



i never  
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what  
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it was

David Antin  
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this book is for elly  
without whom  
it would have been  
much duller



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by way  
of a  
preface

a number of years ago i was giving a talk very much like the talks from which the pieces in this book took their origin and i was trying to think my way through the difficult issues of what it means in this culture to be a professional and why i was never quite comfortable with the term after about forty minutes of this talking and thinking feeling i had done as well as i could for the moment i came to a provisional ending and as soon as i was done a woman who had been following the course of my talk with apparently intense interest rushed up to me and said with a strong sense of relief thank god i was so afraid youd forget your words but there were no words my talks are not lectures theyre thinkings and meditations i come with concerns and reflections with questions and matter for thinking even obsessions but there are no words not ahead of time

i could use the word "improvisations" ive used it before but ive come to distrust what most people think it means the idea of starting from a blank slate nobody starts from a blank slate not charlie parker nor homer nor ludwig wittgenstein started from a blank slate each in his different way going over a considered ground that became a

new ground as they considered it again — so that's what these pieces started as when I talked them — reconsiderations of a ground, an old ground — the experience of time — of repetition of remembering — and forgetting

so much for origins

but the pieces in this book are texts — texts starting from two places: transcripts of the tape recordings — I always bring a little tape recorder with me — and memories of the talking — these are not the same — a tape recording doesn't record everything the audience hears and sees or fails to hear or see — and it records what they don't hear — room noises, slips of the tongue or irrelevant hesitations while the raw transcriptions don't catch meaningful intonation patterns or shifts in vocal quality — so composing the texts involves a restoration from a memory — but it's also something more — there are occasions when the allotted time for the talk or the circumstances are too limited for the material and I feel a loyalty to the material — an obligation to take it further to articulate it more sharply — so I do but there's another loyalty — to the audience that made it possible and helped bring it into being — and to the performance situation it was part of

so in composing the texts I work between these two loyalties; it's not an issue of polish — sometimes the pieces turn out to be very close to the raw transcripts — and sometimes they can be twice as long — but always — I hope — bearing the marks of their origin in talking and thinking at a particular time in a particular place — and to ensure that these texts preserve their traces as talk I've tried to distinguish them from printed prose by dispensing with its nonfunctional markers: regular capitalization, most punctuation marks, and right and left justification — which I see as merely marking propriety and making a dubious claim to right thinking and right writing

x as for the book — it's an assembling of pieces that have come together

in my mind as a kind of open work structure i hope to offer as  
provisional housing for a number of elusive bright colored  
migratory meanings

*david antin*  
 *12/1/04*

by way of a preface



the

theory

and

practice of

postmodernism

a manifesto

about two years ago elly and i decided we needed a new mattress or maybe elly decided it because i didnt pay much attention to the problem

we had an old mattress wed had it for years and the salesman wed bought it from had assured us it would last us a lifetime and it was getting older and lumpy or lumpy in some places and hollowed out in others and i just assumed it was part of a normal process of aging it was getting older we were getting older and wed get used to it but eleanor has a bad back and she was getting desperate to get rid of this mattress that had lived with us for such a long time and so loyally that i thought i knew all its high points and low points its eminences and pitfalls and i was sure that at night my body

worked its way carefully around the lumps dodging the precipices and moving to solider ground whenever it could

but maybe eleanor sleeps more heavily than i do i have a feeling that i spent much of my life at night avoiding the pitfalls of this mattress that i was used to and it was a skill id acquired over the ten or fifteen years of this mattress' life so i felt there was no reason to get rid of this mattress that had been promised to us by a salesman who said it would last the rest of our lives i figured we were going to live long lives i didnt think we were anywhere close to dying so neither was the mattress but eleanor kept waking up with backaches

still i figured it was a good mattress and that elly just didnt have enough skill at avoiding the lumps it never occurred to me that the mattress was at fault so i didnt do anything and elly didnt do anything because shes not into consumer products and hates to go shopping but by the end of a year elly convinced me because she has a sensitive back and i dont that she had a more accurate understanding of this business than i did so i said sure eleanor

lets get a new mattress were rebuilding the house as long as were going to have a new house we may as well have a new mattress but eleanor said how will i know its a good one i dont want to get another mattress that gets hollowed and lumpy and gives me backaches when i wake up how will i know how to get a good one

i said well open the yellow pages and well look up mattresses and therell be several places that sell them and ill close my eyes and point a finger at one of these places and it will be a place that has lots of mattresses where we can make a choice as to what constitutes a good one by lying on them

now elly really knew that you cant just walk into a place and buy a mattress she knows this about american consumer goods and

she knows that these places would be equipped with rich delusional capabilities whatever they might be

we would go to a great warehouse with subdued lighting where they played somniferous music that encouraged you into restful comfort while people would be heard talking in hushed voices walking about examining the mattresses or testing them by gently reclining on them “oh are you buying that one my aunt sylvie had one just like it and practically lived on it”

“thats a wonderful mattress my uncle everett suffered for years from lumbago that never let him sleep he bought that mattress and slept like a baby ever since” “my aunt agnes had asthma and she used to wake up every hour gasping for breath since shes been sleeping on that mattress she sleeps like a log she rises fresh every morning and plays three sets of tennis every afternoon and shes seventy-three”

so eleanor said i cant deal with that and i said okay el what are you going to do she said ill call carol

carol is our expert carol has been an expert in anything domestic that weve ever done all our lives because were definitely not carol has been our great expert on everything gardeners carpenters eleanor calls carol and its hard sometimes carol may have a new husband and then shes living somewhere else and youve got to find her shes an expert on everything but men or shes an expert on men but she changes them fairly often shes been married five times and each time it seems fine but then it turns out after a while its not fine or not fine anymore so she has to change men and probably changes mattresses with them so she should be an expert on mattresses

but for some reason carol is unavailable shes on a jury or shes managing someones election campaign or consulting on somebodys

math program shes inaccessible and cant return ellys phone calls  
 i said well youre going to have to call somebody how about a  
 chiropractor youve got two chiropractors they ought to know  
 whats good for your back

she said which one should i call? i said call  
 them both she said which one should i call first? i dont know i  
 said why dont you call akasha? akasha is a sikh not from india  
 but from los angeles hes a wonderful chiropractor but hes a los  
 angeles kid who grew up to be a vegetarian and a los angeles dodger  
 fan and a sikh he has a pale white bread looking face under his  
 white turban but he knows all about diet and he can stick you all over  
 with little pins and he has wonderful hands and when he presses  
 your back your pains magically go away sooner or later but we  
 dont go to him for the diet or the exercises he can teach or for classes  
 in shamanism or even for the little pins but for his wonderful  
 hands he has more excellences than we can rightly enjoy but we  
 go to him for his wonderful hands and we have conversations about  
 the dodgers and the padres while he makes our back pains go away  
 and eleanor calls him but it turns out that mattresses are not part of  
 his expertise

he tells eleanor he knows nothing about what separates a poor  
 mattress from a good mattress and he suggests we call nikolai he  
 should know more about mattresses he lives in del mar

i find this frankly puzzling nikolai is our sloe eyed weight lifter  
 chiropractor who used to be part of the sixties alternative scene in la  
 jolla that ran the unicorn a theater that showed only classics and  
 ran mithras a bookstore that specialized in spiritual healing but  
 now that the sixties and the seventies were over hes become a

chiropractor to upscale del mar and has to control a taste for rich food  
 in pricey italian restaurants akasha figured he would know about

mattresses i wasnt sure of the logic but nikolai had played the weight lifter in eleanors last movie and i figured hed be willing to share whatever knowledge he had

but he was attending a conference on chiropractic somewhere near aspen and elly couldnt reach him

elly i said if you want a mattress today and you wont come back into the house without a new mattress were going here and i point to an ad in the yellow pages that says

#### THE MATTRESS WAREHOUSE

but they have two locations one is in encinitas eight miles to the north of us and the other is on miramar about five miles to the south so elly worries should we go to the encinitas store or the one on miramar id made the mistake of not looking before i showed it to her

i said we could call them and find out which one has a bigger stock i dial the number a woman answers and i say i have a serious question if i was looking for a mattress and i wanted to make the most responsible connoisseur choice of the mattress of mattresses to which of your two stores should i go she said i dont think theres any difference i said you mean you dont have a bigger inventory in one place than the other? she said i dont know i really dont think so so i said eleanor lets go to miramar its a little closer she said but what if the encinitas store is better? i said lets go to miramar and if you dont like what you see there we can go right to encinitas well go to both of them and then you make your decision

we drive out to the one on miramar and its in one of those little malls with a vietnamese restaurant a shoe store and an aerobic studio for women and theres a big empty looking storefront that says

#### THE MATTRESS WAREHOUSE

its encouraging i say theres a big truck outside filled with mattresses elly says yes but the place looks as blank as a tire store

it doesnt look very impressive i said well the mattresses are all lying down on the floor and youre looking in the window

so i get her into the store and we start looking around trying to figure out where to start and there is a helpful little man an elderly irishman with freckles and gray hair and very laid back and he wants to know if he can help us

can you tell me where the better mattresses are asks eleanor

it all depends on what you want my dear

i want something eleanor says thats firm but comfortable

no i said eleanor you want it to be more than firm every time you talk to me about a mattress you want it to be hard because youre afraid youll sink into it

the little man smiles if you really want it to be hard you want one of these he says pointing to a pastel blue mattress right next to us but if you want it to be luxuriant and hard at the same time you want one of these and he leads us a little further into the showroom the mattress hes showing us is a salmon colored one with some odd looking padding on the top that makes it softer my wife he says loves this one she wakes up fresh every morning and makes me breakfast all because of this mattress he runs his hand lovingly over its padded surface go on he says try them all

now this mattress is only some incredible price like \$890 or \$750 i dont really remember but it was some outlandish price to somebody like me who figures you pay around \$100 for an okay mattress but this is a special top of the line mattress i can see that for somebody with a sensitive back so i say nothing and he tells ell go on try it try them all you can only tell what you like by trying them so elly starts trying mattresses

shes lying down on one mattress and then shes popping up and

lying down on another and then shes beckoning to me to lie down with her to make sure that she really likes it and shes somewhat liking all of them because theyre all new and better than our old mattress to start off with but mostly shes not sure and were lying on them and reclining on them in different positions and im beginning to get a little embarrassed by all this because other people are starting to come in and theyre looking at mattresses and looking at us to see how were lying on our mattresses and there are certain things you do on mattresses that youre not going to try out in public either so im not really sure either

meanwhile workmen are bringing in more mattresses and people are walking around looking and feeling mattresses and looking at us because were a little less uptight about lying around in public and im beginning to feel like a specimen in a laboratory or a zoo animal but elly isnt disturbed about it at all and keeps running around looking for new mattresses with different kinds of support systems that our nice little irishman kindly shows us

but the proof is in the pudding  
he says in the end its your bed and youve got to lie in it

so elly keeps  
on testing and ive bailed out because im not really into this ive been doing it sort of but i keep thinking that what you do with a mattress is you learn to live with it you know? somehow you learn to live with its defects everything made in america is built with defects right? i figure that defects are the name of the american consumption game

but eleanor believes in perfection and marcia thats my sister in law has already told eleanor that if you want a great mattress a really great mattress you have to get it custom made

i said eleanor forget it i wouldnt know what to tell them to custom make would you what do you mean custom made i would have to know what constitutes its greatness do you know what constitutes mattress greatness

she said no so i said forget custom made custom made is for people who are geniuses they know all there is to know about what mattresses should do i dont have any idea what a mattress should do except that its there to be slept on and not get up and bite me i want a mattress that will leave me alone and ill leave it alone but were going through this whole mattress routine and finally eleanor has it narrowed down to two mattresses meanwhile our friendly irishman has told us his life story

he is it turns out the nephew of a famous cinematographer who made a lot of famous bad movies with great cinematography and its through the inheritance from this dignitary that our friend lives in a comfortable house in encinitas where he spends a lot of time when hes not selling mattresses puttering around in his garden or watching public television hes found out that we work in an art department and has some questions he wants to ask us about a program he saw last tuesday about an artist named botticelli what did i think of him

hes pretty good i said yeah there was this one painting it was beautiful you mean the springtime lady i said thats right she was coming out of the water and she had long hair and she was stepping out of a seashell i said very beautiful he said yeah i said very beautiful not anybody could draw like that he said so exact you could tell every line he put down was just where he wanted it to go thats right i said just where he wanted it to go then this other artist who painted a ceiling for the pope that must have been very hard to do lying on his back all the time

8 very hard indeed i said it took him years to paint it he must

have had a very good mattress to lie on his back that long and get it right

thats the kind of mattress you want he said yeah eleanor wants a mattress that would last long enough for her to paint the sistine ceiling fifteen years or more or whatever would be necessary while the pope kept bugging her i believe this would be the right mattress for you he said to eleanor whod just returned from an exploration of the furthest corner of the showroom and he pointed to a mattress with a particularly elaborate cushioning on top

eleanor pops onto it lies flat for a moment then pops up again i dont think so she says it was not rigorous enough it was hard enough underneath but it was too soft on top and you could sink four inches in before you hit rock bottom four inches and my back goes out at least i think so

at this point im getting slightly desperate i want to get out of there eleanor i say if you dont like this one why dont you take the one next to it it has no padding and its solid rock all the way down

this is no solution but she finally makes a choice and the mattress of her choice is as hard as a rock i figure i can sleep on this fucking rock and our little irishman is writing us up while the other salesmen are telling us what a great choice we made were out the door and into the car and eleanor says i think i made a mistake so we go back into the showroom and eleanor says im really sorry to trouble you but our friend is not troubled my dear its no trouble its your choice and we want you to be happy with it

so eleanor goes back and starts over again but she decides fairly quickly this time that it was the other one of the two finalists the pastel blue one with a little padding over the rock shelf am i right she asks youre right i say and our friend writes it up but this one is going to be delivered to us in a week and we could have had the

other one the next day so well still have to sleep on our old one that im used to which is fine with me because im used to it its my old friend i know its hills and valleys and im happy driving home were halfway down miramar road when eleanor says to me david do you think we made a mistake? i said no i didnt make any mistake no mistake i said

but what if its the wrong one she said well get used to it i said but seriously she said what if its the wrong one? i said what would be the right one? eleanor forget it it doesnt matter you know what luther said when he was confronted by the disciple who wanted to know what to do if he wasnt sure whether or not he was in a state of grace? he said "sin bravely" i said dammit we dont know if we got the right mattress we dont know if we got the right mixmaster we dont know if we got the right anything theres no way to know let us live cheerfully in our ignorance and we went home

two weeks later the mattress arrived for fifteen minutes elly wasnt sure theyd sent us the right mattress because we couldnt remember the name of the mattress shed chosen but i said im sure they gave us the right mattress why would they send us another one? but before we got into that we found the bill and the numbers and name on the bill appeared to correspond fairly reasonably with the label on the mattress we think

so now were sleeping on the great mattress that eleanor selected so carefully for us and she still has back troubles but theyre not as bad as the ones she used to have so either this is the best possible mattress for her and for us or not and this is the situation that i think best describes our postmodern condition with respect to which i believe in taking descartes' advice if youre lost in a forest and you have no idea which way to go go for it straight ahead because its not likely to be any worse than anything else

the los angeles county museum of art was putting together a huge california show and paul holdengraeber called to ask if i would kick off a series of talks on the california experience with my resolutely new york accent i was a little doubtful and suggested they start with gary snyder or mike davis or my friend allen sekula

but paul thought gary was too shaggy for sunny southern california davis was too jeremiahlike and allen a little too grim to start the series so i figured that california was filled with so many immigrants and id lived here for over thirty years i could find a way

“what will you talk about” paul asked and i said

california—

the nervous

camel

the reason i was asked to talk here is obviously that im not a native californian so i must have a clearer view of california coming from three thousand miles away and theres a certain justice in supposing this because its very hard for fish to get a clear view of water while if youre a land dweller and come into the water you experience it somewhat more sharply than if youd always lived there

but ive been living here for a long time i came to california

back in 1968 after staying away from california for a long time how long im not that old but id stayed away from california almost as if id been resisting it i had traveled around the united states as a kid a young man id been to the northwest the middle west i knew some of the south i knew new england but somehow id always stopped at california and i dont know why though it may have come from my earliest experiences of california which were of course representations of california

everybodys heard of california but what id heard was probably not very much like what everyone else had heard the first memory i have of california made me a bit nervous

i guess i was about three or four and my next door neighbor was a little kid who was called gedaliah inside his house and jerry outside in that part of boro park we lived in two different countries in those days

inside my grandmothers house where i lived then we lived in eastern europe and my family spoke a variety of eastern european languages that were all very pleasant to eavesdrop on but outside we spoke what they used to speak in brooklyn which was the true american english and so you can tell from my accent that im a truly native american so if i heard this outside sitting on the stoop i heard it from jerry but if i heard it inside sitting on the covered porch i heard it from gedaliah and i think i heard it from gedaliah that he had a brother an older brother and i wondered where he was

i didnt wonder all the time you know as a kid youre busy all the time youre playing marbles youre walking around the corner to watch the police change shifts at the police station across the street so you could admire their crisp blue uniforms and bright brass buttons as they marched out of the station two by two the way you admired the

department of sanitation workers for their fancy gloves so you had

a lot to do but somewhere in the midst of all this i remember asking gedaliah where was his brother i lived right next door to him in a nice little house with a covered porch and a glider inside where we could sit in the evenings eating salmon sandwiches on silvercup bread and listen to the lone ranger on the radio

but id never seen his brother and i wondered why so i asked him where is your brother and gedaliah said he was killed by an airplane on the beach in los angeles

now i was a smart little kid and i knew that los angeles was in california and the image has never left me this image of a plane diving on the beach in los angeles as i saw it this tall handsome athletic looking guy in a bathing suit was standing on the beach talking with two girls who were admiring how handsome and athletic he was when at some point he suddenly left them to go rushing into the water because thats what you do at the santa monica beach

i didnt know about santa monica then

but i imagined him racing madly down the beach to dive into the surf and just as he rushed into the water a plane fell out of the sky and killed him that was something to bear in mind when i thought about california

and then i had another experience that probably stood in the way of my coming to california i had a very interesting uncle who i didnt know too well because lou was a colorful guy who was always going off somewhere doing interesting things being a ships steward or a labor organizer that was back in the thirties and he looked like douglas fairbanks jr a stocky little guy with a dandyish moustache i remember him mainly from a snapshot that looked like it was taken in old encinitas

he was standing next to a model A ford with another guy and a

couple of women under the kind of dusty evergreens that lined highway 101 and they're all standing there in the late afternoon sunlight lined up with their arms around each other smiling into the camera waiting for their photograph to be taken a photograph that in my memory was already brown

and i remember a time when i was a very little kid between three and four and i was sitting on the porch with him when a team of baseball players came trooping across the street they must have been coming back from a game because they were still wearing their uniforms those neat gray uniforms with red socks and i must have been really impressed with them because i turned to lou who was the nearest adult and asked him what team they were and lou looked at them and said "the red sox" and i got hysterical with laughter because they were wearing red socks and we both knew they weren't the red sox and i thought this was so funny i never forgot it even after he went away because one day he went off again and we didn't hear from him for a while but then we got a telegram from california saying he fell off a cliff in yosemite

california's had a disastrous effect on people i knew and i was scared to death of it and i didn't know how scared i was of california but i never got here

and at the same time i had another view of california a kind of golden view because when i was a little older and no longer living with my grandmother and my aunts but living with my mother

my mother was a professional widow one of those people who made a profession of having been a widow my father died when i was very young and this was a great misfortune i suppose but i can't decide whether it was a misfortune or not i always thought the great misfortune was that i wasn't an orphan

but in one of those periods when i was living with my mother in a state of irritated discomfort

my mother had come from a jewish family but she had the character of an irish catholic she was someone who would have loved to crawl on her knees and push a peanut with her nose around the fourteen stations of the cross she had loved to have been a catholic and many times i said to her why dont you convert so you could do penance you could flagellate yourself you could wear sackcloth and ashes you could do all these great things that catholics are set up for and jews are not you could annoy priests by confessing to imaginary sins but my mother didnt have the courage of her nasty self lacerating convictions and she insisted on being jewish in some vague panreligious way and she liked to read spiritual books that proved that all religions were one religion though she was really probably only a superstitious atheist trying to cover her bets but one of her basic strategies was to deny herself whatever she could identify as pleasure and one result of this strategy was our unfortunate little radio a little yellow bakelite radio that used to sit on the night table

now that i think of it it was kind of pretty a little rounded yellow plastic radio with a tiny speaker but it was dying for all the time that we had it it was dying and i had to sit with my ear to its little three inch speaker to listen to my favorite radio programs in order to hear the jack benny show and it was from the jack benny show that i listened to on our little yellow radio that i got my golden image of california

it was from the jack benny show that i learned about places called azusa and cucamonga and to this day i cant imagine anything as wonderful sounding as azusa and cucamonga i didnt know what they were like but their names rang in my ears beautifully

cucamonga sounded more like an animal than a town or a ranch but whatever it was it sounded great

and of course the jack benny show made southern california seem like a kind of golden rural space small townish and golden and maybe it was in the 1940s

but i know it caused an enormous anxiety in me many years later when i was working as a consultant for this very museum at the time

maurice tuchman was putting on his art and technology show and maurice and i had a falling out about the show at one point or another

because i was one of the consultants whose consultations were not being paid enough attention to this happens among friends and it was a long time ago but one of the things i was doing for the show in my role as consultant was acting like a kind of preliminary

matchmaker sizing up the situation at corporations that thought they wanted to take part in the show by collaborating with one artist or another and this part of my job was to check the fit between the artist and the corporation

so i would go out as a kind of scout to see what the real situation at the corporation would likely be if we sent a particular artist out to work there and i remember one of the artists i was scouting for was

ron kitaj who wanted for some reason or other to work with the design group at lockheed and the people at lockheed seemed to be willing to work with him so i had to go out to lockheed to look at the

situation and when i learned that the lockheed plant was in burbank in the san fernando valley i was very excited because i knew from the jack benny show that the san fernando was a verdant farming valley and i wondered what a high tech aerospace outfit was doing tucked into the soft green fields i knew so well

that was back around 1968 or 69 and because i was looking forward to this whole adventure i decided to rent a little mustang

you know those tiny ford's with crisp lines that looked like sports cars  
 but weren't they had these tiny little engines and had their weight  
 so badly balanced you had to put sandbags in the trunk to keep them  
 from slewing around on a turn so here i was in my little mustang  
 and i was about to drive through up and over one of the canyons  
 benedict or laurel to see this technological marvel of a building  
 tucked into the green farming valley

now los angeles was a very  
 beautiful city and it still is in many parts of it a beautiful city in spite  
 of everything that human beings have done to it and these canyons  
 are among its most beautiful parts

so i drove up the canyon to the crest  
 and looked down and was totally shaken mile after mile of little  
 pastel colored stucco houses laid out one next to the other like places  
 on a sunken monopoly board lying atlantislike under a strange grey sea  
 that i realized had to be smog jack benny had misled me

now i probably never would have come to california except for  
 my friend allan kaprow paul brach was starting a radical art  
 department down at the university of california at san diego and  
 wanted allan as a combination artist and intellectual to come out and  
 anchor it but paul couldn't persuade allan to come out to california  
 at this time and allan suggested he hire me i was a poet and critic  
 an art critic and doing doctoral work in linguistics at the time i  
 didn't know paul but i knew he was a serious painter but i'd never  
 heard of the university of california at san diego as far as i knew san  
 diego was a marine base but i asked around and found out it also  
 had scripps institute of oceanography a hot molecular biology  
 department and some terrific physicists and all these scientists were  
 standing around with an open checkbook under a palm tree my  
 friend jackson maclow told me they also had a great experimental

music department and paul was a charming guy and he was able to sell me on coming out to run their art gallery and teach art

why me i was finishing a doctorate in linguistics im only an art critic and poet what do you want from me i dont know anything about teaching art no he said itll be very good people will come to your classes they wont know what youre talking about youll be talking about art itll make them feel better because youre talking about it so its all right that they dont know what youre talking about

so i said but eventually theyll figure out what im talking about and then what do they need me for and he said thats when they graduate i said oh i see

i had never thought about being a teacher i was studying linguistics because i felt like studying linguistics i was interested in it and i liked it i wasnt looking for a job im a determined independent elitist and i dont give a damn about doing anything except what i feel like doing but what i felt like doing was thinking about things and talking about them so i figured if they dont mind my talking ill talk about whatever interests me and theyll come to class if they feel like it and if they dont theyll go away just like in a european university but i didnt know if i could do this because my wife eleanor the artist eleanor antin was busy making art in new york as i was busy writing criticism in new york but it turned out fortunately that we were both very bored in new york in 1968

new york in 1968 i know when you read the art magazines if you read the art magazines youll think that new york was a wonderful hotbed of exciting art in 1968 it wasnt but if you read the art magazines youll believe this at any time in the world because thats the job of the art magazines to create the illusion that

something terrifically interesting is happening all the time and it isnt its happening very rarely if youre really a veteran of an art scene you go around desperately looking for something interesting about one in a thousand shows is worth looking at or maybe its really one in a hundred

its a sad story but we know this the members of the secret society that make up the art world know this but the art magazines have glossy pictures nothing looks better than a glossy picture in an art magazine and they print these promos everyone is promoted because thats the job of the art magazines its to make the whole art world look more exciting thats why they receive their advertisements from all the galleries and the museums its to make their whole world look exciting so youre bound to think it was a terribly interesting time in 1968 in new york city but it was really kind of boring

at this particular moment the minimal art which had been brilliant in the early sixties and which i had written about and admired had gotten tired it was becoming a kind of academy by 1968 it had lost its abrasive edge and needed a rest as we needed a rest

we also needed a rest from new york we were native new yorkers and we were sick and tired of the city sick and tired of the intense feelings of the city and one of the things about new york thats different from southern california is its the kind of urban space where everybodys very close to everybody else you get the feeling that everybody is sitting in everybody elses lap you have no room and you have no privacy you cant afford privacy so everything is built close if you made loud love in your apartment theyd hear you next door if you have an art idea and speak about it in a bar itll be turned into an artwork by somebody next week before youve finished thinking about it

thats why everybody in new york is very secretive when a new york artist gets an idea for an artwork he keeps quiet he probably notarizes the idea because hes afraid someone will steal his great idea which is probably that he intends to make a sculpture thats completely horizontal or build it out of pillows or swiss cheese

nobody has ever made a sculpture out of swiss cheese though henry moore might be assigned primacy in the genre but at the same time everybodys also talking to everyone else about whats the right kind of thing to be doing whos doing it whos starting to do it and whos no longer doing it and because everyone is sitting in everyone elses lap everyone is looking over everyone elses shoulder and wondering whether theyre doing the right thing because everyone is listening to everyone elses conversation and eleanor was getting very tired of this and thought it might be nice to get away from it so she said look im busy why dont you go scout it out

so paul brought me out to visit san diego now san diego is the very bottom of california its almost mexico which is exciting of course but at that time 1968 the only people who knew that were living invisibly in this part of california because all the spanish speaking people lived in places that you didnt immediately get to see when you were brought in to work for the university

anyway they bring me out here im flying out here and i had to fly out through los angeles and as the plane is approaching what i think is los angeles i look down and see something very strange i see all these blue gumdrops little rounded blue gumdrops and i have no idea what in the world this is

coming down lower and lower and seeing them closer i begin to realize theyre swimming pools with softly rounded edges and curved like little trays and it was strange enough to see them sitting in this tawny sandstone landscape

curiously planted with the kind of palm trees you expect to see on the coast of algeria

so you dont really believe in them and then just as we land theres a little earthquake a little earthquake can you imagine what a little earthquake is like the trees shake the earth moves gently under you i started to laugh i thought this was ridiculous so i called elly and said youve gotta come ive just been through a little earthquake the palm trees shook cars moved one foot each water spilled over the borders of the swimming pools who knows what could happen here

californias the place to be its either going to lead america over the cliff or its going to lead it back this is the right place to be now how did i know this

i guess i knew it from the look of the buildings the brightness of the architecture and the way people lived in them every building i saw had a skin over it that looked at first like concrete but you can tell its not concrete because they paint it and people dont like to paint concrete because they think its natural like stone but this is a thin skin they call stucco that they spread plasterlike over lath and chicken wire and they paint it pink or blue or green or yellow or even sand color and none of these little buildings ever has a basement theyre jacked up on cinderblocks over shallow crawl spaces for the water pipes the electrical conduits and the gas lines coming from the east i had never seen so many houses without basements or in many cases without underfloorings and when i thought about this i realized i was looking at a bedouin encampment this was a nomadic group and everybody here was ready to go

theyre really ready i said to myself maybe theyve got an idea here theres something about the earth that leaves us as bedouins and maybe its more obvious here

now its true i didnt experience this all at the same time part of it was when we came in when we moved here my little son was one year old so he wound up speaking with a california accent which i dont have

but we were in this little house first thing wed never lived in a house in new york you dont live in a house you live in apartments well some people do but in manhattan most people dont and we were coming here from living in a newly renovated apartment over a ground floor mafia undertaking parlor which was nice and peaceful in a lebanese neighborhood that had very good little restaurants that all had signs in the window in arabic reminding people that politics and religion were not discussed here thats how things were kept peaceful in this otherwise rather volatile neighborhood which was right near atlantic avenue where they had these wonderful shops like the one run by the sahadi brothers where i used to go to practice arabic

it was a wonderful place but when we were moving to california we knew that we were going to be confronted with having a house where would we have it?

