ghetto." Still, like every other LA neighborhood, it was zoned strictly "residential"

and there were no corner stores, no reason to walk anywhere unless you were dressed in spandex sweats and carrying three-pound dumbbells. The road outside her house led to a secondary service road, which in turn led to a four-lane service road next to the freeway. Here, on Figueroa, was the Lucky Supermarket, Mobil Gas, the Pic 'n' Save, interspersed with body shops and tire workshops, shacks and bungalows inhabited by the exclusively Latino poor. There were no trees along the streets, no, as the urban planners call it, "infill."

While Mt. Washington had the vague charm of Appalachia burred up against West Coast expat English Hinduism, there was no evidence that Figueroa Boulevard had ever existed any other way. That is, there were no tugs of memory. Back east she liked to move across the sprawl with x-ray eyes, conscious of 400 years of history. Driving on the 87 Thruway through northern Westchester County, the exit sign for "Spook Rock" always gave her chills because it made her think of lynchings. As a child in Bridgeport, gazing out the window of her parent's car, she pictured mail carriers hunkered down in horse carts on the Post Road between Boston and New York City. "Neither wind nor snow nor sleet," her dad intoned, as they passed the Dunkin' Donuts.

But as far as she could tell, Figueroa Boulevard and San Fernando Road had never been anything but a string of stores that doubled as a residential dumping ground for the poor. Many of these people gathered every morning at the five-point intersection on Avenue 35 in an unofficial shape-up for day labor. Men in scavenged clothes who pounded on car windows, flexed their muscles, shouting *I Work Good*, and *Hire Me*, which were probably the only English words that they knew. The first time that she witnessed this she caught her breath and sobbed, not believing it could be. At the opening of MOCA's Claes Oldenberg retrospective, she was amazed that there was not a single black person or Latino in the

crowd that milled around the corny giant pencil. Los Angeles, she thought, was like Johannesburg. Everyone was white, except for several Asians. Eventually she got used to it. Later still, she picked up some of these same men to rake her yard and help her strip and bag the old asbestos shingles.

After awhile she stopped looking for shots of content from the landscape.

It was the first house she'd ever bought and lived in by herself, without her husband. It was what she could afford. "It's perfect for her," her long ago ex-boyfriend had reportedly said to her then-boyfriend, an ex-filmmaker turned carpenter who was renovating the house. "It's a real shit hole." She imagined the two of them chuckling. But who'd laugh last? Neither boyfriend past or present had ever owned a house; both were heading into middle age with artistic aspirations and boring jobs they had to keep. While she was living on her own now, for the first time since she'd been destitute and single.

"My goal," she told everyone she met upon arriving in LA, "is to become famous in the art world." Since everyone she met was somehow in the art world, they failed to get the joke and regarded her with some embarrassment. "I figure it will take two years." Because who gave a shit? Unlike NY, no one in the LA art world struck her as especially smart or admirable. There was just one game in town, and that was neocorporate, neoformalist conceptualism.

Back in New York, when she was still trying to become not famous in the art world, but an actual artist, she had no reason to believe she wouldn't die in her rent-stabilized, two-room slum apartment. Desperate about her situation, when she turned 28 she worked extra shifts of night word-processing in order to consult an astrologer and a psychotherapist. "What's all this scarcity shit about?" the astrologer asked, and offered her a discount rate on a Prosperity Consciousness workshop. "You are a masochist," the

therapist sighed when she confessed to hoping she could eventually support herself as an experimental multi-media theater artist. Meanwhile in the building, the old Italian lady died across the hall. When Social Security learned of her demise and stopped emitting checks, her 55-year-old son became a crack dealer. Downstairs in #1E, Frank, a retired featherweight pro-boxer with no known relatives, contracted Alzheimer's. Within a year, you saw him smearing handfuls of his shit across the hallway wall, but there was no one there to stop him. Eventually he died, and his body rotted for five days before the Turkish super finally showed up with a cop to break down the door.

But in LA she had a part-time job teaching at a rich prestigious art school. The LA art world was starting to be considered "hot," and since it revolved entirely around the schools, the job conferred an instant credibility. This particular institution was at the forefront of a movement to expunge identity from contemporary art. It was a two-year hazing process that utilized Socratic modes of instruction. That is, when the students weren't tearing each other's work apart in carefully orchestrated "theories of construction" seminars, their time was spent in private meetings with instructors, whose job it was to draw them out in "discourses" about their "practice." Faced with roomfuls of acrylic paintings of computer chips and monochromes, she learned to cultivate a dreamy vacant stare. She learned to free-associate and verbalize nonsequiturs, and finally drop the names of first-wave minimalists with a slight inflection upwards at the end, as if the names themselves were challenges or questions. "Robert Ryman, Donald Judd?" She had the vaguest sense who these artists actually were.

Black security guards in golf carts crawled around the lawn while she and other part-time faculty sat beneath the pepper trees discussing spatiotemporal realism, Kant and Hegel and the technological sublime. None of the other part-time faculty were any

more or less qualified than she to talk about these things. No one had any formal training in philosophy, much less a PhD. It was a kind of heaven. Better still, unlike the other part-time faculty, she didn't have to teach at other schools in order to get by. Her husband, a Columbia University professor, was still living in New York and he was nominally employed as an advisor to the institution. Every other week, two checks—a large one in her husband's name and a small one in her own—arrived, totaling \$2500. She cashed them both. And so at 41, she had the thing she'd always secretly known to be her birthright: independence and enough money to walk into a store and buy a lipstick without calculating how many hours of word-processing it would cost.

The house was up a flight of 73 cement steps. (A Guatemalan laborer's son had counted them one day when they were hauling bricks to build a patio.) Scrunched between two rubber trees, it looked out across the canyon. Lying in the bed she'd set up in the living room was like living in a trehouse. It was the perfect house for Pippi Longstocking. Except she didn't feel like Pippi Longstocking, because there was hardly any promise of adventure beyond the house outside.

She was trying to become a writer and was discovering that this required large blocks of empty and unstructured time. She drew the shades and read and masturbated and lit a candle at her desk. At night sometimes she used the automated sex ads on the phone. She liked that they could link her up with other outposts of loneliness around the city. She was living entirely within her head. For a while she experimented with keeping pets.

Half a century ago in Poland, the director Jerzy Grotowski began developing a technology through which his actors could attain heightened states of performative extremity within the framework

of dramatic texts. Because he sought a confrontation between the actors and the text, the plays he chose were always mythic, because by that time myths were dead.

The Polish Theater Lab techniques were exercises aimed at pushing actors into states of pure intensity. It was the kind of "cruelty" Artaud envisioned in the 1930s, inspired by traditional nonwestern forms of dance in which performers enter trance states simply by repeating ancient gestures. According to the American theater director Lee Breuer, it works this way: "The Kathakali gestures reverse their way up through the stimulus system of the body. The movement of the hands transmits sensation to the nerve centers of the brain, and this creates emotion. There is a loop." But Artaud had never studied Kathakali, and he was mad, and the only person he ever could enact this "cruelty" on was himself.

And so for 15 years in Warsaw, the Polish Theater Lab devised a system that would make these heightened states repeatable and teachable. They devised a set of exercises called "*plastiques*": exercises that pushed the actor beyond ordinary endurance, to break down the gap in time between cognition and response. After several hours "impulse and action are concurrent," Grotowski wrote. "The body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses." And in this way, "the actor makes a total gift of himself."

Grotowski, a mid-century East European, never saw the "self" as buried treasure waiting to be probed and finally revealed. This came later, in America. To the Poles, the "self" was more like a translation, the energy that flows between the dialectics of behavior. A moving thing. Acting was releasing, and yet it never was a matter of "release." Like the ancient Kathakali gestures, the movement patterns of *plastiques* left no margin for improvisation. They were rigid, codified. "We find that artificial composition not only does not limit the spiritual, it actually leads to it," Grotowski wrote. Years later he spoke scathingly of the experimental theater orgies

staged by his US imitators as "wretched performances ... full of a so-called cruelty which would not scare a child."

Working in small cities in mid-century Eastern Europe, Grotowski saw theater as a technology through which we might "transcend our solitude." It is hard to get a picture of just what that "solitude" might have been. Grimy dark cafes and baggy overcoats; unspoken yearnings underneath a fixed circle of routines and friends? Rehearsal and performance both involve "an utter opening to another person ... It is a clumsy way of expressing it, but what is achieved is a total acceptance of one human being by another."

When the carpenter boyfriend, who she'd seriously considered impoverishing herself to marry, dumped her for a woman he described as "a really nice girl," her truck flipped over on an icy highway in the desert. For half an hour she was trapped inside the cab, feet forward like an astronaut. She thought she was an animal. For two days she was trying to explain this on the phone to anyone who'd listen, her husband and her therapist, her friend Carol Irving in New York, until she finally passed out. The hospital diagnosed concussion and sent her home. Shortly after this she decided she was much too old for conventional romance.

"Tonight," Jeigh said, "I am going to teach you the difference between pleasure and pain."

I'm curious to learn this. I'm curious to learn just about anything he wants to teach me. Today the television said it was the 159th straight day without rain. I can't remember when they started counting. For weeks or even months the leaves of all the eucalyptus trees along the 110 freeway have been a brittle brownish green.

The sky is white and nothing breathes. It is a kind of summer hibernation, hovering like the smoggy air.

All summer long Jeigh and I'd swapped sexy voicemails before we ever talked. I listened to his voicemails from the ferry terminal in Canada; I listened to them in New York. His messages intrigued me, turned me on. His Dom-voice reminded me of a freakish grade school teacher who we all called Snagglepuss. The kind of guy who might describe himself as a "gentleman." Low-class, middle-aged fag trying to play burch. In his phone ad Jeigh described himself as "intense, creative, and oh yes, very dominant" and that he was. He didn't seem to be afraid of me so I figured he was smart.

I think it was his second visit when this happened. He'd instructed me to undress at 7:30 and kneel, naked, by the phone. Sometime within the next half hour he'd call with more instructions. The phone rang at 7:59 and well, I found this pretty fucking witty. How many times have I, has every heterosexual female in this culture, spent evenings mooning around our houses and apartments, psychically stripped bare and on our knees while waiting for "his" call? Why not take the courtship ritual literally? And then there was the psychophysical part: thinking it was silly but suspending disbelief enough to do it; and then waiting on my knees until I felt a queasy shuddering anticipation, like being in the car that's at the top the moment when the Ferris wheel stops.

He arrived to find me kneeling naked in the studio downstairs. He said: "We need to have a little talk." I didn't look at him. My eyes, as he'd instructed when he called, were focused on the floor.

"There are three stages in a relationship between a dominant and a submissive. The first stage is to play together once. The second is to agree to play together on an ongoing basis. And the third—do you know what the third stage is?" I shook my head incredulously, imagining scenes out of Pauline Reage. "No," he laughed. "I didn't think you did."

He told me he would put me on probation. If I consented, we were entering the second stage. The rules were: he'd decide when and how often we would see each other. He'd decide when and how often we'd talk on the phone. I would not know his address or phone number, but I was free to leave as many voicemails for him as I wanted, providing that they made him hard. I found this very liberating. How many hours had I spent in "normal" dating situations, pondering the etiquette and timing of the post-fuck call?

And then his voice turned mock solicitous. "I've even thought about your safety. If when we're playing any of this becomes too much for you to take, you'll say 'Enough.' And within 30 seconds of your saying it I'll pack my bag and be out the door."

Because they were listening to each other hard, the room seemed small.

For the first few months after she moved into the house, she rented out the downstairs studio to a girl named Aimee. Aimee was the girlfriend of an artist she'd met outside the institution, a hippie guy who painted Disney characters humping each other in the woods. In terms of art world discourse, the guy didn't have a clue. At 22, Aimee was a goddess: tall and lean, with masses of blonde hair. Born in a redneck desert town, she was brilliant and completely fearless. Aimee'd spent a good part of her 16th year in a mental institution, like most of the other working class girl geniuses the woman knew. Every boy that Aimee met fell instantly in love with her and Aimee loved boys too. Reading Charles Bukowski, she'd arrived at a Goddess Vision of the World that echoed the belief system of Hassidic Jews. It went something like: Men should have all the power, run the world, because they're spiritually and biologically inferior to girls. Still, they became good friends.

Aimee'd just dropped out Cal State Northridge to become a full-time singer songwriter. The woman hired her as her assistant and let her have free rent. Together, they produced a philosophy rave in the Nevada desert. For nine months, they sold tickets from their office in the treehouse and chatted up the press while Aimee elaborated her existential views on being and becoming: "You're born into the set-up ..." The event was finally a huge success. There was a gorgeous shot on the front page of the *LA Times* of Aimee singing on the stage in a cocktail waitress outfit, towering above Jean Baudrillard—a thing, it seemed, so easy to achieve it hardly counted. Aimee met with managers and sat in with famous NY bands but then she got depressed, spent days in bed. She stopped working, couldn't find another job, and then she started borrowing money. On sunny days that winter, Aimee would get up for awhile and sit on the steps outside the studio writing songs on her guitar. Music pouring out across the canyon. Aimee's vibrant brash soprano voice, singing strings of words about spiders and machinery. The woman was so certain Aimee was about to become a star.

But as the months wore on, things just got worse. Aimee started smoking pot with Travis, the idiot savant next door whose mom had been a manager for Devo. And then when Travis went to jail for spousal battery, Aimee took to dumping bags of garbage in the yard. She hid behind the curtains each time the woman timidly approached to ask about the rent. Eventually the woman kicked her out. Months later, Aimee moved to San Francisco with another boyfriend. She could not remember any of the songs she'd sung that winter. None of them were taped or written down.

The thing that struck the woman most about living in Los Angeles was how things happen but nothing ever quite adds up. The way it's possible to be in regular contact with another person, to talk on the phone, to maybe see each other once a week and

then for no discernible reason the contact stops, the person drifts entirely out of range. Perhaps it was depression? The guy at the bookstore, the photographer, the woman living in Marina del Rey were all like the mythic agent or producer who suddenly stops returning calls.

And that's the end of our discussion. This is pure romance, as in *roman*, a story that's contained within itself. Like theater or pure math, S/m is a self-generating system large enough to reference everything that it excludes. Romance, desire, context, expectation loop back and forth between us through our roles. Multiple paradox yielding triple penetration. The game is totally complete within itself. Unlike ordinary sex, it is an act, and not a metaphor of love.

Montage of Irony was the title of one of the courses offered at the institution where she taught. Like most of the discourse about contemporary art that went on there, the meaning of it narrowly escaped her. She recognized the words, but the meanings of the words in these new combinations drifted out beyond the range of anything she knew. Given that "the work of art as such ... exists to manufacture ambiguity," the trick was to create an atmosphere of meaning without the burden of any particular meaning. Disparaging asides about one's enemies (the "left" and "feminism") are infinitely more effective than a confrontation. "When considered as action rather than idea, in other words, the categorical intentions contained in the word 'feminism' may be seen, sometimes, sadly, to have effects which add further testimony to the case for describing the signified as unstable, and therefore to how it is pointless to attribute to categories the kind of stable and collective benevolence which is their common due on the left."

(Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety*, 1995) Subordinate clauses are your friends. It's best to drop the poison at the end, when the subject of the sentence has been buried in the drift and can no longer be refuted because it is impossible to decode.

Minimalism, Heidegger, Kant, and Beauty. The categorical imperative and monochromes.

It was possible to make up a story about anything, she supposed.

Grorowski sought out mythic texts because he wanted to demolish subtext. There are no internal conflicts within an allegory. Everything's direct and on the surface. When Death confronts him, Everyman seeks out Strength and Friendship, Goods and Kin and Beauty and finds that none of them can help him. But can't there be a way of translating allegory into psychological realms? The Master and the Slave, the Monster and the Slut. All the little dramas of romance get batted back and forth between these poles.

Because she didn't care if people liked her and seemed to notice what went on, most people saw her as a monster. In S/m, she liked that somebody else could play that role.

To make a metaphor so big and bold that you drain it of its subtext, create an overarching irony where all the codes of romance are exposed. S/m is a parody, a carnival, of het-dating.

When Jeigh announces that he's going to teach me the difference between pain and pleasure, my muscles jump. I'm scared, but still excited, because since coming to LA no one's taught me anything at all. I'm blindfolded, listening to the rustle of his bag of whips. I'm so startled I've forgotten that he's told me to respond to everything he



says. He grabs me by the hair: "What do you say?" I repeat one of the lines he taught me: "Yes sir. Whatever pleases you the most." The line's a trope, pure Punch & Judy, an S/m cliché and yet it's *not*, it's totally alive because by saying it I know that I'm inviting him to really hurt me if he wants. (When I use the other line, "I understand," my pussy opens like a mind.)

He says *Get up. Yes Sir*, I stumble. He clips my handcuffs to some device he's mounted on the door. *Legs spread. Hands against the wall. That's right*. He leaves me there, I feel him watching. This must be love because I feel myself expanding in his gaze and so I say *I want you to know I take this very seriously*. He listens, takes this in and slams an index finger up my cunt. *Heh beh. Just as I thought*. There are only two criteria for success within an S/m performance: wet or hard. And then his whip comes down across my back abrupt and sharp. *We'll start with ten. You'll count them off*. There's nothing sexual about this. The pain shakes through my back around the room and then there's two and three then—*Oooops. You forgot to thank me for them. We'll have to start again*.

Grotowski complained that his American imitators and successors were more concerned with working with the "I" than with the "self." I think the difference is important. In the last scene of *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970) the Carrie Snodgrass character submits herself to "group therapy"—a pack of stupid dogs yapping at their prey with one eye towards the bone, an approving nod from the leader of the pack, the therapist. That's pretty much how I remember experimental theater acting in New York. Art schools bring this practice back to junior high school, because it's not the person who's confronted, but their coolness: their ability, or not, to learn a secret set of rules.

Towards the end of his life, Michel Foucault began to write about "technologies of the self." He was interested in how the "self" creates itself within a framework defined entirely by the institution. He only got as far as ancient Greece: and there he saw how individuals became "citizens" by internalizing codes of ethics, investing them with subtext.

Interestingly, Foucault loathed American feminists and dykes. For many years in Paris and later on in California, Foucault played S/m. It's only in his interviews with the American gay male press that he began to talk about what it felt like, what it meant. He described S/m as the "reterritorialization of pleasure." Foucault's biographer David Marcy does not repress this information, but casts him as the top. He apparently admires the philosopher so much he can't admit that Foucault played the bottom.

Grotowski criticized his American followers for seeking out security in the group, creating false familial situations. "A director," he once said, "is not a father. A fellow actor is not a lover. These are elements of a banal sentimentality which is irrelevant to creative work."

I think stupidity is the unwillingness to absorb new information.

The first time that we met, Jeigh handcuffed me to the passenger seat of a rented Ford Aspire. We were in the parking lot behind the Dresden. On the phone I'd told him I was more turned on by people's energy than by their looks, so he decided not to let me see him. In the restaurant I was told to keep my eyes down. Then outside, the blindfold.

In the car he pulled up my dress and slapped my thighs until they bruised. This hurt more than I expected. With every slap I moved a little deeper down inside myself, associating this hurt to all the other hurts I've known and witnessed. It was a bad trip down

the well of psychotherapy. I was a thousand miles outside the car but then he brought me back: "Don't pout." "It hurts." "Then find some way to tell me." I started gasping, moaning and then eventually I came. It was a micro-moment of intense theatricality.

*Let me tell it to you all ... But no, the lines
the rhythm forced ... the heart is larger!
The collected works of Shakespeare and Racine
are not enough for this occurrence ...*

*Misery! There are no shores, no roadmarks!
Yes, I agree, losing score,
okay, by losing you I lose whatever
whoever or anywhere never was!
It's useless—she's in me, everywhere—shut
eyes, she's bottomless, no day—and the date
on the calendar lies ...*

*Through what seas and cities
Should I look for you?
(Invisible man to a visionless
spectator)
Leaning up against the telegraph pole
I hand down the ritual of the road to the wires.*

Exiled in Paris in 1923 the Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva projects herself headlong into submissive space. "I was born to be carried away," she wrote, and then she was. Running between countries, using strange punctuation, dashes, exclamation marks, ellipses to write poems like telegrams, the most advanced technology of her time, she was a ball of longing projected onto the European landscape.

There isn't much I want here in Los Angeles because without a context everything's the same. The streets of Manhattan are a find-Waldo map of personal shortfall and inadequacy but here I don't envy anybody's children cars careers or houses. I think it's 'cause the dead are missing from the landscape.

In a disembodied floating space, S/m offers little pockets of theatricality and connection. So long as they are playing, two people are totally accountable and listening to each other. S/m radically preempts romantic love because it is a practice of it.

To see this fact as cold or cynical is as naive as thinking writing ought to be "original" or that speaking in the first person necessarily connotes any kind of truth, sincerity.



(2000)

Surface Streets

"Any person's life is an evolution and growth path," the ex-Symbionese Liberation Army member Emily Harris told the *LA Times*, prior to Sarah Jane Olsen's trial here in January. "I made choices ... I think I felt that change had to be grandiose and huge. I view change now more as a personal thing. It happens person to person," she said.

On Thursday night I went to meet his guy [Box 4155] in Venice at the Firehouse Bar. We'd exchanged messages on the LA Telepersonals Domination and Submission chatline. I arrived first. The bar wasn't glamorous ... it was a white collar working class crowd, rampantly heterosexual ... female flesh shrink-wrapped in polyester, flashing blonde hair and Rembrandt-white smiles at aging jock boys.

This guy walks in, we sort of recognize each other, and I don't like the cut of his jacket. It's too pronounced for what it must have cost, a double-breasted boxy black thing, knock-off Italian. On the phone he'd called himself "John." He's around 35, tanned and gym-toned. He has razor-stubble on his face *à la* Pierce Brosnan, suggesting classic good looks wearing down around the edge, the kind of person who gives nothing and is waiting for the world to entertain him. I catch John's eye.

John seems embarrassed and maybe ashamed of himself. On the phone he'd left a lengthy self-description: "Six feet two inches, short

dark hair dark eyes, goatee, attractive, athletic build. I don't have problems getting dates but I'm very selective. Beyond that—D/s experience: I've been in D/s about six years and I enjoy both physical and psychological play and don't see them as separate. No blood no scat no animals no kids, other than that, everything else is in bounds, it all depends on the dynamic, the person I'm playing with. What you should know is that I do have a submissive who serves me now and you would be required to take part in threesomes when I was in the mood. You and I would have our own relationship but I would decide when that happened, and so on ...” But now he looks at me and mumbles, “This won't work. You won't do.”

I am more curious than insulted. I'm a little older than him and apparently misjudged the situation by not dressing like a slut. A lot of Doms prefer this: the more proper the woman, the farther they can make her fall. But suddenly I realize what John's really into most is slumming. I'm a quarter way through a six-dollar beer. “Well,” John says. “If you want, we can go now. Or you can finish your drink.” I get the feeling John's afraid. But after driving thirty-five minutes to get out here I'm not in a hurry. John's nervousness interests me; I'm wondering what it's about and where it will lead. So I start playing the hostess, weaving his preemptive answers to my questions into some kind of conversation.

Eventually it comes out that John has always wanted to be a writer. His parents worked in a Detroit factory, he went to college at Ann Arbor, where he did some community organizing after school. But the lefty dead-endedness of this drove him into grad school. Suddenly John's talking in multiple sentences. He attended the History of Consciousness program at UC Santa Cruz where his old-school leftist views made him feel strange and alienated. After UC, he enrolled in a law school, because, he says, “At least with the law, something real is at stake. Somebody's money. Somebody's name.”

It turns out the “submissive” who he said on the phone he would “train me to top” is his wife. They've been together two years; they met on the computer in a D/s chat room. Most female submissives, he says, are looking for unattached Doms, so it's rare that they find anyone to play with. Given the fact I'm married, I'd be well suited to their needs, and we're starting to like each other, have some friendly feelings, but then John gets up decisively. “I won't take up any more of your time. I should go.”

