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Dialogues with Diagrams: Francesca Woodman's book, *some disordered interior Geometries*

Alison Dunhill

Abstract

This article presents a close visual reading of Francesca Woodman's photographic book *some disordered interior Geometries*. The work comprises a complex system of interventions to an antique (c.1900) source text, an advanced geometry manual for Italian students entitled *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria*. The article focuses on selected pages from the book, demonstrating the ways in which Woodman confronts issues of memory and identity through the tight narrative framework of her studio interior, herself and personal and family objects. On an aesthetic level the superimposed images work to construct a series of responses to the geometric forms illustrated and described in the source work. Woodman re-creates or references them through the imaging of her own body, as well as by using the spaces between furniture and wall and floor divisions in the enclosed space. Her response is to the givens of printed diagram, printed text and printed formulae. In her interventions she adds a specially made or chosen photographic image, often annotating it in her own handwriting or making a written aside to the page's instructions, as well as sometimes re-drawing a diagrammatic form for emphasis or delight.

The photographer Francesca Woodman was born in Denver, Colorado in 1958, into a family of which her mother, father, brother and a cousin were, or became, practising artists. It was and is a family which spent a regular portion of its time in an Italian house they owned, with the consequence that arguably Francesca spoke Italian before she spoke English. Despite her early death, by suicide, at the age of twenty-two, she has left a body of work (five to six hundred prints), predominantly using herself as both subject and object, that is remarkable for its maturity, focus and technical mastery. Woodman pays homage to the first wave Parisian surrealists in her work. Having vowed to emulate André Breton's experiments in the interface between text and photographic image and the realignment of the balance between them, in his work *Nadja* of 1928, it is through her photographic books that she best realises this aim and indeed turns both

image and text into space for inflection. This paper analyses selected images from Woodman's photographic book *some disordered interior Geometries*, which contains a complex system of interventions by her to an antique (c.1900) source text which is an advanced geometry manual for Italian students entitled *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria*.

Woodman made six photographic books in her lifetime, five of which used a 'found object' as a base. *Portrait of a Reputation*, believed by Chris Townsend to be from her mid career in 1976 – 1977, is the exception and for this reason and because it uses image without text, it is not central to my project.¹ *SdiG*, probably made at the RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) between 1977 and 1978, is the only one to have been published to date, by the Synapse Press, a small alternative press in Philadelphia specialising in artists' books, in January 1981, the month and year of her death.² The *Angels, Calendar* book, dated 1978, contains some of Woodman's best known prints, often in different versions from the gallery prints, all or most of which were made in Rome, as the book may well also have been. It has a base of handwritten French poetry onto which Woodman places her images in a manner that sometimes conceals the text and sometimes reveals it. Her own annotations, in her larger, natural handwriting, interrupt the original's copperplate flow and sometimes respond to a line of poetry. *Equazioni* or *Portraits Friends Equations* (sic) uses a maths textbook as its base and in it many photographs, made in Rome, respond directly to the printed equations. The two books *Dettati e Themi* and the shorter *Raffaello* were probably worked on in New York late in her career, 1979 – 1981. In both these books Woodman adds transparencies to the densely copper-

plated written pages, again addressing an interaction between revealing and concealing. No annotations exist in the longer *Dettati e Themis* and many of her annotations to the shorter book are written at a right angle to the base text in Woodman's mock-copper plate. This shorter book consists, uniquely, of a sequential narrative. It is no coincidence therefore that the book published in Philadelphia in 1981 and offered for sale at nine dollars by Synapse Press, used Woodman's found *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria* as its template.³

The published edition of *sdiG* measures six inches and a quarter in width with a height measurement of exactly nine inches. Its soft card front cover (fig. 1) is a pale purple in facsimile, with the original title *Esercizi Graduati di Geometria* in large Art Nouveau-Baroque decorative print.⁴ *SdiG* is described by Giuseppe Casetti, dedicatee of *sdiG* and joint owner of the Roman *Libreria Maldoror* in which the turn-of-the-century school books were found by Francesca, as:

... fifteen photos that Francesca had applied onto two pamphlets, joined by her...entitled *Exercises of Geometry*, the first Triangles and Equilaterals and the second *Surface Areas and Volumes of Solids*.⁵

Throughout the book, Woodman confronts issues of memory and identity through the tight narrative framework of her studio interior, herself and personal and family objects. On an aesthetic level the superimposed images work simultaneously and audaciously to construct a series of responses to the geometric forms illustrated and described in the source work by re-creating or referencing them through the imaging of her own body, as well as by using the spaces between furniture and wall and floor divisions in the enclosed space.

Her response is to the givens of printed diagram, printed text and printed formulae. In her interventions she adds a specially made or chosen photographic image, often annotating it in her own handwriting or making a written aside to the page's instructions, as well as sometimes re-drawing a diagrammatic form for emphasis or delight.

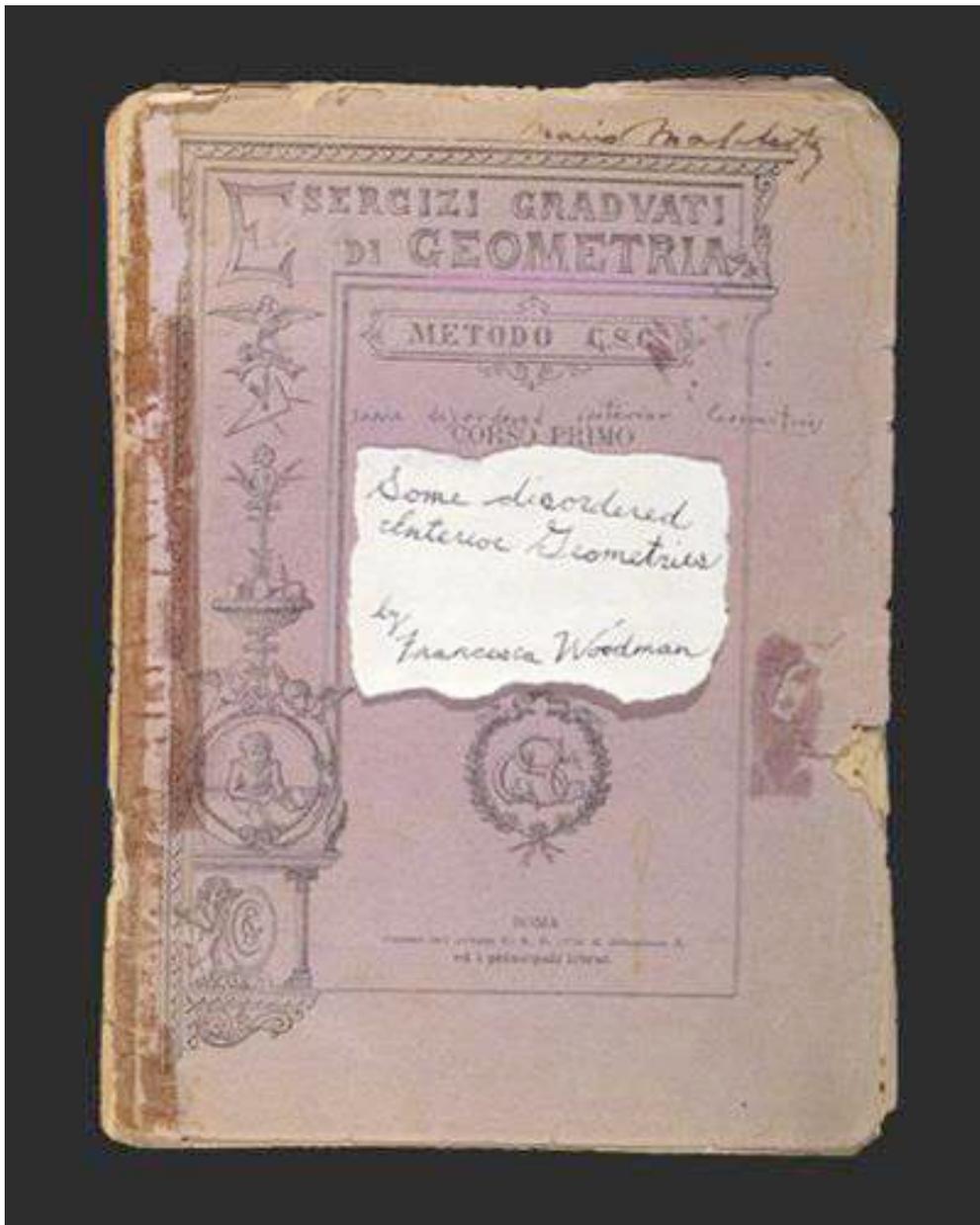


Fig. 1: Francesca Woodman, cover from *some disordered interior Geometries*, 1980-1981, artist book, 16.5 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Within the book format of *sdiG*, Woodman deals with an inter-play of a text in two languages. These are manifest in the original base in Italian in printed text form as in the printed instructions to the original student, the printed labelling of geometric diagrams, and some tables of numerical formulae in the form of axioms and sub clauses. Interventions by the original geometry student are rare, confined to a hand-written name on the cover of two pamphlets and a light pencil marking with a diagonal cross on selected diagrams. Woodman's own authorial annotations are in English and vary between a mock early twentieth century joined copperplate, in her dedication on the inside cover and in her first annotated page, under her second image, for example, and her natural late twentieth century hand script. These annotations often act as a bridge between the demonstration of formulae of geometry in the early twentieth century text and the late twentieth century intervention, surely only possible in quite this way (a female photographer photographing her own body) after the European sexual revolutions. The annotations are arcs of absent poetry disguised as descriptions of geometry exercises. The poetry is deliberately absent in the words themselves but present somewhere in that space between the annotations and those printed instructions and printed formulae for that long-ago student, as in, for example:

L'area d'un parallelogrammo e uguale al prodotto della base per l'altezza (from page six of original pamphlet, text above Woodman's annotation 'These things arrived from my grandmother's they ...// *quadrate considerate quai rombo he per superficie il semiprodotto d'una diagonal per se stessa* ...make me think about where I fit in the odd geometry of time.

At this point it might be relevant to provide a definition of geometry as:

The science which investigates the properties and relations of magnitudes in space, as lines, surfaces, and solids. (At first regarded as a practical art, and mainly associated with Architecture.)⁶

Woodman's stuck-on images concisely stretch the old geometric meanings into an impossible possibility of human interpretation. Her walls, cloths and mirrors and primarily her body make an astonishing and ambitious simulation of geometric forms throughout the book.

The emotional resonance of the images gains maximum potency for having been squeezed out of one sphere of the formal, the tight grid of the graded exercises in geometry, and into the visual formal. Woodman's quest both intervenes in the staged exercises of the base work and operates alongside it in a separate process of enquiry. The courage and complexity of Woodman's self-imposed challenge is clear if we think about the size of the cultural and academic space between the disciplines of geometry and visual art. Woodman meets the challenge with energy. And throughout, the project's seriousness is interlaced with a surrealist play. The success, albeit an awkward success, of the *sdiG* project is in its coalescence of diverging dimensions and disciplines and in their several intricate reverberations.

George Woodman, Francesca's father, has testified to the extent of his daughter's planning of an image in both a conceptual and a technical sense. Woodman's understanding of logic and mathematics was comprehensive. I

would speculate that without that knowledge the subtlety and precision in photographing her own body, seen as form, and its interaction with the surrounding space could not have been mastered to the sophisticated degree she achieves specifically in *sdiG*.⁷ Body seen as form: a fine word-play here exists in the Italian language since *corpo* simultaneously means both form and body. The word has an immense flexibility in Italian (a language in which Woodman was fluent), running through the sciences and law, and can be earthly *corpo materiale* or beyond matter *corpo celestiale* through to *corpus delicti* (famously used in graphic experiments by the Paris surrealists in the 1920s), meaning ‘material evidence’ or ‘delectable body.’ There is no doubt that Woodman responds in depth to these variations in meaning and sometimes she engages directly with the language of geometry as exemplified in such a phrase as *The extension of a body/form is that portion of space occupied by the body* and *In the extension of bodies there are three dimensions: length, width and height*. The work confronts and indeed relishes that diachronic and trans-lingual context addressed in all but one Woodman’s Books (arguably all five which use the found object can be placed during and after her period in Rome in 1977-1978) and in the case of *sdiG* focuses in depth on an enquiry into an inter-textuality of geometric and human form.⁸

Clearly her extensive technical knowledge, especially of the chemical development process of her medium, informs both the results and challenges of her practice.⁹ Woodman’s mathematical understanding of form and its mirrored reflection in space through geometry sustains a developed awareness of how these forms and part-forms can be translated into the visual. Her aim in *sdiG* is

to construct varying geometric forms from her self-photographed body, both clothed and nude and from its relationship with interior architectures. Martha Gever observes, in a contemporaneous review of *sdiG*:

The section headings do not describe only problems in calculating areas and volumes of geometric figures; they also can be read as posing problems of picturing the enigmatic spaces of introspective perception and unconscious reality.¹⁰

She alludes, of course, to Woodman's book title and its primary assumption that the body's form can represent the mind's state. I think, however, that though any psychological and diaristic elements arising in the photographic images through content and sequence are ongoing concerns, they are not primary to the revelation of the formal through these elements in the book. Woodman confronts an exposure of vulnerability throughout her work and possibly even desires a creation in her images of the undifferentiated state of self theorised by Lacan in his (pre) Mirror phase concept.¹¹ Although she does not abandon these enquiries in this book, I would suggest that her overriding enquiry is to construct a parallel formulation of the axioms of geometry within it through her portrait and body, quotidian objects and architectural interiors. George Woodman believes many critics of Francesca's work have underplayed or misunderstood the rigour and exactitude of the investigations she makes into the formal aesthetic field.¹² I hope to be able to redress this balance somewhat and would argue that a formal aesthetic is the ground for every image she makes.

But how disordered are Woodman's interior geometries? Could it not be argued that some of the disorder present is just the natural consequence of the unnatural conjunction she makes between the testing of Euclid's axioms and an analysis of human form that is as cryptic and ingenious a quest as it is intimate and self-searching. A poet acquaintance of the family, Peter Davison, who received a copy of *sdiG* in 1981, described it as 'a very peculiar little book indeed', also reacting to the contents thus:

There was a strangely ironic distance between the soft intimacy of the bodies in the photographs and the angularity of the geometric rules that covered the pages (...)¹³

In the same paper he quotes Woodman as having said the following, the inherent idea of which is perhaps most clearly realised in her *Space* series,

Me and Francis Bacon and all those Baroques are all concerned with making something soft wiggle and snake around a hard architectural outline.¹⁴

In *sdiG* Woodman uses tropes: a chair, a mirror, gloves, a stool, a shell, a pane of glass and a selection of vintage clothes in sections of a repeated interior (her studio) in a constant process of re-selection and re-ordering. Their repetition works to disturb, not to reassure. She changes depth of field, angle, reflection, light source and magnification to 'make strange' our perception.¹⁵ Specifically in this notebook, mirrored and transparent glass is used to construct new and surprising geometric forms from part/s of her own body, in particular in the first and the last image of the book.

It is highly probable that Woodman would have been familiar with Robert Smithson's *Nine Mirror Displacements*, particularly feasible since his account of making the works in the Yucatan was published in the Autumn of 1969 in *Artforum*, (a copy of which was most probably available in her art school's library) and *The Writings of Robert Smithson* had been published just one year before Woodman made the currently discussed book.¹⁶ Smithson's declarative statement that 'Light is separable from color and form' of his *Map of Glass* built in New Jersey in 1969 has many resonances in Woodman's work. Woodman's contention, wrapped inside what is at first reading a 'musing' in her longest annotation, to the image pair on pages six and seven of the Italian pamphlet in which she dresses in her grandmother's 'things' is apposite: 'This mirror is a sort of rectangle although they say mirrors are just water specified'. In this double image sequence Woodman answers the geometry book's axiom '*L'area d'un parallelogrammo e uguale a prodotto della base per l'altezza*' by placing a mirror flat on a floor photographed at a steep angle, in the manner that Smithson placed his mirrors flat on the landscape in his *Mirror Displacements*. Woodman's mirrors, part-covered with cloths and garments reflect the interior environment as Smithson's reflected the exterior. They also form parallelograms partitioned by the cloths into rhomboid and triangle forms. Like Smithson's mirrors, Woodman's are placed where water always is in the natural environment because of gravity, low and horizontal: *water specified*.

Another influence on her explorations of glass and mirror use is Marcel Duchamp, whose passion for the tricks glass could play in rendering three dimensions two probably infected Woodman. We encounter her investigation

into the flattening capacities of glass specifically in her *Charlie the Model* series of eleven images, made in Providence, at RISD, between 1976 and 1977.¹⁷ In this series glass serves as a metaphor for the flattening capacities of the photographic image. As Krauss observed in her analysis of the series 'Everything that one photographs is in fact "flattened to fit" paper, and thus under, within, permeating, every paper support, there is a body.'¹⁸ Krauss argues, too, that in using her body as a site to inscribe, Woodman allows the subjectivisation of objective enquiry and that she uses this approach to counter the emphasis on objectivity in the 'problem sets' directive she first encountered at RISD and which Krauss suggests is Woodman's *modus operandi*. Townsend develops this idea and cites it as an indicator of Woodman's ongoing defiance of the temporal and spatial confinements of the photographic medium.¹⁹

Duchamp's imaginative identification of glass as an agent of both time and philosophy, as embodied in his concept of *delay in glass*, was a testimony to the forcefulness with which photography had entered the field by the beginning of the twentieth century's second decade. As postulated by Dawn Ades, Duchamp arguably conceived his *Large Glass* project as a *giant photographic plate*.²⁰ Woodman's project in *sdiG* sustains an intriguing empathy with Duchamp's *Ready made malheureux* (1919), which, in Arturo Schwarz's description, 'combined allusions to geometry, psycho-physical states, and natural physical forces'.²¹ Duchamp too acquired a geometry book, which he sent to his sister Suzanne, asking of her that she create the *ready made* according to his instructions. Clearly he wanted to remove his participation though not entirely his control. He asked her 'to hang a geometry book from the balcony of her

apartment so that the wind would tear through its pages'.²² The photograph she returned as documentation showed the book's pages rain-washed into blankness and wind-crumpled. In a much later print (fig. 2), made in 1940 and included in his *Box in a Valise*, Duchamp added text and diagrams to give the book an identity absent in his sister's former image.²³



Fig. 2: Marcel Duchamp, *Ready made malheureux*, (in *From or By Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*, Series E, 1963), 1919, printed 1940, collotype with pochoir colouring on tinted card, 16.2 x 10.5 cm.

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SdiG is the most cryptic and stratified of Woodman's six photographic books. Its rich concourse, however, holds many satisfactions for an analytical appraisal. The descriptive paragraph on *sdiG* written to accompany the double page reproduction of the whole book in Chris Townsend's recent monograph on Woodman is written with concision and a lyricism that merits a full quotation:

Some Disordered Interior Geometries is the most complex book, a three-way game that plays the text and illustrations for an introduction to Euclid against Woodman's own text and diagrams, as well as the geometry of her formal compositions. This tripartite balancing act has the magical dexterity of a fugue.²⁴

Printed geometric forms such as cylinders, rhomboids and cones surround the title on the outside cover and in case they are not sufficiently decorative, cherubim, garlands, a scholar at a desk, flying birds and a Greek urn containing a set square form more decoration, in a panel down the page's left hand margin. Unopened, it struck me that this book is very similar in size, colour, format and decorative genre to the London-based *International Surrealist Exhibition* catalogue. The 1936 catalogue, printed by The Women's Printing Society, measures six inches by nine and a quarter inches and has a pale orange-pink soft card cover on which a composite nude male figure by Max Ernst, an engraving, has been reproduced. It is possible that Woodman saw this catalogue at the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition, curated by William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* in 1968.