paul said ill get you a place in la jolla and i said not on your life

i had seen la jolla when i first visited and la jolla is very pretty it was 1968 when i first visited and i was sure that i had been returned to 1952 all the women wore white gloves i hadnt seen anything like this since the fifties and even then living in new york i hadnt seen very much of it and here there were the people who lived in la jolla in rancho santa fe and on point loma theyre pleasant people awfully pleasant as pleasant as wonder bread the men wore dark blue blazers with brass buttons and cream colored pants with checked shirts and they all watched the stock market and

played golf and tennis paul i said find us some funky place in the north county and paul was wonderful he came up with a little house in a town called solana beach solana beach was one of those little towns that stretched along old highway 101 and the house he found us was a little white house surrounded by enormously high oleander hedges in a way this gave us a kind of european garden walled around by ten foot high oleander bushes in all their poisonous beauty and within the garden was a giant pepper tree and orange trees tangerine trees a peach tree for us it was incredibly beautiful but we didnt know anything about house living

one day im walking out of the house and a neighbor says to me its disgraceful and i said whats disgraceful and he said your tree is hanging over my driveway and i said its not my tree and he said what do you mean its not your tree and i said i rent it from the person who owns it and this tree has been here for years its been minding its own business for years and he said well it interferes with my camper every time i pull into the driveway and i said we could call the owner and see if hed like to have the offending bough cut off

but this was all kind of new to me people living next to you complaining about a tree i could imagine complaining about parties running late into the night because they mightve heard a party late at night though you couldve had an orgy in the garden and nobody wouldve known as long as you kept quiet because we were sealed off by the tall oleander but living here among the houses of this small town solana beach the towns of this part of southern california line the highway

not the new highway thats not so new anymore I-5 but the old coast road all the commercial buildings are lined up along the coast road with the houses beginning a block back on either side the older

part of town is the west side where the houses get bigger and more expensive as they move further west with the prime real estate overlooking the ocean even though some of the houses are kind of shambly on the bluffs over the water and we had lucked out and we had this beautiful little place in the old part of town even though we didnt know whether we were going to stay

but we began to understand the nomadic nature of the environment soon after we got there because a couple with a camper moved into the house right across the street just a few weeks after we moved in they were a handy couple and they started fixing up things as soon as they moved in they put up a new fence they painted the house they trimmed the trees they changed the entrance they were always tearing something down putting something up they worked like hell and we thought they were really building their lives after a little while theyd be able to sit back and enjoy the results of their effort but six months later they sell the house to a retired couple and theyre gone it seems they made a business of buying houses fixing them up and selling them to some sucker for more money or maybe theyre not suckers either because they can live in that house for five years and sell it to somebody else for even more money

which is the way that a lot of people acquired capital in southern california this is the southern california style you buy a house live in it a little while and then sell it and you can count on the continuous inflation for your profit eventually you buy houses you dont even live in and sell them for more money and finally you become very rich and move to la jolla or rancho santa fe where you have a golf course at your back and you buy a blue blazer and you give up your little camper for a mercedes or a bmw and you turn off the country music because youre not a redneck anymore so you tune

into the top forty or easy listening stations and you send your children to private schools where they learn to be as bland as you

we saw this happening again and again and we thought there must be a message here but we werent prepared to enter this game of musical houses first because we didnt know if we wanted to stay in california and second because we didnt really understand it so when the owner of the little house with the giant oleanders offered to sell it to us for about \$16,000 because he liked us and because we took such good care of the beautiful garden he had planted and because he had no need of it we said we dont really know and a woman from fallbrook bought it she moved in chopped down the oleander so you could see she wasnt having any orgies cut down the pepper tree severely cut the fruit trees and hung plastic plants on the porch to prove she was a decent citizen so this was a california life we didnt understand

but we lucked out we had a colleague a writer named reinhardt lettau who was a professor in the literature department of the university a disciple of herbert marcuse who was a professor in the philosophy department back then and reinhardt like many of us was against the vietnam war that was raging back then but reinhardt who was a bit of a hysteric was against the war in a way that made a lot of noise and in the course of things a marine recruiting officer came to the campus and when he was preparing to make his pitch reinhardt was outraged and went up and slapped him on the head with a rolled up newspaper naturally the television crews were there with their cameras and reinhardt was featured on the evening news

now reinhardt lived in a shambly old green stucco house with a tile roof on the bluffs over the water with a grand terrace from which you could track the whales or look seagulls in the eye he lived there

with monique a strict maoist whose dark hair was severely cut straight across her forehead among posters of lenin and mao and the uprising in paris of the year before and this house was owned by an elderly lady who lived in la jolla and rented the house to reinhardt for about \$160 a month and when she turned on channel 10 at five oclock that evening the local news was playing the reinhardt story and she had her agent tell him he had to get out not because of slapping the marine officer with his rolled up newspaper but because he was sleeping with monica to whom according to channel 10 he wasnt married

“david” reinhardt said when he heard we had to move out of our little house with the wonderful garden “this is the right kind of house for someone like you we have to get out but i wouldnt want it to go to just anybody” and he sent us to talk to wes maurer the sweet old drunk who ran the philip marlowe real estate agency and handled the house for the la jolla lady the deal was clinched when he learned i was a professor at ucsd and married to elly the owner likes to rent to uc professors he said especially married ones

so we rented the place for \$180 a month and we stayed in it a long time even as it was falling apart because we loved it though we were eventually paying \$200 a month for it and they offered to sell it to us for \$40,000 though they were willing to take a thousand off the price because they thought we would have to tear down the house

but we still didnt get it we still didnt understand this buying and selling or owning of things in this way and we thought it was bizarre a few years later somebody did buy it and they tore down the house and replaced it with a monstrous white thing that swallowed the beautiful terrace creating something that we would never want to look at again

but for all of the eight years that we lived there we saw this kind

of movement of people and things and the feeling i had was again that feeling when i saw my first earthquake and wed had a second little earthquake when we moved into our first house in solana beach we had been in solana beach only a month and there was another little earthquake our bed skated gently across the room and our little one year old climbed out of his crib and crawled into bed with us and we knew again the twitch of the skin of this tawny animal california and began to think about this

how california was really like some kind of animal that is very amiable patient and long suffering but sometimes it gets nervous sometimes the tawny skin twitches and the buildings mounted on its back move and this happens often enough that whole lives are lived in relation to this or seem to be and my sense of this was something i came to realize gradually after living here for many years

because we got here before all these great subdivisions had come in and before all of the great highway that connected all these little towns I-5 had been completed we lived in the house on the bluff over the water for many years and from where we lived you could see the highway intermittently at night or catch glimpses of it from the lights of cars that occasionally passed because the old town center that was strung out along the old coast road 101 was in a sort of valley between the bluffs on the west and the hills to the east through which the new highway ran

now I-5 wasnt even completed at the time we moved into solana beach and south of oceanside it was still a little two lane road then but eventually a few years after we came they completed it still there were relatively few cars running on it especially at night at night it was like watching a kind of eccentrically programmed light sculpture after ten pm car lights would show up once every five minutes or so and if you went to your front window or stood

on the sloping lawn outside it that we allowed to become a field of weeds if you stood on this sloping lawn and looked toward the highway after ten o'clock you could stand there for five or six minutes before you saw two or three cars go by after twelve you could stand there for fifteen minutes without seeing a car go by that was when we first moved in but after a while you would see them every two or three minutes and by now there's no time of the night even at two or three or four in the morning it's a continuous light show and things like this have been happening all over southern California

once there was a little Mayfair market at the foot of the hill leading down from the bluff into town and you could walk to the market from where you lived this was a little beach town and you could walk to the market though some people might drive because of the hill or because of the groceries they had to carry still we used to walk to the market and back and it was no problem but then they built a mall a shopping center in the hills near I-5 and then everyone had to drive to the market even if they lived in the hills because there were no streets in the eastern part of the town

all the time that we lived there things kept changing like this and I began to have an image of what this was like and I was beginning to get an image of what the future would be like the future of malls someday someone is going to be an archeologist of ruined malls because what are they going to do with old malls supermarkets that no one goes to vacated Target stores abandoned for hotter locations once a Target store goes away what are they going to do with the building make an airplane hangar out of it? you know these vast horizontal buildings that house all the goods that anybody could want on the face of the earth in their reduced forms

whatever would happen to these weird buildings

well i found out the other day i happened to drive by one of these new malls they built alongside the highway in solana beach that was an old mall now and not too successful they just wiped it out they bulldozed it out all the buildings that used to sell groceries and stereos and copiers and bicycles and running shoes and toothpaste gone and theyre going to replace it with another collection of businesses that i guess will be pretty much like the ones they just bulldozed but newer and the new developer will have to sell the deal to some new group of hopeful people who think they can make a go of it where the old group couldnt and what will they put there? a bowling alley a frozen yogurt shop a chic boutique a bath center a massive health food store? i dont know but its all changing everythings moving

in this way california becomes a paradigmatic part of america americas nomadic moment thats the sense of where the earth stands in relation to you it knows youre irrelevant as if you were a tourist here everybodys a tourist the indians here knew it well they lived very lightly and they moved from one place to another from the seashore to the mountains following their food sources as the seasons changed gathering shellfish by the ocean and acorns in the mountains and they didnt build very deeply today californians have a somewhat similar feeling about the land theyre not very deeply rooted and they build almost as lightly as the california indians but feeling something is not knowing it knowing requires something more and my friend richard had this feeling without knowing it too well

we met richard not long after we moved here richard was one of the most popular gynecologists in the area he was a tall handsome man and charming and he had a lovely wife alexandra they lived in

rancho santa fe which was the very tailored and wealthy part of northern san diego county because he had a very successful practice he and his friend jack they were an interesting pair these two handsome young doctors both a kind of study in contrasts richard was dark with curly hair he could have been an actor a movie star if he didnt have to act

and alexandra was an elegant blond and blue eyed beauty while jack was blond blue eyed and boyish and had a tall and leggy dark haired wife named melissa and richard drove a bronze mercedes while jack drove a red corvette but they shared this very successful practice and they were both as generous as they were successful once a week they each drove down to work at a free clinic in mexico they took a lot of charity patients in san diego and no artist or artists wife ever had to pay for treatment so their offices and homes were filled with the paintings and drawings photographs and sculptures of san diegos artists

it was through his interest in art that we first got to meet richard i was director of the university gallery back then and id used my new york and los angeles connections to put together a show of post-pop painting that was back in 1969 and it was a more or less timely show dealing with the reappearance of representation so it included a wide range of artists of different kinds ranging from straight pop artists like warhol and lichtenstein and wesselman to the more painterly styles of alex katz and sylvia sleigh and aside from the fact that it was a little early to dwell on representation for an art world hooked on the prime importance of abstraction it was a reasonably conventional show

but this was san diego in 1969 and the wesselman in the show was one of his "great american nudes" it was a kind of collage work with the nearly cartoonlike female figure lying spread legged on a

piece of fake leopard skin fur a completely sexist beaver view nude and somehow even before the show had opened word got out about the wesselman

there were already complaints not from outraged feminists feminism hadnt been born in san diego in 1969 it was still basically a navy town and the city was living in 1959 or more likely 1951 so the complaints were from puritans or if not puritans from people with a strong sense of public propriety whatever they did in their bedrooms or other peoples bedrooms living rooms or jacuzzis and the complaints were all being fielded by the chancellors office before being shunted over to the art department where i could handle them so paul as the department chairman was a little worried about the opening with the chancellor coming and all the other uc and la jolla dignitaries

now our gallery back then was one of the strangest art galleries id ever seen it was the only gallery id ever seen with a black ceiling it was a long windowless stucco shed that had served as the officers bowling alley of camp matthews the marine base our campus housed before the regents of uc acquired it in a land swap with the military but the school did an architectural remake and spruced up the outside with a lot of redwood around the entrance and redwood stripping inside in fact they got so carried away with the redwood stripping that they hung some from the ceiling making the low ceiling lower and recessing the lighting fixtures up behind it where they disappeared into the black ceiling making this the darkest art gallery i had ever seen they completed the remake by covering the concrete floor wall to wall with mauve carpeting that gave the place the appearance of a discreet gentlemans club or a high class funeral parlor

this was the first big show of the season and while i was hanging the show paul kept popping in and out between classes to see how

things were going because he was a nervous guy and as a painter he had lots of opinions about hanging paintings but things were going pretty smoothly id brought in extra lights and managed to get a lot more on the paintings so you could really see them though i had the feeling every time paul looked at the wesselman he would have liked to see it a lot darker

the evening of the opening he got there early while my assistants were taking care of the last details spraying windex on the few works with glass over them laying out wine glasses and he hung out with us till the doors opened and the first few people drifted in but nothing remarkable was really happening the wesselman was at the far end of the wall away from the entrance door and like most opening crowds the first few visitors mainly faculty clustered around the wine table generally scanning the room pleased to see and be seen by each other and fortifying themselves with a drink before plunging into serious picture looking then mcgill arrived

the chancellor was a husky middle aged guy with brush cut grey hair who could have passed for a brit general if he had a sandhurst accent as it was he looked like a c.e.o. for g.m. or at&t although hed been the head of a science heavy psychology department before taking over as chancellor at ucsd which really is a large corporation and later he got to be famous for being president of columbia university another large corporation so i guess he really was a c.e.o.

he came in with a whole group of people among them richard and alexandra and jack and melissa but unlike the earlier visitors he untangled himself from the wine table after a few words and a couple of handshakes to follow richard and alexandra down the line of paintings with paul inconspicuously bringing up the rear and i admit i was pretty curious so i drifted over too

they passed the bechtle and the alex katz and came to a dead stop

right in front of the wesselman richard leaned over and peered directly between the spread legs of the great american nude “left median lateral episiotomy” he said in a stage whisper everybody broke up laughing and that was the end of it

now richard was an interesting man they were an interesting couple he and alexandra richards practice was very successful and even with his charity work he was living the affluent life of all good doctors in southern california in those days of tax shelters and complicated investments before hmos and he and alexandra lived in a spacious spanish style villa on several tailored acres of san diegos choice north county real estate with a swimming pool and a tennis court and servant quarters they belonged to the country club and played golf and tennis and though they had no children they seemed to be leading a typical affluent southern california life

in spite of all that they seemed displaced and a little remote maybe it was alexandras cool east coast style or the occasional faraway look in richards eye they had lots of acquaintances and people they socialized with out of habit or convention but their only real friends were jack and melissa who also had no children the two couples were inseparable they played tennis and golf together swam together went to the theater or concerts together and to art openings and while they saw lots of other people there was a kind of bond between them that couldnt be explained by the simple fact that richard and jack shared a practice or that melissa and alexandra had gone to the same east coast college the only thing they didnt do together was travel together and they had this passion for travel to picturesque places but they would travel separately

so if jack and melissa went off to japan or if richard and alexandra went off to africa theyd arrange to have dinner together at the home of the returning couple usually alone but not always

and after dinner and brandy the guy would bring out the slide projector and show the pictures while his wife gave a running account of the trip

i was never at any of these slide shows but i heard that the pictures were mostly pretty ordinary if a little eccentric because they tended to show the usual things a gondolier on the grand canal or a street vendor in the piazza di san marco punctuated oddly by unexplained casual images of people sitting in a hotel lobby or a man walking into an elevator and while the account that accompanied the slide shows was casual and anecdotal there was something ritualistic and deeply serious about them as if through this procession of ordinary little stories one couple was revealing something secret and deep about themselves to the other something no outsider could understand

richard and alexandra had been to egypt

now i dont know

anything about egypt when i think of egypt i think of ruth st denis looking at a cigarette ad and inventing egyptian dance she didnt really invent egyptian dance she looked at that cigarette ad and seeing an image of egypt she figured shed discovered the east this was the perfect los angeles story it was 1915 and she knew from all the yogis running around los angeles that the east was the site of antimaterialistic spirituality so she simply decided to push further east because she thought india was more spiritual than egypt egypt was just a bunch of pharaohs while india was filled with naked yogis or bodhisattvas in saffron robes and before you know it she was starting her los angeles art institute in 1915 inventing modern dance mostly by placing attractive nearly naked people in picturesque poses that she assumed were spiritual and erotic because she'd seen them in photos of ancient wall reliefs or in magazine articles on kootch dancers in bangalore

and in spite of the absurdity or because of it ruth st denis in true california fashion became a teacher of martha graham and one of the great inventors of modern dance

i never saw ruth st denis' 1915 cigarette ad and what do i know about egypt that i didnt get from a pack of camels so thats what i supposed ruth saw a camel standing in front of a pyramid and maybe a picture of the sphinx this is the complete tourist picture and if you go to egypt thats what youre going to see you may tour the old part of cairo you may go look at the suez canal a buried temple or two and youll certainly look at the sphinx but you know that even before you see the pyramids youre going to take a camel ride someone is going to show you how to ride a camel and someone watching will always take your picture and i take it that all these images were in alexandras slide show of their egyptian trip during which richard was completely silent till alex got to the image of the camel ride the picture was not of either richard or alexandra the picture was of a pleasant looking middle aged lady falling off a camel that was neither standing nor sitting but halfway up and halfway down as alexandra explained the camel driver told the camel to get down and the camel got down the woman climbed on and the camel got up and it went well so the driver let the camel walk a little bit she took two steps and abruptly sat down this took the woman by surprise and threw her off balance so she tried to get off it also took the driver by surprise and he ordered the camel back up but the woman was still half off the camel so when he told the camel to get back up the woman started falling further and he ordered the camel back down the camel dropped down and the woman tumbled completely off in the picture the woman is toppling off the camel on the way to the second sitdown

all through alexandras account of this bizarre incident richard

had remained silent staring intently at the slide and he remained unusually silent for the rest of the show when asked why he said the picture reminded him of something he couldnt quite figure out but by the end he remembered it was the camel after the picture was taken and the woman had fallen off it was the camel kneeling there its face he said

it reminded him of the sphinx

now this was just the kind of image that flares up in someones mind for a moment and is almost as quickly forgotten and richard never mentioned it again he probably never thought about it again because though he was an intelligent man he was not an intellectual he was a doctor and doctors are more like artists and most of their intelligence is expended in their work so richards life went on as usual caring for patients in san diego or mexico playing tennis or golf going to concerts and the theater and to art openings and little parties but one day jack took his corvette and was speeding down to the clinic in mexico when a truck carrying tiles from tecate to san diego pulled out to pass a slower truck and it carried its tiles no further

the bright red corvette was totaled and boyish blond haired laughing jack was dead

richard never seemed to recover from jacks untimely accident his life changed completely after that he moved out of his house and into the servants quarters behind it he stopped going to concerts and openings where alexandra appeared alone he started spending more time at the clinic in mexico and even that wasnt enough for a while he literally disappeared they say he was in an ashram in india though im not sure thats true but when he came back to san diego he gave up his practice left the house to alexandra and took up an entirely new career curiously related to his old one once he had helped bring people into the world now he was helping them

out of it working with mortally ill people and helping them find a humanly meaningful dying

and hed been doing this for some time before we heard of it and when we did wed been through the dying of a number of friends

weve

been through the deaths of a number of friends recently elly and i we were sitting by watching kathy acker die she was a dear friend of ours and an ex-student someone we really loved and we watched her die young and terribly of cancer and what do you do in those circumstances sitting there you do the best you can but what was his expertise what did richard do to make the dying more bearable more human and we heard this story

he drove with his cancer patient out into the mojave where they built a little fire and wrapped themselves up in blankets and camped out for the night they lay on the ground and spent hours singing wordless songs then they put out the fire and just looked up at the stars in the cold night sky and lying there richard began to speak almost to himself in a voice hardly above a whisper about how far away these stars must be and how long it takes their light that travels a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second and millions and millions of years to come down to the earth where it looks so bright to us while so many of them must be already dead and may have been dead for millions of years but their light is still with us and could stay with us for many more thousands of years

we have to think about our lives that way

the odd thing was that this cancer patient got a remission of his cancer and had this story to tell meanwhile i dont know where richards gone but he seems to have disappeared from california leaving us to deal with its sphinxlike character and its camels shrug

this was my last stop on a talking tour through three eastern european capitals whose names all curiously began with the letter “b” bratislava budapest and bucharest i had taken a train from bratislava to budapest but decided to fly to bucharest in spite of misgivings about romanian air it turned out that the airline was run by lufthansa the plane was a sparkingly new fokker and the service was excellent except they flew us to bucharest by way of warsaw which is like traveling from san diego to san francisco by way of denver so i arrived at otopenia airport more than two hours late the airport was a far cry from the sinister green military hangar we came out into the last time i was in bucharest where you had to pass through a narrow cagelike corridor between grim looking guys in camouflage outfits holding kalashnikovs now you came off the plane into a bright new modernist building with an information officer talking cheerfully on a cell phone but it was 8:20 pm and no magda i waited half an hour then tried the information desk the guy at the desk called for a page it came over loud and clear no sign of magda i changed some money and waited a while longer after an hour and a half i persuaded the guy at the desk to call magda for me from his own cell phone and got her answering machine i thought about getting a cab to a hotel but waited another hour when a slight looking kid with glasses showed up carrying a sign saying he was looking for antonje zalisca and chris keulemans from amsterdam i figured he must be from café europa he spoke no english french or german but he knew magda and said she was at META the name didnt mean anything to me then but i figured he was supposed to pick me up too chris and nino got in by 11:30 and we all crowded into his tiny car and drove like hell over the twenty kilometers to bucharest raced across trolley tracks around potholes and over badly cobbled streets into a ghostly warehouse district seemingly populated only by packs of hungry dogs we turned an implausible corner into luigi gavarni street and came to a stop before

the gated entrance and walled courtyard of a gleaming white modernist building this was META

we climbed two flights of marble stairs of this darkened art gallery up to an elegant residence space turned right into a kitchen where magda mileta and krzysztof were seated around a table with a bottle of wine peter walked in about a half hour later and we wound up spending the rest of the night talking about sarajevo eastern europe and the bizarre american presidential election this was just the beginning of three days and three nights of intense discussion that made up this years café europa which was a floating literary café invented by krzysztof czyzewski a visionary polish theater artist who was traveling the old soviet empire trying to retrieve ceremonies rituals and performances suppressed by stalinism the idea of the café was to bring together writers and artists of all kinds from eastern and central europe to reflect on their cultural and esthetic situation it met every year in a different european city this years meeting organized by the romanian poet and art historian magda carnecki included the regulars krzysztof and magda mileta prodanovic an avant garde yugoslavian artist and art critic nino zalisca a wildly comic bosnian novelist and filmmaker along with a few westerners chris keulemans a sharp cultural critic from amsterdam peter jukes a young british playwright and two american writers christopher merrill and me

this years meeting was scheduled to run from november 23 to 26 and was bracketed by the bizarre american presidential election which was still unresolved and the imminently forthcoming romanian presidential election in which a dangerous and incompetent neofascist clown named tudor was threatening to defeat the merely incompetent and possibly corrupt iliescu so this years conference was appropriately called "the flavor of postmodernism" after three days of intense public discussion with a fair sampling of romanian artists and writers and critics and three late nights of even more intense rambling discussion among ourselves we were supposed to give a final reading in the conference hall of bucharests museum of romanian literature a dark wood paneled room whose walls featured photos and

letters from the career of a leftist francophile writer from the early part of the twentieth century who wrote pretty novels about people from the levant and got into trouble with his parisian friends for a disappointed book about the soviet union in the 1930s our readings were preceded and followed by short performances by a classical guitarist the readings were poorly attended maybe because something else important was happening in bucharest or because they were mostly in english so we were reading for a handful of people but mainly for ourselves and maybe the guitarist i was the last reader and of course i wasnt reading i was talking

## café europa

that little tune you played at the beginning the little dance it seemed as if id heard it before a little french dance played on a solo guitar pretty much the way you played it it haunted me throughout the readings it reminded me of something something i couldnt quite remember and now i remember it its the same tune that haunted a movie i saw many years ago a beautiful french movie that was made after the war the second world war

but we used to call it the war because we grew up in it and it seemed to have always been going on and would never end and we the kids growing up then we all expected to be in it my cousins were in it one of them an engineer at the battle of the remagen bridge the other one a bomber pilot over north africa and italy i think he bombed the ploesti oil fields that are not so far from here and we all expected to be in it when our turn came my next door neighbor a

