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"Eccentric Abstraction"

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Only the ugly is attractive

CHAMPFLEURY

The rigors of structural art would seem to preclude entirely any aberrations toward the exotic. Yet in the last three years, an extensive group of artists on both East and West Coasts,

* Reprinted, slightly cut, and rearranged, from *Art International*, Vol. X, No. 9 (November, 1966). This article provided the basis for lectures at the University of California in Berkeley and the Los Angeles County Museum in the summer of 1966, and for the catalogue of an exhibition of the same title at the Fischbach Gallery, New York, October, 1966 (artists represented were Adams, Bourgeois, Hesse, Kuehn, Nauman, Potts, Sonnier, and Viner). This show has received an unjustified amount of attention because several of the artists in it are now so well known. Their work seemed much more "eccentric" in 1966, in the heyday of the primary structure and Minimal Art, than it does today. Most of its more exotic elements were soon eliminated. I was at the time far from fully aware of the implications of this work and overemphasized the Surrealist connection, although it is Surrealist automatism that provides the association with Pollock. Robert Morris' article on "Anti-Form" (*Artforum*, April, 1968) is a much clearer discussion of the way in which the nature of the materials and physical phenomena determine the shape of much new sculpture. His own felt works of that year worked from the premises of Nauman's rubber streamers and random pieces, and perhaps from those of Barry le Va and Josef Beuys, although all three were omitted from Morris' essay. The entire "Anti-form" tendency has since been credited to Morris, although a number of young artists were developing the idiom simultaneously, in Europe as well as America.

largely unknown to each other, have evolved a non-sculptural † style that has a good deal in common with the primary structure as well as, surprisingly, with aspects of Surrealism. The makers of what I am calling, for semantic convenience, eccentric abstraction, refuse to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non-objective art. Eccentric abstraction has little in common with the sculpture of the fifties, since it rarely activates space, or with assemblage, which incorporated recognizable objects and was generally small in scale, additive, and conglomerate in technique. In fact, the eccentric idiom is more closely related to abstract painting than to any sculptural forms. Many of the artists are around thirty years old and, like the structurists, began as painters rather than sculptors; when they moved into three dimensions, they did so without acquiring either sculptural habits or training. The increased influence of painting has undermined sculptural tradition, and provided alternatives to the apparent dead end of conventional sculpture. But where formalist painting tends to focus on specific formal problems, eccentric abstraction is more allied to the nonformal tradition devoted to opening up new areas of materials, shape, color, and sensuous experience. It shares Pop Art's perversity and irreverence. The generalizations made here and below do not, of course, apply to all of the work discussed. Its range and variety is one of the most interesting characteristics of eccentric abstraction. † ‡

† I no longer think that either "non-sculptural" or "anti-sculptural" make sense as adjectives. At the time this was written, these terms seemed the only ones to imply the radicality of the moves being made away from traditional sculpture. Now, only four years later, this radical nature can be taken for granted. Distinctions between painting and sculpture, or two- and three-dimensional art, have been overcome almost entirely. Similarly, the distinction between art and nonart ("But is it Art?") seem a waste of time. Better to call everything art than to waste time inventing semantic labels and rationalizations that will be obsolete so soon.

‡ I have seen reproductions that indicate artists in other countries (e.g. Barry Flanagan in England and Emilio Rewart in Argentina) are working in similar directions, to say nothing of the Americans omitted here due to lack of space.

‡ I did not know at that time about the seminal work of the German

If government-sponsored academic sculpture is rooted in a heroic and funereal representation left over from the nineteenth century, the primary structuralists have introduced a new kind of funeral monument—funereal not in the derogatory sense, but because their self-sufficient unitary or repeated forms are intentionally inactive. Eccentric abstraction offers an improbable combination of this death premise with a wholly sensuous, life-giving element. And it introduces humor into the structural idiom, where angels fear to tread. Incongruity, on which all humor is founded, and on which Surrealism depends so heavily, is a prime factor in eccentric abstraction, but the contrasts that it thrives upon are handled impassively, emphasizing neither one element nor the other, nor the encounter between the two. Opposites are used as complementaries rather than contradictions; the result is a formal neutralization, or paralysis, that achieves a unique sort of wholeness. Surrealism was based on the "reconciliation of distant realities"; eccentric abstraction is based on the reconciliation of different forms, or formal effects, a cancellation of the form-content dichotomy.