There are numerous buildings ringed by concrete-block walls all over Los Angeles. Cheap and otherwise drab, many of these walls feature a line of decorative blocks with spaces cut out in a pattern. The technique is known as *brise-soleil*, which in French means “breaks the sun.” These blocks proliferated during LA's rental market and construction boom of the 1950s. Sold at most lumberyards, they were an architectural “detail” any developer could use to mildly distinguish one bunker-style complex from another. In a recent watercolor series, the artist Renee Petropoulos isolates the patterns within these concrete facades as if they were precious miniatures. Her paintings of mass-produced slab walls are rendered as meticulously as 19th century watercolor sketches ... the kind of pre-photographic memorabilia genteel tourists made and bought when visiting the Great Sights of Europe. That is to say, Petropoulos' paintings have a nostalgic character. But nostalgia implies loss. What is it, really, that we're missing? Because at second glance, the tourist paintings of the Tuscan hills are no less generic than the cinderblock walls that mask the blatant ugliness of parking structures. And so Petropoulos sits with her fine horsehair brushes at the corner of Douglas and El Segundo, copying the *brise-soleil* detail of one of these walls onto parchment and vellum. As she does this, she says, she's learning something about surface.

I visited the corner of El Segundo and Douglas last week and it could not be uglier. There are six lanes of traffic and narrow white

sidewalks that nobody walks on because the strip-malls are strung so far apart you have to drive. Like much of LA, it's interstitial: a commercial high-density zone of low-rise retail and warehouses, constructed cheaply, lot by lot, a half-century ago, when this was still profitable. Eventually this will all be bulldozed, consolidated. But paying such careful attention to these generic details and facades, Petropoulos uncovers traces of history and sentiment within everyday blankness.

Before its deployment as mid-century Contractor Gothic, *Brise-soleil* was a hallmark of Moorish and Islamic architecture. In North Africa, ornamental concrete blocks were arranged in front of unglazed open windows to screen out the sun. The cutout blocks cast marvelous diamond-like shadows and shapes in rooms that would be otherwise be blindingly sun-drenched. Patterns in the blocks evoke the use of patterning in tile mosaics, which themselves derive from patternist Islamic paintings of triangles, hexagons and squares. Islamic artists worked with geometrical shapes in adherence to the Koran, which prohibits figuration. As Habib Kheradyar, director of LA Post Gallery observes, "abstraction became a way that one might rationalize working in a godly manner while staying out of God's business. Look," he says, "how they wrapped everything—the ceilings, walls and floors, in the same pattern, to create eternal space. The decorative surface evokes the culture of the veil ... the surface offers an embrace, concealment and silence."

On Douglas Street and El Segundo, traffic glares.

Eighty years ago in Paris, the poet Max Jacob sought to understand reality by scanning its surface. In *Kaleidoscope*, he wrote:

"Everything seemed to be in mosaic: the animals were walking with their paws toward they sky except the donkey whose white belly carried written words which kept changing. The tower was an opera glass: ... and the little princess in a black dress, you couldn't

tell whether her dress had green suns on it or if you were seeing her flesh through the holes in her rags..."

In 16th-century Persia, Shah Addaba instituted the court production and design of carpets. Combining a tribal practice of bordered rug-making that was already 10 centuries old, with the courtly fashion of illuminated manuscripts, his artisans wove elaborate floral patterns encased in seven borders corresponding to the seven levels of heaven described in the Koran.

In New York City for the past ten years, the artist Brigitte Engler has been dissecting logs and shards of wood to reveal their biomorphic patterning. Engler's work posits a perverse and curious flip on surfaces. She exposes what was previously concealed and expands it into ornamental patterning of chaotic logic. In this sense, Engler is a pornographer of the inanimate: what was once inside is seized and stretched and then recast as a facade. In Engler's recent show at Post Gallery, she renders wood-grained patterns in exquisite needlepoint embroidery of deep brown wool. Born in Brittany, Engler has been influenced by the French tapestry tradition. *Zebra* (1996) exposes an organic wood-grained texture but through its sumptuous execution, invites the viewer back inside.

"Scratch the surface and there's just more surface," Leslie Singer says in her homemade pixelvision remake of *Valley of the Dolls*. I am trying to understand the tendency in contemporary art to isolate and depict the surface. I believe by doing this it might be possible to understand someone like John.



(2000)

Bad Nostalgia

Last week at the art school where I teach, I was talking to the Russian-born artist Zhenya Gershman. Though she's already shown widely, Gershman is presently a student, and we were talking about a recent LA exhibition of her paintings. Loosely copied from a collection of her family photos, Gershman's images depict a cavalcade of bourgeois life from what used to be the Soviet Union. The images span forty years. Does the very fact of painting it transform a casual snapshot into an emblem?

As emblems, Gershman's paintings are exceedingly complex. Like Eric Fischl's paintings, they are as ugly as real life. Both artists concentrate on family groupings—the most humiliating of social units, in which individuals have zero choice as to with whom they will be paired. Is it a coincidence that Gershman and Fischl are both Jewish? The quasi-figurative portraits Gershman makes of parents, fat uncles with their little dogs, aunts and children coax the viewer into a dozen different readings. There is a dash of heavy-handed post-Soviet irony in her renditions of the settings (the Worker's Holiday Camp; the dacha); there is the psychoanalytic kitsch of Fischl. In *Boria and Unknown Woman #2* (1999), a young couple in horrendous swimsuits splash around a lake. Here, it is the lake itself that is symbolic. Boria's two-week vacation was a reward for loyal service to the Party. As in the paintings of another Jew, R.B. Kitaj,

Gershman's images enact a world where doubt lives happily ever after with affection.

Here in Los Angeles, Gershman's show has been derided for the "nostalgic content" of its images. When I tell her I *like* the sentimental aspect of these paintings, she seems very much relieved. Apparently she's been told that while nostalgia is to be avoided, *sentiment* is more acceptable.

I'm curious about this. The language of art criticism can be as emblematic as the summer lake resorts of Krushchev-era Russia. If "sentiment" is good, and "nostalgia," now its opposite, is bad, what is the repellent thing nostalgia means? And why has sentiment been rehabilitated? I get the feeling neither word has very much to do with Latin or Greek roots, in current usage.

I called up Warren Niesluchowski in New York. A long-time art critic and a curator, Warren's also Professional Friend to many famous artists, so he knows everything that's happening in the art world. Warren immediately assumed that "sentiment" is being used as an equivalent of "adolescence." He talked about the work of a new wave of art school graduates who look back across the years to a time (perhaps three years ago?) when they were still inarticulately naive. *Sentimentally*, he says, they recall this state as being more "authentic." When he used the word "post-Raphaelite," I looked up Anna Gaskell's work but this was even more confusing. Was it sentiment enacted by her photos? Or even a faux-return to even faux-er authenticity? It was more like soft-core porn ... all these gorgeous white girls with their long brown hair splayed out in the golden light on beds of fiberfill like clouds or cotton candy. Writing in *Flash Art* (January 1998), the critic Michael Cohen sums up the appeal of this "postfeminist" romance in his comments about Gaskell's debut work, *The Wonder Series* (1996). "... Alice's continuous play with her stockings and panties in these photos turns them into fluid sensual terms, signifying

many meanings beyond 'innocence' ..." Well yes of course, but isn't Cohen really just describing that most classic pornographic trope, *Young Girl Tentatively Explores Her Sexuality In Ambiguous Relation to Voyeur*? Equally beloved by the Enlightenment and *People* magazine, it is the Heisenberg Effect of sex and it works across the board, from Brooke Shields in *Blue Lagoon* to *Lolita* to *Justine*, that most vicious comedy by de Sade.

Nostalgia implies the irrecoverable. The act of remembering, rather than recover the lost to consciousness, serves only to activate the longing to return ... The act of memory itself and the quality of the remembrance of the past brings no satisfaction or joy. It serves only as a springboard to the state of feeling desired: a time when one was content, happy, fulfilled, satiated. The emphasis is on the self, and on a desired image of oneself. The people and places in the memory are stilted, frozen in history and in relationship to the self, which has been—which has been—which has been lost.

Lonely girl from Wellington, New Zealand in New York City office typing words on a primitive word processor and shooting them in single-frame animation. The pixilated letters dance. Words close the edges up and pictures open them. Pictures, dreams of railway wheels and parks and wood-frame houses, from which she wakes up sobbing. Words and pictures. She wants to know which has more power. She wants to creep back into an imagined womb of tenderness which she believes the past might hold, and so she makes a film.

I think nostalgia is a product of diaspora. One of the standout pieces in the *Greater New York* show this month at PS 1 is the video installation *Sweet Illusion* by Adriana Arenas. Arenas constructs a faux-karaoke machine via three-channel video. Masses of pale pink cotton candy waft and spin against a bird's egg sky in random sync

with three *vallenato* love songs. *Vallenato* is a Latino cowboy style performed along the Atlantic coast of Colombia, close to Arenas' home. Beside the viewer, against a color-field backdrop in candy-colored saturated hues, the text of the translated lyrics bop along in and out of cadence with the music and the sugar-drift of cotton candy. It is a joke. And like the greatest jokes, it is completely truthful.

What would I give to have you?

My life, my entire life

I would give.

To discover the mystery

That is kept

in those beautiful eyes

Omar Geles, I Met Him Late

Arenas grew up in Colombia and she conceived the piece last year in New York City. Like Gershman, like anyone who leaves their country, Arenas kept returning in her mind to the past, which has become a mythic place: "I was remembering the fictitious world you think of when you think of what you left behind." *Sweet Illusion* brilliantly acknowledges the nature of nostalgia without seeking to escape from it. The lyric's sentiment flashes baldly on the monitor for all to see, conflated with the cotton candy, and yet the sentiment can't be denied. As Arenas says, "I love this music ... it is the music of nomadic people, cowboys, telling stories about people in the town. It's played with accordions and drums, and yet how much poetic feeling it entails ... that approach to life that is present in most folk music."

Every first-world immigrant city swarms with populations imprinted with tattoos of memory from their countries. To be here and there, to close your eyes. Nostalgia.

(2000)

The Blessed

Dear Chris,

I'm sorry about how I was on the phone the last time we spoke. As you can tell I'm a wreck. I'm loosing it more and more each day. I never know what god is going to do next. As of now I'm six months behind in my rent and even though I owe you five more cleanings on the check-off sheet I can't come back. My t-cells are down below 200 now and I get sick every other week. The car you bought for me is wrecked. This is just one more example of god's evil little tricks. When I had the accident I found my self carving the words "God Is Evil" on the hood. No matter what I do or try god will be right there to take his monumental shit on me, like the weeks I wasted trying to raise those one week old abandoned kittens. God killed seven kittens in one week and at this point I can no longer hide my contempt. I want everyone to know that god is evil.

Look at the day the washer and the dryer at your house went out. That was all planned by god and I don't want to infect you with god's curse. You have been very kind to me and I'm grateful and will not forget but you need someone you rely on. What I'm trying to say is I'm going out of business. I just give up. I just can't clean anymore. Every day I go to work full of such panic and anxiety because I know god will play



another trick. I feel like a ghost has wrapped its hands around my neck. My chest feels like some one is kicking there. Look at what happened when I was going to help you with the move. And what about the apolstery guy I overpaid who did those chairs for you? I'm sorry about those last cleanings but there is no way I can pay you back for them right now. I hope you'll let me pay you back another day.

God is an evil fucker and the accident was just his last revenge. I should have known two months ago when he let those kittens die that something else would happen. What kind of cruel and heartless person would leave seven innocent kittens out to die in a cardboard box next to a dumpster? I spent the last money that you gave me taking them to the vet and still I couldn't save them. Do you know what it's like to have a four week old kitten dying, in your hands?

You have been very kind to me over the past three years, but every time you advanced me money, something happens so I go into more debt and I'm behind again. I have tried for years to contain my depression, my anxiety attacks, my post-traumatic stress disorder, my alcoholism and my food binging. All I can control is the food and the booze. That's it. Ten years ago when I got sober and started up my cleaning business I promised god I'd never go on welfare but why should I keep my promises? I'm going to apply for Section 8. I guess you could say I'm filing bankruptcy on my life. God wants everything to die. Myself included.

Your friend,

Bo

This is a reconstruction of a letter Bo Wilson left for me in June when I was away at Yaddo. When I returned my boyfriend and his teenage

son and my husband and his girlfriend's taffy-colored dog were all living at the place downtown I bought this spring in Westlake.

My clothes and papers had all been boxed and put away and there were Marine recruitment posters hanging in the bedroom. My boyfriend and his son had hunkered down there with a year's supply of Ramen noodles, paper towels and toilet paper, Pepsi. Bo hadn't come to clean for a whole month and everything was dirty. The house was my great hope: a large three-leveled stucco thing ambling down a slope with a courtyard and a guest house, built for a female client at the height of the Depression. I bought it at a bankruptcy sale two days before my birthday thinking it would change my life. Now the place is rented out and none of us are living there.

I picked up the letter in the living room while my husband, boyfriend and his son, and the son's best friend from Christian Camp sat talking to each other, nervously. My husband and his girlfriend's dog were living in the little house. My boyfriend and his son were living in the big one. I didn't know where they all expected me to sleep. I remember holding out the letter at arm's length, hoping the two 14-year-old boys did not find anything *unusual* about this situation. I was thinking: *I don't even have a place to stand!* I was a stationary object teetering without a station. Meanwhile I felt Bo's letter pulsing in my hand as if it was an amputated finger. And so I put the letter down or threw it out because it was just too painful to absorb. Bo's letter hit me with centrifugal force, and like I say, I probably lost it.

I met Bo three years ago when I was still living in a treehouse in Mt. Washington. He had a stack of business cards for "Bo's Earth-Friendly Cleaning Service" at the hardware store and I was looking for someone to clean. Preferably, a professional. The

housekeeper who'd preceded him was the grandniece of the Guatemalan day laborer who'd hauled bricks for my patio. She spoke no English, had no car and refused to use a vacuum. Every week I picked Maria up from her East Hollywood apartment and watched her child while she stole jewelry and dusted. The child, Diana, told me stories about a murdered uncle in their village. Diana'd watched the uncle climb a tree, and when the soldiers came, she pointed. And then she saw his body falling from the tree. Her mother interrupts: *She was just a baby ...*

I'd only been here 18 months and was still a little queasy about embracing the "entitlement" the city's endless pool of indigent undocumented misery provides for folks like me. But still: after 6 months of therapy, it seemed not unreasonable to expect that if you paid someone to do a job, they'd show up alone and do it. Bo, a gay male Virgo, lived to clean. He was a little bit slow-witted: a large man who embraced the retro-culture of a 1950s queen, humming show tunes while he alphabetized my groceries. It was like he'd studied queerness out of the wrong book, but still, this seemed like a big improvement. Bo's shining moment was the time he'd placed the winning bid on a pair of Judy Garland's scuffed-up mules, tenth cousin to the ruby slippers that she'd worn once in a movie. He told this story to me later, teary-eyed and sniffing, when things got really bad. By then he'd lost them in a fire.

I used to like to read a lot of books about Buddhism. They all said: If you can't do any good, at least don't do any harm, and this seemed very realistic. At that time I was seeing myself as something like a fulcrum, creating order in a discontinuous grid through a small ecology of kindnesses. Though my husband lived 3000 miles away, we saw each other as the Greater Good. I believe that marriages are sacred. Because we loathed the capitalist system, we aimed to make as much money as we could and give most of it away. Since there was no longer any physical, love, between us, we

thought we could create an atmosphere of love by giving things away, by sharing.

In Mt. Washington I didn't have a lot of friends, and Bo became one. Stories of his life come out in dribs and drabs. He shares two rooms in Silver Lake with seven cats and whatever "transients" he's placing. When I get home from teaching at the art school, Bo is standing in the living room, chest pumped out, brandishing his feather duster. Often, we talk about his cats. "If I ever catch the bastard who abandoned little Calico in the trash, he'll have to mess with *this* faggot!"

On Friday nights Bo likes to take a walk to Circus Books around the corner from his house. Circus Books is like the all-night Gem Spa newsstand at the corner of St. Marks Place in New York: a magnet for the lonely. He buys his favorite brand of root beer and browses through the racks of porno mags, looking out for young, ideal exotic bodies. Mixed race is best. There are no social overtones to this. It's just a feeling of perpetual sunset.

Eventually, Bo walks around the parking lot to a row of trashcans and a dumpster. Vaguely aroused, he listens for the telltale mewling sounds of kittens who've been thrown away. These are the good times. When he finds a box of strays he knows that God has placed them in his path, and he is following God's will to save them. And so when Lucy, Bo's favorite fluffy black & white, is diagnosed with a malignant tumor, I loan him several hundred dollars for the vet. The cat is saved. The next week I come home from school to find a heart-shaped ashtray and a note: *God Bless and Lucy Thanks You.*

When the art school where I'm teaching moves its studios to downtown Pasadena, I discover that the ASPCA is located right around the corner from the new facility. Sometimes the students don't show up for our one-on-one tutorials and I spend the hour visiting the lavishly appointed shelter. The dogs speak straight to

my heart. They don't need to mediate with art. Like the students, each dog has his or her own kennel.

Bo, like the dogs, does best when following a routine. Sometimes I forget, and ask him to do some extra task as a pretext for giving him more money. But these concierge-like duties almost always end in some disaster. He can't remember things. He has a short attention span. He attributes this to long spells of sensory deprivation he experienced in early childhood.

Inspired, perhaps, by *National Enquirer* exposés of the period, Bo's mother's favorite means of disciplining her fat unruly child was to lock him in a closet. Bo remembers living with his mother in Canoga Park. His dad was gone, they didn't have a car. He remembers nine gasping months of summer heat, flies buzzing round the kitchen, a rusted Chevy Nova, its transmission shot, sitting in the driveway. Bo remembers his mom's stiletto heels; also the belts and straps and Bakelite plastic phone she used to beat him around the head. To this day he is a fan of all things retro. One time the closet-punishment went on too long. When he didn't go to school for several days, the guidance counselor alerted the Dept. of Child Welfare. A series of foster homes ensued; eventually they dug up a distant uncle and Bo was sent to live with him outside of Reno.

It was in this place that Bo discovered he could communicate with animals. Slow-witted, fat, 14 and dreaming constantly of being fucked by other boys, Bo found a kitten near a neighbor's trash one day. Forbidden by his uncle to keep pets, he had to hide the stray, and suddenly his life was full of purpose. Two days before his 16th birthday, Bo decided he would run away. He tried to board a Greyhound bus with a duffel bag in one hand, Fluffy in the other and his bitterest regret is that when the driver said, No Cats Allowed, Bo chose freedom. Now he's terrified that any cat might die unloved, uncared for.

On Friday mornings I taught a diary-writing class at the art school. Attendance in it was the kiss of death for anyone expecting to succeed within the institution. The diary-writing class attracted mostly girls, of course, who'd drifted foolishly into art, thinking art might be a medium for change or self-expression. Girls who'd slit their wrists and been hospitalized for mental illness. Unlike the girls who'd go on to good careers making videotapes of lawn-sprinklers, the diary-writers wondered why there were no senior female faculty at the school and why the Institution's only black employees were security guards and secretaries. The diary-writers wondered why the institution's only class on "feminism" was perennially taught by men. They wondered why the works of major 20th century black writers were referred to at the school as "crappy."

Still, in Los Angeles, it was possible to make a lot of money. Neoconceptual art-school art was flourishing around the world: it was a blue-sky opportunity. LA artists rightly saw themselves as trained professionals: like doctors, lawyers and other lapdogs of the ruling class, they referred to what went on inside their studios as their "practice." Once inside the loop, there was very little competition so long as you abided by the rules: 25% percent of institution graduates obtained major representation within their first year out of school. Meanwhile in New York, artists who'd worked for twenty years languished without galleries.

At that moment in LA it was also possible to make a lot of money buying real estate. Since this required a certain curiosity about neighborhoods and human nature, it interested me much more than artistic *practice*. And so I bought and sold. Meanwhile colleagues who'd arrived here from New York were establishing great careers as curators and critics. Anyone from a decent northeast college willing to work a New York 60-hour week could become a leader in their field. You didn't have to be that smart, or rich, or lucky. In Los Angeles, anything was possible.

There wasn't much in this environment that interested me and I was lonely. Did I mention there were honeysuckle bushes all around the house? The trees here seemed to have no roots, or was it that the roots grew horizontally along the dusty surface of the ground in order to absorb the dew that settled in the morning? At any rate the leaves were hard and rubbery. There were old wooden cupboards in the kitchen, cottage windows painted 1930s green. The house was both strange and familiar, like a New Zealand bungalow that'd been airlifted into the Tijuana hills from that odd premodern world of social leveling.

In New York City, performance artists were still biting heads off rats and splattering HIV-infected blood on paying audiences, but here the discourse was more apt and more contemporary: the celebration of a state of active blankness. It was as if the LA art world had willed itself into the Orwellian state of knowing "what" without being able to say "why." There was "*a continuity between outsides predicated on the idea of the surface, the plane and the point, as opposed to the form, the shape and its interior ... the substitution of becoming-electronic for becoming-animal, conceivably as a logical consequence of modernism's transparent humanism.*" (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999, p.118) How this logic worked no one could say, but in this context drug use triumphed over sex because it left fewer messy humanistic traces.

At first I used a South Bay escort service. Fucked up beyond my comprehension, the escorts inhabited a hustle-world that made them generally more interesting than the artists. But when one of them showed up on crystal meth at 4 a.m. ranting about decapitated heads and graveyard worms, I switched to the LA Telepersonals. At night in bed I used the telephone to reach out across the 50 miles of city.

I met a New Age Dom who made me promise to comply with all his orders. Jeigh, a graduate of EST, was now active in Agape, Self-Empowerment and the Pussy Busters, a Santa Monica offshoot

of the Justin Sterling Men's Movement. Jeigh's training surpassed any normal S/m protocol. He saw me as an agent and a victim of the "negative evil culture" that in his mind, originated in New York circa the late 1970s. Jeigh thought it was his job to save me. Towards this end, words like "luck" and "chance" and "fate" were to be eliminated because *reality is self-created*. Since *poverty and sickness are created solely through the negative thought-patterns of the individual*, adjectives like "depressing" clearly had to go. Also, my clothes (too mannish), tastes in film (elitist), queer friends (whose aberrant sexualities violated God's plan) and sense of humor would be rehabilitated. Since my job required reading, he didn't outright forbid the printed word, but suggested I curtail it.

I stand in the center of the room while Jeigh instructs me on the phone. Exploding. There is this softness now that threatens to take over, and I wonder if it's God. Or else it is belief, same thing. I don't know anything about this person except for what he tells me, but when he says "Your training is the only thing in my life right now that's clean and pure," I melt. The top draws out the bottom's sexuality and hands it back to her, a gift. It occurs to me belief is a technology, a mental trick for softening the landscape. When all value has become exchangeable, stupidity emerges as a new topic of investigation. If the world becomes more sensuous and beautiful when God is there, why not believe? "*The extreme mobility of the contemporary sublime erodes autonomy because it calls for movement through the heteronomous which is itself heteronomous, provisional singularity taking the place of the irreducible, movement being the basis of the indeterminacy of what is erased and represented in it.*" (op. cit., p. 55) California is a chance to rethink everything.

That fall, the night my book came out, the diary-writing girls were gathered in the living room of my treehouse for a party. I escaped downstairs and let the New Age Dom cane me once for every cigarette I'd smoked. I didn't want to be a role model.

Bo charges 40 dollars for a weekly cleaning. His clients are spread out between Mt. Washington and Silver Lake and the San Fernando Valley. On good weeks—that is, the weeks when no one cancels—he nets \$400, and with that he has to pay his rent and bills, and pay for cat food, kitty litter, the vet, and various cleaning products. Needless to say, he has no medical insurance, no vacation pay, no unemployment coverage. On the “anniversary” of our first cleaning, Bo brings me a bouquet of flowers. Meanwhile I fly around the northern hemisphere on tickets paid for by the Institution. Though every word I’ve spoken challenges the Institution’s values, my opinions matter less to them than my husband’s artworld stature. When it occurs to me, I pick up the phone and sell the frequent flyer miles to a Florida developer for another thousand bucks. The absurdity of this does not escape me.