SdiG also has printed on its cover two explanatory subtitles, *Metodo Corso Secondo Geometria* and *Corso Primo* and records its place of publication as

Rome. It is above the second of these that Woodman has written, in her natural, slightly untidy hand, her second generation title, in a distinctive combination of lower and upper case, *some disordered interior Geometries*. And under *Corso Primo* she has over-painted with white a rectangle with a scalloped edge, here repeating her written title, this time in her best upper-case 1900s-in-1970s copperplate. On the rectangle she has written *by Francesca* in the same script. The original student's name *Mario Malatesta* (?) is written on the top left.²⁵ The same signature and page position is repeated on the double page spread bearing the application of Woodman's second image. Perhaps her decision to capitalise only the original word shows a reticence about her own project or this may be self conscious, even contrived. A defiance of letter case rules was fashionable in the 1970s, as, for example, in the poems of e e cummings. Several typographical errors occur in the critical field when transcribing her title's case discrepancies, but I imagine their inconsistency might be favoured by Woodman in order to achieve a maximum awkwardness, that highly ordered *disorder*. George Woodman describes the influence of Gertrude Stein's non-syntactical writing experiments of the early twentieth century on Woodman:

By the time she was in her eighteenth year, she acknowledged Gertrude Stein as the model for (journal) entries that, taken out of context, might seem bizarre in diction, logic and orthography. These affectations of style she referred to as her *Steinwriting*.

An example of a journal extract is:

'Maybe I like Thursdays the way I used to hate baths.'²⁶

The quality of reproduction achieved by Synapse Press in their photolithographic printing of *sdiG* was not high.²⁷ Precious and rare edition that it increasingly (and ironically) has become in the twenty five years since it was made notwithstanding, I was struck by its textural distance (a reverse of intimacy) and mass reproduction feel. On handling it, a light and delicate object, in its cradle of foam rubber cloth-covered triangles, the full experience of texture contrast between page, photograph and hand-writing were absent.

It is claimed by Rosella Caruso that the early twentieth century student books Francesca acquired and (as I have previously argued) *found*, had been given to her by the owners of the Libreria Maldoror (a double find this, as the owners became influential and stimulating friends and the books).²⁸ For Woodman this was a very different endeavour from the display of her prints on a gallery or studio wall, which allowed a simultaneous viewing. Her choice of a small, thin, soft-covered volume brings an intimacy and an image separation to the viewing process. Already an original piece of ephemera that had survived the century before the artist began her appropriation, Synapse's print run of perhaps three hundred copies both freezes the object's deterioration through time and imbues it with a second period in which to become a piece of ephemera.²⁹ Synapse's method of reproduction results in a considerable reduction of the definition of the original's texture, (visible in the original scanned to compact disk). Several ironies emerge here. Did Woodman have the intention in publishing the book of making it available to a wider audience, in a kind of mini mass-production or commercialised form, or did she want the publication to construct its identity as a specialist artist's book?

I would speculate that both aims are relevant. According to Gever in her summary of the development of the artist's book as genre, a split or, more accurately, a development point between these two arenas as aims for artists' practice had occurred at around this time.³⁰ It was in 1973 that the term artist's book had first been used, suggesting a heyday for the form, in a catalogue from an exhibition of the same.³¹ Harriet Riches stipulates that the conceptual possibilities of the photographic book format had by this point long been recognised, citing Walker Evans' *American Photographs* from 1938 as a prototype of the photographic sequence format.³² Yves Peyré, though prioritising painting over photography in his analysis of the development of the *livre d'artiste* into and alongside the artist's book in the twentieth century, describes the nineteen seventies as rich, creative years when (his term) the book of dialogue appears to reach its climax.³³ This recorded split was articulated in part as a response to Ed Ruscha's mid-sixties interview with John Coplans soon after the publication of his now iconic *Various Small Fires* book, in which Gever quotes Ruscha as desiring wide distribution of this work:

Above all, the photographs I use are not "arty" in any sense of the word. I think photography is dead as a fine art ...One of the purposes of my book (*Various Small Fires*) has to do with making a mass-produced object. The final product has a very commercial, professional feel to it.³⁴

It must be remembered here that Ruscha had a printing/typography background which surely influenced his knowledge of the distribution field. Ruscha's first

book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* shares a 'verbal/visual recipricocity' with Woodman's *sdiG*, though an important difference between them is Woodman's use of found and given text and diagram in addition to her own hand-written annotations.³⁵ Ruscha makes and controls his own text completely. The difficulty in achieving a balance between the visual and the verbal, in these two cases the photograph and the text, ensures a certain tension is present in the enquiry of each.

Woodman's verbal and visual dialogue intersects with the book's primary context by following and leading, sometimes erasing, sometimes emphasising the symbols and usually obliterating the spaces for the original student's answers in her self-imposed quest for some different answers.³⁶ These work in tangent and in tandem to the original ones. The answers, which can be more questions, these solutions to problems set, *problems to resolve*, emerge most coherently through her photographic inventions, the investigation of the chosen site that is the construction and deconstruction of her own form: her *body* and *corpus*.³⁷

In this book the printed text font is small and grey, small that is, in comparison to Woodman's hand-scripted annotations which are often between four and six times as large.³⁸ All diagrams are printed in the same grey tone as the text and quite often have a printed shaded surface to simulate solidity. Once (opposite the first annotation '*almost a square*') the artist has filled a given diagram with colour, carefully applied and chosen to answer and repeat the puce and buff harmony of the two pamphlets' pages. Twice, she has underscored the

template text. Firstly she underscores the capitalised printed title *Definizione Preliminari*, on the page of her second photographic image, in a pink blocking which both separates and combines the Italian phrase and her English translation of it. The translation is written in a small italicised black script underneath. The second instance is a kind of highlight of lemon yellow underscoring of the original sub-title *Problemi da risolvere* and of its specification *superficie dei triangoli e dei quadrilateri*, under which is her translation, written in her own contemporary script. The size of the diagrams varies but these visual embodiments of the theories are giants to the pygmies of verbal text font. Woodman's written words are middlemen in size between printed font and printed diagram.

In the pre-publication *sdiG* original, Woodman has underscored the title word on the front cover, *Geometria*, several times with a deep purple pencil (fig. 1). The book has a small hand-written circled c: (copyright mark) next to her name, in her own writing, on the base of the back inside cover, whereas the Synapse edition has expanded copyright details together with a small paragraph of acknowledgements on the original pamphlet's page three.³⁹ This page is now the first inside page *recto* or frontispiece of the new work. It is pale buff ochre in colour as are all those following, with some variations of fading, inside the book. Woodman has twinned her dedication, in her best copperplate writing, with the dedication of the original pamphlet, which is: *for Paolo Missigoi, Cristiano Casetti and Sabina Mirri of the Maldoror Bookshop, Rome.*⁴⁰ This twinning is achieved by placing her dedication exactly in the same position on the page

opposite the original's inscription: *Al venerato F Dr. Michele, omaggio di rispettoso affetto dell'Autore.*

Over the page, the original pamphlet's page four (verso) has as its title *Table of abbreviations....* Woodman has covered most of this by sticking her square photograph over it. This is her first photographic image (fig. 3).⁴¹ She leaves visible only six examples from which we may take special note of the small decorative pause marks separating each base text abbreviation as a result of the formal twinning she conjures between them and the neck decoration she wears in the image. Her own abbreviations are surely the hands and neck, an accentuation used historically in portraiture, as in the fine example in Rembrandt's *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer* from 1661.

This photographic image is a direct foreground self-portrait shot, from the waist up. Though aping the self-portrait genre, she has exactly chosen the area to accentuate for the focus of an enquiry into the formal, conceptual and psychological. Wearing a black dress, she is sitting surrounded by a black background from which her form both emerges and by which it is submerged. A natural emphasis is the area of her dress's shiny neck pattern in its high tonal contrast to the dominant black. It is an embroidered and beaded motif of paisley design in white and forms the lower apex of one triangle at its downward point. Superimposed, probably during the development process, is a thin glowing tube (possibly jello) intersecting formally with the neck pattern in its gentle double convex/concave loop, its concave part echoing the same triangle's apex. The neck area links tonally, in its high tone, to the high-lit fingers of the glass-

flattened hands. The next area of focus is that of the hands. White and dramatic, they are placed on her lap in perfect symmetry, each hand identically opposite the other, her fingers meeting to form the apex of another, natural, triangle. But Woodman has cleverly shot the finger-joining area behind a square pane of glass which highlights and magnifies three fingers of the hand on the viewer's left and two of that on the right. A small light square, the right angles of which are disrupted by her fingers is formed from these triangle sections of the hands and a new non-symmetric square is created by the geometric intersections.



Fig. 3: Francesca Woodman, details from some disordered interior Geometries, artist book, 1980-1981, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Facing this image, on the right hand page, the original text has a page heading: *Definizioni Preliminari* and is subtitled *Poliedri*. Examples of regular polyhedrons are printed from drawn diagrams in a line at the bottom of the page. Woodman's correspondence with this geometry is coaxed from her own body with technical mastery and an eloquent imagination. Her figure sits with dignity amongst the busy spread of symbols and diagrams on and around this 'page stage'.⁴²

Whereas the first image's base-text page was sub-headed *Tabella delle abbreviazione*, Woodman continues her investigation of these same 'Preliminary Definitions' on the next double page spread by sticking her photograph opposite a page of printed diagrams which are examples of prisms and pyramids (in the subsequent sub-section with the same heading) (fig. 4). She underlines the Italian section title with a pink crayon close in colour to the base book's covers. She then translates the printed title into English in an untidy and large version of her own 1970s 'antique' script. She has part-scored through this phrase in black ink, placing it in between the visible and the invisible in its partial ineligibility. At this stage we clearly realise her hesitations, heading to that interior disorder. This is in direct contrast to her intellectual command over the display of interior states in this book, which is why its title is at once intentionally ironic and daringly self-exposing. She had first written her own descriptive title 'I: a sort of round' at the page's top, under both the printed given title and her annotative handwritten title, but then changed her mind and part-erased it in a high-toned white Tipp-Ex, in another gesture of deliberate confusion.

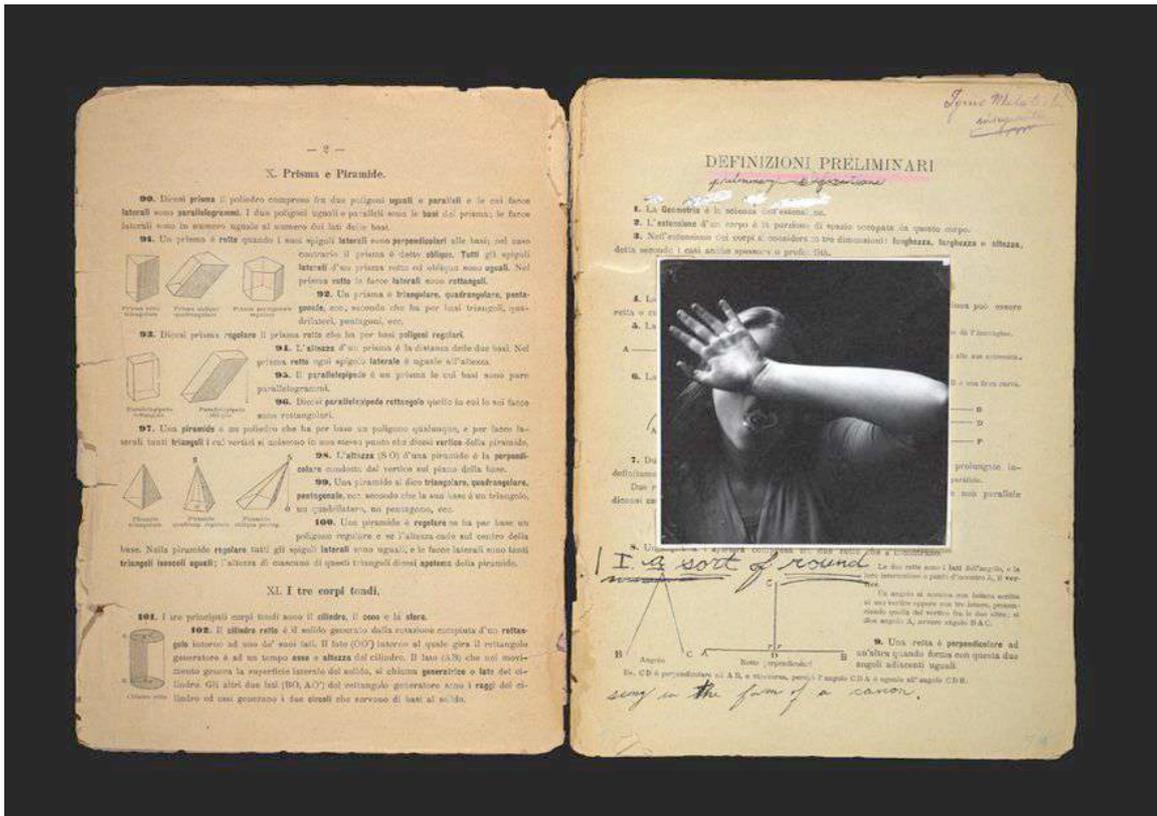


Fig. 4: Francesca Woodman, details from some disordered interior Geometries, artist book, 1980-1981, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

In this image Woodman covers her face with her hand so that her nose and eyes are invisible. In her mouth is a round object, a bubble made either from gum or jello.⁴³ The opposite page, with its heading *Prisma e Piramide* lists the occurrent variations of these forms, which are most pertinently triangular, quadrangular and pentagonal, and provides explanatory diagrams with shaded areas to create a three dimensionality. This section is followed by a new section with the heading *I tre corpi tondi*, followed by a description of the three principle examples of cylinders, cones and spheres. Her image visually demonstrates a cylinder form, her arm and a sphere, the exaggerated 'O' of her mouth: Woodman as Cyclops.⁴⁴ Above her image appear the base text's printed *definizioni preliminari*:

1. *La Geometria e la scienza dell'estensione*
2. *L'estensione d'un corpo e la porzione di spazio occupata da questo corpo*
3. *Nell'estensione dei corpi considerate tre dimensioni: lunghezza, larghezza et altezza, ditto second casi anche spessore o profondita*⁴⁵

Underneath her image she has written a response to the sequence: '1. a sort of round.' Underneath two linear diagrams at the bottom of the page and her image she has written 'sung in the form of a canon,' a pun on the other use of *round* in English, as Townsend has observed, and perhaps too in a response to the intrinsic lyricism in the rhythms of the Italian language.⁴⁶

In the pair of images over a double page spread (Fig. 5), she consciously shadows the given text by repeating her version of its axioms, 'another rectangle' and 'a circle and a parrallegram' [sic] as annotations. The first image, placed on the left page, has at its page base Woodman's hand written annotation 'another rectangle' on a background of over-painted original student's notes. This over-painting is shaped into white cloud-like blobs. Woodman's photograph shows a window sill, on which are a variety of objects, including a centrally placed conch shell viewed through a square blank glass transparency held in her hand. This shell becomes a triangle in magnification. At least eight other rectangles appear naturally or are visually constructed in this composition; her title is clearly a humorous under-statement. The window above the sill is composed of rectangular panes and a balcony constructed from a metal grid structure is visible outside it. These panes are splattered with white

blobs of pigeon shit, (linking to the over-painting blobs) or, in Guiseppe Casetti's reading, snow.⁴⁷ The inside sill, too, is splattered with black blobs. In his description, 'water outside and inside the room,' Casetti refers to the shell as a water symbol. Woodman links a visible part of a shaded triangle from the base text, just outside the border of her photo on the left, to the curve of an upturned vase: cylinder and circle with triangle.

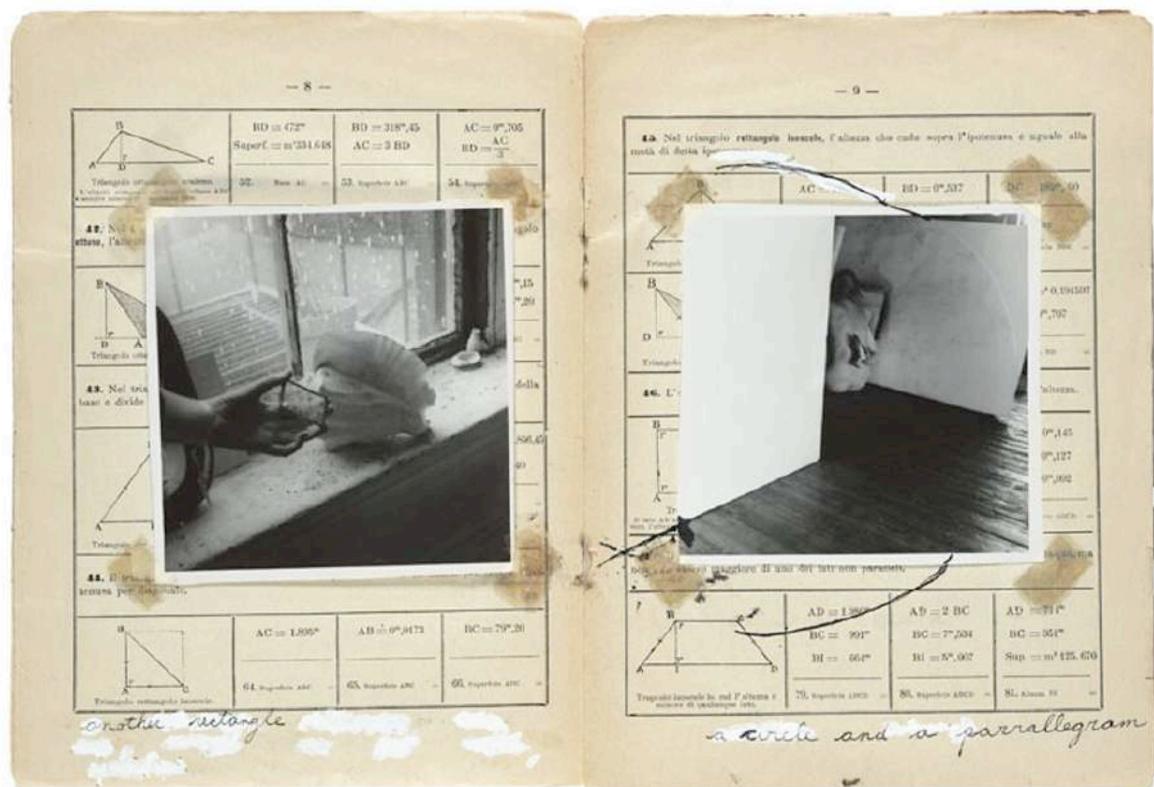


Fig. 5: Francesca Woodman, detail from *some disordered interior Geometries*, 1980-1981, artist book, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

At the bottom of the opposite page on which Woodman has placed her photograph, she has written 'a circle and a parrallegram' [sic]. A segment of a circle is superimposed on the parallelogram at the top right of her photograph. She has extended the curve in black ink right out of the image, above and below its borders, out through the formulae in their boxes and through the

words that block the slightly shakily drawn curves. Part of the circle's centre is constructed by the division between the very dark toned area of floor and where it diffuses, on the lower right image section, into a blurred black and white parallel line section. She extends, too, the straight line at the base of the bright, white, angled rectangle that occupies the left third of the composition. This makes the parallelogram behind which Woodman's crouched and huddled figure is seen, in rear view, before a mirror (a reference to the *Self Deceit* series made in Rome in 1978).⁴⁸ Another parallelogram is constructed, in an unusual connection across both images of the pair, by the sill line of the left image forming an exact parallel with the base line of the white rectangle in the right image. In a trick of proportion across the double image spread, Woodman's crouched figure registers as smaller than the conch shell opposite. Woodman brings the tension between curve and straight to its maximum pitch by accenting with light the added parallelograms of the floorboard lines at the bottom left of the image square.