For instance, in her latest work, a labyrinth of white threads connecting three equally spaced gray panels, Eva Hesse has adopted a modular principle native to the structural idiom. She limits her palette to black, white, and gray, but the finality of this choice is belied by an intensely personal mood. Omitting excessive detail and emotive color, but retaining a tentative, vulnerable quality in the simplest forms, she accomplishes an idiosyncratic, unfixd space that is carried over from earlier paintings and drawings. A certain tension is transmitted by the tightly bound, paradoxically bulbous shapes of the smaller works, and by the linear accents of the larger ones (see reproduction in *Art International*, Vol. X, No. 5, May, 1966, p. 64). Energy is repressed, or rather imprisoned, in a timeless vacuum tinged with anticipation.

There are a good many precedents for the sensuous objects, one of the first being Meret Oppenheim's notorious fur-lined

Josef Beuys in this field, nor of Richard Long's and Jan Dibbets' similarly developing ideas.

teacup, saucer, and spoon. Salvador Dali's extension of the idea, a fur-lined bathtub made for a Bonwit Teller display window in 1941, was a more potent vehicle for sensuous identification. The viewer was invited figuratively to immerse himself in a great fur womb; twenty-five years later an analogous invitation was extended by Claes Oldenburg's gleaming, flexible blue-and-white vinyl bathtub. Yves Tanguy's 1936 object, *From the Other Side of the Bridge*, was another early example—a stuffed handlike form suggestively choked off in two places by a tight rubber band extending from a panel marked "caresses, fear, anger, oblivion, impatience, fluff." Around 1960, Yayoi Kusama developed similar ideas in her phallus-studded furniture which, though unquestionably fecund, remained Surrealist in spirit. Lee Bontecou's gaping reliefs were a departure in the way they firmly subjugated the evocative element to unexpected formal ends, and H. C. Westermann's *The Plush*, 1964, humorously fused the sensuous element with deadpan abstract form.²

Since the late forties, Louise Bourgeois has been working in manners relatable to eccentric abstraction—not nonsculptural but far out of the sculptural mainstreams. Her exhibition at the Stable Gallery in 1964 included several small, earth or flesh-colored latex molds which, in their single flexible form, indirectly erotic or scatological allusions, and emphasis on the unbeautiful side of art, prefigured the work of other artists today. Often labially slit, or turned so that the smooth, yellow-pink-brown lining of the mold as well as the highly tactile outer shell is visible, her mounds, eruptions, concave-convex reliefs, and knotlike accretions are internally directed, with a suggestion of voyeurism. They imply the location rather than the act of metamorphosis, and are detached, but less aggressive

² Ay-O, Lucas Samaras, Lindsey Decker, Vreda Paris and others have achieved similar fusions, though without abandoning the conventional box, vitrine, or platform format. The latter isolates forms and controls the space they are seen in as well as being a counterpart of the famous Surrealist dissecting table where umbrella and sewing machine met. Use of a platform or box as a vehicle of such strange isolation can be traced back to de Chirico's empty piazzas, Ernst's (then Dali's and Tanguy's) broad plains, and Giacometti's Surrealist and later sculpture, as well as to the Surrealist object in general.

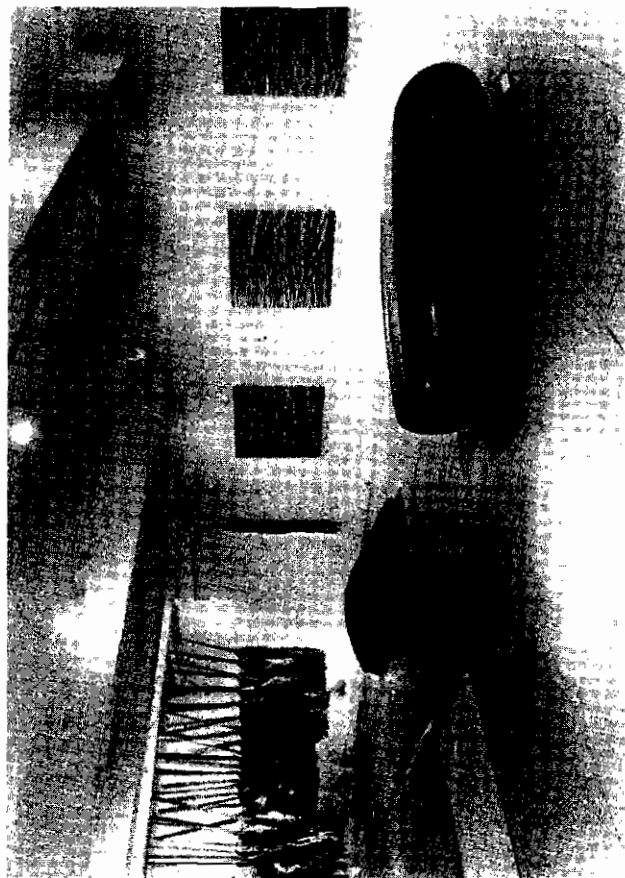
than the immensely scaled work of her younger colleagues. In usual sculptural terms, these small, flattish, fluid molds are decidedly unprepossessing, ignoring decorative silhouette, mass, almost everything conventionally expected of sculpture. On the other hand, they have an uneasy aura of reality and provide a curiously *surrounded* intimacy despite their small size. They provoke that part of the brain which, activated by the eye, experiences the strongest physical sensations.