*I love myself the way I am
There's nothing I need to change
I'll always be the perfect me
There's nothing to re-arrange.
I'm beautiful and capable
Of being the best me I can—*

were the lyrics of a Self Empowerment anthem Jeigh liked to play while he was beating me.

That fall (if you could call it that, the temperature always hovered around 80), I didn't see Bo for a while because he was home sick with pneumonia. But one Friday in November he came up the 72 concrete steps, hysterical and breathless. He'd finally gone to get some antibiotics at a clinic and tested positive with full-blown AIDS. Not knowing where to turn, he'd immediately called his eleven other clients. Five of them expressed regrets, then cancelled. “It isn't personal,” they said. “But we must protect the safety of our

homes/our animals/our children.” I begged whatever artworld friends I had to hire him, and then two weeks later the front end of his ‘93 Chevette got hit in the parking lot on Sunset Blvd. Like him, the driver of the other car had no insurance and the Chevette was a write-off.

To reach Mt. Washington from Silverlake, it is necessary to catch three different busses. Because I found the image of him standing with his vacuum cleaner in the blazing sun on Figueroa Blvd. personally offensive, I gave him money for a car. Bo called me his Fairy Godmother, told me more about his life, and we got closer.

The New Age Dom believes that poverty, like a virus, is contagious. He believes that money is a symbol of God’s love. Therefore, he imagines his house in Santa Monica to be more “spiritual” than mine, adjacent to the slums of Highland Park. (In fact, my house is chic-er than the Dom’s and I have considerably more money.) “Look at your self-created misery!” he rails. “The clothes you wear, the books you read, your AIDS-ridden housekeeper . . .” At that time, I was trying to understand the nature of compassion by following an emotive logic-chain as far as it would go. I thought that emptiness could be offset by acts of kindness—

*I love the world the way it is
'Cause I can clearly see,
That all the things I judge
Are done by people just like me*

Bo took, as the New Agers say, *personal responsibility for his wellness*, but he continued getting sicker. He changed his diet, took the clinic drugs, but soon his face and chest were covered with exotic sores. He couldn’t climb the steps up to the treehouse without wheezing.

Where does luck begin and self-determination end? In LA it's possible to achieve a measure of success, providing you respect the process. No one cares enough to ask too many questions. The airport's close. Freeways make everything accessible. You get up at 7 to do business in New York. You talk and write, you buy and sell. And yet: the luck of the rich and of the poor are very different. Bo's cousin Kevin has leukemia and is just finishing his second round of chemo. Together they tow the wrecked Chevette to Kevin's yard, and a homeless woman and her three-year-old move into it. Bo's thrilled by this, the idea of being someone else's benefactor. Like me, he is seeing himself as something like a fulcrum. Still, I wonder: what kind of country is this, where sleeping in a wrecked Chevette could be construed as a step *upward*? When Kevin's married sister in the Valley buys a new Ford Windstar and the dealer won't take her old subcompact Hyundai as a trade, she sells it to Kevin to sell to Bo with my money. What kind of country is this, where a person *sells* a worthless Hyundai Accent to a relative who is terminally ill, for \$1800?

There is a certain pre-emptive emptiness that pervades the artwork that is produced within the Institution. Conceptually coherent and well-made, the greatest triumph of this artwork is elusion: the way it references so much, content dancing on the surface like a million heated molecules until you can't exactly pin it down to any given meaning. As such, it is an embodiment of corporate practice: Never put into writing what can be mumbled on the phone. It's better to be everywhere than somewhere; to manifest a certain surface edge of elasticity in which authority might see itself reflected: a quality that's come to be defined as "beauty."

One night, Bo's lower wisdom tooth becomes impacted. He's too sick to drive to LA County Hospital, too poor to take a cab, and Medi-Cal doesn't cover ambulances unless you are unconscious. So Bo calls Aston, who he's met at AIDS Project LA, and

asks him to drive him to the hospital. Since Aston doesn't have a car, they take the Bo's Hyundai, but they don't have money for the LA County parking lot. Meanwhile, Bo's clutching at his tooth and howling and when they finally find a parking spot, Aston forgets to lock the car. While Bo's tooth is being pulled, someone pops the hatch and steals his waxer, which he'd been too sick that evening to unload. The whole adventure left him feeling better, but he lost \$200 in cancelled cleaning jobs, and then he had to borrow \$50 to buy another waxer.

At the Institution, I watch a video installation featuring an exercise machine suspended by a rope and pulley from the ceiling. The art-practitioner has placed it in the middle of a makeshift set, consisting on a disco-ball, some astro-turf, and sheets of mylar. A stationary camera is positioned center-frame of this environment. For thirty minutes, fellow students (known as "colleagues") walk in and out of frame. Some of them try hanging from the pulley. One boy wears a dress, and three cute girls are dressed as cheerleaders, though they seem ambivalent with this persona. They shake their pompoms, shrug and leave. Colleagues approach the exercise machine, but no one can figure out the pulley. The videomaker is 36 years old. I can't help wondering what he's doing here: why he isn't making Volvo ads, or late-night infomercials. "Mmmm," I say, hedging for time. "Amazing. Uhh, what is it about?" Then I remember how a work of art is not about anything, it just *is*, the student catches this and smirks. "It's about *video*," he says helpfully, "the color. It's pure video green. The astro-turf is the *same shade of green* as the green on videotape color bars." And yes, he's right, the green *is* kind of smeary.

And then I pick it up, remembering the Institution's discourse about how color saturation can dissolve the *boundaries* of the pixels, hemorrhaging across the *surface* of the screen. This, of course is *paradox*, because video defines a surface without depth, a geo-entologic

fourth dimension. Still, the videomaker adds, there is a great deal more to say about it. The work enacts the *reductive nature of performance*, because the astro-turf defines a *play-space*, to which the colleague-actors (given no direction) enter in a *self-conscious* way. I wonder if this underlines the difference between being 5 years old and 30.

Bo's father disappeared when he was three. He and Bo's mom had moved from Oklahoma to LA in the 1950s when Route 66 ran all the way to Colorado Blvd. in Pasadena. Bo's father was a country & western singer. At that time, there were all these little record labels in offices along the boulevard and Bo's dad got signed by one of them. He cut a record, *Dusty Roads*, and then the company went out of business. He went back to Oklahoma, drank, died sometime in the 1970s.

In between his first and second round of chemo, Bo's cousin Kevin was browsing through the bargain bins at Final Vinyl. There was a promo copy of the *Dusty Roads* LP, obviously never played 'cause it was still wrapped in the original cellophane. Kevin bought it and presented it to Bo, who keeps it underneath his bed, his most valuable possession. There is a photo of his father sitting on a stool with his guitar. His dad looks like the young Merle Haggard, his face frozen under klieg lights in a mask of bitterness and aspiration. Bo's never listened to the songs, because he's vowed to never open up the cellophane. He believes the sleeve contains the spirit of his dad. If he never breaks the seal, he can preserve it.

The orphan Heidi carries a small snow globe with her to the city when her parents die and she is banished from their cottage in the mountains. Each time she shakes it, she remembers home. It is the only thing she owns. When Heidi holds the snow globe, she is transported backwards to a world of hollyhocks and cowbells, her mother's face, featherbeds and cocoa. It is her talisman. But then one night, tired of the orphan's homesick sniveling, her wicked

guardian wrests it from her tiny hands and smashes it the stairs. The glass globe breaks, and water spills. The object is destroyed. Why is it, some people are born to act as magnets for the cruelty of others?

Driving back from Santa Barbara to LA, the body of a man dropped from the Fairview Avenue overpass onto the car in front of me. The body was transported from the scene to Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital and pronounced dead 20 minutes later. "It was a deliberate act," said Sgt. Michael Burr ridge. "He wasn't hit, nor did he fall off his bike. He stepped calmly over the guardrail and dove forward." I was driving back to see a conceptual sculpture show by an artist critics hail for successfully isolating the idea of form from surface.

Three years later, the word "blessed" remains in vogue in Southern California. "Blessed" has dribbled down from self-empowerment literature and videocassettes into conversation and institutional correspondence. "We are blessed," began a form letter from the art school, "to have retained the services of Ms. XYZ as our new IT consultant." If we are "blessed," then who are the Unblessed? And do we celebrate our blessedness at their expense?

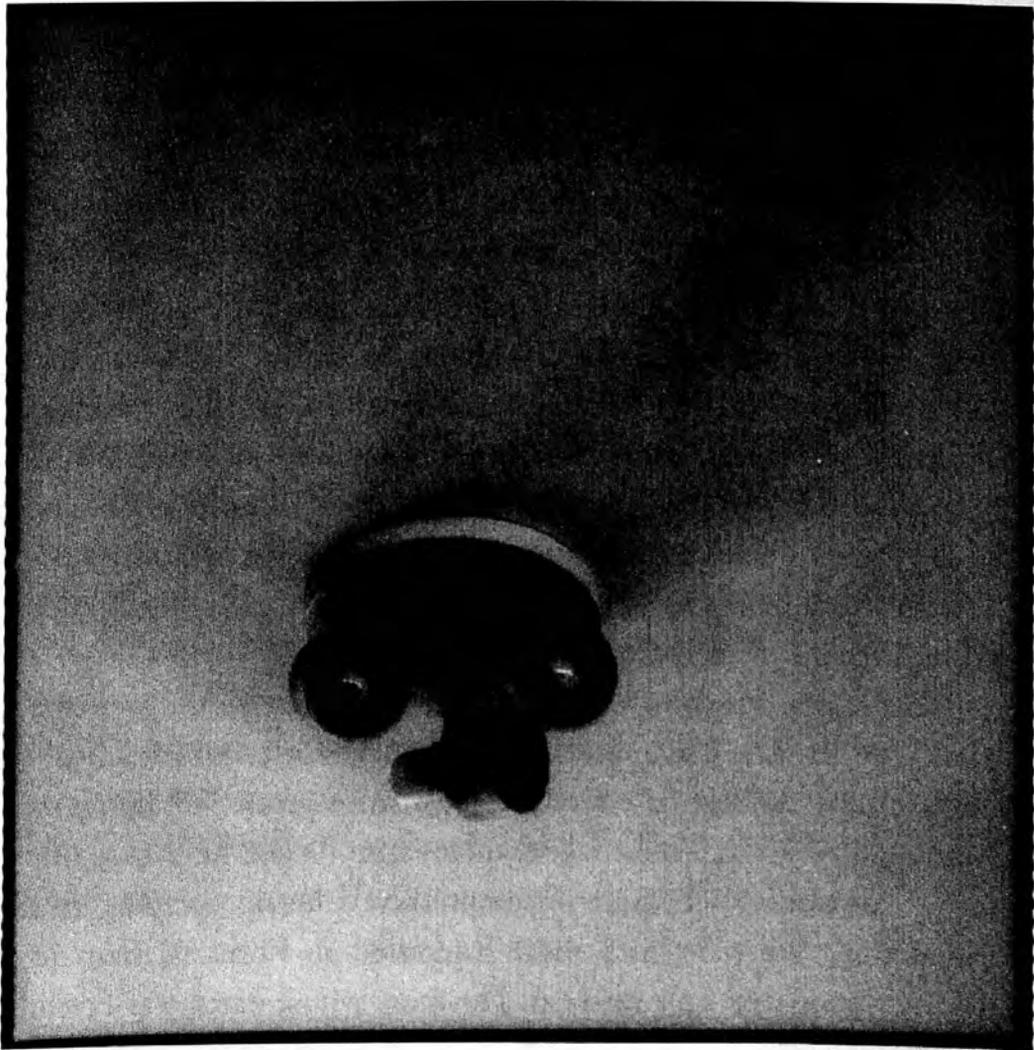
I am now living by myself in a cabin in the central California hills. I don't know where Bo is. I imagine he'll die soon. I am no longer taking comfort from the small ecology of kindnesses.

(2000)

Military Culture

Central California, July 2000—This morning I drove past the Space Shuttle Motel on the road between Los Alamos and Lompoc. Plopped down in the middle of a field, the motel serves the Vandenberg Air Force Base, a facility that's shared by NASA and the US Air Force. I arrived last night at a ranch outside Los Alamos, about 20 miles away. I was disoriented, wanted to see where I was, but the road here didn't have a lot of signs or answers. Two lanes of freshly poured black asphalt stretching 12 miles out of Lompoc... The road dead-ended when it reached an electric chain-link fence around the Air Force base perimeter.

Last night, Sylvère and I drove out here from Ventura in two cars. We'd left LA in one, but then we'd gotten sidetracked, admiring a classic car For Sale By Owner, a mint-green '59 Rambler Ambassador. We called the owner on a whim. When he turned out to be Romanian, it became apparent there'd be no escaping this transaction. We were both more interested in Romania than in getting a good deal on a used car. The man, whose name was Petru, ranted brilliantly. He was a slight man, about 48 or 50, wearing a straw hat, who claimed to split his time between Bucharest and Santa Barbara. The difference between these cities is greater than the difference between Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Baywatch*, and we wondered how he did it. Petru was a *clockmaker*



by trade. He was nostalgic for the Ceausescu years when people plied these archaic occupations although he'd been arrested twice for "crimes against the state" before escaping across, I don't believe he said which, border.

Several hours, several thousand dollars later, we were registering the car, which turned out to be incapable of accelerating more than 30 miles per hour on the highway. We didn't get here until after dark. "Here" being Wild Rose Cabin at Moon Valley Ranch on a hill above Los Alamos. With its fresh pine-paneling and No Smoking signs, Wild Rose was well equipped with scented candles, New Age tracts and executive self-help books. I was to spend the remainder of the summer here, because my boyfriend and my husband who were still living in Los Angeles at my house, thought this remote and para-military locale would be "perfect" for me as a writer.

Moon Valley Ranch had been a marijuana farm for many years before the present owner, an ex-corporate lawyer, acquired it on a fluke from MIT, who'd received it through the estate trust of an alumni. The cabins all have cute names like "Hummingbird" and "Garden View," and it's difficult to get a sense of what might actually go on here among the bare burnt hills. Army towns and testing grounds, strawberry fields and vineyards. The cloudless deep blue sky of inland central California. Behind the gates at Vandenberg, scientists are working on an electro-magnetic interceptor to protect us from the "imminent threat" of nuclear weapons launched at us by "rogue states." According to former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, these rogue states—a synonym for third-world countries—don't only have the atom bomb; they have developed ballistic missile capacities to launch them at America. Obviously these countries got into the nuclear warhead game so late they are still trafficking in bombs, rather than info-warfare and electromagnetic deterrence.

Last month, an odd mix of Israeli military strategists, high-ranking US and British army officers, and American, Canadian, Australian postmodern theorists and cultural critics met for five days at a resort hotel on the Israeli coast to speculate on 21st century warfare. Organized by a group of brilliant young Israeli theory-heads who were performing their mandatory military service, they called the meeting "Martial Ecologies." Sylvère and I were there, and as the week unfolded, Prime Minister Barak's bold plan of pulling Israeli troops out of Lebanon, which they had occupied for nearly 20 years, spawned a series of disasters. First there was a spate of violent riots, the most serious since the Intifada, in a handful of Israeli cities populated by Palestinian Israeli citizens. The instigation of these riots remained vague and undisclosed. Presumably they challenged Arafat's authority. When Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon, thousands of members of the Israeli-funded Southern Lebanese Militia and their families rushed to cross the borders. As collaborators, they'd be lynched if they remained there. Although Barak's plan promised them Israeli citizenship and asylum, they were repelled when they arrived by the Israeli army.

The purpose of the conference was to better understand these kinds of skirmishes. Lebanon turned out to be a paradigm. How will war evolve when you are dealing less with nations, more with ethnic groups and tribes? What will pure war and postmodern war really look like? The papers read by military personnel, like US Army Colonel Douglas A. MacGregor's *Transforming Operational Architecture for the Information Age* were incredibly programmatic and specific ... although he'd never read Deleuze, he'd visualized a rhizomatic plan involving robot-warriors, decentralized systems of command and autonomous sub-units.

The Israeli strategists had impressive flow charts, showing how the principles of complexity theory could be channeled into military

decision-making and command. Those in the field, however, had their doubts about post-Desert Storm, Nintendo-style scenarios. They were nostalgic for the old ground wars where chaos is more finite. The postmodern theorists and cultural critics were more interested in what war meant, and how it served the bigger picture. War was "the vertical control by electromagnetic deterrence and space-based info-warfare over the induced chaos of uncontrolled market forces" (Sylvère Lotringer), or else it was a side-effect of globalism, based upon "an all-around splintering and polarizing, producing destruction and annihilation, not through wars and military machines but through starvation, pestilence, crime, social erosion and loneliness" (Janine Brody and Rajni Kothari). One beefy American corporal cut right to the chase when he reminded us that war is still the willingness to "Get out there and KILL!"

The artist Christopher Lucas sees war as an exchange of energy. He told me this last year when I met him at an opening, and so I stopped off in New York to finally see his work on the way back here from Israel. During the past fifteen years he's created an extraordinary body of work (both exhibited and not) that conflates war with transport, transport with ancient spiritual technologies. As his friend, the writer William Burroughs, said about his exhibition *Passages*: "Lucas aims for the correlation of spiritual and spatial movement—boats, sleds, navigational charts—breaking down the line between the utilitarian world and the magical world of the artist ..." Lucas' Chelsea studio contains a fascinating array of life-sized replicas of heraldic shields and fighter planes, space shuttles, paintings and collages.

As with all my favorite artists, I think his work is truly mad. It zigzags through a thought system defined by Kabbalah and Hinduism, Shinto, the Sephirot, various Korean pop-culture artifacts,

ghost-spirits, toys and games found at a children's playground. Lucas believes that warriors, like children, are engaged in an enterprise of magic transience. Both need to know how to get from *here* to *there*. As Burroughs observes, Lucas' "vehicles" are designed to be used, not just looked at: bringing the psychic and the real into crisp alignment.

Lucas has spent the past decade extrapolating military applications from the children's sleds and slides he constructed during the 1980s. Among these early pieces are the terrifying *Chakra Slide* (1989), a conveyance made of polished balsa wood. It's like a children's slide except it's base is witchily curved upwards, so that the ride you'll take on it will leave you further in the air before you hit the ground. A visceral metaphor, he says, for how children reach the highest energy levels just by playing, while adults may spend their whole lives in prayer or meditation seeking enlightenment and reincarnation. Crowned by a Buddhist swastika, the slide is decorated with seven emblems that represent the body's chakras.

In 1996 he built a life-sized replica of an F-15/MIG fighter plane called *Adam Kadmon's Jet*. Kadmon is named in the Kabbalah as the symbol of Primordial Man, the first being to emerge within the metaphysical void that was the cosmos. He arrived with symbols emanating from the orifices in his head which were subsequently codified and written down as the Sephirot. According to the Kabbalah, the World of Adam Kadmon functions as a bridge between the Ein-sof (God) and us on earth. From this position, Kadmon remains to direct all subsequent events unfolding among humans. The shape of Adam Kadmon's plane follows the zig-zagging diagram of the Sephirot. Based upon the number ten, the Sephirot supposedly contains the key to everyone's potential destiny. Like *Chakra Slide*, the plane is highly decorated, but this time with Lucas' own religio-military iconography. There is a painted Jesus. There are sets of human hands performing Hindu mudras.

There is a picture of a Korean shaman rolling a pair of dice (and this, says Lucas, is borrowed from the Korean-war era custom of US airmen decorating their planes with dice and naked girls)—except the shaman's dice are rolled to ten, a number circling back to the Sephirot.

His latest piece, *Mother* (2000) is a space shuttle constructed, boat-like, of fine resinated wood. A choirboy molded from blue styrofoam steers the space-craft, sitting on a battered children's sled. Transport within transport. The boy's hands are locked in prayer religiously, and beneath the hatch are stick-on decals featuring fractured hands bent into mudras. There is a husky dog and a picture of a dark-haired girl whose hands are clasped together, praying. This is an image Lucas found on an extended visit to Korea. The Girl appears on leaflets distributed to Korean Shinto Buddhists by the Catholic Church, promising salvation for their families if they accept the teachings of Lord Jesus. Formally the spacecraft echoes the graciously curved lines of an old-fashioned sailboat. But decals of oxygen molecules dance along its side, suggesting ways religion can be transposed, transported through all kinds of diaspora. And in the face of the unknown, the infinite adaptability of faith between the gridworks of religious systems. We talk awhile, and Lucas brings out a book called *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*. Written by Kenneth Patchen in 1941, the text begins as an invocation against hunger, fear and darkness and ends: *There is blood on my hands.*



(2001)

Shit On My Sleepmask

For months I've wanted to write something in this column about diaries and notebooks. I teach a diary-writing class in an MFA Studio Art program. Here, diary-keeping is not a popular art. It sounds too much like something girls do. *Theories* of subjectivity sounds sexier and more important. Since diary-writing is subjective practice, it's more fragile, looser, messier. As a transcription of live thought, diary-writing's destined for confusion because the mind does not stay still for very long. As an art-making practice, it's incoherent and therefore essentially flawed.

Things change when the artist is no longer alive. Just as forensic criminology, with its crime-scene videos, barricades, arrows and markers, construct a monument to what might otherwise be an anonymous life, curatorial practice bestows value upon the notebooks of dead writers and artists. Once they have entered the institution, these cheap spiral binders are quickly insured and preserved. They may no longer be xeroxed or touched by unauthorized hands. Occasionally they are spread open to curatorially selected pages and exhibited in climatically controlled, alarmed vitrines. The very act of selection (why is the diary opened to this page, and not another?) imparts meaning. This practice seems especially bizarre when the artist's not dead yet. At PS1's Fluxus retrospective, I saw one of Joseph Kosuth's notebooks, circa 1961,

spread open, preserved under glass—and this seemed very weird, because I'd run into Joseph just two days ago on Broadway. Perhaps because notebooks are rarely conceived as art works, they seem, when placed under glass, fetishistic, corpse-like.

There is something so deeply subversive about seeing these same artifacts adrift in the world. Unprotected by glass, unselected, ostensibly flimsy and worthless, they remind us that the dead artist in question was just a person once like you.

For months, my husband Sylvère Lotringer has been carrying around one of Antonin Artaud's famous notebooks in his backpack. Possessing it is the guiltiest pleasure. Since the notebook left its imperfectly-guarded vitrine at the Pompidou six months ago, it's changed hands several times. A young guy slipped it in his jacket at the Artaud retrospective and gave it as a love-offering to Sylvère's friend Rochelle. Meanwhile the police were looking for it, and Rochelle gave it to Sylvère to take with him to New York. Awaiting further orders, Sylvère keeps it with him at all times.

Because it is so ordinary, the notebook has a magical charge. It's one of those kid's notebooks with multiplication tables on the back cover. It's not unlike the composition books the girls use in my class, with black and white marble covers. Recently we were having coffee with our friends John and Jim, and Sylvère unveiled it from his backpack. On page two, there's a drawing of a man gagging with a cock jammed in his mouth.

The problem of all beings on top of me and their behavior

gleia glesifa

aghifa ipse

nanas

ihsa bauzz

*With me and in me is a problem that only I can solve because
I am the only one who can feel them*

It was summer 1942, the third year of the war, and Artaud was confined to a large psychiatric hospital near Paris. People were starving. He was withdrawing from heroin and he writes in his notebook about a "head" that has been "gone from the point, conferring evening, and making me feel old, the pain of need and the intoxication ..."

We were in Di Roberti's looking at this. We passed the notebook around. Jim, an actor and translator, read some pages out loud. As Jim read, there was a definite spark—as if some kind of transmission was happening between the marks Artaud had made on these pages, and what went on in Jim's eyes. The notebook made Artaud seem incredibly human. No more mythic hero. *A giant army of toilet brushes to sweep out all the beings will then be replaced by an army of soldiers of true men. This army in order to be known as alive has to obey the law of a certain order, which is Don't Look, Don't Laugh, Don't Desire, Don't Swallow, Don't Lay Down On Your Belly, Don't Swallow Meals...* The notebook was written in pencil, a firm hand, cursive-script, moving fast on a slant. The grandiosity of Artaud's writings suddenly shrank to something more troubling ... just a guy writing his notebook. Artaud became our missing friend because his notebook could have been one of ours.

