VERSE AND SENSIBILITY

REFLECTION ON POST '60S SCULPTURE

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I am thinking of the terms "post-Minimalism" and "dematerialization" — of how they have become entrenched within the lexicon of contemporary criticism. I am thinking of the extreme disjunction between the strategic value of these terms and their capacity to signify. For, while I understand the politics of their usage, their meaning eludes me insomuch as it attaches itself to the art they label.

Operationally, "post-Minimalism" acts to drive a historical wedge between the Minimalists of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Frank Stella, and Carl Andre, and the work of a younger generation which began to achieve prominence by the end of the 1960s. "Post-Minimalism," by insisting upon the temporal divide between these two generations of artists, signals that it is acting as a conceptual marker as well, asserting a separation and implying the end of an era.

"Dematerialization" functions similarly as a chronological counter, by scripting as a new act in the his-
And the force of this construction was to produce in triple Histori, as the implication itself of value.

It is a recognition of a universal emptiness. For it points to a moment when history was invoked, as the prologue of a story in which history lives on with a particular tenacity. It history has been rejected as a source of value, it has certainly been retained within the annals of modern art as a source of meaning. And therefore, as explanation. Each art in its turn is accounted for, for it deepens the logic of a particular formal convention, or as it supplier: one convention with another, as if it attempts to transpose the notion of convention altogether. No matter what the stance of a given art toward the arts that preceded it, the description of its meaning is generally encountered within the hermetic logic of paratexts, within the sets of esthetic language that make up the history of modern art. Meaning in the present becomes a coefficient of the past: explanation is circumscribed by the profile of a historicist model.

By continuing to operate within this model, the terms "post-Minimalism" and "dematerialization" are constructions that trap meaning itself within an infinite region of repetition. Neither label really describes, in positive terms, the content of the works they characterize. Neither really describes the particular modality of consciousness, or of reality, which is generated by the works they designate. Yet the interesting thing is that cognizance of that modality begins to tear against the neurosis of the historicizing. For it considers the paradigm of meaning out of which by all that is called "post-Minimalism" operates. One discovers the deep level at which it is analagous to the current of a transhistorical form of康德 rationalism. And finally, one begins to see the absolute continuities of meaning that connect "post-Minimalism" to Minimal Art.

From the outside, of course, a line for the continuity between Minimalism and post-Minimalism will seem rather obvious. For to the uninitiated observer the strategies of the one have an obelisk-similarity to the strategies of the other. Which is to say that the outside, Mel Bochner's use of the series of cardinal numbers in order to achieve extension, or Richard Serra's method of building a form by splashing lead into a corner, pulling the hardened remains away, splashing again, pulling away again... might not appear all that different from Judd's construction of a row of boxes, or Andre's placement of bricks in a line, or even that matter, Stella's repetition of stripes across a canvas surface. They all partake of a similar kind of repletionlessness just as they all show an urge toward the very seriousness of this painting, in use, Judd's words, "one thing after another." Given this sameness
of being the mode of construction, it may be ask from
the red-bone like something at a time point to say that
Sella’s stapes are on a cavo- support while the cava-
heer or Duntalba Rockburme mark directly on the wall, and
it may seem like an invariable distinction that cidd’s
and marus’ and sweeney’s construction involve fa-
bronial geometric turns while Sella’s are generated
through the process of making. The naive observer,
feeling the continuity, may not quite see why one
group is set off from the other in this prefix “pool” on
the historical label. And the naive observer has com-
mon sense on his side. He is pointing to something
that in fact exists — only what he points to is a pro-
cedural similarity, rather than to the more crucial one
which is also present: a shared notion about the pre-
quisites for a model of meaning.

It is only a kind of criticism addicted to the pendular
logic of a history of alternations that turns away from
the obfuscation of the naive observer, insisting upon the
importance of the fact that numbers or pencil marks
on the wall involve a rejection of the concrete object,
that criticism finds itself embracing the notion of “de-
materialization” as the operative tool of distinction.
And then it is faced with the problem that the cutting
edge, rather than appearing too flat, seems too blunt.

