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Contingencies: Visualizing Tensions  
Between Contemporary Critical Theory and Canadian Art Practice

Susan Douglas

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in  
the Humanities  
Program

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**Abstract**  
**CONTINGENCIES: VISUALISING TENSIONS BETWEEN**  
**CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY AND**  
**CANADIAN ART PRACTICE**

Susan Douglas  
Concordia University, 1998

This thesis represents a practical exposition of some of the most urgent debates in contemporary art history. Focussing on deconstruction, formalism, and cultural theory as critical methodologies within the theory of art, it examines a range of cultural expressions and contemporary currents of thought relative to the problem of vision and visibility. As a terrain of enquiry whose key words emerge in this account as representation, reception, and identity politics, vision and visibility (here called visualism) in the literature refers to four things: a critical standpoint, a rejection or retreat from authority, a symbol or iconology, visibility as alterity. Thus from the perspective of new enquiries visualism emerges as a key category of postmodern analysis. As a discourse, it shapes the contingencies that, in this assessment would productively reformulate the relationship of theory with current visual art practices.

The problem of the visual is at the same time the problem of a split between art and cultural theory, also between art production and the theory of art. Hence it can be productively reformulated as a model for performing or negotiating a form of disruptive linkage; this is what brings this study to a

critical sense of the potentialities of thinking beyond postmodern representation as a strategic counterproduction. The work, then, articulates several implicated connections. For example, the linguistic and graphic elements at work in the interpretation of visual texts; the materiality of art-objects and the situatedness of experience that co-determine artistic production and the reception of meaning; a sense of process that renders theory as contingency. i.e. as indeterminate, mythical, and continually in flux. The work advances by thinking the conjunctions between individual art theorists (Jacques Derrida, Michael Fried, and Svetlana Alpers) and representative Canadian artists: Geneviève Cadieux, Attila Richard Lukacs, and Robert Houle. Since this dissertation expresses a series of possibilities beyond conventional aesthetic and discursive reductions, a process, a theory, and a method, its best description is as a conduit for new alignments, meanings, conditions, and effects.

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## Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	1
Chapter 1	
Three Definitions and a Method (Desperately Seeking Discourse)	7
Chapter 2	
Come and See: Introducing Derrida and Cadieux	32
Chapter 3	
An Encounter: Michael Fried and Attila Richard Lukacs	69
Chapter 4	
The Textured Wor(l)d: Houle/Alpers	124
Endpoint	155
References	158



## **List of Illustrations**

- Fig.2.1 Geneviève Cadieux, LA BLESSURE D'UNE CICATRICE OU LES ANGES (1987)  
Fig.2.2 Geneviève Cadieux, AMOUR AVEUGLE (1992)  
Fig.2.3 Geneviève Cadieux, BLUE FEAR (1990)  
Fig.2.4 Geneviève Cadieux, LE CORPS DU CIEL (1990)  
Fig.2.5 Geneviève Cadieux, BLUES (1990)  
Fig.2.6 Geneviève Cadieux, TROU DE MEMOIRE, LA BEAUTÉ INATTENDU (1988)  
Fig.2.6.1 Geneviève Cadieux, TROU DE MEMOIRE, LA BEAUTÉ INATTENDU, detail  
Fig.2.7 Geneviève Cadieux, PORTRAIT DE FAMILLE (1991)  
Fig.2.7.1 Geneviève Cadieux, PORTRAIT DE FAMILLE, detail  
Fig.2.7.2 Geneviève Cadieux, PORTRAIT DE FAMILLE, detail  
Fig.2.8 Geneviève Cadieux, LA VOIE LACTÉE (1992)  
Fig.2.9 Man Ray, À L'HEURE DE L'OBSERVATOIRE - LES AMOUREUX (1932-1934)  
Fig.2.10 Geneviève Cadieux, LA FÊLURE, AU CHOEUR DES CORPS (1990)  
Fig.3.1 Attila Lukacs, 1-800-MIKE (1989)  
Fig.3.2 Attila Lukacs, YOUNG SPARTANS CHALLENGE THE BOYS TO A FIGHT (1988)  
Fig.3.3 Edgar Degas, SPARTAN GIRLS CHALLENGE THE BOYS TO A FIGHT (c.1860)  
Fig.3.4 Michelangelo Caravaggio, CALLING OF ST MATTHEW (1599-1560)  
Fig.3.5 Attila Lukacs, TRUE NORTH (1989)  
Fig.3.5.1 Attila Lukacs, TRUE NORTH, detail  
Fig.3.6 Attila Lukacs, VARIETIES OF LOVE: ADAM AND STEVE (1992)  
Fig.3.7 Attila Lukacs, TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW (1991)  
Fig.3.8 Rembrandt van Rijn, NIGHT WATCH (1642)  
Fig.3.9 Attila Lukacs, WHERE THE FINEST YOUNG MEN... (1987)  
Fig.3.10 Attila Lukacs, WAS WEISS DER ESEL VON MORD (1991)  
Fig.3.11 Jacques-Louis David, BÉLISARE, RECONNU PAR UN SOLDAT QUI AVAIT  
SERVI SOUS LUI AU MOMENT QU'UNE FEMME LUI FAIT L'AUMÔNE (1781)  
Fig.3.12.1-4 Clockwise: After Jean-Baptiste Greuze, UNE JEUNE FILLE QUI ENVOIE UN  
BAISER PAR LA FÊNETRE, APPUYÉE SUR DES FLEURS, QU'ELLE BRISE  
(1769); after Jean-Baptiste Greuze, LA TRICOTEUSE ENDORMIE (1759); Jean-  
Baptiste Greuze, UNE JEUNE FILLE QUI PLEURE SON OISEAU MORT (1765);  
Jean-Baptiste-Siméon-Chardin, THE CARD CASTLE (c.1737)  
Fig.3.13 Attila Richard Lukacs, THE TEA HOUSE (1990)

- Fig.4.1 Robert Houle. HOCHELAGA: PLAN (1992)
- Fig.4.2 Robert Houle. HOCHELAGA: CIRCLE OF SWEETGRASS. detail
- Fig.4.3 Robert Houle. HOCHELAGA: HOCHELAGA. detail
- Fig.4.4 Robert Houle. HOCHELAGA: EXTINCT/DISTINCT. detail
- Fig.4.5 Robert Houle. PARFLECHES FOR THE LAST SUPPER (1983)
- Fig.4.6 Robert Houle. EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT INDIANS FROM  
A TO Z (1985)
- Fig.4.6.1 Houle, EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT INDIANS FROM A TO  
Z. detail
- Fig.4.7 Robert Houle. KANATA (1992)
- Fig.4.7.1 Robert Houle. KANATA. detail
- Fig.4.8 Benjamin West. THE DEATH OF GENERAL WOLFE (1770)
- Fig.4.9 Robert Houle. THE PLACE WHERE GOD LIVES (1989)
- Fig.4.9.1-4 Robert Houle. THE PLACE WHERE GOD LIVES, details
- Fig.4.10 Johannes Vermeer. THE GEOGRAPHER (n.d.)
- Fig.4.11 Johannes Vermeer. THE ASTRONOMER (1668)
- Fig.4.12 Johannes Vermeer. SOLDIER AND LAUGHING GIRL (n.d.)
- Fig.4.13 Johannes Vermeer. THE ART OF PAINTING (n.d.)

## **Preface**

The debates and critiques of vision and visibility as a historical and theoretical field of academic enquiry are by now well-established. The discursive circulation of critical reformulations of the "gaze," "the glance," or "the look," recast to position what the intellectual historian Martin Jay, for example, calls "the denigration of vision," or the cultural critic Barbara Stafford "the visualization of knowledge," or the art historian Jonathan Crary "the technologies of sight," suggests, by reference to representation as a resource for enquiries into the historical conditions of sight as retinal or imaginary, that vision and visibility comes into prominence as a vital and dynamic document of the activation of continuous developments. On a number of distinct levels that encompass the epistemic, the cultural, and the ideological it acquires theoretical value relative to philosophical, social, and aesthetic experience. In academic production, whether understood as a history whose trajectory extends from Brunelleschi's optical projections to Surrealism's visceral "opticality" to a "beyond" organized as starting from the association of cognition with sight, questions of vision and visibility in the current intellectual climate most often express a retreat from visual authority (ocularcentrism), and at the same time an attempt to come to terms with the persistence of an "either/or" in debates surrounding visual and cultural theory. This literature is compelling because it registers the impact of what has sometimes been experienced as part of a more generalized economy of "crisis." Reading the crisis is what this study is about. I read "visualism" as a theoretical and necessary disturbance raising questions of art in the possibility of crisis itself. In general terms, what is presented here is an active model -- a configuration of information -- that ultimately forms part of the broader contemporary articulation of the necessity to register a more adequate definition of the relations between theoretical texts and aesthetic practices.

From the perspective of new enquiries, visualism as a key category of analysis permits movement in the zone of continuities and discontinuities between visibility and invisibility, as well as play between literary and visual representational traditions. Visualism as a guiding intellectual term passes from the specificities of disciplinary codes into a more general cultural theory fastened to the cultural politics of representation by the

destabilization of the sense of sight. In the literature, this "visual" constitution of culture, and with it theories of the visible, insistently defines itself as unstable, provisional, and fluid; it takes its particular sense of unsolvable uncertainty from the larger vocabulary of postmodern discursive practice. Impacted by poststructuralism and deconstruction generally, by social and cultural theory especially, the character of studies that recommend an informed withdrawal from the hegemony of sight is constituted as an address to questions that are always already destined to remain partial, selective and abstract (Jenks 1995, 8; Brennan and Jay 1996). Accordingly, visual culture is discussed in a number of different senses evoking abstract and material worlds through a number of persistent themes: for example, the force of technology as a property of culture and/or a philosophical aim, perception as a moment for the history of painting, and so on. What this brings to the present discursive context is a critical sense of the potentialities of thinking beyond postmodern representation as a strategic counterproduction. For this reason, the problematic of visualism as the philosophical, methodological, or epistemological enunciation of a new, playful or disruptive logic of identity, or as a polemical kind of historical memory is not at issue in these pages, at least not directly. The question of visualism as I want to cast it is one of a specific body of knowledge whose distinctive features to my mind require more complete, nuanced, and subtle interpretation. Visualism read as a discourse would productively be reformulated from the standpoint of current visual art practices.

Although there are examples that would disagree, the fact remains that, in the literature at least, for the most part, and where intellectuals are concerned, the end of art is where theory begins. Examples? Jacques Derrida's recourse to sixteenth and nineteenth century drawings in his *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, Michael Fried's seventeenth and eighteenth century pictures in his *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Svetlana Alpers's historical illustrations in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth-Century*. Some of the strongest cognitive axes of modern scholarship, visualism prominent among them, render an obvious attachment to historical, rather than contemporary figures and production practices. What implicitly communicates itself from the side of contemporary theory as this articulates to visualism is a wariness of the distinctive properties of surfaces and objects that has profound historical causes and tends to favour speculation. An obvious consequence is that contemporary production practices are absorbed into studies of visual culture as if they had nothing to contribute to a rethinking of cultural studies beyond the

complexities of immediate experience, or, figuratively speaking, the fluctuating forms of interconnection and variation in empirical speech put to the service of race, gender and the rest. While this is no doubt true to some degree, it is also true that significant commentary on the topic of postmodern artistic production is being generated by the critical practices of artists such as Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Parveen Adams, and Michael Wong. Their practices afford an encounter with visualism pointing to the potentialities of seeing theory and practice as interrelated but not necessarily connected.

The multiplicity of inscriptions in the terrain of visual culture is not limited to articulating points at the intersection of critical spaces, however, nor are its textualities (its politics and its philosophies, its movements and its *praxis*) clearly defined. Rather, what current critical reflection insists on is an *event*, always plural, often already performing and/or negotiating some form of disruptive linkage. As I will argue in this study, the aspect of binding the place of aesthetics and political action is relevant to poststructuralist theory if this is to produce the possibility of developments among and between critical theory and visual culture. And, if anything is to be gained from an attempt to articulate the wider implications of the theoretical conjunction of theory and practice as a strategic counterproduction in the fraught terrain of contemporary culture, it is perhaps an understanding of how visualism delivers a promising explication of current artistic practice in Canada. In turn, Canadian visualism as a manifestation of pertinent local, vernacular, and subaltern identifications might theoretically raise to issue the terms of a postmodernity globally defined. My hypothesis, put another way, is as follows: through dramatic contestations of the making of history as the subject matter of distinct visual genres what becomes apparent is the theoretical necessity of responding to a discursive situation that leaves intact the notion that current theory and contemporary practice are at opposite poles. This insight, then, provides the basis of a sustained attempt to come up with a creative new formulation designed to function also as a displacement of historical themes and issues in the representation of modern art.

All of which is to say, then, that this is a poststructuralist study, and one that I hope will be read within the context of profound historical shifts away from what Terry Eagleton has called "centralized institutions" of power in what concerns questions of aesthetics (1990, 27), and towards the power of individual subjectivities, at least insofar as these pose an ideological challenge to a situation of polarized strategies for examining the relations between images and words, between verbal and visual meanings as regards visual theory. This study examines the interrelation between three current theoretical

tendencies in visual interpretation (deconstruction; phenomenology/ formalism; socio-cultural history) and three specific art practices that test the theories described. The theorists in question are Jacques Derrida, Michael Fried, and Svetlana Alpers. Their work is critically assessed relative, respectively, to the art practices of Geneviève Cadieux (b. Montréal, 1955), Attila Richard Lukacs (b. Alberta, 1962), and Robert Houle (b. Manitoba, 1947). As noted earlier, the link between theory and practice in the terrain of visualism is significant insofar as it presents the possibility of a productive reformulation between what can be interpreted as antithetical concepts and categories. Hence, in thinking outside the binarisms of categorical schemes and classifications, and articulating two forms of competence, this study makes a distinct contribution to knowledge in the field. Even so, asking pertinent questions about the interrelatedness of theory and art practice might be perceived as a necessary and not sufficient reason to admit this text into the art historical canon. What I am attempting to articulate, develop, and evolve is a "performative" text: one that takes notions and enacts them. A discourse, then, about the particular relations of visual and verbal practices which, read as a coincidental encounter, brings together first, the linguistic and graphic elements at work in the interpretation of visual texts; then, the materiality of art-objects and the situatedness of experience that co-determine artistic production and the reception of meaning; and last, a sense of process that renders theory as contingency, i.e. as indeterminate, continually in flux. The aim of this study is to express a series of possibilities beyond conventional aesthetic and discursive reductions: a process, a theory, and a method. my project proposes a conduit for new and strategic alignments of the meanings, conditions, and effects of texts.

My argument is that visualism is a discourse whose strategic utility and theoretical effectivity still requires adequate definition and at least provisional assessment. To put it succinctly, my investigation takes account of the possibilities of a theoretical and necessary "enmeshedness" among and between ideas and artistic phenomena, defining itself as a zone of relays and interpenetrations whose specific aim is to challenge the typification of theory and practice as mutually opposed. Each specific section of the text in a different way enacts the negotiations and compromises that are involved in rethinking visualism's explanatory potential. In the first chapter, "Three Definitions and a Method (Desperately Seeking Discourse)" I introduce three keywords -- discourse, visualism, contingency -- that articulate the analysis to follow. This section also functions to admit a limited sense of how the question of interpretation generally constellates relative to representation. This is achieved in discussing the relationship between art history and

cultural studies as sites within which visualism's discursivity circulates. The chapter closes with a discussion of the implications of visualism as a place where questions of boundaries between "history" and "theory" might be raised.

The major focus of Chapter 2, "Come and See: Introducing Derrida and Cadieux," is a theoretical encounter between photography and deconstruction. Working within Foucault's historical analysis of discourse, it "begins" with the conceptualization of discourse as subject to scrutiny from without as from within, from which it follows that consciousness should emerge as a major theme for theory and for art. Accordingly, this chapter represents an investigation into complexities of aesthetic/theoretical conjunctions as they are defined in the relations between Geneviève Cadieux's photographic practice and Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. This discussion on one hand deals with the "sight" of the visionary, sensibility, and the necessary theoretical incompleteness of the subject/object position in representation to suggest deconstruction as a condition of possibility for the art object; on the other it conceptualizes the traps and contradictions this implies for the potentialities of material production, and for the issue of politics and representation; the question of visualism as a discursivity emerges in full force and all its relevance.

Responding to deconstruction and to photographic practice points to a contradiction that situates the question of visualism between theory and art. Hence the next question becomes, where do these representations come from? Chapter 3, "An Encounter: Michael Fried and Attila Richard Lukacs" investigates the ways visualism locates itself historically to emerge as a precondition of mediated representation. Within the terms of a discursive practice defined by Foucault, it "modifies" the argument by posing it as a question of history and of theory. Issues of modernism and its legacy in theories of visual culture are investigated by means of the description of an "absorptive," or counter-theatrical looking that Fried presents in the book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Fried writes that the aesthetic has universalizing moments; in introducing the distinctively historical features of a "queer" vision, the artist Attila Richard Lukacs challenges the event of criticism's cultural authority.

The problem of structure pries at any simple classification of the distinction between theory and art revealing, in visualism as everywhere, a subjective element at work in any self-critical process of "destabilizing" the text. Extending this conceptualization for the third and last chapter, "The Textured Wor(l)d: Houle/Alpers,"

the critical potentialities of visualism as discursivity, and the relation of knowledge/power are called into question, to be interrogated as issues that touch upon the more general problematic of cultural codes. In these terms, the reality of an exemplary postcolonial situation brought to bear on visualism by the Native artist Robert Houle is investigated as it reveals the discursive limits of Svetlana Alpers's critical cultural theory presented in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth-Century*. For Alpers science, philosophy, and history emerge as important pathways through which the visibility of a culture can be read to elicit a new level of signification. In demonstrating through Houle how such a reading is subject to the processes of representation, this section poses questions of visualism's accommodation to a situation wherein it becomes imbricated with continuing processes and practices problematized by the term "post-colonial." Broadly formulated, Alpers's modality of the visual is called "the mapping impulse:" it produces a new geography, one registering complex encounters between self and other and one that, in its very complications and difficulties, suggests pertinent and theoretically necessary new destinations for both theory and visual practice. In its linkage with visualism, it makes a necessary intervention by interposing itself between traditional art-historical elaborations of image-making as the transcription of perception, and newer descriptions of art-making as a feature of social power. Following through the consequences of this analysis activates a crucial area of tension in the discourses of the visual imagination, at the same time pointing to what is exciting and sometimes exhausting in the always dynamic, sometimes contradictory, and still vitally uncertain space of an articulation of critical reflection, theory, representation, and art practice.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Three Definitions and a Method (Desperately Seeking Discourse)**

Discourses are constituted in disciplinary mechanisms. This, in part, is Michel Foucault's impressive theoretical legacy to us all. And this dissertation, which considers discourse as a signifying practice and historical modes of analysis beyond their historical institutionalization in linking aspects of art history, cultural studies, gender theory and critical theory foregrounds and thus contests discourse. *L'ordre du discours* (translated in English as "The Discourse on Language" [1972]) is, among other things, an enquiry into the very structures of the will to truth in society, and an exploration of discursive systems. Foucault identifies discourse as a system of exclusion, prohibition and rejection. He explicates the signs, relationships, figures, and he structures mechanisms that operate to control and delimit knowledge. The definition is as subtle as it is complex. For Foucault, discursivity stakes out a place for limits and possibilities. And so it circulates, as he turns signification against itself. With Foucault in mind, I come to visualism's contingency. But first, what is a discourse?

#### ***Definition 1: Discourse***

By discourse what I refer to is a Foucauldian organization of knowledge. For Foucault, disciplines constitute a system of control.<sup>1</sup> What is advanced is that socio-historical groups and institutions constitute a system of control mobilized by means of discourse, a communicative practice expressing their interests. Discourses are at a remove from the rest of the world, and work towards this end. They present themselves as transparent, as espousing simple truths, as rational and systematic and therefore objective. Discourses would have us believe that their tenets are natural, and that what is in fact doctrine should be accepted as given, this is to say, that they are built on unassailable foundations. Foucault wants to set out the rules by which discourses operate.

<sup>1</sup> The section which follows represents a synthesis of some of the key points in "The Discourse on Language" as they appear in my notes for my introductory lectures in "Methods of Art History," a course I taught during the academic session winter 1994. For the sake of smoother exposition I have omitted specific page references.

His aim is to make it clear that there are no givens, that where discourses appear as natural, or transparent, it is because they are working hard to cover up that fact that they are opaque. His intent is to make us see how they operate through institutions whose aim is the will to truth, a will to impose their truth, a will to be in power. In consequence, discourses always also define a position relative to powerlessness.

The operations by which discourses systematically control the representation are, in the first instance, through commentary, which organizes how an audience sees and says. The second is by drawing attention to the authority of authors, a process that rests on investing authors with the magical status of possessing the ability to pronounce the truth. The third is control through selection, which governs who will receive information and what attitudes they are expected to hold. Selection itself can be broken down into three categories. One, covering objects, deals with who is selected to speak to the audience and what is his or her role will be; this one relies on the ritualization of the word. Another, concerning ritual, admits fellowships of discourse, elite groups of individuals -- art historians, for instance -- who are those who produce, manage, control and reproduce discourse according to strict regulations. They are the ones who decide who, what, when, where, and why. Diffuse doctrinal groups can be used to align given persons with certain utterances, thereby replacing or excluding the words of others. Still another process of selection works to celebrate particular subjects. Selection is managed through secrecy and disclosure, through a process of mystification, an official statement, a "proper," whereby that which is noisily dominant, or at least centrally privileged, is naturalized and factualized, in other words, made to seem neutral, real, and true.

In setting these rules down, Foucault enables recognition of the ways in which discourses operate to maintain their exclusivity. He maintains that mastery in a discourse is a narrative of power in which all is made to seem unified: Facts are assembled, data is organized, along a line that talks *from* and *to*, and in accordance with a linear trajectory. The point is to make alternatives "unseeable" and "unthinkable." Hence an invisible but binding contract exists between speakers and their audiences, a rhetorical contract that, if things are arranged in particular ways, will be sanctioned. Also, "Whether it is the philosophy of a founding subject, a philosophy of originating experience or a philosophy of universal mediation, discourse is really only an activity, of writing in the first case, of reading in the second and exchange in the third. This exchange, this writing, this reading, never involve anything but signs. Discourse thus nullifies itself, in reality, in placing itself at the disposal of the signifier" (1972, 228). Questions can be asked about discourse in

relation to agency and process, to affinities and to dissimilarities because, and fundamentally, discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, in Barrett 1991, 130).

It is with this definition of discourse that I will be investigating visualism -- a intellectual field that, broadly defined, denotes cultural representations at play and political representations at stake. What I take from Foucault is that all discourses are subject to internal and external rules. They rely on consensus to master conflict. The vitality of Foucault's position lies in the disclosure that truth-claims are always motivated. A discourse is a movement of tight reciprocity. Read from the standpoint of discourse theory four properties define visualism -- signification, originality, unity and creativity -- which is to say that the academic current to which it belongs, visual culture, is always implicated in operations of regulatory powers already long established. In this view, and even granted the power Foucault confers upon reverse discourse, visualism would focus on the morphology of its generation, on a linear, progressive trajectory, on marks of originality, and on a wealth of hidden ideas. In contrast Foucault's own genealogical analysis centers on discontinuity, contingency and materiality: his is a system based on a homogeneous series of discontinuous events systematized outside time, space and the subject, and premised on the element of chance as it impacts on events. Yet even granted all this, and even in its articulation with the sociological push towards a politics of location set within an academic framework, an articulation that finds expression in Foucault's essay, the emergence of visualism as a key rhetorical/theoretical space might be said to drive a wedge between the stable and comforting structures of academic convention and organized knowledge. In this limited sense it is like the panopticon Foucault will describe in his text *Surveiller et punir* (1975).

But I'm getting ahead of myself. What needs to be retained for the moment is that Foucault's sense of discourse enables me to locate visualism as a discursive practice, one that articulates at the juncture of disciplines. And, precisely because it establishes itself as an interim space, it opens itself to the possibilities, the contingencies, of constructive redefinition.

### ***Definition 2: Visualism***

What is visualism? The words "vision and visibility" were first used by Hal Foster to describe a point of view opened up in 1988 with the gathering of scholars around a publication bearing the same name. What "vision and visibility" defines is a historical term

and a subject of enquiry "between the mechanisms of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations" (Foster 1988, ix). In other words, it refers to a series of studies in sight as optical fact and sight as perceptual and historical phenomenon.

Visual theories and practices articulate the complex realities of the modern era. The interrogation of vision as scientificity is the questioning of a dominant paradigm of knowledge at the same time as it is the questioning of sight as the most important sense. To say, for example, that something is "lucid," to respond to a statement with the words, "I see," is indicative of the prominence sight as a faculty maintains in the culture, where metaphors of sight are fundamental. One of the building blocks of this tradition is the Cartesian division of mind and body which established a hierarchy for knowledge that helped to institute sight as dominant among the sensoria (Jay 1988; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1996; Howes 1991). At first Plato, then Descartes, may have distrusted specular knowledge (Jay 1994, 76), but soon the habit equating visual experience with a disinterested standpoint towards the world led to a culture of viewing, i.e, to what the French intellectual Guy Debord would call "the society of the spectacle" ([1967], 1983). To describe the spectacle, Debord defines "a world vision which has become objectified" (1983 I, 5), mediated by images detached from concrete life: Debord contends that subjects are absorbed into and simultaneously consume the spectacular order (1983 I, 8). For his part Foucault undertook a complementary study of the apparatuses of surveillance. His description of the panopticon's formations, functions and forces shares affinities with Debord's unique sense of the specular.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the field of "vision and visibility," now concerning sight as an instrument and technique, and sight as a representation of imaginative or embodied reality, has gained prominence as a theoretical-philosophical terrain whose boundaries must, if not be entirely reconfigured, then at least scrutinized and re-assessed. The visual impulse is always compelling. Only now, cast as Rosalind Krauss's "anti-vision," Norman Bryson's "anamorphosis," or Christine Buci-Glucksmann's "*la folie du voir*," and "*le regard baroque*," its context has shifted and, broadly speaking, it situates a series of investigations into the historical archives of the culture's visual insurgence, sublimation and excess. Thus structured, the terrain of the visual emerges as not just an object of reflection and knowledge but also as a very specific discursive form; in Roland Barthes's

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of this point see Jay 1994, chap. 7.

words, as "a meaning according to the period."<sup>3</sup> The challenge, then, is to begin to give it sharper definition.

This history of ocularcentrism, or the cultural domination of vision in the history of western understanding, has been most extensively detailed by the intellectual historian Martin Jay (1988; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1996). Locating visual knowledge along a uneven trajectory from its discovery and practical application in the Italian Quattrocento to its special appeal in postmodern production practice, Jay's important first contribution is to make clear that the fiction of the eye and the problematic of representation are intimately conjoined. Others have supplied still more relevant detail (Jenks 1995, 1-25). Since these investigations border on the exhaustive, and would deserve separate study, they will not be further discussed in these pages. But neither, of course, will such critical interventions be ploughed under. My specific interest in this dissertation is in amplifying and extending debates around the "scopic regime of modernity" (Jay 1988) as they are explicated, reinforced and intensified from the sometimes very different perspective of the discipline of art history, and art practice. I will propose that current practice is at least potentially a powerful force with which to encounter the cumulative effects of anti-ocularcentrism. Therefore, in moving towards interrogating culture's theorized sight, I would like to briefly review some influential and contextualizing critiques of the visual, especially those which concern fundamental issues of sight in its equation with knowledge production.

### *(Visualism) and Feminism's Gaze*

Feminist theory especially has aligned western ocularcentrism with a patriarchal model of experience. Feminist interventions pose questions of the domain of vision relative to women's difference, stressing women's subjection to a dominant "male gaze." Some of the most interesting critiques have been generated from the side of cultural theory, where the feminist critique stresses that the visual serves an objectifying function, and that patriarchal culture provides for the detachment and autonomy a distancing vision allows by gendering it as masculine. In other words, for feminism, the potential of vision lies in an active exploration of the modalities by which woman is constituted in culture as the object and not the subject of desire. This issue has been especially important to investigations of the cinema.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "Taking Sides," in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 164.

Laura Mulvey drove the point home when she wrote the essay, destined to become the keystone of a book by the same title, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" ([1975] 1989). Drawing from Freud and Lacan, and thus from psychoanalysis, Mulvey challenged the foundational myths behind the pleasures of cinematic looking. Her intent was to break with and thus leave behind (but without entirely rejecting) constitutive expectations of the image as a sign of erotic pleasure and unpleasure. She distinguished two drives defined in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, both necessary to create and maintain desire as it is projected on the cinematic screen: scopophilia and narcissism. Scopophilia defines the erotic pleasure of looking unobserved; it codes the look as potentially voyeuristic, as an exploitative practice that makes individuals over into objects, controlling them by means of the gaze. Narcissism refers to the pleasure of looking at oneself. Scopophilia and narcissism together, Mulvey argued, are intrinsic to the cinematic experience. Scopophilia drives the narrative: as the observer sits in the auditorium, looking into a private world that appears to be produced expressly for their eyes, and from which they are separated, the filmic event draws them in; the erotic instinct is satisfied by means of a fascination with the performers on screen. Narcissism presents a contrary aspect of the viewing experience, yet one that is equally compelling. In mainstream cinema, the private world of the screen demands the repression of the subject's own exhibitionism; this is satisfied through the projection of the body onto an outside object, the substitute ego -- i.e. in an identification developed by means of likeness and recognition premised on an implied anthropocentrism.

Mulvey sought to fix the processes of transformation by which the gaze circulates power as knowledge. Desire, for Mulvey, was conceptualized in heterosexual, and masculine terms. Mulvey observed, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (p.19). The gaze that produces the cinematic apparatus and controls the technologies of reproduction is, for her, a masculinist gaze, one that produces a psychic density for male subjects whose critical character is to establish difference between men and women in the culture. This is played out cinematically by means of a film's story line, which casts women as erotic performers. The women are in this sense objects of desire for the male protagonists on screen and for their off-screen doubles, the spectators. Both of these parties will achieve "a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (p.20).

A ruling patriarchal ideology colludes with specific psychic structures to confirm woman's status as other. In the symbolic order women's symbolic status is represented

through an unconscious yet visible absence: woman is a castrated man. In Freud, the penis refers specifically to the male organ (although in Lacan it does not). Woman's lack of a penis relegates her to the realm of the imaginary, that is to say, to the "outside" of the symbolic order of language and law. While she may temporarily exist through her (male) child, she cannot herself come to language; her function, constituted by the dominant order and subjected to it, is to inscribe difference through sexuality, to be actively displayed by men as the material evidence of the primal and essential trauma of their (potential) castration. Entry into the symbolic, for men, is mediated by woman as mother, yet her very image provokes the anxiety of separation, so she must be controlled and dominated in the culture. Woman has no desire according to the phallogocentric order, Mulvey advances, it is "subjugated to her image as the bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (p.15).

Although this may appear to be a lengthy digression, my point in mentioning Mulvey is to come to some of the ideas that lie at the core of current debates on visuality. The first of these is that sight reifies and subordinates. However, subsequent generations of theorists and critics, herself included, have complicated this point of view.<sup>4</sup> The visual now presents a space for strategic alliances. One such is worked out by producing female pleasure. Especially in the area of queer studies, for example, the "problem" of ocular seduction has consolidated a variety of theoretical feminist positions (Gamman and Marshment 1989; Fuss 1991; *Bad Object Choices* 1991; also Silverman 1988; Kristeva 1982). On another register, the specular has been given over to other sensoria, especially at the hands of Luce Irigaray. In this light it is important to see a "beyond" to the polarized thinking that characterizes the logic of visuality. This opens up the question of another kind of looking.

### ***(Visualism) and the Other***

Others, especially postcolonial critics, have contributed to the literature by exploring the positive and negative aspects of its implicit relations of domination and submission that inheres in the gaze. In the writings of Franz Fanon, for example, the brute fact of colonialism intertwines sight and difference. The problematizing of the role

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Monique Wittig and Michele Le Doeuff were among some of the most prominent discussants of the link between ocularcentrism and phallogocentrism. For Mulvey's extension of "Visual Pleasure" see "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)" in Mulvey 1989, pp. 29-38.

of observation in its formation relative to subjects of knowledge and objects of study is also particularly prominent in more current anthropological writing, where the question of experience and perception takes shape against the background of larger institutional arrangements. Particularly in the field of ethnography, "objective" analysis has always gone hand in hand with "description" based on an accepted "view" of scientific activity produced by an underlying sense of the truth of vision. Current wisdom stresses that the role of observation in anthropological research functions to "textualize" reality, which is to say that it interprets an interest in data collection and cultural description as a form of cultural representation. Cultural description, data collection, and research based on participant-observation makes visible, explaining, containing, and determining subjects in the field. As a cluster, these studies are marked off in the literature as "visualism" (Taylor 1994). It signifies the notion of a circuit of knowledge that refuses to resolve itself neatly (see Clifford 1987; 1990; Marcus 1986; Howes 1991; Townsend-Gault 1992; Taylor 1994).

### *(Visualism) and/as Discursivity*

Where intellectual history and cultural critique run together is in the more open state of mind brought on by postmodernism, where visualism has achieved discursive circulation as a metaphor for the questioning of visual presence. Vision and visibility locate the thinking of a discontinuity between visual modernism and its reification in the culture. Again, it is difficult to characterize this history in a few lines. But, in what concerns its institutional formation as a disciplinary field, elaborations of its problematic can be found in the work of a wide range of authors from both Europe and America. In one set of theoretical developments that focus around identity, difference, location, power, and representation it marks the social formations and representational practices of alterity as the idea of sex, race, and gender difference. In this regard, the work of Mary Kelly, Mary Ann Doane, bell hooks, Richard Dyer, Kobena Mercer is significant. At another level -- within a generalized logic of representation that has been called the "logistics of the image" -- the history of the regimes of the visual is also cast as a site for exploring new technologies of perception. Think for example of Paul Virilio's machined vision, or Donna Haraway's cyborg point of view.