Arguably one of the most inventive single images in this book is Woodman's first interpretation of the base work's section on the square and rectangle, investigating their classifiable components, such as ways of measurement and ratios of sides. On the original document's page ten the sequence of exercises demonstrates the recapitulation of a triangle into a rectangle and back again (fig. 6).⁴⁹ This image, the first of two with her hand-written annotation 'almost a square' under the photograph, depicts the artist in front of a large, thick and white textured piece of material (either some primed canvas or a quilt) pinned to the wall in and out of tension, an 'almost...square'.⁵⁰ Woodman stands on one

leg; she is trying to become, has almost become, will become, a triangle. An impossible, absurd task this, in which she almost succeeds. She adds a wooden pole where the other should have been (two human legs would detract) and the pole's straight edge enhances the effect of the triangular form made by the thick primed canvas triangle garment she wears. She covers her face with her hands in a symmetry that makes another triangle between her forearms, the apex of which is in between her joined fingertips: almost a triangle. Linked in tone and texture, these two *almost* forms visually transform the base text's first enquiry into a surrealist absurdity: almost a square and almost a triangle. Her interpretation is a transmutation into the human through a serious parallel enquiry containing a comic and self-mocking edge, a simultaneous surrealism. The base page investigates how a triangle can evolve into a rhombus. Woodman's image draws poetry from this evolution.

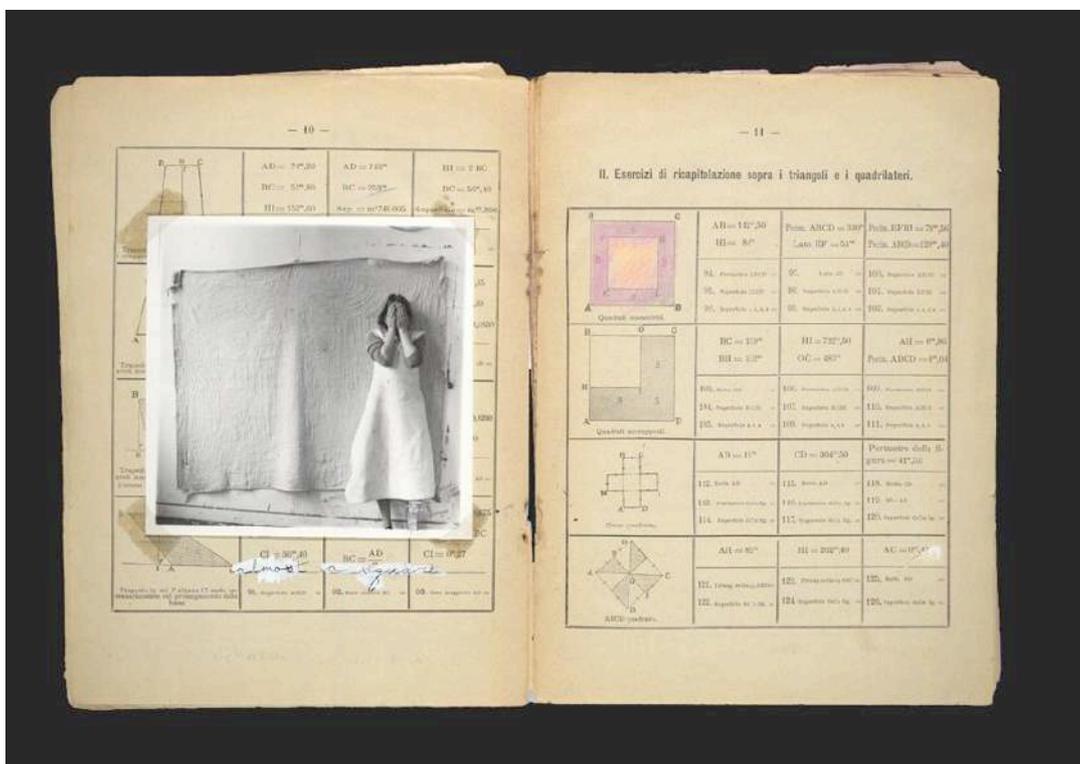


Fig.6: Francesca Woodman, details from *some disordered interior Geometries*, 1980-1981, artist book, 33 x 22.85 cm. Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

The final image of the book can be viewed in relation to the first (fig. 3), with which it forms a direct visual sequence. On the right-hand page, we read the original text's sub-heading *Superficie e volume dei tre corpi tondi*. Woodman has also left a sub-clause legible: *La superficie laterale del cilindro circolare retto e uguale all'altezza moltiplicata per la (circonferenza della base)*. She has here shot herself in the same pose as in the earlier image, wearing the same dress and with the same cropping of her head and legs, all of which are photographed from the same angle. A similar white triangle is established at the neckline with its focus, again, on a shiny bead decorative collar motif. Once again creating and analysing the triangle form, this time she makes her similarly symmetrical hands into one of several discernible triangles. But in this image the hands are held more closely together and the wrists that touch each other are magnified to about one and a half times their size by that same clear square of glass from the first book image; in this image the glass is held almost vertically. The magnified area is printed by Woodman in negative and blurred to make it extraordinary, in a possible reference to the vagina. We think of an x-ray of the two cylinders of her wrists, joined to make a new form that is uncanny, *unheimlich*, disturbing. Woodman has written 'almost a square' in her "neat" semi-copperplate script on the top left of the page. This is a repetition of her caption for the image of herself as triangle in front of an 'almost square' (fig. 6) and seems a simplified problem in comparison to the base text's problem on this page. It provides the solution to her separate inflexive enquiry however. Spaces are left at the bottom of the page for the earlier student's precise

answers to the problems set, for example: *lateral surface area* = ; *total surface area* = ; *volume of cylinder* = . Woodman has most carefully blocked out selected clues and answers, perhaps to leave her audience the impression that her image will provide the answer. And it does, if her audience can make the imaginative leap and the poetic juxtaposition, that rearrangement of thought that surrealism demands.

Although her photographed square containing the composite wrist and hand area is here given an emphasis by her annotation, those more complex problems of the base text are addressed visually in a cryptic layering of meanings waiting to be revealed. For example, her seated position in this photograph can be read as alluding to her height being equal to the base measurement of her body/form: *corpo* in Italian (which double meaning she relishes throughout the book). Two more contrasted *bodies* than the cylinder's *corpo*, left just visible though stabbed with Tipp-Ex marks at the underneath border of this image, and Woodman's body, the omnipresent vector of her life's work, would be hard to find.

Woodman's choice of a geometry student book works as a device parallel in rigour to her own artist's practice both in form and content. It is just such contrasts, surrealist word-plays and anamorphic resemblances which both delight Woodman continually and inform the complex nature of her enquiry. Her estimable knowledge of and implementation of the Bretonian theory of 'convulsive beauty', in particular both the 'veiled erotic' and the 'circumstantial magic' components, is visible throughout her oeuvre.⁵¹ It is a natural, if

demanding choice for an artist able to plan and execute her project through a Euclidean sphere of logical precision, which acts as a tight grid from which to emanate into the domain of the conceptual and perceptual: the volatility of a high-flying imagination. The emotional sphere, too, can become its most potent in the context of a strictly graded learning system, the axiomatic development into logically derived theorems that is Euclid's Geometry. Parallel investigations and tangential leaps, adverse conclusions: a play between verbal and diagrammatic text as visual backdrop and the text as container of meanings and as inspiration to diversion.

The value in *sdiG* is in the meaning and rhythm of Woodman's dialogue with the original: poetic and humorous, analytical and reflexive. The diagrams and symbols used in the first context to illustrate theories of geometry evolve their givens through Woodman's intervention into a second context as primary visuals. These are hard-edged diagrams moulded by logic to necessarily lack human presence and essence: they are the static codifying of an ancient system of understanding, monographic symbols in use by engineering students probably in Rome, almost a century earlier. Woodman's last quarter of the twentieth century project complexly intervenes in the base template they provide. Her books are containers of found text, diagram, explanation and proof, a compression of their era into a piece of ephemera. In common with all found objects, they are dispossessed, separated from a first owner and from a first function by time, death and a resurrection of purpose.

¹ For an excellent analysis of *Portrait of a Reputation*, see Harriet Riches, 'A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation*,' in *Oxford Art Journal* 27.1, 2004:95-113.

² *some disordered interior Geometries*. The full title is hereafter abbreviated to *sdiG*. The combination of upper and lower case is Woodman's own, taken from the outside cover of the published book. Many variations occur in the discursive literature, probably from the corrections of editors.

³ I owe the knowledge of this fact to the review of *sdiG* by Martha Gever in her essay 'Artists' Books: Alternative Space or Precious Object?' in *AfterImage* (May 1982): 6-8.

⁴ My analysis is based on the scrutiny of one copy of this alternative press edition in the Special Collection of the New York Public Library. I had a brief look, too, at the digitally photographed original book on compact disc, which was made available to me by the Woodman Archive to the International Center for Photography in New York in Spring 2006.

⁵ Guiseppe Casetti, 'La nuvola mediocre', in Achille Bonito Oliva (ed.), *Francesca Woodman. Providence, Roma, New York* (Rome: Castelveccchi Arte, 2000): 13-21. I am indebted throughout this document to Casetti's reading of *sdiG*. Casetti's nickname for Francesca was *La Nuvola* possibly in reference to Raoul Ubac's photograph from 1939, entitled *La Nebuleuse*, in English rendered *Woman/Cloud*.

⁶ Shorter OED, Third Edition, reprinted 1990: 845.

⁷ Russell Joslin, 'Francesca Woodman', in *Fotophile* (Spring 1998): 40-43, quoting George Woodman: 'I think sometimes there has been an insufficient appreciation of the formal focus of Francesca's work; she would have certain themes that would be developed throughout a series of works, which are quite elaborate on a formal level'.

⁸ The exception to this is *Portrait of a Reputation* (undated, Townsend dates it 1976/7, op.cit. p51). This text is from the *Woodman Books* CD, by Rosella Caruso (translated by Debra Werblud) 'Woodman probably conceived of the idea of a diachronic correspondence between two different linguistic codes while in Rome...'

⁹ George Woodman relates how the master printer of Kertesz's work, Igor Bahkt, who Betty Woodman and he employed to print from Francesca's negatives for the Fondation Cartier exhibition (Paris 1998) was baffled for hours by how she achieved the archive prints he used as reference: 'The amount of dodging and burning and holding back and manipulation of the image is very considerable.' Quoted by Joslin, 'Francesca Woodman': 42.

¹⁰ Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 7.

¹¹ For an in depth analysis of both Woodman's confrontation of her vulnerability and her work in relation to Lacan's concept, please see Margaret Sundell, 'Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman,' in M.Catherine De Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press: 1996). For examples of the visualisation of the pre-mirror phase undifferentiated state, see Woodman's *Self Deceit* series pp 156/157 in Townsend.

¹² Joslin, 'Francesca Woodman': 42.

¹³ Peter Davison, 'Girl, Seeming to Disappear', in *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2000):108-111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 110. Davison reports a conversation with Woodman.

¹⁵ A different *take* on Ellen Dissanayake's concept of 'making special'. Ellen Dissanayake, 'Sociobiology and the Arts: Problems and Prospects' in Bedeaux, Baptist and Cooke *Sociobiology and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

¹⁶ Nancy Holt (ed.), *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations* (New York: New York University Press, 1979). Woodman attended Rhode Island School of Art and Design (RISD) between 1975 and 1978.

¹⁷ See in particular No. 11 of the series. Nos 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, and 11 of the series are reproduced in Herve Chandès (ed.), *Francesca Woodman* (Zurich: Scalo,1998): 64-68 (This is the catalogue of the Fondation Cartier exhibition in Paris).

¹⁸ Rosalind Krauss 'Problem Sets' in *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (New York: Hunter College Art Gallery/Wellesley: Wellesley College Museum: 1986): 47. The essay was published in the catalogue of the first major exhibition of Woodman's work.

¹⁹ Chris Townsend, Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, p 53, and esp. the chapter ' A Post-Minimal Photography'.

²⁰ Dawn Ades, 'Camera Creation', in Jennifer Mundy (ed.), *Duchamp Man Ray Picabia* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008): 92. Ades is quoting Jean Clair.

²¹ Arturo Schwarz, 'The Philosophy of the Readymade and of its Editions' in *Duchamp Man Ray Picabia*:128-129.

²² Ibid.:129.

²³ The geometry absent in the geometry book is present however in the surrounding structure of the balcony.

²⁴ Chris Townsend, *Francesca Woodman* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006): 239.

²⁵ Very faint reproduction, so difficult to decipher.

²⁶ George Woodman, 'Seething with Ideas' in Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*: 240. I am grateful to Townsend for rooting her word play and disjointed syntax in Stein and for reproducing the *Journal Extracts*. See Harriet Riches's PhD thesis (UCL, 2004) for further discussion of this subject.

²⁷ Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 6. 'In its one-and-a-half year history (...) the founders and directors of Synapse, have produced seven books in collaboration with a number of artists. All these books were published in small, but not miniscule editions; all are priced considerably lower than coffee table art books but considerably higher than comic books; and, to a varying degree...the books share a feature which is primarily conceptual – a concern with visual-verbal reciprocity(...).'

²⁸ Text from *Woodman Books CD*, op. cit.

²⁹ An edition of between 200 and 500 was suggested to me by the archivist of the New York Public Library in 2006.

³⁰ Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 6-8.

³¹ In the catalogue of an exhibition held at Moore College of Art in Philadelphia in 1973 was the first use of the term, according to Stefan Klima, in his *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*.

³² Harriet Riches, 'A Disappearing Act' in *Oxford Art Journal* 27.1, 2004: 109.

³³ Yves Peyré, 'A Glimpse of the Future' in Jean Khalfa (ed.), *The Dialogue between Painting and Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Black Apollo Press, 2001): 163

³⁴ Ed Ruscha interviewed by John Coplans, quoted by Martha Gever, 'Artists' Books': 6.

³⁵ The term 'verbal/visual reciprocity' is Gever's.

³⁶ As it is the working process of both the artist and the scientist both to create or choose the problem and to find its solution.

³⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Problem Sets', in Ann Gabhart et al., *Francesca Woodman, Photographic Work* (Providence: Wellesley College Museum/Hunter College Art Gallery: 1986): 41-51. In this critical text Krauss argues that this student-initiated working method is Woodman's favoured approach into her practice. I agree but hesitate over Krauss's implication of Woodman's immaturity in adopting it.

³⁸ The light page colour is a slight variation, being more grey than puce, to that recorded in the first generation copy of the original that I have viewed in CD Rom format. The photo/litho method of printing used by Synapse Press in 1981 has slightly deadened the original colour, as far as I can tell.

³⁹ Synapse Press edition. Details are given of two grants she was awarded, one from the 'Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Council on the Arts' and one from 'The National Endowment for the Arts', 'And with the help of Daniel Tucker'(Editor at Synapse); 'The drawing in the last chapter is by Jim Johnson'. She has written her name after the copyright sign. All of this acknowledgement section is hand-written in 1970s script by Woodman.

⁴⁰ *Cristiano* was Woodman's nickname for Casetti.

⁴¹ This is the *third pamphlet*, according to Casetti, 'La nuvola mediocre'. I am indebted to Barnaby Lankester-Owen for his translation of it.

⁴² The phrase is Gever's : 'Artists' Books': 7.

⁴³ Strong links exist between this image and *Self-portrait talking to Vince*, made at RISD between 1975–1978.

⁴⁴ The literal Greek meaning is 'round eye' as well as 'one eye.'

⁴⁵ Geometry is the science of extension. 2. The extension of a body (form) is that portion of space occupied by the body. 3. In the extension of bodies there are three dimensions: length, width and height, secondly we shall also consider thickness or depth.

⁴⁶ For an analysis of the differences between the 'round' and the 'canon' and their implication in Woodman's work, please see Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*: 52.

⁴⁷ Casetti, 'La Nuvola Mediocre':19.

⁴⁸ The *Self Deceit* series consists of seven mirror-themed (and 'mirror phase', since Woodman certainly makes reference to Lacan's concept) images made in Rome between May and August 1978 in the cellar of a Renaissance palace. See Chandes, *Francesca Woodman*:105-107 and Sundell, 'Vanishing Points': 437, on Lacan's 'mirror phase'.

⁴⁹ A discrepancy will occur between page numbers and the placing of photographic images as Woodman used the portions of three different geometry pamphlets for her project. See Casetti, 'La Nuvola Mediocre':17.

⁵⁰ The phrase appears again under the last image of the book.

⁵¹ Breton expounds this theory at first in *Nadja* (1928) and advances it in *L'Amour Fou* (1936).

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Leo Steinberg and the Provisionality of Modernist Criticism

Stephen Moonie

Abstract

Leo Steinberg's early critical essays, particularly 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public' (1962) proposed a kind of criticism which we could describe as 'provisional,' acknowledging the fundamentally contingent nature of Modernism, with its recurrent upheavals. Steinberg's arguments were partially motivated by his objection to the Modernist trajectory established by Clement Greenberg, a trajectory which delineated a definitive Modernist canon, established by the critic's practised taste. Steinberg's critical model, however, is both more 'yielding,' and more explicitly interpretative. But despite the profound sense of doubt which permeates the Modernist condition, Steinberg's suggests a position which need not necessarily succumb to a debilitating scepticism.

The period of the early 1960s witnessed the demise of a particular kind of criticism, characterised by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. This criticism took its cues from the tradition of T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis: an authoritative criticism which clearly set out the terms for a definitive canon of works, embodying what Matthew Arnold famously termed 'the best that has been thought and said in the world.'¹ Greenberg and Fried, despite their differences, aimed to set aside any lingering doubts or uncertainties regarding the unwieldy nature of Modernism, in order to track an unwavering trajectory which would 'join the dots' from Manet to Pollock (or, in Fried's case, to Stella). However, the early Sixties saw an increasing scepticism on the part of artists towards such an over-arching narrative, with its implicit historical inevitability. Art critics themselves were becoming equally sceptical towards the Modernist narrative. Some writers, such as artist-critics Donald Judd and Robert Morris, would reject the Greenbergian narrative, only to modify it towards their own, equally dogmatic prescriptions.² But other critics were starting to sense that it was becoming increasingly difficult, if not futile, to 'ascertain the master-current ... of

the epoch.’³ One such critic was Leo Steinberg. His early essays ‘Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public’ (1962) and ‘Jasper Johns’s (1962) would set out a position which acknowledged the provisional nature of the aesthetic judgement under Modernism. This paper will seek to position Steinberg as a critic who articulated a unique space in Modernist criticism, a space which offers fruitful critical possibilities. The demise of the Modernist narrative outlined by Greenberg is often regarded as the demise of criticism as such. However, Steinberg’s position, which acknowledges criticism’s contingent, provisional status, allows us to think beyond the hermetic confines of much late Modernist criticism, and to open up new possibilities for a criticism no longer reliant upon an over-arching historical trajectory.