Because “dematerialization” is a category incapable of
distinguishing the work of, say, Sol LeWitt, Bochner,
Rockburme, and Richard Tuttle from other types of
decorets art — high, Barry’s, for example, or Joseph
Kosuth’s, or Douglas Huebler’s. It therefore en-
courages one to overlook the was, in which the mean-
ing of the work in the first group is deeply opposed to
the kind of content — to the models of how meaning
itself is formulated — proposed by the work in the
second. For the type of conceptual art proposed by the
art in the second group grows from the seeds of a de-
eply planted traditionism with respect to meaning.

In connection with the article “Prospect 69,”
Robert Barry was interviewed. “What is your piece for
Prospect 69?” he was asked. “The piece;” he replied,
“consists of the ideas that people will have from reading
this interview. . . . The piece, in its entirety is un-
knowable because it exists in the minds of so many
people. Each person can really know that part which
Barry’s answer stands as a verbal equivalent for the
Inert Gas Series which he did in the same year. The
photographs of sites over which released amounts of
invisible gas are presumably expanding demand the
same kind of residence within the minds of each of
their separate viewers for the work must be com-
pleted by the addition of a mental image of the invis-
ible gas to the concrete image of the landscape.
Since each of these mental images is private, “each
person can really know that part which is in his own
mind.”

This notion of praxis, and of meaning tied to the
private confines of a mental space, permeates
Huebler’s thinking as well. Deepening Barry’s sense
of the separateness of experience, Huebler proceeds
to deny to time and space their status as the grounds of
a transpersonal reality. “I think,” Huebler declares,
"it's perfectly fair to say that time is what each of us says it is at any given moment." Or take, for another example, On Kawara's "I got up" postcards and "I am alive" almanacs about which Lucy Lippard writes.

The fascination exerted by Kawara's obsessive and precise notions of his place in the world (time and location imply a kind of self-reassurance that the artist, does, in fact, exist. At the same time, they are totally without pathos, their objectivity establishing the self-imposed isolation which marks his way of life as well as his art.

"Objectivity" is a strange predicate to attach to the unsubjectivity of the notion that we can only know someone is alive (or awake) because he tells us so. Forming Conceptual hands with Barry and Huesler, Kawara places art within the confines of what Logical-Positivism has called the protocol language --- the language of sense-impression, mental images, and private sensations. It is a language implying that no outside verification is possible of the meanings of words we use to point to our private experience. --- that meaning itself is hostage to that separate video of impressions registered across the screen of each individual's monitor. In the terms of the protocol language, my 'green' and my 'headache' point to what I see and feel, just as your 'green' and your 'headache' point to something you possess. The separateness of our 'greens' arises from the separateness of our retinas, and thus neither of us has any way of verifying the separate data to which our words point. In the grip of this argument we may feel that we therefore have no way of verifying the meaning of those words; and that 'time' or 'green' do indeed mean "what each of us says it is at any given moment."

Because it is the privilege of our private languages to be exempt from the laws of ordinary language, the question of whether "green" means the same thing for everyone, for every language, is impossible. An art that is properly speaking Conceptual art and is hence a "protocol" language, is a language of self-referentiality, a "language" that can only refer to itself. It is a language in which meaning is defined, not by reference to the world, but by reference to its own structure. It is a language in which the artist is the only interpreter, and the only audience is the artist himself. It is a language in which the artist is the only meaning-maker, and the only meaning is the artist's own meaning.

The construction of the work of art purely around the notion of intention goes roughly like this.

The finished work of art is the result of a process of forming, or making, or creating. It is in a sense the proof that such a process has gone on, just as the print in soft ground is proof that someone has passed by. The work of art is thus the index of an act of creation which has at its roots the intention to make the work. Intention here is understood as some kind of prior mental event which we cannot see but for which the work now serves as testimony that it occurred. It is a common enough reading of the Readymades that they represent or hypothesize pure intention; that since the objects in question were not fabricated by the artist but merely chosen by him, the authorship of the object is seen as residing solely in its capacity to register that decision, to render it up as it were into the physical world. Through this reading, the Fountain operates as an expression of Duchamp's intention to make a work.

It seems very logical to say "Art is an expression of something," and if asked, "An expression of what?" to answer, "An expression of the artist, of what he had in mind --- or an expression of the way he saw something." In the case of Abstract Expressionism this answer seems particularly compelling; and it largely constituted the initial interpretations of Pollock's painting as well as de Kooning's, although it was subsequently withdrawn from formulations about Pollock's art. The early views of his work proceeded from the very logic of 'expression,' seeing every mark on their canvases as 'taking to be read in the context of a private self from which the intention to make that mark has been directed. In that sense, the public surface of the work seemed to demand that one see it as a map from which could be read the private mental currents of personality --- of the artist's invisible self.