40 beautiful russian pianist enlisted in the marines and wound up in

the invasion of okinawa somehow he survived it and sent me back a japanese rifle with a bayonet a beautiful brown piece of wood and dark polished steel looking like a farm implement so i was used to the idea of the war the way we all were then but when i saw the movie it was later the war was over and things seemed different then

but in the movie there was the war again and there were people on the road trying to get out of paris the germans were coming and the road was choked with cars and motorcycles bicycles and handcarts and horse carts people on foot with suitcases and sacks people carrying or leading animals and there were these beautiful people because this was a film a handsome couple the woman was blond and lovely and the man was handsome and intellectual looking and they were in a car with a little girl holding a little dog and the little girl was also blond and beautiful because this was a film and in a film things always happen to beautiful people the crowd was trying to get over a bridge and their movement was choked by the traffic and as i remember the car stalled on the bridge the beautiful couple with the serious and handsome husband was trying to start the car whose carburetor was probably flooded just as the german planes appeared in the sky the stukas with the menacing inflected wings and the beautiful couple took their little girl holding her dog and abandoned the car and tried to run for shelter at the side of the bridge but the lovely blond woman tripped and fell and hurt her leg and the husband kept trying to help her up while the stukas made their first strafing pass and you could see the bullets advancing over the bridge advancing with little puffs of dust toward the place where the husband was trying to help his wife get up but she was unable to get up and she was sheltering the little girl who was still clutching the dog in her arms

and somehow the bullets spared them and the stukas started away but then the planes turned for a second pass and the wife still couldnt move and the bullets progressed down the bridge and the blond actress and her handsome husband were beautifully dead and the little girl was left there crying by the roadside clutching her little dog that was also dead as the stukas flew away

now somehow the little girl got picked up by peasants and thats when the music started because this was a movie and that was the little guitar tune you played at the beginning of the readings and it haunted the rest of the film which concentrates on the two children the little girl who was about four and the little son of the peasant family who might have been eight or nine and theres something childish about the courtly simplicity of the music that went with the film which is a kind of love story about two children in a cemetery because the only way they can get the little dead dog away from the little girl is to provide it with a ceremonial burial which the little boy does but this wasnt good enough for the little girl who was probably jewish and had never seen a catholic funeral and now gets to see one for the first time and shes impressed by the whole ceremony that culminates with the solemn placement of a cross over the grave as a sign of peace so she wants to put a cross over the little dogs grave as a sign of peace which is something the little boy isnt sure is right for a dog but reluctantly does for the little girl and this pleases her so much she wants to bury more dead things and give them peace so to please the little girl the boy has to resort to killing more and more little animals so that she can place a cross over them and bring them peace and all the while the music keeps playing the little court dance we heard at the beginning of the readings

but now the war was over my cousins were back from italy and germany and the pianist was back from japan my japanese rifle

disappeared i think my mother threw the bayonet away and we were at peace in america the kind of peace you get on a long skiing trip when youre surrounded by mountains and snow mutes all the sounds of the outside world which seems very far away

and i remember a skiing trip to mammoth high in the sierras on the border between california and nevada and we were there with my son and my wife and our friends and it was a clear sunny day with fresh snow that had been falling the whole night before so we were skiing on powder and i remember stopping on a crest to look down at the nevada side of the mountain and there wasnt a single cloud in the sky it was such a great skiing day and so sunny as i was coming back from the ski slope carrying my jacket on my arm and still wearing my ski boots that i paid little attention to a dark puddle of water i was stepping into that turned out to be black ice on which i slipped and fell breaking my arm and bringing my skiing on this trip to an end but not wanting to disturb everyone elses skiing i wound up for the rest of the trip back in our rented condo watching on television the overthrow of the ceaucescu government here in romania and this was surely a good thing and encouraging for romania and i watched it with sympathetic interest but there was one scene that was so strange i can hardly believe i really saw it on television the execution of ceaucescu

now i know he was a personal horror and his government a disaster but there was something strange and foreboding in the image of the hooded prisoner handled like a puppet the impersonal executioners and the body that came to lie there inert in this blank walled space that reminded me of a scene from the life of my wifes stepfather also out of central europe

peter was a young hungarian poet and painter at least at the beginning he was a young hungarian poet and that was back around

the time of the first world war because he was born in the 1890s and discovered as a young writer of great promise by the editor of ady's famous magazine *nyugat* when he was barely eighteen he was a poet in love with language the hungarian language which he knew and loved as his own and with french a language he barely knew

i know because at the least provocation or with no provocation at all he would recite to me poems in hungarian like ady's *ver es aranj* or his own poems and he had committed to memory a handful of poems of verlaine and rimbaud and the whole first page of flauberts marvelous novella *un coeur simple* which he would recite to me in a painstaking careful french

but history wasnt kind to him after the fall of the károlyi government and the rise and fall of bela kuns even shorter lived government horthys fascists suppressed most intellectual activity *nyugat* closed down and many intellectuals got rounded up and thrown in jail and some were tortured and killed and peter was one of those thrown into prison he got rounded up with a number of others suspected of left wing sympathies and hauled off to the central police station where he spent a sleepless night in a bare cell listening to the moans of another prisoner being tortured in a neighboring cell while he waited for his turn to come till the early morning when he got dragged out of his cell manacled and left to stand there in the docks next to his tortured fellow prisoner waiting for someone to assign them to their fate

it was a long wait and his haggard companion could barely stand and swayed back and forth in a shocked daze and peter expected at any moment someone to come in with orders to shoot them both but suddenly there was a sound of laughing voices and a young dandy in an officers uniform with a beautiful woman in an evening dress on his arm burst into the room theyd obviously been partying and were

a little drunk the officer pointed to the tortured man and said something peter couldnt make out and the woman went up close to the dazed man screamed “communist pig” and spat into his face the officer laughed and the glamorous couple swept out of the room as suddenly as they came in while peter watched the saliva roll slowly down the prisoners cheek which he made no effort to wipe but then another officer came into the police station an aristocratic ex-classmate of peters who simply pointed to peter and told the police official in charge “you cant hold him hes a poet hes not dangerous to anyone”

so peter escaped prison and slipped down the danube to vienna where he starved for a while and from there to paris where he met a pretty french girl for whom he recited “*il pleure dans mon coeur comme il pleut dans la ville*” and she told him his pronunciation was *extraordinaire*

so that was one of the things i was thinking about when i first visited romania back in 1992 not long after the fall of ceausescu and of course i didnt know what to expect except that i had some images of early twentieth century bucharest as a kind of east european paris where nearly everyone spoke french so i wasnt prepared for the billboard images of michael jackson as a byzantine icon or the ten foot high marlboro man who probably died of throat cancer still pushing here in eastern europe where nobodys a cowboy and nearly everybody smokes the cigarettes that surely killed him back in the united states or the coffee shops selling nescafé instant coffee as a delicacy or the number of street vendors trading currency and hawking everything and anything from condoms to audio cassettes while american movies filled the theaters and king michael was campaigning for a return of the monarchy as iliescus government was auctioning off television and radio licenses to unidentified corporate interests in the

interest of privatization and as testimony to the freedom of the market

but the conference i attended here was wonderful and i listened to round after round of lectures and discussion by art critics and scholars from hungary and bulgaria and romania in french and english and what i could make out of the romanian filled with intellectual excitement with anger and distaste for the stalinist past and great hopes for a new and open future and we got shuttled around the city of bucharest to see the megalomaniac “peoples palace” ceaucescu had constructed for himself and the streets of fashionable international boutiques that were selling french german and italian luxury items at prices i didnt imagine anyone in romania could afford then we went out into the countryside to see the weird buildings ceaucescu had constructed for the people hed forced out of their traditional homes into modernist potemkin villages hollow concrete blocks in which people huddled against a winter without plumbing or electricity as a sign of romanias modernity and of course we got shown around the ruins of count dracus castle by a caretaker who was hoping to immigrate to cleveland where he had relatives that were doing pretty well

so i remembered with some anxiety the tv images from my interrupted skiing trip the blank prison cell the hooded prisoner and the faceless executioners but then we were offered something very special the curator of the big bucharest museum a husky whimsical guy in motorcycle boots who looked more like a paratrooper or a beat poet than a curator had organized an exhibition expressly for us the conferees at the national academy of sciences and we trooped into the museum where he had arranged all the paintings of ceaucescu and his wife that had been offered to the museum over all the years of their reign and there they stood dozens of paintings of

president and madame ceaucescu side by side and arm in arm and always holding a lily in paintings of every style from nineteenth century realism through a kind of monet-like impressionism a seurat or pissarro pointillism and even van gogh like expressionism this was surprising but what really made the exhibition were the sculptures because our curator friend had put on display in the same hall on a slightly elevated but very large platform all the sculptures of president and madame ceaucescu and there were dozens of these too in the same pose and he had lined them up left to right in size places the way we used to line up in elementary schoolyards waiting to enter our classrooms

and though this was a special exhibition and no one else was allowed to see it looking at all these ceaucescus side by side and arm in arm and always holding the iconic lily in statues running in size from dwarf lawn jockeys to public park monuments i figured that somehow in spite of everything in romania it would be all right

wed just driven down on a grey december day from a conference on recent american poetry that jacques darras had organized at his university in amiens where most of the talks were by french scholars and poets but hed also brought over a bunch of american poets and arranged a reading for us at the museum of french american cooperation at blérancourt an old estate that once belonged to jp morgan and had been turned over to the french government sometime after the first world war whose battles had left shell scars on the walls of the older buildings

there were six of us poets who were going to read and we were joined by serge fauchereau a well known french critic translator and anthologist of american poetry who was going to produce part of the introduction along with jacques

so with only about twenty minutes of time available i figured id read a couple of short written pieces because it was not the time or place for a talk poem so what could i do

with all the others i had walked in the cold december rain over the weirdly topiaried gardens that reminded me of alain resnais' *last year at marienbad* id examined the strange collection of paintings mostly by minor american painters whod happened to spend time in france

id seen the dark green first world war ambulance displayed like a found object in one of the halls id read the walt whitman poem to france on the occasion of the franco prussian war that was displayed in one of the glass cases and i figured ill do the best i can

talking at

blérancourt

someone asked me once a simple question an absurdly simple question and i gave an absurdly simple answer whats an artist he asked and i said somebody who does the best he can by now ive said this so many times ive begun to believe it because when you think about it there are very few people in this world that do the best they can

you know if general motors makes a lemon of a car its your problem but if an artist makes a lousy artwork its his problem or her problem so it turns out that artists are the last people in this world who have to do the best they can because their life is at stake you say you know a plumber who does the best he can i say hes an artist you know lots of artists who dont do the best they can? its very simple theyre not artists anyhow thats how i answer the question because up to now thats the best i can do for an answer now as a poet thats the term i get stuck with

i actually choose it fairly aggressively i choose it in spite of the fact that i tend to feel a little uncomfortable with it because if im going to be a poet i want to be a poet who explores mind as the medium of his poetry not mind as a static thing but the act of thinking and the closest i can come to the act of thinking is the act of talking and thinking at the same time

the closest i can come to my thinking is by talking myself through  
 it talking my way through my thinking thinking my way through  
 my talking

a little while ago jacques asked do we have the right material here  
 and maybe he was talking about the tape recorder but thinking  
 about it in general i suppose theres no such thing as the wrong  
 material were in a museum here a small museum of french  
 american friendship and museums have a strange effect on me and this  
 museum like any museum

but in this museum even more so  
 because its a small museum

looking at the pictures on the walls  
 theres something arbitrary about a museums relation to artists  
 its a little like looking at driftwood on a beach the artists are  
 cast up on the shore after the ship has gone down and theyre  
 carried some distance by the current and stranded on this particular  
 beach where they get found and hung on the wall trophies of a  
 random rescue

museums do the best they can and i suppose i repeat myself but  
 my sense is that museums are to artists as anthologies are to poets as  
 zoos are to animals and its hard to think about animals in a zoo  
 where the animals are sleeping while the people are buying ice cream  
 and t-shirts and toys its even hard to look at artworks in some  
 galleries but i got used to it because i had to act as an art critic  
 which ive done for a large part of my life and i had to find a way to  
 do that and live with being an artist a poet at the same time

now the way that i managed to do it was to speak as one artist to  
 another and anyone else who cared to listen so if anyone wanted  
 to eavesdrop they could but i wasnt writing for them and if they  
 didnt want to listen it was all right with me but what i had to say

seemed to amuse a lot of people and the magazines printed it even though i was lousy about deadlines and at one point i was told by donald droll a friend of mine who ran the fischback gallery that a german magazine with a remarkable name *das kunstwerk* wanted to talk with me about becoming their american correspondent and writing about the art scene in new york i'd already been writing a new york chronicle for a danish magazine called *billedkunst* so i said okay donald what are they interested in donald said the editors are coming to town next week they'll take you to an expensive restaurant and you'll find out when you see them

the next week two well-dressed germans appeared at the fischback gallery and they told me all about art they told me all sorts of things and for someone who understands german very well i didn't know what they were talking about they were talking about valuable art expensive art mind boggling art and censored art they wanted me to write about important art about art that was winning art that was losing and art that was important

look i said i don't know about all that i go around to galleries to artists studios to museum shows i think about what interests me and then i write about it is that all right with you they looked disappointed they thought i would give them something definitive and i would have liked to give them something definitive but i didn't know anything definitive i go to galleries to see what's there and sometimes it's all right and sometimes it's not sometimes i'm depressed most of the time it's just not interesting but don't get me wrong sometimes there are wonderful works it's just not often but i keep going around i do the best i can even though i hadn't developed my definition yet i did the best i could and it was one of those years it was a year when a great number of my friends were showing things things i could think about

it was winter and there was a sculptor an englishman an english sculptor a charming man as elegant and handsome as general wavell or ronald colman an evasively intelligent slim and moustached man who was coming to have a show at the fischback gallery and the opening was set for a friday in february and id seen a couple of the works earlier my friend donald had shown them to me

they were small molded plastic shapes about the size of a large door handle they were white and shiny little organic shapes and if you picked them up they looked back at you blankly throwing back at you a dim reflection of your face they were constantly rejecting they had a kind of enigmatic fascination in their refusal small as they were to be lovable

thats the way they looked in the back room because thats where you see a lot of the art before its lit and set on the stage when youre a working critic they take you into the back room before the lights are up and the orchestra plays so to speak because they hope youll review it before it opens but thats how theyll show it to you anyway even if you cant

so i went into the back room and saw these little enigmatic shapes and i was waiting to see what they would look like when the show finally opened wondering whether you could still see your reflection when they were under plexi when the lights hit them the gallery was planning a big opening the sculptor had come all the way from beirut where he was teaching at the american college and there was a picture of the american college in beirut in the *new york times* with a short article about the sculptor the day before the opening the day of the opening new york had one of the worst snow storms in its history four people came to the opening elly and me and marilyn fischback and donald droll and the snow lingered and because nobody knew

him and nobody could be charmed by him at the opening nobody came to see the show with its snow colored little sculptures and it was not reviewed and the elegant sculptor went back to the american college in beirut and never appeared in new york again

now as an artist he was no worse and he was a lot better than many artists who appeared again and again but what was i to write in *das kunstwerk* that these brilliant hard white plastic sculptures had been caught in a storm that buried them like a deluge of styrofoam and the sculptor had disappeared into beirut would anyone have cared could i have written sufficiently eloquently in german for them to understand about the pathos and the loss of the show to him who would never come back to new york his two years of work gone or to us who would have to give up the possibility of finding meaning in those tough little white shapes but you know it was like that new york was filled with excitement and disappointment yet thats not what they wanted me to write about they wanted me to write about important art about artists we knew would come back to new york again and again and i was a working critic and mostly thats what i wrote about the scene

and i got started writing for it because an old friend nico calas had persuaded me to he introduced me to lita hornick so i started my art writing by taking over the art chronicle from frank ohara for her magazine *kulchur* and then john ashbery whod published one of my first art essays in *art and literature* came back from paris to help edit *art news* where he persuaded tom hess to publish more of my essays so i was very much a part of the new york art scene from about 1964 on but after a few years i was beginning to get a little tired of it so john whod become a good friend and something of a comrade in arms at *art news* decided to help me john decided to help me into a kind of curatorial career he knew that jerome robbins wanted to

organize an exhibition for the education and edification of his dancers and john decided i was the one to do it so he provided me with an introduction to robbins

like many new york poets i was an aficionado of dance so i knew of the man i knew that robbins imagined himself as a kind of choreographer diaghilev diaghilev had been a formidably cultivated man whod taken it upon himself to educate all his disciples of the ballet russe in all the arts he would drag nijinsky and fokine to contemporary painting exhibitions to concerts of modern music to poetry readings and in this way he brought together people like fokine nijinsky massine and karsavina and spessivtzeva with painters like picasso and braque poets like apollinaire and cocteau and composers like stravinsky satie or ravel and robbins wanted to drag his dancers into contemporary art in the same way jerome robbins was an american and he was not a diaghilev he was a choreographer who wanted to be a diaghilev but knew he wasnt so he needed somebody to help him be diaghilev

so john arranges it and i go to meet jerome robbins who is a little imperious man "what" he asked me as soon as i walked in "do you think of paul cadmus" paul cadmus was a perfectly competent gay painter who specialized in representations of winsome academic male nudes in 1967 he was about as contemporary as tchelitchev i told him i never thought of cadmus

"so what kind of show would you put on" he said and before i could answer he said "let me show you my space" and got up to lead me there in fact he didnt get up he shot up and started walking from the room in fact he bolted from the room and he wasnt walking he was loping he was moving very quickly in what was almost a half run disguised as a walk

now i am not inordinately

sensitive to one upmanship but it didnt take much effort for me to realize he was moving so fast that unless i wanted to join in his masquerade id have to jog to keep up with him and i was not about to play his game so i set out at a very leisurely pace and ambled into his dance space a good thirty seconds after him where i found him seated on a high stool from which he snarled at me

“so what would you show my dancers?”

now you have to remember this was 1967 or so and most of my friends were minimalist sculptors so i suggested i wouldnt show them things i would get artists like robert morris or carl andre or don judd or ronny bladen or sal romano or walter de maria to confront them with things obstacles over and under and around which they would have to work because i didnt see art then as so much showing things as performing i said i would put on a show for them that didnt look like art but would be the most interesting art by some of the most interesting artists of the time

now you have to understand that jerome robbins had led me a chase into his dance space he had seemed to be walking but had actually been running in order to force me to struggle to keep up with him and i had realized this and stubborn person that i am i had sauntered after him so that he had to wait nearly thirty seconds for me to arrive and he had asked me about paul cadmus and i had proposed minimalist sculpture so in a state of rage he pointed to his pristine dance floor and demanded “how would you do that” and i answered “right on the dance floor id get everything else out of here and fill up the place with all the junk that was needed for your dancers to have to dodge skip jump over or be tripped by so your dancers could encounter the real world they live in” this didnt sound like diaghilev and needless to say i never did the exhibition

so you can see i had a real relation to the contemporary art

scene even if it was equivocal and i suppose i wrote equivocally about it sometimes about the people everybody knew and sometimes about people very few people knew and sometimes about ideas that were going around in it that i wanted to think about

so i wrote a piece called “pop—a few clarifications” for *das kunstwerk* and they seemed to like it because they eventually published it and sent me back a copy of the magazine whose contents i dont remember all i remember was its cover a remarkable black and white photo of a soho rooftop with three young people sitting there and there was something haunting about this image of the three of them stranded in this unlikely space the two artists and the actress i recognized as delphine seyrig the incredibly beautiful star of alain resnais’ *last year at marienbad* who in robbe-grilletts script was always stranded between two men and a past and future she couldnt reconcile

now mostly what the art magazines want are essays that promote the importance of whatever is going on at any moment in the art world by promoting the artists and exhibitions that galleries and museums happen to be staging at the time which is why galleries and museums advertise there to create the impression that theyre participating in a world in which so much of so much importance is happening when in reality very little is usually happening

and to help give shape to such an impression museums often reshuffle the artists and artworks they usually exhibit or have seen other museums or galleries exhibit into theme shows that the magazines try to address with “think pieces” that attempt to articulate the “issues” these shows are supposed to illuminate

now *art news* was at that time a serious magazine that in addition to the usual promotional activities conducted by all the art world publications printed serious essays on art and tom hess who was its publisher and editor-in-chief was a sensitive and

intelligent art critic who was close to the artists he admired and had recruited his reviewers and essayists from a wide range of contemporary poets and art historians and he encouraged me to take on one of these theme shows

it was an expensive and extensive show put on with a large fanfare by the museum of modern art in new york and it was i suppose intended to address the current interest this was 1968 of young artists in new technologies but the museum of modern art was a historical museum devoted to a particular history of modernism and its continuities so the show was a historical show curated by a man named pontus hulten who was something of a stuffed owl a scholarly gentleman not too familiar with really contemporary art and much more comfortable with the interests and art of the early twentieth century so the show turned out to be an exhibition of old art and old technology and was almost inevitably called "the machine" while the technology of the second half of the twentieth century was more about information processing and control and transmission devices about computers and masers and lasers and usually led to variously high tech sculptural installations that tom who was much more committed to the career of serious painting wasnt really familiar with or interested in so he may have overvalued the show and thought i should do a think piece about it

but for me it was old technology and old art so how was i to address it i did it by inventing a machine which in a fit of modesty i attributed to jean tinguely a machine an information processing machine i designated as a *self stabilizing data processing device* the novelty of which was that it was able by means of successive passes through a series of analyzer banks garble heads and erase heads to render all new data submitted to it identical to the data already in its memory system what you knew before you know now and i

presented the patent application for *jean tinguelys new machine* as an introduction to my essay preceded by a functional input output diagram of its manner of operation the form of which bore an odd resemblance to the ground plan of the old museum of modern art but the application was composed in the prose of patent language and the resemblance seemed to have slipped by nearly everyone who read through the accumulation of technological shaggy dog stories that formed the body of the essay it slipped by my good friend tom hess and harris rosenstein who edited the essay and i suppose believed along with everyone else that there really was such a tinguely machine that i was simply commenting on

of course tom probably didnt care very much and merely enjoyed the stories while harris may have been suspicious because he was an all around new york intellectual the kind that probably doesnt exist anymore a rumpled shirtsleeved chain smoking dedicated art world professional who would care more about the meaning of a new rothko painting or a morton feldman composition than a subway strike or a collapse of the stock market and knew the arts as well as most of the writers whose essays he edited though he never published a word of his own but edited all of us for years but he never said a word to me about it at the time

then suddenly *art news* was sold and fell into the hands of idiots and not long afterward charming gallant tom hess died and the old *art news* team disbanded betsy baker went to take over *art in america* john ashbery went off to write an art criticism page for *newsweek* and harris rosenstein went off to administer for the de menil collection in houston

it was hard to imagine harris and sheila in houston stranded on the coast of texas near galveston in a raw redneck town with a couple of great museums a city of flimsy woodframe houses strung out

around a tiny downtown area where a few tall glass and steel buildings huddle up against each other like gaunt pioneers seeking shelter on a windy plain and overhang a cavernous underground space filled with chic boutiques and stylish eating places to which sleekly dressed men and women from the corporate world of the tall buildings come to lunch and browse and shop but which emptied out by five o'clock leaving nothing behind but dioramas of impeccably tailored silent manikins blindly offering on gracefully outstretched arms to the vacant corridors the jeweled accessories of a perished dynasty seemingly destroyed by something like a neutron bomb

but visiting houston several years later i was there for some sort of occasion a conference or symposium of some kind held in one of the tall downtown buildings that brought me and my friend sheldon nodelman to houston that year i took the occasion as an opportunity to visit the rothko chapel which i'd never seen and the de menil collection and naturally we went to visit with harris and sheila to see how they were holding up in houston and they seemed to be holding up pretty well under the circumstances of being stranded in houston harris was handling the publications of the de menil collection which included nursing sheldon's great book on the rothko chapel through an endless series of deepening revisions and expansions and sheila in spite of all odds had turned the de menil bookstore into a kind of cultural oasis for concerts and readings so that nearly everyone who had anything to do with contemporary art who passed through houston connected with them

so we had dinner with them a whole bunch of us went off with harris and sheila to an improbably distinguished chinese restaurant in a seedy part of town far from the glass and steel center where our hotel was located and it was a kind of new york occasion with lots of noisy esthetic arguments was rothko a colorist even if he denied

it were his brightly colored paintings intended to be “beautiful” how black were the chapel paintings were they “beautiful” what about the recent fashion in performance art and were we finally through with technological art or would it recur as regularly as the colored leaves of a northeastern autumn and in the midst of this conversation harris reminded me of my tingly piece

“you know” he said “the fourth time i read it i realized it was terribly funny”

the night got later and we descended into the obligatory personal chronicles who was sleeping with whom now that whoever was no longer with whom but with whomever else and finally sheldon and i took a taxi back toward our hotel and as we came out of the neighborhoods of small houses and two story buildings with store fronts and drove into the central space of the slim tall buildings the streets that had been sparsely peopled before became completely empty and silent as though vacated by something like a neutron bomb and as we were driving through the narrow canyon between the glass and steel buildings out comes a small black barouche about a block ahead of us drawn by a white horse with a little plume carrying a formally dressed man and woman it travels another block turns a corner and disappears “sheldon what was that?” “what?” “the black carriage the white horse” “i didnt see anything”

a year or two later sheila died of lung cancer i guess all that chain-smoking finally got her and harris was really stranded on the coast of texas near galveston but he held together for about another year till hed finally nursed sheldons great rothko book through the press and then harris also died

elly and i got persuaded by a couple of young artists teaching there to spend a week in residence with the art department at the university of colorado at boulder

boulder is an ungainly little town perched awkwardly on the continental divide with little to recommend it but a good bookstore a pleasant university and a magnificent sky and nothing would have persuaded me to spend a week there except the rare chance to perform back to back with eleanor on the same program aside from a small seminar and some meetings with students we didnt have too much to do before the performances and we spent a lot of time reading but i ran out of books so i had to resort to the bookstore where i stumbled on osip mandelstams memoir