Critiques and debates around vision and visibility have taken place across the pages of journals as varied as *Screen*, *Block*, *Art History*, *the Oxford Art Journal*, *Representations*, *New Formations*, *Semiotica*, and *C Theory*; by now they are a familiar



part of conferences and symposia. What emerges from the literature is a double sense of visibility which both participates in and deconstructs the gaze as an expression of Truth. And what emerges from the literature is also that visualism attaches to representation across two equally meaningful registers: one, as it is represented in and constructed by works of art; the other, through the artwork's address to the viewer, i.e. in the object's intersection with the social construction of gender, class, race, and/or sexuality. Involving an examination of the confrontation and dialogue between aesthetics and social theory as well as questions of interpretation and theoretical models of the reception of art, visualism explores the historicity of vision at the same time as examining the visuality of differing art practices.

Such is the proliferation of its discourses that visualisms inflects modernism and postmodernism both. Thus, insofar as written publications are concerned, visualism is a boom industry. In Jay's words, "At a time when the constructed nature of the body in general has become a commonplace of contemporary scholarship, 'the eye' and 'the gaze' (or 'the look') have been opened to historical and cultural interpretations, which undermine their allegedly universal character. Whole theories have been built on distinctions between 'the gaze' and other types of seeing, such as 'the glance,' or distinctions between 'panoptic,' 'virtual,' and 'mobilized' gazes" (Brennan and Jay 1995, 3). In what concerns its relation to art practice, so strong is the fascination of "the discursive limits of sight" as an object of reflection and scholarly attention that, especially in contrast to postmodern art's abject forms, visualism as a whole has been jettisoned as itself a species of authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> Made to function in a didactic, narrative or purifying capacity, visualism constitutes rather than brings down power. This is how it crosses through one zone of discursivity.

Yet in densely meaningful ways visualism can also be cast relative to art theory as the experience of slippage, rupture, and/or discontinuity: the new modalities of visualism insistently encourage a particular reading established by their claim to a marginalized or repressed referentiality that can serve as a resource for the questioning of hardened orthodoxy in the study of culture but will not replace it. This is what allows, for example, the writings of Michael Fried, Svetlana Alpers and Jacques Derrida to be placed alongside one another -- although it is understood that their concerns cannot be collapsed to into one

<sup>5</sup> See Simon Taylor, "The Phobic Object: Abjection in Contemporary Art" in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

another. Each contribution is to a developing body of ideas negotiated in a continually shifting representative context. At various historical moments and with differing degrees of subtlety or awareness, these authors offer an articulation of visuality that resists, reorients or refuses the system of conventions and limitations of optical purity in its identification with power. Their definition of visualism as a continually shifting field is thus a useful one, for it calls attention to the practices, institutions, and procedures of art theory as part of more generalized deliberations about the meaning of universality as a specific concept within and a requirement of the highly specialized business of reading culture.

In this, my own sense of visibility is quite specific. This sense of visualism is one that operates as a key signifier in the work of authors as distinctive as Svetlana Alpers, Griselda Pollock and Michael Baxandall, W.J.T. Mitchell, Jonathan Crary, Jacqueline Rose, Victor Burgin, Laura Mulvey and Lynda Nead: each considers quite different media and altogether different historical circumstances to cast a new light on work on vision and visuality in a nuanced and sophisticated way. What these authors share is a sense of representation in its linkage with the image. This all-encompassing concern with works of art and with pictures in particular appropriates by degrees aspects of social history, anthropology, cultural studies, feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. As a problem of objects and surfaces it gathers force in the terrain of the so-called "new" art history. Quite clearly it accompanies the proliferation of art theory but retains some sense of the necessity of first-hand experience in the reading of art. For the sake of simplicity, let's call this formation of visibility "pictured." A note on the development of its historical formation, its themes and issues, is relevant.

Until quite recently, art history conceived of the image as a world of visual appearance fixed on a limited space. It also assumed a singular and fixed position before the image. A postmodern sensibility is by contrast one that abandons this particular way of "reading" representations. Consequently, it productively exceeds the terms of spectatorship and visualism as it works to locate a set of historical circumstances, and some fundamental contextual assumptions -- for instance, the assumption that "perspective" is the condition of representation. Perspective in representation is essentially projective. It is a system of spatial relations that determine the illusion of depth upon the picture plane. But this is a limiting description. Perspective also refers to a given point of view. Ideologically, it refers to an assumed perceptual orientation or subject position. This spatial location outside the object has historically presupposed a corresponding reading of

the object as a more or less stable and unified event. The ascendancy of perspective as a prescriptive and legitimating device in representation has been the object of study for artists, critics, and theorists for some time.

The turn towards postmodernism has meant that questions of visibility and representation have moved into the foreground. Centrally this concerns a question of borders as the silent spaces wherein meaning is bestowed on events. Basically, four senses of visibility are current: (1) Visibility as the representation of what I call "peripheral blindness." This dimension of the visible is connected with historical processes. Since John Berger presented its first deconstruction in 1972, historical and theoretical studies of visibility as a condition of possibility for the western imagination have been concerned with the interrogation of a totalizing and world-historical point of view. (2) Visibility as technologies of the visible. The recovery of physiological optics, drawing on research into nineteenth century modalities of sight, situates a modernist rejection of perspectival illusionism. As such it has been argued by Jonathan Crary (1992, 19), who has also proposed that the liberation of visuality from prior scopic regimes cast the observer more or less passively into the society of the spectacle. For Walter Benjamin modernist consumption inaugurates a sense of "shock." (3) Visibility as iconology, identifying "form, motif, image and symbol" in the subject of painting and in visual culture. The practice of iconology is called "picture theory" by Mitchell (1994) with whom is inaugurated a new "pictorial turn" (1994; Jay 1996, 2). This leads to (4) visibility-as-alterity, a phrase I'm coining to capture the idea of alternate or multiple subject positions around or within an event. It has recently enabled authors to begin to speak in terms of the image as an event with its own center. And, in a postreferential, postobjectivist moment, the image becomes the "other" of textuality. Within the context of the problems and possibilities of visualism, it refers historically to the dilemmas posed by the distinction between work in language and work in art. For example, Martin Jay needs to call to mind, in a sustained attempt to trace the history of visualism as an intellectual movement, that whereas in the past the study of art and its history could be conscripted to the purposes of language, a very different set of circumstances accompanies the forms of the present. He contends, "The figural is resisting subsumption under the rubric of discursivity; the image is demanding its own unique mode of analysis" (Brennan and Jay 1995, 3).

A renewed interest in the heterogeneity of the visual has informed disciplinary

fields from cinema to political science and beyond.<sup>6</sup> For Michael Fried it takes a position relative to modernism. Svetlana Alpers organizes it from the standpoint of a socio-cultural historian. And Jacques Derrida locates its connection to structuralism. I am citing only those few instances that will be assessed in these pages. These projects have in turn been impacted by the philosophical texts of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Baudrillard and Alphonso Lingis, by David Michael Levin's historical response, and Fredric Jameson's critical theory, and by the contributions of scholars such as Barbara Maria Stafford to name just a few. Again, none of these figures is reducible to the other.

My point is that, both explicitly and implicitly, the pictorial sense of visualism denotes a moment of instability in the complex relationship between visual and verbal ideas. Various analyses locate this tension in metaphors of disfiguration. For instance, Donald Preziosi uses anamorphism as a figure to examine art history (Preziosi 1989). Another example is provided by Rosalind Krauss who in her most recent texts is concerned with Surrealism as a critical terrain for the circulation of wild and potentially catastrophic optical effects (1994). Surrealism's and Dada's unruly and disruptive logic introduces a level of opacity into the field of modernism that works against the grain of its attempt to define the modern era as strictly abstracted, pure visuality. The privileging of notions of ambiguity and indeterminacy over more traditional scholarly concepts of ontological purity is also a feature of the postmodern academic situation, where knowledge is understood as a contested terrain rather than an complex of theories and practices that can be harmoniously integrated. Indeterminacy as a constitutive tendency of postmodernity is experienced also in the blurring of disciplinary bounds. From this blurring stems my method which, keeping historical specificity in mind, pursues the interaction between theory and art. It also takes account of the very different circumstances under which knowledges are brought together as a problem of the condition of thought about art.

***Definition 3: Contingencies (and how they Relate to Discourse and Visualism)***

This study will question the authority of conventional institutional boundaries by stressing a series of linkages (and separations) between art practice and theory, aesthetics and interpretation, "high" art and popular cultural forms, visual images and verbal stories.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the work of film critic Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, or Kaja Silverman.

Among and between these the problem of vision circulates as a common denominator. Vision and visibility introduce the failure of the visual as a negation of a dominant point of view. What this gives rise to in the debates and critiques of visualism are specific forms and practices offered as differing modes of productivity relative to a prior conceptualization of visual modernity, according to which visual culture is constituted as a unified perceptual field. As a dominant tradition modernism registers the separation of the popular from the elite, reproduced in the academy as a division of visual experience into high and popular culture. What this suggests is that the critical literature about visualism locates its specific forms and practices in/as differing modes of productivity, appropriating it to define a paradigm of modernity, or otherwise its representation, as if through a looking glass. In the process, visualism begins to disseminate a relationship between popular taste and a certain cultural elite. If theories of the visual are therefore in any way to be understood then they should be contextualized by the tensions and contours of those disciplines that work hardest to pry at this course on the aesthetic. A definition of cultural studies and the "new" art histories is in order at this stage of the enquiry.

In this age of sight bites and cut backs, virtual reality, hermeneutical slippage, and the endless deferral of sense, art history and cultural studies emerge as disciplinary domains attaching to an equally wilful and spontaneous definition of desire. Both disciplines, after all, involve sensual objects, economic transactions, and bodily needs in way that connects the embodiments and textualities of metaphysics, history, literature, objects, and culture, and by means that reflect considerable cultural, economic, political, symbolic, and libidinal investment. It seems to me that the political and sexual assumptions of cultural studies and the new art history designate a love object premised upon a core identity that is presented as both stable and fixed. I would suggest that we need to remain clear-eyed before this peculiar and limiting paradigm. Or, that we at least develop the definition of its domain. A third perspective, a space-between, might accordingly hint at a province of thinking beyond. Such a space might indeed be queer.

And then again maybe not. For, it seems to me, queer studies as an area of study also articulates an identity-in-desire (Queer Studies invests, for example, in the effects of a sexed subjectivity), thus registering an ontological switch that makes it singular but not peculiar. "Queer Studies" does, however, introduce the notion of a (necessary) disturbance: it indexes a deviance, a modality of perversion, the uncommon, a turning away. With other recent "subaltern" formations organized around difference -- postcolonial theory, gender studies, feminism come most readily to mind -- queer studies

registers a challenge to the dominant assumptions of the past. It is, like cultural studies and the new art history, a politicized disciplinary field drawing its strength from being anti-reactionary, anti-establishment and anti-humanist. What makes queer studies particular is the opening up of the terrain of identity into the space of the performative and of play.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this little detour is not to introduce queer studies as the latest "hot-line to Solomon." Neither, in stressing cultural performance, to take away from queer studies's broader commitments to political activism. I wish to suggest, rather, the potential utility of so-called transgressive categories for opening out the assumptions of any given discursive or disciplinary field. The problematic of the visual at hand might thus be screened against the architecture of a transdisciplinary knowledge that lays stress on the impossibility of keeping borders and frontiers clear-cut.

It seems to me that the categories "cultural studies" and "new art history" operate as containing terms: that they potentially foreclose discussion of the methodological, disciplinary and systemic assumptions at work both in their relation to one another and in relation to what is already understood as the normative term, i.e. to "Art History" writ large. What does it mean to engage with a space of discourse arbitrarily defined already as *either* cultural studies *or* new art history, or even to propose, in the separation of the terms, an eccentric yet potentially productive relationship? In the present context it might prove instructive to ask, what is the nature of this presumed epistemological commitment to the containing terms cultural studies and the new art history, and -- perhaps an even more interesting question -- how does one speak across their foundational claims?

To begin: Framed as a unit, the terms "cultural studies" and "new art history" flag the space of the visual as a space that cuts across two uneven and discontinuous registers. On one hand, the language of "culture" directs attention to "screen" and to "surface" as keywords, to metaphors of "map" and "*topos*" and to the image of the billboard; what emerges is that cultural studies thinks through spatial metaphors, and according to an

<sup>7</sup> Drawing from and away from earlier feminist debates around the social and ideological construction of the categories "man" and "woman" that frequently organized women's bodies around essentialist notions of biological fixity and reproductive experience and from more recent theoretical work in the area of critical theory, history and cultural studies centring on the politics of sexuality, the body and pathology (c.f. Foucault), queer studies recuperates the body as an ambulatory and contingent site invested with social inscriptions (c.f. Butler). To the oscillating position of subjectivity invested by psychoanalytic theory (Freud; Lacan), queer studies grafts (more or less consciously) that trope of Russian literary criticism, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, and with poststructuralist theory: The result is a new and hybrid identity premised on a situational masquerade.

ideology that privileges horizontal extension. Art history's discourse, on the other hand, addresses the subject of memory, always looking back to *mimesis*. Its key references are "the archive," the "gazetteer," the "chronicle," in other words, the Foucauldian *épistémé*: thus it might be said that art history's operations are "vertical." Historical depth is coded as a privileged and "insider" discursive point-of-view. But especially if we compare art history and cultural studies, it becomes clear that the "object" is at stake.

What precisely is defined by "cultural studies" in the context of the academy is not always clear, and certainly it is fluid. The signifier "cultural studies" refers to ways about thinking about culture and about society. Cultural studies is involved in questions specific to particular historical and social circumstances that take place at the intersection of culture and society. It also concerns itself with how subjects "feel" their way through culture, that is to say, with the way subjects engage with and live through the ideological, political, and social structures that surround them (Blundell 1993; Grossberg et alia, 1992).

Scholars working in the field of cultural studies come from disparate disciplines and engage texts in widely divergent ways. Individual expertise might come from departments such as anthropology, geography, sociology, linguistics, or art history, for example. And cultural critique might draw from ethnography, psychoanalysis, and/or linguistic theory, thereby from a constellation comprising not only popular culture and contemporary media studies, their institutions and audiences, but also postmodernity, gender, nationhood, travel, race, ethnicity, film, and more elusive categories such as "the Black imagination" (Grossberg et alia, 1992). All this play of differences that uniquely takes place according to the vicissitudes of the material and not according to preconceived design, makes cultural studies a dynamic and contestatory space within the logic of the university as an institution.

Cultural studies seeks to render culture and society problematic. It represents a place where conventional structural divisions -- for example, between "science" and "philosophy," "technology" and "the social," "popular culture" and "visual art" -- can be if not abandoned then at least interrogated. Consequently, cultural studies attains a prominence in discussions centering around questions of identity and community in relation to social change. Cultural studies has no fixed "place." It has no "home" address -- although the Birmingham School, the space and place in the U.K. where interests and concerns were first brought together and taken up, has come to emblemize ways of thinking about cultural studies (Blundell 1993). Although not anti-intellectual, cultural studies tends away from abstract intellectualism, preferring more material practices and

concerns. Cultural studies denotes a political commitment to radical change, and thereby gestures towards consciousness raising.

This is a feature that cultural studies and new art history share. With cultural studies, new art history admits into discourse the insights of marxist explanation. The details of this history that aligns cultural studies with the new art history are, I must admit, to me as yet unclear but in their plural logic a single thread can be discerned centering in the narrative of a paradigmatic epistemological/institutional shift around the 60s and early 70s that took up the promise of projects abandoned in the 30s. A further coincidence can be traced in the broader social and political upheavals that brought about, in the UK, a revolution in social, political, cultural and pedagogic relations, and in the U.S. the Civil Rights Movement, the second wave of feminism, the Youth Movement, and the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movements. With popular reform came new structures of knowledge. In England they were manifest in the architecture of "red brick" universities (Rees and Borzello 1988; Preziosi 1989; Hall 1984; Grossberg et alia, 1988).

What, then, distinguishes cultural studies from new art history? Two theories of cultural politics dominate cultural studies. The first, distinguishing "Culturalists," is represented by Williams and Brecht; this theory advances that the power of enunciation lies with the subject and believes that individual agency can effect social change. It has been critiqued for hypostatizing agency. "Structuralists" (Foucault, Althusser, and to some extent Barthes and Derrida) proceed from the historical observation that power is deployed by official ideological discourses and mass media, that is, through the practices, tools, representations, and texts of official institutions. They argue that, under the impress of structures of domination, individuals can resist but not escape.<sup>8</sup> There is at least one other, more contemporary and signal position that must be taken into account since, for some, it eclipses the other two in being less totalizing and more complex. It is signified by Stuart Hall's theory of "articulation": a point where unexpectedly different structures emerge as two or more forces are conjoined (Hall 1984). Each of these theories has been amplified, revised, interrupted, contested, developed, or simply rejected; what should concern us here are their collective *effect*, the resolute tendency that distinguishes cultural studies from other forms of enquiry, namely, its stake in displacement, mobility and dispersion. This dispersion of its subjects, these disruptions of orthodox or canonical

<sup>8</sup> For an expanded discussion of this analysis see Jochen Schulte-Sasse in Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Grossberg et alia, 1992.



fields are what mark cultural studies as a site of resistance to orthodox institutional canons.

And new art history? If cultural studies has its own methods and systems, tools and genealogies, then so too the new art history. By contrast to cultural studies -- with its broad sweep of theoretical enterprises -- new art history appears somewhat more restricted, since, historically that is in relation to Art History as a whole, it locates a precise epistemology, a coherent disciplinary body and a specialized method. But art history has come under scrutiny from the inside. Like cultural studies, new art history draws its ideas, scope, modalities, strategies, and impact from marxist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, semiotic, and feminist theory. More recently it has drawn also from post-colonial theory, and more insistently, from literary criticism.

New art history tends to concentrate on issues of representation, or, to borrow a good catch phrase, "on viewing subjects, visual fields, and the objects on view" -- this in their historical as well as contemporary formulations (Brennan and Jay 1995, 5). In the new art history can be distinguished, however, a tendency to engage at any given time with a broader spectrum of critical methodologies and historiographic practices than in cultural studies. Mieke Bal, for example, interweaves features of sociology, psychoanalytic theory, structuralism, feminism, Marxism and/or poststructuralism with aspects of philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology in her writing (1991; 1994). There has been a tendency too to emphasize the dialectic between texts and their audiences: in critical essays there is a tendency to think objects in relation not only to their contexts but also to their interpretations. Here I could elaborate, a number of critical texts might be cited in order to carve out the trajectory of new art history -- whose professional constituency appropriately often resides outside Art History proper in the territories of museology, cultural criticism and art practice, in film, and in women's studies -- but if I evoke the syntagm "Krauss -- Bryson -- Krauss" things (with theorists) should begin to fall into place.<sup>9</sup> In short, just as there is, paradoxically, no single cultural studies, there is no monolithic new art history. With cultural studies, the new art history empties out into the space of rupture, discontinuity and excess.

It is important to note that the new art history does not any more than cultural studies seriously challenge the discourses and constructed categories of academic

<sup>9</sup> The syntagm, of course, also locates the critical situatedness of the discourses of the new art history and cultural studies as Anglo-America, a feature not lost to postcolonial critics or even to cultural critics themselves. See Clifford 1992; Mani 1992; Bennett 1992.

production per se. It does, however, represent a serious threat to the pillars of tradition, an operation that unifies what is in reality a plurality of discourses under a single, ideological, banner. The new art history's wager is on distancing itself from the modalities of traditional art historical method. There are three important assumptions in the field: The first is authenticity, which refers to the mark or trace of the artist and is indexical of style among other things. The second assumption refers to notions of History, and the telos or progression it implies. The third assumption is that the work of art bears the aura of its uniqueness. The authority of traditional art history produces a metahistory for art. It evokes a single time line and a singular myth of origin. The call to authenticity, which sustains and advances on the premise of a unified self, guarantees the legitimacy of the enquiry. New art historians can, then, be said to be concerned first, with rethinking the idea of style and the legitimacy it confers upon the object read as an expression of the artist's will and the sign of genius; then, with destabilizing the question of origins, and the myth of singularity enmeshed in the notion of the avant-garde; and then, to be invested in deconstructing the founding assumptions of the discipline as a whole, assumptions that, conjoined in the myth of artistic genius, have traditionally operated to isolate subjects, and to maintain the exclusivity of the field as discursive terrain (Preziosi 1989; Foucault 1972).

I could elaborate on this subject, but historicity of the visual replicates a familiar hierarchy by and through which it maintains its exclusivity as a discipline. In art history this manifests itself in the notion of a ranking of the arts and of subjects within specific art practices, in notions of connoisseurship, and by a myriad of other processes of mystification by which that which is arbitrary and opaque is made to seem natural and transparent. I refer to the discursive mechanisms by which authority, tacitly or implicitly, are maintained.

One such mechanism, it seems to me, is the new art historians's collective "will to truth," manifest in the impress not only to distance themselves from the past, but to construct an imaginary place where a coherent sense of self is broken down. A key instantiation of this tendency is in the crucial (and canonizing) compendium titled *The New Art History* (1988) where, even as it was being produced individual authors were already self-reflexively denouncing the "revolution." Stephen Bann's reference to the new art histories as celebrations of the "already dead" (p. 20), and other similar attempts to defend against charges of co-optation, in hindsight read like the indulgent manoeuvres of "bloods" intent on distancing themselves from the establishment. And, if the new male art

historians could be accused of jockeying for position just like former dead-white-men-intent-on-looking-at-solitary-naked-women style historians, then so could the women. Pamela Gerrish Nunn's essay directly accuses her male competitors of playing the games of the "new school tie" (1988, 167). These incidents demonstrate, if nothing else, the defensible aim of the principle of autonomy: the new art historians attempt to establish a distance between themselves and the canon, and simultaneously to reject all explicit political alignments.

Whatever the polemics internal to the discipline, however, my point is the following: re-created through the struggles and contradictions of its discourses, new art history emerges as a contextual, relational and, centrally, self-critical expression of a key desire for identificatory unity. This unity is premised on core reaction to art history "proper" -- always as long as this is understood as a positivist, formalist, and conservative site where outmoded concepts of connoisseurship, antiquarianism, periodicity, the avant-garde, genius, and beauty still hold sway. Never mind that, with the exception of feminist theory and practice, which was never allowed entry into the canon in the first place, the new art historians entertain and mobilize the competitive instincts of the old; never mind that, by now, their attitudes seem time-worn and their studies faded: the new art historians usher in an art history with future possibilities.

All this reflection makes me think anew of the entanglement of specularly and speculation. Taking up psychoanalytic discourse superficially, I shall thus propose that the new art history's *effect* can be characterized as somewhat fetishistic. Fetishism as a cultural discourse allows me to visualize in the new art history a difference that masks continuity with the past. And, if the new art history can be characterized as fetishistic, then cultural studies's resolute tendency towards displacement, mobility and dispersion, its self-awareness as the object of struggle and the product of history and of interpretation exhibits all the signs of psychic disavowal. Disavowal operates through a double process of identification in which the fear of similarity gives way to an overidentification with difference. Through the mechanisms of disavowal the ego is protected from the return of the repressed. Of what this repressed is, I am not entirely certain. What is clear is that in the constructions and negotiations of cultural studies and new art history, we, as readers, are implicated. Here, as earlier, I do not mean to downplay the strategic importance of the constructed unity that becomes cultural studies and the artificial discontinuity that is the new art history, nor to empty out any of the insights their joint project of cultural criticism affords. Rather I want to think about and define how cultural studies and new art history

are constituted by and through particular discursive communities.<sup>10</sup> Together, rather than strategically opposed, what the discourses of cultural studies and the new art history reflect is the theoretical necessity of disturbance, and the theoretical necessity of neither completely abandoning nor conveniently clinging to conventional academic equivalences.

This analysis might be accused of being overly reductive, concerned as it is with describing only defining moments, and hence taking little account of the rich diversity and full extent of the question. It might indeed prove instructive to interrogate further the closures of an open field. It seems to me that it is not necessarily a useful task to describe new art history or cultural studies in terms of their differences or continuities, nor to collapse one into the other, even strategically. The braiding of the political and the visual has a lengthy and complicated history, as recent investigations have shown. But my point in playing off one side against the other so that neither one nor the other gains the upper hand is ultimately to stress the fact that neither discipline exists in isolation, or independently. To the contrary, both are constantly in dialogue, and interdependent. Accordingly, the challenge is to remain vigilant to the fact that there is no clear divide between cultural theory and art practice when it comes to thinking visual culture, and to remain open to knowledges that potentially bridge the existing gaps between their mutual cultural competences.

In sum, what my all too schematic analysis will have highlighted is the fact that, in their mutual appeal to science, which presents itself as an issue of social context, the discourses of cultural studies and the new art history have created their own version of time and space within the parameters of an image of the "real" and "truth," an image that they both produce and reproduce, that they both consciously vilify and invisibly work towards. Thus the open field towards which they direct our attention under the name of a window of opportunity, and that sets an oppositional discursive space, is in fact a frame, albeit of "solidarities." This frame reaffirms and consolidates and thus is complicit with the binding of disciplinary and institutional power. Therefore, it is an illusion. In consequence, whether we concur with the proposition that there are two genealogical

<sup>10</sup> It would be interesting to take this enquiry further. In the meantime I would submit, hesitatingly and provisionally, that the sameness that supports Cultural Studies's investment in the ideological circuitry of difference is a belief in supreme individuality; ironically, the very individuality foregrounded as a bourgeois value in left-wing debates and critique.

strands within culture studies<sup>11</sup> or three, or two strands taken up by a third in Hall's theory of articulation;<sup>12</sup> whether we coincide in our view of the new art history as the issue of a linear trajectory signified in the term "convention," whether we adopt the formula of "take-2 and stir," what is still being blocked is a positive sense of difference, and a firm sense of social mission, one that might take place outside disciplinary bounds -- that is, on that won't continually reinscribe, as cultural critic and film-maker Trinh Minh-ha elegantly puts it, "the reign of worn codes" (1989, 47).

In saying this, I realize that I am expressing my own reservations towards academic comparisons; more positively, I would say that I'm describing the historical predicament of scholarship at the fin-de-millennium. Some of this may even seem beside the point. Even so, my intent in stressing the limits and potentialities difference produced in/as "excess" -- in other words, to disciplinary formations as technologies of conflict and change -- is to draw attention to a gap between terms that involves cultural studies and new art histories in a communicative relationship. The space between them is productive. A site of discursive "excess," this "in between" denoted by the "and" in "cultural studies *and* the new art history," nominates a rupture in the already-known, allowing for an act of translation, a figurative "transference of meaning across language systems" (Bhabha 1990, 211). As John Tagg has remarked, such a relation of contestation creates an unsettling terrain, one that in his terms "opens movements of resistance that unseat claims to universality" (1992).<sup>13</sup> Owing itself to accident and circumstance, its point is to demonstrate more effectively the many difficult questions that organize themselves as an

<sup>11</sup> Loosely and to recap, the culturalists, signified by Williams marking off a space for the social into which everything collapses, envisioning the potential for the people, and the structuralists, signified by Althusser, Foucault, and poststructuralists whose collective impulse functions to deny agency, to affirm that discourse speaks us, that there is no potential, not even as authors.

<sup>12</sup> Hall's theory connects the enunciating subject with a historical and social continuum understood as provisional and contingent and that simultaneously carves out a space for a Marxism without guarantees.

<sup>13</sup> I should add that I share Tagg's hesitations about "travelling theory" in its institutional and commodified formations, formations which, by means of professionalization and the media, have "stripped academic intellectuals of the local knowledges they would need to participate in dissent" (p. 29). I would add, however, that there are other reasons to hesitate: "travel theory" and its correlate "migration theory" have been argued by post-colonial and feminist theorists as the project of (neo)colonial expansionism. See, for example, Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

extension of historical concerns under the more simple arrangement earlier narratives about the history of culture afford. To isolate just one of its important aspects, the development of such a critical theory offers an explicitly hostile form of critical representation and can therefore be confronted as a set of tactics involving risk. It seems to me that only by way of such a risk might the effectivity of the presumption that the new art history is external to cultural studies be calculated. Or, for that matter, the value of their strategic collapse.

It would be interesting to take this enquiry further. But, for the moment, what I would wish to underscore is that although the kinds of representation might be different, all of this summons at least the potentialities of strategic conjunctions. I think that the impossibility of any authoritative or conclusive separation in the relations between "texts"<sup>14</sup> cannot but draw attention to the theoretical necessity of constructing new models in which the relations between theory and practice are mutually enfolded. I am interested in the ways in which contemporary practice might leave a trace in discursive production, and in how practice is necessarily implicated in an "other" that might be a text. For this reason, in the chapters that follow, I would like to propose a move beyond sometimes imaginary and always theoretical antagonisms and alliances such as the two I have described. A third position, a discursive space-between, might enable new theoretical risks and gains. But I am not about to propose a strategic reconciliation of terms, or what Griselda Pollock has called a "theory soup," and especially not an irresponsibly polemical convergence of perspectives that leaves us with Camille Paglia as its vanishing point. If anything is plain, it is perhaps that clear cut theoretical definitions have worn themselves out, replaced by more tentative, less frenzied, enquiries. It is theoretically and strategically necessary now to think carefully about what it means to bring critical interpretation to the limits of theory, and to deliberate about the place of accident, coincidence and correspondence.

Contingency: Its sense is nicely explained by one author thus: "Contingency means 'that which may or may not happen,' which is chancy; aleatory, uncertain. But it fundamentally means... to touch together, "a happening dependent on another happening," a causal connection" (Veese 1994, 4). Causality, then, brings contingency

14 Here I'm using Elizabeth Grosz's definition "not simply a tool or an instrument [but] like concepts, texts are complex products, effects of history; the intermingling of old and new, a complex of internal coherences or consistencies and external referents, of intension and extension, of thresholds and becomings. Texts, like concepts, do things ... they are events" (1995, 126).

to Deleuze. Insofar as the Deleuzian sense of conjunction is not causal but leaves room for accident it works to counter the commonly held notion that "to be properly theoretical one has to explicate, one has to open out folds" (Wheale 1995, 155). A Deleuzian folding operates on the principle of constant reversals, and thus elaborates by means of constant reevaluation. Hence what it encourages is a synthetic heterogeneity, and what it identifies is a series of changing elements that work to suggest a non-totalized juxtaposition of points of view. When I think of contingencies this is in part what I mean. The fold does not involve a sense of one thing logically connecting to everything that surrounds it but rather demonstrates to the contrary that relations are suggestively contingent. The notion of a fold also helps to make sense of visualism as a relay of tense interactions. For folding introjects an element of surprise. The revelation occurs when binary thinking is made to fold in upon itself such that it structures the potentialities of *something else*. This movement of two is a practice French author and philosopher Michel Serres calls "baker's logic" (Wheale 1995, 160). Literally, the baker's process of folding together say, flour and water, gives rise to the dough. I find this image quite compelling; it takes me back to my mother's kitchen, where she would bake while I, sometimes distractedly, did my homework after school. The continuous interaction of my mother's and my own almost but not quite complementary activities -- the historical process of working with the distinctive properties of surfaces and objects and the forming of an understanding of historical processes -- defines here what I would suggest as a new body of ideas formed in experience. In more than one sense, then, the fold produces unexpectedly new situations from the mutual implication of conjoining.

Brought to this dissertation, the Deleuzian "folding, unfolding, and refolding" lends rhetorical *energia* or force to my project of drawing together photography, painting, installation, and mixed-media work with other visual and non-visual texts. At the same time it affords a model of analysis in which the inter-relations of verbal texts and visual imagery continually turn themselves inside/out. Such that, in what follows, a certain practice of the given-to-be-seen is assumed.

When I think of contingencies I think, first, of an articulation in a series of oscillating positions of legibility and illegibility and thus of a process of interpretation; then, of a (temporary and provisional) conjoining of the materiality of the art-object and the situatedness of experience, and therefore of the condition of enmeshedness; and, with these, a sense of process that reads theory as "contingency," i.e. as intrinsically indeterminate, and necessarily in flux. In other words, the notion of contingency makes

me able to see a connection between expressive acts and material practices. Accordingly, it is to be identified as a necessary condition of the critical apparatus.

It is the premise of this study that what is urgently required is a test of visualism as a discourse and as a philosophical position against the example of art practice. Theory put to the test of practice, and conversely practice put to the test of theory, would produce a space which like the Deleuzian fold enabled knowledge to flow in no certain direction. Instead of a patterning of evidence that confirms established attitudes towards artistic phenomena, then, a theory of representation that is transformative as it problematizes. Instead of pitting of practices against ideas, a model for interpretation whose mode of effectivity is articulation. Instead of a disciplinary practice of observation, at a remove, one that corresponds as fully as possible with the discourses and actions of art practices today. *For me, the challenge is to express visualism in a way that scatters and realigns thinking itself.*

Touching on cultural studies, literary criticism, philosophy, and history, as well as on the social relationship between vision and representation, this project aims to explore specific theories of the visible on the way to suggesting that, despite theoretical and sometimes necessary allegiances to one or another side, it is necessary to keep in tension theory and practice. Where these representations meet, they reorient questions of visibility and invisibility relative to social and historical bodies of knowledge in meaningful new ways. Reflection is mobilized by reference to three key moments of enquiry: first, an investigation into the complexities of aesthetic/theoretical conjunctions mobilized by means of the theoretical entwining of a derridean deconstruction such as represented by his *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, and Cadieux's photographic practice; second, an investigation into the way visualism locates itself between theory and art, played out in the conjoining of Fried's phenomenological/formalist repudiation of vision's theatricality as explicated primarily in his text *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* and by means of Lukacs's production practice; third, an investigation into visualism as the condition of possibility for relations of power/knowledge mobilized in the encounter between Alpers's context-oriented analysis of perception as presented in her book *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, and in the multi-media work of Houle. My choice of theorists responds to my concern to explore three currents of art historical criticism of particular interest to art historians: namely, content or meaning oriented analysis (Derrida's critical theory), object-oriented analysis (Fried's hybrid of formalism and the history of style).



and social history (Alpers). As for my selection of (Canadian) artists, each working respectively in the areas of photo-installation, painting, and mixed-media, they afford the tools and insights of postmodernism's resistances, revisions and radically deconstructive critique.