For weeks, I've been carrying around three of the late Kathy Acker's notebooks. (National Brand, spiral, narrow-ruled.) I've been researching her life and these books, soon to be deposited in an archive at Duke University, are among the last things Acker wrote. Her friends Mel Frielicher and Mathias Viegner (who is also Acker's executor) discovered them while unpacking some of her boxes. As objects, they're in what the Tibetans call a "Bardo" state, having not yet been catalogued, insured or classified.

Acker wrote all her first drafts by hand in various notebooks. Later, she'd transcribe and revise them on her computer. In the first

of the notebooks—not dated, but probably written sometimes during the spring of 1995—Kathy's drafting a talk. She'd been invited to speak to the Author's Guild about copyright, the impact of electronic publishing on copyright. Several weeks before, she'd had a mastectomy and the post-operative biopsy had detected more cancerous cells. The talk had to last 20 minutes, and on the top margin, page 8, she does the math most writers do: (20 minutes = 13 pages).

Though Acker is a well-known and accomplished novelist, she's not sure what they want her to do. *What am I going to say?* she begins. ...*in public, a public speech ... not in fiction or about fiction as to other writers or in a classroom ...* There is a scary gravity to this task. She writes some notes around a thought she'd expressed often, about how writers don't actually *make things up*, they perceive and record, and then she lands on a quote from Hannah Arendt. She's been re-reading Arendt's collection of essays, *Men in Dark Times*. As she works with it, Arendt's warning—about how in these 'dark times' the intellectual world becomes increasingly self-referential and recedes from public life—becomes the basis of her talk.

In the pages of the notebook preceding the familiar fat block printing of her publishable text, she writes in a messier hand: *What am I going to say? Amount of work I do, me & my friends, support the writing habit—as poverty is outlaw writing is outlaw—computer—great—but no more money—I get off & I still have a body & I still have to eat ...* She does a tarot reading (Chariot, High Priestess, Death Justice Erzulie Wands) and writes down a dream:

East Village apt. Looking for one. Can stay here. X's bed. 4 in room. I fall asleep, try 2 next to me. bad street. a riot. We go inside 2 fl. Andrea. This fourth where not all open. Shit on sidewalks smell. I hate it here. Have to start looking for my own place but I'm so lazy. (place I found in past in East Village another dream. But spaces. Open. ...)

She dreams about being on tour, getting lost, missing shows. People ask her about the violence in her books, and she wonders if there isn't also violence in the difference between representation and reality: that is, her own. "I am supposed to be (*writer, successful, white privileged*)," and then she writes

change
we all work together,
no more stars,
work together to be in the
work which is to see it/
not just electronic rights
but actual reformatting,
new forms

Though of course she's completely aware—publishing a novel once every two years, giving interviews, writing articles, touring two weeks out of each four—that the only way she can possibly support herself as a writer is to maintain being a star.

Maybe she didn't *really* want to write this essay for the Author's Guild; maybe she did. But at the moment when she's writing in her notebook, the future of copyright in the electronic age is not the only thing on her mind. Having decided to decline chemotherapy, she had this idea that the cancer was located in fear, and the fear lived inside her. If she could go back far enough she could find it, confront it and chase it away. So in between her notes on Hannah Arendt she writes down her dreams. She writes them down fast, and they don't relate much to the Author's Guild text. In the dreams there are craters and opium, worms and baby clothes and she writes *I MUST LEAVE* and she writes *I need someone*, and then *Loneliness—it's the American way*, and she dreams of beginning again.

Like Acker, Artaud, and the girls in my diary class, I keep a notebook. Lately things have been missing around my house. I'm in the process of evicting Andre, a young computer programmer-turned crack dealer from an apartment I own and Andre knows my address. Last night I saw Sammy Mendoza creeping out from my garage carrying with him some power tools. Sammy worked for me 'til he got sick. For weeks I've been giving him money, and when I saw him I thought he'd come back on the job, with his tools, 'til I realized the tools he was carrying were mine. And now it turns out everything's missing: the tools, the bike, a leather bag, the mail.

This morning I wrote in my notebook *The essence of rape is confusion*. Yesterday I found my sleep mask lying at the bottom of the concrete step outside my front gate. The mask was smeared with shit and I couldn't tell if it was animal or human. Could it be Andre? In her notebooks, Kathy writes: *Tales of the City ... chronicles of blood chronicles of shit everything must come out of the body ...*

In the dream I had last night I was at a police station being raped by Andre's brother. I stopped struggling after a while, relaxed into it. And then, pleasure. I remember thinking, anyone who has an orifice that can be pleasurably penetrated may potentially be raped. The essence of rape is confusion. The unconscious is also an orifice.

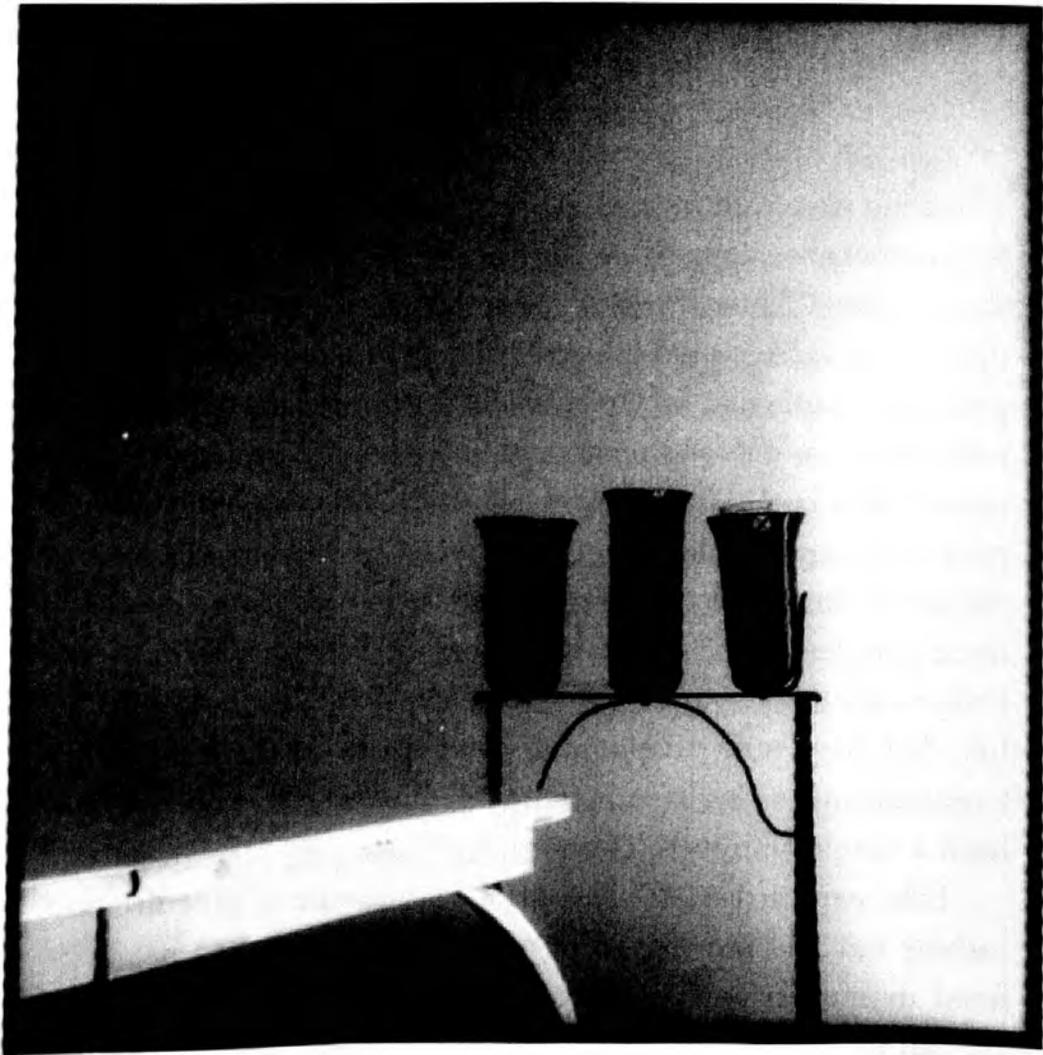
For weeks I've been carrying around Acker's notebooks, and now her dreams are getting mixed up with mine.

(2001)

Cast Away

There is a storefront in my L.A. neighborhood I like a lot, on 7th Street and Lake, along the north side of MacArthur Park. The sign above it says "Flores Envios Express—Seguro Rapido." It's one of those overseas large-parcel shipping places that proliferate in immigrant neighborhoods, where residents from soft-cash countries can send the cheap TVs and microwaves they buy here to relatives and friends back home. It is an essential service, because most of these people are stranded here, undocumented, and could not re-enter the US if they tried traveling home. There used to be dozens of these parcel-shipping places with signs in Polish, Ukrainian and Russian on the Lower East Side of New York City in the 1970s, but they have now disappeared—perhaps because of the fall of Communism, or perhaps because Manhattan has since declared itself a zone off-limits to the poor.

Like many artists, I've become a connoisseur of gentrification, cashing out and moving on from one low-rent ghetto neighborhood to another as things begin to turn. But Los Angeles is big enough to accommodate what was once a vision of urbanity here in downtown Westlake. Gentrification is sorely undercapitalized. There is no single large developer. And so there's flux, without a wholesale flushing out of former residents. Things change piecemeal, of their own accord. A 99-cent store operates beneath the old



marquee of former Westlake Theater on the east side of the park ... it is an architectural slow-dissolve.

Flores Express is squeezed between another 99-cent store and one of those first halting harbingers of gentrification: an ethnic art gallery-cum-coffee bar run by a sophisticated Guatemalan woman. The place is full of primitive armoires and straight-backed blue and yellow wooden chairs and tables. The art is mostly Grandma Moses-of-the-Guatemalan Highlands figuration, though there's also a rotating exhibition of "contemporary" paintings made by second-generation immigrants: blocks of color striving towards some kind of modernist *expressiveness*. I wonder if the owner is sophisticated enough to know just how peripheral these objects are to anything that might be read as actual art in the contemporary art world.

I remember several years ago, in one of the high-profile graduate art programs where these lines are drawn, the program's sole Chicana student fleeing the seminar room in tears when her advisor sneered, "Your photographs are sooo sentimental. We're making art, not Hallmark Greeting Cards, here." The work in question was a photo of the artist's daughter who she'd left behind in Texas to attend the graduate program here. The child was bathed like a tiny angel in a radiant bubble of southwestern light. Days later she returned indebted and defeated to her border town in Texas, it never having dawned on her that *anything* is permissible in the contemporary art world so long as it is pedigreed, substantiated, referentialized. *She could have said* her photos were a performative restaging of the works of Walker Evans, recast in opposition to the appropriationist croppings of Levine from a feminine-interiority. *She could have said* that she'd been reading Gaston Bachelard, the French mailman who became the Father of Phenomenology; all that cozy stuff he wrote about dreaming underneath his featherbed in winter when the snow's piled up outside. You want sentiment? Bachelard's the Bambi of French theory. Etcetera.

The neighborhood around MacArthur Park is variously known as "Westlake Village" and "Mid Wilshire" and most notoriously as "Pico Rivera," home of the Rampart Division Detective Bureau hit squad. Developed in the early 1920s, Westlake is a fantasy of urban splendor. It was the city's first attempt to simulate the northeastern city neighborhoods its residents had left behind. Hotels dripping with Egyptian gargoyles and magnificent apartment buildings with once door-manned entrance awnings line the park. Westlake now has one of the largest Central American populations in the world, and on weekend afternoons it's Spanish everywhere, with fruit stands and balloon men selling wind-up drumming monkeys and flavored ice-shaving vendors, and you might as well be in Tijuana's Central Park.

Flores Express is not the only packaging express storefront near the park. There must be hundreds; it's a Westlake business rivaled only by the 99-cent stores, drugs, and fake IDs. But Flores is the only one that has a permanent art display. In the plate glass window there are a dozen photos of family groups posed behind large cardboard cartons that have made it into their hands in the back alleys of Tegucigalpa or the Guatemalan highlands. The locations are handwritten at the bottom of the pictures: "Xecul Totonigapan, Calle 15, Guatemala City." There is a faded color xerox of a Mayan couple in traditional woven clothing standing placidly beside a carton in the snow. A young woman in a striped nylon dress poses behind Carton #0177 in a pleasant tree-lined alley in El Salvador. On the outskirts of Lake Achteitlan, a family poses with their carton in what seems to be a beer hall. The woman wears traditional Mayan dress; her husband sports a cowboy hat and a bandana while their son is dressed in sandals, a T-shirt and jeans. Sometimes the vehicle that brought the parcel to them appears within the frame. Most often it's a panel truck or pick-up, though in the photo taken in the mountains, it's a burro and a cart.

It takes 4 weeks and \$145 to send a 22 x 22 x 22" carton to the remotest parts of Guatemala and Honduras. Pedro Marino was once a government economist in San Salvador. Now he's the manager of this storefront business in LA. Marino says you can fit a lot of stuff into a carton of this size: shoes, TVs, VCRs, clothes, food and sometimes guns, although he says the guns seem like a waste of time because they're cheaper down in Salvador. For their \$145 fee, Flores will pick the carton up at your LA address and load it on a container ship at the harbor in San Pedro. From there it goes to Acoujutla, Salvador's main port. The trip takes about eight days, then the boat is met by an associate who clears the packages through customs. From there, it's loaded on a panel truck and driven to its destination escorted by two security guards. Recruitment for this job is very democratic: the security guards are a mix of ex-guerrilla army members and ex-military police. Sometimes after the rain and hurricanes, the boxes are hauled to rural destinations by burros who can walk beside the rutted roads.

My heart beats faster when I see these photos. They are what art should be: a document of amazing journeys. The photos are advertisements for a Fed-Ex system built of string and paper clips and burros. Tangentially, they suggest the persistence of traditional cultures, showing us that time and space hang on no matter how much we feel they've disappeared. The images are documents, making no conceptual claims beyond depicting noteworthy events. I think of the photos of Weegee and James Van Der Zee and the earthwork projects of the 1970s, in which the act of documenting difficult, expensive excavations became the work itself. There is no particular "artistry" to these images: they are taken to exist as proof.

Decades later, the urge to document the natural world returns. Joel Tauber, a young L.A. artist, spends weekends burying himself in desert sand and covering himself in mountain bramble. Tauber went to college in the 1990s, and he wants to find out for himself

if what they say at school is true: has "nature" wholly disappeared? Through these projects, Tauber finds that nature makes its presence felt, when the sun goes down and you're buried naked under bramble at 6000'. He wonders: is this experience qualitatively different than those chronicled a century ago by naturalists like John Muir? There is a ghostly presence in the videos and photographs Tauber takes of these experiments. Unfiltered and un-Photoshopped, it's nature *brut*.

I think Marino is a genius for commissioning these photographs. Like Tauber, he is documenting the persistence of impediments to a weightless transience, erected by the natural world. But when I finally summon up the nerve to ask if I can write about him for *Artext*, it turns out I am wrong. The snapshots aren't his idea. Like the ears of vanquished warriors presented by his armies to the king in medieval wars, the photos are "commissioned" by his customers. They are taken by the driver as a proof that the carton has successfully reached its destination. Because in many of these places, the recipients don't have access to a phone.

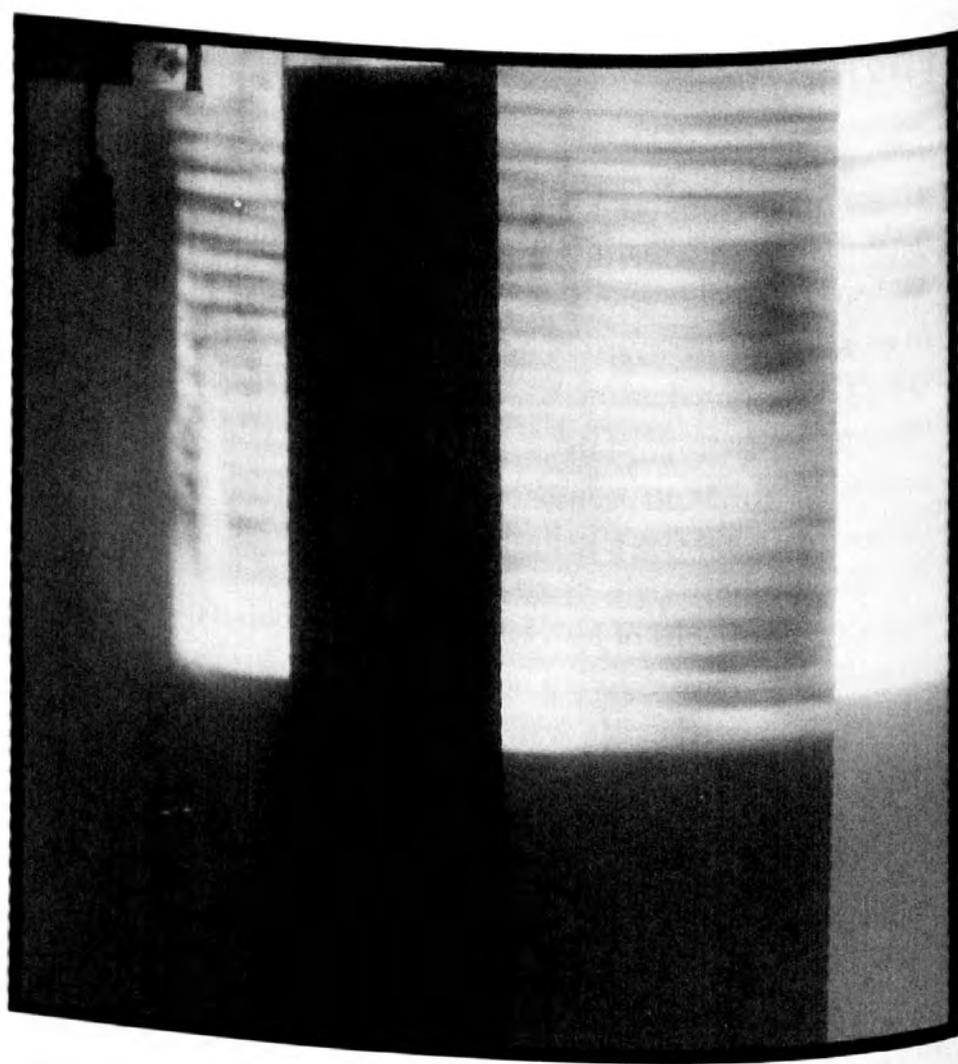
(2001)

Dropoff

In the empty time that used to be my life, I would drive around and I would see things. A skinny kid playing speed-metal guitar in his parent's dirt backyard in Fontana, California ... the origin of rock & roll. Boredom makes things seem so allegorical. Events stand out in sharp relief.

My friend, the artist Jonathan Williams, grew up in Lawrence, Kansas. Lawrence has a college, but it's best known as the town that William Burroughs chose to spend his final years. Lawrence reminded Burroughs of his childhood in St. Louis, with its shady sidewalk trees, kids running up and down the streets, people sitting out on porches. It was a place of dreams already twice removed. I knew Williams when he was working as a muralist for Richard Haas and moonlighting as a union sign-painter in New York. His real work was as an abstract painter. And then 8 years ago he moved to LA.

Knowing very little about art, I was terrified each time I viewed the paintings in his studio. He was, I guessed, a very *good* abstract painter, but still ... looking at these fields of color meeting and diverging, feathering out across the frame, I couldn't really tell which ones were "good" or "not-so-good." Because there were no outside referents through which to view the work, they all seemed pretty much the same.



Two years ago, Williams stopped making abstract paintings and shifted his work entirely onto a computer. The images he makes seem oddly “photographic,” yet they don’t originate with photographs. Mostly architectural, his pictures posit an imaginary landscape that is rendered strange by virtue of its unlocatable familiarity. Every detail in these pictures—a paint-peeled windowsill, a paneled door—reminds you of a thing you think you’ve seen. Except the objects don’t exist. They are what Lawrence was to Burroughs’ St. Louis—composites filtered through a memory-bank, which in this case is an architectural computer program known as NURBS. NURBS (Non-Uniform Rational B-Splines) enables Williams to sample rendered bits of architectural detail into composite images that feel more real than any *particular* door or windowsill in the world. The objects are quintessences of what we *think* these things should be.

Williams became aware of this perceptual anomaly while working as a Warner Bros. scenic painter. Within the scenic painting trade, painters are asked to paint a “tree” or “fireplace” without any visual references. The mark of a successful “scenic” tree is that it looks like *Every Tree ...* an amalgam of what we think a tree should be. This sounds like something that the other Williams, William Carlos, said about the “particular” and the “general,” when he insisted there were “no ideas but *in things*.” The archetypes of “windowsills” and “trees” in scenic painting are something like what happens when a poet, speaking in a personal tone of voice, uses the authority of the poem to make it large.

There is a picture of his I like a lot. *Dropoff Decay* (2001) depicts the white clapboard siding of a house. The horizontal clapboard rows are interrupted by a single window. It is a cheap replacement window, aluminum, double hung, but the house appears to be quite old and possibly abandoned. There’s a graffiti tag-line on the clapboard and the window’s edged with wooden

trim, from which the gray paint is peeling. Someone's left the window open. Oddly, a windowsill protrudes from the outside of the building. The house seems to have been photographed slightly on an angle. Sunlight strikes the surface of the window gently from the south, creating an amazing and yet plausible *trompe l'oeil*. Looking through the glass we see the outlines of the room's interior partially obscured by the reflection of what lies across the street: a pair of high-rise residential towers spouting from the sand. It's as if a Solano Canyon bungalow had been transported out to Venice Beach. The picture is at once ideal, nostalgic and impossible.

Every architectural detail in the "painting" has been virtually constructed via NURBS, from the floor lamp in the room to the rolled-up plastic window-shade. The peeling paint which so strikingly resembles all the peeling paint I've ever seen in every dying town from Binghamton to Glendale is not exactly paint: it is a sample of a single fleck of paint that Williams sampled and re-rendered from a lifeguard tower at the beach.

I think the picture maps an idealized displacement. It evokes a somnambulant state particular to LA, with its faint and utterly decontextualized architectural echoes of other times and places. In its construction, *Dropoff Decay* is a theatrical performance of light and shadow. Williams' computer screen becomes a darkened stage on which objects become themselves according to the quality of light cast on them. "Decay," in cinematic lighting jargon, describes the way light weakens as it travels. "Dropoff" describes the ways a beam of light decreases as it radiates outwards from its center.

In Ezekiel 8, the Bible prophesies a time when people sit around alone in darkness, "each man in his room of pictures." This seems much more applicable to Williams' paintings than the Platonic notion of essential archetypes. The archetypes that Williams summons don't exist and never have. Rather, they're an agglomeration of all the things we've ever seen, as they fall apart

and recombine through memory. The entire rural landscape of America becomes subject to this process: the dreary train ride from a southern Adirondack town to Albany along the Hudson River. The dying farms that can't support their owners; the rows of narrow houses lined up along a dozen Front Streets with their tiny yards and woodframe porches. The bored kids circling the tracks on scooters evoke the "idiocy of rural life" that communism sought to overcome a century ago. Their mistake was thinking they could *rationalize* the countryside with collective farms and schools and recreation centers. In America the rural's simply been abandoned, left to die.

In *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, Randall Packer and Ken Jordan describe how a virtual landscape was envisioned by philosophy a hundred years before technology was devised to implement it. Artists of the 19th century looked forward to the scrambled timespace of the virtual as a fantastic place. But now that virtuality is fully realized, something catches. Fragments of what we recall as "place" recur in dreams we half remember. Through his understanding of the "quintessential," Williams uses virtuality as a technological medium of nostalgia. Just as Burroughs discerned the subtext of our language through collage and cut-ups, Williams manipulates the architectural archetype toward a poetic overflow of meaning.