‘Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public’ (1962)

Whereas Greenberg and Fried cut their teeth as ‘jobbing’ critics of contemporary art, Steinberg, by contrast, was an academic; a scholar of Renaissance art who brought his academic pedigree to bear on the problem of Modernist painting.⁴ Steinberg’s essays, which were preceded by a series of lectures at the Museum of Modern Art between February and March 1960, outlined a position which entailed a changed relation between the viewer and the art object, premised upon a more ‘yielding’ and less explicitly normative mode of criticism.

Steinberg’s essay was originally given as a MoMA lecture on February 17th, 1960, and would survive, largely unaltered, in *Harper’s Magazine* in March 1962. He begins by asking, what is the role of the public? For Steinberg, it is a

functional, not a homogeneous entity, which plays a particularly significant role in the case of Modernism. Steinberg attempts to account for the continuous series of shocking incidents which mark Modernism's history, and makes the claim that it is unhelpful to maintain a 'mythical distinction between — on the one side — creative, forward-looking individuals whom we call artists, and — on the other side — a sullen, anonymous, uncomprehending mass, whom we call the public[.]'⁵ As for the public's 'plight,' it is, for Steinberg, 'chronic and endemic... sooner or later, it is everybody's predicament.' What Steinberg is claiming here is that there is an inevitable clash of values which constitutes each moment of Modernism's development and that those who are the most outraged by those developments are likely to be artists themselves, not merely philistines.⁶ But this quick-fire succession of shocks is accompanied by a related phenomenon, which is the avant-garde's increasingly rapid domestication; that is, the 'outrages' which the avant-garde inflicts upon the public do not remain 'outrageous' for long. It would be easy to conclude from this, notes Steinberg, that 'all is well ... Our initial misjudgment has been corrected: if we, or our fathers, were wrong about Cubism a half-century ago, that's all changed now.'⁷ But the problem with such an attitude is this: it makes light of the very real bewilderment felt by those on the receiving end of Modernism's recurrent *bouleversements*. Rather than being a consequence of an inability to fully appreciate the avant-garde, the public's outrage, in the last analysis, boils down to what Steinberg describes as an unwillingness to accept the 'sacrifices' made by the artist. In order to illustrate this notion, Steinberg offers some historical instances of these 'sacrifices.'

The first example he gives is Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-06), which famously outraged Paul Signac in particular.⁸ To the eyes of Steinberg's contemporaries, it would seem easy enough to attune to its decorative qualities, given the subsequent history of abstraction. But, as Steinberg contends, if we were in Signac's shoes, we would have a great deal more difficulty in accepting the way Matisse unsettled established habits of viewing. Steinberg describes how, despite the technical assurance of Matisse's preparatory drawings, the finished painting arrives 'at a kind of draftsmanship in which his skill seems deliberately mortified or sacrificed.'⁹ Such a sacrifice was necessary in order to achieve the kind of pictorial structure which Matisse desired, a structure which Steinberg describes as ambulatory; for it is not possible for the eye to rest upon any particular point. Instead, viewing the painting is like 'watching a stone drop into water; your eye follows the expanding circles, and it takes a deliberate, almost perverse, effort of will to keep focusing on the point of first impact[.]' The picture's structure is described further by Steinberg as:

[a] circulatory system ... where stoppage at any point implies a pathological condition ... And I think Matisse must have felt that 'good drawing' in the traditional sense ... would have tended to arrest the eye, to stabilize it ... this was not the kind of vision that Matisse wanted brought into his pictures.¹⁰

However, in 1906, such a proposition would seem excessive to most observers; it would entail too much of a sacrifice of what painting had hitherto offered, such as volume and proportion, a tangible sense of a fictive space beyond the picture plane. Of course, only a year later, Matisse himself would be outraged by Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), which he derided as a 'hoax': once more the avant-garde had thrown down the gauntlet to its audience, challenging it to 'sacrifice' the values it had previously held.

Steinberg claims that the earliest example he could find of the notion of 'sacrifice' in art criticism is in Baudelaire's discussion of Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres in the 'Exposition Universelle' of 1855.¹¹ Baudelaire sensed a 'shrinkage in [Ingres's] stock of spiritual faculties,' which resulted from his striving after a cool, detached, Raphaellesque ideal. However, Baudelaire had too much respect for Ingres to regard this as a mere deficiency on the artist's part. He adds:

No more imagination: therefore no more movement. I do not propose to push irreverence and ill-will to the lengths of saying that this is an act of resignation on the part of M. Ingres; I have sufficient insight into his character to hold that with him it is an heroic immolation, a sacrifice upon the altar of those faculties which he sincerely considers as nobler and more important.¹²

Steinberg adds that Baudelaire makes the 'remarkable leap' of coupling Ingres with Gustave Courbet, whom Baudelaire regards as guilty of a similar banishment of the imagination. Courbet, despite being a 'mighty workman, a man of fierce indomitable will,' demonstrates the same 'peculiarity ... [his works] reveal a dissenting spirit, a massacer of faculties.' Baudelaire explains how these two artists, with their markedly different intentions, could converge in such a manner:

... the difference is that the heroic sacrifice offered by M. Ingres in honour of the idea and the tradition of Raphaellesque Beauty is performed by M. Courbet on behalf of external, positive and immediate Nature. In their war against the imagination they are obedient to different motives; but their two opposing varieties of fanaticism lead them to the same immolation.¹³

Here, then, lies the predicament of contemporary art, according to Steinberg:

Contemporary art is constantly inviting us to applaud the destruction of values we still cherish, while the positive cause, for

the sake of which the sacrifices are made, is rarely made clear. So that the sacrifices appear as acts of demolition, or of dismantling, without any motive — just as Courbet's work appeared to Baudelaire to be simply a revolutionary gesture for its own sake.¹⁴

For Steinberg, contemporary art involves an inevitable sense of loss; this is coupled with a provisionality with regard to both the issue of value judgements, and the status of the art object. This problem would lead Steinberg to propose a kind of Existential problematic of judgement, which we shall discuss later, but for now, we must briefly consider an artist who, for Steinberg, posed such a dilemma: Jasper Johns.

Steinberg's writings on Johns first appeared in the essay 'Contemporary Art...' where he introduced some of the issues which would form the basis of his celebrated essay 'Jasper Johns,' and the broader 'Other Criteria,' which we will come to later. Steinberg declared himself to be 'depressed' by Johns's debut solo show at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958. This show contained many of the works which would become central to the artist's oeuvre, such as *Flag* (1954-55), *Target with Four Faces* (1954-55) and *Target with Plaster Casts* (1954-55). The show was a near sell-out, with three works purchased for MoMA by Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller.¹⁵ Steinberg was not alone in his dissenting voice, but this initially negative reaction would prompt him to reflect more deeply upon the root causes of his distaste, as the show's exhibits remained with him, working away at his pre-conceptions.

Steinberg asks himself rhetorically why, if these works 'depressed' him, did he not simply ignore them? He admitted that

what really depressed me was what I felt these works were able to do to all other art. The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Watteau, Rembrandt and Giotto. All alike suddenly became painters of illusion.¹⁶

Steinberg notes how the paint in Johns's work no longer seems to act as a medium of transformation: 'I seemed to feel the end of illusion. No more manipulation of paint as a medium of transformation.'¹⁷ He adds the reactions of 'two well-known New York abstract painters: One of them said, "If this is painting, I might as well give up." And the other said, resignedly, "Well, I am still involved with the dream."¹⁸ Johns, on the other hand, seemed to assert no transcendence, nothing beyond the here-and-now. Indeed, the work struck Steinberg as 'primitive' and strangely uncanny.

Steinberg felt that Johns's Targets and Flags closed the door on illusionism in painting; perhaps they signified the death of painting. He writes, 'one felt the end of illusion. No more manipulation of paint as a medium of transformation.'¹⁹ But he was especially perplexed by their inertness; a kind of deathliness which pervaded them. Discussing *Target With Four Faces* (1955), Steinberg pointed out that Johns seemed to invert — or at the very least, level out — values such as the 'organic' and the 'inorganic.'

Steinberg also discerned something intransigently ambiguous, or paradoxical, about Johns's work; it seemed to operate between the binaries of the organic and the inorganic, between 'here-ness' and 'there-ness.'²⁰ Discussing *Target With Plaster Casts* (1955), Steinberg notes how Johns plays with the nature of both the target, and the cast human body parts. A target is conventionally

thought of as 'there' rather than 'here': we look at it from afar in order to practise our aim. But Johns's painting brings the target flush with the surface: it becomes relentlessly 'here.' Steinberg adds that 'here-ness' is a property usually ascribable to the human face, but that Johns's casting of body parts distances us from them, in particular, from the face: they take on a kind of 'there-ness,' due to the fact that the human body has been presented in such a way as to 'impl[y] a totally non-human point of view.'²¹ These embalmed relics look barely human at all; instead they are cast, cropped and painted, and this clearly disturbed Steinberg. This is what he initially found off-putting, but it would also provide the spark for his brilliant speculations; Steinberg would turn the failure of his initial incomprehension into the triumph of his critical interpretation (a triumph which was nonetheless hard-won).

There is a sense in which this 'thing-like' quality of Johns's work could be aligned with the anti-anthropomorphic attitude of figures such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson. These figures sought to push beyond painting into the realm of concrete three-dimensional objects and spaces. However, Johns's anti-anthropomorphism is more explicitly Duchampian in its use of cast body parts — think, for instance, of Duchamp's *Female Fig-Leaf* (1950) — though Johns manages to evoke this 'thing-like' quality not through an outright renunciation of the human body, but through its subtle inversion.²² Further, he manages to achieve this within the (expanded) realm of painting; he internalises these Duchampian strategies without abandoning painting altogether.

During the 1960s, much was made of the purely 'optical' qualities of late Modernist painting in the criticism of Greenberg and Fried. Whereas the two critics differed over Modernism's 'essentialism,' that is, that there is an implicit "essence" to Modernist painting, be it the flatness of the picture support, or the painting's sheer visual immediacy, nonetheless the 'optical' qualities of the best Modernist painting were primarily the means by which the threat of 'literalness' was fended off.²³ Steinberg, on the other hand, was compelled by Johns's work to suggest that, although a painting is not 'purely' optical, it is not 'purely' tactile either, and so a painting's relation to its status as an object is more a subtle scale of modulated relations. So 'any painting can be rehearsed with either its visual or its tactual modality played up or down. A Johns painting may be flattened into a drawing, or relieved in sculpmetal or bronze'.²⁴ We see this in Johns's continual reworkings of familiar motifs. Johns's 'flags,' for instance, exist across multiple revisions of the motif in various media; his graphite hatchings such as *Flag* (1957) manage to efface the motif almost completely, rendering it barely recognisable, a mere fog of densely woven hatchings. His sculp-metal relief *Flag* (1960) renders the motif an oddly embalmed relic, pushing its uncanny object-ness even further than the encaustic 'original.' And in his more recent ink on plastic works such as *Three Flags* (1977), the motif's (ambiguous) materiality seems even more fluid; taking on the quality of a submerged photographic negative. Through each successive reworking of the motif then, Johns shows the manner in which our relationship to the same object, or sign, can exist in or through various media, demonstrating the uncertain ontological status of painting on the cusp of late Modernism. This uncertainty starts to come to the fore in the late 1950s, when works by painters

such as Johns and Frank Stella pushed painting closer to its material surface, and evinced the qualities of 'literalness' which so alarmed Greenberg and Michael Fried. Furthermore, the figure of Duchamp starts to make himself felt during this period, although not necessarily in a manner which is antithetical to painting.

This ambiguity which Steinberg highlights in Johns's pre-formed targets and flags may be helpfully glossed by Wittgenstein's remarks on the inextricability of perception and interpretation. Wittgenstein deals with this in the second part of his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he introduces simple illustrations to demonstrate his point. Introducing an illustration of a rectangular box, Wittgenstein notes that

You could imagine the illustration ... appearing in several places in a book, a text-book for instance. In the relevant text something different is in question every time: here a glass cube, there an inverted open box, there a wire frame of that shape, there three boards forming a solid angle. Each time the text supplies the interpretation of the illustration. But we can also see the illustration now as one thing now as another. — So we interpret it, and see it as we *interpret* it.²⁵

In a similar way, Johns's studiously banal images call upon us to think about what we see and what we know, in particular how the two are intertwined. Perception does not simply furnish our cognitive faculties with evidence, but perception itself fluctuates, as Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit illustration reminds us. There is thus an inherent instability to interpretation. We think we 'know' what a target is, but what kind of target appears in *Target with Plaster Casts*? A target which is no longer fired at, but looked at, a target which is no

longer hierarchical — that is, a target that no longer privileges the bulls-eye, but submits to the ‘all-over’ mode of abstract painting—the ‘hallucinated uniformity’ described by Greenberg.²⁶ Further, the target is both ‘literal’ and ‘optical’ — it *is* a target, not merely a representation of a target (a sign cannot be merely represented), but it is also still a painting, as its strangely inert, flat-footed application of pigment testifies. This very ambiguity is what leads Fred Orton to suggest that Johns’s work functions in a deconstructionist manner, managing to disarticulate binary oppositions. In the case of *Flag*, Orton’s description of the work whirls around a Derridean eddy: the work manages to be

...neither flag (standard, colours or ensign) nor painting (or something that is neither painting nor collage, but both painting and collage). Mute and eloquent, opaque and lucid, *Flag* works in the space of difference where it articulates well-rehearsed oppositions and disarticulates them.²⁷

Or, as Steinberg puts it rather more succinctly, ‘Johns puts two flinty things in a picture and makes them work against one another so hard that the mind is sparked. Seeing becomes thinking.’²⁸ This is so most markedly in the manner in which Johns revisits and reworks certain motifs, as we saw above. This defamiliarisation is evident as Steinberg puzzles over Johns’s *Flag Above White* (1954), for instance:

Does the flag rest on a white plinth? Impossible since the white of the plinth and that of the stripes is identical: you can taste it.

Is the picture unfinished, as if in expectation of more of those horizontal red stripes? Such finishing might be good for the picture, but it would ruin the flag. But then, is the lower white an excess to be pared away? This might be good for the flag, but it would cut up the picture which is visibly indivisible. In transgressing the design of the American flag, the picture demonstrates its own impossibility.²⁹

As Wittgenstein says, 'We find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough.'³⁰

Paintings for the Blind

As we have seen so far, Steinberg's essay 'Jasper Johns' demonstrates how the artist's works do not provide the kind of purely aesthetic experience which abstract painting would claim to offer. Consequently, Steinberg has recourse to a more interpretative model with which to interrogate these works; it is an interpretation which no longer relies primarily on visual cues. Steinberg would later contend in his celebrated essay 'Other Criteria' that 'The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event.'³¹ Steinberg would suggest, then, that it entails an important shift in how the work relates to the viewer; indeed it would seem that it is no longer concerned with 'vision' at all, in the Greenbergian sense. Instead, it offers something more explicitly cerebral.

That the work is no longer 'purely' visual in address is beautifully discussed when Steinberg stages a fictional discussion with a blind man as to the nature of painting, using Johns's early works as examples.

If pictures are flat, says the blind man, why do they always speak of things IN pictures?

Why, what's wrong with it?

Things ON pictures, it should be; like things on trays or on walls.

That's right.

Well then, when something is IN a picture, where is it? In a fold of the canvas? Behind it, a concealed music box?³²

Steinberg concludes that 'If a painting is truly an object — repeat: if that which is painted is truly an object — then that which is painted cannot be a purely optic

phenomenon.³³ Here lies the basis of Steinberg's suspicion of the Modernist critical model which would merely seek to 'take in' the work visually.

Steinberg's interpretative 'encounter' with the work of art

Steinberg's more explicitly interpretative criticism would give rise to a different understanding of the viewer's relation to the work. The engagement between the viewer and the work becomes something on the order of an 'encounter' which brings the work into being. This engagement also characterises his later essay on *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 'The Philosophical Brothel.' This essay has been described by Lisa Florman 'as a narration or enactment of self-discovery: the detached observer's transformation through his ... encounter with the *Desmoiselles*.'³⁴ This claim is based upon her contention that Steinberg was influenced here by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, in particular, Nietzsche's discussion of Attic tragedy, which involves an engulfment of the viewer, an annihilation of the sense of oneself as autonomous and self-contained. In this sense, Picasso's painting, by swivelling its axis towards the viewer, forces us to confront the visceral claims of sexuality. This 'encounter' with Picasso clearly differs from the encounter with Johns, but what is important for us here is the notion of how the critic engages with the work in order to give it meaning, or significance. Primarily, it concerns the notion that critic and viewer are both intertwined symbiotically, and that the work's status is to an extent dependant upon this encounter.

Now some of the criticism of Fried begins to acknowledge that the experience of a Modernist work becomes dependant upon the intertwining of the critic and the

artist. In 'Three American Painters' (1965) Fried suggests what he concedes may be construed as 'an intolerably arrogant conception of the critic's job,' by suggesting that 'criticism that shares the basic premises of modernist painting finds itself compelled to play a role in its development closely akin to ... that of new painting themselves.'³⁵ Here the critic's task becomes one of locating what characteristics or qualities are required for a Modernist work to 'compel conviction': his lengthy discussions of 'shape' in Stella's Irregular Polygons bears this out.³⁶ However, the kind of collaboration suggested here by Fried is one where an identifiable set of problems can be isolated and defined. For Fried, these problems were largely compositional, relating to the vexed issue of pictorial structure. For Steinberg, the critic and artist are no longer working together on a shared project. Rather, the critic and artist are brought together in a kind of chance encounter, where the shared set of norms and conventions implied by Fried are no longer available. Furthermore, Fried's notion of 'presentness' would imply that, for all the analytic and interpretative rigour which goes into his criticism, that single moment of aesthetic illumination remains the central issue, as it was for Greenberg. Steinberg, on the other hand, seems to suggest that the experience of a work such as Johns's refuses to give itself up in such a manner. Rather, he seems to suggest that his work remains permanently intractable, and that the kind of aesthetic or moral exhilaration of Fried or Greenberg is no longer available to us.

Criticism's act of 'faith'

The more contingent nature of the viewer's encounter with the Modernist work entails a more 'empathetic' relation between the viewer and the object with

regard to the critical judgement. This is brought out more explicitly in 'Other Criteria.' The aesthetic judgement which adjudicates the value of an artist within the Modernist canon can no longer be called upon, for the work begins to resist being framed within such criteria. Rather, it demands a new kind of response, which Steinberg outlines earlier in his essay, where he sets out two possible responses to modern art. The first is clearly the Greenbergian/Friedian approach, which involves 'rest[ing] firm and maintain[ing] solid standards. The standards are set by the critic's long-practised taste and by his conviction that only those innovations will be significant which promote the established direction of advanced art.'³⁷ Thus the Greenbergian critic works within a framework where art's trajectory is something pre-ordained; subsequent work can thus be accommodated without causing too much disturbance to the overarching framework. Greenberg's modernism thus parallels T. S. Eliot's notion of 'tradition,' which consists of a series of 'monuments' which new work must conform to—in this sense the tradition is exclusionary and oppressive; it extorts acquiescence to its existing framework as the price of entry.³⁸

Steinberg, though, offers a different model: a kind of criticism which is more 'yielding,' a kind of critic 'who holds his criteria and taste in reserve,' allowing for the possibility that the new art will demand a new mode of appreciation; one which seeks not to give out marks to the class, but which will '[suspend] judgment until the work's intention has come into focus and his response to it is — in the literal sense of the word — sym-pathetic: not necessarily to approve, but to feel along with it as a thing that is like no other.'³⁹ This kind of appreciation takes more account of the unwieldy nature of Modernism itself.