## Chapter 2

### *Come and See:*<sup>1</sup> Introducing Derrida and Cadieux

"Like writing, photography is as much transformation as recording; representation is always alteration, be it in language or in images, and it always has its politics."  
Linda Hutcheon 1989

This chapter presents an investigation into the complexities of aesthetic/theoretical conjunctions, envisioned here as contingent interactions of image and text. My specific interest will be photography in its conjunction with deconstruction: a meeting investigated in the incidents of a hypothetical encounter between Geneviève Cadieux's photographic practice and Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. It will be my argument here that visualism can only adequately begin to be understood in the renegotiations of specific knowledges that make the communicative activity between theory and art apparent. A production practice which is concerned with how the eye skims across an immanent surface such as Cadieux's is more than adequate to this task. For, if theoretical statements, such as those presented in my introduction, about the nature of visibility contrast the myth of pure opticality for an "impure" discursivity, then postmodern photography -- as the kind of practice that through mechanical reproduction confrontationally challenge art's specific aura -- should expose theory's internalized implications, that is, the implications of theories that connect the hegemonic status of the eye in western culture to a reordered sense of aesthetics.

#### ***Introduction***

Enter Jacques Derrida as a French intellectual whose impact on cultural theory is by now as pronounced as it is widely recognized. The discursive circulation of a critical notion of "instability," recast into what theorist/ anthropologist James Clifford and others

<sup>1</sup> As the early enthusiast of photography as a medium François Arago wrote to William Henry Fox Talbot, "It is hardly too much to call them miraculous. Certainly they surpass anything I could have conceived as within the bounds of reasonable expectation ... I cannot commend you better than to come and see." Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), p. 23.

refer to in metaphors of the "boundary," "nomandology," and "the third space" suggest that in academic production deconstruction has made rapid gains. In these debates that trace the tensions and contradictions surrounding the transmission of experience through culture, what continental theory through Derrida has for the past twenty-five years been examining in the idea of *différance*, *desinterrance*, and dissemination is valorized as a site at which translations, connections, and interstices are inhabited and enacted. The insight that the traditional concept of language as continuous and self-enclosed in fact involves the imbrication of something else, a constitutive impurity or trace located "outside" is central to Derrida's concerns. It provokes an enabling encounter with indeterminacy. Consequently, his practice raises timely questions about the body, subjectivity, matter, and language in ways that temporarily suspend the distinction between self and other, interiority and exteriority, nature and culture, contexts and ideas. In matters of the aesthetic, this sometimes translates into a founding divisibility of "traces, texts, and remains." In the process, traditional discourses on painting, for example, are destined to be put into question as they reproduce "the limits that constitute them" (Derrida 1987, 11). Deconstruction achieves a key place as a result: it maps out the lines of differentiation between the illusions of representation and traditional aesthetic principles as key areas for debate. However, while progressive thinkers celebrate the potentialities of boundary conditions and proclaim the virtues of a deconstructivist semiotization of disjunction structured upon the dissolution of the metaphysics of presence, outraged critics perceive in deconstruction a radical challenge to convention produced in the form of an excoriation of history, literature, interpretation, the arts, psychology, anthropology, religion, and cultural criticism, along with the technologies and institutions of capitalism, corporatism, and the "master object." In short, Derrida signifies for some the office of derangement -- an unhinging of order, method and plan. With Derrida they finally identify all the evils of a postmodernity gone "wild."

Through certain reading practices, deconstruction brings to theory a radical notion of incompleteness that significantly works at displacing or "troubling" received ideas about the formation of the subject. Geneviève Cadieux's photographic practice lends this theory a crucial specificity. Cadieux, who is Montréal-based and internationally recognized, articulates the condition of transformation that is the condition of possibility in Derrida's text. As there are no closures, no final answers under the sign of deconstruction, so Cadieux's artwork operates within and through the notion of a double reading that refuses to resolve itself neatly. Set in a discursive context, this might be

posed as a matter of "voice." Voice, a complex technical issue in literary criticism, involves issues of point of view and interpretation as the experiential and personal are mapped onto the object of enquiry. Dispersed, and in differing levels of relation to one another, utterances participate in the aesthetic as competing visibilities. Hence to extend Derrida in taking up issues of vision and visibility one would have to think "out loud" about the modalities by which deconstruction "thinks" representation: how, for example, it re-inscribes and re-articulates knowledge. In what follows therefore, my approach will be two-pronged: first I want to map the potentialities of deconstruction for art theory, and second, I want to recast deconstruction via an exploration of Cadieux's interruption and complication of a Derridean gaze. The point, I think, is to begin to dissolve the knot between textuality and visibility. This chapter begins, therefore, by tracing the intersection between deconstruction and visual culture.

### ***Deconstruction and Visual Culture***

Within the context of an English language art discourse, deconstruction enters the disciplinary field of art history filtered through cultural studies and philosophy, where it attaches itself theoretically to Foucault's concept of the "hinge" and the Deleuzian "fold," as a position of infinite free play in which "all meaning is temporary and relative" (Weedon 1987, 53). Deconstruction as an exploration of the effect of representation appears in the context of a poststructuralism that embraces, with Foucault and Deleuze, Althusser, Lacan and Kristeva. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1976 translation of *De la Grammatologie*, first published by *Editions minuit* in 1967, is in this respect critical. Spivak is instrumental in bringing Derrida to the North American context as his first English language translator. Spivak, of course, has mobilized deconstruction "in the interests of a progressive politics of gender and race".<sup>2</sup> In as far as poststructuralism theorizes subjectivity "as a site of disunity and conflict central to the process of political change and to preserving the status quo" (Weedon 1987, 21) it serves feminist and postcolonial theory. In this conjunction it articulates with cultural studies.

Cultural studies's disciplinary linkage to sociology and so to the social has political ramifications underscored by Spivak's analysis, especially by her formulation of the theoretical exchanges between marxism and Derrida. It is by way of such conjunctions

<sup>2</sup> See Gayatri Spivak 1985: "3 Women's Texts," *Critical Enquiry*, 12 (1), pp. 243-61. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Quotation from Weedon, p. 165.

that deconstruction is rendered to art history. Within the framework of a new art history identified as contestatory and unbound, one that draws away from simple interpretative codes, Derridean deconstruction comes to take on the value of a site from which disjunction and displacement might be theorized. A post-referential deconstruction has served well those thinkers whose engagement with a postmodern discursivity is mediated by a desire to radically overcome the orthodoxies of a canonical art historical tradition. Consider, for example, the work of Rosalind Krauss, for whom deconstruction circulates implicitly in recent investigations of the "pastiche" as modernism's enemy within. For her, the supplementarity of modernism's optical unconscious contributes evidentiary weight of what the official story causes to disappear (1994). It is pertinent to keep in mind then that within a restructured sense of art history deconstruction makes available a way of conceiving unexamined relations between artists, art objects, and institutional discourses. In this, a note needs to be made to distinguish what, in field of contested practices, is addressed in a critical manner through terms associated with the uncanny or metaphors for "a strangeness within" such as Julia Kristeva theorizes, and alternative approaches evoking the fragmentation of reality into forms of a "hybrid" or "mongrel" theory by way of the wider context of cultural relativism. Even so, these different conceptions define strangeness and difference through the instability, fragmentation, and inconstancy of language brought to bear on key areas of political and epistemological exclusion. It is Krauss who theorizes the gaps, fissures, discontinuities of modern art in their linkage with the unresolved contradictions of a theoretical High Modernism. This point is substantial. And yet, although the author conveys the questions that function to threaten the identity and role of interests that link to membership in the art historical field, such a radical questioning does not make deconstruction as a method of analysis more accessible to readers.

Mark Wigley's, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (1993) might more usefully be cited in this respect. Wigley's book provides a blueprint from which to redefine the institution of architecture in philosophy and the question of deconstruction in architectural discourse. Because architecture is a practice of spaces and boundaries, and deconstructive discourse constructed upon spatial metaphors in ruins, Wigley's *Architecture ...* constitutes an excellent point of departure from which to clarify epistemology, and from which to begin to theorize a certain ontology of spacing. Following Wigley, architecture is a place from which to look for discontinuities, complications, and tensions within the deconstructive text that would be indicative of

irregularities within its structure. To this end, Wigley works across and between architectural metaphors of reading the aesthetic as they have been signified Derrida's publications. By means of such practices, the new art history purchases deconstruction as a discourse within which not only the history of technology but the history of aesthetics is permanently and indelibly inscribed.

Other examples of deconstruction's interpretation for the visual arts might be cited. For art criticism, deconstruction has made a claim to language. Broadly speaking, it has been dominant in a radical reassessment of the politics of interpretation. In this connection, Lynda Nead and Keith Moxey come to mind relative to a current practice of contemporary critical theory informed by a revised reading of historical narratives and searching for alternatives to the theoretical dogmatisms and orthodoxies of the past. Independently investigating theory and its limitations, both have considered carefully the relation of postmodernity to a visual modernism that, some would argue, still and always subtends the history of art (see Preziosi, for example). In fact, the theorizing of modernity explored from the perspective of the reception and interpretation of art is what brings aesthetics and social theory to the practices of figures central to high modernist art. An effect of such critical work is that theory itself has been displaced and revitalized (Carroll 1987, xi). Given new form and complexity -- dispersed into a new combinatory logic -- it has raised important new questions for art, and especially of the boundaries linking and separating artobjects, artists, and art institutions such as the museal. Thus critical theory engages a wide set of questions surrounding philosophical, historical, and political issues once defined by the term aesthetics. Only with such a series of relational articulations of representation in mind, is it possible to understand fully the critical stakes of the questions Derrida poses for the histories of art. Be that as it may, deconstruction is at its most productive in the theorizations of vision and visuality, for example Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Amongst the texts whose explicit subject is vision this one makes the most persuasive argument by which Derrida is to be productively understood in his relation to discourse as an interruption of the legacy of ocularcentrism. In the midst of a wide range of representatives, Derrida is credited as a leading figure in defining what Jay elsewhere calls "a French-inspired suspicion of the visual" (Jay 1996, 3). This metaphor of the blindness as the figure of another gaze is the focus of Derrida's *Memoirs* ....

### *Derrida's Line . . .*

An English translation by Pascale Anne Brault and Michael Naas of *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait* (1990), Derrida's essay was originally developed as catalogue for the Louvre Museum exhibition series *Parti Pris* – or "Taking Sides." The blind in question are those represented in historical drawings; they include self-portraits by artists. From the start Derrida makes clear that this is his attempt to get to the heart of the processes of sight. His position is that there is "too much sight at the heart of blindness" (p. 16). Accordingly, his aim is to effect a metaphorical interruption having to do with the line of sight.

Derrida places at the center of his critique the problem of obliviousness in philosophy, a problem situating historical conditions of visibility. He refers to philosophy's idealization of knowledge, which he qualifies as operating with paradoxical effectiveness. Broadly construed, for him, a constitutive discrepancy between the blindness of philosophical critique relative to notions of accuracy and identity in the world of interpretation stands out as a fundamental part of a specialized commentary; it is evident, he argues, that the narratives of philosophy function with, if not provide for, the awareness that something of a "professional" blindness constitutes insight as well. A kind of double-vision. This double sight that holds in view critical blindness and critical insight together is also Derrida's heritage as a philosopher. But he strains away from it. So that in arguing for a non-canonical discursive system for critical theorizing, although from his standpoint he doesn't write with the pen of semiconscious duplicity he identifies as the irreducible problem of philosophy, within the operations of *Memoirs...* ambivalence and inconsistency are crucial. Critique arises out of the fact that rather than covering up the disturbing or contradictory parts of the partly fictional and partly expository narrative that is philosophy, deconstruction will manipulate, or to put it more subtly "utilize" "blurredness" as part of the postmodern statement. Hence, in relation to his text, the point is twofold: that philosophy as a discipline should undergo revision, and that the self-reflexivity by which its discourse achieves self-preservation should be demystified. In sum, that the mythology of original innocence should function as the condition of possibility for critique.

The "undoing" of metaphysical blindness Derrida diagnoses as a direct consequence of philosophy's unmediated foundational presence in turn implies something about language and the participation of will as it declares itself in representation. Readers familiar with Derrida's writing will recognize a re/decontextualization of complex

statements that are bound to lead back to his *Of Grammatology* and *The Truth in Painting* within the exhibitionary mode of *Memoirs...* The debate, fundamentally, is about cognition. For example, in *The Truth in Painting* as in *Memoirs...* the philosopher explores simultaneously those methodologies of perception and technologies of observation that adhere (although hidden) to imagistic forms. It's worth focussing briefly on the important relationship between these two poststructuralist texts. Imitation or mimesis, and metaphor are two main concepts discussed in *The Truth in Painting* where, in order to show the ontological status of imitation concealed in orthodox aesthetic critique, Derrida has to demonstrate that the processes of representation cannot be assumed. The rationale behind his thinking is that traditional aesthetic theory privileges a binary that renders the artistic entity as a plenitude which function as a mnemotechnic sign in the art object. Correspondingly, and relative to the field of vision, in painting the power of the image lies in restoring the presence of an originary condition. It is significant, therefore, that since representation reaches beyond duplication, to the extent that it ties back to theories in which material objects are always the beginnings and ends of experience, it can be subjected to an ever accumulating and continuously shifting process of determinations.

*The Truth in Painting* and *Memoirs...* are similarly instructive with regard to Derrida's version of visualism, which one might call optical-theoretical. So that it's worth recording that, in brief, *The Truth in Painting* articulates four possibilities involving the rhetoric of art as a semiotic object: First, the context in which the object signifies. "the field of the pictural properly speaking" (p. 6). This operates through the regulatory function of the trace, which in turn is the condition of the art object's special place as the deconstructive terrain of syntactical and critical "play." The second field through which works of art activate the messiness of the world of inherited meanings is the subject of painting, or the picturality of painting as the presentation of representations. The order of fiction, or of cultural representations, follows as the third condition of possibility by which the "truth" in painting is understood. This economy implicitly fixes the debates by which philosophical discourse valorizes its own instability as the "game" of relationally defining its paradigms. Finally, by de-realizing pictorial rhetoric and refusing a relationally defined aesthetic critique, Derrida comes to the fourth possibility for systematically delivering deconstruction to visual culture, and that is the problematizing of the question "what is art?" (p. 9). These are the gathers folding: the concept of the work of art, the aesthetic experience, the conditions of the object as a site of institutional power



through which aesthetic values are received and maintained. How the art object apes and reifies relations in culture amounts to a treatise on genealogy and remainders that in the deconstructive idiom of the drafter is called "patronymic." And for Derrida the relationship of fathers and sons is profound and coextensive. So that much of *Memoirs...* has to do with identification, or what the text offers as it indirectly describes the conditions of its own production.

As I understand it, in *Memoirs...* this all amounts to saying that in dissipating and assembling the possibilities of representation the artwork nominates and textualizes (via its repetitions of pattern and structure) a mode of consciousness. In the process it is possible to see how the vulnerability that emerges from the aesthetic moves to the semiotic and from there to the position of an institutional utterance. By the analogy of language-analysis, then, the forms of medium, content and expressive force of the artwork are associated with wider debates about the historical conditions of visibility termed vision. Imagistic forms bring into prominence fundamental theoretical claims about the idealization of knowledge through sight.

In other words, Derrida's theory constitutes an effort to get away from sharp limits. The discourse of the limit by which aesthetics authorizes itself to recognize and contain the autonomous experience of the artwork and taste, and at the same time to surround the art object with what is "proper" and "true," and thereby with what might be said to give it its name, involves processes of induction that deliver via the proper name (through the model and its paradigm) the fundamental purpose of high art in the theoretical of philosophy. For Derrida "the fact remains that here art is studied from the point of view of its end. Its pastness is its truth" (1987, 26). With this, it is possible to examine the totality/closure aesthetics unconsciously promulgates and thereby to precipitate its full ramifications in a deconstructive manner. But the question remains of how the necessary restructuring of the artwork, or signifier, relative to its (signified) reception as its broader context as well as its referent makes itself available for a radical philosophy that is neither constitutive nor regulative in spirit.

In various texts Derrida has explored western philosophy through the cognitive theories and insights of figures such as Heidegger and Rousseau. For example, the active catalyst for a forceful statement on the interplay of blindness and insight in critical and philosophical language as it is rendered in *The Truth in Painting* is Kant. What the eighteenth-century philosopher calls *Mittelglied* or "middle articulation" is that which gives tension to the argument deconstruction wishes to dramatize by both establishing and

defining the "domain" of what in Kant is the intersection of historical cultural forms and power -- i.e. aesthetics as a continuum of the natural, the beautiful and the legitimate-- and at the same time having the exemplary value of being played off its dynamic undertow (pp. 34-38 esp.). In Derrida's optic, the textual movement in the process of writing modern philosophy admits the trace of a discourse that is related to concepts of perspective and valuative judgement he seeks to clarify through the element of difference-deferment or *differance*. The architecture of *differance* appears in *Of Grammatology* where -- to the remain within the orbit of my own question which for the moment is concerned contextualizing the terms of drawing presented in *Memoirs of the Blind...*, what becomes significant is that the trace is described as a word not to be taken of an origin or anterior presence, or as a fixed end, but as the structure of *differance*. The trace is that which within the structure of *differance* is the sign. Such that, as Derrida reminds readers that the vocabulary of practice and structure of any teleological development corresponds to questions of strategy -- i.e. to a discourse already related to notions of perspective, valuative judgment, interpretation and distinction -- what becomes clear is that the element of *differance* translates in painting as a style of possession which for drawing makes it recoverable as an onto-hermeneutic interrogation of the limit. Now what is important is that the double register of both structuring (and therefore recovering) by making visible a "sign-chain" means at the same time that it passes away from perception. This pictographic (as opposed to phonetic) script by its discontinuous periodicity functions as a structure that as it stresses the relations between that which is produced "fully" as self-presence and the impossibility of its recovery in the name of a field of objective knowledge. Again, the denial of an original is fastened to an extent on critical categories at different levels of abstraction in the history of western philosophy. As such their definition and specificities are not relevant here. Except that for the most part they foreground the chaos of reality and manifest the disintegration of the progressively continuous character of the text. For the subject of a prevailing imagistic disposition and capacity encoded in cultural production and in aesthetics and in the social practices of a disposition to look among artists as a group, this drives a wedge between two opposites. To cite the Derrida of *The Truth in Painting*, a third term can touch either or both of the two edges. It can participate. "But the ambiguity of participation does not exhaust it. The very thing that makes -- the believers -- believe in its mediacy can also give up to neither of the two terms, nor even to the structure of opposition, nor perhaps to the dialectic insofar as it needs a mediation" (p. 34). In other words, as absolute value is discredited as

a categorization that serves a theoretical critique based on metaphysical insight, so the notion is postulated the projects of transparency will draw undecidability and discontinuity into themselves. The disruption of cognitive progression is arrived at by thinking that theory's "outside" is already within. This moment when control is lost provides a framework for theorizing supplementarity and excess -- an act of resistance against theory's blind spots. Braided into the political economy of culture museums materialize through objects such as historical drawings and thereby attached to the system of representations called displays, exhibitions, and presentations, it is this apparatus deconstruction delivers to visual culture via *Memoirs of the Blind*...

Returning indirectly to the problem of the parergon, the main framework of *Memoirs* ... takes place on three main registers: 1) a recognition of consciousness as a issue for art; 2) an interpretation of the actual position of the artist as one which extends beyond the framing-edge of the art object; 3) and two hypotheses to the effect that "blindness" is the condition of possibility for representation. In essence, and very much reduced, this is a translation of the claim that "*il n'y a pas de hors texte*" ("there is nothing outside the text")<sup>3</sup> extended for a visualism which an art historian would argue was defined in terms of historical and formal self-awareness.

For the exhibition, Derrida organizes a series of works of art that for him serve as moments of the performance of a blindness that represents a false illusion of presence. He does not provide a complete overview of the Louvre's drawing collection, and since he places works from diverse periods side by side, clearly, the connections between given images are speculative rather than causal. Mounted in such a way for me the works touch on debates and criticism around the exposition of the visual arts as an academic thesis. At any rate, it is not a social or contextual point of view that is presented. The treatment of the art exhibition must be looked at from a cognitive perspective. Which is to suggest that, since he evokes a linguistic model in the narrative, he understands exhibitions to be like texts. Derrida advances a theorization that blindness, as an actual situation in representation, draws attention to that which has not yet made itself felt with any originality in discourse, namely a theorization of the part of self-awareness in the inventiveness of the artist. The argument hinges on the hypothesis that physical blindness, which requires estrangement, affords a visionary insight. Drawing in this figure is taken up a counterpoint to the eye; the trace that appears in their folding -- the "trait that joins

3 The definition of this phrase is rehearsed in *Of Grammatology*, esp. pp. 158-160 and 207-10.

and adjoins only in separating" (p. 54) — gives rise to "the speech of the narrative" that is, to the "pictures or depictions of the blind" (p. 41); it is this "shadow writing" that in turn "inaugurates the art of blindness" (p. 51), a theorization of that which "exceeds the field of vision" (p. 44).

What occupies Derrida's philosophical attention is the art of drawing as a signifying structure that refuses with ceaseless alertness to either reproduce the legacy of mimesis or to take up the path to authenticity. Such that the notion of a conceptual blindness is introduced against a dead hand of history that would close in on the division of sight and viewpoint (p. 20). Into this argument is introjected a sense of consciousness that formulates its existence between subject and object. The argument is held aloft by idiomatic threads "neither clear nor countable" (p. 16) that commemorate on one hand the estranging quality of an art that forces self-recognition in the observer/reader, and on the other a critical practice that locates a beyond and within in the text. In this regard, the trait is a pretext to situate the translation from drawing to writing. In a literal sense, the trace is the token that refers to drawings Derrida selected for the exhibition; these portray visionaries, blind-men, artists, and sometimes tears. As outline, it signifies the drawing together of voices, sometimes objective and sometimes subjective, as might articulated by the movements of an author's pen. This conscious, self-effacing, voluntarily reproductive trace, writing, is an act of memory, a necessary and privileged ruin, or vestige, of experience itself. Rather than becoming a limiting condition caught up in the demands of a specific medium, however, the trait (now constituted as fragment) connects to an experience of the present as the condition of emergence for the spectator's subsequent writing (p. 56). Each aspect repeats without being reduced to the other.

The inference is that since theory itself is always in question in theoretical investigations, since it is fundamentally a process, it inheres in but does not determine critical practice. Accordingly, the reference to memory as a fragment that makes representation and self-presentation carries the implication that between the hand and the eye, between sight and the sketchpad lies a close correspondence of bodies and positions circulating as a discursive exchange of marks, limits, frames, and borders in representation. Put another way, as in *Of Grammatology*, "the outline... the line which is imitated... both outlines the space of imitation and the imitation of space" (p. 209). Thus what it means to view and perceive must always pass through semiology to begin to take adequate account of itself, because discourse interrupts and would destroy any form of

authorizing presence. In essence, blindness reduces to issues of truth claims in language to find against formalism.

As literary theory identifies it, a conventional viewpoint aims at a "fixing" an interpretation, at "straightforward" reading, a closure of the text. A Derridean deconstruction, on the other hand, works to dislodge appearances, evoke ambiguity, create ambivalence, will be deliberately abstract. Contingency proves relevant because that which both overwhelms and floods the text with meaning also speaks to the resonances between and anxiety around the artobjects. Hence, in the mutual entwining of drawing, philosophy, visual perception and figures of the blind in art, *Memoirs of the Blind* sketches the possibilities of drawing as a theoretical line between writing and looking, between expression and interpretation, each part irreducible to the other. In tracing this line, the text throws into relief the advantages and disadvantages of preserving the specificity of distinct approaches to the arts.

In some lights, deconstruction might be an arbitrary application of a particular philosophy to an indifferent object. Thus a critique of a Derridean post-referentiality that aims to recuperate specific knowledges lost to the denial of "reality" or that wishes to distance itself from what has come to represent "the acme of resurgent idealism" (Harrison and Wood 1992, 918) is by now advanced. In varying proportions critics hostile to deconstruction such as historical materialists and some cultural feminists have resisted the prescriptive method of deconstruction as a species of "simulacra" which is revealing of meaning and value by virtue of its self-reflexive artificiality. Their move has been in favour of a more conventional depth and opacity (see Weedon 1987; Barrett 1991; Elam 1994). But every for view amounting to a position that deconstruction is barely worth the mind-strain there is, paradoxically, a counter-practice that serves itself of its valence. Hence deconstruction emerges as defensible in relation to photography's production in visual culture and in a historically analytical frame. This path in effect also opens the way to Cadieux.

### *and Cadieux's Pleasure*

Simply put, as an art form photography has historically been caught in a bind wherein what would materially be considered unique and proper to the medium, and might otherwise be valued, is raised not to make but even to force a judgement against it. The invention of photography, and subsequent declarations of its potential as an artistic medium in 1839, for example, met with immediate scepticism on the mistaken grounds

that its evidential or mimetic character, as well as in Carol Squiers's words "the comparative simplicity of the photographic process -- and the ease with which it could be learned" disqualified it as an art form. Subsequent critics would seize on its household familiarity and commercial use "to challenge its expressive and informational capabilities" (Squiers 1990, 8). Hence photography has always been the object of anxiety, first, because it ushered in the age of mechanical reproduction, and second, because it threatened the end of aesthetic autonomy. But what worried critics most over the years was not the question of whether photography was a "proper" medium for the imagination but its seeming innocence. Because it insinuates a direct connection between sign and signifier, and is therefore taken as a virtually transparent medium, it has been attacked not only as a through terms associated with ideology (e.g. as a symptomatic of a criticality often associated with a social agenda) but also because its embeddedness in the culture denies "the possibility of distinguishing between reality and phantasm, between the actual and the simulated" (Krauss in Squiers, 23). Photography's seeming faithfulness to nature gestures in the direction of a fold in consciousness by throwing emphasis upon what is not usually seen. Hence as sight, representation, and process entwined, it can productively be recuperated to reveal conditions of visibility and invisibility in the culture.

Postmodern photography captures and undermines an often concealed politics of representation (Hutcheon 1989, 32). As a medium it calls representation into question by self-reflexively deconstructing, distorting, developing, or exposing its own conditions of possibility. The turn to semiological methods in photography such as those utilized early by Victor Burgin in the U.K. has given rise to its current identification as a form of cultural critique. But insofar as it puts into contact the semblance of a universal, transhistorical "truth" in its interconnectedness with uncomplicated viewing pleasure, however, postmodern photography as a signifying practice is also always at least potentially apprehensible as complicit with institutional power (Hutcheon 1991). As the work of Cadieux makes clear, in both these fascinating and compromised guises it bears implications for visualism.

For instance, in Cadieux's *La Blessure d'une cicatrice ou Les Anges*, 1987 (Figure 2.1) the artist's interest in juxtapositions of scale and value emerges as an exploration of the relationship between the medium's instrumentality mediated by the camera's seemingly "innocent eye," and the photograph's complicitous representational seduction. The work consists of two very much enlarged single images placed side by side: a monumental simulacra of a watercolour illustration from Antoine de

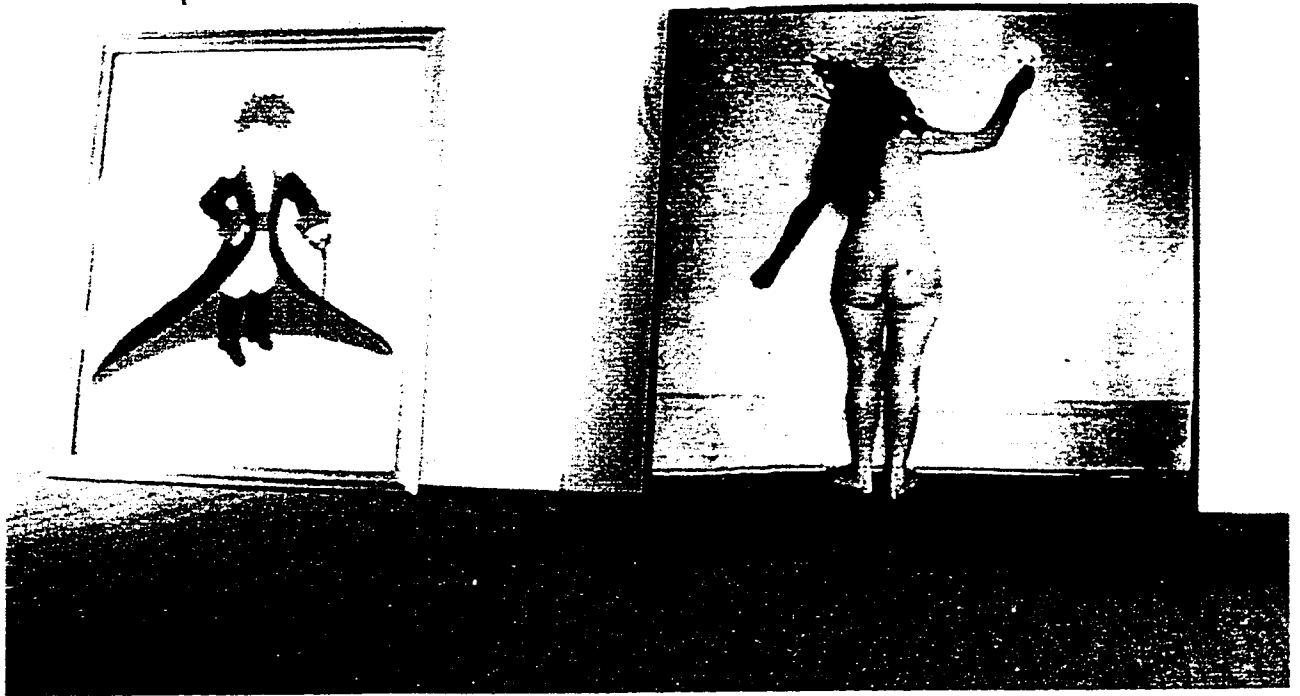


Fig.2.1 Geneviève Cadieux, LA BLESSURE D'UNE CICATRICE OU LES ANGES (1987)

Saint-Exupery's *Le Petit Prince*, and the magnified reproduction of a photograph by E.J. Belloq, which documents a New Orleans prostitute. The latter has her back towards the observer. In their enlargement the images stimulate comparison with cinematography.

Especially because the piece is cut up into sections it could be described relative to the cinematic process of fragmenting, and then manipulating, meanings relative to an outside world. The ability to describe reality in motion pictures as though everything that is perceived in the picture either goes inside the frame (on screen) or outside it (off screen) encourages generalizations at the same time as it denies differences, for example, of scale. The limits of legibility, and the physical and social controls by which discourses frame the features of realism and representation suggest themselves, then, as part of a complex strategy within which "readers" are set up as a deliberate part. In a situation evoking the body as this is situated relative to the work's presentation format, the encounter is one that can justify claims to a connection between what the spectator feels as self-consciousness. In other words, the awareness of being a seeing subject faced by the image of two vulnerabilities that are interrupted. The observer's detached gaze relative to the image is disturbed by the fact that Cadieux constitutes representation as the object of loss. Recognizably, what she organizes in the field of perception is a reflexive consciousness. How? Because not only does she "trouble" the spectator's expectations of the spectacle, but makes it clear that within the functions of the scopic field, it is representation's role to deny absence. The form this deepening of the detached gaze by its radically overthrown absence takes is a "chance" intervention by an "unseen" hand. Crucially, Cadieux has matter-of-factly recorded two instances of violent negation intimating the repressed operations of reflection. In a literal way both images present evidence of violent disfigurement: the little Prince neither sees nor is seen because his face has been scratched out (according to one source by the artist's brother as a child); the print has been destroyed, or cancelled, perhaps to prevent its unauthorized reproduction, by a line scored diagonally across the photographic plate. The situation is one that obviously conveys the fragility and sensitivity of photographic film as a metaphor for the grain of the skin. This aspect of representation that Cadieux is interested in is one that recurs throughout her work, and one I will elaborate on further in the dissertation.

It has been noted that many of Cadieux's works use poetic, psychoanalytic, or symbolic framing devices to allocate a place for the observer, sometimes creating a situation of violence (Godmer 1993). This violence has been compared to the discomfort that presents itself ambivalently as attraction/repulsion or seduction/horror in



pornography. In part it is constituted through the artists's use of enlargements, which reduce the specificity of difference. But on another register of perception, because the images function to concentrate attention on the particularities of the human body, there develops a sense that it is not difference being established but *a* (specific) difference that might be read as an overflow, in a certain sense, of meaning. So that finally what these images evoke is a sophisticated sense of the dangers and pleasures of photography's apparent transparency. On one hand there's the seduction photographic images arouse, which Mulvey's feminist analysis of the gaze made clear in the earlier part of my study. And on the other hand, the images register an inherent danger, which is that photography's precise function is to draw attention away from the viewer's awareness of the ideological constitution of representation. The inscription under the P'tit, from the original, makes this reading present: "*Voilà le meilleur portrait que, plus tard, j'ai réussi à faire de lui.*" It is the partial loss of identity to which the text and image refer that provokes the notion of ideology as representation, hence foregrounding a sense of how photography always inherently "troubles." With this lens it is possible to think of this work as it serves as a basis for considering problems of subjective status, and for thinking the transformation of culturally given meanings as these gather around visualism lending it texture and detail. Following from Derrida's analytic of approximate knowledge this, it would seem, is the gap which opens up to those who wish to see it. For me it constitutes a substantive point of blindness in contemporary poststructuralist criticism. It should be clear that the question of an "open and closed" visibility is both not at issue, and requiring of modification. To call deconstruction a blinded vision means to find in it a creative disturbance that might be taken as a protective mechanism of self-deception. Or, it might be the condition of possibility for an interruption of thought to be pursued as an oblique interpretation through a side glance. Or, with paradoxical logic, it might simultaneously be a progressive and a regressive performativity. I want to explore how the articulation of Derrida's interests with those of Cadieux can open the way to discussing the possibility of an alternative theory/practice conjunction. To stay with the idea of the politics of representativity, which is the vital undercurrent to this critique, it is to produce the forms of vision's discursivity as "material metaphors for moves of consciousness which do not intrinsically belong to any particular cultural domain but rather transversely cross, as it were the entire range of cultural expression" (Bersani in Ferguson 1996, 185).