Last spring, members of Bucharest's young Rostopasca Group were in New York to show their work at the Romanian Cultural Service Center. I met them there by chance: I'd gone uptown to buy a copy of *Ten Steps Closer to Romania*, a book the Cultural Services department produced to counteract the negative stereotypes held by foreigners about their country. Translated by Romanians with the most halting grasp of English, the book does little to fulfill its mission. Nationalist rants against the Hungarian

Magyars pose as “history,” and the elimination of 350,000 Jews during WW2 is written off as regrettable “discrimination.” The book, of course, was unobtainable. The Cultural Service Center had run out of its two dozen copies and had no idea when these would be replaced. There were, they said, two thousand copies of this English-language book in Bucharest, but shipping them—or even one—seemed insurmountably difficult. I could xerox the reference copy if I wished, but then the library didn’t have a photocopier.

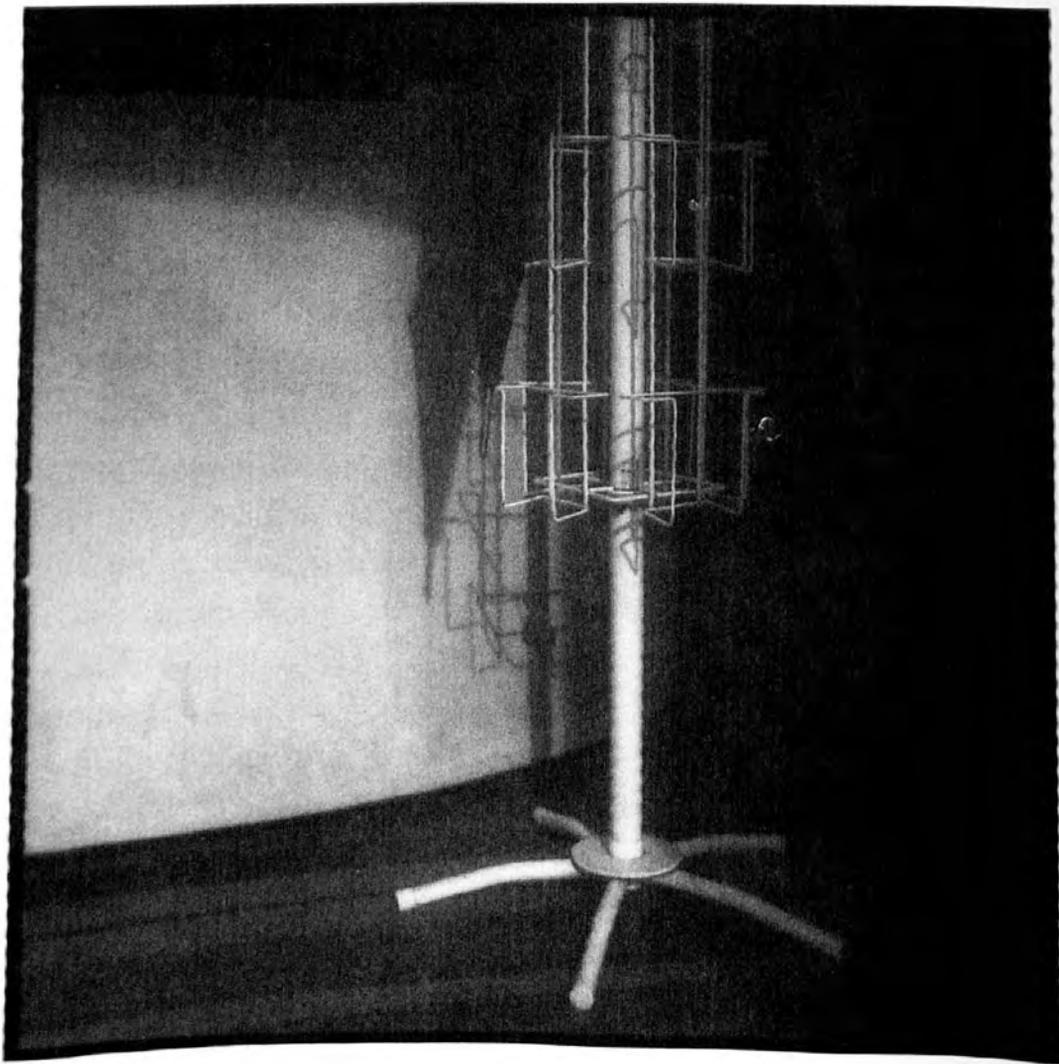
Still, I didn’t waste the trip, because there was Rostopasca: six artists in their twenties who were totally unlike the Cultural Service workers. Alert, well-dressed and English speaking, they were eager to disassociate themselves from any kind of national identity. They were *international* artists—or at least, European. They found the proliferation of art about the recent Balkan Wars from the former-Yugoslavia “regrettable” and “self-defeating.” Becoming international means to forget the past and move forwards to the future. But then, their show was a reprise of some of the US art world’s greatest hits of the past twenty years. There was a little bit of CoLab and the Times Square Show; a little bit of Dennis Oppenheim; a great deal of Mike Kelley. Alina Ionescu showed me a funny video she’d made about the moral crisis of her generation: extreme bikini waxing. It was a little like the garish cibachromes of teenage bedrooms made by would-be Valley Girls of Mexico City. Yet beneath its blatant posturing and imitation, there was something there about the Rostopasca work I found incredibly compelling.

Attempting to be “postmodern” in the entirely pre-modernist environment that is Bucharest, Rostopasca artist Nicolae Comanescue writes in one collage:

Everything started last year in Vevey when I walked throughout a passage full of graffiti. On the walls somebody displayed some big photographs. I looked consciously instinctively after the text associated with the graffiti on the walls. I think that in reality there was no

connection between them ... The subject is nothingness. Or to be more precise, that moment in life when time stops to flow as we are used to. When any evolution disappears. Moments that, if they really exist, it means we have been told so many fucking stories and we did believe them all.

There is something just so great about this text, which does not make sense. Partly, I guess, it's the exuberance of *Becoming International* against all odds. The perpetual jetlag experienced when living in a context that is hard and soft. Images of last year's Documenta fill your head but you are walking in a cloud of 19th century coal dust. In Romania 200,000 stray dogs roam the capital and it's impossible to send a package. Consciously or not, Rostopasca's work captures the violent effects of conflicting space and time ... a conflict that, in Jonathan William's work, has migrated into the virtual bodies of computers.



(2001)

Panda Porn

It is a nondescript day, all emptiness and breathless heat, and I'm driving through Fontana, east along the 10. There are a lot of billboards. *Smelly Credit? Psst I'm at Flesh*. The Spearmint Rhino girl gazes straight ahead, all ivory and pink and I'm wondering how her face achieves its state of pornographic blankness. Unlike the blankness of contemporary art, which references the futility of gesture, her blankness is a verb and the viewer its direct object. Her blankness is an invitation to ejaculate against the surface of her face. Her face says, *Come all over me*. Beyond the Spearmint Rhino girl there is another billboard with a picture of a giant panda. *Fine China*. The panda glances at me shyly. *Escape to the San Diego Zoo*. She is trying to conceal her round and fluffy body behind a single bamboo stalk, a modest gesture that's as futile and endearing as the Girl in the Skintight Sweater wondering why everyone is staring at her breasts. It's retro Panda Porn. She seems to be the last one of her species, or nearly.

I remember having seen her once three year ago when I visited the San Diego Zoo. Jeigh, the New Age Dom who I was dating, chose this outing as a special treat. For five days he'd been ejaculating against the surface of my face in a Mexican hotel and this visit to the Zoo would be a culminating celebration of my new-found feminine identity. Everybody knows that girls love pandas.

They're fluffy and adorable even when they are incarcerated in zoos. And what is the Adorable, if not an invocation against everything that it is not? The ribbons and bows, the yellows and pinks, the tendrils of ivy in little clay pots, the desire to be cocooned within in a cloud of prettiness, all reek of death and decay.

I remember this trip to the Zoo as a vision of department-store hell. The San Diego Zoo is a series of money-extraction points done up as "kiosks," cleverly linked by simulated habitat "exhibits" through which the movement of crowds is masterfully planned and controlled. All points lead to the pandas, the money shot, the Zoo's star attraction.

At the time Jeigh and I visited there were just two: the captive-raised female, Bai-Yun, and Shi-Shi, a male born in China's remote Sichuan Province. As panda lore has it, Shi-Shi was mortally wounded in a territorial fight with another male panda, found by a peasant, and rescued by foresters who "brought the dying panda to China's Wolong Giant Panda Research Center ... where he was literally stitched back together." (*ZooNooz*) Shi-Shi was then shipped to America. On the verge of extinction, with less than 1,000 pandas left in the wild, everyone waited for Bai-Yun and Shi-Shi to mate. Sassy Bai-Yun did her best. She exhibited all the right panda-mating behavior, but Shi-Shi rejected her. He was an asocial panda, perhaps homosexual. Did Bai-Yun blame herself? Despite her desire to mate, she could not overcome Shi-Shi's negativity. Finally after three years, veterinary technology intervened. Vials of sperm were obtained from a reluctant Shi-Shi—*ZooNooz* gives no details of how this was done—but after several attempts, Bai-Yun became pregnant and Hua-Mei was born. Now an array of webcams broadcasts Hua-Mei's every move, 24/7, live, over the web.

Landscaped and curved to give the illusion of space, all the Zoo's walkways converge at the Pacific Bell Panda Research Station, which is Hua-Mei's home. Spectators approach the Station on a long

concrete ramp that slopes downwards, a bit like an abattoir, elaborately guarded by rails. The crowd moves slowly but steadily. Inside the Station, Jeigh and I stepped onto a moving floor that took us from one end of a Plexiglas wall to another. It lasted about 90 seconds, but this was the Panda-View. Sure enough, Hua-Mei and her mother were there. *Ohhh, look at the pandas*, I dutifully squealed. Did the 25 minutes we'd spent to achieve it increase the view's value? I remembered being conveyed on a belt with a crowd past a milky-white statue called the *Pieta* at the New York World's Fair, as a child. The installation was a magnificent metaphor for the public's relation to what the culture called "art."

Four decades later the San Diego Zoo's manipulation of spectators, and what it tells about our relation to the disappearance of nature, is much more complex. I wanted to investigate further. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to compare San Diego's "soft" curatorial strategies with the unreconstructed, 19th century menagerie at Paris' Jardin des Plantes?

At Jardin des Plantes, no effort is made to place the animals in simulated "natural habitats." It is a *zoo*, a place where people come to look at the animals. It's not very different from France's first zoo, the Cabinet of King Charles. Built in the mid-18th century, the Cabinet was a collection of strange zoological specimens brought back from the colonies and wild lands beyond. Here, they were catalogued by the Comte de Buffon. In his *Illustrated History and Description of the Animals* (1755-1767), the great naturalist writes: "The stupidest man is able to guide the most spiritual of animals ... man is a being of reason; animal is a being without reason."

And yet a trip to the Jardin des Plantes is always a pleasure. Its only concessions are postcards and ice cream. Within just a few acres of shaggy chestnut trees, sidewalks, enclosures and green wooden benches, the Jardin fulfills Frederick Law Olmsted's utopian vision of what parks should be: a place where city dwellers might

go to find spiritual refreshment. But San Diego's not really a city, and its zoo offers no spiritual refreshment.

I called public relations associate Christine Brennan at the Zoo's marketing office to pitch these ideas. Was there someone with whom I could discuss them? "We don't like comparisons with other zoos," she replied. Finally, she asked me to fax her a list of my questions.

"Dear Christine," I wrote. "I'm interested in exploring the ways different zoos and animal preserves are designed and constructed. Can zoos be read as public spaces, as architecture? In what ways do they reflect the customs and values of the cities they're built in?" She sent back a voicemail: "I think your topic's too vague. We need to know *exactly what you're looking for*, before someone can talk to you." Since I hardly knew this myself, I got in the car and went down to the Zoo. My old friend Ray Johansson came along for the drive.

When panda Bai-Yun was finally successfully inseminated in 1998, the birth of her baby Hua-Mei was big news. Adult females usually only give birth once in a lifetime. Hua-Mei's birth was a symbol of hope. The fifth captive panda born in America, her name means "splendid-beautiful" in Chinese. As China's panda-habitats are daily destroyed by the very foresters who rescued Shi-Shi, there is little chance the species will continue to live in the wild. But Bai-Yun turned out to be such a great mother! She was the ultimate mammal, holding the cub "nearly continuously on her ample front during the first two weeks, usually cuddled and warmed by her massive arms." (*ZooNooz*)

Ray and I counted 42 different types of panda-merchandise at the Zoo's dozens of outlets, most of it featuring Mother and Child. There were panda bibs and placemats, panda spoons, panda shoelaces, panda socks, panda sweatshirts, T-shirts and puzzles. Panda chocolate, panda olive oil, panda salad dressing, a panda

cookie cutter. A panda Christmas tree ornament, a night-light, a snow-globe. Refrigerator magnets. Panda shot glasses and shooters. Panda masks, panda kites, panda liquid soap dispensers. A panda switchplate, a panda-stamped mousepad. Ray and I settled for the Panda Topper Slipper, which was a plastic take-out container of Coke decorated with pandas, for \$8.95.

Like most institutions, the San Diego Zoo relies on corporate sponsorship. Among the logos displayed alongside pictures of pandas were Pacific Bell, Coca-Cola. Kodak, Delta Airlines, Isee, Crystal Geyser. Strangely, McDonald's was missing. After all, the simulated rain-forest environment at the zoo is named for the Kroc Family, who own most of McDonald's. (In New Zealand, the branding of the McDonald's Rainforest at the Auckland Zoo is unabashedly corporate.)

Still, this is rather ironic, because, as Susanna B. Hecht, Professor of Latin American Studies at UCLA points out:

"The optimistic market forecasts and real growth for the demand for cutter beef ... which McDonald's, as the world's largest consumer and promoter of beef products, has stimulated, are an essential part of the large-scale deforestation and its biotic and social consequences in Latin America."

The Krocs don't see it this way. As the curatorial text displayed in the Kroc Family Rainforest argues:

"Will tropical rainforests be gone by the year 2050? Yes, as people demand more timber, firewood, cattle and farmland ..."

Like contemporary art, corporate linguistics seek to eliminate the dreary mechanics of cause and effect. *Shit happens. People demand.*

Clearly the San Diego Zoo's most prominent message (beyond its Saturday mall-crawl experiential gestalt) is that there will be no more wild. Corporations maintain animals because they are cute and genetically useful. "Tapirs have been on earth for 20 million

years but most are gone now, as people destroy their habitats," the Kroc text coyly explains. This is how Buffon described a tapir upon seeing one for the first time:

"The tapir is the size of a little cow but without horns and a tail: it has short legs, and its body arcs just like a pig's. It wears a deer's livery when young, and the later on, a uniform of dark brown. It has a big long head; with a trunk like a rhinoceros, ten incisors and ten molars in each jaw, features that distinguish it entirely from the cow. The tapir is a dark and sad animal..."

Ray and I drove home on the 5 through a very long dusk. He told me how he and his mother had traveled to El Rosario, Mexico to see the migrating butterflies six weeks before she died. It was dusty, Ray said, and there were guys driving pick-ups who charged people a couple of bucks to go up a hill where the butterflies mated. But then when you got there, there were millions of butterflies, everywhere. The ground was covered with butterfly corpses. It wasn't beautiful like they had thought, but still, it was something. And then he told me how he'd been in the room when she died.

It got dark around Irvine, and for the first time all day we felt a slight kind of openness. Escape is vestigial, just like the wild.

(2001)

Picturing the Period

On December 1, 1961—about a year before the American first breakout of pop art with Sidney Janis' Neo-Realist show in New York—the artist Claes Oldenberg opened a storefront on the lower east side. Intended to be a venue for Oldenberg's work, the store also became it.

*The whole store an apotheosis! Actually make a store!
14th st or 6 ave
butchershop etc*

—he wrote earlier that year in his notebook. The store was filled with plaster replicas of all the things people could buy in real stores in the neighborhood: slices of cake, wristwatches, cigarettes, underwear, calendars, shoes, cans of sardines. Everything was on sale and at rock-bottom prices! \$99.95, \$49.95, \$9.95. All the paraphernalia attached to running a store would be part of the project: the receipts and the rent bills, the budget, the signage, promotional flyers. "The store," he wrote excitedly, "is like the Street an environmental (as well as a thematic) form."

Willem de Kooning's *Women* paintings were showing uptown. Even though Jackson Pollock had been dead already for six years, his influence lingered on. Fratricide rules in high art:



you have to kill anyone who is remotely like you. So, of course Oldenberg loathed Jackson Pollock.

“Lately I have begun to understand action painting that old thing in a new vital and peculiar sense—as corny as the scratches on a NY wall and by parodying its corn I have (miracle) come back to its authenticity! I feel as if Pollock is sitting on my shoulder, or rather crouching in my pants!”

Oldenberg then 32, was married to a woman named “Pat.” As his diary tells it, he liked waking up with her. He liked how parts of her body got mixed up with the sounds of the street, the radio songs, the idling cars. Born in Stockholm, Oldenberg uses American words like a foreigner. “My wife’s back ... my wife’s hair ... my wife’s tough tits.”

It’s a very mid-century thing, this having a wife. It makes you more of a guy. You have to be big, because you have to support her. And in a photograph taken in Oldenberg’s store, he is enormous. He is all muscles and eyes, an ox with a buzzcut, wearing nothing but a pair of white overalls. The wives mostly wore girdles and garters. Generally they liked being little, but in the rare instance one of them tried to do something big, she just seemed ridiculous, ineffectual, silly. It was a very sexual time. There was also something about bodies and cities. Oldenberg hated the Beats. He found them too sentimental, and therefore unable to grasp the grinding mechanics of cities.

In the mid-century, “What is art?” seemed like a vital and interesting question. Oldenberg saw the store as a way out of this conundrum. “Art—that’s the notion I’ve got to get rid of. Assuming I wanted to create something, what would that thing be? Just a thing, an object. Art would not enter into it.”

As a European, Oldenberg considered himself immune to the co-optive force of consumerism. He knew that yesterday’s rebellion is today’s hot commodity. “The bourgeois scheme is that they

wish to be disturbed from time to time, they like that, but then they envelop you, and that little bit is over, and they are ready for the next." If art is instant commodity, why not take the most vulgar, contemptible route, and turn yourself into a shopkeeper?

It is so difficult viewing this time from a distance. To imagine the first dawn of consumerism, before it became wholly crepuscular. To imagine people's excitement with the world of newly available *things*—TVs, home appliances, stereos, hair-dryers, electrical toothbrushes. A black and white photo of the street taken from inside Oldenberg's store puts this time in perspective. It is a wet December day. The sidewalk's flecked lightly with trash. There is no traffic except for two cars parked on the street. A skinny Jewish man is caught striding by, hands shoved deep in his pockets. The man wears baggy pants, a cheap Macintosh raincoat and a fedora. You can tell that it's cold.

The world in 1961 was a very dreary place and its inhabitants were not reconstructed. They had bad teeth and when these fell out, they wore dentures. They dyed their hair at home with crappy powders and peroxide, and in the summer they sweated. They lived in cold-water flats with bathtubs in kitchens. Their childhood memories weren't based on television. When the glittering world of *things*—fanciful electric gadgets and brightly colored cereal packs—was unleashed on the populace (which had not yet been redefined as a series of markets) they were hit like a cargo cult. Blunt pygmies, examining a plastic toy with wonder. For ten or twenty years consciousness lagged way behind the promise of products.

While old-school art critics were inclined to read pop art as an indictment of the "spiritual nakedness" of standardized products, Oldenberg and friends were completely enchanted. "I have got love all mixed up with art," Oldenberg wrote about his store. "I have got my sentiments for the world all mixed up with art. I am a disaster as an artist because I cant leave the world alone."

Echoing the dadaists, who he also (naturally) hated, Oldenberg wrote: "I wish all my actions to be exemplary."

Of course, the Pop Artists eventually became as involved with the ethos of "signature" and "originality" as the AbEx and action painters they despised. "Signature" was simply transposed from a mythic personal expressiveness to the patenting of concepts. The "big" artists of that time were the ones putting forward "big" ideas. The Pop Artists still believed in ideas. It's no coincidence Oldenberg constantly wrote manifestoes. Others, like Jasper Johns, produced works so obdurately emblematic they effectively became manifestoes.

Still, there was this yearning in the culture for an art spiritual enough to transcend the individualist limits of "originality." Though published in the mid-1950s, *The Recognitions*, William Gaddis' massive, brilliantly opaque novel about high art and forgery, continued to circulate in New York during Oldenberg's time. In it, Wyatt Gwynn, the son of a minister, moves to Paris intending to become an artist. He takes a job restoring old Flemish paintings, and soon abandons his "own" work in favor of copying obscure works by minor masters. In this, he finds a much greater pleasure. "Every week or so he would begin something original ... but he abandoned it. Still, the copies continued to perfection, that perfection to which only counterfeit can attain, reproducing every aspect of inadequacy, every blemish on Perfection in the original ... One by one, they reached completion unbroken by any blemish of originality," Gaddis writes.

Tempted by an unethical dealer who wants him to go into business, Wyatt finds that there's a short, sideways step from copying to inventing new "originals." While his "own" painting languishes, Wyatt reinvents himself as Hans Memling, an obscure German painter of the Flemish period. Memling's paintings sell well, and Wyatt is outraged when the gallery licenses reproductions.

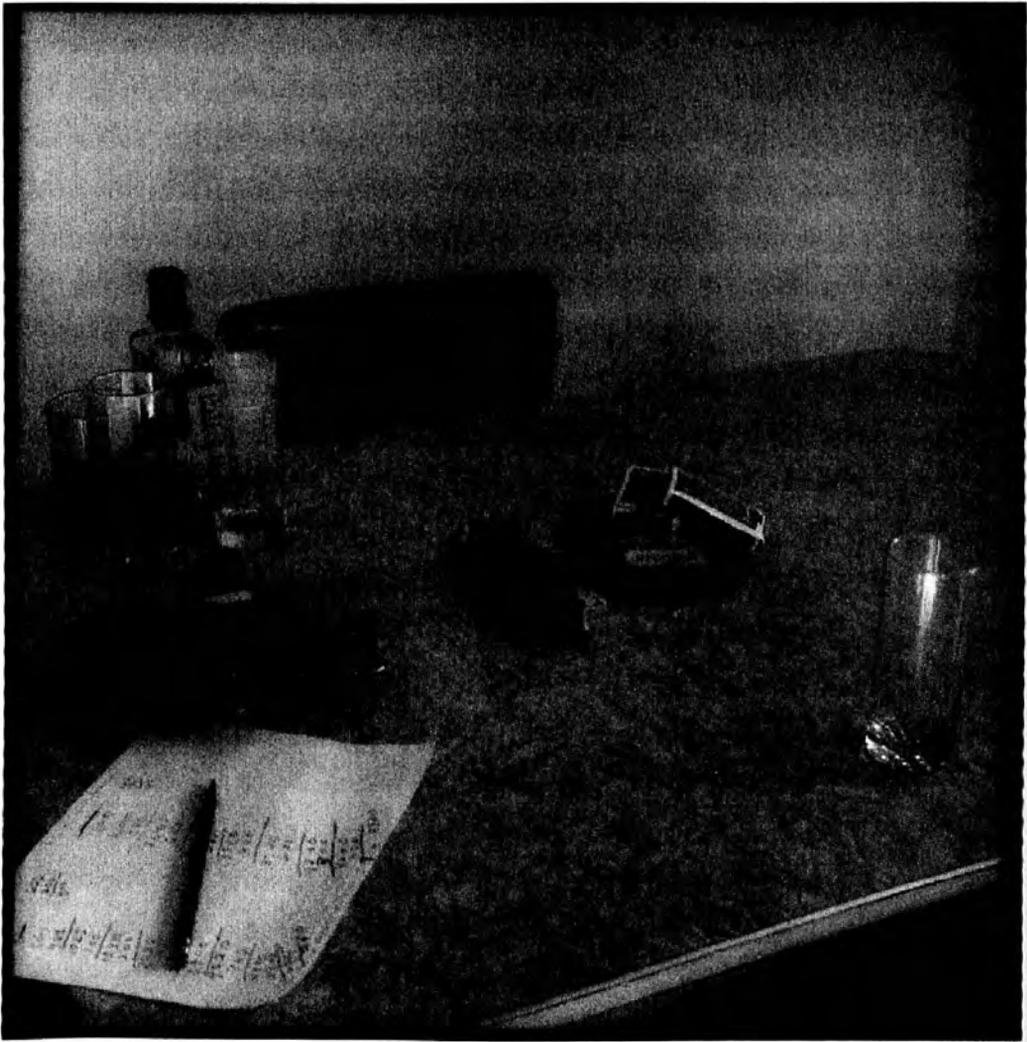
"They have no right ... These reproductions, these cheap fakes cheapen the whole." Through his forgeries, Wyatt attains the alien, spiritual worldview of the Flemish painters. He understands that their "lack" of perspective was in fact multiplicity. "Do you know why [Flemish painting] has its own character? Because they found God everywhere. There was nothing God did not watch over ... God did not relax for an instant then, and neither could the painter."