## the noise

## of time

i suppose most people know that when i come to a place i have a bit of difficulty trying to say precisely what im going to be doing so i dont start with large introductions but as usual ive got a number of things on my mind when i go places and i think about them out loud in public and because what im doing is entertaining ideas not people im quite happy for people to feel free to get up and leave whenever they stop finding this entertaining and thats how i know im a poet not an entertainer though on several occasions people have compared

me to entertainers like lenny bruce but thats not what im like im not very much like lenny bruce if im an entertainer at all

i admire lenny bruce and have great respect for what he did but lenny bruce worked in clubs where he had to take on drunks and coax and coerce them into thinking about something more than getting laid while he kept them from getting out of the chair and hitting him or running away the difficulty is that hes there in that space where hes got to be entertaining even when he doesnt want to be in my case i always imagine i should put a sign over the door that reads ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE so that we could begin in a reasonable conversational way now recently ive been in a kind of conversation with a number of young artists and what weve been trying to figure out is what is a good way to think and talk about art and it seems that art has recently been accused of having ideas

i know theres also a large contingent of people for whom art has no relation to ideas and exists only to express emotions but that idea is so stupid its hardly worth thinking about at all

at the same time there are very serious and intelligent people who see an artwork as a container for ideas something like a suitcase or a blackboard on which the artist has inscribed in a more or less idiosyncratic script a message they could read out once theyve deciphered the handwriting so they study the handwriting and when they think theyve got it figured out they declare that this artwork says this and thinks that and they arrive at this notion because they believe that artists as relatively intelligent people having intentions and opinions declare them in their artworks like a traveler passing through customs

i realized id never thought about artworks this way and i wondered whether or not it was at all reasonable to think so and

around this time i happened to read something that made me think of this idea again id picked up a copy of the *nation* in the bathroom we keep our copies of the *nation* in the bathroom its a magazine we like to read when were otherwise occupied because it has amusing political conversation though its otherwise totally absurd but it also has one intelligent person who writes about art a very cultivated and eloquent writer most of their other reviewers are worthless their film reviewer is silly their literary reviewers are ridiculous but they have an art writer named arthur danto who is an educated and sympathetic critic of contemporary art and he was writing a commentary on an exhibition by robert morris his retrospective at the guggenheim morris is an old friend of mine and as a result although i no longer like to write formal art essays i had been persuaded to contribute an essay to the catalog and because of currents of cliché in the contemporary art world i realized this exhibition was going to run into a generally unfriendly press so i was curious to see what arthur had to say

the essay was disappointing it was only mildly affected by the negative currents of fashion but didnt get very far in talking about morris at all but in the course of the essay arthur quoted apparently with approval a statement of hegels from the *aesthetics* a kind of sweeping statement you dont usually find quoted in art reviews which made a remarkable claim that an artwork is the embodiment of some truth

now im not entirely sure what in this context would have counted for hegel or for danto as a truth and im not sure why we couldnt with equal confidence consider it the embodiment of a lie for which theres a great classical tradition in all those smooth bodied statues of young greeks and noble roman emperors and all those paintings of complaisantly luscious courtesans and handsome warriors but this

doesn't really answer the question of what an embodiment either of a truth or a lie might really be

it seems to imply at the very least that an artwork can be created as the physicalization of a very unphysical thing an idea and while there may be some difficulty in deciding exactly what an idea is the real problem i had with this claim was that i wasn't really sure how an obdurate object like an artwork could be the physical manifestation of something as abstract as an idea

now my first thought was that christians might understand this for christians jesus figures as the embodiment of an idea of god yet even for them this is a bit confusing because sometimes jesus is shown exercising divine powers doing miracles here and there casting out demons raising people from the dead but at other times his body and even his spirit appear to suffer all the pain and anguish of being human and abandoned on the cross and of course jesus is no more like an artwork than any other human being because his creation according to most dogmatic accounts is effected by human though miraculous means and this has been confusing even to orthodox christian theologians so it should be no surprise that personally i find it totally absurd but interesting and up to now its been the closest i'd ever come to understanding the notion of the embodiment of an idea

but of course i never really understood it i never understood how anything as tangible as an artwork could embody anything as intangible and singular as an idea or a concept or a proposition or even a sequence of propositions though now that i think of it

maybe i can imagine a kind of example something that comes close to it maybe an artwork that's a kind of machine a machine has a sequence

of parts that are functionally related to each other like a series of propositions and you can follow them from part to part from an initial supposition to a determined end like a mousetrap a mousetrap is a simple machine its simple and lethal its there to kill mice and it works in an elegant way it consists of four basic parts a base a killing engine a bait platform and a restraining bar the base is simply a rectangular piece of wood the killing engine is an assembly consisting of a rectangular loop of metal wire anchored by one of the shorter legs to the center of the wooden base where the short leg acts as an axle for a spring thats slipped sleevelike around it pinning the opposite short leg of the looped wire down to one end of the wooden base the restraining bar is a straight piece of metal wire attached longitudinally by a loop at its end to a small metal hoop anchored at the other end of the base and the bait platform is a small cantilevered piece of plastic or metal mounted on an axle situated toward the center of the wooden base and within the pinned down wire loop in such a way that it can pivot up and down like a seesaw for the machine to be set to work some peanut butter is smeared on the bait platform the metal loop of the killing engine is pulled back down to the other end of the wooden base and pinned in place by the restraining bar the end of which is laid over it and hooked under a projecting element of the near leg of the cantilever elevating the bait smeared end of the platform which is held in place by the restraining bar under pressure from the spring exerted upon the short leg of the wire loop which is reciprocally held down by the restraining bar all thats required for the machine to work is the mouse

a mouse is drawn by the smell of the peanut butter approaches the bait platform and tries tentatively to lick the butter in doing so

it rests its head lightly on the raised end of the bait platform and this slight weight depresses the bait end of the platform pushes up the other end of the seesaw and frees the restraining bar which explodes upward releasing its downward pressure on the wire loop that the spring slams down on the mouse and breaks its neck in theory anyway and the theory is an exercise in logic

if the mouse is drawn to the bait it tries to eat it licking the peanut butter depresses the end of the bait platform if this end of the cantilevered platform is depressed the other end is elevated if that end is elevated the restraining bar is released if the restraining bar is released the spring driven wire loop is forced up and explosively down onto the neck of the feasting mouse so the mousetrap is a chain of successive implications embodying a single truth desire leads to death at least from the point of view of the mouse

but even from that perspective there are some uncertainties in the chain of implications first there is the question of the bait i dont pretend to be a zoologist but ive conducted numerous experiments and in my neighborhood there are two classes of mice peanut butter mice and jelly mice peanut butter mice have no desire for jelly and jelly mice have no desire for peanut butter this will not affect the theory but no mouse will come to the trap if i put out the wrong type of bait then there is the question of dining style a fastidious mouse may not rest its head upon the platform while delicately licking up the peanut butter or jelly the platform will not be depressed and the mouse will have its banquet in peace this might suggest that the mousetrap embodies a quite different truth like manners are a life and death matter or refinement can save your life

but there are other variables that affect the unfolding logic of the mousetrap a clumsy mouse might jostle the wooden base with its

paw knocking the restraining bar loose and springing the trap without ever entering it

with the trap sprung the mouse can feast at leisure  
the truth this suggests may be god looks out for fools sometimes

but then there are still other variables we live in california  
surrounded by geologic faults rock shelves move along the fault  
plane the earth shrugs lightly and the trap is sprung the truth  
no machine is fault free but this truth is manifested only occasionally  
and then the fault may be in me i may fix the restraining bar too  
firmly under the bait platform and it may never spring or too loosely  
and it springs almost immediately or the mouse is frightened and  
moves quickly back so that only its paw is caught in the trap and  
then i pick up the trap and set the wounded mouse free in the canyon  
in back of the house

but these are all practical imperfections that can occur in the  
working of any machine and i suppose we have to look for the idea  
the intention of the machine as embodied in its form the way we  
look at a vito acconci kinetic sculpture which rarely works but lets  
you figure out how it would work if all other things were equal still  
theres nothing in an acconci machine that suggests a logic as  
remorseless as a mousetrap which unfolds like the plot of a story

so i suppose if you imagine an artwork thats built like a story  
but i cant think of many artworks that are very much like a story  
and even in a story it is a serious question whether the logic of its  
unfolding plot is the only or even the main meaning of it but this  
chain of events seems to mirror a sequence of purposes and actions  
intended to fulfill them and this movement from an intention to an  
end seems too single minded and purposeful for most artworks i know  
in fact i cant think of many artworks aside from leni riefenstahls films  
and roman imperial sculpture that are as goal oriented as this so

maybe an artwork is not at all like a mousetrap maybe it doesnt embody any ideas at all maybe its more like a bowling ball that you roll toward ideas you know the ideas are out there somewhere and you roll this bowling ball toward them and it knocks over some of them and leaves other ideas standing or leaning against each other and i thought maybe thats the way it works thats so wonderfully clear but i guess it depends on what kind of bowler you are

i think i should point out that ive bowled only twice in my life and while I loved the setting i hated the sport half the time my ball went down the gutter at the side of the alley and missed all the pins but my incompetence aside maybe people are less purposive when they make artworks and a bowling alley is all purpose the pins are all stacked up neatly in front of you and the alley leads straight to them you pick up the ball and look right at the pins a bowling alley is all intention how often have you seen a bowler pick up the ball and roll it in another direction

now as an artist ive never felt so purposive that it seemed i was looking down an alley at a bunch of ideas i wanted to knock down sometimes i felt like ideas were running in all directions and some of them were running by me and i was tempted to stick out my foot to see what might happen but it never felt as if i was leaning forward so directly into my intention

still there are ways in which an artwork can be addressed to doing some particular thing formulating a paradox lets say that might be something like sticking your foot out into the smooth flow of traffic

but theres another way in which you could make an artwork that would be something like the construction of a narrative a narrative not a story because i distinguish between narratives and stories

this is a distinction of which aristotle and the french critical tradition as well as the american folkloric tradition are all ignorant because all

theyre interested in is plot and as i see it a story is all about plot a story is the representation of a series of events and parts of events that result in a significant transformation its a logical form but a narrative is a representation of the confrontation of somebody who wants something with the threat and or promise of a transformation that he or she struggles to bring about or prevent or both these are two different cognitive modalities addressed to the problems posed to us by time because time is measured by change and change destabilizes all things especially human things because we are all temporary steady state systems who like to have to think of ourselves as stable in order to imagine ourselves as selves at all

and theres only one philosopher i know whos thought about narrative this way and thats paul ricoeur when hes in his augustinian mode but then he falls back on aristotle and gets too involved with plot and thats story not narrative from my point of view because while narrative is usually encountered on the inside of story the two modes do not require each other and each one can appear pretty much alone there are stories without narratives in every newspaper in the country a hurricane swung inland and hit the coast of florida once there was a peaceful town called tallahassee and now its in ruins you lay out the before and after with all the demographic and sociological detail you like and youve got a story without a narrative and there are narratives without stories plays like *endgame* or *waiting for godot* or in a more extreme case the wraparound paintings of rothkos houston chapel where the viewer can only struggle to see the paintings on the walls in front of him and try to relate them to the difficultly seen images of the paintings in back of him that hes desperately trying to hold stable in his mind while all the paintings are subjected to changes in color and figuration by minute variations in the natural lighting every time a cloud passes overhead or to changes in

the viewer who would like to believe that hes not changing in spite of the near inevitability of changes in his perceptual state and mood occasioned by the duration of difficult viewing this is what ricoeur saw as the center of narrative the human mind confronting what he called the aporias the blind alleys of time

but why do we want to represent it why does anybody represent to himself or herself the struggle for and against transformation and the answer may lie somewhere close to the anxiety produced by the paradox that however much we are tempted by transformation the beggar would always like to become a king but this change courts the danger that the beggar could be lost in the transformation and merely inherit the kings troubles without any memory of the satisfaction of the obliterated beggars desire

or maybe it lies closer to the terror of absolute erosion that can be forecast by even the most minute changes in our lives

so its the loss of experience that were struggling against and the loss of the self in the increasing unintelligibility of our lives that is produced by time and today i was walking in the mall and we went to a bookstore and i bought a book that i was attracted to only by the title although its a beautiful book by a very good russian poet named osip mandelstam its a book called *the noise of time* and the name resonated for me in a way that went beyond mandelstams lovely essay of that name on the lost petersburg of his childhood and got me started thinking about all these things

there was something in that name *the noise of time* that fascinated me in a way i didnt think it was possible for mandelstam to mean though what he meant by it wasnt entirely clear even to clarence brown the excellent translator of the book or rather brown sensed what it meant but wasnt quite sure of the best way to translate it and in the introduction he gives an elaborate description

of the reason for his choice of *the noise of time* from a great variety of alternatives

the name mandelstam had given the essay in russian was *shum vremeni* the second part is easy it means “of time” the question is what exactly *shum* means if you look in a russian dictionary it can mean the rustle of leaves the roar of the sea the pounding of the surf the buzzing in your ears the clamor of a crowd the drumming of rain the racket of traffic or more neutrally the sound or noise of any of these bundles of continuous repetitive percussive and abrasive events

the translator cites all these and adds one more an astonishing translation provided by vladimir nabokov in his weird version of pushkins *eugene onegin*

nabokov was a formidably educated if eccentric linguist with a poets superb knowledge of his native language and the translation he offers for *shum* is “hubbub” in what must be one of the funniest lines ever to show up in a poem in english “morns pleasant hubbub has awoken”

only a comic genius like nabokov could have produced a line like this where “awoken” is just about as funny as “hubbub” which he comments on in a lengthy deadpan note that provides not only an extensive consideration of the onomatopoetic career of *shum* in all its morphological forms but also an almost equally wonderful line of pushkins containing the word *shum* which he renders as “morns frisky hubbub has resounded” and “frisky” is almost as good but “resounded” cant compete with “awoken” yet in spite of all these wonderful suggestions i think i can understand why clarence brown chose to go with *the noise of time*

clarence brown translated this work in 1963 or 64 just about the time that works like claude shannons book on communication

theory became part of general culture this book and many works like it extended the meaning of "noise" to entropy the growing disorder that affects all ordered systems over time the frictional forces that reduce all directed energies to forms of disorder sooner or later as we go from more orderly universes to more disorderly universes given enough time

working in the sixties brown must have sensed this though he may not have been aware of it when he made mandelstam the gift of this brilliant new meaning of the word "noise" a meaning that mandelstam benefited from but couldnt possibly have known or intended when he wrote *the noise of time* in 1928 just ten years before he died in one of stalins prisons

time does strange things to you its a bit like the ocean mostly it takes things away but it also casts things up on the beach new things or old ones from different places now looking very different every bit of disorder contributes to the formation of a new order usually worse but sometimes better

you lose a lot and you may win a few maybe in the end you lose it all but meanwhile some disorder may be good for you even if you dont know it

i was sitting in oklahoma city in a diner having lunch with leo steinberg and we were eating potato skins with two different kinds of gravy because oklahoma citys cuisine is distinguished by thirty kinds of gravy and very little else we had just given talks at the oklahoma city museum of art a pretty little beaux arts building complete with a porte cochere perched perilously over an oil well that the trustees periodically threaten to open up whenever theres a shortfall in their operating funds or a sharp rise in oil prices

now leo is not only the most elegant art historian i know but he

is also distinguished in his profession by having the most extraordinary admiration for artists — maybe even an exaggerated admiration for them — and since he had just given a talk on picasso — an artist upon whose genius he had reflected brilliantly for a very long time — our conversation over potato skins swung around to a more general discussion of the mysterious nature of artistic genius — which isnt a subject about which i ordinarily have much of an opinion

but in the course of the conversation leo quoted a line of shakespeare that he regarded as a distinctive mark of his poetic genius — it was certainly a remarkable line — and its distinctive in many ways — its from *measure for measure* — and i think it goes “his head sat so tickle on his shoulders that a milkmaid might sigh it off — an she had been in love” — and its a pretty sardonic comic line — coming as it does at a dark moment when the hero is in real danger of losing his life — but what got leo was the word “tickle”

“tickle — tickle — nobody but a great poet could have written that” — up to then we were in agreement about it being a remarkable line — but at the word “tickle” we parted company — i agreed it was a pretty startling word — it stops you for a moment when you read the line — and shakespeare was a brilliant poet — but he was also a workmanlike if equally terrific playwright and it didnt seem to me too likely he would expend his energy on inventing an entirely new usage for a single word that could easily be misheard in a line of a quickly written play — somehow it didnt seem too likely — and somehow i felt that if he was a genius that wasnt the way his genius worked

so i said come on leo — i dont really know but i bet there were dozens of elizabethan uses of the word “tickle” that simply meant unstable or precarious thatve just disappeared — or maybe its a misprint for fickle — or maybe its a cognate with fickle

but maybe its not maybe its just a normal word used in the ordinary way you would refer to a ticklish situation without suggesting the feeling of being rubbed lightly under the arms

but we didnt agree because for leo i think a great artist is like an isolated mountain peak dominating the surrounding plain and for me a good artist has got to be very ordinary and a great artist is just more ordinary than everybody else so we left it at that but when i went back home i looked at the big oxford english dictionary and sure enough i found a late fifteenth century text that described rocks that stood so tickle in a stream they rendered passage perilous because you could fall and break your neck and i was about to write this to leo when i thought no i dont want to write this to leo why should i do that the noise of time had drowned out all the other ordinary uses of tickle and left shakespeare's line alone a brilliant stone thrown up on the beach why should i take this gift away

so you dont know what time will do it can stick a feather in your cap or take it away the feather may be blown out of the tail of a pheasant caught in a whirlwind and land on your hat but you never know whats going to happen

still we struggle with time we try to come to terms with its transformations that undermine our understanding of our being because time is at war with being all the time

and thinking of the separations of things the separations of things affected by time i think of the way generations are separated by time

like my son who elly and i are very close to he grew up as an art kid the kind of kid who was at home with all kinds of art because he grew up with it hes four years old and were driving along the freeway and hes getting bored because were talking to each other not

to him and hes sitting in the backseat suddenly he lets out a scream

“look im chris burden” and dives headfirst into the front seat between us so i guess we brought him up the right way

and he was not much older than that when we were once again driving along the freeway through a beautiful natural landscape and he spots a billboard with a wonderful mountain landscape on it and he says “look theres a landscape in a landscape”

so we had an art kid when he was four years old but now hes thirty and hes running a think tank that advises people with lots of money at stake on whether the lira or the deutschmark or the kroner will rise or fall and he makes these predictions on the basis of the political expertise hes been acquiring since he was a kid in the days when he used to hang out at the university library and study all the newspapers and elly and i had to bring him back the local papers from wherever we went to do readings or performances and he makes these predictions from a certain sense of distance because although hes predicting these outcomes for people who are profoundly interested in money and passionately committed to profit he has relatively little interest in profit and somewhat like an artist hes mainly interested in the game

so theres a separation of a sort but a connection across it and we come together in certain interests we share though in different ways across a space that we understand and it remains a space though we can look across it

and one of the spaces we shared and looked across almost but not quite together was the greater space separating him from his grandfather

ellys stepfather was a man of the nineteenth century at least he was born in the nineteenth century a hungarian poet and painter

named peter moor whose real hungarian name was barna jozsef whod taken the romantic name moor after shakespeares moor of venice and my sons name is blaise cendrars after the romantic name taken by a young swiss boy on his way to becoming a great french poet so they had something in common across a gap of about seventy years

and peter and blaise spent a lot of time together blaise used to visit him regularly and play tennis with him and its not easy to play tennis with an eighty-eight year old guy who has elegant strokes but moves somewhat slowly around the court it takes more effort than playing a thirty year old because when your eighty-eight year old partner hits a deft forehand into your backhand corner you have to take it on the run and return it with only moderate power to a point no more than one running step away from him so that he can make a stylish return to keep the rally going for a sixteen year old blaise was very good at this and at refraining from hitting a full power serve

he was also good at receiving lectures between games on how to improve his backhand or forehand in the manner of borotra or lacoste or henri cochet or other great stars of the distant past

it was a little exasperating but blaise was good at it because peter was very charming and could explain to him why kurt vonnegut was too smart to be a truly great writer or tell him stories about growing up in a small town in hungary before the first world war about being on his schools gymnastics team and about the little white peaches of keckemet that were sweeter than any hed ever eaten the rest of his life or about prewar budapest and the swimming pool of the hotel gellert with its artificial waves and the famous candy shop with the most voluptuous chocolates in all of europe but then he might also talk to him about the excellences of the poetry of ady or of hofmannsthal or goethes *faust* and this was probably a little less interesting for blaise

who is a talented writer but has no patience for nineteenth century poetry

but between peter and blaise there was a real intimacy across the space of seven thousand miles and seventy years of experience that separated 1914 budapest from 1980s california an intimacy that may have been as deep as the gap was wide blaise was sixteen and just awakening into his sexuality and peter at eighty-eight could look back from a waning physical being on a long history of romantic attachments whose image burnt so much more brightly now in the light of memory and unsatisfied desire now that the last and longest of these attachments to eleanors mother a beautiful woman even in her seventies had disappeared with her descent into the abyss of alzheimers and one thing they probably shared was a sense of sexual loneliness

i dont really know what they talked about in all the time they spent together but peter was the first person except perhaps for blaises closest friend brett to learn of his first real girlfriend so im sure that peter remembering the temptations and fears of his own distant adolescence must have offered blaise a mix of chivalric encouragement and cautionary tales from the experiences of his fin de siècle youth in one of the great capitals of the hapsburg empire which is what he must have meant when he said that hed given blaise some “very good advises” and whatever blaise made of these “advises” he must have sensed through the intense nostalgia of these schnitzlerian reminiscences the intensity of peters loneliness and sexual longing

an eighty-eight year old hungarian poet and painter who had outlived his contemporaries now living in california surrounded by people who couldnt speak his native language whose beautiful and accomplished paintings could find no appreciative audience because

their time had passed without making him sufficiently famous to preserve them a place in the history of either hungarian or american art whose poems could really be understood by no one he knew and blaise was the only one to whom peter could comfortably confide in however masked a form the desperation of his sexual desire and all blaise could do was listen

but peters birthday was coming up and blaise wanted to get him a present he knew that fairly soon he would be going away to college and he wouldnt be able to see peter quite as often and wanted to get him something very special he talked this over with his friend brett and at length they came to a decision the two sixteen year olds decided to find him a hooker

now i only heard of this many years later from someone who wasnt there either but as i understand it this is what happened

they took bretts parents great red cherokee and cruised slowly through san diegos gaslamp district looking for a hooker their plan was to find a girl in miniskirt and boots and too much makeup and arrange for her to encounter peter probably in the supermarket where she would pretend that shed heard he was a great artist and convince him that she desperately wanted to see his paintings and then he would take her up to his apartment to look at the paintings and she would seduce him

this was the great plan and they would pay her pretty well theyd pooled all their money and they had something like a hundred and fifty dollars that theyd saved up they had it all worked out and the only thing they needed to do was find the hooker

so they got into the red cherokee and drove downtown to the gaslamp district where they spotted a woman in a miniskirt and boots they double parked and blaise ran out to talk to her look he

said weve got a job for you and she looked doubtful its an eighty-eight year old gentleman

thats cool she said theyre gentle hes a painter blaise said its ok she said im hip this was 1984 and she spoke in the language of the sixties blaise went on youve got to meet him by accident and pretend you know about him and you want to look at his paintings i dont know she said i dont know about that brett came out of the car to help you dont have to say a lot he said hell tell you all about them and hell probably recite some poetry to you in german blaise added or hungarian in german? she said look they said weve got a hundred and fifty dollars

i have to listen to poetry in german for a hundred and fifty dollars thats all weve got they said and she thought a while wait she said i think theres a girl i got a friend down there monica you know she works further down the block i think shes german or maybe polish but anyway shes european she could probably listen to that so they tried

two three four five girls in miniskirts and boots and they offered plenty of money or what seemed like it at the time a hundred and fifty dollars but nobody wanted to look at art or listen to poetry for a hundred and fifty dollars this was the gap they were finally unable to bridge in their attempt to recuperate losses from the noise of time

new york was changing when we lived in it we had an apartment in old greenwich village on cornelia street right around the corner from the building that housed new directions and the fugazzi travel agency and in back of the garden of emilios restaurant the apartment was on the fifth floor of a walk up that was so old it had the remnants of a slave quarter in back it had a bathtub in the kitchen and shared the toilet with my neighbor across the hall but it was right across the street from an italian bakery whose bread you could smell in the early morning hours it was up the street from a great cheese store where you could buy unpasteurized stracchino and down the street from a tuscan fruit store guy who corrected my italian and it had an unimpeded view of the hudson and the palisades on the other side

when i first got the apartment in 1957 i paid \$18.75 a month for its princely three rooms and by the time elly moved in with me in 61 it had a bathroom and shower and we paid \$29.00 a month

meanwhile the rest of the city was changing the old citys nineteenth century buildings were being torn up for glass towers we left the city to go upstate for a while and came back in 63 in 64 the old pennsylvania station bit the dust we moved to california in 1968 and when i came back to do a reading at st marks in 69 the italian bakery was gone in the late seventies the cheese store was replaced by a boutique new directions moved up to fourteenth street fugazzis was gone emilios disappeared along with the used bookstore carl ashbys frame shop and the florentine fruit vendor so its kind of comforting to be here at the whitney philip morris across the street from old grand central station thinking of how

i never

knew

what

time

it was

you probably wonder why i gave this title to a piece since im generally known for not knowing precisely what im going to talk about my titling has often been accomplished by other people calling my talk something ahead of time and i say that sounds interesting maybe ill talk about it but this time i knew i was going to share a program with eleanor and its very rare for me to be on a program with eleanor who i know very well ive watched her perform so many times but one of the things i know best about eleanor is her peculiar relationship to time

its a very peculiar relationship i have the sense that eleanor always believes theres much more time than anyone else would believe so that if eleanor has to go somewhere that takes about an hour to get to she will imagine it takes fifteen or twenty minutes and she

regularly starts preparing to get there at a time based on that assumption but then she always forgets the amount of time it will take her to complete her preparations taking a shower brushing her teeth combing her hair choosing her clothes

simply going to the movies might require her to try on half the contents of her closet before deciding on the right pair of jeans or the sweater that goes with it and by the time half the closet has been emptied onto the bed and she looks dashing and chic in just the right amount of makeup to look like no makeup she starts to realize that shes approaching the moment of departure

which triggers a set of retreats from the door for a variety of reasons all of which are extremely well justified its still sunny outside and may be warmer outside than inside so the sweater shes chosen that goes so well with her jeans and feels so nice inside will be uncomfortable outside this produces a return to the bedroom till the other half of the closet is emptied onto the bed and eleanor returns to the door in another elegant sweater looking chic and ready to go but shes forgotten her reading glasses or sunglasses or at least she thinks she may have forgotten them so she has to return to the kitchen to dump the contents of her bag on the table and search for them

eleanors inability to get out of the house approaches the epic because she always has to confront these anxieties which are always justified but she always forgets them and always forgets how long it will take her to get anywhere and so she is almost always late

now i know that i have my own peculiar relationships to time i was doing a piece last month or maybe it was only a couple of weeks ago

now im not even sure what time it was i was doing this piece

but it was at the museum of contemporary art in los angeles and it was about remembering it was an exchange piece it was a piece in which i was going to exchange my stories for other peoples stories and i knew this was possible because everybody tells stories to make sense of their lives because the way we make sense of our lives is by telling stories about them stories which may or may not be true but making sense and telling the truth isnt exactly the same thing so when i speak i guarantee nothing i say as truth i do the best i can but beware

anyway i decided to structure this story exchange somewhat like a piece i had done much earlier back in 1971 and thats one way in which it became a memory piece because i had to remember this show back in 1971 it was a kind of goofy hypermodern show called "software" that was put together by jack burnham for an exhibition at the jewish museum which on the face of it already sounds goofy but it wasnt as goofy as all that

the show was looking forward to the progressive mentalization of art in a computerish kind of way or so its name suggested and the jewish museum was an avant garde museum in those days that had put on a variety of important shows by major figures of what was then for the lack of a better name called the avant garde and jack was committed to the progressive conceptualization and dematerialization of art and somehow he decided that i should be in the show and he asked me for a proposal those were the days when the art world was talking about art and technology so i designed an elaborately engineered installation whose only goal was to create a long poem made up of a chain of different peoples stories all built around a single obligatory word a kind of narrative exquisite corpse and the sole function of the installation was to encourage people to tell their

stories and reward them for it afterward by allowing them to hear the stories of other people who had preceded them followed by their own story as a kind of last word

but as i see it now my installation was a kind of overkill coming from an engineering background i did an engineering version of it it was the kind of thing you do when youre a kid the contemporary world has gone high tech and you want to keep up with it so you have to use a lot of high tech now you see me here with low tech or no tech ive outgrown all my technical devices

theyre great toys just like a rattle and i love them still even if i dont use them anymore and the piece i designed in 1971 had some of this childish charm it was like a little house a little three room house with windows

i didnt really want the windows

the windows were forced on me my idea was to have you come into a room and hear a voice explaining that you were about to hear a word and asking you to think about this word and if you felt like it go into the next room and tell a story preferably a true story using that word and if you were still interested to proceed into the last room where youd hear the work you had been part of

which turned out to be four stories containing the same word the first three by the people who had immediately preceded you with your story providing a kind of ending so that each segment and then the whole tape was a simple kind of narrative an exquisite corpse made out of different peoples stories built around the same word but since the first person into the installation would otherwise have had no stories to listen to jeff raskin eleanor and i each told one

story on each of the thirty-some words on each of the thirty-some tapes for the thirty-some days the exhibition was scheduled to run and this was what also made it a story exchange our stories for theirs now the idea or the ideas behind this piece were very simple but the details of design and construction were fairly complicated and it took a fair amount of time and effort and money to realize them and it took a long time for me and my friend jeff raskin to plan and construct the control mechanism and for the smithsonian institution which was collaborating on the exhibition to construct the housing for the installation from our drawings

which were quite precise but in a manner typical for high powered organizations helping artists in high tech exhibitions the smithsonian screwed up they didnt take my drawings seriously in fact they paid no attention to my drawings and made a complete mess and i had to kick their people out and rebuild the installation with tools i ran down and bought on canal street the week before the exhibition opened

but that was then and this was now this time i figured i would design the whole work as a simple gift exchange and i was going to do it in the lowest tech manner i figured id go back to the old software show take all those old audio tapes i had hours and hours of audio tapes of the stories people had given me and transcribe some of them

id take stories from twelve of the days of the software exhibition the new installation was to run for twelve exhibition days print up three stories on each of the twelve words put them all up on the wall and then i would set up under a card with instructions a simple little box like a letter drop on a desk with pads and pencils beside it and each day the curator or the curators assistants or leprechauns or

brownies would put up on the wall a little card with the word of the day printed on it a simple word like “balance” “black” or “drift” words that the instructions would encourage you to use in a story that you could write and drop into the box on the table as a gift to me in exchange for the stories i had put on the wall

it seemed like a great idea and because this piece was all based on remembering an older piece i had done back in 1971 i called it