I would put it differently and state that, as Jean Baudrillard's theory of seduction has taught, there is much potential in the subversive logic of the superficial, which first

affords a powerful critique of modern theory's tendency towards depth (1990). Baudrillard's conceptualization helps to clarify how photography's momentary and contingent vision might also be read as the condition of its sensibility. In constituting the effect of a transparent and immediate visibility photography as a medium manifests its involvement with pure fascination. Accordingly, self-reflexivity, as the example of *La Blessure* clarifies, involves an operative estrangement of the faculty of sight, and the simultaneous recognition that it is through perspective that critical practice operates. Cadieux asks viewers to question their view of reality and therefore themselves. In introducing "representation" as a space upon which experience is inscribed and across which culturally determined codes are simulated, she contests the idea that photography is "a mirror with a memory" -- a mere recording device attaching to art history in the idea of mimesis. For her, photography does not amount to an exact representation of the real world. This, it seems to me, brings her practice to a conscious link with theory. In speaking of the fantasy of the body as conduit, a body beyond the traditional nature/culture divide, Cadieux speaks of representation, and then of social powers and cultural bodies as well as of bodily surfaces and specific corporeal archives rather than of the presences in the world. In this limited sense the image offers itself to the faculty of sight as an instrument whose power lies in a strategy of simultaneously naturalizing and unsettling cultural and/or socio-political assumptions. Thus Cadieux keeps alive the connections between a tradition of critique that has been incorporated into photography's practice, and the formal conditions that distinguish it as a reflexive structure. The melancholic overtones are distinctly postmodern.

### ***On Practice***

Blindness in Derrida finds its analogy in the night, manifestly the condition of possibility for expression as "the ruination and death of all foresight" (p. ix). In this connection the present historical situation -- postmodernism -- is opened up to the dimension of vision as incapacitating and destructive, but also capable of generating sustained reflection. For Derrida, these always already involve spectatorial practices as blind spots (a narcissistic memory, melancholy, for example) inaugurate both the scopic field and the scene of drawing. In consequence what is ultimately at stake in *Memoirs of the Blind* is "the way viewers approach philosophical ideas through art, and the ways art enriches philosophical reflection." Thus the movement is "from blindness to evidence" (1990, vii). Vision, like melancholy, arises when the attachment between actual

experience and the realm of transcendence-as-determination-and-salvation seems to be lost. As Julian Roberts explains, the melancholic world picture is one whose starting point is scepticism, and whose end point is the conclusion that "the mimetic account of knowledge does not work" (in Wheale 1996, 139). Accordingly, nihilism is connected to subjectivity as a continually changing identity (Levin 1988). Thus for Derrida the hypothesis is advanced: expression belongs to a history of visualism in which the concept of art involves more than the element of formal difference; crucially, it concerns problems of legibility. Similarly, Cadieux's *Amour Aveugle* (Figure 2.2) metaphorically winks at resemblance, at aesthetic convention, as its signification displaces itself, now towards corporeal referents, now towards signifying bodies. The problem of perception is structured by means of singling out a fragment of the face, the eyes, and subjecting it to a double-exposure, so that in a close-up shot the transparent superimposition of contrasting states within the visual field, the physical features of the model are recognizable as they would be in a portrait, but what constitutes the viewer's apprehension is that there is something held in reserve, underneath. Hence the image is conceived in terms of an overlapping of possibilities which, proceeding from Derrida's reflections on an unmediated presence, might take on, on one level, the value of a mirror of consciousness, offering themselves to the spectator as the ruin of something already lost, the expression of a creative act "disappearing before [their] own eyes into an abyss" (Derrida 1990, 60). It would then be deciphered as corresponding, in what is always a philosophical or theoretical representation, to the double sense of that whose operations are both to constitute the apprehension of a thing (as matter/figure, as intelligibility/sensibility) and simultaneously determine something supplementary. The reading of the eyelids as veils is appropriate in order to constitute a framing of a problematic lucidity. As the hymen in Derrida's discursive determinations, they denote that which "causes to disappear" along with a liminal undecidability (1987, 291ff.). At this level it would also present itself self-consciously as an act of memory, the ruin of experience.

On another level, and also in a generalized way, the photograph's status as a "mirror" draws attention to the quantitative distribution of dark and light: in this respect, it is the testimony not so much of a "loss of direct intuition" (Derrida 1990, 70) but of the fact that photography is the art of light and dark. It would not be reductive to state at this point that, in this limited sense, photography is by definition the most "deconstructive" of practices, since it comes into existence in the fold between two orders, an open self-reflexive process of awareness that translates as the finished print and a closed

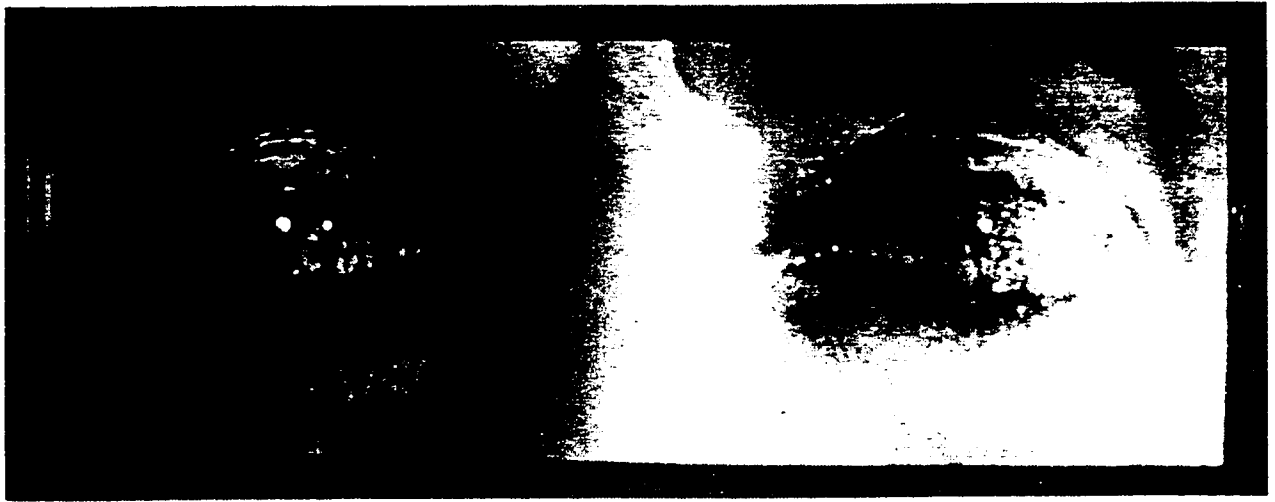


Fig.2.2 Geneviève Cadieux, AMOUR AVEUGLE (1992)

self-contained technical one, the filmic negative. To this one might add that the photographic image is in fact constituted as the space of in a momentary eclipse of the object by the hand (Derrida 1990, 106), and in the duration of a performance sight alone would be incapable of generating. In this reading, the artist transcends reportage not only because artobjects result from a providential conjoining of observation and sagacity but also because according to Derrida "a work is at once order and its ruin" (1990, 122). Postmodern photography, as stated earlier, stresses that the order of providential clairvoyance quickly reverses itself to signify the betrayal of the eye, that is, to announce the deception of appearances (p. 92). Here Cadieux's *Amour Aveugle* might be read as a direct and personal expression of a certain relationship between an apparently seamless surface of codes whose logic seems absolute, and that looks natural and whole, and its negative, corresponding to a discourse that doubles back upon itself ideologically, transgressively, and paradoxically. In this move away from rationalization towards reproduction – and on one further, final plane – Cadieux's practice emerges as an extension of a Derridean sensibility.

Because it holds in tension the cancellation of sight and scopic pleasure, because it elaborates on blindness, consciousness, and the subject/object position in Derrida, the spectre might be raised that postmodern photographic practice illustrates rather than generates theory. Even begging the question of what this means in terms of aesthetic value, nothing could be further from actuality, at least in what concerns Cadieux. What I have been suggesting is that there is in postmodern practice a profound ambivalence towards the object that commentators like to express in the words "paradox," and "irony,"<sup>4</sup> and an equal acceptance of "artificiality" as a normative value in the culture. Frequently it reduces to a repudiation of what Wollheim conceptualized as "the material character of art" (in Harrison and Wood 1992, 787). One way of explaining this is to follow the changing attitudes of critics towards art as an autonomous object. In the literature, what on one side will emerge as a defense of the integrity of medium specificity will be pitted against rival interests engaged in marshalling arguments for interdisciplinary media. A formalist approach, for example, might lay stress on a given art medium's specificity and/or concentrate on historical self-awareness. On the other side of the debate, however, a post-referential, post-objective analysis might pose questions of the relations between artobjects and spectators. As a necessary and theoretical corrective to the

4 For example, Linda Hutcheon 1989; 1990.

commonly held view that these two tendencies, formalism and semiology, are mutually exclusive, I would like to suggest that a more adequate model to begin to explain Cadieux's production practice. It seems to me that, rather than preserving or artificially separating any two sides of a theoretical description of the object, it might be more productive to consider the ways by which art practice itself renders the relation between aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic ideas. In this a rich weave of correspondences suggests itself. Although the two kinds of representation sometimes compete in current critical practice, it is a fact that in visual culture today there is a discernible trend towards conceptual cross-pollination, albeit when this is sometimes prompted by economic or professional competition. However, issues of bad faith aside, for me it is the essentially material character of Cadieux's representations that demonstrates the intellectual rigor at her command lending force and relevance to her practice. More than a theoretical self-awareness such as "postmodern irony" might define, this formal element is the equivalent gesture that distinguishes Cadieux from other practitioners; more significantly, it is the means by which she makes deconstruction a condition of possibility for practice.

What I am suggesting is that in being concerned with the object Cadieux creates a space for radical new potentialities in theory. How can this be? It is a simple matter of understanding how the gap between the signified and the signifier has amounted to a breaking of a code. It transforms critical theory by making the question of what practice signifies a rather subtle issue. Derrida's subjection of vision as he distinguishes between similitude and semblance is constitutive of it: the insight of the blind. It turns on the "sense" of intuition. Organized around intuition a conversation between theory and practice might be effectively restored.

### ***Some Fluid Developments, or, An Encounter of Practice and Interpretation***

To recap: What, then, has been the impact of deconstruction on more recent histories of art? And, what are the conditions, what the limits, and what the implications of appropriating a Derridean poststructuralism for the canon? These are difficult questions, and their answers are somewhat fraught. I should state that it is only after many readings that I come to what is always to be understood as a provisional assessment of Derrida's utility as a theorist who opens an edge of the "proper" for art's history and visual culture. To read Derrida as a prelude to thinking deconstruction involves a certain risk. This is partly because his language is complex, and his thinking nimble; in part, too, it is due to the difficulties, at least in what concerns Anglo writing, of translating a text that

itself speaks to the instability of signs and the blurring of boundaries, of lines. Significantly, it is because the playfulness and discontinuity of his brand of postmodern discourse relies to a point on the formalization of certain methods and modes of reproduction only to effect their undermining. The "Derrida effect" is a breakdown of codes: deconstruction is a discourse whose edgeless textuality ceaselessly constitutes in order to make collapse, whose very premise is indeterminacy and indefiniteness, and whose main themes are the instability of subjectivity, language, and the transcendental signifier. The question is, if deconstruction works to displace art history and therefore visualism within it – that is to say, works for and between institutional practices as a process, then can it or not be bracketed off in the interests of a more sustained and nuanced reading for any given cluster of images or structures such as "architecture," or even sketched self-portraits? I don't know. But what I do know is that neither Wigley's recourse to architecture's spacing, nor the binding of blindness to drawing is sufficient to speak to the contingency of postmodern photographic practice. Re-enter Cadieux as a case study of deconstruction's limit-edge.

I have been suggesting that, in its aspect of breaching boundaries and thus "fleshing out" art theory, photography affords an efficient mechanism for deliberating on the "knot" (the Foucauldian "dispositif") of representation as it articulates visualism.<sup>5</sup> From this hypothesis might stem another, namely, that the act of visual representation, as evident in Cadieux's work, dramatizes productive tensions in what surrounds and positions the dialectical necessity to preserve and then reverse the political economy of culture. This statement might be structured by reference to Cadieux's *Blue Fear* (Figure 2.3), an image which brings home the fact that, from the beginning, photography throws into question the notion of an original to which the image refers. The image consists of the double exposure conjoining the back of an older man's head and shoulders with the image of (the same man's?) eyes. The two images together form a third by which the edge of the nose uncannily becomes a fold in the body that seems to describe the junction where the torso comes to an extremity. In its doubled character *Blue Fear* admits another interpretative possibility: between the aesthetic experience of the object and the structural limitations imposed by the artist (setting cool blue against warm orange, for example, or

5 What the dispositif references is the conjunction of texts (objects and institutions), with how these are brought together, and how they function strategically in relation to one another. In other words, it refers to a knot of objects and statements and how they function in terms of effects. With such a series of alignments, no part is reducible to the next.



Fig.2.3 Geneviève Cadieux, BLUE FEAR (1990)



the proportions of the frame), what emerges is a new structural relationship in the form of an imprinted body suggesting a geographical map. Into this new terrain liberated by consciousness a new set of critical possibilities might be precipitated.

How so? Literary critic Terry Eagleton signals the radical potentiality of deconstruction in describing it as "an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of political structures and social institutions maintains its force ... to see such things as effects of a wider and deeper history -- of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices" (Eagleton 1983, 148). Deconstruction in this sense can be envisioned as utilized by Cadieux to break away from the idea of resemblance to the notion that western systems of knowledge always rely upon some originating moment of truth. Similarly, the term "logocentrism" in deconstruction calls attention to a tendency in western philosophy to hold up questions of meaning to the light of the transcendental signifier or any other singular founding presence. For deconstruction this means that meaning is positioned behind language or other representational forms in the culture allowing only illusions to be known. Since for Derrida, "meaning is always deferred, perhaps to this point to an endless supplementarity, by the play of significations" (Norris 1982, 32), in terms of a consideration of aesthetic practices what deconstruction means is that interpretation is never final or complete but keeps on moving. Accordingly, and carried over into Cadieux's image, this idea of motion and of deconstruction opens up onto the conditions of new and vigorous political potentialities. Thus focalized, the question of how photography has taken up for aesthetics must be recognized, first, as itself a constructed site, but principally, and under still postmodernity's banner, not only as a potentially destabilizing space for received wisdom but as a generative terrain that might itself productively become a site of struggle.

### ***A Kodak Moment***

Hesitant before the image, the viewer is now forced to reflect. Turning back to the question of a critical sense of materialism that drives a wedge between competing modalities of critical interpretation, between "writing" in the manner of modernist criticism, and "reading" in the poststructuralist/deconstructivist vein, the discussion would be brought forward in two examples, *Blues*, and *Le Corps du ciel*, both dated 1992. Both images make a conscious structural analogy between the photographic process and the productivity of language. This is expressed in the ways both represent the physical connection between the mechanical reproduction of memory, assumed in the

camera's eye, and corporeal memory, identified in marks upon the skin's surface. A quotation by the artist aptly demonstrates the connection: "The skin is a sensitive surface which reveals and retains information much like a photograph."<sup>6</sup>

In *Le Corps du ciel* (Figure 2.4) two categories of finite phenomena are developed in such a way as to point to their imaginative and historical connection in the realm of the visual. To one side of the image is sky, on the other bruised skin. At a glance an art historian might make the organic connection between a phenomenology that involves the combination of body and language such that might begin to be shaped to the measure of the outside world, and an illusionism made vivid by the contradiction between the pigmented surface described and the enclosing shape of the support as its limiting condition. In other words, the connection to the object's materiality, to painting, and to colour.

Cadieux's photographs are, paradoxically, painterly. Colour annexes them to a tradition that begins with Titian in the sixteenth century taking up Turner's atmospheric studies of sky in the nineteenth. The prints, now metaphors for sensory experience, ironically represent the collected historicity of perception described, materialized, understood in terms of colour and coloration. Thus what *Blues* (Figure 2.5) in particular seems to refer to, especially as it relates to the camera as an instrument of perception, is that artistic expressiveness involves confronting the paradox of what properly constitutes the character of the photographic medium. Accordingly, and as Frederic Jameson has hypothesized, it comes into being as a materialization of subjectivity. The visual mode, for Jameson, registers colour as "punctual beats of energy" (1992, 142). Thinking Cadieux's representations, I take this to mean that visual practice exceeds and at the same time belongs with the dimension of language. What is offered to the eye is the enticement of the image in its material, and intrinsically substantial character. The fact that this is pursued in photography -- a medium that, as artist Victor Burgin intimates in his essay, "The absence of presence" (1986, 29-50), escapes the tradition of painterly realism -- cues its critical force. Perhaps it seems odd to write of colour via a return of painterly signifiers (and as a privileged site), but it seems necessary to a reconsideration of what precisely is visualism's limit-edge. The edge, I think, is subjective depth. Unlike Burgin who jettisons the object for a glimpse at the fetishism of presence, and like Burgin who

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ann Duncan, "The Realm of the Senses," *The Montreal Gazette*, (Saturday April 3, 1993), p. 5.



Fig.2.4 Geneviève Cadieux, LE CORPS DU CIEL (1990)

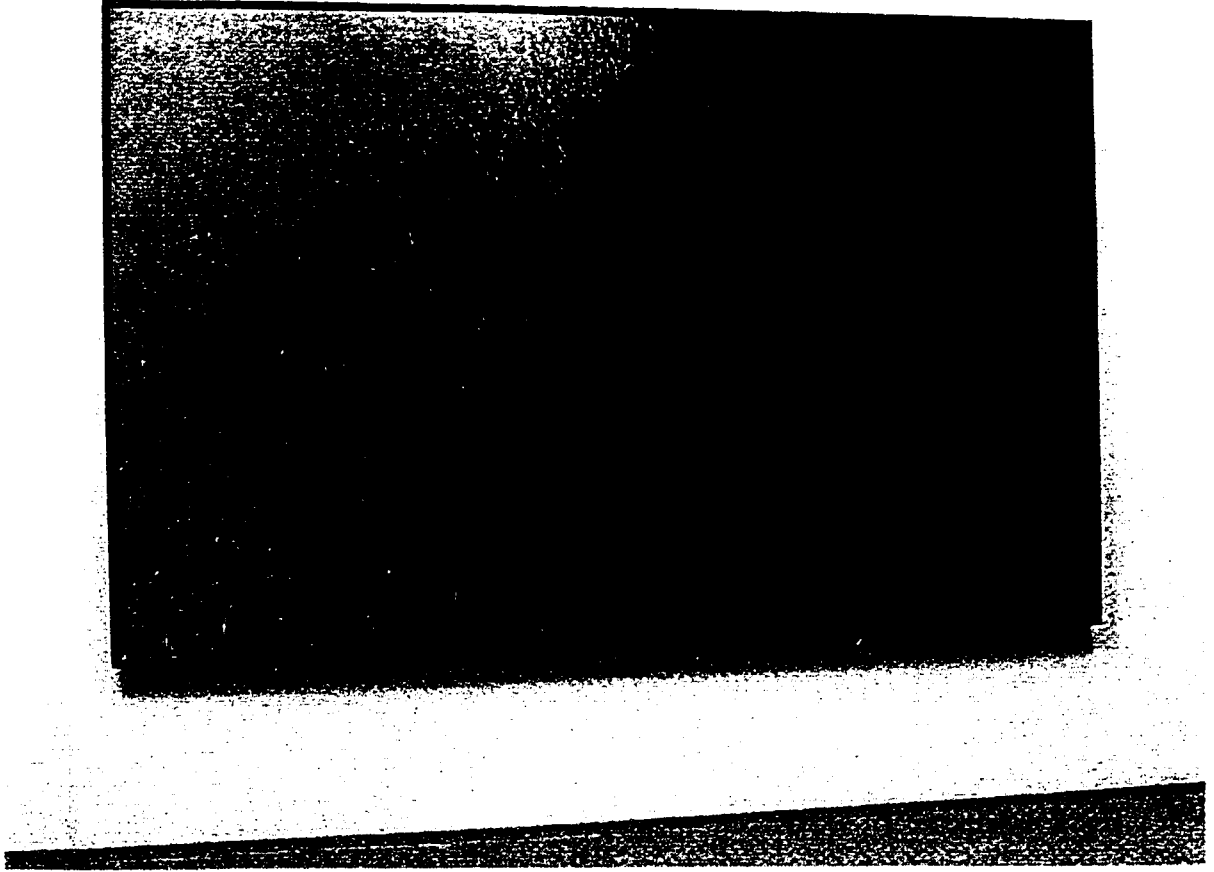


Fig.2.5 Geneviève Cadieux, BLUES (1990)

believes that the task of the critical artist is to interrupt the flow of representations, Cadieux's work intimates that the potentialities of the art object's materiality should freely circulate. To the dry if seductive theoretical exegesis that relies on philosophical content and discourse, Cadieux offers the sensual immediacy of colour. To intellectual subordination, a textured surface.

The notion of a "folded" world, in which creases, furrows and folds structured according to a field of correspondences operate *against* deep determinations, a folded world such that Deleuze might describe, is supported by its affinities and differences with Cadieux's *Trou de memoire, la beauté inattendu* ("memory gap, an unexpected beauty") (Figure 2.6). In general, the artist's preoccupation with scars and skin promotes the sense of a taste for fluctuation, transformation, and change, functioning as well to draw attention to the physical features that distinguish entities from one another. The image is simply that of the trace of a wound: in Chantal Pontbriand's view, a scar in "field of skin and hair," "part of one's field of gravity" a mark of "the passage from life to death."<sup>7</sup> I cite this description because at one level the blemish can be read as the scripting of a personal narrative applied as writing on the flesh. This would take it back to Hutcheon's sense of photography's legibility, cited earlier. Scars are graphic in the sense that graffiti is, i.e., as a signatures or "tags" produced to lay claim, to map initiation, more recently to invite attention. Scars so function in the culture; when Kurt Cobain's death is constituted as era-defining as it is now, on the rhetorical surface that is skin, scars take on the social form of initializing the body as a discursive battleground. Scars represent that which falls out of bounds. Thus, in the very moment that they are enlarged, and in particular when they are transferred into the museal context, they become surrogates for the "other," and for alterity as the representation of "otherness."

However, the non-traditional three-dimensional format employed by the artist, making something between the photographic work's traditional flatness and sculpture's conventional three-dimensionality, enables a further reading constructed on the tantalizing play on visibility and invisibility enveloped architecturally in *Trou de memoire*. As noted earlier, the object-status of the work displaces a painterly paradigm of past representation. But the mobile effects of referentiality are present also in the choice of a silverized mirror to constitute one side of the piece. In the mirror, the photograph of the scar becomes an

<sup>7</sup> Chantal Pontbriand, "Geneviève Cadieux," *Pour la suite du Monde. Cahier. Propos et Projets*, p. 68.

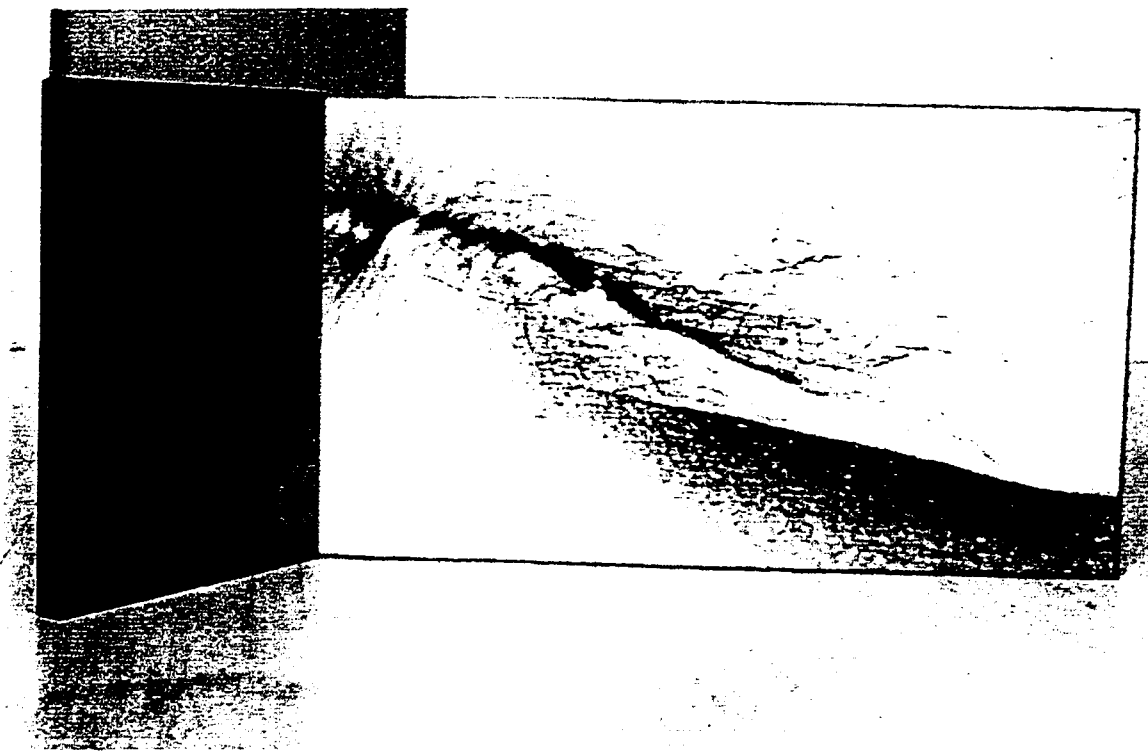


Fig.2.6 Geneviève Cadieux,  
TROU DE MEMOIRE,  
LA BEAUTÉ INATTENDU (1988)





Fig.2.6.1 Geneviève Cadieux, TROU DE MEMOIRE, LA BEAUTÉ INATTENDU (detail)

elliptical curve whose very abstraction enables a criss-crossing from two dimensionality into three. And back. So the combined effect of the arrangement of the whole folds into the idea of a fragmentation of the body and of its environment along the line of an apprehended eye. From this perspective the following theoretical speculation might perhaps be recovered: the visual appeal of the image is revealed by means of the formal device of replication, only to be expelled as it is acknowledged. What emerges is a necessary sense that optical experience is the sole basis for practice, and a praxis that maintains its critical value against a post-referential visualism such as Derrida might conceptualize.

An alternate response put forward by literary critic Linda Hutcheon when she observes that, "Like writing, photography is as much transformation as recording; representation is always alteration, be it in language or in images, and it always has its politics" (1989, 92), suggests that it is in drawing attention to a network of relations between politics and representation that deconstruction might be destabilized. In this connection, what comes to mind are the senses in which in Cadieux's work is invested with a response to the social body, and succeeds in making an intervention in public space. Read as a theoretical point of departure, the actuality of art can thus be conceptualized as a series of bodies existing as texts and surfaces, performances whose effects betray an exploration of conceptual shifts, and sustain profound ambiguities. The framing and position of *Portrait de famille* (1991) helps to raise this issue, which is essentially about the politics of representation. The installation consists of an environment made up of three enlarged close-up images of sizeable proportion dedicated to father, mother and daughter. The work has a strikingly material dimensionality. The photographs are intimate portraits: pictured with their eyes closed, each subject is backed by sections of the body. The visual strategy of superimposition, actual as in the father's allotted case where the play is between the daughter's lips and the father's torso, implicit in the others, express the problem of inclusion and connection. It seems to me that Cadieux touches on Homi Bhabha's definition of culture as "symbol-forming" and "subject-constitutive." This symbol-forming and subject-constitutive culture operates through processes of relation to itself,<sup>8</sup> processes that might be theorized as taking place in the artist's attention to the

8 Developing this idea, Bhabha writes: "[C]ultures are only constituted in relation to that otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity which makes them decentered structures - through that displacement or liminality opens up the possibility of articulating different, even incommensurable cultural practices and priorities." See "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha," in J. Rutherford,





Fig.2.7 Geneviève Cadieux, PORTRAIT DE FAMILLE (1991)

institutions and systems (like the family) in which subjectivity is produced. New and unexpected articulations result from the conjunction of forces, forms, and signs produced in different locations in space and time. In offering the critical possibilities of a theoretical and even temporary negotiation of power positions, Cadieux focuses attention on a notion of spaces-between, hence on productive resonances destined to challenge the frontiers and boundaries that make up discourses.

### ***Politics and Deconstruction***

So far, what emerges from the discussion is that, at a semiotic level – that is to say considered by reference to its internal systems – artistic texts point towards deconstruction's failure to engage in the history of the means of art's production. Thus what has been explored is the question of aesthetic consciousness. In such reading, visualism is raised as a matter of format, references, and imagery. What interests me now is to bring in the wider issue of context. As noted earlier, in photography border tensions between theory, politics and representation operate to denaturalize, and thus politicize art. The question of politics, however, cannot help but destabilize theory.

For many critics, Derrida is caught in the discourses of postmodern art badly burned by his connection to linguistic studies, laying claim to language conceptualized as a narrative of relativity. Because the "real" is put into discourse and interpreted, literary theory, as a critique of practice, is suspect on both general and specific grounds. As feminist literary critic Chris Weedon observes, by constantly raising questions of location to issue relative to fixed signs such as social meaning, a poststructuralist deconstruction constantly defers to language, opening discursive relations to constant interpretation and redefinition in a specific range of ways. Accordingly, "Deconstruction theorizes the discursive context as the relationship of difference between written texts and while insisting that non-discursive practices are important, does not spell out the power relations within which texts are located" (Weedon 1987, 25). Even so, Weedon argues in support of postmodernism's utility for a feminist politics whose case is made along the lines of a poststructuralist sense of subjectivity as a supplementary logic. The linkage between material interests and ideology on one hand, and deconstruction on the other, offers a way out of the deconstructive impasse. Weedon insists that full attention must be paid to the "social and institutional context of textuality" (ibid.). Echoing this sentiment, Linda

ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 211.

Hutcheon concurs in stating that a theory of agency is visibly lacking in poststructuralism "caught as it is in a certain negativity that may be inherent in the critique of cultural dominants." It has no theory of positive action on a social level as all feminist positions do. To "de-doxify" as she puts it is not to act, "even if its a step towards action or even a necessary precondition of it" (Hutcheon 1989, 151). Accordingly, while a Derridean discursivity can be used as a tool, for example, to throw subjectivity and consciousness into question, it cannot alone constitute a structure by which to create operative change in society or in the culture. By contrast, a representative postmodern practice such as Cadieux's would serve to overcome this limitation in taking account of the critical, political and ideological conditions in which art is produced. The political significance of shifting subjectivity onto such a field of conflicting discourses is that it draws attention to an enabling critique of the grounds of difference. In this it offers a means to identify how specific discourses inhere in social institutions.

### ***The Artist and Politics***

Put into this context, Cadieux's practice is cast into the plural, as it articulates the complex intersection between image and text. It is the detachability and infinite repeatability of the photographic medium that captures the idea that in mediating subjectivity the image offers something of a critical and necessary translation. Perhaps it is for this reason that Cadieux's representations are so readily appropriated for the culture. Consider, for instance, the following quotations:

Mais ce qui étonne, à Montréal, c'est la vitalité et la quantité d'art qui s'y produit, tant dans une discipline que dans une autre. Dans tout cela, il y a une émergence de qualité, un art foncièrement critique, informé, présent à la réalité contemporaine, loin de tout mimétisme ou provincialisme.

Montréal est donc une ville francophone et en cela beaucoup plus européenne que les autres villes du continent. Ses artistes sont depuis longtemps tournés tant vers l'Europe que vers les Etats-Unis tout en étant sensibles à leur

propre spécificité culturelle. Américanité et européenité se conjuguent et produisent en art une approche qui distingue les pratiques montréalaises.  
Chantal Pontbriand<sup>9</sup>

Today, whether or not as a result of the cultural complexity of its situation, the critical understanding of postmodernism in Montreal ... hinges more on a notion of history and on the hybridization of genres than on the critical deconstruction stressed in Toronto. Nor has Montréal much of Toronto's self-conscious preoccupation with place. Rather, it has sought to represent itself in international terms, without, for all that, losing a sense of its identity.  
Diana Nemiroff<sup>10</sup>

[I]l existe dans le champ des arts visuels, comme dans d'autres champs culturels au Québec, la littérature par exemple, une surconscience linguistique qui travaille la production, qui marque le lieu et qui n'est pas sans infléchir les modalités selon lesquelles la postmodernité visuelle a trouvé à s'y formuler. Dans leur prise en compte ou leur engouement pour les effets de langues, les codes de suppléance, les transferts esthétiques et les co-habitations disciplinaires, les oeuvres ... sont animées d'un désir de traduction, voire de conversion, où le corps est souvent l'interface entre langue et vision, ou alors le dispositif qui secoue toute tentative de les concevoir comme régimes hégémoniques.  
Johanne Lamoureux<sup>11</sup>

When Pontbriand, Nemiroff, and Lamoureux write these sentences they speak to a view of Québec influenced by differences between Québec and English Canada and, on another level, are themselves influenced by the elasticity of postmodern theory. These authors

9 "The astonishing thing about Montreal is the vitality and quantity of art that is produced in all disciplines. And from all this activity, true quality is emerging: art that is basically critical, informed, in tune with contemporary reality, and far removed from all mimicry and provincialism. Montreal is a francophone city, and thus much more "European" than the other cities on this continent. For ages, its artists have turned to Europe for inspiration as often as to the United States, while maintaining an awareness of their own cultural specificity." Translation in the text, p. 9. Chantal Pontbriand, *La Ruse Historique: l'art à Montréal = The Historical Ruse: Art in Montréal* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1988), p. 13.

10 Diana Nemiroff, *Canadian Biennale of Contemporary Art = Biennale Canadienne d'Art Contemporaine* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada: 1989), p. 84.

11 "[I]n Quebec, visual art and the other cultural fields (literature, for example) are permeated by a heightened awareness of language that has left significant traces on what is produced, and influenced in ways in which postmodernism has come to be articulated. In their attentiveness to (or fondness for) the effects of language, for supplementary codes, aesthetic transfers and disciplinary couplings, the works ... are inspired by a desire for translation (or indeed conversion) in which the body is either the interface between language and vision, or the apparatus that undermines all attempts to conceive of them as hegemonic regimes." Translation in the text, p. 39. *Seeing in Tongues/Le Bout de la langue: A Narrative of the Visual Arts in Quebec* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995), p. 19.

present us with a perspective on Québec visual art that privileges the value of language, mobility and transience, that conceptualizes "hybrids" and figures "translation," takes stock of contemporary social reality, and envisions the possibility of a sense of community forged relative to debates that take place in the broader context of identity. In other words, a concept of difference is promoted that provides ways of theorizing disjunction and displacement without dismissing the appeal of the locative. Beyond accommodation, each of these texts frames, in providing a socio-political context, how we look at Geneviève Cadieux.