And this is where that sense of traditionalism which I imputed to certain forms of Conceptual art begins to appear. For connection might begin to be made at this point between the way in which intention/expression functions as a model in time for the same kind of things for which illusionism in painting serves as a spatial model.

We can think of various kinds of illusionistic spaces: the orthogonal grid of classical perspective; the more nebulous continuum of atmospheric landscape; the designator, infinite depth of geometric abstraction. And in each of these pictures of the world, space itself operates as a precondition for the visibility of the pictorial events --- the figures, the depicted objects --- which appear within it. We consider that the ground (or background) in a painting exists somehow before the figures, and even after the figures are placed on the ground, we understand that the ground "continues" behind them, serving as support. In illusionistic painting, 'space' functions as a property which exists prior to the knowledge of things within it. It is in that sense a model of consciousness which is the ground against which objects are constituted. On its most abstract level, traditional picture-making is an argument about the nature of appearance --- suggesting that its very possibility depends on a consciousness that is the ground for all relatedness, for all differentiation, for the constitution of perceptual wholes --- and that that consciousness operates within the prioness of a mental space.

Thus, just as intention can be understood as a necessarily private, internal mental event, which externalizes itself through the selection of objects, the objects which appear within a pictorial space can be seen as issuing from an internalized, prearranged set of coordinates. As one moves within the history of painting to postwar American art --- that is, to Abstract Expressionism --- these two aspects of prioness fuse and become more nakedly the subject of the pictures themselves.

And clearly, the meaning of an attempt to undermine illusionism cannot be dissociated from the baggage that Western picture-making carried along with it. It is a rejection that inheres in the dismantling of the notion of a constituting consciousness and the protocol language of a private self. It is a rejection of a space that exists prior to experience, passively waiting to be filled, and of a psychological model in which a self exists relative to its meanings, prior to contact with the world. So if we wish to speak of the anti-illusionism of the art of the '60s, we cannot limit our discourse to an ideology of form.

It is common enough to say of Stella's painting that it is structured deductively --- that all internal differentiation of its surfaces derive from the literal aspects of the canvas edge. Thus in the early black paintings, like Die Fahrt von Hoch, we point to the way Stella begins with the midpoints of the vertical and horizontal sides and forces the stripes into a repetitive, unbroken declaration of the expense of the painting's four quadrants in a double set of mirror reversals. Or, in the later aluminum paintings where the canvases begin to
be shaped, we note that the stripes perform a more self-evident reverberation inward from the shape of the support, and thereby seem even more nakedly dependent upon the literal features of that support. It seems easy enough to say this, and further to add that the effect of this surface, flashed continuously with the sign of its edge, has purged itself of illusionistic space, has achieved flatness. And that flatness, we think, is the flatness of an object — of a nonlinguistic thing. Yet we would be wrong, in the way that half-truths are wrong: for we would not have said enough.

The signs that haunt Stella’s early stripe paintings are more than signifiers of their literal shapes. Die Fahne Hoch! is deductively structured; so is Luis Miguel Dominguin. But both paintings arrive at a particular configuration, which is the configuration of a cross. We could call this accidental of course. Just as we could conceive it as accidental that the Cross itself relates to that most primitive sign of an object in space: the vertical of the figure projected against the horizontal plane of the nascent ground. But the three-way relationship that fuses along the striped surface of these pictures is a kind of argument for the logical connection between the cruciform of all pictoriality, of all intention to locate a thing within its world, and the way in which the conventional sign — in this case the Cross — arises naturally from a referent in the world. In canvas after canvas one finds oneself in the presence of a particular emblem, drawn from the common repertory of signs — stars, crosses, ring-interlocks, etc. — part of a language that belongs, so to speak, to the world rather than to the private, originating capacity of Stella to invent shapes. But what Stella convinces us of is an account of the initial genesis of those signs. Because in these paintings we see how they are given birth through a series of natural and logical operations. The logic of the deductive structure is therefore shown to be inseparable from the logic of the sign. Both seem to sponsor one another and in so doing ask one to grasp the natural history of pictorial language as such. The real achievement of these paintings is to have fully immersed themselves in meaning, to become mere meaning itself a function of surface — of the external, the public, or a space that is in a way a signifier of the a priori of the image of the intention.