Such mindless, near-visceral identification with form, for which the psychological term "body ego" or Bachelard's "muscular consciousness" seems perfectly adaptable, is characteristic of eccentric abstraction. It is difficult to explain why certain forms and treatments of form should elicit more sensuous response than others. Sometimes it is determined by the artist's own approach to his materials and forms; at others by the viewer's indirect sensations of identification, reflecting both his personal and vicarious knowledge of sensorial experience in general. Body ego can be experienced two ways: first through appeal, the desire to caress, to be caught up in the feel and rhythms of a work; second, through repulsion, the immediate reaction against certain forms and surfaces which take longer to comprehend.

In 1853, P. J. Proudhon wrote: "The image of vice, like that of virtue, is as much the domain of painting as of poetry: According to the lesson that the artist can give, all figures, beautiful or ugly, can fulfill the goal of art."³ In a broad sense all modern art is subject to the Camp cliché, "it's so bad it's good," which neutralizes opposites. The words ugliness and emptiness are resurrected periodically even now in regard to new art styles. They, and the modifying concept of anti-art, which rationalizes unfavorable reactions to the new, are obsolete. Nothing stays ugly for long in today's art scene. Following the line that dualism is also obsolete, some of these artists have tackled the almost impossible task of reconciling the two major attitudes toward art today, which are as mutually opposed as oil and water: the art-as-art position and the art-as-life position.

³ I am grateful to Elizabeth Gilmore Holt for suggestions on the nineteenth century in this context.

"Eccentric Abstraction" installation: (l. to r.) Frank Lincoln Viner (hanging at rear), Don Potts (on floor), Eva Hesse (on wall). September, 1966. Photograph courtesy of Fischbach Gallery, New York.



One element in their work that characterizes this attempt is the adaptation of aspects of Pop Art to a nonobjective idiom. While Pop Art has had no direct influence on these artists, it was Pop that made palatable parts of the contemporary environment previously considered vulgar, ugly, and inferior to the "beauty" required by tastemakers in art, fashion, and commerce. It opened up new possibilities for materials and attitudes, all of which must be firmly controlled from the aesthetic angle.

Frank Lincoln Viner, who has been working in this idiom since around 1961, has explored multiple areas of sensuality purged of sentiment, and is now concerned with a more stringent but equally nonsculptural direction, based on the juxtaposition of taut, boxy, hard forms against limp, random, soft forms, or fusion of the two in a single work, such as his huge expandable hanging piece made of orange vinyl, silk-screened with large spiral shapes in blue and yellow and edged with a still more multicolored fringe. The series of identical rectangular shapes are pierced by a central hole, or corridor. His combination of garish pattern and disciplined form does not so much soften structural effect as it shifts the focus. In other works he has manipulated surface until it contradicts the form it covers, armoring a soft surface with shiny metal studs while the hard forms are softened with irregular, wavy bands. Because he has consistently worked in this manner over a period of years, Viner has already excluded some of the more obvious aspects of eccentric abstraction with which others are still occupied. His work transcends ugliness by destroying the notion of ugly versus beautiful in favor of an alogical visual compound, or obstreperous Sight.