Exhibited from Tokyo to Sydney, her work is included in the collections of Canada's most prominent institutions from coast to coast, among them the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée du Québec, and Montréal's Musée d'art contemporain. This would imply a double time of nation and culture pleated into her practice; that is, the existence of a necessary and theoretical convergence of the processes of selectivity that construct truths about the nation conjoined with a retracing of the present in the past read into Cadieux's production in what might come back to an unproblematic notion of representation. However, this is belied by competing readings of her work. Writing on Cadieux insistently elaborates around her competing definitions of "cultural identity." At one moment, her production discursively circulates as a defining moment in Nemiroff's diverse present for the National Gallery of Canada (1989), and at another it embodies Canada at the 1990 Venice Biennale. Two years later it will represent a socially responsible Québec for the exhibition *Pour la suite du Monde*. In 1991 the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal presented works from Québec, Canada, Europe, the United States and Africa that "specifically engaged in political debates or social causes." In this last case Cadieux is to be regarded as spectacularly paradigmatic of an effective dominant culture such that Raymond Williams might define it. The catalogue essays of Manon Blanchette and Gilles Godmer both underscored the public, city-bound, and world oriented discourse of the museum. Citing philosopher Michel Serres, Blanchette described the Musée's function "as a beacon, as a guiding pole."<sup>12</sup> Her description seemed to play on *La Voie Lactée* (Figure 2.8), Cadieux's bill-board sized translucent image of a woman's rouged and parted lips set on the museum's rooftop.

12 Blanchette "Les nouveaux éclairés," in Gilles Godmer and Réal Lussier, curators, *Pour la suite du Monde* (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1992). The English version of her text, cited here, appears on pp. 236-247.

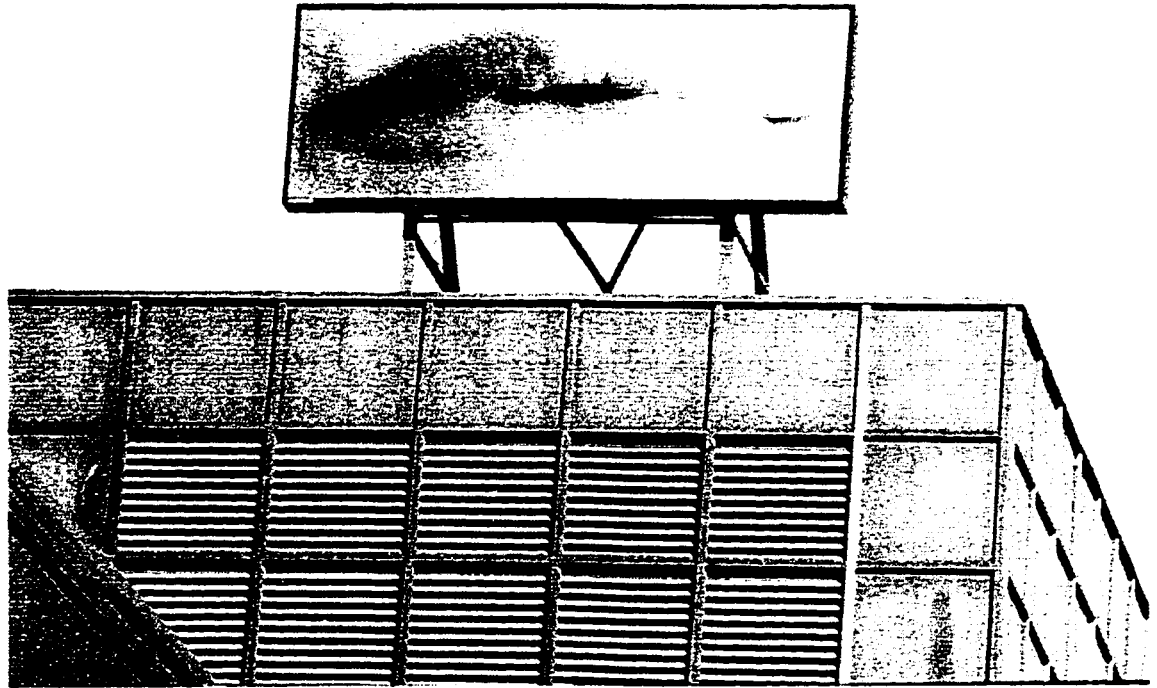


Fig.2.8 Geneviève Cadieux, LA VOIE LACTÉE (1992)

Fig.2.9 Man Ray, À L'HEURE DE L'OBSERVATOIRE - LES AMOUREUX (1932-1934)

Inspiring comparison to Man Ray's surrealist *À l'heure de l'Observatoire -- Les Amoureux*, 1932-1934 (Figure 2.9) and as strategically exaggerated, abstract, and consciously composed to overlap, yet not coincide, with the close-up conventions of cinema, *La Voie Lactée* becomes, in Jean Baudrillard's words, "the smooth operational surface of communication" (Baudrillard in Foster 1993, 127). In other words, it is revised and flattened to the museum's globalizing rhetorical sweep. In effect, the image is appropriated to purchase a certain cultural politics, which is to say that it is assimilated by the institution for profit and for spectacle. This represents one of several possible interpretations. Alternately, the image might be read as an effective critique of power. In this interpretation it would refer to language and silence. If "*la voix lactée*" is read as referring to the specificities of voice, of a mother tongue silenced, rather than taken literally as "the milky way," then that silence can be read as having a specific historical meaning, and in the context of the dominance of particular politics in Québec during the period the work was "bought" by the museum, as specifically francophone. Such a suggestion can be developed with the related observation that art institutions always represent a "selective tradition."<sup>13</sup>

However, in the literature both these narratives seems to be avoided, or at least inadequately understood. Used on the cover of the exhibition's publication, and hence representing the institution's link to the larger social community, the image loses some of its function as a particular, sensuous and imaginative expression of the artist's experience and becomes mediatized. At this point, something different begins to happen. What touches me now is that by contrast to the gallery's mediatized effect, Cadieux provides Pontbriand, Nemiroff, and Lamoureux with a crucial specificity. These authors understand that Cadieux "speaks" not only for Québec but to Montréal within a more complex representational narrative whose terms are heterogeneity, identity, and visibility. In its linkage to postmodernity, within a spatialized projection of history foregrounding disjunctive synthesis, her site-specific practice accrues value as a site in which hackneyed and pre-given distinctions between "regional" and "national," "inside" and "outside," no longer offer a synchronic presence. As a consequence, her practice attains a key place in theorizing questions of community and identity relative to the culture.

<sup>13</sup> See Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 39.

When I say that Cadieux's work is political what I mean is that it exists within a larger political and institutional context; I'm referring to ideology in the Althusserian sense to state that she participates in a politics of representation. Which is to say that the work functions with great efficiency to denaturalize a certain realistic logic, but not to say that it intrinsically possesses a specific oppositional function, say, within a sense of an occupied history. Even so, her practice was early regarded as connected to the values of feminism, and as therefore belonging to a history marginalized to the dominant culture's selective tradition. The artist insists that neither the imagery, nor its references, are explicitly ideological, however.<sup>14</sup> All the same, the question of identity pries at a deconstructivist textualization of the object, pointing at the peculiarities of an enterprise that refuses to take account of the text's unique modes of materiality.

In this, the critical reception of Cadieux's work points towards a certain definition of the national as a local refused. Representing the specific context of a québécois and Canadian postmodern, paradoxically it also claims international status for artists in Québec. It seems to me that such a confusion of categories, such a decentered figuration of "nation" insistently brought to the artist's practice, raises interesting questions of the processes of selectivity that construct culture and of certain discursive and non-discursive practices in Québec, Canada, and France.

### ***Translations***

The act of visual representation, as Cadieux's photographic practice, dramatizes productive tensions in what surrounds and positions the political economy of culture. What might be said, then, about "cultural identity" as a performative and analytical category by reference to the specificities of individual art objects such as hers? Something of an oblique access is required to clarify cultural identity from art practice. And, in this connection, Lamoureux might again be cited. Utilizing the figure of "translation" to speak generally to identity in the context of cultural production, specifically to art in Québec, she theorizes translation across and through discourse, time, and space in her text entitled *Seeing in Tongues/Le Bout de la langue: A Narrative of the Visual Arts in Quebec*. Lamoureux highlights "translation" in order to negotiate certain issues around identity, language, and national cohesion. Referring generally to the spatialization of identity in the context of cultural production, she observes that the idea of "site specificity" no longer

14            Conversation with the author, June 1996.



indicates an "attentiveness to the place where the work appears," but functions "as the linking, the problematic articulation, of the place one comes from with the place one is going to" (p. 23). For me, Lamoureux's sense of site specificity implies that creativity in visual work involves the mutual entwining of future and past, a movement that shapes the autonomous and self-reflexive conditions of viewing/ writing. The capacity of visual codes to travel is thus rooted in the notion of translation. What I want to retain from Lamoureux's discussion of Cadieux is how she works across and through a field of sensoria enfolded in the notion of a visual *identitaire*, as the citation earlier makes clear. This metaphor of translation would give way to the possibility of reading site-specificity against the grain -- as discursivity rather than according to its more traditional topographical or phenomenological ordering in the culture. In adopting this position, stress accordingly falls on spaces-between: between discursive and non-discursive practices, between affect and the Law, among competing subjectivities. Socio-political geographies, with language, are transitively linked to the objects organized within them.

Making the connection between braille and visual representation in her analysis of Cadieux's *À fleur de peau* (1987), in her essay Lamoureux perceives the potentialities of a shift of sensory registers. The formal elements of this artwork are a clouded mirror and a silverized plate inscribed in braille with a quotation from Saint-Exupéry reading: "Here is the best portrait that, later on, I was able to make of him." So, language is linked to the given-to-be-seen as an "encounter" between sensual fields ex-centrally assembled. From the artist's position, the objectivity and framing power of vision in contrast to concrete touching enables, in a mutual identification, a new awareness, or change of state. Thus read, the crucial element of Cadieux's photographs is not so much what is visible in the image, but what might be apprehended in the movements between frames. The arbitrary link between ideas and materials signifies a system whose potential destabilization conveys a deeper meaning and evokes a field of contested social evaluations. This systematic differential relation, which in effect stresses a dependency on context, sets up a provisional closure of meaning such that, in Cadieux's later image *La Fêlure, au coeur des corps* (Figure 2.10) for instance, it will not only be the reflexive dimension of the spectator's identification with lips and dermal surfaces that deserves close scrutiny, but also their division and in-complete separation which suggest that what has to be thought is a necessary plurality that was always already there, that is, an existence that has already been more than one in being dispersed. In its many forms Cadieux's practice is an art of memory.



Fig.2.10 Geneviève Cadieux, LA FÊLURE, AU CHOEUR DES CORPS (1990)

For Cadieux as for others in Québec, the question of a politics of identity is relativized by an international profile which throws into relief the question of a politics of representation. Québec cultural difference might be productively worked as a system of meaning whose narrative positions a collective sense of liminality; Québec cultural identity tends to highlight the impossibility of images, languages and structures to disclose more than personal involvements. Québec art practices "trouble" nationalist discourses, even inside Québec. It makes little sense, then, to try and fit Cadieux into a framework that might imply any more than a temporary coexistence among cultural practices. The work itself makes evident that cultural geography is a contested term. Cadieux's photographs intimate that we are transversed by memory, language, and representation in ways that we do not control. This has something to do with the fact that, as the traditional apparatus of realism, photography always marks an absence of the recorded. So that, when the photograph ratifies, as it does in Cadieux's prints, a fictive discourse, it confirms that "art's ability to make political statements is tied to the context in which it is produced and/or shown."<sup>15</sup>

I have in mind Derrida's conception of the art object as a playground for the beholder's imaginative projection of tensions within the referenced order of the visual as I write this. In the *Memoirs...* the movements from and of the work of art turn the field of cognition into a productive zone of exploration. As much metaphorical as physical, the trace is that which pre-figures the infinite variety of ideas that engage with philosophical aesthetics to present itself as a picture whose relationship with reading is to confront meaning and value as ambivalent, indeterminate, and disorienting problems. By this it undermines the subjection of cognition, metaphysics, and language to presence. In general accord with Derrida's earlier examinations of "metaphorical" vision, the critique of the plenitude of the represented object made from the standpoint of displacing the limits of vision sharpens the kind of critique practice can offer.

The gap between the object of visionary knowledge that turns out to be a blind spot underlying the visual field offers at least one strategy to a theory of practice concerned with the challenging and subverting the mimetic imagination. Its sense of displacing the permanent and endurable as this concerns the "proper" objects of the eye articulates the representative conventions that artists put into discourse and evaluate.

15 Sheena Gourlay, "Geneviève Cadieux and Discourses on Representation," Université de Montréal (December 1992), p. 12.

Where the image and the text might be read as simply two sides of a doubly-coded ideology, the realm of vision deconstruction opens up shows up this practice as suspect. For the theory of visual language and the vocabulary of textual representation are in constant contradiction, although it is possible to account for them as mutually enfolded. Hence what may not be immediately visible but participates in invisibility may not necessarily be productive of a critical blindness either. This renders the argument against intellectual vision equally and openly available to its unmaking as a construct. I will have more to say on this in a moment. What is meaningful is that without the dynamic and far-reaching anti-ocularcentric paradigm deconstruction affords, there can be no first definition of the cultural stakes which mark current visualist discursivity.

Put another way, if it has been established that photography as a mode of representation re/assembles reality "into some sort of presentist spectacle" (Hutcheon 1989, 93), then to the extent that it renders the scopic field present to a spectator whose relationship to the image troubled as in Cadieux's work, the fact that this is not a perspectival structuration of the gaze is keyed by the conditions of textual impossibility. Obviously this suggests that the idea of the detachment of the gaze that is so central to a radical postmodern visualist critical practice will be a functioning part of the viewer's cognitive effort as it ties, for example, to the conditions of beholding in the cultural domain of the museum. My argument is nevertheless that to fully understand cultural production as it is carried out in current representational practices within a social context it is theoretically necessary to understand what in deconstruction passes as *differance*. As a mediating category putting pressure on theoretical conceptualizations of origin and totalization, the concept of difference/deferment is able to lead to a reprocessing of representation that to a general and idealized notion of form might be closed out.

The rhetoric of blindness relative to optical purity poses another problem of intelligibility though its explicit center of reflection. Recently, cultural critics have been stressing that to analyze the "pure gaze" as this is constituted by historical processes requires alertness to the modalities by which spaces and institutions assemble, name and categorize works of art as visibilities.<sup>16</sup> Presenting the need to revise ways of thinking the expression and representation of drawing in relation to an underlying ideology for the Louvre museum, Derrida not only moves vital discourses around semiotic meaning into a

<sup>16</sup> For example Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), among others.

public gallery, but in making them available alongside the social routines and performances of an international exhibition, sheds light on the imbricated relations between contemporary cultural institutions and popular culture. Although the subject of visualism has been an acknowledged concern for some time among different academic communities it remains undertheorized within the social space of the cultural field. For contemporary art, the location of the significances of art treated as a semiotic object can unfold a more meaningful form of "close reading." Above all, the conscience of deconstruction offers a way to come to terms with the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, fiction and fact, subject and object postmodernist debates and critiques reject. Which is to say that with the help of a poststructuralist post-referential philosophy, the conditions of pictorial illusion can be circumscribed (always provisionally at least) as they convey a sense of completeness a more extended awareness disturbs.

In this, retracing something that visualism thinks, production practice clarifies -- through its correspondence with the inconstancy of the sign -- that which the circuit of detachment-reattachment investigates. The question of an open and closed visibility remains the most pertinent issue for both types of work for which deconstruction is a central device. The artist's perspective, however, is productive both for and against deconstruction. Consequently, what is revised in this movement between positions is a point of view that valorizes theoretical instability, and what is effected is a translation of theory that in practice takes place by means of form. In general terms, Cadieux's pictures accommodate the conditions of the periphery, of possibility, while at the same time confronting them by strategies of contestation. Because her work engages with the scopic field in a manner that foregrounds it as uneven and discontinuous, because in her images the articulation of unexpected visual and symbolic conjunctions whose interactions are defined through technology as it releases the details of fragmented and undefined bodies and subjectivities, she reveals something of the current forms of uncertainty, displacement, and instability. Accordingly, it can be said to refer to postmodern debates around issues of possession and loss. Cadieux drives a wedge between identity first, as a secure ground from which to speak, and then, as the basis for exclusions, limits, and omissions. In this interval between the stability of identity, and identity defined as limitation, the political stakes of the equation of deconstruction, subjectivity, and art history emerge in full force. Consequently, within a more complex representational narrative whose terms are heterogeneity, identity, and visibility in its linkage to postmodernity, within a spatialized projection of history foregrounding disjunctive

synthesis, Cadieux site-specific practice might express the potentialities of a practice in which time-worn and fixed distinctions between "here" and "elsewhere" no longer hold. In this it would pose interesting questions for both visualism and art history.

Artistic practices, then, signal concretely and forcefully the continued necessity of remaining vigilant before any discourse whose address to the dominant culture emerges from within the framework of a specialized structure of understanding. In this what is gained is a sense that to come to the scopic field self-reflexively is now to understand that the regime of representation can be looked at in at least two ways at once. Once as a verbal description starting from a transcendent interiority that, transposed to the realm of painting and drawing, takes up what we wish to see and not to see, and twice as something that is put into discourse as materiality by artworks and so designed to stimulate feelings as well as critical faculties. It now becomes possible to recognize that if the possibility of a speculative linkage of reciprocity between modes of cultural production whose borders do/not touch is advanced, it is likely to need finessing if it is to take account of increasingly differentiated confrontations between culture and power as these present themselves in the contemporary situation.

For Cadieux it is vital to assert that the specificities of questions of identity, voice, and the social vitiate the intellectual projects of the philosopher. For me, the separation of the theoretical and the material text, and with it the repression of the fact that for visualism this functions to create an object of loss means this chapter should be taken as a point of departure for questions about the relationship between histories of perception that will be drawn out further in the argument. So, as Cadieux's figural blindnesses edge into Derrida's deconstructive blind spots, a structure of contesting and resisting achieves circulation as a driving textual, intellectual and material force.

### *Summing Up*

Cadieux's practice is continuous with Derrida's in the aim of differentiating relations between the visible and the invisible by translating and displacing what in her work comes to be defined as space of contestation. Both narratives undermine any momentary experience of totality or presence. But as Cadieux's images speak to the complexities of reading national identity as a subject, they also modify the problems and possibilities of deconstructive critique. In effect practice asks to what extent visualist discursivity functions to give character to visual space. The condition behind illusion,

however, is that I become aware that the historical grounds of such a conceptual practice is to be found in the vocabulary of transgression deconstruction's interpretation shows.

In other words, works utilizing representational convention strategically stretch the limits of deconstruction through the political register of experience. In its political continuity with art, then, deconstruction's intellectual origins become explicit. The study of Cadieux's work has "unravelling" deconstruction by foregrounding material and conceptual self-awareness as the condition of possibility for representation. By this I do not mean that it infers a return to the elitist connotations of traditional aesthetics which would rely on art's material specificity and internal conventions to constitute a canon of high culture. Rather, what I mean is that production practice, in confronting theories of differential relations between signifieds and signifiers in which meaning is deferred by a decontextualization and recontextualization such as described by the Derrida of *Memoirs...*, demands that attention be paid to the historical specificities of production. Feminist theory has made clear that for women this also means a move towards the specificity of subject positions and "their place in the overall network of social power relations" (Weedon 1987, 135). As feminist standpoint theory -- the theory that location informs knowledge, and therefore a theoretical model that experience informs knowledge -- advances concerning the inseparability of representation and political activity, "how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests they represent (Weedon 1987, 26). From which it follows that the study of visualism, if it is to be formulated relative to the wider world of material culture and society, must take into account a range of important broader questions as this study will now endeavour to do.

It suggests as well that visualism as a problematic locates itself between theory and art. This chapter has drawn attention to an often overlooked and profoundly ambivalent presence that works surreptitiously in theories of visualism such as Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, namely the question of representation raised as a question for art. Derrida accepts representation in its linkage to the object on one register as a strategy which is important to questions of spectatorship, and thus which bears on the condition of inseparability between artobjects and texts. On another register it pertains to criticism, functioning in the public sphere (the Louvre, the Louvre's catalogue)

to explore a range of contending and conflicting forms of consciousness: the spectator/reader's, the author's, the artist's; historical self-reflexivity, illusion, and literature. On still another level, it is related to fascination and scopic pleasure. This is where and when play enters to shape the character of his study. What Derrida makes explicit is that aesthetics must take account of the text as matter, and of the unsatisfactory idealization of art as a metaphysics of presence at work in western thought.

Deconstructivist work on aesthetic discourse interrupts commonplace knowledge to force critical attention upon a definition of aesthetics that relies on the inseparability of contraries such as inventiveness and beholding. In traditional aesthetics the spectator is established as one term of a dialectical movement only to be driven out as a temporal subject. The aspect of indetermination in Derrida's postulation of the trace as a mediating position between subject and object introjects duration to create a different type of theory in which space, not time, becomes the unacknowledged factor. What this means to a Derridean visualism that relies on a semiotics of representation is that location must be brought in to explore the gap between imaginative trace and awareness of production. To conjure the relation between them all that is necessary is a meditation on cultural traffic, and in particular, some further reflection about subjectivity relative to theoretical and philosophical claims. The next chapter will explore this possibility further.



### Chapter 3

#### An Encounter: Michael Fried and Attila Richard Lukacs

What is to be made of visualism's stakes in the necessary flow between theory and art? As the last chapter demonstrated, despite the distance that seems to separate their respective politics, the complexities of the ambiguous relationship between postmodern photography and current critique can only be adequately deliberated if the assumption of their mutual exclusivity is held in tension. Visualism finds a place within a French intellectual tradition of critique in the process, and comes to define a withdrawal from the authority of ocularcentrism. What has emerged is a sense of it as a creative and critical form of demystification. The theoretical ground has shifted, then, from a somewhat reified and rather smooth analysis situating itself at the center of poststructuralist theory, to an irregular structure of continually contesting processes that prove the difficulties of surrounding concepts such as vision and visuality with even the simplest arguments of deconstructive estrangement. If, however, visualism in this emerges as a site of struggle, then its system of values remains to be explored, and by the terms that it has already constituted, i.e. by and through its conceptualization of history and of distinction: these are the grounds of visualism as a system by which it becomes a political, aesthetic, and social discourse.

In this section, Michael Fried's response to the demonstrated power of perspective as an authoritative form of representation in modern art, described in his text *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980) will provide the basis for facilitating visualism to the kind of reality that appears in Attila Richard Lukacs's paintings. In installing Fried as a standard by which Lukacs can be contrasted, and vice versa, the terms of the debate shift from a description of visualism's determinations to the logic upon which these are founded. The process of dispersing visualism's suppositions at the same time introduces the contradictions and difficulties that characteristically supply meaning to postmodern visual culture as the site of appropriation and reversibility. Precisely because postmodern practice is complex it can withstand comparison with the modern scopic regime.

### ***Beauty and the Beast: Sexing Modernity***

An art historian, and a critic about whose work Hal has referred to as "a catalyst" (1994), Michael Fried is among visualism's prominent commentators, no less for his study of "absorption." than for his considerable contribution to the discourse of modernity. The historian of American studies and art critic relates visualism to a canonical construction of art history, at least as this operates as a localizable modality of modern art criticism whose methodology is formalist critique. In broad terms, what the modernist standpoint identifies is an intellectual, and hence abstract, position relative to the object and a vantage point that is premised as neutral and disinterested. In what concerns matters of the aesthetic, then, it is indicative of a self-conscious criticality. Its strategic work is to inoculate against artistic social engagement in general, political subject matter in particular: modernism is brought sharply into focus against a backdrop of historical unrest marked by the liberation movements of women, blacks, youths, and queers.

The cultural critic Adrian Piper has meaningfully referred this period an age of "somnambulism" (1993). Identifying this "sleep" with a rhetoric that functions to impose closure from an "invisible center," Piper's analysis speaks to the invisible fiction, and cultural or personal "absence," that surrounds the modernist narrative as an arbitrary system of value and meaning. In modernism, the object is deployed at the service of the categories of the authentic, culture, and the beautiful. And it is made to stand for artistic "creativity" and beauty within certain conventions of modernist literature. This tactic, which would accord objects the capacity to edify, rather than, say, the ability to inform or confirm knowledge, from the beginning was a powerful model of interpretation and explanation for art in the modern world: it is also one that "in announcing the empty flow of time itself" (Williams 1989, 3) is articulated through a tendency to suppress historical processes of production. Meaningfully, it is related to postmodern visualism, for "absorption" as a category of visualism's discourse at once separates material objects from their context in social reality, and imposes a sense of identity through the rejection of the experience of social life. This representation is one of the defining dimensions of what Fried calls "absorptive" as opposed to "theatrical" modes of painting. The absorptive mode, Fried contends in his publication *Absorption and Theatricality*, registers a self-enclosed visuality wherein the three-dimensional space of images, the viewing process, and the intelligibility of representation in theoretical and practical terms resembles a closed-circuit. This "detheatricalized" relation of the painter-beholder, which he sees as an alternative to the mediation of perspectivalism's unitary prospect, introduces the

beholder into the world of the representation via the perceptual sphere. Accordingly, it is to be thought of as imbricating the corporeal in the external scene. This brings the problem of the Subject immediately into prominence. For, to understand the absorptive tradition, the subject-beholder must first be understood as the theoretical center of the representation. It means two things: first, that visuality is neutralized in the absorptive model; then, that the beholder who, Fried allows, might be absorbed in the representation but might also (spectatorially speaking) feel at a distance from it, will always remain first and foremost a passive agent: that is, a viewing subject who "simply" sees. Such that, generally speaking, the fundamental intuition of absorption as a modality of visualist discursivity is that it contributes a separate development of sense experience that is to be distinguished from the dominant forms of ocularcentrism. This is where it is most pertinent for theory. And yet it is at the same time profoundly problematic. For, the universal subject disavowed as an abstract totality is a central reference for modernist theory. Paradoxically then visualism, which I have been arguing functions as a reaction to a dominant paradigm of representation, and as a rejection of pure opticality, can be experienced at the same time as a familiar form of authoritarianism. In this chapter, I would like to explore "absorption" as it completes modernism's mission. And with this in mind, I will be bringing in Attila Richard Lukacs's production practice such as to suggest that, if visualism can be illuminating and compelling, it can also dazzle, be capable of blinding. For, if it is significant that the combined effect of the theories of vision and visuality is to rupture the smooth surface of ocularcentrism, its complications also deserve careful attention. Especially as they are brought in by visual culture, the identifications and political realities of visualist discursivity come into view. It is this that concerns me primarily in these pages.

The absorptive attitude is a historically specific pictorial and theoretical production. And yet, not accidentally, it manifests expressive and representational forms of signification that incite comparison with modernism's pure opticality. From which it follows that in order to analyze the phenomenon of absorption it is appropriate to explore the modernist visual idiom. In this way, one would prepare for the artistic and political event of anti-theatricality to come. So: Since the turn of the century the place of paintings has been identified relative to an essential meaning explained by formalism as a system of scientific evidence. This definition of cultural value presented as an objective, and distanced, was developed first by Edward Fry and Clive Bell in Britain, then in America by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried; it was fundamentally a system of classification

by which the temporality and spatiality of a work could be erased. And it borders on a series of complex interactions between subjects and agents, performers and readers of texts. As such, it is worth examination.

In general terms a modernist discursivity identifies the art of painting with a sense of cultural practice that recognizes inner consciousness as the force driving aesthetic experience. Reason gives this view a particular density, establishing the use value of the modernist hypothesis as the ability to recognize, trace, and periodize critical affiliations between texts without being sucked in by issues of content in representation or cultural context as this might be applicable to the culture's art. An alternate way of expressing this is to say that modernism valorizes "art for art's sake." From the aesthetic desire to valorize and constitute an ideology of taste regulated by the self-determining capacities of individual critics to account for what art in a "scientific" way, the operations of modernist critique partake of mutual relation with subjects through the fiction of an objective body. The distancing of subjectivity from relations of power in a material world in turn creates the illusion of an innocent or natural order. Like this:



I am connecting a scene of modern life titled *Bonjour M. Courbet, or The Encounter* (previous page), to the intensities modernism articulates endlessly succeeding and never contradicting one another. *Bonjour M. Courbet* is an obvious choice to situate visual modernism because it is not only one of the icons of the western art historical tradition but also because the artist has been the focus of one of Fried's more significant publications. In a monograph titled *Courbet's Realism*, Fried uses formalism to build the argument that the French realist art is directly linked to major statement on formal and descriptive intentionalism. With Courbet as an informant, nineteenth-century pictorial practice is unproblematically reduced to, as Keith Moxey puts it, "a rehearsal of names, places and dates" (1994, 101). Quite apart from the way Courbet helps to assemble a sense of modernism as a structured environment, however, he helps me to articulate what "style" represents, thus beginning to outline a sense of Fried's absorptive imagination.

Typically, Courbet's supposedly disinterested creative expression is rendered by a positive method of explication. What follows proceeds systematically as does a "conventional" formalist reading. It draws on John Canaday's reading of the picture in *Mainstreams of Modern Art* (New York: Harcourt, 1959).

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*Title:* Bonjour M. Courbet, or The Encounter, 1854.

*Subject:* Alfred Bruyas of Montpellier, art-patron-with-a-manservant, salutes the leader of the realists and pre-eminent rebel Gustave Courbet, whose production of painting is a statement of social dedication in the modernist theory of culture.

*Theme:* An encounter between patron and painter in the landscape of Courbet's world.

*Composition:* One sees, front and center in the image, the artist as a self-identified journeyman and bohemian. His prominence in the representation suggests that the artist wants to focus on the lived experience of modernity as a series of mobile social relations. The question posed by the particular conditions of modern life in this perspective demonstrates the difficulties and problems faced by the struggles of the avant-gardist artist. What is striking in the image is the evidence of modernity investigated in the artist's radical textual practice as the site of a troubled distinction between the people and the elite classes. This is revealed in Courbet's concern to represent himself at as an equal before his patron Alfred Bruyas. The bowing manservant seen to one side signifies the stakes of the engagement.

*Space:* With clear formal precision the artist has rendered to perception a common, perhaps trivial, gesture of daily life -- the anatomy of an encounter -- one that impresses itself upon the eye as a part of a innocent and repetitive social pattern. Everything in the painting seems to denote the truthfulness of immediate experience and fact. This is significant because it denotes the correspondence of perception with lived experience. By this route the viewer comes back pragmatically to the "original meaning" of the artwork.

*Style:* The treatment of the canvas -- the artist's scrupulous notation of isolated phenomena by means of a correspondingly spontaneous manipulation of paint, the intimation of temporal brevity conveyed by bright lighting, the faithful rendering of field

and meadow -- denotes the sense of an instant frozen in time. Here daily experience is anchored in the here and now such that the viewer might imagine that the artist is involved strictly with the notion of replicating tone by tone the visual field upon the flat surface of the canvas. In its apparent simplicity, then, the image codes the conditions of possibility for an aesthetic revolution. And, in developing an entirely new strain of realism in representation that in its specific nature contrasts with the elements of academic artistic production, it might also be said to construct an "art-remembering."

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As this reading demonstrates, the first, descriptive, examination of the image is authenticated by the evidence of history, for example, the knowledge that, towards the turn of the nineteenth century, images began to communicate an unrivalled awareness of social and material reality. Frequently the vehicle for such communications was the camera, whose technologies made the world tangible to the beholder. Its introduction and incorporation into the world of representation meant that the formal properties of painting also began to change. The requirement of this innovation was a departure from a classical painting tradition. As virtues of naturalism and objective truth took over from the idealized and unexpressive pictorial types sanctioned by the French Academy, what was admitted was a concern with recording a constantly changing external reality. So that when, for example, Canaday writes about *Bonjour M. Courbet* in *Mainstreams of Modern Art* (until recently a standard text for students of modern art) he does so in a language that speaks to and from a pre-established set of categories and norms. Evident in his description is that the image is not about "reality" (perhaps the reality of a social greeting), or about a distinctive part of modern experience, but about the ascendancy of artists as subjects in the culture. It is interesting to note in this connection that, as far as Courbet's concerned, it is relevant for students to know that the representation borrows from a popular print type; in my view, this fact serves to make the connection between high art, and the avant-garde's newly-minted interest in the commonplace. The inference is that the confounding of popular taste, coupled with a corresponding struggle for self-independent exploration, gives rise to artist's genius. From which it follows that the artist must possess a critical self-awareness that extends far beyond the specific moment and recognizes what it means to produce art at some basic level. This model also conveys implicitly the idea that visual meaning will remain elusive to the element in society that does not belong to a dominant class of elite intellectuals. Why? Because as the critic offers a reassuring illusion of descriptive plenitude he at the same time elides the circuit of production that goes to creating meaning in the artwork; leaving it in would permit reading audiences to identify, investigate, and create representations of their own. Keep in mind that the Fried of

*Absorption and Theatricality* constitutes the same type of aesthetic discourse.

As soon as a narrative is constructed for explicating the physical and metaphorical space of the visual the spectator is enveloped by it, so that reading a complex set of signs (composition, light, colour, etc.) that fit together as if to reveal a concealed meaning in the visual text soon produces the reader as "identified with" the artist's unique viewpoint. In other words, the artistic style known as aesthetic "realism," that holds ideas of social and cultural experience and is Courbet's response to the classicism of the French Salon, offers a way to make the connection between perception, interpretation, and the enshrinement of material culture as an affective investment. In this, the problematic of a common heritage seems to me to be all-important.