Rather than seeing Modernism as a smoothly functioning production-line of products subject to continual tweaking, it is instead regarded as a scandalous phenomenon predicated upon the rupture of Greenberg's historical continuity. Modernism thus refuses to allow the viewer to rest easy in his convictions, but rather demands continual vigilance to any potential *bouleversement*.⁴⁰ However, Fried, too, notes that the Modernist artist must live 'in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness.'⁴¹ But Fried's Modernist artist/critic assumes a kind of stability to the Modernist enterprise — the artist/critic's vigilance consists in his fidelity to Fried's critical parameters, whereas Steinberg's vigilance differs in that it is willing to acknowledge their provisionality.⁴²

Now I could imagine a commentator such as Stephen Melville coming to Fried's defence here, suggesting that Fried's 'conviction' with regard to the status of the best Modernist painting is by no means as stable or definitive as it is often construed.⁴³ The moment of 'presentness' is unstable, fleeting and constantly under threat from theatricality; indeed, 'presentness' and 'theatricality' are deeply intertwined with one another, to the extent that the theatrical can never be fully defeated, but only allayed, or deferred.⁴⁴ It needs to be borne in mind that Melville's is a deconstructive reading of Fried, which seeks to read him 'against the grain,' teasing out meanings and resonances which lurk between the lines of his polemic. The value of Melville's position lies in compelling us to recognise that the fiercely partisan nature of Fried's criticism should not lead us to reject him as cavalierly as some commentators are wont to do.⁴⁵ However, despite the instability and uncertainty which underpins Fried's Modernist project,

he always seeks to repress this. Greenberg, writing in 1950 on the criticism of Eliot, describes the poet-critic's conviction in terms which could describe Fried equally well:

Mr. Eliot is certainly grave. But he is also sure of his opinions. Behind the skirmishing line of qualifications, there comes always the main force, in the form of a lapidary flat statement, to decide the issue.⁴⁶

Steinberg, on the other hand, is unwilling to set aside his doubts regarding the Modernist project, and is more candid about the historically contingent nature of his judgements.

Given that the encounter with the Modernist work is contingent, Steinberg raises the notion of 'faith'. If the work of Modern art is intractable and ambiguous, then one can only put one's 'faith' in the work of art, which presents itself like a Kierkegaardian Existential dilemma.⁴⁷ In 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public,' Steinberg quotes a passage from the Bible concerning the fall of Manna in the desert (*Exodus* 16), as an analogy for our relationship with contemporary art.⁴⁸ He claims that what struck him most about the analogy was this: 'that you were to gather of it every day, according to your eating, and not to lay it up as insurance or investment for the future, making each day's gathering an act of faith.'⁴⁹

What Steinberg means by this statement is not particularly clear, and certainly strikes us now as rather arcane. In particular, this sense of the critic being entwined in an Existential dilemma seems to evoke the period excesses of Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg. Steinberg's claim here is directed against Formalist criticism, whose judgments of 'quality' were seen as going hand-in-

hand with the market; that is, the critical strategy of 'picking the winners' served to enhance the reputation (and subsequently the market value) of canonical artists such as Stella and Noland. In retrospect, however, it is clear that Formalist criticism was not alone in being complicit with market forces. The work of Johns himself is a pertinent example in this respect. His work is among the most valuable of any living artist in the United States; his work *Diver* (1962) recently sold for a record \$4.2 million at auction. One could point out that Steinberg's criticism has doubtless played a part in establishing Johns's blue-chip credentials, which owe much to the large corpus of academic, critical and curatorial work which under-girds the artist's formidable reputation.

As a rebuke to criticism's complicity with the market then, Steinberg's critique may not hold, but what is pertinent about his invocation of Manna in the 'Contemporary Art' essay is that the historical occurrence of the Modernist work of art cannot be subsumed within a stable, over-arching historical trajectory. Instead of approaching contemporary art with the eager anticipation of the next link in the historical chain, the work which will bear the weight of the Modernist tradition, all we can do is remain receptive to its occurrences and adjust our critical expectations accordingly.

Steinberg's position would seem to entail a radical scepticism with regard to the Modernist artwork. If the work of art is historically contingent, and the values it embodies are so precarious, then what is left but an enervating scepticism with regard to artistic value? But Steinberg's invocation of Manna suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Steinberg was undoubtedly sceptical about any kind

of coherent trajectory of Modernism — we have seen that Modernism was, according to his account, essentially a history of ruptures and discontinuities. We could describe his notion of Modernism as ‘provisional,’ according to which Modernism can no longer lay claim to permanent criteria; instead, the parameters are constantly in flux. The notion of ‘provisionality’ has taken on some currency in recent years, often with regard to political theory and practice.⁵⁰ Here, the notion of the ‘provisional’ has been used to refer to small, pragmatic gestures or procedures which reject a reliance upon grand emancipatory narratives. But the notion can be profitably brought across to Steinberg’s notion of criticism. Indeed, this pragmatic attitude accounts well for some of the procedures of artists during this period — not just Johns and Rauschenberg, who are associated with Steinberg, but also figures such as Frank Stella and Roy Lichtenstein. But further, the notion of provisionality implies the constant openness which is required of criticism to keep abreast of contemporary developments. Steinberg’s criticism could be seen as marking a point at which Modernist criticism breaks down, as the notion of value judgements comes to seem increasingly suspect.⁵¹ But Steinberg suggests that the breakdown of Modernist criticism need not signal the end of criticism as such. Further, it does not imply that the Modernist work becomes emptied of meaning once one can no longer appeal to an over-arching historical trajectory.

Indeed, the notion of Manna, with its attendant significations of bodily and spiritual nourishment, suggests that there may be an implicitly redemptive quality at work in contemporary art. Fried famously ended ‘Art and Objecthood’ with the claim that ‘presentness is grace.’ Such a claim would be too much for

Steinberg, given what we have discussed above. But perhaps, rather like Johns's work, which some commentators understand as operating in the 'grey zone' between binary oppositions, we could suggest that Steinberg's criticism stakes out a similarly uneasy position: one which is aligned with neither the certainty of Modernist orthodoxy, nor the relativism of the theorists of visual culture, who would consign artistic activity to the realm of mere signifying practice.⁵²

¹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1960).

² This is unsurprising, given that both Judd and Morris were artists seeking to articulate a position for themselves within an expanded and increasingly competitive market.

³ Greenberg opened his 1948 essay 'The Situation at the Moment' with this quotation from Matthew Arnold: 'To ascertain the master-current of the epoch, and to distinguish this from all minor currents, is one of the critic's highest functions; in discharging it he shows how far he possesses the most indispensable quality of his office — justness of spirit.' In John O'Brian (ed.), *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 192.

⁴ Steinberg did write some criticism for *Arts* magazine in the mid-1950s, but these articles can in no way be compared with the sustained critical projects of Greenberg and Fried. Rather, they were an aside to his art historical studies. As Steinberg recounts in a typically wry and piquant anecdote: 'In... the mid-1950s, practicing art critics were mostly artists or men of letters. Few art historians took the contemporary scene seriously enough to give it the time of day. To divert one's attention from Papal Rome to Tenth Street, New York, would have struck them as frivolous — and I respected their probity. Therefore, whenever a fellow student referred to my column, I begged him to lower his voice. He was speaking of my secret life.' 'Preface,' *Other Criteria: Confrontations with twentieth-century art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007): xxi.

⁵ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public,' *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 224, no. 1342 (March 1962): 32, republished in *Other Criteria*: 5. Subsequent references refer to the republished essay in *Other Criteria*.

⁶ Steinberg writes of 'the general rule that whenever there appears an art that is truly new and original, the men who denounce it first and loudest are artists. Obviously, because they are the most engaged. No critic, no outraged bourgeois, can match an artist's passion in repudiation.' 'Contemporary art': 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 6.

⁸ Signac famously commented, 'Matisse seems to have gone to the dogs. Upon a canvas of two-and-a-half meters, he has surrounded some strange characters with a line as thick as your thumb. Then he has covered the whole thing with a flat, well-defined tint, which, however pure, seems disgusting. It evokes the multi-coloured shop fronts of the merchants of paint, varnishes and household goods.' Letter from Signac to Charles Angrand (14th January 1906), translated in Alfred Barr, *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951): 82.

⁹ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 8.

¹¹ See Charles Baudelaire, *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and other exhibitions*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (Phaidon: London, 1965): 129-135. Steinberg does not provide the reference in 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public': the readers of *Harper's Magazine* would be unlikely to follow up footnotes.

¹² Baudelaire: 131. The term 'sacrifice' also comes up in section XII of 'The Salon of 1846', where, in his critique of eclecticism, he writes, "if art is to be profound, it must aim at constant idealization, which is not to be achieved except in virtue of sacrifice—an involuntary sacrifice." 97.

¹³ Baudelaire: 131.

¹⁴ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 10.

¹⁵ The three works purchased were *Green Target* (1955), *White Numbers* (1957) and *Target with Four Faces* (1954-55). Barr and Miller also bought *Flag* (1954-55) for Philip Johnson.

¹⁶ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 12-13. This shift away from illusion would later form the cornerstone of the shift from 'Nature to Culture' articulated in 'Other Criteria' in 1972.

¹⁷ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 12. This "thing-like" quality which Steinberg discerns in Johns is well discussed by Megan R. Luke, 'Objecting to Things,' in Harry Cooper and Megan R. Luke, *Frank Stella 1958* (ex. cat.) (Yale: New Haven & London, 2006).

²⁰ This quality of Johns has been described by some commentators as "deconstructive." See Charles Harrison and Fred Orton, 'Jasper Johns; Meaning What You See,' *Art History* 7 (1), (March 1984); and Fred Orton, 'On Being Bent "Blue" (Second State): An Introduction to Jacques Derrida/A Footnote on Jasper Johns,' *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 12(1) (1989). Orton's study *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion, 1994) would discuss this at greater length.

²¹ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 14.

²² The sexual quality of Duchamp's work is relevant here if we recall Alfred Barr's request to exhibit *Target with Plaster Casts* with the compartments closed. (One of the compartments contains a cast of a penis). Johns refused.

²³ For Fried's argument with Greenberg over the nature of Modernism's imputed 'essentialism,' see 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism,' in *Art & Objecthood*: 33-40.

²⁴ Steinberg, 'Jasper Johns': 50.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), lixi: 193.

²⁶ Greenberg writes in 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948), that the new abstract painters such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey created "polyphonic" structures, which 'making their variations upon equivalence so subtle that at first glance we might see in their pictures, not equivalences, but an hallucinated uniformity.' *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, p. 224.

²⁷ Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, (London: Reaktion, 1994): 146.

²⁸ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 14.

²⁹ Steinberg, 'Jasper Johns': 41.

³⁰ Wittgenstein, lixi: 212.

³¹ Steinberg, 'Other Criteria,' in *Other Criteria*: 90.

³² Steinberg, 'Jasper Johns': 48.

³³ Ibid.: 50.

³⁴ Lisa Florman, 'The Difference Experience Makes in "The Philosophical Brothel,"' *Art Bulletin* vol. LXXXV (no.4), (December 2003): 778.

³⁵ Fried, 'Three American Painters,' in *Art & Objecthood*: 219-220.

³⁶ See Fried, 'Shape As Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons,' in *Art & Objecthood*: 77-99. What I mean here is that the pictorial 'problems' which Modernist painting has to solve become shared by both critic and artist together, to the point where it is unclear who the problems belong to, the artist or the critic. See Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art After Greenberg, Fried and Clark* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005): 100.

³⁷ Steinberg, 'Other Criteria,' in *Other Criteria*: 63.

³⁸ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' *The Sacred Wood* (New York & London: Methuen, 1960): 47-59. See Terry Eagleton for this particular interpretation of Eliot's tradition in 'The Rise of English,' *Literary Theory*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983): 39. Eagleton writes, 'the Tradition... can never be caught napping; it has somehow mysteriously foreseen the major works still unwritten, and though these works, once produced, will occasion a reevaluation of the Tradition itself, they will be effortlessly absorbed into its maw.'

³⁹ Steinberg, 'Other Criteria': 63.

⁴⁰ Steinberg uses the analogy of the Detroit automobile industry to describe the "closed loop" of American Formalist painting. See *Other Criteria*: 79.

⁴¹ Michael Fried, 'Three American Painters,' in *Art & Objecthood*: 219.

⁴² Given Steinberg's earlier reference to Baudelaire, it may be pertinent here to mention the poet-critic's term "the *aesthetic pundit*," which also appears in the 1855 'Exposition Universelle.' He writes, 'So true is it that in the multiple productions of art there is an element of the ever-new which will eternally elude the rules and analyses of the school! That shock of surprise, which is one of the great joys produced by art and literature, is due to this very variety of types and sensations. The *aesthetic pundit*—a kind of mandarin-tyrant—always puts me in mind of a godless man who substitutes himself for God.' Baudelaire: 124. Perhaps Steinberg had this notion in mind when he refers to the inflexibility of Modernist criticism.

⁴³ Melville discusses Fried in several places, but one could mention here his discussion in 'Counting As Painting' in Philip Armstrong (ed.), *As Painting: Division and Displacement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001): See page 15 in particular, where Melville discusses how the interlacing of "nature" and "art" in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* entails a more complex, shifting notion of "convention."

⁴⁴ The precarious nature of Fried's notion of 'presentness' is subtly discussed by James Meyer in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001): 229-43.

⁴⁵ Fried's detractors are numerous, but prominent among them would be Rosalind Krauss and her co-editors in *October*. See *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), and Annette Michelson, 'Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression,' *Robert Morris* (Washington D.C: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969): 7-75. Reprinted in James Meyer (ed.), *Minimalism* (Phaidon: London, 2000): 247-52.

⁴⁶ Greenberg, in O' Brian (ed.), *Collected Essays* vol. 3: 68.

⁴⁷ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 15.

⁴⁸ The quote reads: 'In the morning, the dew lay round about the host, and when [it] was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoarfrost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it ... they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.... Gather of it every man according to his eating ... And the children of Israel did so, and gathered, some more, some less. And when they did mete it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every man according to his eating.... But some of them left it until the morning, and it bred worms and stank... And the House of Israel called the name thereof Manna; ... and the taste of it was like was like wafers made with honey. And Moses said Fill an omer of it to be kept for your generations; that they may see the bread [that] fed you in the wilderness So Aaron laid it up before the testimony to be kept ...' in 'Contemporary Art': 15.

⁴⁹ Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art': 16.

⁵⁰ See Anna Deuzeze, 'Thriving on Adversity: The Art of Precariousness,' *Mute*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2006): 74-87. See also Anna Deuzeze, 'Assemblage, Bricolage and the practice of everyday life,' *Art Journal*, (Spring 2008).

⁵¹ This turn away from the problem of judgement characterises both the field of visual culture, with its broad, anthropological acceptance of cultural practices, and some of the criticism of the *October* journal, which would claim to interrogate the underlying conditions of judgement. See for instance, Hal Foster's discussion of the critical displacement from 'quality' to 'interest' in 'The Crux of Minimalism,' *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996): 177.

⁵² Johns once remarked, 'It is the gray zone between these two extremes that I'm interested in - the area that is neither a flag nor a painting.' Cited in Jonathan Katz, 'Jasper Johns and the Body Politic,' in Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (eds), *Performing the Body, Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999): 181. Katz uses this notion of a 'gray zone' to buttress his argument which situates Johns's practice in the realm of queer politics. However, he concedes that the first commentator to relate this notion to deconstruction was Fred Orton. See Charles Harrison and Fred Orton, 'Jasper Johns: Meaning What You See,' *Art History* 7 (1), (March 1984); and Fred Orton, 'On Being Bent "Blue" (Second State): An Introduction to Jacques Derrida/A Footnote on Jasper Johns,' *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 12(1) (1989). Orton's study *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion, 1994) would discuss this at greater length.

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Paint and Pedagogy: Anton Ehrenzweig and the Aesthetics of Art Education

Beth Williamson

Abstract

Anton Ehrenzweig's work training art teachers at Goldsmiths College in London was groundbreaking in its field. The work of the studio fed back into Ehrenzweig's writings through his reflections on teaching and the work produced in end of year shows. In *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967), he theorised the creative process in psychoanalytic terms and elsewhere he likened the task of the art teacher to that of a psychotherapist. In this paper I argue that, by taking psychoanalytic art theory into the teaching studio, Ehrenzweig provided a psychic space within which students were freed from convention and encouraged to pursue their own practice.

Good teachers are like artists who are capable of using other people as their
"medium".¹
Anton Ehrenzweig

Introduction

As we approach the centenary of his birth, the mercurial figure of art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig (1908-1966) remains relatively neglected and little researched. An important figure in aesthetics in the 1950s and 1960s, Ehrenzweig's enquiry lay somewhere between the intellectual field of art history and the clinical field of psychoanalysis, which perhaps helps to explain this neglect. Neither one thing nor the other, no one, it seems, knew quite what to make of this Viennese lawyer turned art theorist. This is particularly so in the area of art education, a field much maligned in art historical criticism. Ehrenzweig's interest in art and psychoanalysis was an enduring one and his concern with art education was, unsurprisingly, positioned at that theoretical locus of psychoanalytic aesthetics. Yet, however much he theorised his approach, his focus was always on the experience of the art work. Training

young artists in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s was a difficult task; art education was divided and, as Ehrenzweig saw it, fundamental changes in approach were required to rescue the training of artists from the rigidity that had been imposed upon it by government-led courses and guidelines.² The degree of change that was seen in approaches to art education in Britain during the 1950s became even more pronounced in the following decade.³ In 1959 the Ministry of Education appointed The National Advisory Council on Art Education (NACAE) — known as the Coldstream Council after its chair, Sir William Coldstream — which devised the new Diploma in Art and Design. The Council first reported in 1960, then again in 1962 and 1964.⁴ While its proposals offered improved status for art schools, it also called for inspection and validation of courses by a central controlling body. The Summerston Council, chaired by Sir John Summerston and set up to implement the Coldstream recommendations, sent its team around the country to inspect and validate the bulk of art and design courses at degree-equivalent level in the UK. Most inspections took place between February 1962 and March 1963. Of the 87 colleges (201 courses) that applied for recognition, 29 colleges (61 courses) were finally approved — Goldsmiths College in London was one of these.⁵ Following the Coldstream Report, the National Diploma in Design (NDD) was gradually replaced by the Diploma in Art and Design (DipAD).⁶ The Coldstream Council was clear that teacher training as such was not within its remit, although the changes it called for did impinge upon subsequent developments in teacher training. After completing the DipAD students entering into teaching normally took a pedagogy year to complete their Art Teacher's Diploma qualification. The Art Teacher's Certificate (ATC) course at Goldsmiths had fulfilled this purpose since the

1930s and it was the ATC course that Ehrenzweig, along with artist and teacher Tony Collinge, transformed with the changes they introduced there in 1964.⁷ As we examine Ehrenzweig's approach to teaching in this paper, it is worth remembering that, at this time, work in most art schools was still representational and life painting was a required part of NDD courses. The nature of Ehrenzweig's approach, and the devotion that he earned from students and colleagues alike, was unprecedented. Yet it is in the area of art education that he endured the most scathing attacks on his integrity. His radical approach to art education may have earned him some life-long friends and admirers, but it also attracted the most vehement criticism.