REMEMBERING: A GIFT EXCHANGE but like a lot of great ideas based on remembering it came to grief in the remembering

i remembered i had all these tapes all these tapes filled with stories and i did have them twenty-seven years ago but somehow they had disappeared so now all these tapes were gone the show was about to begin and i had no stories to put on the wall but i still had the word list or part of the word list and i thought i could remember the rest and i did what any practical artist would have done in my place i sat down and wrote thirty-six stories on twelve words that i remembered or thought i remembered from that old list in about two weeks time

actually i got carried away and wrote forty stories in two weeks two weeks

there seems to be something meaningful about this number two weeks is fourteen days in which i was going to recover words lost from twenty-seven years ago maybe its the temporal dislocation between weeks and years anyway it all sounds very precise and meaningful to recover in two weeks what i had lost over twenty-seven years but of course there was something of an accident in this as

usual the reason i had only two weeks to do it was that just before my exhibition was to be installed i had to go east to providence rhode island to mourn for a friend of mine my publisher jay laughlin who had died rather unexpectedly and now they were arranging at brown

university a ceremonial remembering for jay who had also had a strong sense of the arbitrariness of duration

in any event i wrote forty stories it turned out i somehow got carried away with some of the words and i liked them so i wrote forty stories and i got them printed up to the size i wanted the fax machines were kept terribly busy between san diego where i live and los angeles where i dont live and we had to send proofs back and forth with bigger and smaller print change the typeface alter the layout darken the print

finally i had all these stories up on the wall and i explained that this was going to be a gift exchange i was giving them all these stories and as a further gift i would come in twice during the two week run of the show and do two talk pieces and their gift to me would be the stories they would write on the word of the day on the little pads on the table and drop into the letter box and i figured you know whats going to happen everyones going to go in there and theyre going to want to read the stories for their day but not for any of the others how do i get people to read the other stories how do i get people to read text on a wall

my stories were very short three lines to fifteen lines maybe very short stories but the real question was how to get people to read text in a museum any text people hate reading texts in museums unless they have a reason to read them so i decided to make it hard hard but not impossible to find out which word a story was based on so somewhere in each story the key word was italicized once you had to look for it but you could find it if you read the story but i also made sure that none of the stories that were on the same word could be found right next to each other so you had to go hunting for them among stories that werent on the same word if you wanted to find all the stories that were on the same word you had to

go looking through stories on lots of other words if you wanted to find all the stories on “drift” or “balance” or “car”

apparently my strategy worked people wandered around the walls of the gallery reading through stories on “grain” and “neighbor” and “balance” while they were looking for “drift” or “friend” and they didnt seem to mind because they wrote me lots of nice stories when they came back to the table at least thats what the curators tell me because the stories havent come back yet

so i guess i managed to get it done barely and of course the stories havent come back yet because the curators like all curators are busy with their next show and they havent shipped anything back to me yet though they say theyll send it back in a minute and maybe they will get here in two weeks or three or a month but it will still feel like a minute to the curators because thats what its like with time

theres time their time and my time and maybe theres our time or maybe there are only senses of time different senses of time all these things happened in a sense of time or in a mix of senses of time

and i was thinking of my feelings about this when i agreed to do talk pieces at the museum there to go along with the stories and i thought i was going to talk about remembering and i wanted to try to remember what 1971 was like and how in the world i came to the idea of a story exchange as an idea for an artwork back in 1971

now i believe that what i call narrative which other people call storytelling is a fundamental cognitive activity without which human beings couldnt exist at all but thats what i believe now i couldnt have believed it then or not in that way not in the teeth of received modernist opinion that narrative and representation were the two greatest enemies of modernism but i must have believed it in some

way in spite of the classical modernist notions of the futility of narrative and representation promulgated by that lovely classical idiot apollinaire

i have a very low opinion of apollinaires intelligence but a terrific opinion of his ability as a poet i share this low opinion of him with duchamp who also thought he was a jerk perhaps for different reasons but basically we stand on the same ground about apollinaires understanding of the modern but in any event of this particularly preposterous notion

apollinaire used narrative nearly all the time but put it down because he thought he should yet what he was putting down wasnt narrative but conventional narrative and not all conventional narrative at that he knew as we do that pornography produces defective narrative and whats interesting is its defectiveness but this was also something that was not quite so clear to me in 1971 and i kept trying to remember 1971

now how do you remember a date like 1971 how do you remember any date like the millennium i keep hearing this bullshit about the millennium who hasnt heard something about the year two thousand everybodys heard something about it two thousand from what

look a radical young rabbi gets killed by romans he dies and his followers who admire him try to remember this and they remember it was somewhere during passover and they know who was governor at the time who was the roman governor at the time? then they have to figure out how old their rabbi was when he died and they figure out he was either thirty or thirty-three or some other nice number and they count back from this passover which they try to locate by remembering the time of this governor whose name they remember

because if they know the governor then this had to occur within the governors lifetime and if they can locate this within the period of his service in judaea working from what the governors dates were and the age of their young rabbi they start trying to count back they count back and they wind up with a number but there is another question

do they count back in terms of the roman or jewish calendar in all probability their rabbis age and the time of passover would have been computed by the jewish calendar and the governors age and term of service would have been computed by the roman calendar from which the christian calendar was created

but the jewish calendar has a much earlier first date because it was computed from when the world began because jews know when the world began which was five thousand some hundred years ago on one particular day it was like the big bang the world began all of a sudden though it took seven days to finish the job or maybe it was six because nothing happened on the seventh except rest unless that was also part of the job so then it was seven then its a question did the world start to count on the first day or not until the job was finished at the end of the sixth or seventh thats hard to determine but at least you know what a day is

a day is something you can understand the sun comes up the sun goes down thats a day its a revolution of the earth on its axis but what if you have to count years what do you mean by a year do you mean a certain number of days or do you mean the number of times the seasons come around and in those days i guess they might have thought of the number of times the sun goes around the earth well the sun doesnt go around the earth and anyway the

sun doesnt go around the earth in an integral number of days the earth goes around the sun in 365 days five hours forty-eight minutes and forty-six seconds

so maybe we should think about it in terms of months but what are months months are figured by the number of days between one full moon and the next thats pretty good but it doesnt come out to an integral number of days either its actually twenty-nine and a half days and twelve months comes out to 354 days eight hours and forty-eight minutes which doesnt work out too well in relation to the time it takes the sun to travel a cycle around the earth thats not so good

so youve got a problem days dont work out neatly into years days dont work out neatly into months and the cycle of months doesnt fit neatly into solar years the jewish calendar is based on the lunar year and the roman calendar is based on the solar year so its not very easy to compute the year one with any certainty and its no easier thing to try to compute the year two thousand

i begin to think that finding the year two thousand is like painting a wave white in the middle of the sea and saying lets gather there and celebrate well go out to the right place 575 waves out into the atlantic were going to make an indelible white patch and then were going to take our lifeguard boats and go out there and find it thats what the year two thousand is like its like a white patch in the middle of the atlantic ocean

now since i start from this particular way of understanding time and have a kind of disdain for what its about sort of even though i would like to arrive earlier than eleanor at least i try to get there earlier than eleanor but thats because i have some idea of what time it is

though im not always sure about it because when i start thinking about 1971

well i have a picture a photograph my sister in law and her husband lived at a place on central park west right over the park and theres a photograph of me in a corduroy suit playing with a kid of about three or four years old who was my son blaise hes named blaise cendrars after the poet but in english hes blaze and hes sort of standing there and im throwing a football to him a little blue football the kind that kids play with and its a great shot taken from sixteen floors up through a canopy of trees shedding cascades of golden leaves and i can see this tiny kid with a sort of dutch boy haircut in a little corduroy lumberjacket and hes either throwing the ball to me or im throwing the ball to him and were standing among mounds of golden leaves between the shedding trees and a blue chainlink fence that separates us from a small playground lined with bright little childrens swings its a gorgeous shot and michael my sister in laws stepson is a gorgeous photographer its a gorgeous photograph in its full fall central park color and from the photograph i think i can remember how old blaise was because that was the year i think i think it was 1971

well maybe it wasnt it may not have been because looking at it it looked like it might have been a cold day in central park blaise was wearing the kind of corduroy lumberjacket with fur trim that kids wear in late fall when its already cold and if that was the case then it couldntve been the year of the jewish museum show which happened during a very hot indian summer

inside the jewish museum it was a hundred degrees and all the computers were losing their minds somebody had forgotten that at certain high temperatures computers lose their memory or they simply had not realized quite how hot it was that september or

when they planned the show they had figured that since the show was to be in the fall and fall in the northeast is usually cool there would be no special need to cool the computers and then they forgot all about cooling them but then came the indian summer and the computers developed alzheimers

that was one of the great events of the show the alzheimers effect on the computers

every artist i know who signed on to work with computers carl fernbach flarsheim agnes denes they had all agreed to be on computers i had had grave doubts when jack suggested controlling my piece by computer because in those days powerful computers were as big as a whole gallery space and while there were some smaller ones that were in the show they were nowhere as powerful as todays tiny personal computers and they had heat sensitive memories and didnt come with their own cooling systems but much of the computing in the show was done from much larger computers addressed through telephone lines in some faraway air conditioned laboratory and when jack asked me about computers i thought to myself do i really want to be hooked up to the bell system do i really trust the new york telephone system and as it turned out my distrust of the telephone system was justified because just at that time the telephone repairmen were terribly angry at the phone company probably for very good reasons and were sabotaging the phone lines they were going around tearing out lines and then collecting overtime for repairing them and the city was going crazy with so many of its lines out of service so the computer pieces in the show were either undermined by memory failure or by the telephone company though my piece was not one of them

but as i remember the september of the software show was a

very hot indian summer and we were all melting away so it seems unlikely that this picture was taken at this particular time

now of course its possible that this picture was taken in 1971 and the jewish museum show was in 1970 that could be validated if i went to the catalog providing that the catalog was right catalogs are usually right about dates you know if you can agree on your count from the birth of jesus to the present or from the beginning of the world to the present but i dont have a catalog here and you usually have to deal with time without a book in front of you  
though  
you might have a watch

i have a watch that tells me what date it is but its not always right because i dont always correct it for months of different length and theres still the question how could i find 1971 in my memory what would it be like

how do you find a particular time in memory usually you position it around some event that means something to you and you have some kind of temporal event structure in mind this happened before that and that happened after something else and you have an image of some of these events intersecting with other events and this gives you a set of loose coordinates a kind of grid on which you can fix the idea of a particular time but its a shaky fix  
consider how you would do this you want to bring one memorable event together with another so when elly and i came to california for us that was a big event we were total new yorkers you can tell by my accent unless youre a new yorker in which case you think we dont have an accent i know nobody in california believes that californians have accents but i hear it all the time the california accent the los angeles the southern california accent its so distinctive to me i can hardly imagine not hearing it in fact it

changes when you go north of santa barbara yet californians dont think they have an accent but they know i have one

now eleanor and i drove to california in a 1951 chrysler in the spring of 1968 with our new york accents and our one year old son i know my son was one year old a few days after we arrived in san diego because he was born on june 10 1967 and then i had to begin teaching at the university in the fall the university begins its year universities are funny our university begins its year on july first but we dont start classes till the end of september nobody else in the world begins their years july first but californias universities begin them july first the world seems to end every june thirtieth and begin july first if we can trust the calendar and i imagine i can trust the calendar and say somewhat confidently that blaise was one year old so you imagine these dates you imagine the confluence or congruence of dates but most of them most of them escape me so i couldnt remember precisely what else had happened in 1971 what happened first or second in 1971

what was going on in 1971 if you live by media you could say they were fighting the vietnam war but the vietnam war had been going on forever i was beginning to think that the vietnam war was one of the things we would live with forever it would never go away no matter what we would do it would continually be there and of course in the beginning i didnt understand why we were fighting the vietnam war i didnt understand it i was an innocent when i went to the university of california

and the university of california san diego was more or less administered by navy people retired navy people and after two years at the university of california i didnt understand any better why we were in the war but i did understand why we couldnt get out of it there was no way that these navy people could ever get out of

anything that they were already doing their mentality was such that once they started doing something they had once been ordered to do there was no way for them to stop doing it you could never show them that what they were doing was directly opposed to whatever they were supposed to want to accomplish that it was undermining the ground they were standing on it wouldnt help they didnt understand it whatever they started doing they would continue doing till they died or until they were pulled away from it by a direct order from whoever had set them to whatever they were doing and even then they would only withdraw with reluctance and distrust any report that suggested they should stop doing whatever they had been doing the reports would be considered inauthentic or wrong because they contradicted whatever they had been doing which had to be right because thats what they had always been doing

everything in the university went this way and i figured that these were the kind of guys running the war so clearly it would never end

but finally the war seemed to end it didnt end in a very decisive way it seemed to end very much like the way it started and could have ended years before but then it was over so you cant even really locate the end of the vietnam war as a place on your grid

i know some people remember american soldiers remember people suddenly leaving saigon and there is a video image of all those south vietnamese soldiers and civilians trying to get onto the american helicopters that were leaving but that was not the end of the war for the vietnamese people though it seemed to dwindle away after that at least for americans but i guess the trojan war wouldve been something like that

for the greeks if not for the trojans odysseus would be trying to tell the story of the trojan war and hes there in the land of the

phaeaceans trying to tell how it all ended and he remembers the trojan horse and the sack of the city but thats not how it ended for him

though there was the departure which was maybe a little like the departure from saigon

and he says i guess we were in the third year of the trojan war maybe it was the fourth or the tenth and that was the time everybody got sick or that was the time everybody wanted to go home

and he says im trying to remember and he says no im getting confused i remember i was on calypsos island where they kept feeding me viagra i had nothing else to do but eat viagra and fuck my brains out and we couldnt get away from that whole scene until they took the pills away you know how it was

but how did he know which year of the war it was if we were trying to locate the beginning of the vietnam war we might locate it by the election of a president but which president was it was it the election or when he was nominated what year was it if you thought it began with the violation of the geneva accords it was eisenhower if you thought it was when it became a public issue it was kennedy and if you thought of it when it became a large scale american war it was johnson

and anyway what time was it where was i standing in what light somehow you have to try to localize it and when i localize it

i had an image we were talking about celebrating birthdays and people wanted to know if i wanted a birthday party and i said i dont know if i want a birthday party because birthdays are a little bit like being in a falling elevator and celebrating at every floor you fall and then i thought about this again and i realized id only thought about this

since i got to be thirty because when i was a real little guy i always thought of getting older as an ascension you know how you have a different image of getting older when youre a kid how you cant wait

i remember i was sitting on a stoop with about five other little kids and we mustve been somewhere between three and five all of us sitting out having a conference on a stoop in brooklyn and were trying to decide how old we want to be because nobodys content being three or four or five its a bad time you dont want to be between three and five first of all everybody else is too tall youre always looking up and you get a crick in your neck from it you cant play stickball yet with the older kids in the street you know its not a good time youre too dependent somebodys always got to take you across the street and thats a drag and you cant drink coffee or they wont let you i actually had an aunt who snuck me coffee and it was like being free for a minute

she was my favorite aunt i lived with her and my grandmother and three other aunts in this house with a covered porch and a stoop and thats what i remember thats where we were sitting having this conference on aging and one kid said oh id like to be thirteen that sounded like a real good powerful male age i think all the kids were boys but im not even sure of that and one said id like to be fifteen and everybody agreed that was good and one said eighteen and then somebody said twenty-one no we said thats too old it takes two words to say it

we knew twenty-one was over the hill so we already had this ballistic idea like the trajectory of a shell you went up for a while till you reached a certain point and then you came down because even then we knew that whatever goes up also comes down and we had some sense of the failing of our powers at twenty-two and we would no longer be the same happy cute kids at the age of twenty-two

thats the view we had then and ive had several different views of this since then

sometimes ive seen the movement of time as something like a carousel

i was walking in balboa park in san diego san diego has a beautiful park called balboa park its not as grand or great as central park but its a very lovely park a lush park botanically we were there i forget for what reason and we were walking by the Prado just a couple weeks ago and we were walking in the area that leads to these grandiose stucco turn of the century buildings that they call the Prado because they want to evoke a kind of Spanish grandeur and all these buildings are decorated with stucco gingerbread and theyre really very charming and we were walking by the outskirts of the Prado where there is this great carousel its a very old carousel the kind with dragons and griffons and palfreys that keep coming around and going up and down and these are the fanciful animals that children know and love and we remembered going there many years before when our kid was about the age he seemed in the photograph where we were playing football in central park and i kind of think of the seasons as going around like a carousel

now you may think thats not a good image because if you watch carefully as it all goes around you see that the seasons are not always the same but the carousel is not always the same either because you cant always pay perfect attention to it and you miss a black horse

you know its like Rilkes poem about the carousel he seems to want to pay constant attention but what he notices is intermittent every now and then he spots a white elephant going by now its probably the same elephant but hes not sure about that and he wants to let you know that so he tells you several times every now and then theres a white elephant but whos sure its the same elephant

now when spring comes im not always sure its spring not the spring i recognize nowadays i dont even know when its spring sometimes i think this is a great spring a great moment but its a little displaced you know how when we were kids we might have thought this is very inappropriate for may its really more of an april a belated april but kids know everything at least we all knew everything about new york we knew when forsythia should come out when the pussy willows should be out but what happened if they came out wrong this year i was in new york just a few weeks ago when it should barely have been spring it was april it was eighty-nine degrees what kind of spring was that summer showed up and went away the merry go round went out of synch somehow we had a merry go round and it wasnt rolling right you know you keep watching yourself on the merry go round now you can even see time going by as a merry go round if you watch it from off the merry go round

but i can also see myself on the merry go round watching the world go round and then the world comes around and around and you see it again or every now and then which is another way but you could see it that way and you see how you could get to ride longer there used to be a way you could get to ride again if you could catch a gold ring that was the prize you could get to ride longer if you could reach the gold ring that was on a beam just outside the merry go round but if you were too little you couldnt do it somebody would have to hold you and you would try but you couldnt reach the gold ring but the idea was that if you got the gold ring you got an extra ride i dont remember if thats really true i dont remember if it ever really happened it sounds a little like the mythical good humor stick

when i was a kid good humor used to sell these ice cream pops

chocolate covered ice cream on a stick and there was a rumor that there was a magical stick that would give you a prize nobody that i knew had ever won this prize or seen this differently shaped good humor stick that when you ate the ice cream pop you saw something printed on it or it looked like a propeller or was somehow different and got you some fabulous prize though nobody knew what that was well the gold carousel ring was a little like that i had seen the rings i dont think they were gold and i dont know if they got you another ride but if you didnt get the ring which was what always happened you didnt get another ride and you had to get off the merry go round so you can measure time by when you have to get off the merry go round and the sense of it comes from seeing it happen again

not for the first time but seeing it again and again and recognizing it now this is the time of the year when we see forsythia or when the minute flowers on the maple trees suddenly show up for a moment in central park

its a great moment where the trees that have been bare all winter bare in the fall and bare in the winter and then before they turn into the grand green leafage there is this moment when they have a feathery look that makes you think your eyes are going bad but its just a moment and very soon theres this green dust on the ground its just a moment but a great moment the moment of spring and i always used to look for it

but you dont always get to see it sometimes the rains would carry the maple flowers away before you got to see them and there might be no landmarks for the spring

now i have another way of looking for the cycle that would make it possible to figure the time though maybe its even more bizarre suppose you think of yourself on an escalator youre on an escalator

and say youre on an escalator going up youre growing youve got a career youre going up the escalator and the career is carrying you almost without effort you know this is not really true but it feels that way it feels good

youre doing well you know youre having shows youre getting published youre on an escalator and its going up but you know at some point youre going to be catapulted off the escalator so how do you stay on the escalator the biggest artists problem is how do you stay on the upper half of the escalator without reaching without getting pushed off

so what you do is run backwards youre busy running backwards its very busy running backwards as you keep running in order not to get to the top of the escalator and not to get off at the bottom and start over you know youre not trying to get down to the bottom youre trying to stay in the upper quarter of the escalator desperately the whole art scene my sense of the whole art scene is like this i watch people doing this all the time theyre busy jogging in the wrong direction on the escalator but theyre also looking for something while theyre jogging something familiar

because the longer theyre on the escalator the more strange faces begin to appear on it people are coming up and passing them people they dont recognize anymore their contemporaries are getting bumped off the escalator and theyre still on the escalator and obviously they think its a much worse art world because they cant recognize all of the people in it

what do you mean all these new people on the escalator are making me very nervous i dont recognize them and since you cant recognize the people you keep looking at the escalator to see if the escalator has some familiar step a step with a deformation in it you

look for a place where the escalator has something peculiar like gum

stuck into it because you know the escalator is a continuing series of steps that cycles around and around and around and the same step that stood up once to lift you up goes down and flattens out and then it comes around and lifts you up again so you want to find the place on the escalator that you remember and its very hard to recognize

have you ever tried to recognize a step on an escalator its very difficult to recognize the step you last stood on on the escalator its very hard i know how hard it is and it happens to everybody this need to find the right step your step the step that you recognize on the escalator and this need came home to me not with my own life but in the life of my father in law

my father in law was a hungarian poet painter his name was moor peter that was a nom de plume his real name was barna joszef but he took the name moor like the moor of venice or thomas moore the irish poet took this as his pen name in budapest and if you take that name in budapest nobodys called moor there where he had a grand early career or a very quick early career he was a poetic wunderkind he was adopted as a young writer and immediately became accepted in this great hungarian magazine published by the great hungarian poet ady who accepted three stories by young moor peter in this great magazine called *west* in hungarian *nyugat* because it was the westward looking magazine but the trouble was the first story got published and peter became instantly famous for a minute then came the revolution and the counter revolution and *nyugat* got shut down never having had a chance to publish the other two stories and peter had to flee the country and go to vienna where he got some work in alexander korda films in those days they were silent films so he didnt have to speak german because his german was very poor but then he came to the

united states and here in the united states he was a man who spoke very poor english and was nevertheless a hungarian poet who became a painter and a poet

that is he continued to write hungarian poems which were broadcast over hungarian radio anti fascist hungarian radio in new york and he had a kind of circle of hungarian friends and he was constantly trying to find the step on that escalator that had lifted him up into the center of the budapest hungarian publishing world from which he had been cast out cast off the escalator by revolution counter revolution and the turns of the world that he lived in and he lived a very interesting life he became a very beautiful painter but he always thought of himself as a hungarian poet we have his paintings his paintings are wonderful theyve been exhibited and all that

and in some way he may even have been a much more original painter than a poet but that doesnt matter because he was so deeply embedded in the hungarian language by his love of that language that he kept looking and looking and looking to find some way back he even translated some contemporary hungarian poetry into his then reasonably good functional english but hungary had gone to a different place he was an old leftist poet from a country that was suffering from stalinist lunacies that could no longer find a way to appreciate him he was gone the way solzhenitsyn was gone from russia he was a displaced hungarian poet living in la jolla

so one day hes on the tennis court at the age of ninety-three showing a beautiful young woman how to put away a serve he shows her how to put away the serve he trips and falls and breaks his hip breaks his hip and goes to the hospital and in the course of the treatment they give him heparin to keep his blood from clotting and unfortunately that makes him worse he has a stroke hes dying

at ninety-three when someone dies you usually expect it but he was in good shape and we werent expecting it we werent ready for him to be dying i was used to his arguing with me about goethe and all of german and hungarian literature he never failed to explain their excellences which were sometimes hard for me to take and we used to argue he would explain to me why kurt vonnegut was too smart to be great or why charles olson was too smart to be great he was a wonderful wonderful old guy he was terrific and he was dying and we were beside him and we tried to talk with him but his english which was never very good was now much worse now that he was dying and he must have had a stroke though we didnt realize it at the time so it was much harder than usual to communicate with him and he was very impatient with us for not understanding him he kept trying to tell us something that we didnt understand as we tried to talk to him about his life and console him by reminding him of what he had accomplished as an artist and writer but he kept waving us away shaking his head and repeating one word over and over again

i dont know much hungarian i know a little but i dont know much he had taught me one sentence that i remember very brilliantly it was the first sentence he learned to read in school which goes “*o legyelsho magyar ember o kirai*” which means “the first man in hungary is the king”

which tells you what kind of country he grew up in and when but my pitiful stock of hungarian words didnt include the one word he kept saying over and over as a kind of denial of what we were trying to tell him as we tried to console him about the meaning of his life

*zaha* he said *zaha* shaking his head and repeating it over and over *zaha zaha* to anything we had to say it didnt mean anything to me and of course there was plenty of hungarian i didnt know so as he lay

there dying i didnt have any idea what he meant later i tried to look it up in my hungarian dictionary and i couldnt find anything remotely like it

anything but one day im talking to a friend a marvelous virtuoso hungarian violinist named janos negyesy and i tell him about the word and he thinks a moment hes a musician and he says *zaha* its an inversion

thats *haza* it means homeland

so it was as if someone speaking english would say to me *dnalemoh dnalemoh* for homeland so it was homeland he was trying to say only i couldnt figure it out he was somehow trying to find the step his step on the escalator that particular step that had lifted him up and had somehow disappeared and i dont know if it was the budapest world that had welcomed him or the little town of keckemet where he had been born

but he was thinking of his homeland and of course budapest is no longer his budapest and keckemet is no longer the little town where his father painted the interiors of churches but he was looking for this one place that he was sure never ever to find again

sanda agalidi asked me to come up to talk at cal arts where she was conducting a seminar on the experience of time sanda is an old friend an idiosyncratic art historian and critic who many years ago had been a graduate student of ours at ucsd to which she brought a great intelligence a deep european education a masters degree from the university of bucharest barely a word or two of english and the haunted look of an iron curtain émigré

when she left us with an mfa to go on to a doctorate at ucla which she completed with a brilliant thesis on *neue sachlichkeit* painting she spoke a fluent romanian english that she perfected with years of teaching at the california institute of the arts in valencia though the luminous california sunlight had done little to brighten her eastern european soul so i knew that any seminar she was teaching would be eccentric and interesting and i was also interested in going over once again what still seems to me the inexhaustible peculiarities of the experience of time

time

on my

hands

of course everybody is always dealing with time in some way or another so was i this morning

in fact the whole idea of coming and talking at ten in the morning was already committed to an engagement with time since i was

coming from san diego to talk at ten in the morning and ten in the morning is quite early to make a trip up to mcbean parkway when youre coming from san diego it used to be faster to come to mcbean parkway and then it was slower to get to mcbean parkway and then it got faster again

at different times there were different speed limits when i first came to california in 1968 there was a seventy mile an hour speed limit before they clamped it down and the trip was so quick because there was nothing here back in 1968 cal arts wasnt here this was a place where white tailed deer ranged when they could find water coyotes of course and other small beasts valencia wasnt here either back in 1968 i think there were a couple of ranches back then and i had come to san diego for the odd experience of teaching which i had never desired or intended to do i was invited to come out and be the director of the art gallery of the university of california at san diego and teach a few courses in spite of the fact that my graduate work was in linguistics

but i was a writer and i wrote art criticism and i was a poet and they told me thats what they really need you put some slides up people will look at them and sometimes youll talk about them and theyll wonder why youre talking about them but after a while theyll get used to the idea that even if they dont know why youre talking about them itll be all right this was the version given to me by paul brach the man who founded the art department up here but that was after he founded the art department down there and once again were talking about time

and its curious how talking about past time involves the memory of time its one thing to experience time and another thing to experience past time which is already over and to imagine future time which isnt there yet or sometimes to put yourself in past

time and imagine a future time that happens to be over for which they have tenses in some languages that can drive you crazy a future perfect where you imagine a future thats already over but you put yourself in a past in order to imagine it

when i started out this morning i knew that saying ten oclock ten oclock was rather early the earliness didnt bother me because i wake up around six or so anyway the sun comes in our windows our bedroom faces the east and by the time the sun comes in this time of year its a function of the time of year and this time of year the sun comes in very early im up by six and that wasnt a problem the question was to figure out how to arrive at something in the nature of ten oclock ten oclock is a very specific moment in the division of the day an arbitrary mechanical or astronomical division of the day it stands in a particular geometrical relation to the position of the sun when it stands directly overhead which is at noon or at an azimuth of zero degrees so at ten oclock its two hours before the sun stands directly overhead which is sixty degrees below the zenith or an azimuth of sixty degrees all other things being equal

but theyre not equal because were on daylight saving time so that ten oclock is really nine oclock and the sun would stand at an azimuth of ninety degrees or at an angle of ninety degrees below the zenith more or less depending on where were located within a given time zone