The size of Viner's latest works approaches an environmental concept. Most of these artists have, so far, avoided such ideas, largely because of their concern with formal wholeness. Harold Paris, who persists in a more sculptural concept, has made a series of rooms that extends the reconciliation of sensuous opposites to a more complicated level. The latest and most successful room even includes temperature change and electronic sound controlled by the viewer's movements and pressures on the surfaces. Made primarily of various kinds of

black synthetic rubber, each surface has its own chiaroscuro, glowing with absorbed or repelled light. Some are smoothly soft, others matte, others finely textured or ribbed. They and the folded, molded organic forms fool the hand as well as the eye. A deceptively squashy-looking shape will be hard as metal, while a flat, wall-like surface gives resiliently when touched. The sculpture itself is set up in a multipartite, aislelike arrangement, small forms before larger, parent forms, augmenting the ritual quality of the entire environment.

These artists usually prefer synthetics and avoid materials with long-standing literary associations, but Don Potts (like Paris, from San Francisco) uses fur and leather with a wood veneer. More a sculptor than most of those mentioned here, he converts his materials into surfaces of such commercial precision that they can be explored in a directly sensuous manner instead of as anecdotal devices. Potts's great flowing structures, or the planar piece that suggestively rubs its furred edges together, are luxury items that invite touch but repel emotion by their almost maliciously perfect appearance. *Up Tight, Slowly*, an immense undulating floor piece with a two-color leather surface, is both sensuous and sensual; it forces a kind of attraction that might be said to border on titillation, were the form not so clearly understated.

The materials used in eccentric abstraction are obviously of distinct importance. Unexpected surfaces separate the work still more radically from any sculptural context, and even if they are not supposed to be touched, they are supposed to evoke a sensuous response. If the surfaces are familiar to one's sense of touch, if one can tell by looking how touching them would feel, they are all the more effective. As far as American art is concerned, Claes Oldenburg has been the major prototype for soft sculpture. Though his work is always figurative, he divests his familiar objects of their solidity, permanence, and familiarity. His fondness for flowing, blowing, pokable, pushable, lumpy surfaces and forms has none of the self-consciousness of, say, Dali's illusionistically melted objects. By taking single manufactured items and ready-made goods for his subjects, and using them with a high degree of abstraction, he bypasses the anecdotal barrier set up by the assemblagists

with their combinations of objects. Several, though by no means all, of the younger abstract artists working in soft materials noted their possibilities through Oldenburg's work; it differs from earlier uses of cloth in that he uses the medium in full range—stuffed and slightly resistant, left loose and absolutely manipulable.

Taken together, the effect of an Oldenburg soft canvas ghost model for a giant light switch and the streamlined, hard final version make up a kind of before-and-after or double-edged experience. Similarly, the "subject matter" of many of the works illustrated here could be said to be an understated metamorphosis. Though energy in any active, emotive sense is anathema to most of these artists, they have not rejected the idea of change, but systematized it, suggesting the force of change rather than showing its process. Their work tends to be anticlimactic, with no crescendo or buildup of forms. Gary Kuehn, for example, makes structures that use asymmetry as a neutralizing agent. Precise rectangular sections melt into a broad, fiberglass flow. Kuehn's earlier works were more tumbling and active, more obvious in confrontation of box and flow, but in the recent pieces, the flow is heavy, extremely controlled, and self-contained, often separate from its parent form, epitomizing inactive contrast. Momentary excitement is omitted; the facts before and the facts after action are presented, but not the act or gesture itself. Kuehn has been working with a structural versus idiosyncratic combination for some three years now, building primary single forms and juxtaposing them first against pillows and soft objects, then bundles of bare branches or twigs, bright-colored plaster flows, or swatches of hairlike nylon fiber. The high finish and assurance of the recent work deemphasizes novelty and oddity in order to stress and crystallize a concrete aspect of sensuous experience.

The use of a flexible instead of a fixed medium opens up an area somewhere between kinesthetic and kinetic art in which moving or movable elements are extremely understated, as opposed to the hectic "technological" bases of most kinetic sculpture. Keith Sonnier's inflatable forms are sometimes static, sometimes "breathing." The ones that inflate and deflate boxy vinyl forms include a similarly boxy counterpart in

hard, painted material—thus presenting two apparently contradictory states as parts of a single phenomenon—a very slightly speeded-up version of the kind of soft sculpture that can only be altered by touch. The rhythm gives life to inert forms while their static precondition is simultaneously noted. Even when the inflated shapes do not move, they span space (from wall to floor) in a manner that suggests the lines of movement within a single physical sensation. The clear vinyl forms give the effect of formal mass but physical impermanence, a strength derived from frailty.