The meaning of Stella's expurgation of illusionistic space is unsalvageable apart from a will to lodge all meaning within the (semiological) conventions of a public space. And to expose illusionistic space as a mode of privacy — of the Self conceived as constitute and its contact with the space of the world.

That conception of the Self has by the late 1950s already become an aspect of the literary experience of Beckett and of the nouveau roman. And it has emerged as the particularly urgent claim of the philosophy of Wittgenstein, in which the language game was a therapy aimed at severing the connection (the logical connection) between meaning and mind. In the Blue Book, for example, Wittgenstein asks what means to make the claim that we know a tune: do we mean that before we sing it we have quickly written it to ourselves silently? or that we have a picture of it in our heads — a mental image of the tune from which we read off the notes, as we sing them.
claiming to know the tune dependent upon having it stored up somewhere inside us, like beads already positioned on a string and ready to be pulled out of our mouths? Or is it simply singing the tune, or perhaps hearing many tunes and saying, "that one just then is the right tune," the tune, and the question of just where it is stored when we claim to know it, widens out in The Philosophical Investigations to memory and images and to the bases for all claims to know. Again and again Wittgenstein tried to sever the certainty of these claims from a picture of a mental space in which definitions and rules are stored, awaiting application. His work became an attempt to condemn our picture of the necessity that there be a private mental space (a space available only in the single self) in which meanings and sentences have to exist, before they could issue into the space of the world. The model of meaning that Wittgenstein implies us to accept is a model removed from the beginning claims of a private self.

The significance of the art which emerged in this country in the early 1960s is that it masked everything on the truth of that model. Therefore, if we read the art of Stella or Morris, or Laid, or Andre, merely as part of a test of formal reordering, we miss the meaning that is now central to that work. Further, we may miss or misconceive the way in which that very notion of meaning persists in certain art of the present.

Bochner's work, for example, has been a consistent attempt to make the linguistic fact into the essential fact — not to deny the materiality of the one or opposed to the materiality of the other, but to deny the necessity in experience of their mutual fusion. In Measurements, Group B, 1967, the walk of a wall is printed with the notion of its dimensions, so that the space appears against the image of its own blueprint. But one has no sense of the presence of the one to the other, of either serving as ground for the other as figure: illusionism is erased in the experience of the extensical objects (the wall) as the basis by the very notion of authenic extension, and of an abstract geometry being indiscernible from those oblique directions through which dimension projects itself into the world.

In Action of Intelligence, a group of linguistic propositions are set up in relation to a group of physical facts, each corroborating the other. A wall running down the center of the work splits the eight segments of the work into two groups of four and makes the total configuration of physical shape and verbal proposition invisible from either side. Wholeness of shape as well as wholeness of the propositional essay becomes a matter of reconstruction, which is to say, of memory. And memory is shown to be a function of language, as language is a arement of that which is complete, external — a presence that is forever possible, "immediate experience." Bochner has written, "will not cease, as an independent domain. Memories tend to be refigured, at least sensations, but not verbalizations. Further, Action of Intelligence, like 7 Properties of Interference as a compensatory entity is in which verbal propositions and physical fact appear within a single act of perception. Veridicality is therefore immediate, and the work acts as a kind of model for public assignment of truth-value to a given statement. But this is how... These works bridge themselves within a broader aspect of the notion of a model, for what is central to them is that presence upon the external, the publicness of the space in which veridicality and meaning reside. They are, one would say, visualizations of a linguistic space that is fully nonpsychological.

The attempt to make the linguistic fact into the essential fact — not to deny the materiality of the one or opposed to the materiality of the other, but to deny the necessity in experience of their mutual fusion — gives new meaning to the idea of a protoil language, a kind of necessary overwriting of the texture of privacy from history.