but the real question was how precisely i was to respond to ten oclock would that be the same as five to ten or ten-fifteen a quarter of ten or ten-thirty actually i arranged to meet sanda outside the main building at a quarter of ten so i had a target of some sort but while the fractioning of the hour changes the scale of exactitude somewhat it doesnt change the nature of the question it simply

raises a similar question about the divisions of the hour — was a quarter of ten exactly fifteen minutes before ten or was it roughly — how roughly

when i think of roughly im always reminded that sometime around the fourteenth century — or maybe it was the fifteenth century a great council was convened by the emperor sigismund to resolve the differences among the feuding parts of the catholic church and to determine among other things which one of the three claimants to being pope was the real pope — the council was to meet on the shores of lake constance and the meeting was set for the middle of april which was already spring — and as it probably promised mild weather and early flowers — must have seemed like a good time to resolve differences — so the great dignitaries of the eastern and western churches set out crossing land and sea and started to arrive — and some arrived by april tenth and some arrived by the thirteenth and some by the sixteenth and the eighteenth

and when they got there they set up their pavilions and settled into what must have been a festive scene of ceremonies and games surrounded by markets with rug merchants and horse dealers — with musicians and dancers and jugglers and acrobats and tightrope dancers and gamblers and pawnbrokers — while they waited for the latecomers among whom was cosimo di medici — who didnt arrive in april or in may — but he was a great merchant prince and banker — so they waited — through april and may — till he finally arrived in late june when they started their deliberations

and by november they resolved whatever differences they could resolve and then went home

so the question for me was how close to medici time did i have in mind for my ten oclock appointment with sanda here in valencia outside the main building of cal arts — i thought we intended to be a

bit more precise than cosimo because in a school the day is divided into periods of time when i was in high school they used to ring bells to let you know a period was over or a period was about to begin high schools and elementary schools were defined by bells you'd be working at some problem or other and then brrrning and everybody would suddenly rise up in the midst of whatever they were doing and rush madly out the door into a crowded hallway to get to another room where they would sit down and start doing something entirely different for another short period of time that would then be interrupted by another bell and these bells would go off in a way that was related to the large wood framed clocks they used to have on the wall and they would always go off something like ten minutes before the hour and that was on the theory that the hour was a beautiful moment nine o'clock ten o'clock but they used to ring the bells ten minutes before the hour on the principle that if they let everybody know ten minutes before the hour they would all get to their new place precisely on the hour of course that never happened anyway the bell would ring and the kids would scramble to gather up their things and rush into the hallway where they would wander around gossip with their friends go to the bathroom go for a smoke and do whatever they did and arrive at their new place whenever they were through though this didn't happen with everybody some kids got there earlier some kids wandered in later the way it usually happens in life

so i had to figure out how was i going to get here how long does it take to come up the freeway on I-5 before it becomes the 405 and wanders in a sedate manner somewhat to the west before it rejoins 5 somewhere north of l.a. on the rest of the way to mcbean parkway i figured it's gotten very fast to get to l.a. that's about 110 miles and certain times of the day you can make it to l.a. in an hour and a half

though its uncertain what certain times of the day that time will be thats the most uncertain thing about it when will you be able to travel a full seventy-five miles an hour to get here so i figured it would be wise for me to be on the road by seven in the morning and that if i came too early if it turned out there was no traffic on the road at all i could stop in santa monica get a caffe latte and continue the trip arriving in plenty of time to meet sanda if it turned out that the road wasnt empty three hours still seemed to me like a marvelous amount of time

so i get on the road and im driving along speeding past the beach towns of san diego past del mar solana beach cardiff encinitas leucadia carlsbad and oceanside and theres traffic on the road but were all speeding along on this clear day from which the sun has burned off the morning overcast and then in a totally bizarre manner theres suddenly a traffic jam this was not unpredictable it happens nearly all the time but there was no particular reason for it cars are suddenly stopping and then proceeding at a crawl that stretches a good half mile ahead

yet theres no accident i can see there are no feeder roads suddenly emptying into I-5 theres no visible reason cars are just stopping and theres a traffic jam that then in an equally illogical way just opens up

and were speeding again till the next illogical traffic jam and were proceeding in this way racing from traffic jam to traffic jam all the way to san juan capistrano where were approaching the toll road that for two bucks and a quarter lets you race through the back country behind irvine almost to huntington beach and i figure for two bucks and a quarter its worth it so i dont leave sanda out there for half an hour because i expect sanda to be standing out there wilting in

the hot sun waiting hopefully for me to arrive and wondering whether ill be coming an hour late but an hour late seems excessive so i take the toll road i get on the toll road and its the first time ive ever seen the toll road have a traffic jam this was really startling and i reflected this has really got to do with the time of day this is the time of day when all these people go to work all these people work in software companies where people start working at ten oclock thats why theyre on the road at this time ten oclock is a bad time to have to arrive in an area where all the people work in the tech industry if everybody just worked at blue collar jobs as truckers or construction guys theyd get up at five and out on the road by six in the morning if they worked in meat packing houses theyd be up early if they were factory workers theyd be there before eight software workers walk in at ten oclock i realized this was my mistake i should have figured a way around this

of course i could have stayed in los angeles the night before except i had things to do in san diego san diego is 130 miles maybe closer to 140 miles from here los angeles is only thirty miles south of here or something like that so i should have stayed there but im in the middle of something thats taking a lot of my time im in the middle of a long email dialogue with a friend of mine the poet charles bernstein email is nice because it doesnt take any time to send but to write it when youre writing seriously

you see ive never learned how to deal with email the way everybody says email is used i write email the way i write letters some people dont some people dont put english sentences down there that would be all right if they wrote french sentences or german sentences

french sentences would be fine when sanda first came to

california she didnt speak english and i didnt speak romanian so we communicated in french sanda will remember that when she first came to the university of california at san diego there were only two of us in the art department who could speak to her subsequently shes become so fluent she sounds like a native californian and teaching up here shes developed a perfect valley accent

but since it would have been very inconvenient for me to come up to los angeles the day before i had to deal with the timing of the morning traffic between san diego and valencia and here i was on the toll road trying to deal with the opening up and closing up of traffic which gives you a very different sense a kind of accordionlike expanding and contracting sense of time

now i wasnt feeling very pressured by this because having three hours i was reasonably sure id get here within ten minutes either way of our appointed time unless there was some unforeseen disaster on the roadway some dreadful accident that overturned a trailer truck that spilled hundreds of thousands of marbles on the roadway or a frantic gun battle between the police and a desperate band of bank robbers holding them off with ak-47s

i once saw

something like this on the highway it was about twenty years ago and i was giving a talk at cal arts i seem to do this intermittently i was giving a talk at cal arts and i was on the way home i had the radio on and i was listening to one of those all day news stations i was just south of northridge and a reporter broke in to the ritual of the regular broadcast to announce a gun battle going on in south los angeles where the police had somehow caught up with the scruffy group that had labeled itself the symbionese liberation army the group that had robbed a couple of banks and kidnapped patty hearst who was now a full fledged member of their so called army the

army was apparently hiding out in a safe house in south l.a. when the police caught up with them and they were exchanging rifle fire to the great excitement of the news staff which was following it like a battle in vietnam "theres some fire from the house the police on the south side are returning fire the roof seems to be burning theres a native on the porch side running for cover . . ." and suddenly i was in a traffic jam suddenly the whole 405 came to a stop north of manchester because everybody else had their car radios on and realized they could watch the gun battle they were listening to from the highway so i sat there too listening and watching from my stationary car on the 405 till the action apparently subsided and all the drivers decided to continue on home later i heard the police who had surrounded the building were firing into it from two sides so that every time the police on one side fired into the building they received answering fire from the other and they kept this up for some time before they realized they were exchanging fire with each other while the symbionese liberation army had either slipped away or never been in the building at all

so coming here with the intention of arriving in time to meet sanda i was reminded of all the other times id come up to talk at cal arts in fact i taught a course here once i got conned into teaching a course here by john baldessari and paul brach paul was the person who founded the art department up here i used to come up here once a week and it was an interesting experience because after a while the drive got so automatic that it disappeared and i never knew what happened to it in those days i lived in solana beach id come out of my house get in the car turn the key in the ignition and before i knew it id arrive in front of this insane building in which the rest of the day disappeared i never understood this building which seems to have been designed to withstand all climatic events a hermetic

container aimed at being a future time capsule you lose all sense of weather in this building there could be a raging storm outside and you wouldnt have a clue

so i would get out of my car go down into this building where id have a very pleasant talk with my class all the time wondering what the weather would be like when i came out then id come out get into my car and wake up in solana beach so that was a time that disappeared

today it didnt disappear it was interesting every moment along the way i could register how the time was unfolding and it unfolded very unevenly there were periods during which it unfolded very slowly and i had a nearly physical feeling of its unfolding it was not a feeling of the environment i was passing through or my physical situation in the car it was a sensuous feeling as if somehow a surface in my physical being was slowly unfolding and then something happens and suddenly its over and everything is going very quickly even though youre not moving

youre in a traffic jam and youre very aware of the moments of the traffic jam one car is driving very peculiarly moving from one lane to another you figure this guy is setting himself up for some kind of accident the trouble is you want to keep away from him because hes going to create an accident three cars back and this black cherokee is weaving back and forth back and forth and cutting in front of other cars like hes desperate to gain three car lengths which seems odd because three car lengths up youre not much better off than you were before so i started speculating on what urgency he must have had i kept wondering where was he going

i knew he wasnt on his way to meet sanda i thought hes got some kind of rendezvous he told his wife some story and hes on his way to meet a girlfriend and

hes got to get there on time because shes going to think he stood her up if he arrives late shes going to leave the motel and go somewhere else shes probably going to go to the flamingo lounge and pick up somebody else and hes very distressed because she has a very bad temper and shell take off with somebody else and leave him stranded there and hes gone to all this trouble deceiving his wife telling her he was meeting his accountant to handle a special tax problem and making a great show of taking this briefcase filled with papers and really this is all so he can meet his girlfriend and im beginning to feel very sorry for him but then i wonder why doesnt he call her doesnt he have a cell phone like everyone else driving today you realize the cell phone has transformed the car into a communication center

the car is now a communication center people are on the phone doing etrading driving with their left hand but doing etrading while switching lanes is very interesting especially if theres a great change in the price of your stock or youre trying to place an order a limit order committing you to buying at this price but not a higher price or to selling at this price but not a lower price but youre having trouble getting through to your broker or your phone contact is breaking up because you have a bad satellite connection the way most people have between oceanside and san clemente

but up here theres no telling it may be because of the heavy satellite traffic everyone is on his cell phone trying to reach his broker from the same place on the toll road north of san juan capistrano and south of huntington beach orange county may be the heavy etrade place so this guy if he had a cellular phone may have had trouble reaching his girlfriend or she may not have had her cell phone on though i realize these people always have their cell phone on theyve got it plugged into their cigarette lighter and theyve

always got extra battery packs my cell phone always seems to go dead i dont know what it is i always have my cell phone off its resting in my backpack till i have to make one call i take it out and turn it on and it has no energy left it seems to be very fatigued maybe its because i dont do much with it and it feels very neglected the people who use cell phones all the time they always seem to have them working nevertheless the satellite doesnt always transmit when you want it to particularly when youre in certain places far from home

because then youre roaming and you have to pay higher charges and lots of people are very sensitive to this and unwilling to pay these roaming charges that cost a few cents more even though theyre calling their broker and could lose thousands of dollars if they cant get through but theyre worried about a dollar or two toll thats charged by another group that puts your calls through to the satellite in this area and thats one of the real problems of our moment

and so im thinking about this while im coming up and all this is going on and at the same time im reflecting on all the other times ive come up here before and im remembering how this place before it became a solid place was an imaginary place cal arts was an imagination in the minds of the disneys and in the minds of the people they approached to realize it

the disneys apparently owned or acquired a great deal of open ranch land in this area north of los angeles where they imagined starting some great art school either because they felt a need for a greatly expanded and updated professional school like chouinard that could provide them with an unending supply of up to date talented animators and filmmakers or because they knew that nothing raises real estate values faster than the creation of a prestigious school so with either or both of these considerations in mind they got themselves

a president who seemed like the kind of person who could put together the kind of prestigious art school they wanted and the person they picked was bob corrigan a very personable theater historian with a strong attachment to the contemporary theater avant garde and the first thing corrigan did was go out and hire a group of deans to turn the imagination of an up to date school of the arts into a concrete reality

to head the visual arts corrigan went to paul brach whod started the art department down in san diego paul was a refined optical painter with a long teaching record and could have fit into any kind of sixties art school but he brought in allan kaprow as his associate dean and that immediately raised the experimental stakes corrigan recruited his friend herb blau to head the theater school blau was a modernist theater director from san francisco whod briefly taken over the new theater at lincoln center where he immediately staged a disastrous production of dantons death and promptly left either because he was too experimental for the new york theater establishment or not experimental enough to override their predictable objections corrigan got mel powell a midstream modernist with a long career that moved him from his jazz beginnings to a neoclassical style in the fifties and to a postwebern style and experiments with electronics in the sixties to take on the music school and he got bella lewitzky a founding figure of modern dance in los angeles to take on the dance school

somewhat weirdly or maybe not so weirdly considering the disneys he got sandy mackendrick a skillful director of hollywood farces to run the film program there was also a design school run by an ex-disney animator with a background in bauhaus and a school of critical studies that was to be run by a hip sociologist from brandeis named maurice stein

so the deans were a mixed group and the differences between

them were significant because they all had different imaginations of what it would mean to have an up to date school in their separate arts but these differences were as nothing compared to the differences between the deans and the disneys because the deans somehow collectively arrived at a vision of the school as a kind of updated version of black mountain college

thinking about this now it seems completely implausible black mountain was a small and nearly penniless experimental college formed in the deep depression of the 1930s aiming at a progressive liberal education in which a small number of students would try to work out their individual identities in community living with a tiny faculty as they meandered through a sparse curriculum in the foothills of rural north carolina while hitler was consolidating his grip on germany it was never a professional school or even an art school even though its founder brought in josef and anni albers two bauhaus refugees toward the very beginning probably out of a deweylike idea that art making as a form of concrete doing should occupy a central role in a real education while the california institute of the arts was founded as a consolidation and expansion of an art school and a music conservatory with the vast wealth of the disneys just thirty miles north of glamorous affluent los angeles in rich 1970 america

but by the end of the sixties when they were planning the new school black mountain college which had been disintegrating almost since it started in 1933 till it finally dissolved in 1956 had developed a legendary reputation everybody in the art world knew it as the experimental school where albers had taught where rauschenberg and kenneth noland had been students where merce cunningham had staged some of his first ensemble dances where bucky fuller had put up his first dome and cage had staged the first happening and even if most of these famous figures were only there

briefly or just visitors at its summer institutes the school was connected in everyones mind with the sort of experimentalism that questioned authority of every kind including its own and this was a time when students in america and around the world were beginning to question seriously authority of all kinds especially the kind that had led them into the disastrous and ongoing war in vietnam so maybe it was not such a surprise for maurice stein to suggest and for the other deans to accept the idea of hiring herbert marcuse as a professor in the school of critical studies though it seemed pretty surprising to me back then when it came up at a meeting of the deans they were holding down in san diego maybe because marcuse was teaching at ucsd or because paul brach was still teaching there and he was helping to plan the new school

which is probably how i got taken along to this meeting that was an informal dinner at a mexican restaurant in la jolla where i first heard steins idea of recruiting marcuse and i thought it was pretty funny

but to realize how funny it was you first have to remember that ronald reagan was governor of california nixon was in the white house and h.r. haldeman nixons chief of staff was on the board of trustees that the disneys had set up for cal arts while marcuse was the darling of the new left or of its youth movement in spite of the fact that he was really an elderly german intellectual whose radically revisionist marxian ideas of the liberational possibilities of the sexual revolution were invariably expressed in the pedantic prose of the hegelian dialectic so he must have looked to the southern california right wing like a combination of bakunin and havelock ellis besides which he had an absolutely negative relation to just about all contemporary art

but maurice stein was a very hip sociologist he was so hip you

could hardly be hipper so i suppose he wanted marcuse not only because he was a respected philosopher and a distinguished member of the frankfurt school but also because he was spectacular in the way he attracted students to political activism and maury was in some ways what in yiddish they call a *kochleffel* which translates a little lamely into "ladle" but a ladle is something thats always stirring the pot and maury liked to stir the pot

as i remember it he said he was thinking of getting herbert and i objected you know theres no place where he can go and walk along a street herbert has to have a place where he can stroll down the street with his hands behind his back and peer into shop windows can you imagine him doing that in valencia if he doesnt have a street to walk along he could become deranged he wont feel like hes in any place at all coyotes and deer will amaze him spotted owls will puzzle him there will be nobody for him to gossip with and no place for him to go in for a *kaffee mit schlag*

but maury dismissed all this he knew that it would be fine to have marcuse here but i said hes such a sentimentalist about art he thinks all real art is about ideal beauty he thinks the works of surrealism are canova nudes theyre pure beauty because theyre the objects of an unaccommodated desire generated out of the unconscious which is not acculturated and denies the crass materialism of bourgeois culture and the commodified pleasures it distributes as kitsch the art school wont know what to make of him he may inspire students to get involved with politics but every time he thinks about art hes going to think about max ernst and thats all very well but max ernst is dead maury said oh well lots of people are dead its all right dead people can act anyway look at marx

i wasnt sure that max ernst could act very significantly at this point in time but all this was taking place in the vacuum that

existed before cal arts became real down at our school at ucsd marcuse had been teaching for several years and we had plenty of time to observe him he was a kind of paternalistic old gentleman with a train of disciples consisting mainly of literature and philosophy students and faculty who trailed after him like a bunch of ducklings following a mother duck mostly to demonstrations against military recruitment or the war i dont remember ever seeing him at art exhibitions though angela davis who was his most beautiful and chic disciple invariably came to all of them but the one time i do remember he got involved with contemporary art was on the occasion of an exhibition by martha rosler who was a graduate student of ours back then she was putting up her first year review show and as a new yorker who had only been in san diego for a year or two was fascinated with the southern california phenomenon of garage sales weird occasions in which people who moved on an average of once every five years regularly emptied onto their front lawns all the objects theyd once bought or inherited or traded for and no longer found useful or necessary or beautiful or simply considered conveniently replaceable so it was a common sight to drive through a town like solana beach or encinitas on any day and pass three or four little houses whose well watered green lawns had turned into thrift shops displaying plaster saints gold leaf framed mirrors ladies dresses childrens toys kitchen tables small television sets phonographs and vinyl records makeup cases power tools and lingerie and martha as someone whod frequented a few of these sales when shed simply needed a few cheap things for the house because she was a graduate student and didnt have much money had become fascinated with them and began to study this emptying out and evaluation of ones past as an exercise in autobiography

so for her first year review she turned the student gallery into a

garage sale and as a young conceptual artist because the art world was into systems then she schematized the objects somewhat arbitrarily and as i remember somewhat ironically along freudian lines so that things like underwear were assigned to the id toasters and mixmasters to the ego and books to the superego im not really sure of the exact arrangement but it was something like this and of course because in a truly contemporary way she wanted her show to be a garage sale not merely a representation of a garage sale she put little price tags on the objects and actually sold them thats where the show collided with marcuse

im not sure he ever really saw the show but many of his students knew martha she also had leftist philosophical interests and many of them saw the show and one of them who is now a successful literary agent for commercial novels was so outraged by the show that she wrote a very long and bitter attack on it in the school newspaper

martha who was very sensitive was very hurt by the review and brought a copy of the *triton times* to show me because i was a friend but also one of her advisers i read the article and it was the standard marcuse line how marthas garage sale was a flagrant example of contemporary art being co-opted by the commodity values of the surrounding bourgeois culture where the responsibility of art was to stand back from all this and defend the human powers of the imagination by the beauty of its form and so on

what should i do she asked martha i said this is not so terrible its an opportunity you have to write a response and you write a lot better than sandy dont defend yourself and dont attack her this is a marcuse position go out and kill him take his theory of art apart he thinks of artworks as canova nudes he thinks by putting them up on a plinth they attack bourgeois culture by their

refusal of any relation to it this is frankfurt school nonsense  
 adorno made even more ridiculous by the freudian twist marcuse gives  
 it write an essay for the paper and go out and kill him

so martha wrote an essay for the *triton times* she took my  
 advice and it was pretty devastating the result was that the art  
 department received a message from the philosophy department an  
 invitation to discuss the role of esthetics in counter-cultural thinking  
 in other words who was more left?

the meeting took place one night in the philosophy departments  
 seminar room a fairly narrow space with a long table the philosophy  
 and literature folk on one side of the table and the visual arts people  
 on the other marcuse sat near the head of the table and on the  
 same side of the table were reinhardt lettau the german short story  
 writer marcuses wife and arthur danto who was a visiting lecturer  
 that year and there may have been one or two others im not sure of  
 on our side of the table elly sat directly across from marcuse i was  
 next to her and next to me was allan sekula and next to him fred  
 lonidier martha was too sensitive to come

in the beginning we were all very tentative and polite trying to  
 see if we could agree on the terms because if we couldnt agree even  
 loosely on what we thought art was it would be pointless to argue  
 about it but it may have gone on a bit long because marcuse became  
 somewhat impatient with it he pounded the table with his fist  
 "nonsense!" he said in his heavily accented english "we all know  
 what art is"

"so what is it" i asked

"art is the imaginative transformation of reality"

"so is advertising so what?"

that was the end of the amenities and it was open warfare for a  
 while but elly introduced a conciliatory tone

“you know” she said to marcuse “i think i agree with you about beauty and i tried for a kind of ideal beauty in my most recent work its a sculpture and i used the traditional method of the ancient greek sculptors who worked gradually all around the figure refining and refining”

marcuse was intrigued “but” elly said “im a poor conceptual artist and i cant afford parian marble so i used my body i went on a diet for thirty-six days and every day i photographed myself nude front and back and both sides till i reached the perfect state for my own body it was the best i could do as michelangelo said not even the greatest artist can get anything out of the stone thats not already in the marble”

marcuse exploded “young woman you are a sophist!”

thats why i thought it was a funny idea to hire marcuse to teach in an art school but maury made the offer and predictably it drove the trustees wild which may have been what stein wanted but marcuse who was rather chivalrous about it declined it in the interests of the schools survival so marcuse never came up to cal arts to teach and the disneys didnt shut the school down though they very nearly did about a year later when the school got started in temporary quarters on the grounds of an old catholic school in burbank because the art students they recruited had their own sense of what the school should be like which may have been a cross between black mountain and a commune so in the spirit of the sixties which were by no means over in 1971 in the interests of freedom and wholesomeness and ordinary teenage sexiness they decided on nude swimming in the swimming pool which might have been overlooked by the trustees if they didnt have to visit the swimming pool themselves

but one day they did and it just so happened that one staff

member who used to meet her boyfriend at the pool for a shared lunch hour got carried away by erotic enchantment and was fucking her lover at the side of the pool precisely at the moment that mrs disney followed by a train of trustees arrived

you might think that this would have been an even greater offense to the disneys and their trustees than the hiring of marcuse and wonder that the school survived but this would be to underestimate the charm and persuasiveness of bob corrigan who worked his magic somehow pacified the trustees and ensured the survival of the school

thinking about all this im struck by how telling the story of these events goes so quickly while the events can take days or weeks to unfold the story of marcuse and marthas show took maybe two to three minutes to tell but to prepare the show martha probably ran around for several weeks looking at other garage sales it could have taken her a week just to decide what objects she was willing to unload and then a day or two to install them in the gallery after which it took several days before sandys review came out in the *triton times* another week for martha to write her response and maybe yet another week before the next edition of the school newspaper came out and then a week or two before we arrived at our confrontation in the philosophy department thats practically two months of time in three minutes of telling but even in those three minutes theres an elasticity to the time all the weeks leading up to our meeting go very quickly in the telling and then the night of the meeting in the philosophy department takes almost as long as the account of all those weeks leading up to it but even within the account of the meeting the only part that approaches the real time of the event is when elly presents marcuse with her version of poor peoples art and its this elasticity of time that expands and contracts in our hands like some kind of game of cats cradle in our telling but also in our experience

so driving up i was thinking of when it was that i had time on my hands and when is it that you have time on your hands its when youre waiting for something to happen that isnt happening and this waiting will always go slowly but never so slowly as when what youre waiting for doesnt seem purposeful or richly rewarding and it can go so slowly that your experience of time arrives at a duration as absolute and solid as a block

so i was reminded of a time when i was in college and got a summer job in a bubblegum factory they didnt know it was a summer job they were hiring mechanics because their machines were always breaking down and they needed lots of mechanics to keep the machines running but they had to train them or at least give them enough time to learn how to work on these idiosyncratic gum wrapping machines so they wanted people who would stay with them for years but somehow i managed to persuade them i was looking for a career i had gone to an engineering high school and had worked at a number of jobs that made this seem likely enough even though i was lying

so i came in for my first day of work and of course the chief mechanic didnt really know what to do with me its not like he could have said come with me and led me over to a machine that we could take apart so i could learn how it worked you see there were rows and rows of clattering gum wrapping machines at each of which stood a young woman dressed in white like a nurse dropping little pieces of gum into the tall vertical chute that a mechanical pusher at the bottom rammed two by two through two layers of paper and into a tumbler that folded the paper around them and passed them under a heater that sealed them with wax melted from a little tub alongside the pathway so that they could arrive in bright little red white and blue packages onto a conveyer belt but all these young women were paid for the

number of trays of gum that were wrapped by their machine so each of these mostly young women moved in a graceful and nearly continuous dance in which they leaned over to take a wooden tray of sheets of gum from the huge stack behind them placed it on the shelf at the back of the machine split the scored gum sheets into long straps broke these into the individual gum pieces with a few quick movements of their hands and dropped handfuls of them into the vertical chute till theyd emptied their trays which they then placed on a dolly of empties in back of them and turned to take another fully loaded tray only to begin the process all over again

and this never stopped until one of them shut her machine down to go to the bathroom for a smoke a move they couldnt undertake very often without their supervisor noticing so what they occasionally did was accidentally drop a piece of gum into the gum pathway instead of the chute this would gum up the works and bring the machine to a sudden halt and a mechanic to help get the machine up and running again but the nature of the machine the viscosity of the gum the excess of sugar powder flying around produced enough breakdowns anyway but there was nothing to do until there was a breakdown so the chief mechanic had to give me something to do and what he did was lead me to a table where there was something that resembled a very large paper cutter and a huge stack of amber slabs of wax and what he instructed me to do was to cut up these slabs of wax into brick size pieces small enough to place in the little tubs on each machine and fill up the box that stood next to the wax cutter

it was not a job he took seriously it was not a job i took seriously we both knew he was just giving me something to do till he could find a way to work me into a mechanics role still i had to find a way to make it look good but what was good

i had to make it look like i was doing something serious i start cutting wax now i know im not doing anything very useful and i wonder how long am i going to be cutting pieces of wax before i get to do something meaningful its like being in school im cutting wax if i cut too much of this stuff theyre not going to know what to do with it and i have to figure out how to cut an insufficient amount of wax in the amount of time i have available so that it doesnt begin to spill out over the box they gave me im looking and i figure i could fill this box very quickly he doesnt want me to fill this box very quickly he doesnt want to talk to me for another fifteen or twenty minutes at least maybe thirty minutes how can i take thirty minutes of wax cutting to fill this lousy little box in such a manner that it will seem reasonable i want it to seem reasonable you dont want to look like youre working too hard because that doesnt look fair to everybody else on the other hand you dont want to look like youre goldbricking because that doesnt look fair to everybody else you want to look like a union worker so you take a piece of wax and you line it up and slowly you apply pressure to it to make it a precise cut of wax then you go and measure it against the little wax pots on the side of a machine so you dont make one too big to fit into the wax pot you want to make a little wax brick of exactly the right size each time you cut into the slab and you have this moment in which youre wondering how long have i been here how long will i still be here waiting for this guy to say come on lets take apart a machine but he cant take apart a machine thats running he has to wait for one to break down because it cuts into what the women are getting paid theyre getting paid piece work for the work they do so only when a machine really breaks down can you take it apart and figure out how the timing chain and everything else works