While Ehrenzweig's work training artists at Goldsmiths College is possibly his best known, his interest in this field began much earlier, while he was still employed at the Central School of Arts and Crafts under Principal William Johnstone. It was at this time that he began to mark out his thinking on children's creativity — thinking that would come to maturity in *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967). In the 1950s, Ehrenzweig worked closely with Harry and Elma Thubron from Leeds College of Art, whose radical, Bauhaus-based approach to art education was a model for his own. He taught occasionally at Leeds College of Art, as well as at Thubron's Byam Shaw Summer School in London. It was at another of Thubron's Summer Schools, this time in Suffolk in 1959, that he first made the acquaintance of Bridget Riley. During a brief period as a colour mixer at Ravensbourne College in Bromley, he further developed his thinking and began to build a coherent theory of art education.

By the time he was invited to take up a post at Goldsmiths College in 1964, Ehrenzweig's reputation was well established. The ATC Course that he developed there was very different to that which had gone before it. Despite criticism from both inside and outside the college, the course was in huge demand by students and much admired by both artists and educators.⁸ In Ehrenzweig's hands, the studio became an almost analytic space; students and colleagues alike claimed to have experienced a kind of analysis through their engagement with Ehrenzweig.⁹ As he himself said, 'The art teacher's task is similar to that of a psychotherapist. Both must unlock the hidden fantasies of the unconscious; both must handle the resistances opposed to revelation of the unconscious.'¹⁰

The Developing Process

My purpose in this paper is not only to examine Ehrenzweig's theory and practice of teaching, but to establish his place in the intellectual genealogy of British art education in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, I also want to touch on the place of Harry Thubron, Richard Hamilton and other important figures in British art education. But I want to begin in 1950 with William Johnstone and the Central School of Arts and Crafts where Ehrenzweig spent time as a textiles technician. Johnstone's approach to art education was unique. He was unimpressed with rules and conventions and, as Ehrenzweig wrote of him, 'Johnstone, as an art educator, tried to counteract the rigidifying effects of skill admired for its own sake'¹¹ Johnstone's own background as an artist had much to do with the flexibility inherent in his approach. It is because of this, Ehrenzweig tells us, that Johnstone brings together an eclectic mix of styles

and methods in his own work. This eclecticism, together with his mercurial personality, seems to have made him interesting to Ehrenzweig. Since Ehrenzweig himself was known as something of a Puck, perhaps their mischievous and unpredictable natures helped to bring them together.¹² Johnstone looked beyond human experience of the external, material world, plunging instead into the inner psyche in search of something that perhaps defies words and is, therefore, more easily explored in the language of visual art. In this model, thinking becomes principally wordless and often associated with mental images that represent the total solution to the particular problem being worked through. Johnstone's thinking here would have been well aligned with Ehrenzweig's own.¹³ As Ehrenzweig says, 'through his own personal experience with the paint, [he] work[ed] out his own destiny.'¹⁴ Talking of a period spent in Paris in the 1920s, Johnstone reflects that, '[t]his constant practice of painting taught me to look beyond the object, the visual world, into the other inner world which was me.... An osmosis occurs when I, the painter, become my subject...'¹⁵ This idea of osmosis perhaps prefigures Ehrenzweig's later thinking on 'dedifferentiation', a moment when artist and work become as one, when limits cease, boundaries collapse and the depths of the unconscious surface to precipitate a momentary oceanic experience for the artist.

With experience at several London County Council institutions, Johnstone had taken over as Principal at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1947. At that time, the school consisted of a School of Drawing, Painting, Modelling, Etching and Allied subjects; a School of Book Production and Graphic Design; a School of Interior Design and Furniture; a School of Textiles; a School of Theatrical

Design; and a School of Silversmiths' Work and Allied Crafts. Johnstone's desire was to 'synthesize the different Schools into a far more integrated unity.'¹⁶ To achieve this, he intended to introduce a Basic Design course that would 'be geared to give a grammar of art in such a way that each student could develop any particular medium he or she happened to choose.'¹⁷ The notion of a 'grammar of art' had originally come from the writings of Walter Gropius and Lázló Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus, who marked out a way forward for art education that was taken up extensively in Britain and America. I would want to add that Johnstone's personal experience of training in the Paris studio of artist André Lhote may have made him sympathetic to these ideas. As Johnstone intimates in his autobiography, Lhote's idea of teaching, 'was to give you a grammar, the root of his teaching. He gave his students a new freedom, but also a new restriction; he gave an understanding of the endless possibilities in variations of analysis, and then he turned you out to find your own motif.'¹⁸ By concerning itself less with any academic knowledge of art, and more with the experience of it, art education of this sort could focus upon the form of art teaching rather than being overly concerned with the content presented. Now method and matter take on equal importance.

The Basic Design course that Johnstone sought to establish at the Central School in 1947 came only a year after the Ministry of Education introduced its National Diploma in Design or NDD course in 1946. The phrase 'Basic Design' was used to express a way of teaching the elements or rules of design, as well as a method of communication through art; hence it was often said to teach a grammar of art. The course provided training in an understanding of the

qualities of line, pattern and form. This ranged from exercises in drawing in a relatively free manner, to others calling for order and precision. As Johnstone saw it, there was a constant transition between 'order and disorder, fanciful and careful planning, with all the variations of experience that this interaction can give.'¹⁹ The balance between the exactitude required for formal exercises, and the potential for freedom and variety in free drawing, set up a succession of tensions for the students involved. This continuous cycle of tension and subsequent release was important since it injected an element of the unexpected into a process that might otherwise have lost its energy and become merely a sterile exercise devoid of any creative potential. The important point here is that design exercises only acted as a starting point, from which students could develop work and ideas. As Victor Pasmore said in 1959, 'A Modern 'basic' course ... should assume a relative outlook in which only the beginning is defined and not the end.'²⁰

The establishment of a Basic Design course at the Central School was not the only thing that Johnstone did in his quest to move art education forward. Under his leadership there was a liberal exchange between art and design schools or disciplines, facilitating an important cross-fertilisation of skills. The result of this sort of strategy was that placement of staff and students outside of their own areas of expertise allowed a freer development of ideas, unshackled by training or historical precedent. This is not to suggest that established high standards were abandoned. Rather, it facilitated the application of those standards in new areas. By working beyond the previously established limits of existing crafts and

disciplines, a new creativity emerged that displayed an inventiveness and originality.

Johnstone's strategy to reinvigorate art education at the Central School was assisted by the engagement of many young artists who would themselves later become central figures in the development of British art education — Victor Pasmore was one of these. Pasmore had previously worked for Johnstone at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts where he was greatly admired and his contribution to the 1959 exhibition 'The Developing Process' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London was instrumental in moving British art education forward. The exhibition documented art educational approaches reflecting Bauhaus influence, where emphasis was on the dynamic, open-ended nature of training. The exhibition opened on 29 April 1959 and closed the following month after a short run. Despite its London venue, the show had been conceived at King's College at the University of Durham, where the progressive Department of Fine Art was lead by Pasmore. The other organisers were Richard Hamilton, also based at Durham, and Harry Thubron and Tom Hudson, both of whom were doing groundbreaking work at Leeds College of Art. Whilst initially enthusiastic about the exhibition, Thubron became less so as plans developed. The demand for clear definition of purpose and meaning which Hudson and Hamilton wanted to demonstrate through the exhibition was resisted by Thubron.²¹ His concern was that this would 'lead to system and curriculum, and the essence of open-ended exploration would be lost.'²²

In his catalogue introduction for the exhibition Richard Coleman acknowledges the historical lineage of design when he remarks that 'As a concept of art education, basic design has its origins in the Bauhaus, particularly the pedagogical work of Klee and Kandinsky and the teaching program of Johannes Itten.'²³ Yet, like the course itself, the Bauhaus was just a starting point, an opening up of possibilities. The ideas presented in the exhibition represented two differing attempts to move art education towards a more satisfactory solution and to resolve the inadequacies that were perceived within the system of training they sought to replace: Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore presented a constructivist approach, while Harry Thubron and Tom Hudson offered a more open, organic approach to teaching and learning.²⁴ The important point, as Coleman notes, is that 'Neither attempt is final nor are they closed systems and both are capable of developing to meet changing requirements.'²⁵ The flexibility inherent in these approaches was central to the creativity they embodied and the openness with which they operated. As Pasmore said, 'the student is asked to embark not on a static imitative system, but on a dynamic voyage of discovery....'²⁶ In practice, however, students were not always free to pursue their own creative processes in the way they would have wished. This is what Richard Hamilton had to say about his own teaching:

The tasks I set my first year students are designed to allow only a reasoned result. Rarely is a problem presented in terms which permit free expression or even aesthetic decision. The student is prompted to think of his work as diagrams of thought processes – equipment which

will enable him to derive further conclusions. Artistic personality or manipulative charm is coincidental to the result.²⁷

Ehrenzweig's belief was that set exercises, when misused, stifled creativity and led to a lifeless academicism of practice and that forced adherence to rote design exercises tended to dull the creative sensibilities of the artist. I have often discussed Ehrenzweig's views on Basic Design with his student David Barton. On one such occasion Barton suggested that, 'for good teachers the "Subjectivity" brought to the [basic design] exercises by pupils was the most important ingredient - to be encouraged! But for most teachers and for academic boards, who were simply looking for a recipe to work from - a solution to all their problems, Basic Design was the most sterile and destructive force in art teaching.'²⁸ The dogmatism and sterility with which Basic Design was pursued by some educators precluded any opportunity for dynamism or creativity, or so Ehrenzweig believed. He had nothing against Basic Design per se. Indeed those such as Pasmore who taught using Basic Design exercises greatly impressed him. According to Barton, however, the difficulty that Ehrenzweig had with Basic Design was that it 'provided ready-made exercises which in the hands of run-of-the-mill "uneducated" teachers produced ready-made easily assessed easily understood results.... [It was] useless for the committed artist struggling to find a way into his or her own sense of being.'²⁹

Ehrenzweig was unforgiving of this sort of approach to Basic Design when he wrote derisively that:

The development resembled the deductive method of developing Euclidean geometry.... A too conscious handling of single elements prevents the development of the intuitive capacity for scanning the emergent allover structure.³⁰

Basic Design, however, was not what Ehrenzweig taught: it was merely his point of departure for developing a unique approach at Goldsmiths. It was in the midst of detailed exercises in design and drawing that Ehrenzweig identified the potential of the accidental and deep unconscious symbolism with which he associated it. There he saw the possibility of developing something more dynamic, more urgent and intensely personal in nature. It is this focus on an individual experience of creativity that marks out Ehrenzweig's ATC Course as something apart from Basic Design training. In no way am I suggesting that what he promoted was a solipsistic art practice but, rather, one which was fully focused on the individual's experience in the world. In this way, the artist's experience of the world is laid bare for all to see and to identify with, potentially at least. The work becomes more than an expression of personal experience and takes on a wider relevance. It is in dealing with something tacit, prescient and visceral in the process of creativity, that the artist opens him- or herself up, and exposes, through the work, the vulnerability of all humankind.

Ehrenzweig's work with Harry Thubron is typical of the sort of approach to working and thinking that he advocated in his students. Thubron's training certainly provided students with a basic grammar of art. Yet, this was not a mere matter of rote instruction and learning. For what Thubron instilled in them

above all was a deep sense of inquisitiveness. It was this inquisitiveness, a desire to understand themselves and their medium more fully, which was to take these students forward in their careers. For this reason, Thubron should be singled out as running courses which related only loosely to Basic Design. He never formalised his thinking on art education or anything else for he was, first and foremost, an artist and a teacher. According to the late Norbert Lynton, Thubron 'had no set program but responded to what he saw happening around him.'³¹ Ehrenzweig acted similarly in his teaching practice at Goldsmiths and it is perhaps this freedom, this non-programmatic approach, which set Thubron and Ehrenzweig apart. Their methodology, if it can be called such, was simply to respond to the creative process as it happened in the studio. As student David Barton experienced it, 'In the studio Anton acted much more as an unquiet restless spirit, a disturber of the peace. He often rejected the easy targets that students were setting themselves ... encouraging a far more exciting albeit "Dangerous" alternative.'³² It is this sort of approach that differentiates Thubron and Ehrenzweig from those who followed the Basic Design course. Still, their methods were so bound up with Bauhaus legacies and Basic Design that its importance cannot be denied. On a more personal level, it may be significant that Ehrenzweig was once taught by Ludwick Hirschfeld-Mack of the Dessau Bauhaus, an experience he recounts in his 1956 paper 'The Mastering of Creative Anxiety'.

Goldsmiths and the ATC Course

Ehrenzweig's pioneering role in the field of art education was formalised in 1964 when he was appointed to teach the ATC course at Goldsmiths College (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Students working in the ATC studio, Goldsmiths College (1964/5).
Courtesy of Tony Collinge.

Before that date, he fulfilled more technical roles — a textiles technician at the Central School of Arts and Crafts and a colour mixer at Ravensbourne College in Bromley — simultaneously building his teaching profile through talks, lectures and occasional teaching. His appointment at Goldsmiths was, in many respects, recognition of his contribution to the field of art education and that is certainly the way that he himself viewed it. Ehrenzweig's partner in teaching at Goldsmiths was Tony Collinge, a young teacher and artist in his own right. Ehrenzweig and Collinge worked closely to deliver their radical program of teaching through the ATC course in a manner reminiscent of the Bauhaus art and craft dual workshop directorships.³³ Yet, as I have already indicated, the ATC course was no exercise in Bauhaus pedagogy or Basic Design. Certainly it

owed something to that particular lineage of art education, but it stood apart as a something more fluid, less rigid and, some would say, chaotic and revolutionary in its approach (fig. 2). Chaos, of course, was in the air in the early 1960s. As art theorist and educator Gyorgy Kepes writes:

The formlessness of our present life has three obvious aspects. First, our environmental chaos, which accounts for inadequate living conditions, waste of human and material resources, and pollution of air, water, and earth. Second, our social chaos – lack of common ideas, common feelings, common purpose. Thirdly, our inner chaos – individual inability to live in harmony with oneself, inability to accept one's whole self and let body, feelings, and thought dwell together in friendship.³⁴



Fig. 2: Still Life in ATC studio, Goldsmiths College (1964/5). Courtesy of Tony Collinge.

Kepes's *Education of Vision*, from which this quotation is taken, was not published until 1965 but the ideas with which it deals took seed earlier that decade. Ideas for Ehrenzweig's own chapter in the book, 'Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning', were formulated several years earlier in his article 'The Morality of Craftsmanship' (1962) and relate well to several other chapters in the collection.³⁵ When *Education of Vision* was published, Kepes was Professor of Visual Design at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he had been teaching since 1946. Being in the United States, however, did not prevent his influence in Britain and *Education of Vision* was taken up by enlightened art teachers across the country. It is Kepes's interest in theoretical constructions of chaos, as well as his focus on our inner experience of the world around us, which lend pertinence to his thinking in the context of the present study. As he wrote at the time, 'Our contemporary art and literature reveal a menacing picture of contemporary man's inner chaos and self-alienation. We are displaced persons, not only historically and socially but within ourselves.'³⁶ For Ehrenzweig, only by compelling the individual artist to face up to the struggle with their own creativity, did he believe they would be able to teach others do the same. That struggle would, in his estimation, be revealed through 'accident' and so the spontaneous and the unplanned became critical in his approach.

In 'Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning,' the essay which Ehrenzweig contributed to the Kepes collection, it is primarily the artist's inner creative imagination that interests him. The problem as he sees it is that 'The new freedom of imagination is usually lost as soon as the student has to accept

a modicum of planning and control.³⁷ This effectively precludes the sort of Basic Design training that 'simply kept repeating the same known formulas while ignoring the creative individuality of the student.'³⁸ It was this sort of use of Basic Design exercises to which Ehrenzweig objected. The difficulty, as he clearly sees it in this paper, is that, 'Creative thinking ... presupposes a mysterious capacity for operating precisely within imprecise structures. The creative thinker has to take steps and make interim decisions without being able to visualize their precise relationship with the end product.'³⁹ The problem is that in creative thinking, more and more possibilities open up at each and every stage. The artist then has a potentially infinite number of options, which simply cannot be consciously examined one by one. Hence,

he must rely on unconscious intuition for scanning these many possibilities....[T]he assistance of the unconscious mind is not merely needed for a greater measure of imagination, as is commonly assumed, but is indispensable for efficient work, owing to the superiority of unconscious scanning over conscious visualization.⁴⁰

The conscious mind, of course, will perceive all of this as rather vague. For Ehrenzweig, it was paramount that students should resist the temptation to settle for a neat solution, any 'well-clipped *Gestalt*.'⁴¹ His point was that students should be encouraged to think creatively, to shift their working register from surface to depth, scanning solutions syncretically and exploring the limitlessness of their own psyche in order to create the work. It is only through

this sort of training that students could hope to be strong enough to resist, to stand their ground in the face of a conscious desire for that *Gestalt*.⁴² Instead, they would be enabled to work towards something less well defined, shifting 'to lower mental levels and that unfocused type of attention which is so much better equipped to deal with ambiguous or-or structures.'⁴³ We might relate Ehrenzweig's ideas on unfocused attention to Sigmund Freud's commentary on analytic technique, where he calls for the analyst to maintain an 'evenly suspended attention ... in the face of all that one hears.'⁴⁴ The necessary suspended attention of the analyst is taken up elsewhere in the work of Hanna Segal, Marion Milner and Wilfred Bion, for example. Most important in the present context is the work of Marion Milner, with whom Ehrenzweig worked closely. In a 1952 essay Milner recalls writing in her Joanna Field books — *A Life of One's Own* (1934), *An Experiment in Leisure* (1937) and *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) — 'about having observed that there were two kinds of attention, both necessary, a wide unfocused stare, and a narrow focused penetrating kind, and that the wide kind brought remarkable changes in perception and enrichment of feeling.'⁴⁵

For Ehrenzweig, the important point for teaching practice was to provide an environment within which students could freely experiment and begin to recognise the importance of the unconscious mind in the creative process. In this way they could begin to feel secure enough to take risks, make mistakes, and search in an unplanned way for the next step in their own process, without any concern for where it might eventually lead them.



Fig. 3: Example of student's work from Tease and Worry book, Goldsmith's College 1965/6. Courtesy of the artist John Steers.