Gaddis relentlessly pursues the notion of counterfeit as a conceit that undermines the modernist premise of "originality." This sort of challenge to modernism was one of the period's great romances. But *The Recognitions* is equally about color and the texture of life in New York during the 1950s. Everything's brown. Windows stick, and clothing smells of damp wool. Shopgirls come home to their rooms and read Hollywood fan magazines, while intellectuals trade callow ideas in enormous apartments. Gaddis' scorn for the affects of mid-century life in New York was unsparing. Meanwhile, Jack Kerouac, that great sentimentalist, records one of his poems about watching the flapping of pigeons around Cooper Square. You hear in his voice the sated elation of one of those long spring afternoons that stretches out into the evening 'til words finally fail him. *I just wanna be sincere*, he ends with a mumble, and his baritone voice slumps like a shoulder. The cadence feels weirdly a part of that time. It could be picked up by anyone, tossed around like a ball. In *Sadness at Leaving*, an espionage romance set during that period, Erje Ayden, a friend of various New York school artists, writes:

Carl lit one of Hubert's Pall Malls and sat on the window ledge. He could see, below in the avenues, the summer falling to pieces into autumn so there could be another spring. Yes, he always suspected that fall was an extension of spring, they both felt the same way. You

were ready to love again, or sail away alone and then come back and have a cup of coffee or something ...

A feeling of limitless time. "Evanescence," Oldenberg wrote, "is not just a theory it is part of me. Come and go. Nothing I do is a theory but is me."



(2001)

Calle Art

There was a time when I was thinking LA might be something like Paris. I was thinking mostly about navigation and sex: how sex can be used to mark terrestrial points like a GPS compass. There was something in this idea about narrative, too.

I was in East Hampton. I'd gone there to work on a book for four months in extreme isolation. It was a book about chance, and all during that time I'd talked on the phone to a guy who called himself "Africa." We met on the phone that September, when he was about to start shooting a film in Namibia. The tall yellowing grass outside my window looked something like Africa, but it was his accent, the sound of his voice that compelled me. It was familiar. Two decades ago, we'd both lived in New Zealand and known the same people, gone to all the same parties.

At that time I was trying to remember New Zealand, which seemed like a good enough reason to start having sex with him on the phone. He called on the radiophone at least once a week. (I didn't know how to reach him.) I made up stories and both of us acted them out. Since both of us normally lived in Los Angeles, the city became our cognitive link. He lived in a Malibu compound. I lived in a treehouse northeast of downtown. The thirty miles between those two points provided locations where our ongoing trysts could unfold.

I was wondering, *How can I hold your attention?* I couldn't see him or touch him. Holding someone's attention is a very sexual thing. I kept looking for places that would mentally hook him. Places he might remember, places that triggered more nuanced stories than the generic pornography we talked on the phone. A particular booth in the corner of Musso & Frank's; the fake Taj Mahal in the Hollywood Hills built by some English Hindus. The House of Pies parking lot. The entrance gate up the hill on Big Rock Road; the Good Luck Wishing Well in Chinatown outside Hop Louis. A Whitley Terrace condo-rack; a friend's house in Bel-Air. Africa didn't say much and I was trying to locate his taste. What was romantic, what would be tacky?

We make plans to meet when we both return to LA. When I get back after four months alone in the woods, I'm dizzy, disoriented, can't remember how anyone lives here. The sites of our stories become my guide to the city. Which one will he choose for our meeting? I started re-reading *Nadja* by Andre Breton. For Breton and Nadja, Paris becomes a curved grid with melting edges, marked by the places they meet: the taxicab outside the restaurant, Najda's one-star hotel. In January Los Angeles is uniformly soft and golden, and it occurs to me that sex can be a conduit to something else, like madness: a means of fixing points upon an interstitial landscape that would otherwise be markerless; where the question *Who am I?* is best answered by asking *Whom do I haunt?* Imagining our meeting-points gives some shape to the city, but when Africa comes back to Los Angeles, he doesn't return my emails or my calls.

The only thing left of what I imagined is *places*. I rent an office in Hollywood and buy a cheap Russian camera. Walking along the boulevard, coincidences multiply. I go to Musso & Frank's to take a picture and discover that across the street is a store called *Africa Imports*. I walk into a cine-memorabilia shop on Hollywood & Vine, and on the counter *at the very top of the pile*, is a script from *Twelve*

Monkeys, one of Africa's movies. I wonder if what I'm doing is something like the work of Sophie Calle? Or then again, is it stalking?

I remember reading something about a woman who was arrested in a Toronto suburb for sitting outside someone's house every night in her car and *writing her notebook*. Calle's projects always have objects, a purpose wholly outside herself. Investigating others through their traces, Calle herself is invisible, and the work becomes something about the *nature* of traces. Invariably, the subject of Calle's investigations is someone she is not particularly interested in. This is important; it makes the work conceptually clean. Unlike the woman arrested for sitting outside a house in her car, Calle's work is never considered offensive, objectionable. Rather, it has been described as "aloof and purposeful," "deliberate," "mysterious, intelligent" and "well-executed." Calle's work raises fascinating questions about the nature of privacy, identity, control. It triggers a discourse about seduction, secrets, surveillance. Old-fashioned feminists like it because it gives them a chance to "reverse the male gaze." More thoughtful critics, like Amy Gerstler in *Artweek*, find it stimulating and pleurably unsettling because "Calle keeps herself under wraps." Calle does not embarrass us, because she does not address us directly. Therefore, we can assume she is free of any *personal* agenda ... and here the art criticism starts sounding like personals ads, warning prospective dates against "baggage or hidden agendas."

In *Nadja*, When Breton passes the Place Dauphine it reminds him of "the sex of a woman." This, we assume, is a positive thing: mysterious, rhapsodic, enticing. The Place Dauphine *invites* you to enter it. It's not invasive, like a cunt writing her diary outside your house in a car.

Photography is, by nature, elusive. Once it's been photographed, the thing that was once *here* is already gone. Writing is too much like talking, and no one likes a talking cunt. It's sooo demanding. Presence is never far away from a demand for recognition: do you see me?

To talk or write is to explicitly assert one's presence ... something we are relieved Calle, as absent-investigator, doesn't do.

Disappearance never struck me as a very interesting subject. It's always so much harder to appear. In a film I made called *How To Shoot A Crime*, two dominatrixes talk to an interviewer about the "electric space" of killing. The year is 1987 and the interviews are held in a Front Street loft in New York City. The neighborhood, at that moment, is being reinvented as the South Street Seaport, a simulationist mall. Meanwhile a police videographer named Johnny Santiago travels the city to document crime scenes. His videotapes show anonymous and often decomposing corpses strewn around the city's interstitial zones: a railway yard, a parking lot, a rooftop. These crime scenes are to New York what Breton's Marche aux Puces and Place Dauphine were to early 20th century Paris: a means of placing a mark. Halfway through the video, one of the dominatrixes challenges the interviewer's voyeuristic interest in S/m. "Bullshit, boy, you have to be in here with me," she says. "I'm out here alone." "I'm here." "No ... It's one thing to trust these experiences up against things that you share—but we're not going back and forth, this is not a conversation." "That's why I have a camera. I'm here." "No, we need your dick out here. This is half a conversation."

Circling around the interviewer's own desire to disappear through his interviews, the film chronicles the larger disappearance of the neighborhood during New York's first massive wave of gentrification. The crime scene becomes the only place where time stops. The barricades, the cameras, become an urban ritual mourning. "When a death occurs," the interviewer concludes, "there must be a reason. We just have to find a reason."

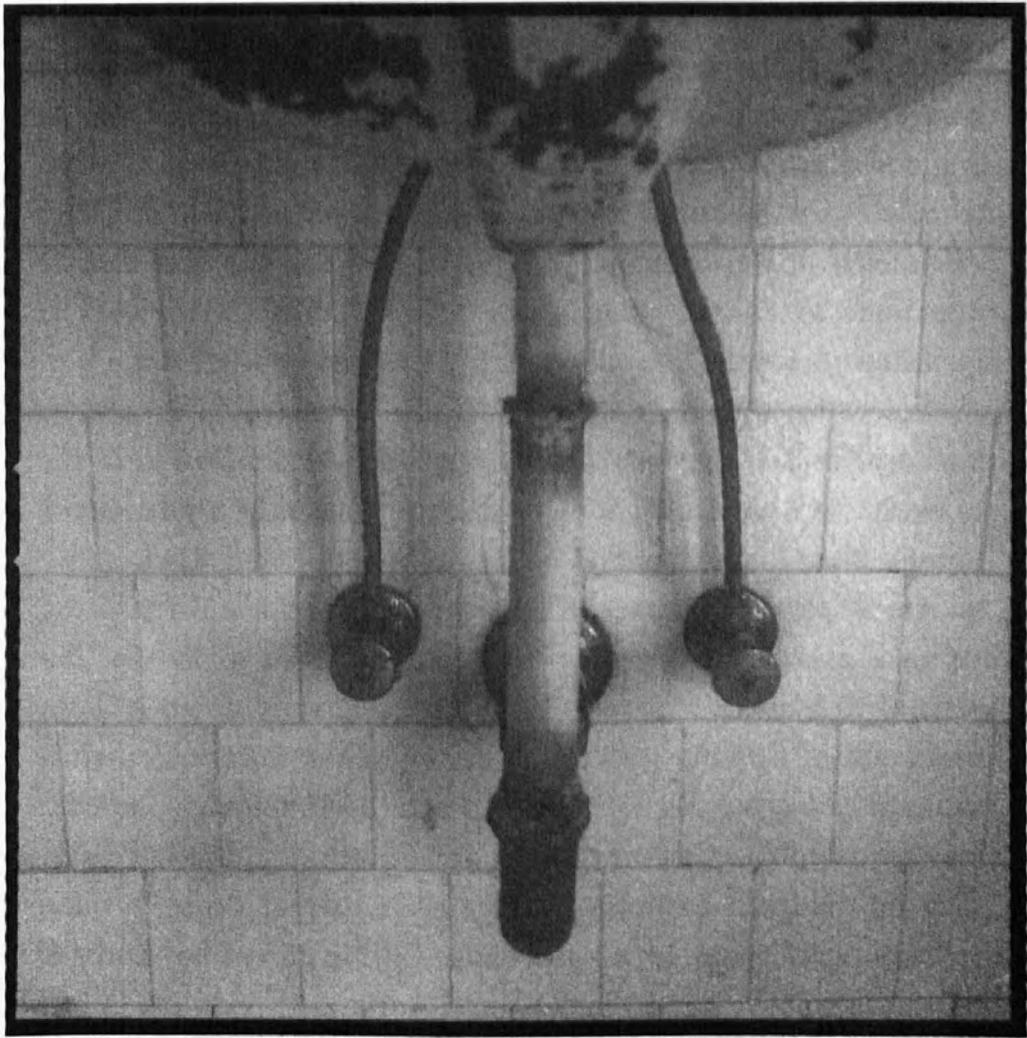
Calle's work opposes this finding-of-reasons. There isn't any particular *reason* Calle follows Henri B. in *Suite Venitienne* (1983), much less any meaning. She herself finds it "banal" and is affected only by B's absence when she finally stops. There isn't any reason

why she chooses to construct a detailed portrait of the life of Pierre D. in *L'Homme au Carnet* (1983), other than that she found his address book. Everything circles on absence. It's an effect she pushes more consciously later in pieces like *Color Blind* and *Ghosts* (1991). In these works, shapes, colors, and the emotional affects of well-known artworks are described in their absence. These written recollections are displayed besides reproductions of the artworks themselves. Calle's projects are all conceived within rigorous game plans based upon chance. Perhaps the most startling, original aspect of Calle's work is that, unlike the high modernists, she has no belief that "chance" reveals hidden meanings through secret codes. Whereas Burroughs and Gysin saw cut-ups and chance operations as a means of cracking reality's code, Calle's work is much less romantic. She allows empty space to be what it is.

Except for the anger vented on Calle by Pierre D. in a letter published in *Libé*, her work elicits very little condemnation in the art world. In her calculated, witty absence, Calle is as mysterious as Breton's Place Dauphine. She is no smelly cunt. She is flawless.

Anne Sprinkle became well known in the art world for giving audience members a speculum and inviting them to look at her uterus. Her friend/competitor Penny Arcade remains dubious about the nature of Sprinkle's success. Creator of the notorious performance *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*, Penny loves talking. She talks directly to audiences all over the world and begs them to talk back. They do, and she answers. During intermissions, Penny invokes audience members to get up and dance with the seven boy and girl strippers who back her up in the show. And usually they do. When the strippers coax them to take off pieces of clothing, they comply with this too.

"Hmm," Arcade surmised. "Now if Annie could get her audience to stick the speculum up themselves, I think she might have something."



(2001)

Featured

1. Face

In *dePictured* (2001), a project commissioned by Art Center College's Williamson Gallery, German architect and media artist Christian Möller exhibits large flat panels of bitwall through which faces of prisoners are magically transmitted through folding electromechanical pixels. Rendered through bitmap graphic technology, the image is analog, permanent. It does not depend upon any live digital feed. *dePictured* is a portable, gallery version of a project Möller's pursued for the past several years: the use of bitmap pictorial matrixes as architectural exterior surfaces. Within this entirely soft technological medium, Möller favors the faces of prisoners and homeless as subjects. He finds their expressions—in contrast to the blank clean lines of the contemporary buildings and highway walls upon which they're installed—to be texturally pleasing and "hard."

"The aim," says Möller, "is to develop a façade system that as an outer skin both fulfills the demands of a building to resist weather conditions, and at the same time functions as a daylight-capable image transmission system." Like human skin, these pixel-matrix surfaces at once protect, project and interact with their surroundings. Three decades ago, holography offered a similar

visual illusion of depth perceived through a flat surface. Like most science fiction writing, the narrative content of early holograms—pictures of flickering candles and rosebushes—clung to an earlier century. But Möller's choice of imagery is audaciously on par with institutional technology. What better counterpoint to the straight, flat lines of contemporary architectural surfaces than the grittiness of human suffering? The surfaces are new. The faces of the prisoners emitted from them, like so much electronic sweat through a pictorial matrix, are haggard and worn.

What makes a face? What makes a face become an image? In a catalogue interview with Art Center curator Stephen Nowlin, Möller explains how he wants the flat architectural ambience to be altered by the "hardness" of the prisoner's expressions and their "piercing eyes." Pixilated images of these prematurely old men radiate from the Frankfurt Schirn Museum's entrance and the City of Karlsruhe's highway walls. *My borrowed misery ...*

Möller tells Nowlin how surprised he was that his two little daughters were "horrified by the fierce-looking man and his size" when he brought one of the renderings home. Criminals, he says, "are often men with very marked facial features." He sees these faces as texture. Never were they intended to evoke surveillance methods or serve as cautionary tales. To depict via a process of *depicturation* ... The prefix *de-*, in this case, seems really operative, as in to *deform*, to *decapitate*, to *deneuter* ... It entails the estrangement of the image from itself, siphoned off and fed back as interactive architectural detail.

In a brilliant conceptual coup, Möller arranged to have the images for the Art Center show rendered into bitmaps *by the prisoners themselves*. It is a fascinating confluence of two institutions. Within the forced-labor system of the Darmstadt State Prison, the prisoners are deployed in depicting themselves, processing the contoured light and shadow of their own anguished faces into

architectural texture. Look, no more messy penal colonies! No more torturous inscription of the sentence of the crime upon the body. The prisoners are becoming-ambient. It is both reward and punishment.

2. Cinema

Everybody's living in the same movie. It's what we want to think. Traveling in Romania in 1998, the James Cameron blockbuster *Titanic* was big news. In the provincial capital of Arad, a stooped and toothless populace wearing Turkish scarves and ancient bowler hats and poly-cotton tracksuits huddled, chain-smoking, at a tram stop underneath a lavish full size *Titanic* poster ... Kate and Leonardo rising in a passionate embrace above the stormy sea. The *Titanic* was the city's only new contemporary thing.

"Do you like Celine Dion?" a young journalist asked me intently. We were sitting on the floor at a party while a bootleg of the song *My Heart Will Go On* quavered from the boombox in this freezing tiny room in a rodent-friendly Ceasescu-era building. Clearly there was a Romanian meaning of the song that went deeper than its dubbing into any foreign language. It was something about the necessity of fate, the way the Titanic victims spent their final hours as forced witnesses to the sinking of the ship.

The Romanians have a national story about a good shepherd informed about a plot against his life by his favorite lamb, Miorita, a lamb "with wool of yellow-white." His killers, Miorita tells him, will be two of his most hated ethnic enemies. A Vracian and a Transylvanian will put aside their own ethnic differences to do the shepherd in. The shepherd does not resist. Instead, he spends his final hours planning his own burial in a bed of native soil. ("Native soil" has a special meaning here. In 1931 the Iron

Guard, a fascist organization drawn from Romania's intellectual elite, marauded through the Jewish border towns with bayonets and clubs, bags of native soil hung around their necks.) By surrendering to fate the shepherd enters a paradisiac state, described in nationalist semiotics as Mioritic Space. To the Romanians, this is a happy story.

The essence of movie is transparency. Movies engender multiplicity because they can be read so many ways. There is a butch dyke urban legend that Steven Spielberg's essentialist sci-fi epic: *AI: Artificial Intelligence* is actually an allegory. In it, David, the alienated young robot-boy who will eventually be disowned by his adoptive family, functions as a cipher for the butch girl-child stranded in the parallel universe of the hetero-nuclear family.

When sentiment prevails, identity isn't that specific. Movies are us because the people in them aren't anyone. Emotion's always larger than the characters or story.

3. Vertigo

Is it a coincidence that Rodney Graham's elliptical reprise of Hitchcock's *To Catch A Thief* is titled *Fishing On A Jetty* (2000)? A coincidence because in 1962 Chris Marker made a film called *The Jetty*, which was itself a strange homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). *The Jetty* was in turn re-imagined by Terry Gilliam in 1995 as *Twelve Monkeys*. But *Vertigo* was a movie Marker couldn't leave behind: in 1982, two decades after the release of *The Jetty*, Marker returned to San Francisco in his movie *Sans Soleil* to trail James Stewart's trailing of Kim Novak around the city streets of San Francisco, as Hitchcock first depicted them in *Vertigo*. Although Marker's seen the movie 19 times, he still can't quite recall the story. "It seems to be a question of trailing," Marker writes, "of enigma,

of murder, but in truth it's a question of power and freedom, of melancholy and dazzlement, so carefully coded within the style that you could miss it, and not discover immediately that this vertiginous space in reality stands for the vertigo of time ..."

The transparency of movie invites a multiplication of re-stagings that makes it totally Talmudic. The film is no longer only what it was; it's how it's been reprised. Ronnie van Hout paces in his room carrying a knife as if he were Anthony Perkins from *Psycho* (1960). Acting, in the cinema, is already discontinuous. The "original" is siphoned off so many ways that it becomes a palimpsest.

4. Role Play

When artists work with cinema, they aren't seeking to create illusion but to intervene in the illusion movies are creating. You do this with your person. But since the "person" is already many people, it's not so much a matter of becoming yourself or someone else, as of borrowing and adopting. Like people, personae are completely interchangeable and expendable. The old heroic mode of acting in the theater, in which the actor verges on a total merging with the role, does not apply in film. A persona's just a look, a piece of costume or a gesture.

In traditional nonwestern dance and theater, gestures are repeated as a technology to jump-start inner feeling. There is nothing to "prepare" because, the logic goes, a gesture repeated 500 times with infinite precision evokes emotion of its own. The actor's personal memories are less useful than the sheer psychophysical effect of repetition. Writing on the "uncanny," Freud describes the way children devise repetitive games to accept the unacceptable. Through repetition, the child achieves a mastery over something that he once found troubling. In Freud's most famous example, a

boy's mother leaves the room and he is distraught ... and so he replicates departure with a game in which he throws a ball against the wall 100 times. A gesture is employed; it doesn't penetrate the identity of the person. Through repetition, trauma becomes domestic, normalized. Can personas be the same as gestures? But perhaps there's only ever a persona at the center.

5. Paranoid

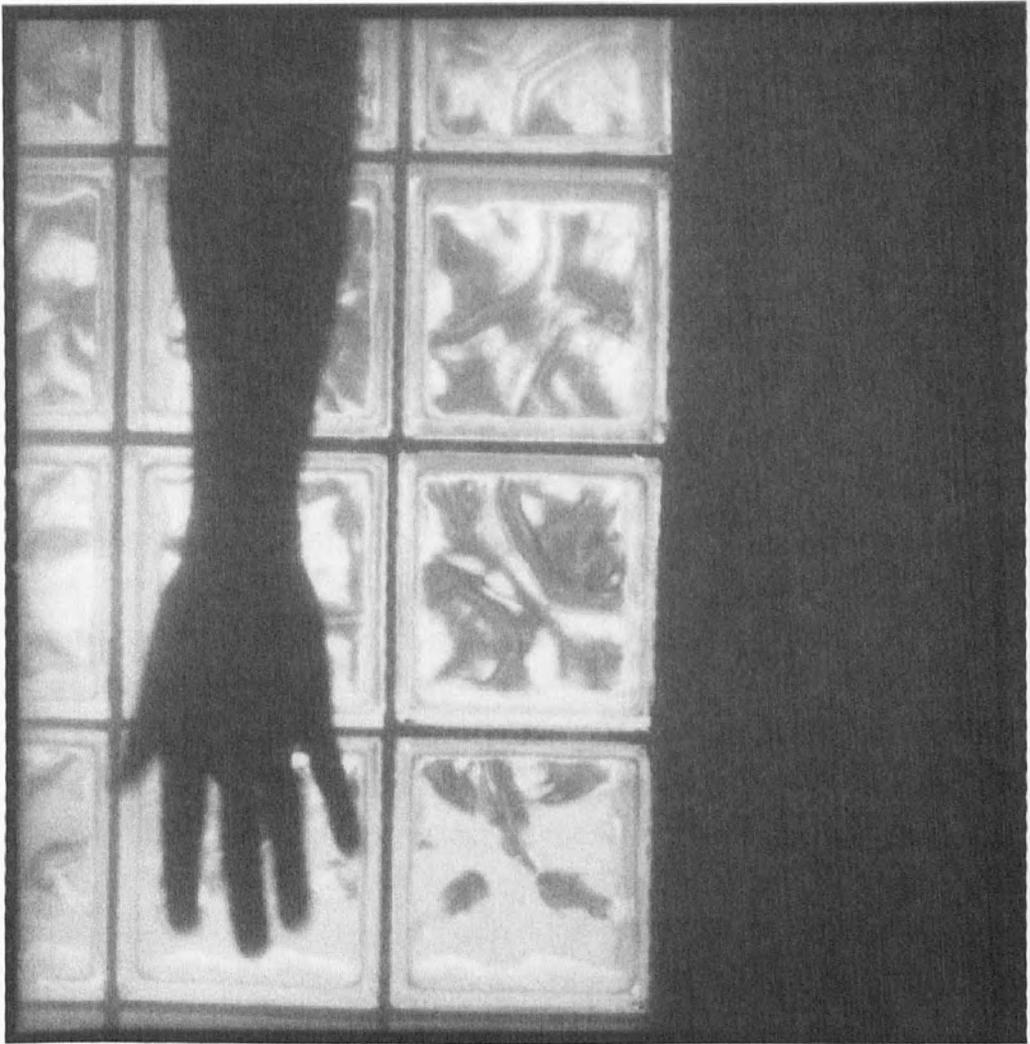
Paranoia is the ability to see the future. Things speed up. If the present is affected by the past, then it also must be affected by the future. The paranoid mind has the ability to penetrate the encrypted-ness of movies. Movies are the perfect death, because the content of a film is sealed forever. The film will always play exactly the same way; the only thing that changes is our viewing of it.