apprenticeships take the longest time in the world because in

this kind of instruction you have to kill an enormous amount of time waiting for your instructor to stop what hes doing so that he can instruct you so here i am wasting time knowing that im wasting time as im standing in this refrigerated room under gusting clouds of sugar dust not only with time on my hands but with wax on my hands alongside a growing pile of nice little wax bricks cutting one piece of wax another piece of wax another piece of wax until the time becomes as dense and solid and blank as a block of yellow wax

id been a getty fellow since january theyd given me a pleasant apartment in brentwood and an office in richard meiers great white castle in malibu overlooking bob irwins curious formal garden and the pacific ocean living in san diego 130 miles away i would take my little jeep wrangler and drive up early monday morning for the weekly seminar spend the rest of the week in los angeles and take my bumpy ride back home on thursday night if nothing was happening on the weekend or if elly wasnt coming up to join me for the weekend the intellectual company was great the theme for the year was “frames of viewing” and the getty had cast a wide net to consider the question a net that brought in scholars from neurology archaeology and philosophy as well as art critics and historians so the seminars were lively and wide ranging and in april the getty following a tradition it had developed over the last few years commissioned three poets marvin bell jorie graham and me to engage in some way with its theme this was an entertaining commission for me because id been a fellow since january and had taken part in the seminars and conferences but also because id never heard either marvin bell or jorie graham read as it turned out bell read a series of short humorous pieces that played in and around the theme but nobody got to hear graham because she developed a punctured eardrum and was prohibited by her doctor from flying so her smoothly disjunctive poem was read in an appropriately high rhetorical style by her friend the poet carol muske out of which my memory fastened on a single concrete image of a painting by michelangelo pistoletto

how wide

is the

frame

i was taken by the mention in jorie grahams poem of michelangelo pistoletto because many years ago back in 1969 i was putting together a show of post-pop painting that included a number of artists like estes and alex katz malcolm morley and sylvia sleigh with a few pop painters like wesselman and lichtenstein and warhol and i wanted a pistoletto for the show this was 69 and i was beginning to think that we had to take another look at representation because somehow the frame of the art worlds serious concerns seemed somewhat narrow to me and at the time i was the director of the gallery for the university of california at san diego and i wandered into his dealer who was jill kornblee an old friend and i looked over what she had there because she had some of the paintings from a recent show and i saw a very modern looking modern that is it felt very sixties looking there was a young guy standing in a contraposto wearing white jeans very tight white jeans looking as though he had just come out of *blowup* i said i want that one jill you cant have it why cant i have it she said because harry abrams is having a party and he owns it he wants it for the

opening of his new loft she said but you can have this one and she pointed to a sparkingly startling painting of a beautiful naked woman standing and talking on the telephone it was a painting in that the figure like all pistolettos figures was painted from a photograph on some kind of paper affixed to a burnished steel surface and it was this beautiful naked woman having a graceful conversation on a white telephone now a white telephone was the marker of italian sixties modernism so i said why can you give me this one

well she said david its the only one i have left the others are all going to a major show at the albright knox i said "and theyre not taking this one?" she said "the albright knox cannot show nudes" this is 1969 and the albright knox cannot show nudes? she said thats right david and so i came back with a pistoletto that was more pistolettoish more antonioni-ish than any i might otherwise have gotten

now the reason im thinking about this is that i was thinking about the peculiar frame of mind that the trustees of the museum must have been in to exclude this rather startlingly characteristic work i mean they had a very tight image of a museum where you cant show nudes but then i reflected that there were other tight visions in the world of serious art as i found out a couple of years later when i found out that the whitney museum was not allowed to show photography i found this out when marcia tucker was putting together a david duncan show and there was something of a scandal at the whitney because the whitney museum had been chartered to show american art i thought to show *american* art but actually apparently to show american *art* and photography wasnt art painting was art and so when i reflected upon this a couple of years later i could imagine how the albright knox in the early part of the twentieth century in america had found it inappropriate to

display sexy nudes as art even though titian had existed long before though i wondered what would happen if they did a titian show would they have been forbidden to show any titian with an unclothed woman

this sort of persistence takes a certain kind of concentration an intense concentrated sense of the frame that holds you together in a way and lets you go on in a manner that youve been going on all your life or for the last ten minutes or the last thirty seconds theres something about this kind of concentration something i experienced this morning

we were at the hotel on sunset elly and i we were coming by car we had our jeep and we managed to get out of the driveway into the street in spite of the horrendous traffic and we were coming up sepulveda and i had no idea how many people wanted to see saenredans mournful church interiors in one day i assume thats what they were all gathering for and as we approached the getty going north on sepulveda and got closer to the getty entrance there was this incredible number of cars backed up in the entrance way extending partially into the street and blocking one whole lane of the southbound traffic which consisted mainly of cars waiting to get into the getty though it included cars that were not intending to get into the getty that had somehow neglected to get out of the inner lane

now the people at the getty who run the entrance and you may be familiar with the way they work work reasonably slowly and they have to work reasonably slowly because you might be a terrorist carrying a bomb you might have something under your jacket or you might not have a reservation and they work slowly because theyre only human beings

and then there are people who pay with credit cards and then maybe a credit card doesnt get taken by the magnetic strip reader

and these things happen all during the wait to get into the getty so both the gettys entrance lanes were blocked

now as everybody knows one entrance lane the entrance lane slightly further to the south is mostly for staff and scholars and people involved with the getty and the other one is for visitors casually coming in and this makes a lot of trouble because there are many more visitors than staff and some of the visitors take notice of this and pull into the relatively emptier inner lane only to be shunted shortly afterward back into the visitors lane before they can approach the admission kiosks the result of all this was two lanes of entering cars extending out into the street where they completely blocked up the inner lane on the southbound side and made it equally impossible for the cars in the turn lane on the northbound side of sepulveda to make their left turn into the entrance when the traffic light favored them with the result that there was also a long line of cars in back of them waiting to get into the left turn lane where nobody could move and im at the back of the turn lane on the northbound side and i realize its going to be hellishly time consuming though im reasonably patient

but elly says oh my god open the windows were going to suffocate in here before we get in while im looking ahead and seeing that the cars at the head of the turn lane are very timid theyre afraid to turn in at the right moment because theyre worried theyll be stuck out in the street further impeding the traffic from the north

but generally people are keeping clear and only one lane is really impeded

finally weve advanced to the very front of the left turn lane to get into the getty and were waiting for the light to change and were watching the cars come rushing down when somebody in a car in the inner lane on the southbound side waiting to make the turn in became

extremely dispirited with the wait she really must have felt very concerned about the wait

she had this sparkling little silver volvo there were four people in the car and they were all looking concerned about it then a smile broke on her face and she started to turn to her left as she realized she could go if she could get there into the parking lot across the street from the getty because on the other side of sepulveda there is a little open parking lot and she blithely turned slowly and in stately fashion she turned her car and headed across the adjacent lane

at the moment that she was doing this at enormous speed a snappy little red volkswagen probably on its way to wilshire heading for ucla was tearing down the lane racing toward her she never noticed it i saw it drawing close as she continued in her stately way moving gradually across the lane and i was sitting there waiting trying to figure out whether i should blow my horn to warn her of the approach of this rapidly advancing red volkswagen or whether that would distract her even further and make her do something even more maniacal what could she do?

i figured if the red volkswagen hit her volvo it might spin into my car i looked out to my right and there was a very good chance of her hitting us if the volkswagen hit her at that speed of course it would depend on the place and angle of impact

im beginning to contemplate this like a billiard table trying to figure out what would happen when the red volkswagen hit the little steel colored volvo and im trying to see is there a car is there traffic coming up on my right pursuing the pathway north past the getty because if that lane is clear maybe what i should do is bolt into the little parking lot on my right

my problem was solved by the good brakes on the little red volkswagen the little red volkswagen came to a screeching halt but the woman driving the silver car making the sedate turn never noticed she didnt hear a sound she didnt hear the brakes she didnt see the other car she smiled blithely and drove right across three lanes of traffic into the parking lot across the way i took this to be a profound artistic commitment to the frame

and i thought about the way this kind of commitment works because we were talking the other day several of us were having a conversation about poetry the other day at the getty and the conversation got around to music because i had brought up john cage and his original generalization of the notion of music finding its fundamental possibilities its most elemental possibilities in the contrast between sound and silence that is a sound might be made manifest by emerging from a ground of silence and its manifestation would be the fundamental act the fundamental act of the composer would be the decision to manifest or not to manifest

or maybe in a more cageian manner a piece of sound would simply replace a piece of silence thats all very well but in thinking about it i realized it requires a very rigid frame of some form or another to determine where the sound is you have to be able to distinguish between the sound and the silence and at the margins this is not very easy its not so easy with morton feldmans music in feldmans music sometimes you can hardly hear it at all and when you hear it what you may be hearing is simply background noise if you listen to feldmans music on a recording and dont play it back on the very highest quality audio equipment you cant listen to it at all

i remember hearing him say once we were on a panel at an anti-vietnam war forum and everybody in the audience was yelling at the avant garde that we were letting them down we hadnt been

doing enough politically against the war — it was the excited left and they were complaining that we were letting them down — and there was a point to it i suppose — but when it came his turn to speak morton said “look im against the war — but im an avant garde composer and i like very soft sounds and thats what i use in my music — thats all i can do — i cant help it”

but the edge between sound and silence is very problematical which means that for the kind of work cage was pointing to he had to present it within a very tight frame — a durational frame that you simply accepted arbitrarily

but theres more to it than that — it occurred to me that framing becomes a major issue because you have to be able to identify a sound as a sound — to identify it as a discrete sound — to have a musical experience of it as a sound — you have to be able to separate it from a sound continuum — if sounds within the continuum change — if youre hearing a variety of sounds within a sound envelope

im not speaking

of sounds that are easily identifiable like the screech of the volkswagens brake — the screech of the volkswagens brake is identifiable because its a piece of a recognizable real world event — and the event structure allows you to frame it — but if youre a composer using a computer and oscillators to generate sound events synthetically — sound has a variety of parameters — frequency — timbre — amplitude — and if youre dealing with noises — there are frequency bands and timbre packages which may not be easily defined though they can be easily generated — but can they be remembered — one of the worst problems of electronic music is whether youre hearing a sound again — its not always clear in this music that you can always distinguish an event as an event — distinguishing events is not so easy — especially when the events are moderately unpredictable — not all events are easily recognizable or

intelligible and if they're not they may not be recognized as events at all

now the notion of an event is psychologically the center of our being we recognize objects and events from infancy in a certain sense we recognize them because what they mean to us is the loss of the milk the mother has taken her breast away her beautiful face has disappeared or it comes into view or rather it reappears so we recognize our mother or our father as an object very quickly as soon as we recognize the regularly repeated disappearance and reappearance of the father or the mother this repetition gives us an event structure "you kept going out of the room!" "you mean he's going out of the room?!"

this gives us the room as a background we've framed it and it's not even an object but what surrounds an object and lets it stand out so we've framed these objects and actions and we've learned to frame these objects through actions and of course we don't learn it the way we learn things in school we may be hard-wired to learn this we may have a neurological structure that makes it possible for us or impossible for us not to frame not to give a sharp definitional edge to something and to the breakdown between the something and the nothing the contrast between what's in front of you and what's not in front of you is very sharp especially if it's moving the first thing that infants can see is motion the thing goes by in the dark and it's gone they see movement before they see anything else which from an evolutionary point of view is a very good idea the one thing a young animal may have to do is get out of the way of rapidly moving animals or things you've got to be careful and carefulness is built into the structure of humanness but probably into chimpanzees also and maybe all animals with visual centers but this kind of perceptual understanding of objects and events

means that the representations of objects and the recognition of events or stories or narratives are grounded in our being but this recognition comes at a price it comes at a price because it means that we have to concentrate on those things at an expense at an expense of the loss of other things you get nothing for free if you see one thing you dont see another unless you make a very definitive effort to try to

i was thinking about this because a computer artist visited our campus recently and he was trying to provide the experience of a 360 degree panoramic vision for human beings theres something wonderfully comical about this because in a literal sense its not possible the simultaneous apprehension of a 360 degree space is prevented by the structure of your body because your eyes are in the front of your face and all you can do is assemble the 360 degree space conceptually

you can present the video image of all 360 degrees on multiple screens very rapidly juxtaposed or you could overlay them on each other but you wont get a 360 degree surround experience completely synthetically and instantaneously because youre not capable of experiencing it im not either dont feel terrible about it none of us is capable of this ghastly situation of imagining it but theres something funny about his idea its like imagining that by letting you see the unseeable he was creating out of the unexperienceable a new art experience

but art experiences are created about not seeing about what you want to not see in order to be able to see something else and maybe thats what we mean by an experience

i was thinking of something like this when i was trying to explain to myself what it was about his life that i didnt understand when we had dinner with my father in law a couple of nights ago my father in law is a ninety-three year old man who is in perfect mental health

the only thing you might suspect about his mental health is that hes constantly working at mathematics

hes not a professional mathematician who pursued mathematics during his working life hes a mathematician by inclination and devotion when he was very young he was considered something of a mathematical virtuoso

this was in poland which at that time was in possession of vilna which is now vilnius in lithuania he was at the great polytechnic school there and he was destined for a great role in mathematics but many things happened and it never worked out so he came to the united states his life changed and he never worked at mathematics professionally

but this didnt mean that he lost his love for mathematics and he was always eccentrically interested in numbers in his later life he was married to a very demanding woman his second wife who persuaded him to retire from his job in the dress business where he was a skilled technician making by his standards very good money he didnt care much about money he was making reasonable money but his wife wanted to retire to florida

florida is a place where you have tall palm trees that give no shade its a humid but dry oasis that was once under water from which the waters have now been conveniently pumped out a place old people go to die slowly and comfortably though they dont regard it as that my father in law didnt regard it as that and of course theres more to florida than that but the fact remains that a large part of the southern florida saucer is a vast retirement home but when my father in law retired he still had lots of energy and no desire to spend his days sitting around the pool with his wife or his pinochle cronies so he found a job a part time job at a dog track because he was always interested in numbers and liked gambling but that didnt

last too long because his wife required more of his company at the pool so he took to going to the jai alai games to which he could bring his wife and pay attention to the numbers

he didnt really know the rules of the game he had no idea how the game was played but he observed that the players were all assigned numbers and at the end of each game they announced the winning numbers

and each day the local newspaper published the list of the days winners with their numbers and by carefully studying the newspapers he began to see a pattern in the numbers so without any idea of what the players were doing except generally running around swatting at a ball with a basket attached to their arms he discovered a pattern to the victories

as certain numbers remained unvictorious for longer periods of time their probability of imminent victory increased markedly so he could go with his wife and a list of likely numbers to the jai alai games bet without the slightest idea of why or how the players wearing the favored numbers would win and generally walk off with a noticeable profit so he was by his character oriented toward numbers and toward discovery and invention because he was also an inventor

for years he struggled to invent the perfect card shuffler this was something i never understood everything he did seemed to have this oddly placed image of reality that i found hard to frame the card shuffler you could design a mechanical shuffler that had some kind of rotating or tumbling reservoir you could crank by hand or drive with a battery that would reasonably scramble the order of the cards and spit them out into some kind of reservoir reasonably shuffled but he had set himself rules esthetic rules his shuffler had to have no moving mechanical parts and it had to produce a perfect shuffle every time you dropped the cards in no matter how perfectly the

suits were arranged you would have to get a random distribution when the cards came out

he finally got a patent on one it was a beautiful little plexiglas tower composed of three little boxes that fitted neatly into each other you dropped the cards into the top section which was a little box containing three upright angled pieces of plexi that cut the deck into four smaller packs as the cards slid down into the second box where they were further subdivided by two angled t-shaped plexi pieces and dropped when you shook the tower gently into the bottom box where voilà they were shuffled and it kind of worked though not into a perfect shuffle because there were many things that prevented this from happening including the viscosity of the cards the humidity of the room or the skill with which you dropped the cards in and jiggled the boxes around but he had a patent and he was working at improvements when he got involved in another project

somehow he got the idea that he could solve a problem that mathematicians have long considered unsolvable he wanted to solve and find the roots of high powered polynomial equations of any degree a simple polynomial equation is an expression like  $x + y = 444$  thats a linear polynomial or a polynomial equation of the first degree in fact he was more ambitious than that he thought he could find a way to solve any polynomial equation of any degree so instead of  $x$  and  $y$  you might have  $x$  to the 435th power +  $y$  to the 434th power and that wasnt the half of it he said he was on track to be able to solve any polynomial equation of any degree you mean i asked him for any kind of powers?

for irrational powers like  $\sqrt{3}$  or transcendental powers powers like  $\pi$  which is 3.1416 . . . and so on forever yes he said all of them

look i said sol maybe youll solve some of the higher power polynomial equations but theres a proof i know he said abels

proof says you cant get a general solution for polynomial equations higher than the fourth degree

i can do it ive got a way its almost perfect he said i said whats that he said i think ive got a way to find a root of any equation no matter what power rational powers irrational powers doesnt matter ive got a way im almost there

now this may sound trivial to find one root of an equation with a variable to the 434th power but if you can find one root of that equation you can extract the root and get an equation to the 433rd power and keep repeating the process until youve extracted all the roots and youve solved the equation it seemed to me an outrageous proposition how could you do it besides how would you know that you could do it lets say you could solve any equation you tried to solve but you cant test every equation so how would you know youve succeeded

this was not the way he viewed the problem every night he worked late into the night solving equations he would solve one and then another and then he would come to some he couldnt solve and he wasnt quite sure why though he thought he would get them eventually but i said sol maybe whats happening is youve solved some of them maybe theres something about the ones youve solved theres a family of them and they have a family relationship if you could define a technique and define the group that youre solving them for you may have discovered a brilliant algorithm

he knew he had a great idea but he didnt know what an algorithm was hed learned mathematics in polish and he didnt know what the word algorithm meant eventually i explained it to him but he shook his head and said i go up to my room every night and i dont watch the television and i dont read a book i work at problems all night and when i wake up in the morning i cant wait till ive had breakfast to start

working again im ninety-three years old and it keeps me alive to keep working like this and ive almost got it im very close

i thought that was wonderful still i said sol while youre working away at the total solution it could take longer than you think for the complete solution and in the meantime you could have this brilliant algorithm for solving a whole family of difficult problems

you think that would be something? i dont know for sure i said but it sounds like it all youd have to do is figure out the difference between the equations you can solve and the ones that you cant solve

“youre right” he said “youre right theres only one problem i dont remember the problems i cant solve” “but you write them down in a notebook youve got them in a notebook youve got a notebook for the ones youve solved and a notebook for the ones you didnt”

“i write them down the ones ive solved on pieces of paper ive got them on pieces of paper” “and the ones you cant solve?” he shrugged

“i throw them away”

he took me to his desk and the drawers were overflowing with scraps of paper pieces of envelopes parts of old bills deposit slips paper bags and old memo pads covered over with letters and numbers in a jumble of computations

“sometimes i tell myself i should put them in a book but im too hot working and i have no time and then im tired and i go to sleep and in the morning i forget because i want to start on new problems so i put them in the drawer and there they are but i think im almost there”

i looked at this chaos and i asked myself what does it mean that he doesnt keep a notebook to see what hes doing and i figured maybe im looking at this the wrong way maybe my frame is too

narrow maybe this is the scheherazade story scheherazade never stopped talking and thats how she stayed alive sol is ninety-three years old it may be that hes beginning to identify his life with the act of working out these solutions every night if he found a complete technique for solving any and every polynomial equation he would never have to solve another problem

it may be that i have to change my frame and see sol not simply as a mathematician working at a difficult or even impossible problem but as a mathematical scheherazade solving problems to stay alive

so once again its a matter of the frame of how to frame an event it seems easy as simple as the fall of a glass of water a glass of water falls to the floor and smashes it slips through my hands and smashes

but its not a glass of water its a whiskey sour you ask for a whiskey sour and the bartender hands it to you but the condensation on the outside of the glass produced by the ice makes it slippery so it slides through your hands and falls to the floor where it smashes and there you are the ice the pieces of glass the drink on the floor and youre slightly embarrassed by all this as you wait for the bartender to get you another drink

we had an event you asked for a drink it was handed to you it slipped through your hand and smashed on the floor but why are you embarrassed why did it slip from your hand

it slipped through my hand because just as he handed it to me i looked up and saw someone over there implausibly at this party in this fifth avenue apartment house i saw a woman i knew and there was no way she could have been there it was an old girlfriend and i was so surprised at seeing her that i failed to take hold of the glass which slipped out of my hand and smashed and i looked down at the floor and saw the glass and the whiskey on the floor and i looked

up to see my girlfriend who i wanted to go say hello to and she had suddenly turned away and was headed for the door shed been standing there before in a crowd of people and then she was out the apartment door

i left my drink on the floor and started walking after her following her out the door figuring before she goes away i should exchange hellos with her i get out the door and shes already in the elevator going up to another floor i push the button so the elevator comes back down and i go up i figured by the time i got out i would have lost her but actually shes way down the hall turning into another apartment i see what apartment she enters and follow her down the hall i figure ive gone this far i may as well say hello to her i knock on the door and a woman comes and opens the door and shes wearing the same dress but its not my girlfriend at all

its a eurasian woman a beautiful eurasian woman who doesnt look the least like my girlfriend

now how did i imagine it was my ex-girlfriend

but she smiles like shes expecting me she says come in i come in and as i come in i see that in the middle of the room there is a large roulette table she says pick your number i walk over and i look at the roulette table while she stands there silently watching i look at the numbers

the numbers are strange  $\sqrt{3}$   $\pi$   $\epsilon$   $\alpha$   $\delta$   $\sigma$  i pick  $\epsilon$  somehow thinking its the natural log e

so i pick  $\epsilon$  a transcendental number my croupier claps her hands the ball goes round and round and it stops on  $\epsilon$  she claps her hands again and an elderly gentleman in a tuxedo without a tie comes out of a back room carrying what looks like a violin case he comes in takes out an old violin and starts to play he plays in this

odd broken way for moments he plays brilliantly hes playing  
a caprice a paganini caprice which you shouldnt play unless youre  
in full control of everything in the world he starts playing this  
paganini caprice and for a few bars its brilliant and then it goes  
very bad and then he starts again and hes playing the same  
paganini caprice and again it starts brilliantly and this time goes  
fourteen bars further before it breaks down he puts down the  
violin and starts to cry hes weeping there and a little girl comes  
out and takes him by the hand and leads him out of the room

i look at my croupier

she says "winning is *also* losing"

ben weissman was putting together a writers series for the armand hammer museum in the summer and wanted to know if id be willing to do a talk piece in july i said sure as long as i could do it on july 14 id always wanted to do a talk on bastille day because the idea of liberation still appealed to me but when the program came out it seemed i was scheduled for the twenty-first i thought about protesting but decided there was a message in the mix up so i decided to forget about liberation which often turns out badly anyway and thought about the hammer museum its located on wilshire close to ucla which its now a part of and i considered how often and repeatedly id traveled back and forth to los angeles in the years since we moved to san diego

when we first came out here san diego seemed very far from los angeles to reach the great metropolis you had to drive past long stretches of empty orange county citrus groves and hop and strawberry fields sheltered from the coastal winds by thin stands of ragged eucalyptus but gradually this changed one day a sign appeared over a new exit from the 405 it read MISSION VIEJO

implausibly because there was no mission there or anything else weird glass buildings began to appear in the hop fields hillsides were flattened for cookie cutter housing and after a while orange county began to look like an l.a. suburb meanwhile in the south encinitas gave up its hillside flower fields for "cape cod" style condos scruffy oceanside took down its tourist welcoming sign COME TAN YOUR HIDE IN OCEANSIDE and we were all los angeles now from wilshire boulevard down to the mexican border

what

happened

to walter?

i came here with something on my mind something ive been thinking about for a while and thinking about it i havent been able to resolve it its a question thats been addressed by a lot of people whether there is such a thing as repetition and how we should think about it if there is such a thing and even if there isnt

now ive thought about it a number of times which already suggests there is such a thing but its an old problem that goes back a very long time in european thought if you consider turkey part of europe because herakleitos lived in ephesus on the western coast of turkey during the persian domination toward the end of the sixth century bc which was a long time ago and herakleitos observed that you can never step into the same river twice this made a lot of sense to me because it seemed to confirm a conclusion id come to long ago that experience prepares you for what will never happen again but how does this square with kratylos' subsequent wisecrack you cant step into the same river once its always good to have a smart student wholl push you further

which is what the kratylos crack seems to do the river changes

so fast that by the time you step into it its already a different river  
 but when you think about it the kratylos pushes the herakleitos further  
 than that in fact it pushes it over a cliff because it implies that you  
 cant experience anything once because to experience it once you have  
 to experience it twice which kicks the question from an argument  
 about repetition into an argument about experience

consider an infant trying to engage with the alien things out there  
 in the world around it it sees something out there it might turn  
 out to be its toe but at this point in time the infant doesnt know that  
 its toe is its toe eventually it discovers a relation it feels it when  
 it moves it sees a hand its hand reaching toward it feeling its  
 hand reaching and then touching and its toe feeling something  
 touching it but all this cant happen the first time around

a child isnt born with a map of its body and it doesnt know its  
 hand is its hand until it sees it several times and connects its movements  
 with the feeling of its movement and seeing it move it takes a few  
 shots the child reaches may fail to reach reaches out randomly  
 grabs and then it feels something else and it has to process this and  
 recognize it the next time as the same thing it saw before but its  
 not exactly the same thing because its the other foot now the child  
 may not know its the other foot it may not yet know it has two feet  
 because its early in its career

later the child will be a philosopher and will know perfectly well  
 or maybe because its a philosopher the child will not be certain that its  
 the other foot the point is that kratylos positions the argument in  
 such a way as to start the debate on whether we can see anything once  
 at all and whether repetition however impossible to imagine may  
 be necessary for any apprehension of reality at all

the problem doesnt go away nobody seems to know how to deal

with it what we do know what we come to know now about the brain which is not the mind

nonetheless the brain and the mind have a sufficiently close relationship such that if you cut somebodys head off he cant think

beyond that the connections though illuminating are somewhat more uncertain the mind is not the brain and the brain is not the mind but the brain seems to support all the activities of the mind we recognize as taking place and one of the things weve come to recognize is that the inputs of the sensory system are very strangely dissociated that is to say if i notice your green shirt if i notice that you have a green shirt on and youre leaning on your elbow the visual information about your color and shape and location in space are registered separately by differentially sensitive parts of the retina and transmitted to different parts of the brain the signals for color and shape are not initially processed in the same place and motion is not processed in the same place as either of these two so in effect everything that we see is disassembled in our sensing before its reassembled in our seeing we no longer have the same model of seeing that we used to have the eye is nothing like a camera

or its only a little like a camera in that it has a lens that focuses the light rays reflected from the objects of the world and transmits them to the retina but thats it because these visual impulses are registered selectively by differentially sensitized cells in the retina and transmitted in a series of discrete impulses to different parts of the brain which has to have some organizing system to reassemble them for the mind to allow me to recognize that the green belongs to your shirt and the angled shape is the elbow that belongs to you sitting

there in the second row we dont know how thats done when i say we i mean nobody knows how its done

nobody knows how the organizing system works some cognitive psychologists and neurologists can point to certain places in the brain where this might be done and are careful to say might be done because various conditionals and subjunctives are necessary to honestly express the doubtfulness of what we know which coming from an early background in science always seemed easier to me than it has apparently been seeing that the career of science however brilliantly successful its projects appears at the same time to be a history of error since any theory proposed by any scientist will eventually be disproved

now one might say that there is a cumulatively positive achievement in each disproof that each time you disprove something you improve the state of our knowledge so that gradually we know more and more and are ignorant of less and less

well maybe and maybe not but generally no particular scientific judgment has the kind of fixed validity you can come to rest on as we just found out about the popular hormone replacement therapy that was known to protect women from the hot flashes sweats and the vaginal drying of menopause to counter osteoporosis and in the imagination of its most enthusiastic advocates to reduce the risk of heart attacks and to act against almost all the effects of aging including alzheimers disease

but now along comes a double blind study of nearly twenty thousand menopausal women conducted over the course of a year and it shows a  $\frac{3}{10}\%$  increase in the combined incidence of breast cancer heart attacks strokes and blood clots in the group receiving the combination of estrogen and progesterone over the control group

but what does that tell you the drug combination still works

against the distress of menopause and its action against calcium loss remains unchallenged no other benefits were documented and there was a very slight increase in quite severe problems but does a  $\frac{3}{10}\%$  increase in the incidence of problems translate into a  $\frac{3}{10}\%$  increase in risk for any woman taking the medication and if so is it a bearable risk and then what generates the risk the drug combination?