Ehrenzweig replaced Basic Design sketch books with 'Tease and Worry' books where students were expected to write notes, draw, paint, or work in any way they felt appropriate (fig. 3). The purpose was to track down images, in the manner of free association, for which the only criterion was that they were felt right or rang true.⁴⁶ Classes changed and mutated in real time, taking account of the needs of individual students and events as they arose. This responsive way of working encouraged students to follow through ideas as they happened. In an environment where spontaneity was privileged and established convention spurned, planned exercises and learning became unnecessary. The ATC course was, by Ehrenzweig's own admission, 'an experimental course for art teachers' and so required him to reflect on its efficacy. In a 1965 paper, *Towards a Theory of Art Education*, Ehrenzweig writes about the need to make students aware of the sorts of things that might block or release their own

creative imagination. With this awareness, they would be better equipped to understand similar problems when later teaching their own students. The first hurdle, as he saw it, was to free them from convention, so that rather than pursuing preconceived ideas they would be able to respond to the medium with which they were working and modify those initial ideas appropriately. Unlike Basic Design tutors, who also encouraged exploration of the medium, Ehrenzweig's interest was more wide ranging, with an emphasis on the artist's unconscious processes or inner world in relation to the medium. As he writes, 'The creative thinker may consciously aim at a precise target, but this precise aim need not interfere with the possibility of a broader interpretation.'⁴⁷ Perhaps, then, there is room for both ways of working, so long as preconceptions are willingly set aside when other ideas or 'accidents' arise. Ehrenzweig explains some students' need for rigidity or fixed ideas, suggesting that, 'The psychological reason for their rigidity is the fear of losing control and allowing split-off parts of their personality to intrude into the work.'⁴⁸ That fear, Ehrenzweig believed, could be tempered, or rather made sufficiently tolerable, in the right environment. In the ATC course, he tried to provide that environment, a space in which the artist, 'will not try to impose his will on his medium, but will invite accidents or rather keep his planning flexible and scan his own work in process for new cues that could stimulate further ideas and images.'⁴⁹ This implies that the student is able to tolerate a considerable degree of anxiety during the creative process, an idea which Ehrenzweig fully elaborates in *The Hidden Order of Art*. We are reminded in this short paper, however, that 'We have to understand the student's negative attitude as an expression of his anxiety at being confronted with himself.'⁵⁰

The idea of students being asked to confront themselves may explain why some complained that what they experienced was not art teaching but psychotherapy.⁵¹ If this were the case, then the teaching space of the studio might reasonably be equated with the clinical space of the consulting room, allowing us to draw more directly on psychoanalytic theory. Ehrenzweig talks of the artist as a parent to the artwork. 'The rigid artist is like a bad parent who does not allow his child to develop according to his own mould, and tries to keep tight control.'⁵² What Ehrenzweig describes here is a kind of aestheticised anaclisis. What I mean by this is that he takes the relationship between artists and artwork and reframes it in very precise psychoanalytic terms. The term anaclisis is more usually employed to mark the relationship between infant and mother as one of libidinal attachment, an attachment that has to be successfully worked through in order for the infant to grow in independence and eventually develop as an individual, wholly separate from the mother.⁵³ In this frame, the artist's relationship with the work approaches the separation-individuation dynamic of mother and child in psychoanalytic terms. It is, in fact, the anaclitic condition of the relationship that problematises the completion of the work. For it is only when the artist can achieve separation from the work, once again locating them in a unique independent space, that the (psychic) work can be considered complete.

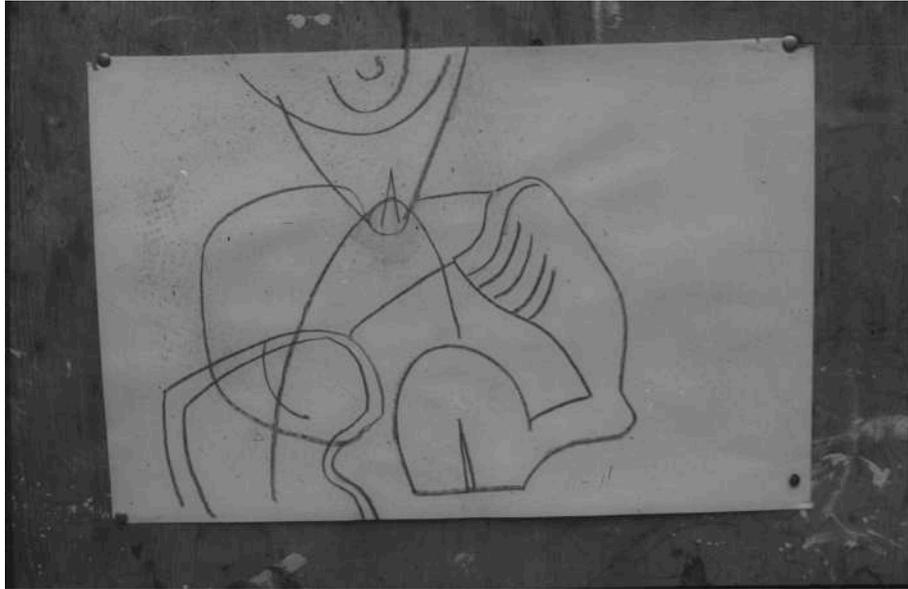


Fig. 4: Example of student's work in the ATC Studio, Goldsmiths College (1964/5).
Courtesy of the artist David Barton and the Estate of Anton Ehrenzweig.

Ehrenzweig's theories here are based on the experience of the ATC course and observations made there. Theory aside, the ATC course provided both staff and students with a valuable experience that taught them more about their work and themselves. Tony Collinge, Ehrenzweig's close teaching colleague on the course, was no exception. Collinge's role was to run a studio based class one day each week. The work that students produced in this class then formed the basis of individual tutorial sessions with Ehrenzweig. In these sessions, Ehrenzweig helped students to work through ideas in their 'Tease and Worry' books, as well as any difficulties with the work they were expected to produce in their own time. As his student David Barton imparted recently, 'Tease and Worry books were the "Arena" in which Anton confronted his students. There were "No holds barred", although he was incredibly sensitive to those students who were unsure of themselves.'⁵⁴ Although ATC students spent some time in teaching practice in local schools, Ehrenzweig never ventured into the classroom setting to visit them. His interest, it would seem, was simply to teach

students how to teach art from their own concerns. What this meant was getting them to abandon the safety of the familiar, take risks and trust their own process.⁵⁵ The significance of this way of working and teaching is that the work no longer relies on established styles and becomes more exploratory in nature. Some members of staff were opposed to this way of working and thought Ehrenzweig's methods were unacceptable. What troubled them most was Ehrenzweig's demand that students search within themselves, freeing up a libidinal aesthetic that, to some, seemed at odds with learning to teach art to children. Co-incidentally, it was this same demand that was so fruitful for ATC students in terms of creative growth (fig. 4). This exploration of the inner self in the work meant that students were placed in a vulnerable situation, the conscious in supplication to the unconscious. Indeed, as we have already seen, some felt themselves to be in the position of analysand rather than student. In such an analytic space, how might we see Ehrenzweig's role? As he said himself,

the task of the analyst and of the art teacher may often be complimentary. Analysis is needed to resolve the more severe cases of neurotic and psychotic anxiety which defend the patient's ego against the undifferentiated functions of the unconscious and prevent him from giving up his rigidity. Once this initial obstacle is removed the teacher affords his pupil the opportunity for mental gymnastics which help to make his weakened, yet rigid, ego functions supple and athletic.⁵⁶

For Ehrenzweig, creating art and art education itself are not static, imitative systems with rules and conventions to be laid down and followed. These experiences are ever changing, dynamic process, and take us on often remarkable inner journeys, if only we allow them too.

An earlier version of this paper was given at the Association of Art Historians Annual Conference — *Location: the Museum, the Academy and the Studio* — held at Tate Britain, London, 2-4 April 2008. I would like to thank Martin Myrone, convenor of the conference session 'Museums, the Academy and the Studio', for inviting me to speak on that occasion. The doctoral research from which this paper comes was funded by the AHRC.

All references to Ehrenzweig's personal papers are made courtesy of Anthony Ehrenzweig and the Estate of Anton Ehrenzweig. My discussions with Ehrenzweig's students, David Barton and John Steers, and his teaching colleague Tony Collinge, are all cited with their kind permission.

¹ Anton Ehrenzweig, *Towards a Theory of Art Education*, (London: Goldsmiths College, 1965): 3

² A division existed between those students following the National Diploma in Design (NDD) and those on non-NDD vocational courses.

³ For a concise and critically adroit account of changes in art education around this time see Lisa Tickner, 'Back Story: NDD to DipAD' in *Hornsey 1968. The Art School Revolution*, (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2008): 13-19.

⁴ Ministry of Education, *First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education* (London: HMSO, 1960); Ministry of Education, *Vocational Courses in Colleges and Schools of Art, Second Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education* (London: HMSO, 1962); Department of Education and Science Post-Diploma Studies in Art and Design, *Third Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education*, (London: HMSO, 1964). For a useful survey of this period see Bruce Laughton, 'The Coldstream Reports' in *William Coldstream*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004): 242-50.

⁵ Tickner: 19. Here Tickner refers to Appendix B of Stuart MacDonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1970): 385-7. See also Stuart MacDonald, *A Century of Art and Design Education. From Arts and Crafts to Conceptual Art*, (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2005): 207-10

⁶ Tickner: 106. The NDD was phased out gradually. The first DipAD was awarded in 1963 and the last NDD in 1967.

⁷ A.E. Frith, *Goldsmiths' College. A Centenary Account*, (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Athlone Press, 1991): 58. Here Frith mentions the beginnings of the ATC course in the 1930s.

⁸ Ehrenzweig's son Anthony Ehrenzweig, his teaching colleague Tony Collinge and his student David Barton all informed me on different occasions that some members of the Art Education Department at Goldsmiths College were extremely critical of Ehrenzweig's work. He encountered particular resistance from Seonaid Robertson, a Goldsmiths colleague. Ehrenzweig wrote to Pat Millard – then Head of Goldsmiths Art Department – on at least two occasions to discuss these difficulties. (Copy letters from Ehrenzweig to Pat Millard on January 9th 1965 and May 21st 1965 found amongst Ehrenzweig's personal papers). Millard was responsible for Ehrenzweig's appointment and regarded him highly. See Marion Milner's memorial speech for him: Marion Milner, 'The Hidden Order of Art' (1967) in *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 241-5. He was well respected by other important figures in art education too, such as Harry Thubron and William Johnstone. See Johnstone's references to Ehrenzweig in William Johnstone, *Points in Time: an Autobiography* (London: Barrie and Jenkins Ltd, 1980).

⁹ David Barton (ATC student 1964/5) has told me on many occasions over the last three years how some students felt they had undergone psychoanalysis with Ehrenzweig. In a recent

discussion regarding the way that Ehrenzweig gave feedback to students about their work Barton pointed out that ‘he gave you his own very personal response to it – responses so personal that some students did think that perhaps they were being psychoanalysed – but the more intelligent or honest ones realized that it was he that was undergoing a process of self analysis as a personal response to their work in order to search out the emerging imagery and help them to realize it themselves.’ (Email from David Barton to this author 29/09/2008). Interestingly, John Steers (another of Ehrenzweig’s ATC students (1965/6)) informed me that he never felt this to be the case (John Steers in conversation with this author 28/03/2008 and following email 09/10/2008). Tony Collinge also intimated that his own experience of teaching with Ehrenzweig was similarly framed – he felt he had been through psychoanalysis. He said that, “In a way it was as if I’d been through a kind of psychoanalysis myself and I gradually felt the better for it. It was all a maturing and developing experience.” (Letter from Collinge to this author 07/06/06) Ehrenzweig’s son told me that Ehrenzweig underwent a period of analysis himself before leaving Vienna in 1938. (Anthony Ehrenzweig in conversation with this author 11/04/2006.) To date, I have been unable to establish any further details of that period in Ehrenzweig’s life.

¹⁰ Anton Ehrenzweig, ‘The Mastering of Creative Anxiety’ in Ruth Armer et al., *Art and Artist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, London: Cambridge University Press, 1956): 51.

¹¹ Ehrenzweig in William Johnstone, *William Johnstone*, (London: London School of Arts and Crafts, 1959): n. p.

¹² David Barton has often referred to his mischievous nature. He told me on several occasions how other members of the Faculty referred to Ehrenzweig in similar terms, calling him a Puck. (Puck is the mischievous character in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.)

¹³ Michael Culme-Seymour, ‘Foreword’ in Johnstone, *Points in Time*: 10.

¹⁴ Ehrenzweig in Johnstone, *William Johnstone*: n. p.

¹⁵ Johnstone, *Points in Time*: 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 220.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 221-2.

²⁰ Victor Pasmore, ‘A Developing Process in Art Teaching’ in *The Developing Process* (Durham: King’s College, University of Durham, 1959): 3.

²¹ David Lewis, ‘Introduction’ in Eric Atkinson, *The Incomplete Circle: Eric Atkinson, Art and Education* (Aldershot: Scolar, 2000): 22.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Richard Coleman, ‘Introduction’ in *The Developing Process*: 1.

²⁴ For some helpful reflections on these different approaches see David Thistlewood, *A Continuing Process* (London: ICA, 1981)

²⁵ Richard Coleman, ‘Introduction’ in *The Developing Process*: 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 3.

²⁷ Richard Hamilton, ‘Work in progress towards a new foundation of art teaching as developed at the Department of Fine Art, King’s College, Durham University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and at Leeds College of Art’ in *The Developing Process*: 19. Also available in Richard Hamilton, ‘Diagrammar’ in *Collected Words 1953-1982*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982): 169.

²⁸ Email to this author from David Barton 30/04/2007.

²⁹ Email to this author from David Barton 29/09/2008.

³⁰ Anton Ehrenzweig, ‘Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning’ in Gyorgy Kepes (ed.) *Education of Vision*, (London: Studio Vista, 1965): 32-33.

³¹ Norbert Lynton, ‘The World in a Grain of Sand’ in *Harry Thubron* (London: Austin/Desmond Fine Art, 2007): n. p.

³² Email to this author from David Barton 29/09/2008.

³³ For more on this see Rainer K Wick, ‘The History of the Bauhaus’ in *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, (Osterfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000): 29-51.

³⁴ Kepes: ii.

³⁵ Anton Ehrenzweig, ‘The Morality of Craftsmanship’ in *The Listener*, vol. LXVIII, no. 1748, (Sept 27 1962): 470-472.

³⁶ Kepes: iii.

³⁷ Ehrenzweig, ‘Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning’ in Kepes: 27.

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- ³⁸ Email to this author from David Barton 29/09/2008.
- ³⁹ Ehrenzweig, 'Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning' in Kepes: 28.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.: 33.
- ⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis' (1912) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Vol. XII, (first published London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), (London: Vintage, 2001): 111-112.
- ⁴⁵ Marion Milner, 'The framed gap' (1952) in *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, (London: Tavistock Publications, Ltd, 1987):81.
- ⁴⁶ Email from David Barton to this author 30/04/2007.
- ⁴⁷ Ehrenzweig, 'Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning' in Kepes: 43.
- ⁴⁸ Ehrenzweig, *Towards a Theory of Art Education*: 1.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.: 2.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.: 7.
- ⁵¹ See footnote 9 above.
- ⁵² Ehrenzweig, *Towards a Theory of Art Education*: 8.
- ⁵³ For a useful definition and discussion of anaclisis and anaclitic object-choice see Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988): 29-33
- ⁵⁴ Email to this author from David Barton 29/09/2008.
- ⁵⁵ How this impacted upon schools and the GCE syllabus is a matter for further research.
- ⁵⁶ Ehrenzweig, 'The Mastering of Creative Anxiety' in Armer, *Art and Artist*: 49. This notion of 'mental gymnastics' is borrowed from Arnold Schönberg's *Theory of Harmony* (1922), an influential text for Ehrenzweig.

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Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and Postwar American Art, 1940-1976

**The Jewish Museum, New York
4 May – 21 September 2008**

**Saint Louis Art Museum
19 October 2008 – 11 January 2009**

**Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
13 February – 31 May 2009**

‘American art – if it not to degenerate into a succession of lonely giants, flashing comets and cultural sports – had better face the fact that art is a realm of ideas,’ declared the editorial of the New York art journal *Scrap* in 1961, going on to conclude that ‘art and words need each other; art leads to words and words lead to art.’¹ The Jewish Museum’s current exhibition *Action/Abstraction* takes the symbiotic relationship between art and criticism as its central premise. On two floors its curators seek to reframe some three decades of American art from Abstract Expressionism onwards through the words of two of the period’s most ardent and powerful critics: Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.



Jackson Pollock, *Convergence*, 1952, oil on canvas.
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1956.
© The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The exhibition's opening gambit, a room of works by Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning sets out its comparative methodology. Opposing these two painters at the pinnacle of the Modernist canon, it draws a comparison between the critical positions of their most ardent supporters, men whose criticism sometimes converged but more often did not. Greenberg's formalist advocacy of the purity of pictorial abstraction is set against Rosenberg's existentialist belief in the creative act of painting. The works on display in this first room – including Pollock's *Convergence* (1952) and de Kooning's *Gotham News* (1955) – articulate these oppositional stances; but they also point to the fact that the situation was far from clear cut by suggesting the drawbacks inherent in trying to categorise artists whose works demonstrate both abstraction and figuration, both action and abstraction. It adds a subtle note of qualification to the exhibition's main thrust, and demonstrates a rigorously intellectual curatorial project that is evident throughout the exhibition.

In thematic rooms, artists are paired or grouped to evoke the critical tensions that existed between Greenberg and Rosenberg, articulated through a recurrent return to their writings in the form of short quotations on the walls of the exhibition and explanatory texts throughout. Through the pages of specialist journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Art in America* and *The Tiger's Eye*, as well as in more populist magazines like *The New Yorker*, *Time* and *Vogue*, the two critics steered the meteoric rise of post-war American art. By 1949, when Pollock was profiled in *Life* magazine, Abstract Expressionism had become a matter for household discussion. Many such publications are included in a detailed documentary room curated by Maurice Berger, alongside photographs, film and television clips and personal correspondence, all of which reveals vehement disagreements not only between the two critics but also between them and the artists that were their protagonists.

One of the exhibition's declared aims is to highlight the considerable caesurae in the work of both critics. Works by the African American artist Norman Lewis, and by Grace Hartigan and Lee Krasner are on display, the last reprieved of her more common role as an extra in the story of Jackson Pollock: though she had close connections with both critics – it was Krasner who introduced Pollock and

Greenberg – neither he nor Rosenberg wrote substantially about her work. Krasner's *Untitled* canvas of 1948, recently acquired by The Jewish Museum, presents an intense network of abstract signs that evoke primitive letters, and seems proof enough that she belongs in the company of those male artists to whom Greenberg paid more attention. This is one of her *Little Image* paintings the intimate size of which, curator Norman L. Kleeblatt suggests, precluded them from the heroic rhetoric that surrounded and shaped Abstract Expressionism.² That the same issue of scale does not apply to Krasner's *Blue and Black* (1951-53) or Hartigan's glorious *New England, October* (1957), nor to the large-scale sculptural works of Anne Truitt on display later in the exhibition, suggests that there were more complex and forceful prohibitions at play. The works in this room are impressive, yet only nod towards rectifying the situation.



Lee Krasner, *Untitled*, 1948, oil on canvas.

The Jewish Museum, New York. Promised gift of Craig and Caryn Efron, P.1.2008.

© The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

One female artist who was championed by Greenberg was Helen Frankenthaler, whose *Mountains and Sea* (1952) he singled out as a formative influence on Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, both introduced to her by Greenberg in 1953. The work is included in the exhibition alongside Louis's *Iris* (1954), both impressive examples of what Greenberg would present to the public as 'post-painterly abstraction,' the legitimate heir to Abstract Expressionism. The colour field works on display here articulate Greenberg's continued advocacy of the tenets of modernism – the merging of medium with support and the essential truth of painting's flatness – and provide a coherent visual development of the early rooms.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil and charcoal on canvas.
Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc.