The paranoid mind unlocks the messages of movies. It is possible to discern a multiplicity of narratives through repeated viewings. In Philip K. Dick's paranoid opus *Valis* (1981), Horselover Fat discovers, after an exhaustive search, that the ancient Gnostics are communicating with him through a movie. Fat sees the movie *Valis* 15 times. *Valis* is itself an acronym (Vast-Active-Living-Intelligence-System) and the movie is the perfect conduit for this collapse of present, past and future into continuous time. Word messages are embedded in the movie's soundtrack. The movie's "plot" functions like the Old Testament of the Bible: an institutionalized reduction of the story. But for the truly mad, it is possible to access an Apocrypha by abstracting plot and character from the film and studying how props are moved around. The props themselves are symbols and their placement constitutes an *inner-text*. Students of the Kabbalah have noted that the char-

acters of the ancient Hebrew alphabet are actually runes depicting sexual acts. To form a sentence is to stage an alphabetic orgy.

In *Suburban Legend* (1999) the artist Julie Becker picks up on an urban legend that's been kicking around for 20 years in stoner culture ... that the Pink Floyd album *Dark Side of the Moon* was actually conceived to be a secret soundtrack to *The Wizard of Oz*, that generation's favorite childhood movie. If you know the secret sync-point—and Becker does—the entire system works. *Dark Side of the Moon* superimposes a new reading upon this ancient childhood “text” that is hilarious, triumphant, terrifying.

In this video, Becker seems to be proposing a completely realistic function for the artist. If the universe is movie, the artist's job is neither to decode nor to create, but to identify some temporary systems within the chaos.



1

(2002)

Torpor Los Angeles: Daniel Marlos

As anyone who's lived here any length of time knows, there is hardly any architecture in Los Angeles. Oh, of course there are the famous Neutra houses and the magic monolithic Gehry structures and the Case Study houses and the gorgeous Lautner spaceship house nestled somewhere up above Mulholland Drive, but this isn't what you see.

What you see when you are driving, and you are always driving, are miles and miles of low-rise stucco apartment complexes. Built fast and cheap by small-time developers between the 1950s and 1970s when LA's rental market swelled, these buildings, known as "dingbats," are distant knock-offs of mid-century modernist style. Land was cheap; there was no need for high-density. Thousands of dingbats painted pale flamingo pink, mint green and buttermilk yellow still line LA's wide streets from South Bay to Pomona. In them, you see the aesthetic purity of west coast modernism reduced to cement blocks and stucco topped by low asphalt rooves. Form is function; it was also cheap to build. As modernism's bastard cousin, the dingbats are free of all ornamentation. No gables, no rafters, no columns, no dormers. Except for the occasional *brise-soleil* cinderblock wall or pieces of mesh-metal spray painted mauve and attached to the stucco exteriors, the only architectural detail on these buildings are their address numbers, and these are huge. But

then, they must be: there's no pedestrian traffic in LA; people scrutinize address numbers while driving.

Crafted from wrought iron, copper, plastic, burnished steel and brushed aluminum, these numbers constitute a kind of folk-modernism. They stand against their stucco facades, jagged and straight, in italics, roman numerals, cursive script and blunt sans-serif outlines. Just as institutional inmates devise subtle means of individuating rigid codes of dress—a hair barrette, the way the sleeves or cuffs of uniforms are rolled—the designers of these architectural numbers expressed themselves (or something) through choices of material and typographic styles.

My friend, the artist Daniel Marlos, has been taking pictures of these buildings and their numbers for more than four years. Except Marlos doesn't just like photographing architecture, he likes to take pictures of his friends. He is a kind of folk formalist.

Perhaps because he is a gay man living in Los Angeles, and perhaps because his art career has taken a more jagged path than many of his MFA art school contemporaries, Marlos has the widest circle of LA friends and acquaintances of anyone I've met. He shares a home with his partner José, a Mexican-born tailor. Since leaving art school, Marlos has worked as a staff photographer for the Griffith Park Observatory, a photo-finisher at a one-hour photo lab, a porn video critic, and an instructor at LA City College, picking up friends and portraiture subjects along the way.

In *The Century Project* (1998–1999) Marlos documents the 100 years of the 20th century by photographing 100 of his friends. In each of these images, the friend stands outside a dingbat apartment building whose address corresponds to a different year of the century. The addresses, numbering 1901–2000, were culled from boulevards and streets spanning thirty miles of the city. Standing in front of 1942 Rodney Street, a lime-green number in residential Los Feliz, I was 1942. In the rest of the series, my fellow citizens—bricklayers,

short-order cooks, movie producers, museum curators, small-business owners and gardeners—pose in various states of awkwardness and composure outside these buildings, numbered by the year. Just like in life, we may not actually relate to each other, but all of us are *here*.

As a photographer, Marlos keeps an open mind. The portraits aren't generic. Nor are they sensational, or intimately probing. They're more than a sociological catalogue and less than a record of any underground scene. Through the conceit of historical numbering, Marlos can photograph all of these people—who don't fit into any particular psychosexual genre or narrative—within a framework large enough to hold them. Architecture, space and time connect Marlos' friends. Living in one of the world's great immigrant cities, these friends come from every conceivable race, age group, body type and class. *The Century Project's* one hundred images comprise a group portrait of a whole century. By photographing them within the arbitrary holding pattern of numbers, Marlos has accomplished just what his title's goofy grandiosity suggests. .

But a century only has 100 years and Marlos has more than that number of friends. So when the project outgrew its admittedly arbitrary parameter, Marlos turned backwards to history. The fact that LA was incorporated 221 years ago in 1781 gave him another 120 years, for which he could photograph another 120 buildings and friends. This second project, *Timeline* (2002) was recently exhibited at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE).

As an assemblage, *Timeline* is a cumulatively monumental work that, in its casual obsessiveness, makes perfect sense. In addition to taking hundreds of photos each month, Marlos is a prodigious record-keeper, making entries in a photographic logbook/ diary every day. Assiduously apersonal, the diary reads more like a police blotter than a journal. Marlos is always on the job, notating film

stocks, light conditions at particular intersections, dictionary definitions of words he hears that interest him, and speculative quotes from Vladimir Nabokov about escape and time. All these things are given equal weight, and there is never a first-person narrative. Yet this diary and the photo works perversely make me envy Daniel Marlos' life. It is a life consumed in an exacting and exhausting project. Excitement and mystery threaten to leak through the completely arbitrary formal boundaries of his projects. Where fascination rules, can happiness be far behind? I want to live in the LA of his notebooks.

Though Marlos is actually from Ohio, his work seems more Latino than American: part tabloid-art, part Borges. Once, when proposing an article on Marlos' work to an art magazine editor, I said what interested me about him most was that he led a very artistic life. *What does that mean, an artistic life?* asked the editor, looking at me strangely. A thing that once seemed obvious—that it might actually be more artistically productive to herd goats or hang around with gardeners and porn stars than to spend your time exclusively in the art world—now seems alien and childish.

Marlos' current project, *Plotting Along Parallel Lines*, takes place underground. It is part of a project curated by Brent Zerger of LA's Metropolitan Transit Authority. Boldly attempting to overturn the provincial character of LA's public art, Zerger commissions temporary projects on subway lines by contemporary artists. Unlike New York, where internationally known artists compete to fill public space, LA's high art traditionally stays in museums and galleries. Public commissions are assigned mostly to amateurs. I can't think of another metropolitan center where high art is as estranged from the rest of the city.

In *Parallel Lines*, Marlos projects slide images of numbers onto the station walls of the subway. Seemingly arbitrary, these numbers correspond to the address-numbers of buildings above ground.

Because the City of Los Angeles was cobbled together from adjacent neighborhoods once separately incorporated into hamlets and towns, LA's street numbers end and begin at each of these now-meaningless boundaries. You do the math. The numbers flash off of Marlos' single-lens projector at each station, quickly, back and forth, in chronological succession. Distance, social histories, time, dissolve and reconvene in geometric patterns. The project is a sculptural inversion of *Timeline* and *The Century Project*. In *Parallel Lines*, the human presence of Marlos' friends is relocated in the moving bodies of subway riders. In this sense, the work is a massive group portrait. It is also a bizarre investigation of time and the way people's paths intersect, or don't. How many chance meetings occur within subways?

The promotional brochure for *Parallel Lines*, produced in English and Spanish by the Metropolitan Transit Authority, reproduces excerpts from Marlos' diary. "Granted that time and space were one," he notes, quoting Nabokov on October 27, 2001, "escape and return become interchangeable." In Marlos' work, LA becomes a Borgesian world where flight takes place within a set of finite boundaries.



(2002)

Sentimental Bitch

In her stunning 2002 show, *From Mouth To Ear*, Andrea Bowers chose, after exhibiting widely for nearly a decade, to make her vocation completely explicit. She is a memorialist, a “sentimental bitch,” (as Bowers boldly titles *Mouth*’s commemorative scrapbook to Lori Twersky, editor of the greatest girl rock ‘zine), hungry for traces people leave on the landscape. Mounted in a granite boulder on the floor of Goldman Tevis Gallery, a small monitor displays some video footage of Bower’s steady handheld camera moving closer towards a gravestone. *Bessie Smith The Greatest Blues Singer in the World Will Never Stop Singing 1895–1937*.

Reflected in the polished marble of the marker, a streaky gray-and-white pearlescent sky wraps itself around the grave’s location: a tranquil, not-too-manicured African-American cemetery in a neighborhood outside of Philadelphia, PA. The pearly gates of heaven are maybe just beyond the stand of trees that lines the graveyard. Bessie Smith, RIP. Is Andrea Bowers black? Is she a manicurist paying off the mortgage on her manufactured home in Ohio? Is the lady who she videotaped selling t-shirts in the mall actually *her* Aunt Dee?

I’m tempted to say that race and class are at the heart of Bower’s strategy, though in the most devious kind of way. The images of humanist photographers like Alan Sekula have traditionally

bestowed a dignity and grandeur on their subjects. It is a gift that can only be given by a person reaching through some distance. Bowers, on the other hand, who seems to simply disappear, in fact becomes an *agent* of her subjects. Isolating and recontextualizing images of mass culture within the gallery's sacred high-art space, Bowers manages to present the values of her subjects—bravado, color, sentiment, a pretty picture—as something powerful and worth considering. *I Love You Fucking People! Look At Me!*

In *Mouth to Ear*, Bowers recapitulates a presentational technique she's devised over the years that serves her purposes very well. Videotape has always been an integral part of her work. From there, she isolates images from the faux-reality television-*verite* flow of her tapes, and painstakingly mounts them on the creamy sober vellum space of gallery archival paper. In the beautiful wall-mounted photographs in Bower's *Moving Equilibrium Show* (Sarah Melzer Gallery, 1999), the pre-teen girl in the Wonder Woman costume who skated to a messy finish in her earlier video *All The World Is Waiting For You* floats against the background of the paper like a butterfly. Captured in time, cherished and poised, the photograph is an image any parent would be proud of. Bowers deploys the materials of visual art—dissonance, dispassion, space and time—to arrive at the heightened pitch of sentiment anyone who's ever taken family snapshots has aspired to, not knowing this is something that a snapshot never can achieve.

The street finds its own uses, William Gibson proclaimed in *The Neuromancer*, the first pop novel of the 21st century, published 16 years early in 1984. He was talking about the way technology filters down to the street like all other fashion, the way technology becomes itself by being corrupted to meet people's needs. Arriving in Los Angeles from New York in 1990, Bowers spent the decade trailing around the stadiums and karaoke bars and malls and air shows of Southern California with her cameras. These things

interested her a great deal more than the then-fashionable discourses about duration, transcendence and beauty. *There's never really nothing*, she must've realized early on, *there's only ever the problem of describing what there really is.*

I'm struck by the similarities and differences between Bower's images and Andreas Gursky's photographs of raves and spectacles and sports events. While Gursky's images function as a blankly frightening lament for the vapidness of Global Europe, Bowers looks and finds a subjectivity within the mass. If you are 19 and living with your parents in Corona, Bowers will take a picture that makes you look exactly how you want to be. Her subjects don't need to be pushed or tricked or prodded to the point where things begin to ... spill. It's all right there, in the Pasadena Rose Bowl couple's red and orange funny hats (*One & The Same Body*, 1998–99); in the concertgoer's loose raised fists (*Intimate Strangers: Hand Gestures*, 2000); in the amateur skater's apprehension as she crouches on the ice before her cue (*Waiting*, 1999). The philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva noted recently that her analysands have fewer and fewer *words* to describe just what it is they're feeling. But that doesn't mean they aren't feeling. And in these works, emotion vibrates in Andrea Bowers' subjects like the incredible multi-colored wind-up plush toys in the Rose Bowl tent.

In *Democracy's Body: Dance Dance Revolution* (2001) Bowers discovers discipline and anarchy in a video arcade/club in the Inland Empire of San Bernadino County. It's any night, and about a hundred people of nearly every race and body type in their teens and twenties are gathered in this metal building around a dual-platformed Konami interactive game.

Flanked to the north and the south by the San Gabriel and Santa Ana Mountains, the Inland Empire is a smog pit of arterial life. Here, freeways, condo complexes, instant subdivisions, railway yards, warehouses, malls and car dealerships spread out across a

desert valley 50 minutes east of downtown LA. It is also the fourth fastest growing region in America, a place where personal income has more than quadrupled in the past decade. It's possible, here, to buy a brand new five-bedroom manufactured home complete with master-bath spa tub in the low 100s. Abhorrently ugly to some, the Inland Empire is a mecca of empowerment for Southern California consumers, i.e., the people formerly known as the poor.

The kids around the platform watch the Konami players with a great deal of intensity. Like Rocky Horror, karaoke, and other art forms self-propelled by urban myth, there are obviously favorites here among the dance game crowd, it has its stars. The Konami game looks a bit like a treadmill, with four footpads sunk into a rubberized platform. A map of these footpads is shown on a video-screen in front of the platform, connected by fast-moving arrows that show you where to put your feet. The Konami program offers a video-animae partner of your choosing: female, male, or if you would prefer, ungendered. In one of *Democracy's Body's* best scenes, a Vietnamese girl dressed up in a Superman costume strains to look at the screen as if she's deciphering a difficult math problem. And then there's the young white guy who dances as if he was fucking: his body's a pole, conducting the energy between his face and his feet.

Bowers fascinatingly conflates the kind of dancing done in this club to the work of the Judson Dance Theater, minimalism's star house performers during the 1960s and 70s in New York. Like Judson choreographers Yvonne Rainer, Anna Halpern and Terry Meyers, the Konami kids use patterning and repetition to break free of character-imposed rhythm. Both use mundane movement tasks as a means of transportation, shunning the personality flourishes of virtuosic feats.

As she did in *Moving Equilibrium*, Bowers abstracted a series of images from the *Democracy's Body* videotape and re-formed them as

wall pieces. By isolating the dancer's images, the wall pieces give them permanence and let us look at them closely against empty space. In one, Supergirl floats like a lily on a deep black pond of shiny polychrome, encased. By doing this, Bowers is acting both as botanist and fairy godmother: yes, they're framed and we're looking at them, but she is turning these kids into the mythic icons they most want to be.

If Bowers can do this for the Inland Empire youth, why shouldn't she do it for herself? *From Mouth to Ear* is possibly the closest she'll come to making a self-portrait. It is a self-portrait fashioned from a Deleuzian sense of self, or from the identities held by adolescent fans (same thing): a belief that who you are is never any more or less than who you love, than who has made you larger.

In *Mouth*, Bowers memorializes twenty of the dead people in 20th century culture who've enabled her—a female artist born in Wilmington, Ohio in 1965—to be. *After you've gone/And left me crying ... Your heart will break like mine ...* Bessie Smith's voice resounds around the gallery. Smith's grave remained unmarked for 33 years because of who she was—a woman married to a deadbeat alcoholic who pocketed the proceeds of every benefit held subsequent to her death. It was not until 1970 when a Philadelphia woman wrote to the *Inquirer* commenting on the absence of a marker on Smith's grave that a memorial got underway. The stone was paid for by Janis Joplin, a rock star and Juanita Green, a local small-business owner.

And it's like this in *Battlefields, Gardens and Graveyards*, Bower's 50-frame wallpiece in the *Mouth to Ear* show. Janet Jackson samples Joni Mitchell, Nina Simone covers Bessie Smith, Lori Twersky creates a magazine to memorialize the best of female rock & roll—each of these fifty frame-images shows how people loop back to find inspiration from others who made their lives possible. It is the essence of culture.

The Latin root of sentiment, *sentire*, means consciousness or thought: to experience recognition. It was only much later that thought became separate from feeling, as if the two were opposed. Bowers the Sentimental Bitch is the most intelligent of artists. Acting as a material witness to the fact of life in southern California, she has managed to provide a subtext to the global experience of "sentiment." A concept that, until now, together with "surface," has been one of West Coast neoconceptualism's least examined, most Pavlovian clichés.

Whole

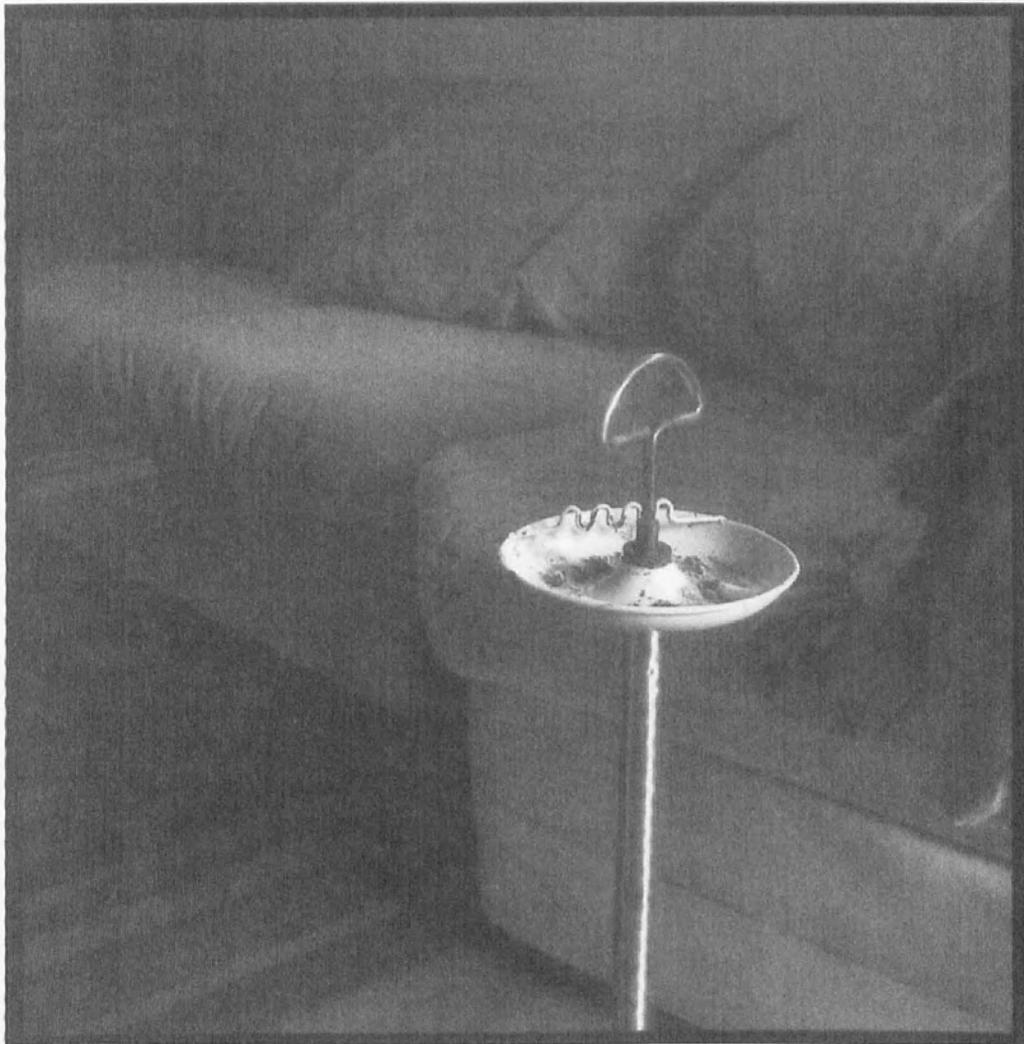
Tanglewood, MA
September 16, 2002

Julie Becker
2852 Berkeley Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90026

Dear Julie,

On September 11 (the anniversary of) I was in this ashram in Tanglewood Massachusetts, and I'm not even going to tell you what put me there, the fit of despair, the endless crying, the pull in my heart towards going all the way into that blackness, which would be death, or wanting to die ... all I can say is that Alexandra Kollontai, the Russian revolutionary who wrote *Red Love* (her manifesto of the multiple human relationships of sexuality friendship and love that might be possible in a revolutionary society) had a very brave project and it isn't her fault that it failed. I was exhausted.

Immediately after arriving I began to feel better, it was a strange and beautiful culture being practiced there. The path to the lake was wide and well worn but enclosed on both sides by all kinds of foliage: chokeberries and I don't know the other names, but yellow and purple and red. I felt extremely protected. Everything was



held in place, the lake by the hills, the hills by the white strands of cloud in the sky, and I began to feel whole. The “hole” being filled by the “whole.”

The yoga they practice here at Kripalu is based on presence, acceptance and love. They say that Everything Matters. They call it Intentional Living. You can feel it by the way they smile at the check-in desk and open the door. Or the swathes of white and pink cosmos they’ve planted up on the hill. Or the utterly rational way they’ve deployed technology within their 20,000 square foot physical plant towards the greatest efficiency, comfort and pleasure. Money is effortless here, the result of an affirmation. Some of the ones I’m learning to say are, “Money rushes to me because I am a master at multiplying its abundance” AND “A full love surrounds me” AND “Financial success comes easily to me” ... And seeing that there are so many expensive new cars in the ashram parking lot with New Age bumper stickers, maybe it’s working—although I must say it’s in their total exclusion of relativity (i.e., their banality) that the affirmations begin to lose me ...

There are hardly any rules here in the ashram except for the absence of cellphones and sexualized clothing. There is even an area designated for smoking, except this area isn’t marked or disclosed. You have to declare yourself to the front desk staff as a smoker and then they will tell you, but I didn’t do that. I tried to find it myself, unsuccessfully. Still, I was curious how this culture deals with taboos. Because it seemed to me, the Designated Smoking Area on the “east hill” above the ashram would be like the boneyard outside the Marquis de Sade’s Chateau ... the back end of the institution, the place where they throw all the used-up dead girls, the place that everyone knows of but nobody wants to go.

A couple of weeks ago when you were preparing your show for Greene Naftali, I asked you, What does it mean to be Whole? You answered, *That’s a good question.* Because you’d been preparing this

show called *Whole* for nearly four years and you were starting to realize it would never be finished. It was becoming an endeavor as gorgeous and doomed as *Red Love*, or the San Francisco sculptor Jay DeFeo's enormous white plaster rose that grew like a tapeworm inside her apartment until it threatened to take down the whole building ... or else, even Jill Johnston's early art writing in *Lesbian Nation*, which she later recanted, and here I am possibly imitating—

You said: "There's always an attempt to be whole. Everyone in the universe has spent time trying to become whole through religious means, from sitting in a church to yoga to swimming, and everybody is trying to get more energy and become more whole."