no

increase in risk was seen in a group of postmenopausal women taking estrogen alone

was it the manner of administration or the preparational form of the medication natural or synthetic progesterone the questions go on

this is also the way of science the more we learn the less we know and what we know about the brain is even more uncertain because the organizing mechanism that puts green angle elbow person back together again into the person in the green shirt leaning on his elbow in the second row is completely unknown and we certainly dont know how we can turn away and remember him and his green shirt when were no longer seeing him because we dont know about memory we dont know how memories are stored if theyre stored and in the course of the discussion i was having with myself i was thinking about the question of memory i was thinking how we often speak of the value of experience and its experience that interested me because i wasnt sure i knew what it was

when we speak about experience we imagine that memory has a positive value but the term memory overstates the case people when they speak of memory imagine it vaguely as a kind of neural storage bin maybe like a filing cabinet the way they think of a computer storage system where each memory has an assigned place in a distinct folder in a particular drawer of this imaginary filing cabinet

the trouble is nobodys ever been able to find these bins though when i was in college there was a great physiological psychologist named donald hebb who proposed that memory which had long been an embarrassment to all investigators could be located in what he called reverberatory circuits that is electrical impulses corresponding to perceptions could be shunted into a self enclosed circle of neurons around which they would circulate till they could be recalled to be acted upon by the motor system or integrated into some higher level cortical activity it was a nice idea and it created a fair amount of excitement at the time but nobody could find any of these circuits that lasted longer than a few seconds and since that time back in the 1950s in spite of all the great technological advances in the study of neurology and psychology nobody really has had anything like a concrete idea of the neurological basis of memory so were thrown back as we often are on the phenomenological and the linguistic we have to examine experience from within experience to find out what kind of sense we can make of it

now one thing we always seem to mean when we use the word "experience" is direct sensory apprehension direct contact with something rather than reading about it or hearing about it thats the primitive way we talk about it we say hes an experienced driver which means that when you put him in a car hes done more than read the manual because if you take someone give him a list of driving instructions and send him out on the road god help you if youre anywhere near him learning to drive is a complex activity which everyone in los angeles knows about los angeles has generated a demonstrable evolutionary development the automated centaur nearly everyone in los angeles is attached to a car for the better part of their lives to get from anywhere to anywhere in los angeles you need a car because if you try to walk they might arrest you

it nearly happened to us many years ago it was around 1968 and elly and i were staying with a friend in beverly hills and we were old new yorkers so we decided to take a walk we had a one year old child in a stroller and we ambled slowly walking and talking to each other so we didnt notice that the streets were completely empty of people nor did we notice that a squad car was slowly trailing us as we walked until it pulled up alongside of us and the cop on the curbside asked

“where are you going”

“were not going anywhere were walking”

“where are you staying”

apparently it was such a shock to see somebody walking in beverly hills that they were prepared to interrogate us but after a couple of questions they were satisfied that there really was a baby in the baby carriage not a submachine gun and that we were simply taking the air so they let us go but they said you have to be careful

“be careful?” i said “of what?” they said “well be careful people dont usually walk here” and i guess they were warning us that if we crossed the street we might be killed by the oncoming traffic because the lights are organized largely for the convenience of the people in vehicles not people who need to cross the street which we noticed again this afternoon as we waited endlessly for a green light to cross the broad avenue in front of this building and then had to wait for the little white manikin to appear in the green light which signals that you can cross though cars may still be turning in from the cross street while youre trying to scurry across before the little white man in the light disappears and this was also an experience that remains somehow as part of a body of experience in a memory you can draw on almost like a bank account because here experience refers to the memory of events and you have to be

able to draw on the memory of past events to be able to do almost anything requiring a skill or a strategy to drive to make love to do anything at all to swim any activity you undertake you have to be able to draw on a repertory of previous engagements with similar situations you have to recall having been in the water

if youre an adult and youve never swum and somebody tells you how to swim and then you go into the water youll be surprised the water will be colder than you thought and youll start to sink and youll think that it wont hold you up and you will sink if you dont relax and let the water do its job but its hard to relax and believe that youll float if its your first time in the water no matter what they told you in physics

im trying to imagine this because its a long time since i didnt know how to swim i must have been about ten years old when i first learned to swim and i remember lying down in the water and being filled with anxiety

so what i did to allay my anxiety was to find a couple of old gasoline cans the kind you could fill with a gallon of gasoline when your car ran out because i figured a can filled with a gallon of air would be lighter than a gallon of water and would float and help hold me up i took the two cans and went into the surf and the two cans actually did keep me up and i felt so confident floating comfortably on the waves with my two gasoline cans that i began to relax i got so confident that i let go of one of the cans and i still floated and i was so confident and relaxed i let go of the other can and i was still floating but i found this out in the water if anybody had told me this i dont think i really would have believed it not in a concrete physical way water is somewhat different when youre in it than when you think about it

there is in fact nothing in the physical world that behaves precisely

as its described because descriptions are linguistic or diagrammatic simplifications and dont represent all the concrete events you experience when you actually do something

now of all the philosophers i know the only one who tried to make a case for the meaning of experience is john dewey dewey actually tried to think it through although his most thorough thinking through took place in a very special situation in an attempt to describe the experience of art which was not an activity he was very knowledgeable about but he was knowledgeable about human activity and he proposed that art making was very much like any other form of human activity and that at its center is the experience it provides you with in order to describe this he had to work out his idea of what an experience was and this turned out to be a profound idea a very beautiful notion that an experience a real or integral experience has a narrative form it has a beginning a middle and an end he supposes that all experiences are generated by a kind of need or desire as he sees it if you dont need or desire something you wont experience it fully at all and he distinguishes between what he calls full or integral experiences and partial or chaotic experiences that dont involve full self awareness and these dont count at all for dewey

he says look suppose you go to a french restaurant thats supposed to be a wonderful restaurant and youre all set to have a great culinary experience youre waiting for the first dish to arrive youve selected an *hors d'oeuvre* and youre waiting for it to come you could be terribly surprised because in spite of the candlelight and the sparkling tablecloths the paintings on the wall the waiters all speaking their earthy dialects the frogs legs just dont taste very good they taste like tough chicken thighs and theres nothing more banal than overcooked chicken thighs so this is a bad moment a small personal tragedy but you still have hopes for the entrée you boldly order

boeuf bourguignon but it comes back sour and unpalatable the wine is past its prime and the beef is stringy this is very disappointing but youre still trying to find some of the satisfaction you imagined or hoped for so now youre at dessert

you order an apple and some brie what can they do to an apple and they didnt make the brie your luck turns around its a marvelous apple firm and sweet with the fragrance of its blossom and a luscious creamy brie its a partial retrieval youve snatched a small satisfaction from the debacle of the meal this is an experience you will never forget its hopes and its fears its great defeats and its final small victory next time you go to a french restaurant youll be wary of the frogs legs and maybe youll avoid the boeuf bourguignon

this is of course a kind of esthetic experience but dewey isnt satisfied with this he sees all real experiences as esthetic but hes particularly interested in active experiences in most cases hes talking about somebody trying to do something and pushing his argument further he offers a wittgenstein-like example

imagine a stone he says on top of a hill it gets dislodged somehow and starts to roll down the hill but let us imagine one more thing that the stone takes an interest in its fate has a desire to come to a safe resting place somewhere at the bottom of the hill that it wants to come there and will judge every obstacle along the way as something to be overcome this stone dislodged somehow in los angeles by a slight earth tremor that shakes it lightly it starts to roll slowly down the hill

it approaches the first larger crag and tries to shy away from it but slams off it skinning its shins so to speak and from there slides into a little gully that accelerates its descent then every boulder and every fold in the landscape becomes part of its experience

till it finally comes to a secure haven at the bottom of a little ravine where its safe until the next rains come and wash it out into the sea  
 now of course this is a fantasy but according to dewey this is what all experiences are structured like and this is a very appealing model but im not sure that it makes adequate sense im not sure it works this way because it suggests that every experience comes fully narrativized that as something is happening our consciousness fits it into a narrative form saying now im at the beginning this is the turning point and this is the end this is certainly possible but not necessarily so

maybe its only after everythings over and the experience is no longer present when were trying to recall it that we fit it into this narrative form which is sometimes hard to do or hard to do when we first start to recall it when we may only recall a fragment of the experience or a single image but even then is there a place where i store stories like a comic book rack and how do i get a story out of my memory when i recall an experience does the story come out whole i mean is the story stored somewhere complete from beginning to end like a film script think about how you call up the memory of an experience

try to retrieve a memory and try to think about it you know all stories have something in common though theyre not necessarily the same

so once again we come to the notion of repetition but in recalling you dont start at the beginning you may start at an image in the middle

you come to a bridge so lets imagine coming to a bridge  
 my friend jean pierre gorin a french filmmaker an american filmmaker who used to be a french filmmaker he was the young

partner of the somewhat older jean luc godard back at the end of the sixties hes been teaching at the university of california san diego and is a longtime colleague of mine he was in the bay area seeing about a feature film he had written a script for and was seeing someone in berkeley this was the seventeenth of october 1989 and it was the day before i was supposed to be doing a reading at fort mason in the marina district of san francisco

id been teaching i remember how id been teaching and driving home i figured id watch the third game of the world series and when i got home i turned on the tv and im listening to al michaels and this other guy in the broadcast booth chatting for a moment when the booth suddenly shakes

al michaels says "i think this an earth . . ." and the screen goes black and its a while before the tv comes back on because this was the loma prieta earthquake

now jean pierre was in berkeley planning to drive over to san francisco to visit a film friend and talk with him about one of the festivals so hes in his car and hes driving to the bay bridge its october 17 and hes driving to the bay bridge and hes a few blocks away and he says to himself "you know i should visit alice" alice is his ex-wife thats alice waters of the famous nouvelle restaurant they were married for a short while but they remained friends after they divorced and he helped supply her with fresh vegetables from an organic farm called chinosis in san diego and now he was right up close to the bay bridge when he decided "im going to go visit alice" so he turns the car away and as he turns the earth starts to shake later he found out that the bridge collapsed moments after he turned away it was a very substantial collapse in which a couple of cars fell in and a bus filled with buddhists very nearly went down or at least according to the story i was told

this group of buddhists was on a bus coming from the other side of the bridge i suppose on the way to some monastic retreat in berkeley and the bus was very silent as the driver drew up close to the bay bridge and then just as he was about to get onto the bridge he hears this strange abrasive sound coming from the back of the bus and figures something happened to the transmission so he pulls to a stop and cuts off the engine but the sound continues he turns around and its the buddhists chanting and he turns back just in time to see the bridge and the car in front of him go down

now we may suppose this sequence of events must have been deeply experienced and deeply and somewhat differently encoded in the memory of the buddhists and the driver for the chanting buddhists this might have seemed a plausibly reasonable miracle plausible and reasonable because from their point of view their chanting was efficacious for the bus driver the chanting was even more efficacious but in a different way because had he known they were chanting he would have ignored it and killed them all it was important for him not to have been a buddhist and not to have been familiar with their chanting practice whereas if the bus driver was a chanting buddhist just imagine the bus driver as a chanting buddhist hes chanting theyre chanting theyre all chanting and they all go down together

now this is an odd memory to unpack its my unpacking the memory of a story somebody told me is this an experience if its an experience its an experience of somebodys telling and im not at all sure that this retelling my retelling is anything like an exact copy of that other persons telling but whether thats true or not how does it unpack when i tell it it unrolls as if i had a complete script ahead of time and im not aware of any script before me i seem to sense it as i come forward how does a narrative roll out of your mouth

how does it unroll in your mind because it unrolls in your mind pretty much the same way it unrolls in your mouth like im coming to a bridge at some point in every narrative you come to a bridge whatever kind of bridge it is it has to be crossed something will happen at that place and somehow the trigger for me is coming to a bridge something i might not have thought of but the bridge made me think of it

it was back in the summer of 52 when eisenhower was being nominated for the presidency i was working for the forestry department as a smoke jumper out in idaho and i was hitching back home itd been a fine job working in the intoxicating pine forest of northern idaho just about two miles from the canadian border and you made money but i sent most of it back home because there was nothing to spend it on up there youd work all week and then the guys would pile into cars and rush off to coeur d'alene to play cards and get laid by the whores that hung out at the local bar i liked the bar but i wasnt turned on by the whores so id go along for a few beers and play some cards and i didnt spend much money because i wasnt losing it at cards and i wasnt spending it on the girls so i had plenty of money but i got rid of it sending most of it home keeping what i considered a reasonable amount for the hitch home so i was hitching my leisurely way back because it was a warm and beautiful summer

but by the time i got to eastern pennsylvania id almost entirely run out of money and i was getting what i hoped would be my last ride which for some reason or other was pretty hard to get till a guy came along in a beaten up old plymouth it was a real wreck that had almost no brakes and the only way he had to slow down was to gently ease on the emergency brake and i would open the door and drag my foot along the road to help bring the car to a stop the driver didnt have any money either and somewhere in pennsylvania i gave him my

last couple of bucks for a little bit of gas which took us into new jersey where we were starting to run very low he was nursing the gas coasting down hills and trying to economize as much as possible and as were getting nearer to the george washington bridge i realized i didnt have enough change for the bridge toll which i remember was something like a buck and all i have left is fifty cents which as an old new yorker i knew was just enough for the tunnel but the holland tunnel is a couple of miles further south we could get fifty cents worth of gas that would get us there but we couldnt pay the toll to get through we discuss all this while were coasting down hills and im dragging my foot to slow down at the bottom and we decide to go for the tunnel and hope that our gas holds out long enough to get us there and were watching the gas gauge which i know works on a float valve and is never very accurate and were nursing the car along knowing it can go dead at any minute and we make it to the tunnel were finally into the tunnel hoping to get through and were talking to the car encouraging it come on little car dont go dead on us now come on little car be a good little car if the car had a name wed be patting it on the dashboard and whispering in its ear come on sybaris come on sybaris dont give out on us now so were nursing it along and we come out into the light of new york we get to tenth avenue and were out of gas

but the little italian guy the driver hes streetwise he says i tell you what we do we push her over to some car thats got lots of gas you lay chickee and tell me if theres any cops coming and ill siphon some gas out for us we get out of the car we push the old wreck over toward a shiny new oldsmobile my friend takes a length of rubber tubing out of the trunk of the plymouth hes apparently done this before he unscrews the other cars gas cap inserts the pipe sucks the air out and siphons some gas until he figures hes got enough

and then he offers to drive me home but i wave him off because im kind of glad to see him go and then i realize i dont have the carfare to get to newkirk avenue because id spent my last money on the tunnel toll so then i do what lots of new yorkers do i go down into the subway wait till i hear the train coming leap the turnstile and rush madly down to the platform and into the train headed for brooklyn

now these stories unrolled smoothly enough from beginning to end but they all started before the beginning they began at a bridge and seemed to coalesce around it though i was never aware of that i was only aware of calling back an experience that came back in the telling but i dont know how i remember stories though now it seems like they coalesce around an image maybe it labels them and they get stored under that label so i call "bridge!" and they come out like an obedient dog though i very much doubt it but i think i often recall whole passages of experience from an image a single salient image and they emerge as stories though not always and i dont really know how other people remember experiences and whether they even recall them as stories

the sciences have not been very helpful in the study of memory when psychologists and neurologists have studied memory theyve mostly concentrated on simple objects like word lists they might present you with a handful of words like "solipsism" "civilization" "orgasm" "cat" and then test to see how many you remember and you may say them over and over again in your mind and remember most or even all of them but thats not terribly useful information because it doesnt tell us much about the way we usually remember and it tells us nothing about how we remember experiences or stories though we might combine the words into a sentence like "civilization permits sufficient solipsism to ignore the cats orgasm" but then weve turned the word list into part of a story which we might compress

into an image of bishop berkeley serenely contemplating the moonlight falling on the liffey while two cats are fucking on the river bank beside him that would probably give us a better memory of the word list and do it in a more characteristically human way

i think we remember things much better when we narrativize them which leads me to believe that memory has an organizational structure much like narrative narrativization or the logic its based on may be central to memory and narrative experience may itself be based on the registration of repeated sensorimotor sequences in volitional action having a form like noticing something starting to reach for it almost reaching it and finally reaching it or failing to reach it

but all this is pure speculation and in any case doesnt address the question of why the same story of the same experience told at different times can turn out different

i was telling the story of how we got across the hudson how we came to the bridge and turned away and drove to the tunnel and i remember the little guy who was driving but i had a friend who was traveling with me on the whole trip home and i dont remember what happened to him i cant remember what happened to walter walter and i had come back together we hitched across the whole country together i remember him sitting next to me in the cab of a truck outside bismark but i dont remember him in the car i dont remember him in that brakeless wreck of a plymouth i dont know if he was sitting in the back dragging his foot on the other side of the car out the back door i dont remember him standing by while we were siphoning the gas walter has disappeared and now i remember that he disappeared but i still cant fit him into the experience i didnt remember him when i was telling the story and now i remember it as a fact that he was there or i think it was a fact

but somehow the organizational structure left walter out there's no reason why i should have wanted to leave him out but somehow it didn't dramatize for me that way there must have been something about the way the story meant something to me the way my experience unfolded but this is an experience that's not an accurate representation of what happened it's an adequate representation of the way i felt it happened

but something is wrong i don't know where to put walter walter's a perfectly fine fellow and i like him there's no reason why i should want to leave him out but i don't know where he sat in the story maybe he left somewhere earlier and went home on a bus but i don't remember that either and somehow he's gone

now this failure suggests something of the reconstructive power of this kind of memory maybe there's some kind of matrix for the kind of stories we tell and for the experiences we remember that may take shape as we experience events again and again and tell stories about them again and again and the shape our experiences may take may come from the habits of our telling as the habits of our telling may take shape from the habits of our seeing and apprehending and in my case i think they may take shape from a play of contrasts between certain tonalities

like between the hapless car and the distance we had to traverse and the funny little guy in his beaten up car who was the only one willing to give us a hitch while we were being passed by all these other comfortable people in their expensive big cars on the pennsylvania turnpike a little italian guy from red hook or bay ridge driving his brakeless gasless car who probably picked us up for some gas money and was making a mistake because we didn't have much but he was almost lovable in his marvelous italian neighborhood smalltime crook amiability there must have been something that appealed to me in

the contrast between his good nature and his bad character his competent incompetence and its contrast with the conventional reality were always presented with

as at the very beginning of the trip back home i remember driving with one guy who gave us a hitch close to spokane this guy was driving what in those days was a very fast car a brand new hudson hornet we get in the car and were cruising along this wide open four lane highway and it doesnt take long before i notice were sailing past every car on the road i lean over casually to see the speedometer and i see were doing 110 miles an hour it doesnt feel like 110 miles an hour the car is new the road is new and the drive is smooth as silk still im getting nervous because anything that happens at 110 miles an hour is going to happen very fast

but the driver is imperturbable hes a freckle faced sandy haired guy in a plaid summer jacket and an expensive white on white shirt open at the throat looking like some kind of successful salesman who turns to me and says why dont you boys keep an eye out for the police i always get a little concerned when i light a cigarette then he proceeds to reach into his breast pocket for the pack flips out a cigarette places it in his mouth puts back the pack and reaches for the lighter thats when i notice the guy has no arms he has two prosthetic steel clutching devices hes starting to light the cigarette with one steel hand on the wheel the other holding the lighter hes driving 110 miles an hour and handling the car with the confidence of a racing car driver sure i said well keep an eye out for the cops but you know we really need to make a phone call and wed appreciate it if youd let us off at the next exit and i turn around to look at walter his handsome pale face paler than ever his eyebrows raised in amazement as he looks from the wheel to the cigarette to the speedometer and back to me shaking his head and this time walter is with me

# endangered

## nouns

the other day i looked out the window and saw a bird with a black head walking upside down along a branch of the honeysuckle bush outside our dining room it was a familiar bird but strange its black cap its queer way of walking head down along the branch were familiar but its color was strange i had never seen a brown bird with a black cap that walked like that not here in southern california northern san diego but it reminded me of another bird i knew very well from winters in upstate new york of a different color the tailored grey of a pair of spats or dress gloves a slightly absurd little bird that helped cheer our winters along with the chickadee and a lone cardinal that used to sit on the leafless shadbush on the other side of the brook back in north branch i remembered that bird i said to myself it was a . . . and then no name came

it was as if

instead of a name there was an empty space the size of a name that should have been there

i guess i could have gone to a field guide to find the name but my field guide was a guide to the birds of california ive been living here almost twenty years now and it was the new york bird i wanted to remember but there was something else also a certain sensual pleasure mixed with anxiety of tracing a path as if with my finger

around the small empty space in my mind that should have housed  
the bird

because that was what i was experiencing the physical  
sensation of tracing a shallow space where the word should have been  
and if it was not a pleasure there was a certain almost sensory  
satisfaction in running my finger over the space that i felt was just  
the right size to house the body of the word i almost said  
the bird

because it was like the archaeological pleasure of finding a  
tipped over sarcophagus from which the body it had contained had  
simply rolled out or of discovering an inscription carved in the face  
of a rock from which one word had been rubbed out

and while i was enjoying the shape of the scar in my memory my  
mind kept stumbling over other memories of winters in north branch  
snow piled fifteen feet high along the roadside of the schilburys gerda  
and kurt the two german émigrés with their pair of weimaraners  
their hopeless foreignness in the bare upstate landscape though this  
part of western sullivan county had been german once in the days  
when they were cutting down the hemlock trees for the tanbark  
industry and had even had a chapter of the bund in pre-second  
world war days as names in the phonebook like schadt and ebert and  
ellersig still testified

but gerda and kurt were german jewish though gerda had  
become catholic because of the nuns whod sheltered her from the nazis  
in their convent and she used to go to mass in the franciscan church  
in callicoon while kurt ran for county controller because he wanted to  
stem the tide of corruption in western sullivan county but he didnt  
have a chance with the local farmers or even in liberty or monticello  
and gerda had to stop going to the franciscans because she was shocked  
by the violence of their cold war sermons

and i kept seeing the small grey black headed bird whose name i had forgotten through the kitchen window of the house we rented from peters the dairy farmer down the road surrounded by the swarms of images of people and things id forgotten that id known that seemed in some way related to this one and i remembered another forgetting that i had experienced in a similar way

the name of a painter architect a droll horse faced man who had broken with his friend mondrian over the use of diagonals and the color green who had introduced dada into holland and designed playful little geometric houses whose deadpan descendants have cursed european and american housing developments since the 1960s

i mentioned this to my son and blaise just shrugged and said "i bet you can name all the charger receivers"

which i thought i could so i said charlie joiner and wes chandler and bobby duckworth who was still with the chargers then and those were the wide receivers and i started on the tight ends there were three of them and i got through eric sievers and pete holohan and i came to the greatly gifted one the giant black one with the face of a petulant child who i remembered seeing in a game once with miami three times come limping off the field nearly destroyed by collisions that might have hospitalized an ordinary player and i remember this shot of him on the sidelines between hits slumping exhausted and helmetless his face drained of everything but weariness and pain like some roman gladiator and i remember seeing him return three times to a struggle that only his pride and nasty character lent an illusion of dignity and tragic seriousness beyond the ridiculous game

and it happened again i forgot his name

“blaise” i said “i cant remember his name” and he asked  
 “should i tell you”

“no” i said “let me try to remember it”

“kenneth maybe no it isnt kenneth its kenneth i think  
 kenneth washington no booker? booker t washington kenneth  
 washington no kennel kellen kellen winslow”

and so i came round to it knowing i knew it all the time which  
 means what?

that i could come around to it that i could arrive at it  
 that i knew what it wasnt and if i tried long enough and hard  
 enough i could find a way of getting to it the way i used to find my  
 way as a child to the ancient capital of egypt by passing through the  
 names of laundry soaps

rinsolux luxor thebes

by way of the  
 sound poetry of the language which is my language our language  
 in a way that talking will not often show or maybe theres something  
 in back of language that stands behind it and makes it possible not to  
 remember but to remember what you forget even when you cant  
 remember it which is like coming to stand before a place to which  
 memory may or may not be able to arrive

the way my mother in law  
 went looking for a lost story she used to hold up before her life  
 it  
 concerned her own mother back in poland then and she told it many  
 times

“my mother was a tiny little woman but she was a strong  
 woman a businesswoman my father was a scholar and he had no  
 time for such things” this was the central theme and jeanette had

taken it to heart because throughout her life Jeanette had thrown herself into business after business small hotels then larger ones grandly conceived family enterprises that were almost always just beyond her reach so we heard this story many times

"my mother was a tiny little woman but she was very strong and she ran the local mill where the peasants brought their grain and one week she neglected to get enough cash to pay off all the peasants so she had to give out notes to the ones that came in last and most of them grumbled a bit so she would make a little joke and they would laugh and take them because they knew her and knew that she was good for it but one peasant a huge man and very drunk got very loud and insisted on receiving cash

"but my mother just looked at him and said 'what do you think im going to give rubles to a drunken peasant youll just drink it up or lose it in a ditch or worse you go home and send your wife and ill give her the money' but the peasant roared that no woman was going to lead him around by the nose and he would go down to the bank with her to get the money now

"but my mother said 'you think im going to take you to the bank like this theyll take one look at you and chase you out besides the bank is closed'

"but the peasant swore that nobody was going to chase him out even if they were closed and he held up a giant fist and demanded cash or else and the little woman looking up at the fist above her head coolly turned her back on him and happened to catch sight of her tiny nine year old son watching big eyed from the corner 'samuel' she said 'go get a stick and show this gentleman out'"

which punch

line in the authorized version in its absolute absurdity delivered with perfect sangfroid so tickled everyone that even the drunken

peasant couldnt keep from laughing so hard he had to sit down and cry

but in the last few years my mother in law has been losing hold of the lines that held her to her life which has been slipping away with fewer and fewer lines to hold to shes been living in a resident hotel filled with older people whose lines are similarly slipping and with whom it doesnt always so much matter but from time to time when we come to visit she reaches out of habit for one of the stories to which her life was moored and she happened to reach for this one

“my mother was a tiny little woman but very strong. . .” and she went through her story to the angry peasant and how her mother looked up at the giant fist and cooly turned around then she reached for the punch line

but jeanettes little brother was hopelessly gone and jeanette waited just a moment and replaced him with manya their old peasant housekeeper who wasnt frail enough to carry off the joke so my mother in law stopped and started over

“my mother was a tiny little woman. . .” and she went through the whole story again and as she drew near the ending this time the old housekeeper was gone so jeanette replaced manya with her scholar father which clearly would not suffice

three times jeanette made her way around the story of her mother and the drunken peasant and each time she circled the story the actors changed they became in turn the maid her father and her own husband and three times she looked for the line that her mother now delivered imperfectly to the altered personnel and each time she came to the end of the line she paused and began again but the third and last time she arrived at the line she simply stopped and waited and im not sure how long she was prepared to wait