With Bochner's work, particularly the series Drawing Which Makes Itself, one finds the reason of publicness cannot recoilally into the realm of process. For insofar as Process art can be understood as the generation of a work from a set of rules or procedures insinuated into the performance of the work, process is not logically distinct from the arbitrariness of the private language. Part of the effort of Drawing Which Makes Itself is to generate the work from rules inherent in the materials used: the dimensions of the edges of the paper and its diagonal folds, the double-sidedness natural of paper that makes flipping or reversing it possible, etc. And the effect of this insistence is that one feels the creation of a logical distinction between the grammar of this work and the interwoven grammar of process.
What I am claiming, then, is that decision is the need of certain artists to explore the \textit{paradox} of \textit{language} and \textit{existence} of meaning. During the same time period this need has a parallel project in the work of other sculptors: the discovery of the body as a complete extension of the self.

That aspect of the self comes to light in what is termed the \textit{paradox of the alter ego} — the way in which the picture of the self as a combined whole transparent only to itself and the truths which it is capable of contending, crumbles before the act of connecting with other selves — with other minds. Menck-Henry describes this paradox as the separation of two perspectives, as the fact that in each of us — he and I — there are two perspectives: I for myself and he for himself, and each of us for the other. "Of course these two perspectives in each one of us, cannot be simply juxtaposed, for in that case it is not I that the other would see, nor he that I should see. I must be the exterior that I present to others, and the body of the other must be the other himself." The revelation of this leads away from any notion of consciousness as unified within itself. For the self is understood as complete only after it has surfaced into the world — and the very existence and meaning of the \textit{I} is thus dependent upon its manifestation to the \textit{other}.

Part of the meaning of much of Minimal sculpture issues from the way in which it becomes a metaphorical statement of the self understood only in experience. Morris' three \textit{I}-Beams from 1965, for example, serve as a certain kind of metaphor for this fused dependence of intention and meaning upon the body as it surfaces into the world in every external particular of its movements and gestures. For no matter how clear we understand that the \textit{I}-Beams are identical, it is impossible to really perceive them — the one upended, the second lying on its sides, and the third poised on its two ends — as the same. The experienced shape of the individual sections depends, obviously, upon the orientation of the \textit{I}-Beams to the space they share with our bodies — that is, the \textit{I}-Beams are according to the object's specific relation to the ground, both in terms of the overall scale and in terms of an internal comparison between the two arms of a given \textit{I}.

The \textit{I}-Beams have been described as suggesting a child's manipulation of forms, as though they were huge building blocks. The urge to alter, to see many possibilities, inherent in a single shape is typical of a child's syncretistic vision, whereby learning of one specific form can be transferred to any variations of that form.

But that account seems to violate one's actual experience of the work, to superimpose a mental construct of "sameness" on a world of unlike. In a sense it is to fail for what Morris refers to as "the known constant" — that ideal Cartesian unity — which the piece holds out as a kind of nostalgic remnant of past forms of explanation. It is to ignore the way this "constant" recedes into the ground of the sculpture as a kind of fiction, crowded out by the emergence of absolute difference within the particularity of the
actual space. Situating themselves within the space of experience, the space to which one's own body appears, if it is to appear at all, the t-beams suspend the axiomatic coordinates of an ideal space. We explain space in terms of these coordinates when we think of it as an absolute grid which seems however to converge in depth because we are badly placed to see it. We imagine clearly to come from thinking ourselves suspended above it in order to defray the distortions of our perspective, in order to recapture the absoluteness of its real parallelism. But the meaning of depth is nowhere to be found in the diagrammatic assumptions of this suspension.

The project of Morris' sculpture has consistently been to defeat the diagrammatic. In the sectional fiberglass pieces of 1967–68, for example, the specific configuration of the work is not allowed to become a figure seen against the 'ground' of the object's 'real' structure. The notion of a fixed, integral armature that could mirror the viewer's own self, fully formed prior to experience, founders on the capacity of those separable parts to shift or to have shifted, to formulate a notion of the self which exists only at that moment of externality within that experience.