But you couldn't do it. You'd started to realize that the real project of *Whole* would be "an endless exposing of parts and not ever reaching a whole," you said that, and then you added, "so I have tried to share that, that human process," but when I asked you if being *Whole* is like being dead, you complained, "But I haven't even had coffee yet!"

The show you mounted this month at Greene Naftali was a part of the *Whole*. We both agreed that showing these parts over time was the only way you could do it. Because in fact, we agreed, it's sort of a quantum tautology to think you can capture the [W]hole without falling into it ... And this gets close to something like madness, a state both of us know.

In the videotape you made, called *Whole Film 2002*, you cut a square hole in the floor of your living room-studio and hoisted a model of the California Federal Bank building down through it on pulleys into the basement ... The CalFed Bank was the building you saw then, looking outside the window, when you were still in the Echo Park house that became the site of this project called *Whole*. When you moved in, the house was owned by the bank, and then later it wasn't. During the three years you lived there, the place changed hands several times, it kept being bought and sold.

Except no one knew what to do with it, because Echo Park hadn't gentrified yet and the real estate market was flat. The house was really a shack falling into the ground, there was constant flooding. No one fixed the place up, but the actual land wasn't worth enough yet to bother tearing it down. The lot hadn't reached its maximum value yet.

I think we were talking, later, about the mystical power of money: the way the US dollar bill is engraved with 27 masonic symbols. The bills change hands many times every day but nobody knows what they mean ... You made a drawing then, called *Playful Embellishment*, with the Eye of the dollar bill pyramid blinking in front of the CalFed building, all brightened with candles and glitter.

Anyway, before you moved in, when the bank took it over, a gay man with AIDS was living in the basement apartment downstairs. It was really only a room built over cement. The man had been a stained-glass maker, but when he died nobody came to reclaim his stuff. The bank let you use downstairs for free in exchange for clearing it out, and this stuff became part of the Whole.

The walls of this room were covered in cheap pine paneling, and the basement became the metaphysical-conceptual lab for the yet-to-be-fully realized *Whole*. You found it strange to be living on top of this stuff, it was like something was brewing down there beyond your control. But really things were happening *outside* the house, the buying and selling, the change in the market, as well. There was a Tiki Bar built into the wall, one of those shingle-roofed things that they use to sell poolside drinks. It seemed to be holding the whole place up. As you told me once, the Bar, (which you later rebuilt and called the Mysterious Object Bar,) is the underside of the belly of *Whole*.

The bar, as it appears in your installation, contains certain disturbances at the "bottom" of a house that is decaying at its very foundations and has been tied up in lawsuits for years. Is the bar an

alchemical center for the production of negative energy? Obviously your work *alludes to the social fact of gentrification and its attendant displacement*, as they'd say in art criticism, *while probing the psychic underside of what we call "real estate"* ... the troubled lives of actual property occupants, whose troubles are only compounded by official papers and documents.

In your videotape, the camera hovers around a sign hanging on the pine-paneled wall left behind by the previous tenant. The sign is a riff on the kind of inspirational slogans hung all over the ashram (that say things like YOU ARE PERFECT IN YOUR IMPERFECTION) but his sign said IF YOU CAN KEEP YOUR HEAD IN ALL THIS CONFUSION YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION ... and I was struck by his use of the word "situation," the way it's a noun and a verb ... as you as a sculptor, i.e., a visual thinker, must have been, because it seems that part of the project of *Whole* is to willfully *resituate* things. In *Whole Film 2002*, the camera holds on a piece of the urban landscape, i.e. the bank, as seen through your living-room window. And then it cuts to the model you've built of the bank, which is small enough to be hoisted down into the hole ... The actual bank itself is full of holes. It has those porthole windows designed to make a large building look like a plane in the hi-tech imagination of the 1950s, when commerce, like god, took off like a jet.

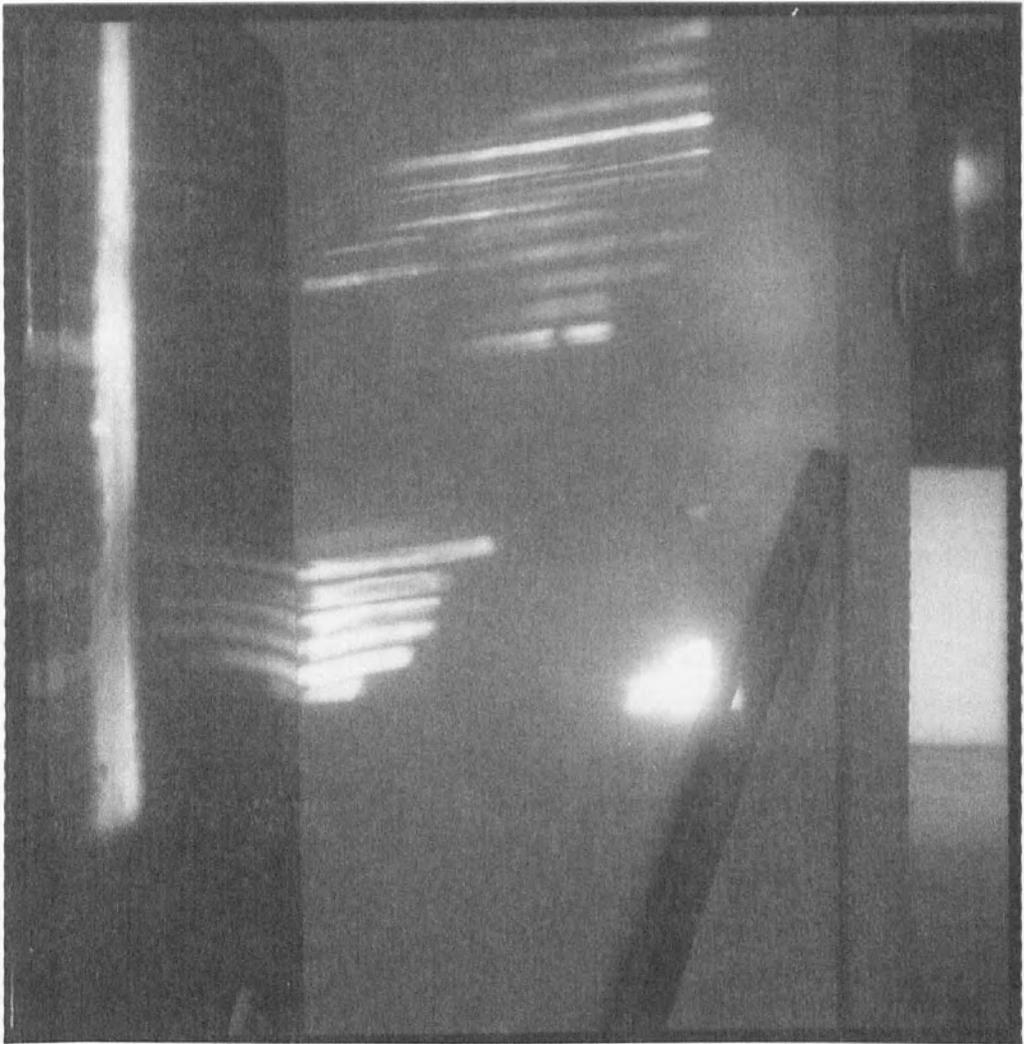
The landscape seen through the window was blurry and smeared.

At the ashram this week, I kept thinking about Alice when she fell down through the hole, or Ariadne, how she didn't forget to tie a string to her wrist when she left for the land of the dead. Mexican radio music blasting on the video soundtrack, the frequency of the pirate radio station someone runs near your house, the way that music enters the wires whenever we talk on the phone ... Eleanor

Antin quoting Baudelaire in her installation *Minetta Lane—A Ghost Story* (1994): *The city changes faster than the human heart.*

At the ashram they always light candles at the heart of the circle when they gather to meditate. Everyone wept for the 3000 dead on September 11, because these are the dead we can imagine best, they are triggers of grief, and you said, *What attempt to move forward isn't an attempt to become Whole?*

Love,
Chris



(2003)

How To Shoot A Crime

The throughline of my film *How To Shoot A Crime* is composed from a series of videotaped conversations that Sylvère Lotringer had with two dominatrixes over the course of several months in 1982. The women, Terence Sellars and Mademoiselle Victoire, visited Lotringer's loft separately and together seven or eight times to be "interviewed," on camera, about sadomasochism. Lotringer was teaching a class on sexuality and death at Columbia University at the time. There was a certain glamour to this: uptown meets down. East Village filmmaker Marion Scemema, who was one of Lotringer's girlfriends, shot the videotape and the loft was well stocked with cocaine and wine. Perhaps because Lotringer didn't *know* what he was looking for, the "interviews" devolved or evolved into long conversations about the two women's lives.

Terence Sellars, a pro-domme with a dungeon in Chelsea, was a sometime-writer and fixture on the lower Manhattan club scene who'd been trying off and on to get out of "the life." But Mlle. Victoire was purely an amateur, and she pursued S/m with mystical zeal. (Years later, she would become a lay Carmelite nun.) Both women find the interview process highly ennobling. Lotringer seems to share their belief that S/m has some greater meaning outside itself. If they can tell him how it really is, he can help them give their lives a greater resonance and form. Lotringer proves to

be an excellent listener. Through him, we hear the two women talking to themselves at a moment—lower Manhattan, 1982—when lives were lived desultorily and examined passionately and everyone thought there was plenty of time.

Throughout these long conversations, Marion stood behind the camera, panning with subliminal ease, between boot-tips and faces and jittery fingers, and everyone agreed she was cool. “How old are you, Marion?” asks Victoire, who’s real name is Vickie, and Marion replies, “32,” in a heavy French accent, and everyone agrees that 32’s cool. Sylvère’s soft questions and non-judgmental manner lead them both to say the most amazing things. “It’s so difficult,” Victoire says one late afternoon, “to get to anything organic,” while describing her urge to kill someone in the most conscious and ritualized fashion.

Lotringer’s own stake in these conversations is never very clear. He has no personal experience of S/m, and no apparent urge to acquire any. The fact that he is a child survivor of the Holocaust barely registers within himself, and is unknown to the women. He is merely the interviewer. And since it is lower Manhattan, 1982, there is no imperative that anything be finished, that analysis ever reach a terminal point. Yet his separate conversations with the two women both move towards the same climax: each confronts his opacity. “Why do you have to be right all the time?” Sylvère whispers, teasing, to Terence Sellars, and she bounces back: “Don’t *you*? Twenty years from now there is only going to be this videotape of me when I was 30 years old, talking.” Victoire confronts Sylvère more directly: “We are not going back and forth. We are not bouncing these experiences up against ones that you share. This is not a conversation. This is only half a conversation. We need your *dick out here.*”

I made the film in 1987 from an urge to make sense of that earlier time. More specifically, since I’d started living with Sylvère

Lotringer, I wanted to understand his opacity, and with typical grandiosity, thought that this *personal* issue might somehow be reflected through the culture at large.

Pop sadomasochism had become a hip rebuttal of feminism: the season's hottest coffee table book (at least in New York) featured "broken birds;" tiny young Japanese women with fractured limbs set in casts, and female bondage was MTV's favorite trope. Sylvère's loft no longer existed as such; the Fulton Street buildings had become part of the South Street Seaport development. And it occurred to me that these long conversations, which once seemed so innocent, could be juxtaposed with a second body of video interviews conducted by Lotringer the following year. These tapes were made with a NY Police Department videographer, whose job it was to document crime scenes for use as court evidence in homicide trials.

Police videographer George Diaz talked avidly about the tricks of his trade and proffered two hours of crime scene documents out of the vault. It was through his police work that Diaz, who'd once been a video artist, discovered narrative. Because edits can be prejudicial, the NYPD format required that crime scenes be shot in a continuous pan. But homicide juries, like everyone else, like to be entertained, and Diaz worked out a strategy of "whetting their appetites" by moving really slow around the ambient stuff and then flashing very fast across the murder weapon, leaving his captive audience eager to see more. This "more," of course, was the bodies—corpses sprawled across a bed or a floor in very sharp focus—then soften a bit, bring the audience down, denouement, as the camera trails off.

George Diaz's videos were to the present what Wee Gee's gritty black and white photos were to the early 20th century. Diaz's footage spoke as powerfully to the floating architecture of the city and its disembodied urban space as it did to criminality or the vic-

tim's wasted life. The dead bodies occupy the video-screen foreground. Yet the background is equally chilling. Close-up of a skinny week-old corpse in blue jeans and a t-shirt. The boy's face is infested with maggots. We're in an abandoned railway yard in the West 30s. Scrub foliage dilates in midsummer heat. The site is entirely interstitial. It will soon be demolished, and then become something else. The camera pans up to the city: cars buzzing along the West Side highway, and beyond this antiquated freeway, a line of new high-rise buildings, banks and developers, another ten thousand lives.

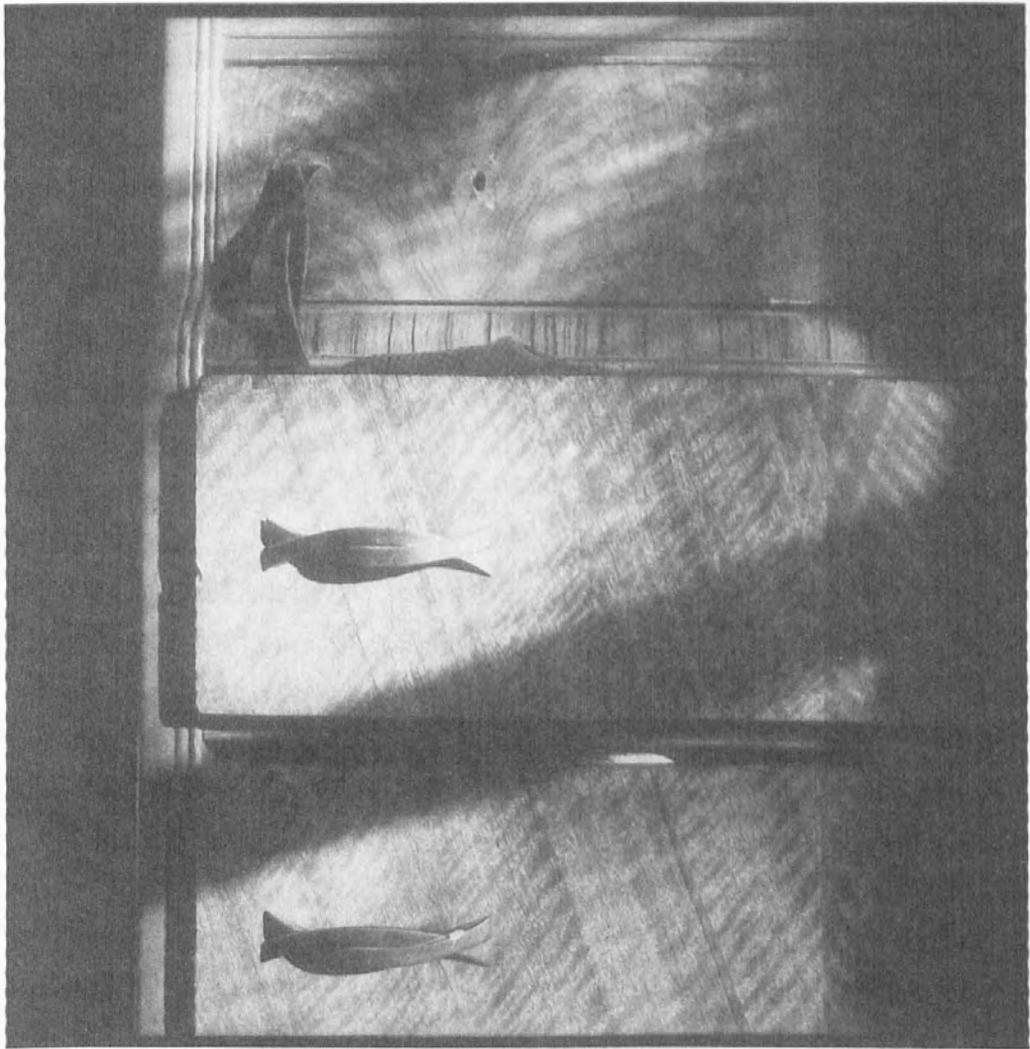
And what is sadomasochism, really, if not an enactment of urban displacement? Beyond the junk-bond boobs in black leather corselets of early MTV, it's a desire to *be* someplace, to be locked in an intractable complicit transaction that takes place firmly in time.

Thirty-year-old Terence Sellars, stoned on coke and wanting to be a philosopher, holds out her arm and drawls slowly, "Sadomasochism is like, 50 percent. But murder," and here her voice gets soft and high, "is more like, 100." Cut to: sounds of city, renovation of the South Street Seaport, the world outside the loft: a limitless anonymity in which anything is possible and equally banal.

Lotringer saw George Diaz's crime tapes as a form of urban grieving. Unlike the rest of us, he reasoned, murder victims do not go entirely unmourned; they become the subject of an investigation, however cursory. They are logged into the NYPD caseload, documented, and sometimes even "solved." And what is the crime here? Among the dozens of crime scene documents in the video, there is the image of a girl's dead body sprawled face down on a sidewalk on White Street outside the long-defunct Mudd Club on a sunny afternoon. Wearing a black and white 1950s dirndl summer dress and spike black heels, she could be you. Soundtrack of a

no-wave song circa the period, *Finding Someone To Take Care of You*. The girl vocalist speak-sings the words “Your mind needs a mind, to think, Your heart needs a heart, to feel.”

Inside the loft on those long days in 1982, the two women on screen are intent on self-probing, not listening or looking around them. They are highly atomized single units, barely conscious that they are operating within an environment. And as such, they are emanating everything important about that environment. They are emanating anxiety, longing and fear.



(2002)

Falling Into The Whole

There is a theory that madness, like emotion, results from sensory overload. Information floods in so fast that it is stripped of its referents, its place in the system, and can no longer be classified or sensibly arranged. This September/October, Julie Becker debuted the first fragment of her massive, in-progress installation, *Whole*, at Greene Naftali: a 28-minute film (*Whole Film 2002*) and an accompanying series of drawings. The film contains elements of a sculptural installation that has yet to be realized in a gallery setting, but evolved from the space in which she was living for nearly three years.

Becker, the enfant-terrible stepchild of Los Angeles neoconceptual art, debuted with great acclaim (at Sao Paolo, the Tate, and Regan Projects Gallery in Los Angeles) with a similarly complex installation begun while she was an MFA student at CalArts called *Residents & Researchers* (1993–1996). *Residents*—which spanned several rooms to recreate an investigation into the lives of certain, residents, in an old SRO type hotel—somewhat (in its messiness) evoked Jason Rhodes, and somewhat (in its complexity) recalled the works of Jessica Stockholder. Yet it was neither. SRO's—single room occupancy hotels—are a dying breed of cheap transient housing once found in all large American cities. They were the last stop before homelessness—the place where the functionally crazy, the drunk and the poor could rent a cheap sin-

gle room with a lock and a door. Becker—whose own childhood was marked by similar transience—was fascinated by the lives of these occupants. Who were they? What were their histories? The piece combined a Balzacian zeal to excavate urban archeology through fiction, and a very postmodern willingness to acknowledge the strange penetrations and crossed subjectivities that occurred in the body and mind of the researcher herself. When Becker completed the work, she was 24 years old.

Whole tells us what happened after. Becker, embarked on a career as an upcoming young Los Angeles artist, rented a bungalow house with a cellar to use as a studio in Echo Park, a soon-to-be-gentrified section of inner LA. Owned by a bank—which was Becker's original landlord—the house was tied up in a Dickensian series of lawsuits, while sliding ever deeper into the shallow mud on which it was built. Her predecessor in the house had recently died there: a gay man who did some kind of stained-glass craft for a living, before dying of AIDS. The man had lived in the cellar, and when Becker arrived all his stuff was still there. "Clean the space out," said the bank, "and you can use it for free ..."

Except she never actually did. There was cheap wood-paneling everywhere, and a strange Tiki Bar built into the wall—the kind of shingled bar set up by a poolside to sell tropical drinks. He'd hung up a sign over one wall that said, *If You Can Keep Your Head In All This Confusion You Just Don't Understand The Situation*. The bar seemed to Julie like an alchemical thing, and since she was studying astral travel, it occurred to her the bar might be *used* as a metaphysical-alchemical lab ... The windows upstairs looked out through a park to some highrise buildings, and the CalFed bank, with its helicopter-landing pad on the roof, was at the center of that. Going up and down between the house and the cellar, Becker began to experience some affective connections between the city control-grid out the window and the chaos downstairs.

What I am trying to say is, that while *Residents & Researchers* drew a schematic map of urban experience—that conflux of architecture, real-estate commerce, and the litter of real people's lives—in *Whole*, she psychically penetrates it. Becker enters the conflux, so you can no longer tell what's outside and what's in. She builds a scale model of the CalFed Bank building. She cuts a hole in the floor between the cellar and living room. She repositions the bank from its fixed place outside her window, brings into her room as a model, and then hoists it on pulleys down into the pit. It is that wonderful moment of madness after everything's been ripped loose from its moorings and floats, before the anguish and suffering start to set in. The faux-grandeur of commerce and the constriction of poverty exist on the same plane, both are equally present. Art as a form of astral travel between social realms ...

Whole, which by its very definition may never be actually "finished," is painful, ecstatic and dangerous. While much contemporary installation art presents a cosmetic chaos, Becker is reinventing process art for her generation ... that thing, that once it's begun attains a life of its own, and you don't know where it will go.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the publications in which earlier versions of these essays first appeared. The editors of these publications have no responsibility for opinions expressed in these expanded versions. "Art Collection: Part 1" in *Obsession, Compulsion, Collection: On Objects, Display, Culture and Interpretation*, ed. by Anthony Kiendl, Banff Centre Press, 2004 and the William Bronk portions of "Art Collection: Part 4" in *Index* magazine, Winter 2002. "Let's Call The Whole Thing Off" in *Artext* #63, Fall 1998; "Pay Attention" in *Artext* #64, Winter 1999; "Posthumous Lives" in *Artext* #65, Spring 1999; "Pussy Orphanage" in *Artext* #66, Summer 1999; "Deep Chaos" in *Artext* #67, Fall 1999; "Emotional Technologies" published as "Sleeping With The Alien" in *Artext* #68, Winter 2000; "Surface Streets" in *Artext* #69, Spring 2000; "Bad Nostalgia" in *Artext* #70, Fall 2000; "The Blessed" in *More & Less* #3, 2000, edited by Sylvère Lotringer and Giovanni Intra and published by Art Center College of Design and in *Log Illustrated*, edited by Tessa Laird, Fall 1998; "Military Culture" in *Artext* #71, Winter 2000; "Shit On My Sleepmask" published as "Ravished by Jesus" in *Artext* #72, Winter 2001; "Cast Away" published in *Artext* #73, Spring 2001; "Dropoff" in *Artext* #74, Summer 2001; "Panda Porn" in *Artext* #75, Fall 2001; "Picturing the Period" commissioned by Rosetta Brooks for *Smart Collector* magazine, 2001; "Calle Art" published as "We Need Your Dick Out Here" in *C Magazine International*, Fall 2001; "Featured" in *Feature: art, life and cinema*, (exhibition catalogue) edited by Gregory Burke and Hanna Scott, The Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand 2001; "Torpor Los Angeles: Daniel Marlos" in *C Magazine International*, Spring

2002; "Sentimental Bitch" in *Andrea Bowers*, (exhibition catalogue), Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York 2002; "Whole" in *C Magazine International*, Winter 2002; "How To Shoot A Crime" in *Visit* magazine, Govett Brewster Museum, New Plymouth, New Zealand and in *Monica Bonvicini/Sam Durant Break It/Fix It* (exhibition catalogue), edited by Rike Frank, Seccession/Diese Publications, Frankfurt, Germany; "Falling Into The Whole: Julie Becker" published as "Falling Into The Whole" in *Texte Zur Kunst* magazine, Summer, 2002.

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Chris Kraus is the author of *I Love Dick*, *Aliens & Anorexia* and the forthcoming novel, *Torpor*. Between 1995-2002 she taught in the Graduate Program at Art Center College of Design. She lives in upstate New York and Los Angeles.



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