Rutgers University, where Sonnier and Kuehn have taught, is a hotbed of eccentric abstraction, a phenomenon due mainly to the individual developments of the artists, but indirectly attributable to Allan Kaprow's unrestricted ideas and his history of involvement with bizarre and impermanent materials, which was influential there even after his own departure. Last year Robert Morris also taught at Rutgers and his older work mingled contradictory premises in a cerebral manner opposing Oldenburg's intuitive approach. Jean Linder, who was making large phallic sculptures of epoxied and painted cloth in San Francisco, also taught at Douglas in 1965–66, when she moved away from the rough materials and techniques that characterize the so-called funk art of San Francisco (mainly Berkeley). Now in New York, she makes furniture-like structures, overtly sexual in their imagery and utterly unexpected in their awkward and uninhibited forms. With soft clear plastics and vinyl fabrics she has developed a hallucinatory use of transparency; her best work is relatively simple and less imagist.

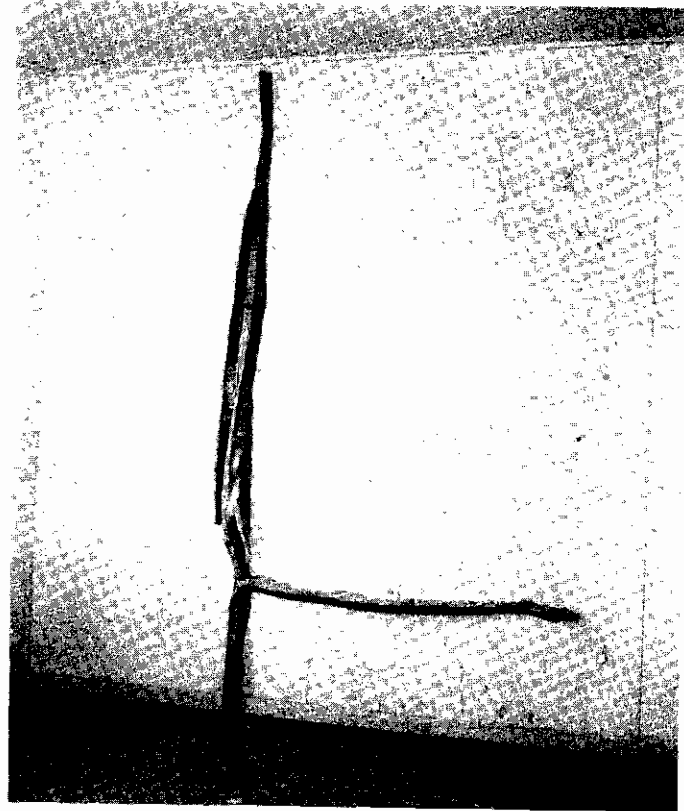
This applies to most of the San Francisco artists who deal with "funk," described by a West Coast writer as a kind of rugged individualist's Camp, unofficial and inelegant: "While Camp cultivates 'good' bad taste in a way that is often precious and even *recherché*, Funk is concerned more with the essence than the pose, and can even be 'bad' bad taste if the Funk is mean enough."⁴ Whereas funky art, or West Coast

⁴ Kurt von Meier and Carl Belz, "Funkville: The West Coast Scene," *Art and Australia*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (December, 1965), p. 201.

eccentric abstraction, deals with a raunchy, cynical eroticism that parallels that of the New York artists, the West Coast is more involved with assemblage than with structural frameworks. Among those artists with a more developed formal sense (as far as I can tell from the little work I have seen) are Wayne Campbell, Dennis Oppenheim, Rodger Jacobsen, Jeremy Anderson, and particularly Mowry Baden's big fibrous, membrane-like *Traps*, as well as his more abstract ceramics.

Typical of a much cooler kind of Funk is Bruce Nauman, who lives in San Francisco and has shown once in Los Angeles. Nauman's paradoxical ideas and intellectual inventiveness recall those of Robert Morris, though the work bears no resemblance. He has manipulated blotchy synthetic rubbers, tinted fiberglass, painted woods and metals into a curious limbo between mere existence and establishment of barely marked areas of space. His recent pieces are concerned mainly with molds—the negative-positive and inside-out properties of hollow, open, and solid forms and their enclosed or filled spaces. The older work is more random—a group of rubbery streamers, a thin T-bar with a slightly curved-out stem, an irregular “melted” barrier arched against the wall, a roughly circular group of centrally attached rubber strips to be thrown arbitrarily on the floor. The majority of Nauman's pieces are carelessly surfaced, somewhat aged, blurred, and repellent, wholly nonsculptural and deceptively inconsequential at first sight. Their fragility suggests fragmentation, but they are disturbingly self-sufficient, with the toughness of lost, left-over function and a total lack of elegance. When Nauman uses color it is spiritlessly urban, but not commercial—like a shrimp-pink house badly in need of a paint job.