Morris has persistently written about the conceptual context of his own work and that of fellow-artists. In one of the earliest of these essays, "Notes on Sculpture," Morris speaks of his preoccupation with strong three-dimensional gestalts. "Characteristic of a gestalt," he wrote, "is that once it is established all the information about it qua gestalt is exhausted. (One does not, for example, seek the gestalt of a gestalt.)" The body of criticism that has grown up around Minimal art over the past five or six years has strangely enough, understood the meaning of that statement, and indeed the meaning of the gestalt itself, to be about a latent kind of Carrionism. The gestalts seem to be interpreted as an immediate, ideal unit that persists beyond the particularities of experience, becoming through its very persistence the ground for all experience. Yet this is to ignore the more rudimentary notions of gestalt theory in which the properties of the "good gestalt" are demonstrated to be entirely context-dependent. The meaning of a trapezoid, for example, and therefore its gestalt formations, changes depending upon whether it must be seen as a two-dimensional figure or as a shape perceived in depth, or a meaning that can in no way precede experience, Morris himself pointed to this when he said, "it is those aspects of apprehension that are not consistent with the visual field but rather the result of the experience of the visual field." With different forms and varying strategies, Ludd's and Antin's and Flavin's works are similarly involved in discerning the persistence of Carrionism and in positing meaning itself as a function of external space.

That sense of coalescing in experience and of a realization of the self as it achieves externality is evident in the Prop Pieces that Serra began to make in 1969. By means of a metaphor of striking abstractness, these works suggested a continuing coming of coherence of the body, in the guise of a form that was constantly seen in the act of cohering. The special precariousness of their parts was not about imminent collapse or dissolution. Rather it was directed at evoking the tension between a conceptual unity of certain simple shapes and the actual conditions of their physical union. The One Ton Prop (House of Cards), for example, is a cube (therefore an 'ideal' shape) perceived as perpetually dependent upon these conditions. As well, House of Cards deals specifically with internal space as something constantly available to external vision, and as something entirely defined by the perpsective act of balance by which its exterior is constituted. Thus, in its interior the "I (for myself)") is clearly made a function of externality (the "I for others").

In assigning to this work and to the rest of the Prop Pieces the problematic of the double-perspective, I am obviously not speaking of any specific text for which the works serve as some kind of sign. Rather I hope to locate a certain ground from which to grasp...
the meaning of Serra's need to achieve verticality without permanently adhering separate parts of the sculpture. And this meaning, reaching beyond the domain of the purely formal, connects to the sensibility I have been trying to define within this essay — a sensibility which bridges the boundaries of historical labels.

In the past several years Serra's works have tended to adopt a special form of drawing to define the modules of one's experience of them. In this usage of materials rather in terms of line, linear vectors, and types of boundaries, Serra shares in the way that recent abstract art in general has posited the importance of line, or of drawing per se. This was true of Robert Smithson's and Michael Heizer's art which related to the landscape as a linear unfolding, and in a different way it is clearly true of Beuher and Rockburne.

One explanation for the interest in line — which is at this point quite widespread — might be the inherent closeness between line and language: the formulation of signs both simple and complex, and the assignment of meaning. And line fully externalized is part of a larger strategy. As I have argued, it functions within that metaphorical expression of the Self that has been the concern of a completely post-Expressionist art.

Godard once said that he thought most films turned out to be a form of remembering, that almost all of them seemed peculiar to inhabit the past tense. He did not, he said, want that for his own work. For that reason, he explained, he did not prewrite his films. He would wait until the night before shooting a given scene to block it out, and during the shooting itself he would urge the actors to improvise their lines. He counted the absence, the mistakes even of a lived present. In describing this, he was outlining a sensibility which history, in the form of a narrative
past seemed simply not to apply.

This essay began with another example of history rejected — that of Manet. I realize now that it was a bad example. For his was a procedure that was intensely historical; it was a disavowal of the content of a particular history, but not of history's form. Because in order to criticize or oust it or even outdistance the past, Manet had to incorporate it within a given work. The Old-Master prototype had to serve as a ground against which the forms of the present could stand in relief. Couched within that juxtaposition was history itself, like an outwear garment used to line the kids of a new cloak. The meaning of the present was articulated against the included residue of the past.

If I have tried to account for anything in this essay, it is something about why that very procedure has become unacceptable to certain artists of the last ten years. Some of these artists I have named, these artists, of course, many others. For all of them there is no longer any question of proceeding by holding out an alternative to a past position. For so make as out of a reply to a formulation from the historical past is to


immerse oneself within the solipsistic space of memory


not so they are not, for example, offering a new account of emotion, because to do so would leave them trapped within the privacy of a mental space which is but one element of the space in which they exist, and for which they might as well be precisely one in which meaning is present as it maps itself onto reality, and in which the art they create must do the same.