As a discursive site, Courbet's painting illustrates how formalism generates an "aura" around works of art, one that through an intellectually driven statement will link ideas about art and culture in the nineteenth-century, and prior to a visual modernity. The historical formation of visual readers will thus seamlessly be folded into the modernist sense of aesthetic judgement. As the two converge to reinforce a normalization of the conditions of viewing, the history of art will begin to read a single, homogeneous, and public high culture. It all comes down to taste, value judgement, and provenance. The idea of the modernist reader as one who fits together clues that function relative to his or her own interiority implicitly carries with it a sense that immediate experience is the result of an accumulation of historical knowledge. Thus the text is always one that informs subjectivity from within the "ongoing" present of a relationship with the historical past. In the case of American criticism, what this situates is the distance between the forces of European culture as simultaneously the proximity of modernist referentiality.

Now visual discourse closes the gap between the space of production and the space of consumption in its capacity to render productive the narrative of history for the individual subject (i.e. the "public") that it replaces. In other words, the characteristic modernist gaze constitutes a totalizing philosophical explication. So that, in modernist literature, a normative narrative dawning with Edouard Manet, and concretized by Jackson Pollock becomes the condition of possibility for the abstract expressionism of the New York School; and so that the incorporation of Courbet into the canon articulates tensions and contradictions relative to a visualist discursivity that might be coordinated differently from an account of visual culture that envisions objects as revealing complex relations to larger social, artistic, and philosophical questions.

A contrasting position would be one that calls attention to the fact that Courbet's



work is at least intermittently readable as a social practice, or one whose original temporal occasion gives rise to questions about how artist's participation in culture is always strategic or selective. Again, the fiction that detaching objects from important historical processes creates relies on a system articulated through equal measures of historical data, surface description, stratification, and condensation: a reservoir of incidents that, buttressing one another, advance modern art theory and visibility through the premise of essence and continuity. Hence the notion of formalism as a system that also lies outside the contingencies and time of social experience, making it possible to differentiate between the time the artist "marks off" as the historical time of production, and the transcendent value the critic offers from a physical remove. The technology and textuality of such a fiction results in a new mode of engagement between the artist, audiences, and art critics as subjects and agents.

In poststructuralist discussions Courbet emerges in quite another light. Charles Harrison's and Briony Fer's separate revisionist projects (1993) take the artist's production practice as indexical of broader relations circulating in mid-century France. Harrison, for instance, resituates Courbet as a "critical realist," which is to say that to the extent that he is acknowledged as a translator of the customs, appearances and ideas of his epoch, he locates a self-conscious criticality. Only this time it is not his own, but his reader's. There is a frank acknowledgement in Harrison's reading that subjectivity mediates between the artist's sense of vision and the critic's statement. Accordingly, Harrison's pursuit of the mechanisms that discursively align modern life and visual culture deliberately shift attention to the problem of the conditions of enquiry something, and here I speculate, Fried would only do to rhetorically, i.e. to highlight his fictional status as producer of the text. But you'll have to take my word for it at this stage. The point to be retained is not that Harrison is beyond rhetorical devices; rather, that he is more concerned with looking at the way visual culture invests in producing a historic sense of democracy; and in recognizing that the reader's external position relative to the object is marked (coded) by a continually changing discursive and social environment.

To elaborate, still taking Courbet as exemplary, for the interpreter willing to write, rather than read, is that the first level of interpretation is not a totalizing statement but one of a series of critical efforts to set meaning in motion. Poststructuralist discussions of Courbet's work start to read it as part of a larger statement on cultural politics, for example, relative to events in a world impacted by a social and economic revolution. Thus, in these discussions, even the Revolution is another character in an on-going

fiction. And, in these discussions that privilege contingency, since the historical record shows that France in 1848 was in a state of upheaval, in providing a new and provisional set of correspondences, it allows for yet a further reading of the painting; for instance, as image-making arises to play itself out against a representative moment. Courbet's political attitude, which incidentally art historians such as Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina (1993) identify as "ambivalent," might be interpreted as sharpened by artistic practice in this light. In this way, and resituated for the critique of representation, the object effectively raises questions of the author as producer, and must be confronted as part of a more generalized commodity culture. Most immediately this means that the artwork, rather than appear atemporal, includes the preoccupations of an increasingly informed and politically organized labouring class. In other words, it exists not at the service of a distanced past, but rather as a transient creation, like language. It is the aspect of an institutionally sanctioned process of replacing the individual interpretations that would be generated by diverse viewing audiences relative to a representative art object by an intellectual and programmatic statement that makes it possible to specify Fried's theoretical modernism as ideological. Now, with the semiotic space between modern and postmodern approaches to interpretation elucidated, the work of Attila Richard Lukacs comes into focus.

### *The Artist as Auteur*

Subjects marked as distinct or foreign, and also subjects marked as arising out of the immediate experience of the trace of a structure of desire are central in the work of Richard Attila Lukacs. For critics, his production practice is both a source of repulsion and of attraction. These opposing reactions have caused the cultural critic Arthur Kroker to describe him as the "contemporary successor to the artistic vision of Francis Bacon" (Kroker 1990. n.p.): Already as a student at the Emily Carr College of Art in Vancouver in the late eighties, Lukacs was exploring the visceral poetics of artists such as Mishima, Genet, Chaim Soutine and Anselm Kiefer. In Lukacs's student work he was already appropriating not only from art historical tradition and style by rendering slabs of meat (*Meats, [Wholesale Cuts]* and *Crucifixion*, 1983) and hanging them in a store window, but he was also appropriating and synthesizing the representational language and historical pose of the artist as cultural rebel. He therefore set up a theoretical dialogue with artists such as Vito Acconci and Robert Morris, and with Claes Oldenburg, whose simulated ice-creams and pies the meat-pieces formally and conceptually echoed. Lukacs's work thus immediately poses difficulties through its idealization of what Benjamin Buchloh in

another context refers to as "the paternal principle of the master."<sup>1</sup> Part of this has to do with the affirmation of masculinity as an artistic principle. And part of it has to do with projecting masculinity through the language of painting. But also, it refers to making the life of the artist itself into an aesthetic commodity. This is what brings it into alignment with modernist critique.

Over time, Lukacs has evolved a complex representational vocabulary of decadence, urbanity and decay in a series of monumental pictures. Tableaux's inhabited by skinheads, monkeys, and various other forms, used to comment on the nature of cultural retention, exploitation, revelation, and the conformity these notions sometimes promote, distinguish a poststructuralist production practice coded by the terms "fragment," "rupture," "discontinuity" and "excess." And in this, like the men he portrays in his canvasses, Lukacs's personal history overlaps aspects of the squalid and the puritanical. I am interested in how the aspect of ocular desire is collapsed into the materiality of the canvas through the artist's identity. In this, it is the element of sensuality in Lukacs's technique that admits or locates the sense of a kind of exorcism through craft: it picks up and refracts elements of the modernist myth of genius in the process.

The early painting *One Good Reason* (1986) for example, draws on the experience of his incarceration for holding a minor in his apartment in Vancouver, allegedly against the student's wish,<sup>2</sup> a situation that is mediated in the canvas by the thematic connection between the material surfaces of the body and the material surfaces of the painting process. which insinuate a ritual (and perhaps psychic) disemboweling. *This Little Boy* (1985), in a jewel-like and mysterious environment suggestive of the fin-de-siècle decadence of a Gustave Moreau painting, also captures what it means to inhabit a visual climate of objectification/subjectification. This is a complicated figure. So it may be useful to bear in mind in what follows, then, that three things deserve remark: 1) as a consequence of being perceived as a "rebel-innovator" Lukacs was immediately taken up

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," in Brian Wallis, ed. *Art After Modernism* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Farris, Lukacs's dealer, in conversation with the author, November 1992.

by the press and labelled a "Romantic," and a painter of postmodern "morality tales,"<sup>3</sup> tags expressing the ideal of human action Courbet is also said to have embodied, and that by association work to situate the artist relative to a radical avant-garde; 2) that this last is historical role and one that Lukacs has emphatically reinforced partly through his transgressive personal behaviour; and that a transgressive femininity is a limited option for women artists, while for "Young Turks" it broadcasts the celebration of danger (see Jones 1993; Betterton 1996). The question is how does the valorization of visual experience in representational practice register the imbrications of the corporeal and theoretical as visibility.

Feminist critics have suggested, reading from a psychoanalytic model, that the perceived equivalence is one between tactility and facture, a prescription of visibility that transposes the Phallus as a "visible sign of difference" directly into "a prescription for a visual aesthetic" (see Betterton 1996, 94). Many of Lukacs's images reference this kind of metonymic substitution suggesting the duplication of a system where the relationship of the body to the surface of the canvas is consciously recognized as involving a dimension of virility and potency. For example, such an embeddedness in material production is recognizable in *1-800-MIKE* (Figure 3.1), a painting which opens up the experience of art-making to the discovery of the male body. I will later discuss how this relationship with male sexuality raises questions about the ways postmodern painting recontextualizes an imagined order from within staged identity that posits a discontinuity between bodily actions in the social realm and critical language itself. But for the moment I want to elaborate how the male body poses a literal and metaphorical equivalence between the surfaces of the body and the textures of oil paint.

The picture renders two naked youths on one part and an avenging angel on the other behind whom appears the name "MIKE." The allusion is to Michael Morris, a friend who helped him when he first arrived in Berlin from Vancouver in 1986; one critic has read this picture as the moment in which the male body is cast as "an erotic projection in vision" (Jay 1993, 117). In this description the critic appears to reference the language of a critical discourse that maintains that the phallic mastery of the artist is underwritten by a libidinal economy writing sex into the act of painting. Sexual displacement accounts for a subject that is depicted as desiring and a painterly practice that itself becomes an object of

<sup>3</sup> See, in this connection, Thomas Sokolowski, *Morality Tales: History Painting in the 1980s* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1987).

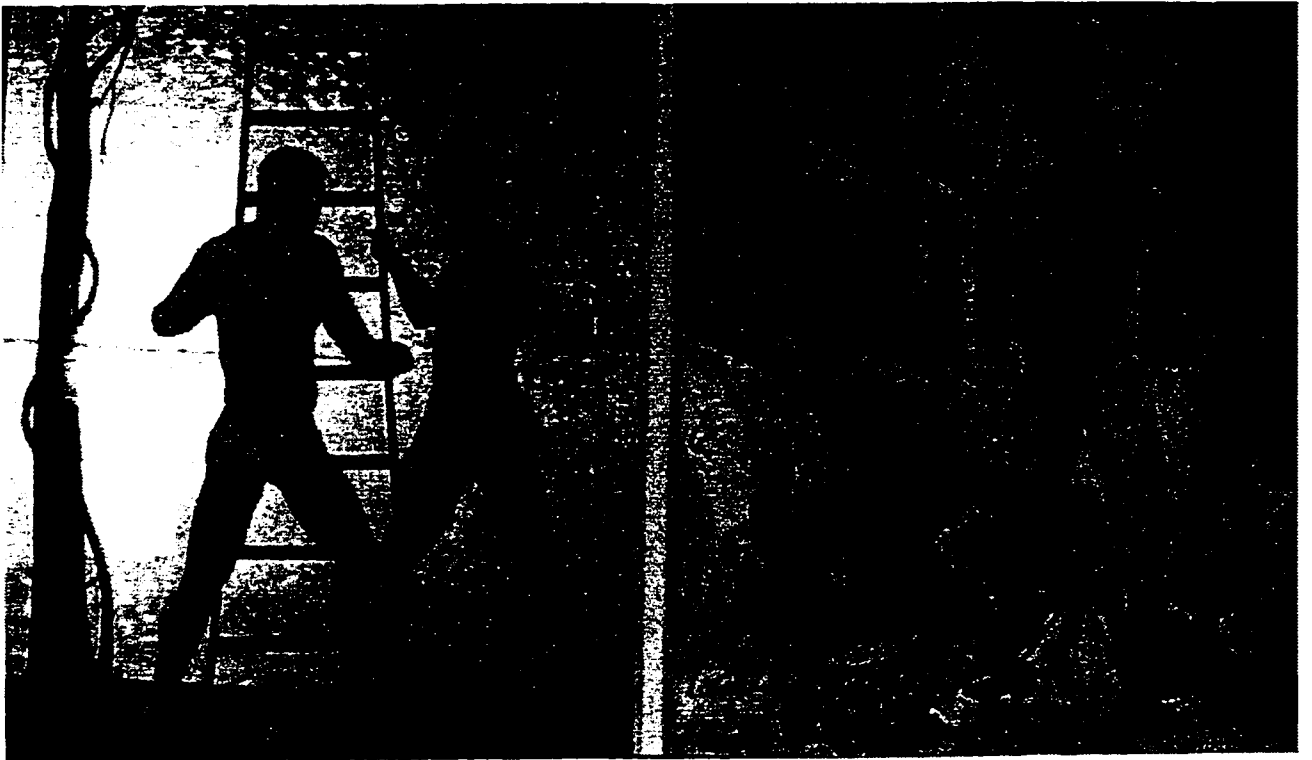


Fig.3.1 Attila Richard Lukacs, 1-800-MIKE (1989)

desire. What is telling about Lukacs's image is the way it sustains a reading of the sexual metaphor through its surface and its forms. It accounts for itself as the site of sexual displacement by explicitly making the subject of the representation into a painted object. This implies a distinction between an active and a passive subjectivity, as well as between a passive object and a penetrative process of identification. It suggests, in other words, that it is not only the canvas but the body in the representation that is a receptive surface. Put another way, the canvas stimulates analogies to the sex act through the description of paint. Everything points to the production of the image as being formed by immediate sensual pleasure: the rhythm of the painting is the rhythm of the trace of the subjective subject painting. the symbolic system is generated as a potent(ial) space relative to an effect of the real held in tension by gold leaf. As a result, *I-800-MIKE* presents painting as an illusory signifying system that at the same time shapes the experience of desire offering immediate sensual pleasure. The point is that by identifying the canvas surface with the materiality of the body, Lukacs's work can be seen to reveal the historical domination and at the same time concealment of biographical and essentializing concepts of masculinity in the construction of a confrontational and expressive painterly practice. I suggest that it is the aesthetic valuation of the purely expressive in its entanglement with historical processes that embody it that define critical relations between Lukacs and the constitution of a modernist sense of visibility. And, if my claim is true, then the beholder is made complicit with the narrative through the conditions the painting imposes.

Yet it would not be inappropriate to suggest that the textual and painterly qualities of Lukacs's representations -- and that I am arguing situate explicit sexual content by reference to the sexual body of the artist -- are capable at the same time of critically dismantling or rupturing such a critical discourse. Not to do so would be to overlook certain historical factors that touch the work locating a new response to masculinity, as I will now demonstrate. One of the factors that contributes to an oppositional interpretation of the modernist canon is that, traditionally, it is the female image and not the male that faithfully offers itself as an object to the eye, providing a reference that stimulates without fear of confrontation. It is, of course, in exploring the alternative to those determining conditions constituting hierarchies of power as normalized situations of authorship and mastery in western art discourse that Lukacs becomes an important reference for a reordered sense of visualist discursivity. In the process, his practice reveals very clearly the imbrications of a sexed subject position that, as Rosemary Betterton clarifies, "underpins the modernist myth of the artist" (1996, 87).

In her essay "Bodies at Work," Betterton is interested in gendering the painting process on the way to describing its interrogation by contemporary women artists. Thus she observes succinctly: "The male painter expresses his sexuality through the medium of paint; his paintbrush 'comes' without his conscious control" (ibid.). What happens to this libidinal investment when the masculine preserve is disrupted by a previously unrecorded queer sexuality? Significantly, it is Lukacs's development of a sense of identity that can be classified as outside the mainstream by virtue of an art-making process that involves the discovery of the male body as it conveys the notion of beauty, and by extension aesthetic value. It is on this ground that the critical dismantling of modernism's dominant scopic ideology takes effect. As I said, characteristically it has been women's bodies used as the ground of a western tradition of erotic imagery. When, in the history of art, the appreciation of masculinity has been referenced, typically it has been only in occasional figures of male saints. But, when a humble integrity and a meaningful dogma with regard to truth is hinted at in the kind of beauty images of St Sebastian afford, as in the Baroque mould, he is depicted in ways that can easily be recognized as precariously close to encompassing male spectators in a circuit of homosexual desire. So entwined are such images with their religious context, however, that nakedness itself is said to be transformed. According to the literature, the aesthetic domain distinguishes the specific activity of creative expression from the mundane experience of knowing the world. And this is important, as it brings theoretical purchase to Lukacs's visualism by establishing a point of access to a cultural tradition that can be dismantled by allusions to current artistic and political events.

In other words, I read Lukacs's production practice as at once complicit with and actively intervening against modernism's discourses and institutions. On one register, he avails himself of an aesthetic and representational canon premised on the privileging of bold force as on a sense of the artist's driving aesthetic and sexual impulse. A personal history of sexual exploits and pharmaceutical escapades feeds into this reading. Now Lukacs's image reveal connections that in the end imply complicity with Fried's philosophical and totalizing representation. And yet, on another register, his practice functions as a critique: for, in its virtuoso demonstrations of the handling of materials, in his celebration of the male body, he begins to suggest that as a cultural tradition, art history and its masters constitute a failed historical presence. Once I realize this I begin to see the work as calculated, and to find in Lukacs's production the codes of postmodern culture -- its compulsive repetitiveness of its iconographic references, in the work's

transvaluation of commodities, and its indexicality. But it is the perceptual convention of visual overdetermination, saturation, excess, that most readily points to a process of contestation from a practice constituted by the expropriation of signs. This interpretation would deliver a sense of visualism that functions to actuate the interaction between the artist, the subject of representation, and the experience of viewing. In other words, it would construct a new set of procedures from which to look at a specifically ontological and historically focalized institution of art. I should clarify that I conceive these representations as enfolding visualist discourse in a way that is neither automatic or directly oppositional.

### ***The Way into Nationalist Culture, Or, Modernism Revisited***

It can be argued from within cultural studies that the reconstruction of material objects for their evidential value as sites of a bounded history of evolutionary aesthetics results in part from a process of abstraction and transformation. At least from within anthropological discourse the processes of aestheticization are defined by a language of metaphorical relations whose partiality resonates relative to an original and necessarily distant social or cultural experience (Clifford 1990). This establishes them as distinct from, for example, the art market. In order to analyze it in terms of the problems of a visualist discursivity as a mode of representation it would be useful to examine its development within the framework of a still broader system of cultural significations than I have presented so far.

Art produced since the mid-nineteenth century in Europe is said to belong to "modernity," and thus to the generation of a conscious modernist artist whose aesthetic intent is to destroy classical representational standards while situating itself in terms of a vanguard practice. It is generally agreed that "modernity" originated with the democratic laws of the French Revolution, and that philosophically it is a consequence of Enlightenment thinking (Wheale 1995, 7). The notion of human perfectibility is important to introduce the sense that modernity shaped a new era of humanity. From modernity emerged many discoveries that changed almost all aspects of human life. The steam engine, the telephone, electricity and the camera are the most important discoveries; these dramatically altered people's knowledge and perception of the world, and with it the world of appearance. While the time before the French Revolution seemed linear and slow, "modern" times became associated with acceleration, a process that was literally enabled by faster communication networks across the globe.



On one register, then, modernity admits social experience in identifying a temporal and spatial conjunction corresponding loosely to a post-Revolutionary France, and significantly to Charles Baudelaire's description, in the essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859-60), of contemporary Paris. To the French philosopher the new times became associated with a break from traditional belief; the sense of a civilizing crisis accordingly subtends his oft-quoted opinion that: "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is eternal and immutable..." (in 1964, 13). Hence, following Baudelaire, the ephemeral quality of daily life bursts into art practice by means of the artistic imagination while tradition, in the form of family, religion, or the canon, is rejected for an ever-changing consciousness that comes to be associated in the work of the Cubists and Futurists, for example, with the multiplication of points of view. On another register, then, "modernity" refers to the lived experience of the modern as a contemporary situation re-lived in painting, sculpture and photography. Matei Calinescu (1987) argues that these two modernities reflect an irreconcilable opposition. Even so, the chance operations of this perceived fragmentation in the culture provide an opportunity for modernism's reinvention of the world.

If modernity relies on new technologies and new means in matters of perception, then a modernist culture must be founded on the conceptualization of a collapse between self and time. For cultural historian Jonathan Crary, this represents a complex embedding visibility in a network of events and powers. Crary argues that modernity pushes "attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds" brought on by "the ceaseless introduction of new products, new sources of stimulation, and streams of information" (Crary 1994, 22). Capitalist interests, then, drive him to argue for a materialization of the observer in the field of vision (1992). Such a theory of culture is instructive because it precisely describes that which modernism as a discourse fails to take up. Whereas some contemporary formulations of modernity, such as Baudelaire's, were concerned with sense impressions and aesthetic sensitivities, seeking to ground representation in phenomenological experience, and postmodern theorists provide an interpretation of culture qualified by the contemporary accounts and debates, modernism, in extending modernity for a representative moment in American history, aims to explain modernist production by deliberately removing it from the more general developments of society and culture. Accordingly, the theories and perspectives that are discussed as references for modernism's optic are those which, in defining and assessing the modern situation, will prove useful to put forward the notion that conceptual innovations are representative of an

intellectual elite. What is significant in this account is that a theory involved in renewing a Kantian perception of art is constituted as exemplary for high art studies. Thus the relation between the system of objects in the culture and the situation of radical critics is collapsed into a broader institutional paradigm.

An art-historical modernism represents a set of beliefs and an ideology created to explain the development of modern art without the cognitive limitations the taint of the common culture might impose. Which is to say that modernist critique is explicitly designed to effect a new disposition of time and space. In what amounts to a reinterpretation and reinvention of the world, it announces the object to be independent of actualized experience. Consequently, it represents artistic "sensibility" as a transcendental statement of truth. Such that, along with the transformation of the revolutionary aspect of Baudelaire's theory that art should reflect the impact of major political and social changes in the culture, there is some rethinking of an eternalized environment for the fine arts. In short, whether defined as "avant-garde practice" or designated as "an authentic terrain of feeling," modern art will be entangled with vision, formal interests erasing historical determinations via a manipulation of context.

Looking ahead, it is possible to recognize this limiting paradigm as a calculated reaction to a turbulent period in America's past (Piper 1993). From this vantage point discursivity can be theorized as attempting to maintain a sense of cultural integrity and boundary during a period increasingly marked by civil disobedience and social unrest. More specifically, rival interests and tendencies in modern art were engaged in a vigorous and often fierce dispute about the nature of the object during the nineteen-sixties. There was a need to distance culture from the Cold War.

In other words, modernist critique was being written when the social integration of the subject as a "good," "responsible" and "moral" under capitalism is being "troubled" by alternatives from the Left. Hence the modernist critic's project emerges as a theoretically necessary retreat from the contingencies of historical process in the name of consolidating a position within dominant culture, which implies that the debates and discussions that situate the visual preoccupations of modernist critics are complicated by their connection to the political and historical contexts they try to leave behind. Again, it is Clement Greenberg who declares earliest that the inventions and discoveries of painting (and sculpture) have a symbolic function. The polemic is extended in the work of Michael Fried.

On one level, then, read as a retreat from politics, modernism's ambition is to

deflect attention from the working processes that go into making visual culture via a largely essentialist, though not necessarily easy, account of the development of modern art. The ramifications of this knowledge, of its historical consequences, are not relevant to this discussion. What is of interest is that, by proclaiming the value of "autonomous" objects -- a term referencing the integrity of medium-specificity -- and of aesthetics as independent of lived experience, modernism identifies painting with the morphology of art. Following from this modern art is understood as a direct and personal response to conditions internal to the practice, to its specific history, to its conventions and techniques. Outstanding works of art, *ipso facto*, are those which express formal and historical self-awareness. This mythology of the expressive artist, and of art as an autonomous practice, in short, of what "great" art is, lends coherence to Greenberg's enormously influential publications of the 1960s.

Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" (1961) characterizes painting as resulting from a sense of the object's production: first, its identity is constituted as expressing a concern with "the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment;" second, it is constituted as tending towards the validation of past production practice as a vehicle for the deployment of the self, therefore, as hinging on a natural condition of narrative of interiority. It is this which, by reference to aesthetic tradition, allows it to be disengaged from the political implications of potentially transgressive or disturbing narratives of sexuality, nationality, or race. So that "Modernist Painting" makes explicit what is unique and irreducible to modern art. Into the bargain, American art attaches to a muscular nationalism.

In the literature, not insignificantly, Kant is a central reference. The following citations from the essay make Greenberg's position regarding the important question of building a modernist utopic practice abundantly evident, and with it the connection to Kant, who is embraced as the "first real Modernist" (Greenberg in Harrison and Wood 1992, 754).

The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself -- not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it (p. 755).

To which he adds,

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of

self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered "pure", and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance (p. 755).

As for Fried, in his essays he extends these arguments for a self-referential sense of moral rigour based on the production of abstract art. But I will come to that. Now a fundamental problematic within modernist thinking is also worth remark. It emerges from the self-consciousness that for the modernist text opens into sense of secure categories:

Realistic, illusionistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting -- the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment -- were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. Manet's paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted. ... Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to [pictorial] art ... and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else. ... And it is the course of its effort to do this ... that art has made itself abstract (p. 755-6).

This citation makes clear that to be "modern" one must belong to the temporality of the present and enact its forms and themes with vigour; nonetheless one should avoid the taint of "novelty" whose deliberate construction would serve only to dismantle the refinements of a finely-tuned aesthetic system.

In an essay on literary theory, Susan Stewart well describes what modernism would seem to value: "It is not the materiality of signs which makes them subject to ideological formations here; it is their immateriality, their capacity to serve the interests of those formations regardless of their physical form" (1993, 32). Thinking visualism, I take this to mean that the process of acquiring a degree of cultural knowledge is by necessity reduced and perspectival. These processes guarantee also its stability and continuity.

Yet, in modernity, the complexity of the present is also understood. Part of the necessary reduction of modernist painting involves the demand that artists react or respond to one another. So that some voices will increasingly articulate a relationship to tradition as a form of resistance, while others will only organize a present-day singularity. Greenberg makes a special point of taking up the American Post-painterly Abstractionists Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland as the founders of a new mental landscape: Intervening, according to Greenberg, in a national aesthetic by way of a fixed subjectivity,

they are constituted as particularly important through a perceived tendency to expand the pictorial plane through the use of colour; abstracted, experience becomes meaningful at the point in it loses its equivalence in the real world, becoming "disembodied." So much of the visual field is occupied that, in Greenberg's words, the painting "loses its character as a discrete tactile object and thereby becomes that much more purely a picture, a strictly visual entity" ("Louis and Noland," p. 28). Difference then begins to explain how, in modernist critique, a sense of cultural truth interacts with a series of mutually reinforcing regulatory norms to produce a sense of identity, a process that deflects attention from what the postmodern arts are drawn to as the triumph of absolutism.

### *Querying Vision*

Coming back to Lukacs's *I-800-MIKE*, and relating it the way the modernist critic situates images, I am struck by the way masculinity and modernism are mutually defining, but do not render a coherent narrative. This is because the image investigates "form," "materiality," "high art," "subversion," and other visual intensities in dealing with issues that pertain to a politics of representation. In other words, Lukacs actualizes social theory for visual purposes; in so doing, he sends out a political message. Do visual and then verbal texts have specific historical meanings? Or do they reproduce particular interests and therefore suggest, in ideological ways, that the viewer's interpretation is key?

I concur with Andreas Huyssen when he states that the historical avant-garde as a field of art was a protest movement, and thus can be read as always having had a political dimension; and I would suggest that the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement constitutes such a political critique today. Visual practices which tacitly or implicitly suggest political action impact those processes through which individuals constitute themselves ethically, culturally, aesthetically. They define the work of art as the historical product of social practices, and a reader/spectator who is responsive to the material world, and who therefore raises questions of arguments that attempt to overlook social distinction. This hypothetical subject, pictured actively looking, displaces the moment of authority and originality set up by modernist theory; in this scenario it is the subject who holds the threads of history, and who, by virtue of insisting on the pertinence of their own unique set of assumptions and propositions as relevant utterances of the social text is simultaneously a knowing subject who brings ambivalence into the work of meaning. In this sense meaning is understood as a visibility whose instrument is language, the

condition of possibility for a theoretically necessary a space of resistance, subversion, and resignification.

This position is brought out, in part, by a relocation of difference and continuity as major statements whose double structure converge in occidental cultural politics.

*1-800-MIKE* encourages the viewer to reflect on them relative to a purposive time the artist provides as the stilled memory of a more literal way of "fixing" the interpretation of pictures. Appropriation and pastiche in this work as a semiotic devices through the signifying mode of the symbolic referencing an association between painting, history and myth. As it is used in works such as *Junge Spartaner fordern ... (Young Spartans Challenge the Boys to a Fight)* (Figure 3.2), and *True North* (Figure 3.5), pastiche makes it clear that postmodern representation involves living, "with the abstraction of the secondhand" (Stewart 1993, 173). The first impression is that eclecticism is an end in itself. When he uses Caravaggio and other masters of western representation including Degas (Figures 3.3, 3.4), and Gainsborough,<sup>4</sup> Lukacs does so with no particular concern for the possible metaphoric, didactic, or poetic relationships artists intended for the original. Subsequently, however, the reader begins to wonder whether an artistic principle lies behind the appropriation of stylistic and historical poses. After all, artistic tradition has always stimulated artists, even when they were reacting against it. What makes Lukacs's practice distinct, of course, is not his reworking of details, elements, or whole compositions, but rather that they are treated as if they were commodities. In this way the past becomes another product, an archive for contemporary culture. From the side of commodification, the point is not to establish authority by reference to a historical source, but to objectify it; and in so doing to bring into relief the fact that image-making is the product of pressures that are both idiosyncratic and culture-specific. This would define postmodern culture as parodic; in painting parody describes that which, effectively and frequently by the techniques of distortion, or by pastiche's patching together, produce image and/or text combinations that trade on questionable material, or aesthetic disingenuity (Wheale 1995). Sometimes on both.

Yet, if as a formal technique pastiche enables a "counterhistory," that is to say one whose details can be meaningfully reprocessed for an ambiguous present understood as contestatory, rather than say a totalitarian utopia, then it can also be seen to derive from past tradition. The capacity to achieve transcendence in narratives that assert the

<sup>4</sup> The iconographic source for *True North* is Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*.

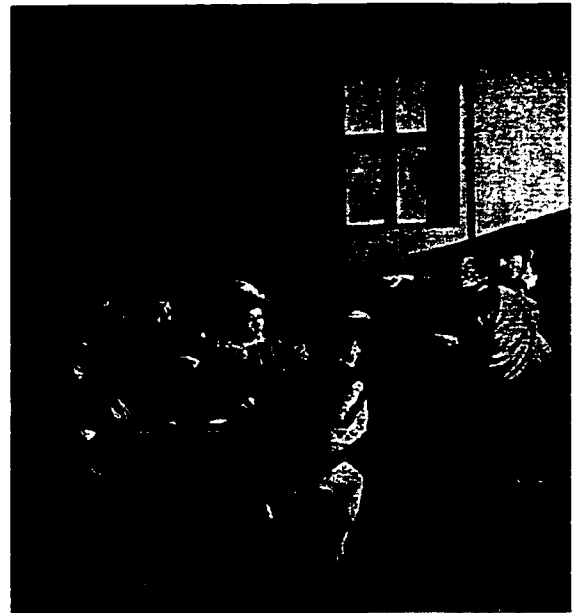


Fig.3.2 Attila Richard Lukacs, YOUNG SPARTANS CHALLENGE THE BOYS TO A FIGHT (1988)

Fig.3.3 Edgar Degas, SPARTAN GIRLS CHALLENGE THE BOYS TO A FIGHT (c.1860)

Fig.3.4 Michelangelo Caravaggio, CALLING OF ST MATTHEW (1599-1560)

dominance of painting as a tradition is one that is conjured, at least in part, by innovations at the formal level. Painting tradition also defines itself by facture, a unifying principle in Lukacs's aesthetic. And the celebration of facture as the visible record of a triumphant masculinist touch is the ideological consequence of modernism's particular form of critical creativity, the materiality that affords the "penetrative insight" I touched on earlier. So it would be difficult to say that Lukacs's images are not validating a problematic meta-narrative; to an extent they are. But in directing attention to the cultural function of vision as productive of a historical context they inherently signify representation as a construct.

At a certain point, everything in Lukacs's approach begins to expose the address of the eye, and it provides a clue to sustain the notion of a critical encounter with mainstream rationality. For example, *Junge Spartaner fordern . . .* is structured by a network of gazes intensified by lines of projection corresponding to the spectator's viewing position. These lines situate the beholder relative to the depicted scene; it can be read, therefore, as a recognition of the ways the process of art press upon the operations of the eye. On one side of the picture, against a red backdrop patterned with insignias, one group of male figures stands naked, menacing their opponents with a scythe. A crouched form situated at the center of the composition makes it possible to interpret this scenario as having undertones of bondage and domination, especially since the second party is comprised of partly clothed and visibly less confrontational bodies. Since the figures do not address the beholder, but communicate a rhetoric of distanciation through looks staging my viewing presence relative to them as intrusive, I can read this as a materialization of the closed universe that commodifies subjects in dominant tropes of the scopic field. In the logic of the vanishing point, the image becomes a commodity by virtue of the expansion of space it purveys for a colonizing master subject/gaze. So that the detachment of gazes in and across the visual field in Lukacs's image leaves me on the outside by virtue of my dislocation from the scene of representation: paradoxically, since the vanishing point also makes the scene knowable as that which is ordered before my eye. In this way Lukacs would provide a way of understanding modernism's aesthetic of distanciation.

Yet simultaneously in directing my attention to a specific configuration of subject/agent positions, Lukacs draws attention to and hence questions visualism as a discursive context. By reading this as a practice of estrangement, the politics of representation and the representation of politics come to the fore. Hence the unique



specificity of Lukacs's images is that they prosaically de-compose not only the notion of who is the subject of the gaze, but of who is doing the looking. The switch of focus is signalled in the comparison between Lukacs's representation and Degas's. In a parodic reversal, it is not girls fighting with boys that are at the conceptual center of the image, as in the painting Lukacs "quotes" from (Figure 3.3), but boys looking at boys; it is the binary reversal that suspends a motion of solicitation that moves my eye towards and away from the compositional center. Consequently what the image emphatically freezes is the kind of infinite exchange the modernist paradox offers. In this, I am aware that image-making offers the construction of reality as implicated with the processes that reproduce them. Which could mean, to return to again to the problem of perspective, that language and the body are thoroughly intertwined. Or so Lacan (1990) explicating vision points out. Meaning is infinitely inaccessible, uncatchable; it consumes itself within that which cannot mean. So now Lukacs, from yet another angle, and still interpreted relative to a postmodern sense of self-reflexivity, might be trying to say something about is that which slips beyond the traversable field of visibility onto an even more slippery slope of signification. Who knows. This is, after all, about the ambiguity of perception. The point, I think, is that what is first taken up at a glance as a sensual vision becomes transmogrified as it plays in a roundabout way with subjectivity. Thus it reveals the element of criticism. And therefore the image constitutes a tangled field of relations which modernism (contrastingly and arbitrarily) makes hard to follow.