Kenneth Price, in Los Angeles, conveys an ambivalent sense of vulnerable hostility in his small, painted ceramic ovoids. The self-containment of the bright, dry armored shell is at odds with the dark, damp tendrils emerging from the core. In later pieces the outer form is free and fluid, still biomorphically sensuous but avoiding any specific erotic reference, and in others, a single form—lumpy, independent, like a small island—is taken entirely out of the organic category. Though the metallic, glowing color has the same sort of sin-



Bruce Nauman: Untitled. 1966. Latex. Collection of Panza di Biumo, Varese.

ister refinement as the earlier pieces, the later ones are more arresting in their divorce from extant sculptural tendencies. The fact that Price, a highly self-reliant artist, and by choice isolated from the stylistic mainstreams, has arrived at an un-fixed asymmetrical flowing form that can be related distantly to Kuehn's and Nauman's is indicative of the extent to which such an idiom is in the air.

Alice Adams was an accomplished weaver for many years; when she turned to sculpture, she acquired no sacred sense of medium, and was free to invent. Her familiarity with flexible, manipulable materials led her to work with forms that are patently man-made, but have a strangeness operating close to a natural level. The gawky, semi-architectural armatures of chicken wire, industrial cable, and link fencing retain traces of biomorphism, though not so much as her older work, which evoked unnamed creatures—ropy, rough tangles of fiber and painted cable. Adams' animate references are erotic and often humorous, whereas Robert Breer's white styrofoam "floats" are more ominous. Unseen motors enable them to creep at an almost imperceptibly slow pace and they constantly alter the space in which they move. Their simple, angular, quasi-geometric shapes dispel by understatement most of the biological suggestions that arise from their motion, and unlike the related kinetic sculptures of Pol Bury, they avoid cuteness.

In 1924, André Breton wrote that for him the most effective image was the one with the highest degree of arbitrariness. The artists discussed here reject the arbitrary in favor of a single form that unites image, shape, metaphor, and association, confronting the viewer as a whole, an undiluted aesthetic sensation, instead of as a bundle of conflicting or balanced parts. Evocative qualities are suppressed to subliminal level without benefit of Freudian clergy. Sensual aspects are, perversely, made unpleasant, or minimized.⁵ Metaphor is freed from subjective bonds. Ideally, a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol, a semisphere is just that and not a breast. Too much free

⁵ See Barbara Rose, "Filthy Pictures: Some Chapters in the History of Taste," *Artforum*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (May, 1965), p. 24.

association on the viewer's part is combated by formal understatement, which stresses nonverbal response and often heightens sensuous and/or sensual reactions by crystallizing them.

Abstraction cannot be pornographic in any legal or specific sense no matter how erotically suggestive it becomes. (There is no pornographic music.) Instead of employing biomorphic form, usually interpreted with sexual references in Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, several of these artists employ a long, slow, voluptuous but also mechanical curve, deliberate rather than emotive, stimulating a rhythm only vestigially associative—the rhythm of postorgasmic calm instead of ecstasy, action perfected, completed, and not yet reinstated. The sensibility that gives rise to an eroticism of near inertia tends to be casual about erotic acts and stimulants, approaching them nonromantically. The distinction made by the Surrealists between conscious and unconscious is irrelevant, for the current younger generation favors the presentation of specific facts—*what* we feel, *what* we see rather than *why* we do so.⁶ The Surrealist poet Pierre Reverdy said thirty years ago that "the characteristic of the strong image is that it derives from the spontaneous association of two very distant realities whose relationship is grasped solely by the mind," but that "if the senses completely approve an image, they kill it in the mind."⁷ This last qualification clearly separates Surrealism from its eccentric progeny. For a more complete acceptance by the senses—visual, tactile, and "visceral"—the absence of emotional interference and literary pictorial associations is what the new artists seem to be after.

⁶ See G. R. Swenson, *The Other Tradition* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1965).

⁷ From "Le Gant de Crin," quoted in Marcel Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz Inc., 1950), p. 288.