The direction of Greenberg's trajectory is contrasted with Rosenberg's notion of the artwork as "anxious object". Works by artists as diverse as Joan Mitchell, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg and Lee Bontecou are brought together by reason of the evidence of the physical act of creation: brushstrokes, paint drips, stitches, tears and accumulations of glue. The inclusion here of works by Saul Steinberg and Philip Guston confuse matters somewhat, overshadowing a thematic hang with the chronological equivalence of connection Rosenberg made during his time writing for *The New Yorker*.

The parameters of this exhibition are broad, despite the specificity of its conceit, and the binarism that underpins it feels a little relentless by its closing stages. The limitations of reducing art criticism to the words of two men, however titanic they may have been, shows especially during these late stages, when it would have been refreshing to hear the voices of Leo Steinberg or Michael Fried. At times, the binary approach also seems a little reductive when it comes to the choice of works. In the case of one or two (notably those by Oldenburg and Peter Saul) one has the uneasy suspicion that the predominance of red and

green may have been a deciding factor, given the names of the exhibition's two critical protagonists. If at times the choice seems a little obscure, though, or as if it has been twisted to fit a specific curatorial purpose, this may perhaps be attributed to an effort to highlight that the art of this period is especially prone to versions. After all, both Greenberg and Rosenberg used artworks to further their particular visions of Modernism and their arguments would begin to be contested by the late 1960s and fully turned against them by critics who sought to theorise postmodernism in the 1970s and eighties. Maurice Berger's timeline in the catalogue serves further to emphasise that 'history is never neat or linear.' That this plurality is not reflected in the list of venues for this exhibition, which steers clear of the West Coast, is a pity and one that perpetuates the monolithic reputation of the New York School.

Action/Abstraction's endgame is a pair of seemingly antithetical works that are presented as extensions of the values of Greenberg and Rosenberg though they did not garner their critical approval. The works on display are by Frank Stella, whose Black Paintings extended Greenbergian formalism to the point of interrogation, and Allan Kaprow, who epitomised the predominance of action in the 1960s. They are clearly intended metonymically to represent Minimalism and Performance Art, though this serves somewhat to oversimplify the genesis of both movements. Kaprow's Environment *Words*, first shown at the Smolin Gallery in New York in 1962, is here 'reinvented' – Kaprow's own term – by Martha Rosler, whose emphasis on the politicised nature of our current media-saturated environment acts as the perfect articulation of Kaprow's assertion that 'the past can only be created (not re-created).'³ Kaprow's vision of an open-ended artwork freely reinterpreted by artists, curators and critics alike nevertheless results here in a work far more similar to Kaprow's 'original' than the reinvention of *Words* concurrently on display at the Geffen Contemporary in Los Angeles. Rosler, despite reversing the order of the installation's two claustrophobic rooms so that visitor's are led from the dark out into the light, has largely retained the permanent-marker aesthetic of Kaprow's own 1967 version. An LED display at the entrance reminds us that our technologies of communication have been updated, but it is in the selection of words that the greatest social and political changes are apparent. In the 1960s they had

included 'Saigon,' 'Secretary,' 'X-ray,' 'Nylon,' and 'LP'. Today the walls articulate the concerns of a new and more technologically advanced generation: 'Al Qaida,' 'myspace,' 'regime change,' 'carbon offsets,' and 'viagra.' Most powerful perhaps are the words that remain the same, some poignant, some banal: 'war' appears in both, but so does 'hot dog.'

That our last engagement with *Action/Abstraction* is enacted through a shift in language is appropriate. The exhibition itself conjures a critical moment of grandiose and prophetic pronouncements that had immeasurable impact on the art writing that followed. We emerge with the certainty that no art critic today approaches the stature or the influence of either Greenberg or Rosenberg. At a panel discussion held at the museum, David Joselit identified a shift in the role of the art critic: with art increasingly regarded as entertainment, Joselit proposed, the role of qualitative judgment has been displaced onto the market, leaving contemporary critics with the job of interpretation rather than the valuation so devastatingly practiced by their predecessors. On one level then, *Action/Abstraction* might be read as a paean to this lost art, albeit one critical of the limitations of its model. Upon the occasion of my visit, one visitor to the Jewish Museum had articulated this sense remarkably succinctly: on a post-it-note dangling from the ceiling in the first room of *Words* was written the following indictment of a profession that seems able now only to articulate its own state of crisis: 'Critics should be seen and not heard.'

Norman L. Kleeblatt (ed.), *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008), 344pp., 255 ill., 166 in col. \$65 hardcover, \$40 paperback. ISBN: 978-0-300-12215-2

Lucy Bradnock
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¹ *Scrap*, issue 6, April 19, 1961.

² Norman L. Kleeblatt, 'Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Postwar Art,' *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*, p.146.

³ Allan Kaprow, 'Creating 1957,' [1990], Allan Kaprow Papers, 1940-1997, box 4, folder 12, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, accession no. 980063.

Blood on Paper: The Art of the Book

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 15 April – 29 June 2008

Blood on Paper marks a curatorial response to a groundswell of interest in artists' books in current art historical debate. An impressive program of events accompanied the exhibition, including a symposium — *Beyond the Book* — that explored the varying and creative ways in which major modern and contemporary artists have approached the book as artwork. Covering subjects such as private presses, the development of the book as a genre and artists' books in the digital age, the day provided a generative ground for anyone interested in further researching this field. Another similarly themed symposium at Tate — 'The Liquid Page' — invited a reconsideration of the book and the art of reading itself in the light of new technologies and cultural interventions on the printed page.

At a time when the printed page is increasingly being challenged by the computer screen and electronic text, a return to the book as medium is refreshing. This particular exhibition represents a collaboration between the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Ivory Press. The V&A is famed for its collection of artists' books going back to 1851 and forty percent of the books featured in this exhibition are drawn from the museum's own collection.

The Ivory Press, renowned for publishing limited edition artists' books, suggests on its website that books 'are a measure of both our culture and our craft.' Artists' books in particular seem to embody both of these things, which may help to explain why we are seeing an upsurge of interest in them. Perhaps this is a nostalgic return to the book in the digital age, but there is another underlying theme in this exhibition. Whilst focused acutely on the book, it struck me that this exhibition allows something deeper to surface as notions of religion and the spiritual are brought into play in an exhibition space marked out like a chapel. The ambient noise too encourages us to immerse ourselves in the experience. For the time we are here, we forget the bustle of the Brompton Road outside and the hum of activity in the adjacent museum rotunda. The

lighting is dimmed with spotlights focused on individual works, the same way that an icon might be lit up in a church or chapel. While religion intersects with ideas of the Book itself, it is also a perennial theme in which there has been a resurgence of art historical interest in recent years. In this show, the carefully grouped books are displayed in a church-like space, complete with side-chapels and high altar. Interestingly, it begins and ends with the work of Anselm Kiefer whose new work, *The Secret Life of Plants* (2008), dominates the entrance. Upright on the floor in front of us, we encounter this huge book in much the same way as we might encounter a piece of sculpture; it is a good example of the variety of forms the book takes in this exhibition. Indeed, the unusually large scale, and the variety of materials used, might lead us to question whether some of the works in this show are books at all.



Anselm Kiefer, *Steigend, steigend sinke nieder*, 2006
Photo: Nigel Young. © The artist and the Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery

Damien Hirst's stunning body of work, *New Religion*, confronts the viewer with Christian iconography in new and exciting ways. A huge coloured altar table teases us with drawers we are not permitted to look inside. The altar, which first appeared as part of Hirst's *New Religion* installation in a working Anglican church — All Hallows, an 18th century church on London wall — in 2007, is imposing. Yet despite its size, its secret spaces invite a more private, intimate

Louise Bourgeois and Paula Rego both present books dealing with memories of childhood experience, something to which the intimate nature of our encounter with the book is well suited. Why only two of those represented here are women artists I cannot say. It is not that women artists don't make books — Carolee Schneemann's luscious, velvet bound *Vulva's Morphia* (1997) is held in the museum's own collection and one wonders why it was not included. Perhaps the transgressive nature of such works would disrupt the show's rarefied, almost spiritual nature.

The ambition of this exhibition to 'reveal both the creative process and the soul of the artist in question' is a bold one. I am not sure it does either of those things but it does bring together the books of some twentieth- and twenty-first century artists in new and challenging ways. It addresses the idea of the book as artwork in its own right and the notion of the book as sacred, an object of contemplation. The accompanying catalogue is a book almost worthy of inclusion in the exhibition itself. The copy placed at the end of the exhibition space clearly indicates the curator's and publisher's view that this is the case. Wall-mounted at eye level and promoted to the status of art, this lovely limited edition catalogue is expensive. The ivory, clothbound box is beautiful to look at — like a precious prayer book wrapped in liturgical vestments. Each wonderful book in the exhibition is reduced to a single leaflet. Inevitably poor substitutes for the unique books they represent, the leaflets nonetheless afford us the opportunity, finally, to turn the pages. To borrow a phrase from literary scholar Mary Jacobus, they permit us, at last, to return to the scene of reading. The only remaining difficulty is that the catalogue has already achieved rarity status and, assuming you can find one, is prohibitively expensive. But perhaps that was always the point.

Elena Foster and Rowena Watson, *Blood on Paper: The Art of the Book*, (London: Ivory Press and V&A Publishing, 2008, Madrid: TF Artes Gráficas), Box containing 41 folded sheets. Fully illustrated., £45.

Beth Williamson
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Psycho Buildings: Artists Take on Architecture
The Hayward, London, 28 May – 25 August 2008

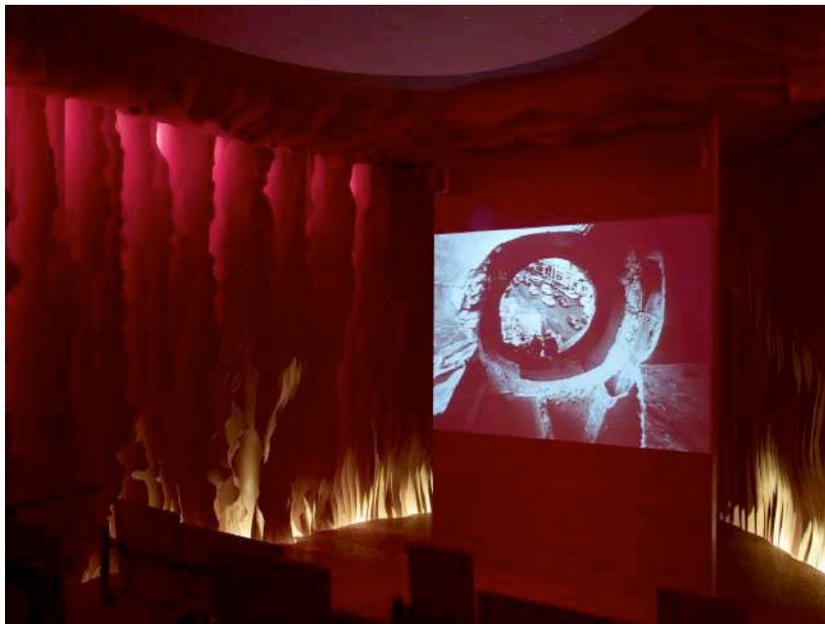
Coinciding with the fortieth anniversary of the Hayward building, this exhibition presents an opportunity for artists to engage not only with architecture in the broadest sense but also with the Brutalism specific to the gallery. Taking its title from the German artist Martin Kippenberger's book of photographs, in which a 'psychobuilding' refers to a deviation from Modernist architecture's rationalism, the exhibition gathers together the work of ten international artists whose contributions – most, but not all of which were created especially for the exhibition – include habitat-like structures and architecturally influenced installations.



Gelitin, *normally, proceeding and unrestricted with without title*, 2008, mixed media.
Courtesy the artists. Photo: © Stephen White

Whereas some of the interventions could aptly be described as playful, others, like Mike Nelson's *To the Memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, border on the terrifying. On the playful side, the Austrian artists' collective Gelitin have created an artificial pond by flooding one of the Hayward's terraces with water in order that visitors, in pairs, can

row boats overlooking the cityscape. The reflective surface of the pond captures the images of the surrounding architecture and creates a space not only reflective but also for reflection. Other artists who chose to work on the exterior of the building include the Argentinian artist Tomas Saraceno and Tobias Putrih of Slovenia. Saraceno's *Observatory, Air-Port-City* consists of a two-tiered transparent dome in which visitors can observe the goings on of the city and in which they can in turn be observed by the passers-by below: a utopian city in the sky anchored to the Hayward with what appears to be the potential to move about freely from place to place.



Tobias Putrih, *Venetian, Atmospheric*, 2007,
Plywood, OSB plates, scaffolding, PVC curtain, digital projectors.
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Photo: © Stephen White

Drawing on the golden age of American movie theatre architecture, Tobias Putrih has constructed a temporary cinema on another one of the Hayward's terraces. Originally installed in Venice during the previous year's biennale, *Venetian Atmospheric* is comprised of exterior scaffolding that covers PVC curtains which in turn encircle undulating plywood partitions framing the interior. Shifting to the rhythm of the wind, the curtains create a continuously changing light within the

space. The cinema is infused by the sounds of the city around it and a projected blue sky on its ceiling darkens as the screening begins, slowly giving way to a starry night sky. The program includes the films of six artists, all dealing with architecture, from Gordon Matta-Clark's seminal *Conical Intersect* (1975) to Andrea Fraser's critical yet immensely humorous performance *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001).

Back inside the gallery building, notable works include Do Ho Suh's *Staircase V*, a finely woven orange mesh hanging suspended several feet from the ceiling of the room and traversing the entirety of its surface, suspended from each of the four corners of the room. From its centre, a spectral staircase extends downwards towards the floor, stopping two or three feet from ground level. It is an exact, to scale, replica of the staircase joining Suh's New York apartment to that of his landlord's on the floor above. No detail is spared; from the light switch to the banister to the moulding on which it rests, this in-between space, a space of passage, hovers delicately before the viewer. Inviting the visitor to enter, it simultaneously underscores the impossibility of such an act of ascendance, for to enter it would be to destroy it, to tear the fragile fabric from which it is constituted. A dis-location, a displacement as well as a location within a location, it recalls both the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s as well as the soft sculpture of artists such as Claes Oldenburg. Suh's other contribution to the exhibition, *Fallen Star 1/5*, consists of a collision of two houses – his childhood home in Korea and the shared students' residence he occupied during his studies in the United States. Like *Staircase V*, the buildings are made to scale, precisely one fifth of their actual size. Reminiscent of dolls' houses, the interiors of the two residences are meticulously reproduced, from the books on the shelves to the posters on the walls to all of the furniture and appliances.



Do Ho Suh, *Staircase – V*, 2003/04/08, polyester and stainless steel tubes.
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York. Photo: © Stephen White

Like Suh's *Fallen Star*, there is a voyeuristic element to Rachel Whiteread's *Place (Village)*, a collection of pre-made doll houses sourced on eBay and displayed in a darkened room. Unlike Suh's structures, however, those of Whiteread's are devoid of detail. Peering inside their lighted interiors, the houses reveal themselves to be empty and unfurnished, with only the odd rug and wallpapered walls inside. Without the dolls and accessories to animate it, the village stands uncannily abandoned as though it were trapped in a permanent night.

The most unsettling work in the exhibition, Mike Nelson's *To the Memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, occupies two adjoining rooms, the walls of which have been gouged and scratched as though a wild beast – perhaps a rhinoceros – had been held captive in the space. Resembling piles of animal dung, mounds of dirt are scattered along the floor. In the centre of the first room is a large open wooden hatch leading to the floor below, as though the creature had escaped and could return at any moment. The installation's title refers to a dedication found in Jorge Louis Borges' short story 'There are More Things', which centres on the protagonist's encounter with a

malevolent, unknown presence: something felt, yet unseen. Nelson restages this encounter, casting the viewer in the place of the protagonist.



Mike Nelson, *To the Memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, 1999, 2008, mixed media.
Courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery, London and Galleria Franco Noero, Torino.
Photo: © Stephen White

The only architects participating in the exhibition are Yoshigaru Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kaijima who form the Japanese architectural duo Atelier Bow-Wow. Their intervention, called *Life Tunnel*, is a steel plate passage joining two gallery spaces and running diagonally along and inclined floor. Narrow at the entrance and progressively wider towards the exit, the tunnel places a constraint on the human body such that the visitors are forced to crawl or bow down and can only gradually straighten out as they navigate their way towards the exit in an imitation of the human life cycle. The tunnel also extends upwards where an opening at the top offers views from below as well as from above. Another work designed specifically with the Hayward's architecture in mind is Michael Beutler's *Sandwiches, Dobbels and Burgers*, an improvisational work constructed out of coloured paper and mesh that begins with the gallery space and works its way outwards following the parameters of the surrounding walls and ceiling.



Atelier Bow-Wow, *Life Tunnel*, 2008, steel plate.
Courtesy Atelier Bow-Wow Photo: © Stephen White

Yet another artist who has created a micro-environment within the pre-existing space of the gallery is the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto. A membrane-like enclosure filled with aromatic spices, *Stone Lip*, *Pepper Tits*, *Clove Love*, *Fog Frog* evokes the architecture of the human body and invites the viewer to explore the interior. While visually interesting, the womb or vaginal-like space of the structure, coupled with the title seems to emerge from a traditionally heterosexual male-normative perspective and lacks a critical edge. Indeed, it seems problematic for the male artist to address issues surrounding the female body without lapsing into objectification. A more successful exploration of this theme that comes to mind is Mona Hatoum's work, *Corps Etranger* (1994), in which the artist inserted an endoscopic camera inside her body, creating detailed close-up images of it and its internal mechanisms.

Overall, *Psycho Buildings* succeeds in opening up the viewer's experience of the architecture of the surrounding space and of highlighting the porous boundary

between art and architecture. As a regular visitor to the gallery pondering the architectural theme of the exhibition, I found myself noticing for the first time some of the subtler configurations of the building, the way in which the curve of some of the walls play off the sharp angles of others, the way in which the sloped floor serves to connect otherwise autonomous spaces, and, most of all the way in which the rooms of the gallery fit together as a harmonious whole. Yet, to this reviewer's mind at least, it seems as though the organisation of this exhibition in conjunction with the anniversary of the building appears as somewhat of an afterthought insofar as many of the artworks, while strong on their own, could just as easily have been installed elsewhere. While not intended explicitly to address the gallery's architecture, it seems to me that the Dan Flavin retrospective shown in 2006 proved to be more revealing of the internal structure of the Hayward space, illuminating central features of the interior that otherwise take a back seat to the artworks on display. Nonetheless, the curatorial team at the Hayward, and, most of all, the artists who contributed to the exhibition should be applauded for standing up to the challenge presented by the very broad theme of responding to architecture in such a general sense.

***Psycho Buildings: Artists Take On Architecture*, with essays by Brian Dillon, Jane Rendell and Ralph Rugoff, texts by Francis McKee, Tumelo Mosaka, Midori Matsui, Brian Dillon, Paulo Herkenhoff, Francesco Manacorda, Tom Morton, Miwon Kwon, David Greene and Iain Sinclair (London: Hayward Publishing, 2008). 184 pp, hardback, 19 b&w, 173 col. ill., £34.99**

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