What I mean is that Lukacs, again, in both confirming and problematizing aesthetic tradition, enables the discovery that a moment of institutional "truth" is not natural, rather the product of orienting individual references at the point of reception. The body is also a sign. Lukacs's work can be qualified as deconstructive at still another level, because it draws attention also to the ways the body is taken up in theory as a discursive object. For example, in *True North* (Figure 3.5), by leaving open and hence problematizing the formation of masculinity as an effect of the boundary. In this image, what initially appears to be framed as a normative masculinity reveals itself as a culturally determined perception by the overlapping of eighteenth-century conventions of pictorial representation -- the full-length portrait set in an idyllic landscape Lukacs appropriates iconographically from Gainsborough -- with a contrasting "formal" logic predominantly taken from skin-head subculture. As my installation shot shows, the inclusion of military boots within the display situation gives a "literal" account of the body as an extension of painting-construction; and, in admitting an imbricated political and social contextual

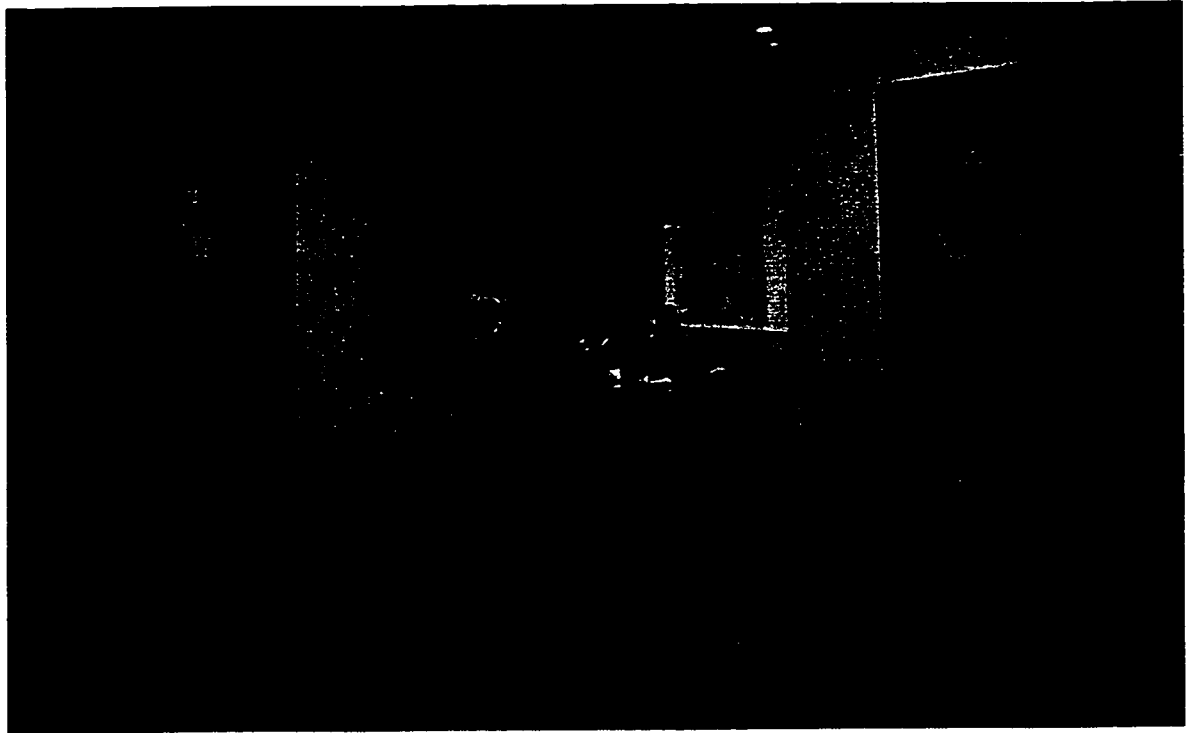


Fig.3.5 Attila Richard Lukacs,  
TRUE NORTH (1989)

Fig.3.5.1. Attila Richard Lukacs,  
TRUE NORTH (detail)



experience it repeats the structuring of semiotics as presupposing a wider social situation. Thus its effect is doubled. In postmodern representation the corporeal body, as its multiple images in the series Lukacs's *Varieties of Love* (Figure 3.6) insinuate, belongs with the subjective dimensions of ideology as a regulated, but ultimately troubling category. Right from the start, then, the body Lukacs strategically and importantly renders defines not an ideal form but the possibility to see.<sup>5</sup> Or, Lukacs's practice pries at the implications of braiding together a field of determinations that, organized by manipulation and reversibility, constitute the distinction of the roles of author, agent, and modes of productivity.

This sense of the image as a semiotic paradigm does not in itself guarantee the distinction between production and consumption at the level of perception, however. So it is relative to a reading environment that the reader contributes the necessary act of resignification that in turn signifies the textual as a writerly choice. Barthes's construction of the distinction between the "writerly" and "readerly" text is useful in this connection, for it makes readers into producers rather than consumers of texts. But it renders itself indirectly. The contrast between reading and writing presents theoretical difficulty because what is performed at the most basic level as critical theory in the experience of interpreting texts is called "writerly" but defines the reader's active participation in and engagement with one or many levels of reality; what dispenses with this process for the sake of completing the author's meaning is its opposite, the "readerly" text. And so it is confusing: Barthes at the same time preserves and extends a function relative to a work- or text-centered system. But either way he brings to mind cyborg theory.

As it admits the transmutation of the body and its intelligences along with the cross-cutting of recombinant machineries, the cyborg creates a "situated knowledge." In Donna Haraway's definition, a situated knowledge is one that builds on common places and sometimes takes unexpected turns (1995). "Cyborg culture," as it locates an intimate conjoining of what is built, imagined, and commodified, is thus a point of articulation in the gap between conventional representations of what postmodernity is. For Haraway as

5 *Varieties of Love*, in compressing the temporality and spatiality of Indian miniatures as a point of origin, also utilizes the strategy of appropriation to generate a narrative in which culture is no way obviously connected to representation. The series fundamentally preserves a limited number of ethnographic and aesthetic cultural objects to make a statement for the globalized market in a transnational postmodern age; I describe the notion of aesthetic integrity relative to the invention of cultural tradition in some detail while at the same time describing several pictures in the group individually in publication I wrote for *ArtNews*, 92 (Jan. 1993).



Fig.3.6 Attila Richard Lukacs, VARIETIES OF LOVE: ADAM AND STEVE (1992)

for other cyberpunk writers postmodernism is a discursive construct for cultural theory it represents the dematerialization of the art object into to a proliferation of signs. This is evident in the pervasiveness of science fiction cinema, comics, and television as the topics of serious academic attention. Especially in the area defined as cultural studies, but also in science studies, research into virtual reality, reproductive processes, and terminal identities gains validity as it serves to explain what is conceptualized in the notion of a continual flow of images.

Haraway's explication of the cyborg as a theoretically necessary situated knowledge attaches to the idea of a "man-machine living system" imagined and invented by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in 1960 as a man-machine hybrid. Her distinct contribution, however, is to pry the cyborg away from its overdetermined, masculinist, moorings. For feminism, cyborgs in the broadest sense materialize a "functional analogy" between the human sciences and technology.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, and following Haraway, cyborgism refers to the ideology, and cyborgology, to the attitude and the praxis. Thus a "cyborg" emerges as defensible relative to postmodernism's production of cyberspace as hybridity, its micronarratives, and its broad "vision of cultural operations" (Bukatman 1993, 7). Consequently it achieves a certain prominence as it articulates to cross-referential discourses such as critical and postmodern theory. I have commented already on these discourses that are destined to be put into question as they reproduce "the limits that constitute them" (Derrida 1987, 11).

When cyborgs come to be defined relative to notions of visual culture they are identified as they create a crisis in a dominant narrative of the technological and the organic which they are perceived to both enhance and disturb. I am interested in art theory that like the cyborg builds on the notion of a necessary and theoretical overlap and takes unexpected turns. Such an entwining might throw into relief the advantages and disadvantages of preserving the specificity of distinct knowledges relative to art and to culture. Which is to say I want now to concentrate on the cyborg in terms of its analysis as it extends semiotics to material culture. So my own sense of the cyborg is quite specific: This sense of the cyborg is one in which it operates as a key signifier in its linkage to the image and to representation. On this register, and on one hand -- where it is to be identified as part of a much wider cultural system and as a site where a

<sup>6</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989)

destabilization of boundaries might be thought -- it locates those practices that explore a mediatized culture by means of video, photography, closed-circuit t.v., and/or virtual technology. Alternately, it might explain the body's performance. Because it stresses the possibilities of a machine-human interface, it brings to mind the practices of artists such as Stelarc or Orlan. Such posthuman bodies embrace the radical impurity of the cyborg, promising, as they frontier knowledge for aesthetic, commercial or research purposes, the uncertain status and ambiguous distinction of a newly-minted personal identity. This register, then, is one whose central aspect is the conjoining of the culture of images with the notion of a "culture of imagining systems" (Tomas 1995, 259). Accordingly, it indexes a sophisticated project as it admits a doubled representation whose interpretation may require the combined knowledge of art appreciation and of visual technologies relative to global data circulation and management networks.

On another register a second set of practices introduces actual and potential historical and critical investigations that redefine technology as it responds to the imagination. In this category I would include newly-emergent studies of cubist, dadaist, and surrealist projects as they call attention to an overlapping frame of reference between science fiction and image-making. In this category further studies are anticipated, for example, the one proposed by Scott Bukatman in his book *Terminal Identity* (1993) -- Bukatman essentially proposes the mutual enfolding of science fiction discourse and Pop art. Basically, such practices allow for the introduction of new circuits of competencies. And, what they bring into play is a confluence of the speculative and the material. Sets of practices such as these suggest, at least provisionally, that the value of cyborg discourse lies in its crucial recognition that a flexible text is not only one that contains multiple textualities but also one that contains the fundamental assumption of vulnerability.

Cyborg theory, then, entails dealing with an extended ontological and epistemic paradigm. Simply and briefly stated, it requires resituating received notions of the subject and technology. It also means reading visual culture anew, as it becomes important to acknowledge that a body of knowledge is sometimes simultaneously both discursive and material. It is perhaps at this level, the level of critical theory as a cyborg practice, that it becomes most compelling. As it establishes a framework made up of physical structures and theoretical, philosophical, and communicative components, in the context of a perceived connection between texts and visual objects in which the spectacular is ambivalently implicated, cyborg discourse emerges as a zone of radical potentialities.

Arbitrarily, it provides a particular context from which to articulate how perspective depends on the subject position from which individuals speak and question.

What I am coming to is my sense that, for Lukacs, the act of reading signifies the image as a system for which cyborg theory offers an analogy. And what cyborg theory allows me to see is a postmodern practice of appropriating images of high culture for a self-consciously posed construction of the gaze as a discursive practice. This is in part because it derives from mass culture. Lukacs's paintings have their source in mass media material -- the popular press, television, photographically derived reproductions in books -- so that independent of their formal or technical processes or of their reflexive modes pictures such as *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (Figure 3.7) reference technological-social relations; where signs are interchangeable, or at least equivalent, images can be said to sustain a connection to digital technologies and to advance them as their conceptual and theoretical parameters. And thereby to denote another area of ambiguity. What interests me is that the images implicitly celebrate a disintegration of the object confirmed by the artificiality of the facsimile, a technology of identical substitutes. Quite literally, Lukacs's receives images in his studio by fax transmission;<sup>7</sup> it is therefore not coincidental that his images speak to what comes to the body as a virtual system, that is, to the instant entertainment and quick oblivion of popular culture brought into the studio by electronic goods. So that the title *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* becomes more than a crude reference to the un-reality of original images, or an appropriation of language's sense that meaning will subscribe to an interchangeable flux; as it layers visual references it extends mass culture's white noise. Everything is offered up for consumption in Lukacs's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*: the male nude on the bottom right, for example, taken straight out of eighteenth-century academic painting,<sup>8</sup> Rembrandt's *Night Watch* (Figure 3.8), the picture's compositional source, and (through the continuity of situation) Turner's painting titled *An Iron Foundry* (1797). Clearly, the machine is a central problematic: electronic images intervene from "outside" the text to bring the images into contact with a contemporary context. And at a more abstract level, the function of technology is to operate as a deliberately motivated switch.

7 Conversation with the author, November 1992.

8 Paulette Gagnon draws attention to this figure, originally belonging to the painting *Charon passant les ombres sur le Stryx* (c.1743) and by Pierre Subleyras, in her text, "Un désir de désordre," in *Attila Richard Lukacs* (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1994), p. 14.

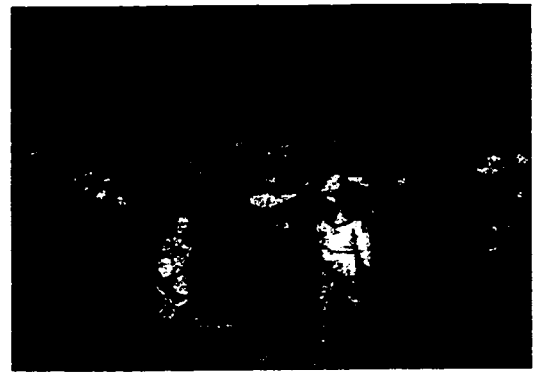


Fig.3.7 Attila Richard Lukacs, TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW (1991)

Fig.3.8 Rembrandt van Rijn, NIGHT WATCH (1642)



that is to say, to reveal that the center of attention is always and obliquely changing. In short, cyborg theory as a technology encourages different kinds of associations, and reciprocal exchange; in the way it critically poses questions of a unitary, autonomous subject of discourse it also seems to suggest itself as an opaque version of the Albertian grid.

So what I've said so far is this: full of incident, cyborg theory offers a useful way of thinking how Lukacs accounts for subjectivity in a specific historical relation wherein the surface touches on the problem of visibility. Thus its challenge is to modernism's totalizing representation; cyborg pathways not only would suggest a world within and around the thematic of a postmodern reflexivity, but also a space where the experiential and speculation combine. In other words, a complicated set of interrelated viewpoints caught up in historical processes of production point to representation as a social practice. Context, but more specifically materiality in its conjoining with cultural-historical situations, points also to a critical conjunction of artistic practice with theory.

### *Queer Theory?*

In a way that is analogous to Lukacs's sense of multiple points of view, queer theory envisions any normative measure of the real as an arbitrarily produced effect. So that, similarly, its strategies for de-naturalizing the forms of a discursive historical metafiction include appropriation, eclecticism, quotation, parody, and hybridization. These terms establish a frame of reference for complex formations of understanding; immediately they construct an image both amusing and revealing. The sum of collective energies amounts to the narrative of an alien/nation, as this quotation from the anthology titled *Fear of a Queer Planet* demonstrates:

at present there is no comparable category of social analysis [to the Marxist notion of class] to describe the kind of group or nongroup that queer people constitute. "Class" is conspicuously useless ... in queer theory the question is unintelligible. "Status," the classical alternative in social theory is somewhat better but does not account for the way the ascribed trait of a sexually defined group is itself a mode of sociality, nor does it describe the terror and atomization by which its members become 'members' before their presence in any codefined group, nor does it express the definite pressure exerted by the assumptions that this group, far from constituting one status among many, does not and should not exist.... Queer

people are a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class (Warner 1993, xxiv-xxv).<sup>9</sup> Implicitly, queer theory's commitment is to take issue with social and political traditions of theory, Marxism among them, which have instituted heterosexuality as both a normal and functional description of the social world. With other recent "subaltern" formations organized around difference -- post-colonial theory, feminism come most readily to mind -- queer theory indexes a politicized moment that at the same time defines a social geography that might be amplified as a horizontal city of textual and sexual translations. This close relationship between the sense of a national imagination and identity politics identified in the conceptualization of a "queer" subject position brings to mind Barthes's call to writing as the act of self-mapping, sacralized in the phantasmic Tokyo of his *Empire of Signs*. What touches me is that queer theory opens the terrain of identity into the space of the performative and of play. And the queer operates as a document in Lukacs's visualist representations.

In the broadest terms, and as an academic production, the emergence of Lesbian and Gay Studies as a key rhetorical/theoretical space might be said to drive a wedge between the stable and comforting structures of established academic convention from the standpoint of the uncertain and struggling object that is the body. Foucault is a key figure for Gay and Lesbian Studies generally, and for queer theory in particular. In the *History of Sexuality*, as one critic has explained, Foucault describes a political anatomy, "an anatomy of the body politic in terms of the politicization of the body".<sup>10</sup> In Lesbian and Gay Studies here is always a taken-for-grantedness of this theoretical and tactical claim (c.f. Warner 1993). Lesbian and Gay Studies treats pedagogy as an *ars erotica*, and with important and strategic effects. "Always already" there exists in Lesbian and Gay Studies a "twofoldness" of representations: a movement of textual and of sexual bodies, i.e. bodies of knowledge, political bodies, and sensational corporalities. Hence, we are

<sup>9</sup> Warner elaborates upon this point as follows: "Lacanian-Althusserian cultural studies, trying to bring politics and sexuality onto comparable conceptual levels, has relied on the categories that made the two equivalent ("phallus") or evacuated into structural effects ("subjectivity"). Social theory as a quasi-institution for the past century has returned continually to the question of sexuality, but almost without recognizing it has done so, and with an endless capacity to marginalize queer sexuality in its descriptions of the social world (Warner 1993, ix).

<sup>10</sup> Alan Sheridan in Biddy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism and Foucault," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds. (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1988), p. 7.

already alerted that to frame the queer — as an analytical and performative category — within a broader discussion of the problematic of visualism will be no simple task. It is for this reason that, in what follows, I intend not to engage in the study of the discontinuities and differences inherent in queer theory or in Lesbian and Gay Studies. rather, and coming back to thinking Lukacs, I will proceed in the spirit Foucault rather than his letter to lay stress on particular patterns of disciplinary coherence that distinguishes Lesbian and Gay Studies from other academic disciplines. In this formation they will proliferate for the development of an experience of displacement that makes the link between verbal theory and visual practice.

Assertive, subversive, playful, non-conformist, queer theory, as a sub-set of Lesbian and Gay Studies, principally and critically engages a politics of representation, the subject and desire. Foucault once located the self as a practice of transformation and change.<sup>11</sup> Thus, for Foucault, practices of political action impact those processes through which individuals constitute themselves ethically, aesthetically and politically. This is the corpus queer theory takes up. Queer theory problematizes the question of the self via a spatial metaphor; following Foucault, the self is envisioned as a dynamic interaction between heteronomous elements (ibid., 6).

Lesbian and Gay Studies is that field of learning that concerns itself with a double project: first, the historical survey of a subject always already understood, as per Foucault, as "sexually marked" and as a "practice of transformation and change"; second, the study and analysis of "games of truth," i.e. "the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience" (ibid., 6-7). Two movements are quickly discernible within the practiced and political space of Lesbian and Gay Studies. In the most reductive terms, it defines a field of knowledge premised on sexual identity and preference.

At the time of writing, it is both an institutionally recognized disciplinary field and a scholarly method of enquiry wherein research falls into three broadly defined categories: first, sexual politics and theory, a heading under which might be found AIDS discourses and critiques of the historical control of sexuality as well as debates on the social construction of sexual orientation and subjectivity (e.g.: Evans 1993; Patton 1990; Plant 1990; Silverman 1992; Singer 1992; Stein 1992); second, gay and lesbian political and

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality [Histoire de la sexualité]*, III, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

judiciary history (e.g.: Cruikshank 1992; Halperin 1989; Hirsch 1992; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Plummer 1992; Seidman 1991; Winkler 1989); and third, the arts, which have tended to centre on literary and visual culture and on the dramatic arts (e.g.: Bristow 1992; Dubin 1992; Garber 1991; Gevert et alia 1993; Merck 1993; Taub 1992).<sup>12</sup> Framed as a unit, the areas Lesbian and Gay Studies maps -- anthropology, history and aesthetics, cultural theory, literary criticism -- represent the space of the sexual as a space that cuts across two uneven and discontinuous registers: the first demarcates a social and cultural context; the second, a historical continuity.

The "queer" designates the eccentric, unsettling, assertive nature of Lesbian and Gay Studies's placement in the academe (Abelove et alia 1993, xvii). "Queer" also positions and secures the radical and contemporary side of "Studies." Consider, for example, the following passage from the introduction to *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, an anthology on lesbian and gay media, in which the editors situate themselves within a distinctive perspective identified by critics as subversive, provocative, refreshing, complex, and sometimes contradictory. Writes Michael Gevert:

On a queer day you can see forever. Or can you? Things move fast. Things move faster. When we started this book in 1989, three people from three cities, we knew we were living in three very queer places. Places of new possibilities and shocking repercussions. Places of unprecedented opportunities and unbridled repressions. In our particular cases: London, New York, Toronto. We knew from travel, from work, from networks of friends and colleagues, that there were lots of other queer places, north and south, east and west. Very queer places. Each particular, each idiosyncratic. Their experiences were nevertheless similar to ours. ... A critical mass of artists were producing, debating, challenging. A new militance in street politics was being cross-pollinated with a new rigor in queer critical theory. A significant moment to savor. ...

Things move faster. Things get more extreme. For the three of us, in our tale of three cities, it was certainly the best of times, the worst of times. The three of us decided to work on a book born of the moment: a book designed not to wallow in the grimness, but to fight back against it. ...

Parameters? Independent film and video by lesbian and gay artists since Stonewall. An equal commitment to the voices of critics and of producers. An openness to wildly varied notions of the text and the image. An interest in contradiction. An excitement about exploring the edges of borders, the restricted zones of boundaries, the shadowy places where certainty isn't welcome and rules no longer apply (Gevert 1993, xiii-xv).

12 There are scores of other examples, I have cited only some of the most recent. See Abelove et alia, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), for an extensive guide to further reading.

In the play of identifications this lengthy quotation engages, two moments are clearly discernible: 1) queer theory's self-awareness as the object of struggle and the product of history and interpretation, and 2) the broad sweep of its theoretical enterprise. Gever wrote the text as the introduction to an anthology titled *Queer Looks*. With *How Do I Look?* by the Bad Object Choices collective (1991); *The Woman at the Keyhole* by Judith Mayne (1990); *Inside/Out* by Diana Fuss (1991); Richard Dyer's *Now You See It* (1990); and Teresa de Lauretis's classic *Alice Doesn't* (1983), *Queer Looks* is one of a growing number of texts whose ambition, at the academic level, is to make theory queer at the same time as it makes a theory about queers. As an embodied vision, then, and full of complexities, it pleats artistic practice.

The degree to which self-awareness, scepticism, and protest against the normalizing methodologies of social knowledge are imbricated in the identity of Lesbian and Gay Studies generally and in queer theory in particular is what arguably differentiates it from the other disciplines in the social sciences, such as, for example, Women's Studies. Yet save for its rhetoric, this feature does not immediately distinguish queer theory from, say, Cultural Studies, whose interest also lies in deconstructing and contesting what Gever et alia elsewhere in the same essay situate as "tired old tropes" of representation (Gever 1993, xiv). What the hyperbolic, frequently restless, but always alert and impassioned voice of queer theory identifies is the voice of subculture, a voice that ends "in the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer" (Hebdige 1979, 3). Theorists such as Dick Hebdige would like to claim this space for Cultural Studies, to take up for Cultural Studies a historic position vis-à-vis the official discourses of "the university," i.e. subculture's nervous edginess, its ambiguous relationship with normalized forms, its ingenious expressive artifice (Hebdige 1979, 19). Hebdige wants to contrast the academically "respectable" disciplines (literature is cited) with Cultural Studies's own conflicted institutional position. But the fact is that, whatever its voice, Cultural Studies's face — more than than now certainly — is the face of Marxist thought. Queer studies seems to advance beyond even the left's claims to truth. Queer theory flees the domain of reference ontologically implicit in marxian logic by problematizing the "natural" equivalence between "identity" and "sex" and, by extension, all naturalized equivalences. For example, commenting on strategic terminological shift from "gay" to "queer" one critic writes: "For academics and activists "queer" gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy" (Warner 1993, xxvi). Such questions make it

clear that queer studies enables social theory to elaborate the connection between sexuality and politics in ways that other disciplinary fields such as cultural studies clearly cannot.<sup>13</sup>

Queer studies images itself on the vectors of longing; membership is premised on sexual desire. And sexual interactions take place against the backdrop of what is genuinely understood as shaped by the paradox of a text that works itself in and around the elements of language, political efficacy, and the everyday, forms speaking to a differentiated culture. In this location queer studies constitutes a mediation that marks it as cutting across and between different registers of the ideological and the affective. Queer studies's disciplinary space is, centrally, a landscape where discourse and a specific conception of sociality collide. For Michael Warner it constitutes a socio-political geography of desire:

In the middle ground between the localism of a 'discourse' and the generality of 'the subject' is the problem of international -- or otherwise translocal -- sexual politics. As gay activists from non-Western contexts become more and more involved in setting political agendas, and as the rights discourse of internationalism is extended to more and more cultural contexts, Anglo-American queer theorists will have to be more alert to the globalizing -- and localizing -- tendencies of our theoretical languages (ibid., xvii).

Gever's "tale of three cities" -- "Very queer places. Each particular, each idiosyncratic." (ibid.) -- guardedly tells a similar story. All this accompanies and extends what I propose is the basic language structuring Lukacs's pieces: subversion, ambiguity, aporia. Along the way, he speaks to pleasure and sensation in a way that is revealing of the very heterogeneous strands that make up the field of popular culture. From which it follows that what Michael Gever understands as an imagined community in writing, Lukacs articulates through the analogue of the visual text.

This articulation of the national popular Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a "habitation/nation" system. Sedgwick describes the "system" in the following terms: "The 'habitation/nation system' would be a set of discursive and institutional arrangements that would mediate between the physical fact that each person inhabits, at a given time, a particular geographical space, and the far more abstract, sometimes even apparently unrelated organization of what has emerged since the late seventeenth century as her/his national identity, as signaled by, for instance, citizenship" (Sedgwick 1992, 239). In significant ways this characterization is reminiscent of Foucault's description of the rules

<sup>13</sup> This might seem like an unfair comparison, especially when, at conferences and symposia, Cultural Studies and Queer Studies's discourses and communities seem to overlap (see for example, Greenberg, et alia 1991; Parker et alia 1992). Yet the fact remains that queer studies does not only revisit or give new definition to the old, it abrogates regimes of the normal altogether.

of serving to control of discourse, "none may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so. More exactly, not all areas of discourse are equally open and penetrable; some are forbidden territory (differentiated and differentiating) while others are virtually open to the wind..." (Foucault 1972). Foucault finds an analogy that repositions, in political terms, the evocation of discourse as a nostalgic binding of an idealized past to a transcendent cultural object. Stated another way, what the queer look establishes is a radically new of conceptualizing space in which the potential alliances between individuals both radicalize and transcend identity politics and national boundaries, in some formations, an eroticized nationality. Or, a gesture that establishes a compelling discourse of definitional relations, one that celebrates, rather than try to stand outside, the fact that texts are unrationalizable and intermittent (Sedgwick 1992). But it is not always about that. Sometimes it leaves room for questioning. Now it allows me to catch sight of Fried's absorptive model.

***Each Man Brings With Him a Substantial Following...***

Fried's connection with Greenberg goes some way towards explaining the distinction between a reflexive and a reflective model of visual culture such as the one I am proposing by analyzing visual culture in its articulation with theoretical practice. But one must be careful not to give the impression that Fried was not in his own right a significant theorist. For example, Fried is to be differentiated from Greenberg in that he imputes to modern art and to writing about it an ethical commitment to moral rigour. Where Greenberg endows the object with aesthetic power so that it works to confirm the state of painting as a "strictly visual entity" (Greenberg, cited in Harrison 1993, 173), Fried goes a step further to secure for aesthetic judgement all the dignity religion can attain in a rationalized, secularized environment. First point. Second point: To the extent that Greenberg's criticism at the time of writing implied that abstract art involved a state of moral alertness, it was to situate itself as part of a larger problem of knowledge production; but, significantly, this did not itself exclude the possibility that the aesthetic might not necessarily be disconnected from political or moral value. For Fried, on the other hand, the aesthetic would always be associated with innocence, holiness and purity, a definitive reading that explains the "formal critic of modernist painting" as "a moral critic" (Fried in Harrison and Wood 1992, 771). Availing itself a Kantian sense of immanence, the operations of an art criticism envisioned in the words of Greenberg as a

"unique and proper area of competence," would be raised to the absolute by the Fried of "Art and Objecthood," an article published in *Artforum* in 1967.

It would be appropriate here to make some further remarks about the particular procedures and conventions that are recognizable as Lukacs's visualist discursivity, in order to eventually get at how "Art and Objecthood" is the key work upon which *Absorption and Theatricality* is premised. These references will also enable me to articulate more specifically a critique of the absorptive attitude as it obtains the articulation of art and a temporal/historical framework that for visualism is conceived as the object's "presentness." Again, I do not propose an unproblematic view of history. My goal is always to explore the protocols by which modernist critique prescribes what is progressive, relevant, and valid as "modern art" and therefore contrasts, in its paradigmatic intelligibility with a postmodern critical theory that would retain a sense of the object's relation to the political, social and formative work of history. I take a page from queer theory in order to do so.

I find it suggestive the critical operation of an ironic and discontinuous poststructuralist theory is capable of constituting multiple interpretative positions for the viewer's subjectivities. Lukacs makes it clear that the social text undercuts the aesthetic paradigm. The matter at hand is now to reflect, not on its sociopolitical power structure but on the specificities of Lukacs's visual idiom. I have already commented on a certain aesthetic manifestation of the reactionary enabling a process of identification and representation in the artist's work. I refer specifically to the artist's deconstructive use of facture, and to his reference to the male nude. These help to determine a politics of reception. The simultaneous presence of the element of the decorative, and especially of the detail, fragments further the illusion of aesthetic mastery.

It is in his treatment of corporeal tattoos that I find insinuated a continual process of negotiation through the semiotic component of visualism. How then does the tattoo signify? Take the National Gallery of Canada's *Where the Finest Young Men...* as representative (Figure 3.9). This image appropriates Caravaggio's *A Concert of Youths (Una Musica)* for what may be read as a socially disturbing and potentially life-threatening ritual event. Nude and semi-clothed skinhead youths pose confrontationally throughout the composition; some gaze towards the spectator, others look towards the ritual baptism that structurally operates as the focus of the narrative. The theme is grisly. The painting compresses a range of sexual signifiers and incorporates a morbid sadomasochistic fantasy; supplied as much by the rubbery skin of figure who



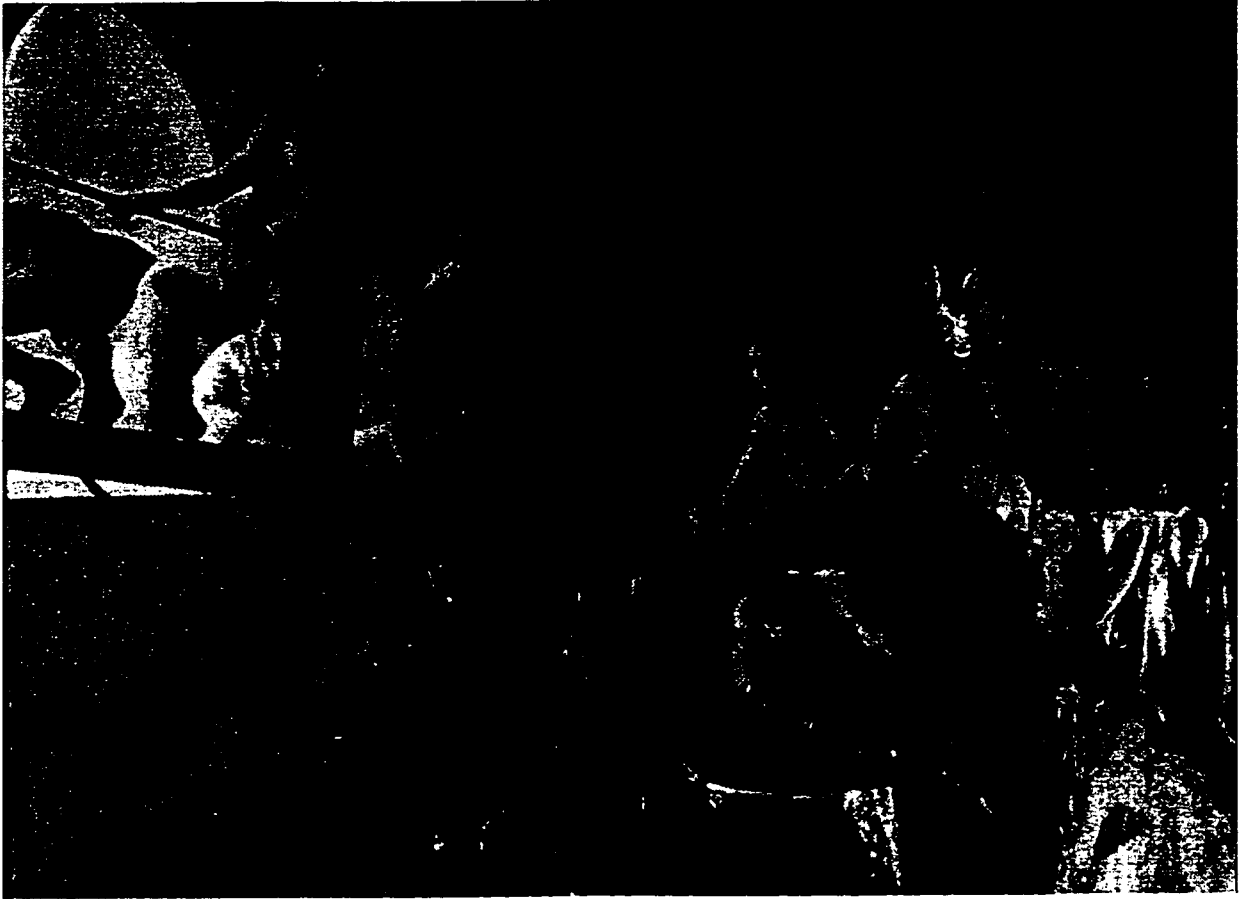


Fig.3.9 Attila Richard Lukacs, WHERE THE FINEST YOUNG MEN... (1987)

holds another down in the water as by what critics have proposed as a dangerous fascination with fascist skinheads,<sup>14</sup> its aesthetic constellates across and between context-bound, historically specific and always contingent social relations. I could go into this, but the point here is that the image evokes unapologetically the cannibalistic, irreverent and overdetermined codes of queer corporeal style and of postmodern culture, denoting in a momentary act of exposure the connection between textuality and sexuality.

It is the tension-between that the essential elements of a queer vernacular refers to, and that describes, too, the ways in which Lukacs negotiates identity, and especially gender, as a kind of imitation for which there is no original (see Butler 1991, 21). Judith Butler's work comes to mind in this connection. In her article "Imitation and Gender Subordination," Butler deconstructs gender as fiction, the effect of socialization and history; it is at this moment that it becomes a body in ceaseless and self-perpetuating state of transformation. So that identity is constituted not relative to the body's surfaces, or to an "inside," but as an ongoing process that achieves monumental simplicity and can be understood without reference to anecdotal incident. Butler is writing about figural oscillations and linguistic codings, but I can relate it to the visual and symbolic materiality, simultaneously representational and abstract, that becomes the site of an enactment in Lukacs's postmodernist enterprise. At this juncture Lukacs contributes towards defining an exploration of representation, paradoxically perhaps, by means of paint as a body that can be touched. Which implies that the viewer too can touch the surface of signification at the point where the picture becomes most attractive. I'm getting ahead of myself again. Perhaps it is useful to think of this imbricated sense of visuality relative to a formal "ground."

Tar is an unstable pigment because it will continue to migrate and contaminate through the strata of the surface even though each coat will, so chemically too the work is never fixed. Used extensively in Lukacs's representations, and in *Where the Finest Young Men...*, tar, through its "soft" and "fluid" presence, acquires discursive value in its linkage to the unbounded, hence to processes that, in psychoanalytic theories of the "visceral unconscious" admit the formal ruptures of the inchoate, occur as disturbances

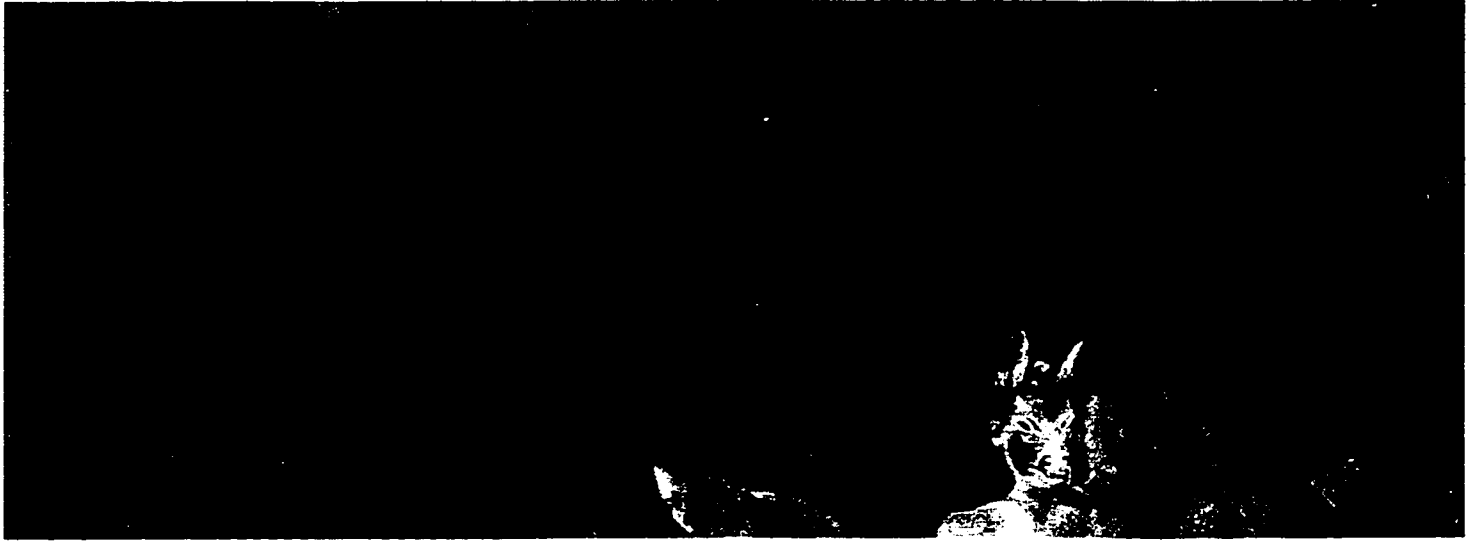
14 Critical reception of Lukacs's work has functioned to connect the subjects of his representations, naked skinheads dressed only with military trappings, with the details of his personal life, suggesting that his work is a sensationalistic endorsement of fascism. See Kelvin Browne, "Still Naughty After All These Years?," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto) October 18, 1997, and Susan Douglas, "Slave and Master: Picturing the Politics and Poetics of S/M," *Parachute* 76 (1994), pp. 29-33, for a development of this theme.

that have unpredictable effects upon subjectivity. The investigation of degraded elements is part of a broader set of enquiries into social and cultural taboos. Thus it touches also on George Bataille's conceptualization of a formlessness that exceeds and undermines categories by inhering in the structure of things (see Krauss 1994). And relative to a theoretical and necessary theory of abjection it can be situated as that which is expelled from the normative model of identity, "What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, 4). This, in the patriarchal tradition, is associated with moral worth through a morphological system that links the feminine with the unbounded (see Betterton 1996, 85). This liquidity would demand a reformulation of aesthetics itself, and is probably worth debating further. But what interests me is that the compound, defilement, and abomination together emerge to constitute an order that as a site of struggle begins to be confronted in contemporary theory to the extent that it problematizes a modernist, hence rationalized, sense of sight (ibid.). Put another way, tar enables a description of aesthetic practices that in Lukacs's theory link transgression to the symbolic order.

In other words, it makes available a renewed sense of visualism. Lukacs's *Was Weiss der Esel von Mord* (Figure 3.10) helps to elaborate this point further. Articulating Lukacs's visualism of keenly observed surface phenomena, the painting comprises two panels hung close to the floor: semantically, it brings together alternate references to the same thing. It can be interpreted as interrogating opticality's immanence through the intersecting vectors of the gaze and specular memory.

The sheer materiality of the irregularly placed gold leaf represents the physical manifestation of the attempt to play with and therefore expose contradictions (aesthetic, philosophical, theoretical) that cannot or perhaps should not be resolved. Forms in the painting exist on a two-dimensional surface of vast, ambiguous proportions. It is in this way they concretize the literal and theoretical tension in the shift between author and beholder, and between reflection and reception visualism as a discourse makes present at another level. Here the artist takes up the faculty of sight to signify a perceptual encounter that, entered into through a Lacanian identification of Symbolic with language, and passing through it to the mirror phase that forms the ego-subject, provides a scaffold for a topography of tensions in which memory and perception course as if motivated by the machinery of desire.

In other words, it is language that opens up and puts into question the assumptions and presuppositions of the "real" as a daily practice. And so, as a trope in the age of simulations, the tattoo functions for a practiced sense of visuality. At a structural



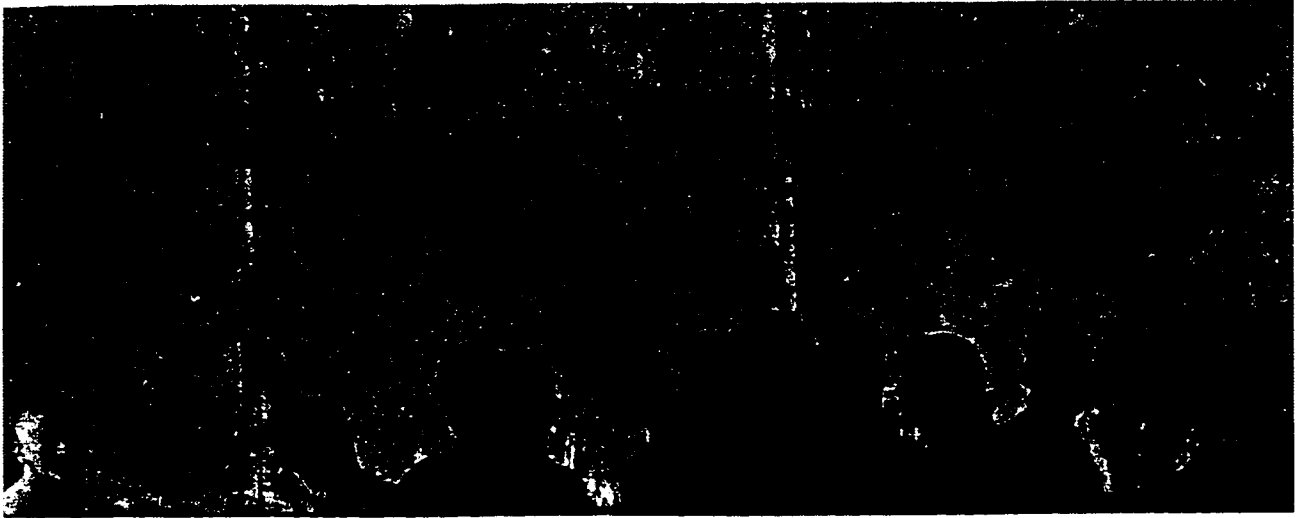


Fig.3.10 Attila Richard Lukacs, WAS WEISS DER ESEL VON MORD (1991)

level it reveals the enterprise of painting as one that puts into question "founding" knowledges; literally, it is constituted relative to a "ground" that, as close scrutiny reveals, is not built up from preparatory sketches, but by means of a series of glazes and white enamel, a process that reveals the canvas as a field of play. More significantly, it is constituted as an index relative to a terrain of "undecidability" literalized as an unstable medium. In the scenario *Where the Finest Young Men...* stages, it is the tattoo grafted onto the "squirmy" qualities of it all that, proceeding from a phantom object, insists on a reading of bodies in relation to language. But isn't it also a reading of the body as language? I'm not sure any more. For visualism, presence and representation are threads interlocking. And this precipitates the question: if the rhetorical effect of the tattoo is to reveal the "truth" of language in the "presence" of consciousness, then could it not also be a reminder of the possibility that the empiricism of the trace may well be the empiricism of the senses, too? This hypothesis would leave open the possibility that discourses can be extensions of older traditions at the same as interventions upon them. However, its full ramifications will have to pend more detailed reading. Here, a case can be made for indeterminacy; ultimately, it brings Fried's visualism back into view.

### ***Staging the Gaze: Fried's "Theatricality"***

It should by now be plain that there can be no art modernist critique without theoretical abstraction operating as a vacuum to isolate it from the contaminating particles of culture. The concept of absorption similarly depends on weaving together modernism and formalism as habits of attention; but more than that, it relies on history for a phenomenology of the intransitive. In this, the role of observation is operative, ironically, as an efficient filter between perceptual knowledge and the experience of art.<sup>15</sup> With this another story begins. If Fried illuminates visualism from the vantage point of the subject writing, or from the viewpoint of the author as the incarnation of a transcendental signifier, then contrastingly, Lukacs illuminates it from the perspective of those who perform or enact the text. This much is clear, rendered so by the physical detail that conveys the specification of identity and, like the scar, "is always the bearer of contingency and death" (Schor 1987, 81). The tattoo, in being tied to existential fragility, functions relative to a broader consciousness. So it theoretically displaces the authentic

<sup>15</sup> What I mean by perceptual knowledge is knowledge linked to the senses, and thereby to physical perception. This is meaningless and/or disturbing to modernist criticism, as I will go on to show.

self that modernism schematically and absolutely renders as an aesthetic category. Put another way, it destabilizes the presence-ridden evidence of modernism's structural relations. Or, it marks the subject's inscription into existing social relations while subtly arguing that viewer positions and subjectivities are always in flux. This we already knew, as feminist theorists perhaps, which is to say before the "queering" of notions of the gaze and representation. The point, from a feminist perspective, is to try to ask questions, at least provisionally, about the enmeshing of the body as a discursive object incorporated into larger system of meanings and values, that is to say, as a sign in a system of signs (see Hutcheon 1989, 141-160). But, as Linda Hutcheon has observed: "To de-doxify is not to act, even if it is a step towards action or even a necessary precondition of it" (ibid., 21). The more interesting part of Lukacs's visualism, for me, involves communicative activity between practice and theory. And so it manifestly argues for a dynamic conjoining of visual and non-visual texts. In appealing not only to the "open-ness" of the writerly text but also to the physical body, not only to textuality but also to sexuality, to high art and to popular culture, Lukacs's deconstructive visualism emerges as a site not only discernible as a ludic intelligence but as a cultural space, a space of critique. From this vantage point, pure opticality is found wanting.

As I said earlier, pure opticality provides for absorption, constituting it relative to a theoretical and conceptual "theatricality." Therefore, theatricality demands attention as it points to a quality of attention ("the absorptive gaze") that takes account of how visuality itself is "troubled." The concept of theatricality also demands that we keep in tension the annexation of modernist theory as it is recontextualized by artistic and theoretical projects whose political function is being revealed in carefully considered arguments as problematic. Only then will the relationship between a narrative history of an American tradition of criticism that, briefly, proposes nothing less than the project of a far-flung epistemic overhaul, and one offering a glimpse into a problematic sense of the isolation of material culture from everyday life be fully revealed.

In his intent to celebrate art as a form of transcendence, and to enquire into the conditions that govern visual images, the Fried of "Art and Objecthood" — a text which can be taken as exemplary of a key moment in the 1960's in which the theories of visual modernism reached their heyday — provides a lucid reference to a set of terms that already appear in Greenberg's modernist critique. This is hardly surprising, as Fried with Rosalind Krauss was Greenberg's student. In her essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), Krauss effectively re-positions the whole of European high culture to lay

claim for the originality of American post-war art. And, in the process, Morris and Smithson become the rightful heirs to the equestrian monument of Marcus Aurelius and with it the seat of Imperial Rome. Her account of the genesis of site-specific art is of significance here because it constitutes an example of the normalization of critical force. I say this, then, not to score off Krauss, but rather to underline the aspect of modernism's methodology which, as Greenberg's knew and his students registered, recommended that to entertain the notion that sculpture represents the residual feeling of the past, one must first annex it to American culture. Fried similarly makes use of traditional notions of European art for an expanded sense of culture; in his case, however, historical explication will be extended with still more perspicuity for aesthetic thought.

So that Fried's view of art as an ontological essence colludes with, but is not committed to, Greenberg's. Attention to what distinguishes one theoretical position from another touches on the full complexity of the subject. In brief, Greenberg's approach offers the reference of a position that, intellectually, emotionally, and symbolically recognizes the necessity of acts of interpretation in the difficult task of rendering visible artistic creativity, and what spectators discover within the aesthetic experience. In this respect it is both like and unlike what Fried puts forward. Although he comes into play as an early defender of aesthetic experience against the contingencies of time and place, and thus can be seen to approach the same area of enquiry as his mentor, eventually Fried streamlines Greenberg's line of argument and with it the canon; artists are situated in his pantheon according to an organic hierarchy of formal experimentation. Proclaiming the value of the "autonomous" object -- a term by which he referred to the integrity of medium-specificity -- and of aesthetics as independent of literal reality, for him, modern art was a direct and personal response to material poetics, and to the specific history, conventions, and techniques of artistic tradition. Outstanding works of art, moreover, were to be defined as those which expressed formal and historical self-awareness; this is what brings Noland and Olitski's work into prominence as the official voice of modernist aesthetics.

I realize that in this account I'm passing over all manner of nuance and inference but, in relation to visualist discursivity, it is the principle that needs to be re-thought. For Fried, "presentness is grace," a mantra (and a claim) enabling me to see a politics of representation that in representing art as aesthetics proposes an improving and revelatory mission. To recap: A modernist sense of aesthetics comprises the following crucial components: 1) Modernism upholds painting as an autonomous practice, to be



distinguished from other legitimate forms of expression, such as sculpture. 2) The limits of painting are linked to its internal conventions, tools, and procedures, which, revealed by artistic creativity, purchase a link with the past as the artwork becomes part of an all-important active tradition. 3) The specific character of painting differentiates it from everyday experience, making the authority of painting the authority of high art. This is the side of modernist criticism that, in its attempt to shape the conditions of the visual field, comes back to the problem of form in traditional philosophy.

Form in traditional philosophy refers not to matter but to "spirit" -- to express form then is to dis-cover the imagination. In my understanding it is this notion that leads modernist criticism to the hypothetical concordance between reproductive processes and ontological purity. In the process, the conceptualization of objects as valuable through the unity of form and matter, reified as "beauty," "uniqueness," or "knowledge," through notions of the "aura" of the aesthetic object, shifts attention away from historical processes of production. Thus the larger semiotic field, which might necessarily restructure modernism's spatio-temporal analysis, is treated in a syntactical and critical manner; becoming the object of philosophical thought and writing: art objects are understood, and through notions of isolation, reification, and specialization, as distinct from the world of experience.

If the artwork is interpreted as the discernible trace or physical manifestation of an "aura" for a foundational enterprise, then it follows that it must come into being between display and hiding. Made invisible is the work of severing and thereby decontextualizing art from its moorings in the experiential world. And it is obscured for the project of a re-ordered modernist discursivity. At another level, there is an "intimate distance" (here I apply Rosemary Betterton's apt phrase to an entirely different context), a truth that, moving through enunciation, exposition, and translation, while attaching to the authentication of a past that must remain impossibly distant and yet hold out the promise of acute sensation in the present simultaneously. The politics of modernism are necessarily indeterminate: abstract, as it restores an idealized relation to the past within the flux of a contingent experience of the present that is destined to remain absent, modernism constitutes a subjectivity whose consciousness will never fully be revealed. Or, that will function to constitute the illusion of mastery. The elusive relations between the solidity of modernist critique as a metaphysics of presence and the idea of an autonomous subject whose consciousness guides him (sic) towards the revelations of a modernist discursivity

bring out the linkage between art and power. I like to think of it as the fiction of a sovereign aesthetic.

In other words, in its drive to make available the experience of the work as a cognitive enterprise, modernism's conception of art constitutes a phenomenon whose own set of questions relative to historically productive processes in real time serves to elide them. For Fried, the analysis of pictorial representation demands an awareness of the necessity of historically specific responses to the material practices and effects of art. By this route he elaborates a theory wherein reference to heritage is made by laying a claim to visual knowledge, so that in the name of what appeals to the eye the terms of painting are made available as the model and not the instrument of representation. It follows that visual works from this point on will submit to the unobstructed clarity of the modernist critic's distancing and objectifying cognitive lens. In this way a modernist visuality accounts for modern art as belonging to a space beyond personal, social, political, and other determinations (Harrison and Wood 1992, 686).

Which is to say that, historically, the most urgent function of modernist critique is to secure a "proper:" for it is within its logic the modernist critic discovers depth and genius, and so the transcendent cultural artifact. Yet the urgent question here is how opticality comes to generate a dialectical, and at the same time philosophical, project in which painting and visuality continually reinscribe one another; tangibly, this part floods a latter-day visualism with significance. It is important in two connections: It implies the conceptualization of an ontological essence substituting for the subject as agent (Krauss 1987). And it obtains the regime of truth required for fending off a potentially contaminating and therefore inherently threatening late capitalist culture. This is the part that begins to lap at the "logic of prohibition" (Kristeva 1982, 64) that, made relative to visualism, begins to constitute its abstractive function. It is also one that hints, in the prospect of the symbolic object, at the problematic of the borderline as something profoundly related to critical authority.

The problem of edges relative to the arbitrariness of the myth of presence mapped onto the everyday is neither self-evident nor unequivocal (see Krauss 1990). But it is adequate to produce a representation of the world as a provisional context for an encounter between painting and reading, and this relative to tensions and intensities that are always destined to be strategic and selective. In a sentence, the inscription of the limit serves a regulative function that denotes the contingent, the quotidian and the popular as belonging to an "outside" of aesthetics. Thus it emerges to discriminate and hence isolate classes of

objects in the culture. "Art and Objecthood," Fried's essay published in 1967, makes this meaning clear. Keep in mind, parenthetically, that even though *Absorption and Theatricality* is published much later, and it covers a different period and style, essentially it works to make modernism viable, it localizes a certain and instrumentalist opticality. I'm isolating it relative to Lukacs's critical glance.

The notion of the limit begins to describe a polarization between the everyday world and fine art that is experienced by Fried relative to minimalist practice as deeply problematic. Writing about a situation in which the arrangement of objects conveys theoretical or ideological ideas, the Fried of "Art and Objecthood" constitutes Minimalism along with Pop art as "theatrical," manifestly because it blurs the line between an the intellectual and the performative sense of "reading" a text. Fried claims that minimalist practice, which is fundamentally about the presentation of materials from the everyday world as a debunking of an inherited modernist visual culture, merits critique first as it articulates a challenge to selective tradition, and second through an inferred commentary on modernism's structural "closure." In other words, it is dangerous because, in perceiving the obvious interconnections between a schematic and absolutist sense of history constituted by authors/tradition, and a larger system of meaning generated by discourse/culture, minimalist art practice frees itself from an arbitrary context of "high" art. In this it would seem to test what modernist visualism proposes; at least this is what Fried points out by referring to it as "literalist."

Francis Francina vividly sums up the aesthetic experience that admits the distinction between "absorption" and "theatricality" as one wherein they are both understood as part of a broader critical response:

[Fried] opposed Modernist painting and sculpture on the one hand, and Minimal Art (or 'Literalist Art') and Pop art on the other. For example, the Modernists Caro, Olitski, David Smith and Noland were set against the Minimalists such as Judd and Morris. Because Minimalism and Pop art entailed the beholder in a 'duration of experience' (including outside associations that threatened the established boundaries of a self-referential 'art'), they were in Fried's terms 'largely ideological', 'theatrical', 'literary,' 'historically specific' and the 'negation of art'. Modernist paintings and sculptures, by contrast, served to 'defeat theatre' because they were 'more explicitly concerned with the conventions that constitute their respective essences'; these are experienced as a kind of 'presentness' or 'instantaneousness' (in Wood, Francina, et alia 1993, 91).

A brief representation of Minimalism would make the point clearer. Typically, minimalist artists used standardized industrial materials -- bricks, plywood, fluorescent light fixtures -- arranging them according to straightforward principles and relationships. These tangible

aspects of the work mean that Minimalism pre-eminently rejected traditional sculptural methods, as industrial fabrication substituted for modelling, welding, or cutting away. In consequence minimalism as a practice is neither "pure" nor "absolute" in the traditional sense: first, its material composition militates against a well-established aesthetic tradition: second, its reductive processes draw attention to the artificial boundaries separating painting from sculpture and other media. Further, Minimalism's apparently matter-of-fact objects demand the viewer should move about in order to apprehend them, which means, in effect, that not only are the processes circumscribing Minimalism's production phenomenologically informed, but so, explicitly, is the beholder's body in the performance of apprehending the object as "text."

For example, Robert Morris's objects defy visual convention in demanding what is known as "parallax" viewing in order to be read. What this means is that its object is not to present an authorial absolute but rather the immediacy of the viewing experience, minimalist practice restructures the beholder's sense of formal wholeness in requiring a different sense of perception. In much of this work, the object in order to be experienced in optical terms requires multiple vantage points to be apprehended. Providing a gloss on this point, Rosalind Krauss, in suggesting that a perceptual encounter between the work and the observer's field of vision articulates the immediacy of the viewing situation in a manner analogous to Merleau-Ponty's sense of phenomenology, states the following:

Minimalism was indeed committed to this notion of "lived" bodily perspective. this idea of a perception that would break with what it saw as the decorporealized and therefore bloodless, algebraicized condition of abstract painting in which a visuality cut loose from the rest of the bodily sensorium and now remade in the model of modernism's drive towards absolute autonomy had become the very picture of an entirely rationalized, instrumentalized, serialized subject (1990, 9).

Basically this makes the work disquieting because, as it influences the space around it, it introduces a sense of temporality. What is at issue, then, is the way theatre defeats or suspends not only its own objecthood, but also the various ways in which the "fictionality" of the display context imposes itself upon the space the viewing subject, and objects, inhabit. This is "theatrical" because, if art objects call on viewers to integrate and connect visual experience with the experience of themselves as subjects, then the "crucial distinction" (Fried's term in "Art and Objecthood," in Harrison and Wood 1992, 827) between the totalizing, universalizing, and timeless processes of aesthetics in the European tradition, and the explicit practices of contemporary art begins to be lost. Which carries the implication that, in involving a thematization of the enactment a somatic

response to artworks frames, the viewer is made aware of meaning "as it happens" rather than "as it merely *is*" (ibid.). Meaning that, for the more restrained determinations of an aesthetics of disinterested contemplation that would ceremoniously enshrine modern art with the spirits of the dead great masters, theoretical notions reinforce the discontinuity between the individual arts and, in Fried's own words, those "conventions that constitute their respective essences" (ibid., 831). To convey the message that he perceives literalist practice as "motivated," Fried documents it as "hollow" and "boring" (p. 831). So for Fried the virtue of "presentness" and "instantaneousness" that as expressed in the work of formalist artists such as David Smith, and Anthony Caro, and that distinguishes their work as "the authentic art of our time," partly through the "dedication, passion, and intelligence of its creators" (p. 832) has to do not only with style but with taste.

In review, it becomes clear that the conflict between the condition of art as social engagement and contingency, and the analytic proposition that art should remain "aloof" from such conditions, is supported by "formalist" criticism. It is continuous with modernism in that it accepts the morphology of traditional art as normative. And it justifies the terms of traditional art by identifying the physical attributes of artworks according to a logical system whose formal and theoretical neutrality it endeavours to make scientific in character. In a sense, then, theatricality arises out of, and is fuelled by, dynamic processes that for a more progressive visualist discursivity are understood as two sides of the same coin. Minimalism produces the understanding that it is not through any intrinsic quality or convention that art should be experienced as a rejection of the tenuous boundary between art and life; rather, it is an arbitrary system that organizes a circuit of exchange as part of a historical process.

In that Minimalism affords the insight that contemporary art would inscribe the corporeal body within the same system of meaning as the intellect, it is significant in two respects. First, Minimalism's "invention" reconfigures aesthetics as textuality, so that objects have the capacity to generate meaning, and meaning is circulated as a mutable product of experience rather than a transcendental category available only to the trained eye. Second, it destroys the invisible continuity between the past and present; in making accessible a living present, Minimalism effectively embodies a thinking subject. Thus it achieves the transformation of a generalized point of view into the precise appearance of a self constituted by historical process. In other words, what modernism proposes as a generalized beholder, the critical perspective disposes as white, male and Eurocentric

(Frascina in Wood et alia 1993, 90). This is enough to challenge Fried's sense of authorial control.

And yet in "Art and Objecthood" he discredits minimalist practice as reflecting questionable aesthetic interests. Minimalism, he argues, presents the "relational character" of a "lapsed tradition" that "stakes everything on shape as the given property of objects, if not, indeed, as an object in its own right" (in Harrison and Wood 1992. 824); his formulation, in other words, is that on the evidence of its breaking down of the isolation of art objects from the world of everyday life, Minimalism advances the disintegration of symbolic expression. Modernism would by contrast treat artworks as idealized aesthetic commodities whose value, in a religious parallel, is to be conceived as spiritual. To quote from the end of "Art and Objecthood:"

... I have wanted to call attention to the utter pervasiveness -- the virtual universality -- of the sensibility or mode of being which I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most of our lives. Presentness is grace (ibid., 832).

### ***Absorbing Absorption***

All this accounts for "absorption." It should be evident by now that the literal or theatrical reveals the absorptive as a grounding center for aesthetic knowledge, and I can add that as a major resource for accurately presenting some of its implications, "Art and Objecthood," shares a significant number of features with *Absorption and Theatricality*. Such that in what follows I will confine my comments to a few short points. *Absorption and Theatricality* is an analysis of the arts of France around the early and mid-1750s; the absorptive style emerges between the Rococo period and Neo-classicism. It is recorded as an object of enquiry in the texts of Denis Diderot, the most significant critic of his age, and connotes the nobility and spiritual excellence as the pursuit of disinterested knowledge and the highest aspiration for art.

Again, absorption is not simply something that happens to the beholder, but is an object in the painting. In a generalized way, it corresponds to the "spiritual" aspects of the philosophy of art, but is circumscribed by the practice of art-making: two phases that, in Fried's optic, precipitate it towards a purely material, logical, and self-rewarding modernist painting practice. And in a still more specific way, it refers to the way visuality is expressed in pictures. On a formal level, it establishes a connection between Rembrandt and Vermeer. Fried is of the view that the absorptive attitude is apprehensible in the work of Caravaggio, Domenichino, Poussin, Le Sueur, Georges de la Tour, Velásquez, and

Zubarán. And, passing through the axis of the eighteenth-century that concerns him as an area of scholarship, the end product is discernible, he argues, not only in David, but later in Géricault, and later yet in pictures by Manet: it seems that nothing can escape the network that makes explicit a qualitative distinction between the space of representation and visibility.

The fact that the absorptive tradition emerges in full force in the work of the eighteenth-century painters Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Carle Van Loo, Joseph Marie Vien, and Jean-Baptiste Greuze is significant. And it is worth remark in that all this corresponds to the period in which the modern concept of "aesthetics" was itself developed. Neatly introducing a hierarchy of values according to a relative, rising scale, the absorptive falls into two broad classificatory areas I think of as the *thematic* and the *diagetic*. *Thematic absorption* denotes acts of attention within the painting that do not acknowledge or take account of the viewers's standpoint (Bal 1991, 29) -- these include also visions of symbolic abandonment (sensual or otherwise) denoted by unconscious/automatic actions (p. 64), and of dishevelled physical states, such as those signified by the pictorial devices of a torn jacket, or an unpinned apron (p. 71). *Diagetic absorption* refers to a quality of attention wherein networks of glances that mesh together within the structure of the composition and seem to bar visual entrance from the outside (ibid.). Fried hypothesizes that it is within representational practice that the painting's relationship with the viewer is generated, but that the preoccupation with self-absorption evident in eighteenth-century images implies at the same time that the beholder must remain outside the conditions of the representation. This is what distinguishes it from "theatre" which, in allowing for the viewer's identification with the characters depicted or the scene described, grounds representation in actuality.

Or, absorption privileges the iconic to conserve the hierarchy of its critique. At the representational level, and in the fullest sense, the absorptive subject engages in totalizing (contextual) activities whose situational indeterminacy Fried is careful to colonize for a description of object relations. So that as the distracting allusions to external narratives or history are expunged so too is the evidence that the subject of representation might be known as anything but an object of seduction.

In the book, a series of images rendering passive occupations such as listening, reading, melancholy, prayer are mustered to the scene of cultural writing as the signifiers of what absorption triumphantly inaugurates: again, a clear-edged frame for adjusting the

artist's thought to the critics's theory; again, the binding of visibility to consciousness in the problematic of a hermeneutic situation that announces the mystification of art practice.

The text poses for me a number of structural questions about desire, and perception. For example, the unitary conception of the self is a device used to explain how representational figures constitute the pious fiction of the autonomous text. If I had to choose one specific example of this from the book I would take Jacques Louis David's rendering of the story of Belisarius (Figure 3.11) entitled, *Bélisare, reconnu par un soldat qui avait servi sous lui au moment qu'une femme lui fait l'aumône* (1781). As I interpret it, Fried's analysis of this image depends on a rhetoric that produces a narrative that for me speaks more about institutions than about producing information on the subject of the object displayed. The history of rhetoric confirms my felt sense that this has something to do with agency. The hortatory character of the image is founded on memory for words (the art of rhetoric) in classical antiquity that in turn makes rules for images in the order of the French Salon (see Yates 1966). Rhetoric has historically been significant to the concept of aesthetics where it connotes the staging of a historical citation. Scholarship suggests that for Alberti at least, rhetoric provided for a balance between connection and distance as equally important parts of the design of "Historia." It constitutes the highest form of art because it is hortatory, dignified, and measured, therefore it is suited to the demonstration of the values of *virtu, onore, nobilita* David seeks to express in his *Belisarius*.... If I think of this in terms of how it relates to the production of meaning, what the image makes apparent is that, evidently, as images are forms so vision connects to truth; perhaps unconsciously, then, Fried echoes the Platonic dictum. "Vision connects us to truth as it distances us from the corporeal."<sup>16</sup> It is the notion of an autonomous self existing outside history and ideology, clarified by what Lukacs's images organize relative to the visibility of an oral and urban postmodern culture, that enables me to speak to the seduction, and political operation, of this representation.

Now, I realize that maybe I should be analyzing the book's content more thoroughly and systematically at this point, perhaps to re-problematize and interrogate visual culture in general, and especially what passes for the canon in terms of theoretical models for studying and writing about art. And critical assessment of Fried's vision and

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontowski, "The Mind's Eye," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983). I am grateful to R.A. Sydie, University of Alberta, for bringing this citation to my attention.





Fig 3.11 Jacques-Louis David, BÉLISARE, RECONNU PAR UN SOLDAT QUI AVAIT SERVI SOUS LUI AU MOMENT QU'UNE FEMME LUI FAIT L'AUMÔNE (1781)

visuality is very near; his vocabulary, concerns, and main thematic might continue to be productively developed to uncover complex and contradictory interrelations that take place relative to consideration of authorship, identity, history; there are, in other words, many levels of nuance. I recognize that absorptive looking, in addition, may intersect with the modernist gaze but cannot be reduced to it. But it seems to me that the most pertinent enquiries would be those that, rather than function instrumentally, would begin to turn the terrain of the scopic upside down. Visual culture does not simply work on one register. What if, rather than examine its operations from the side of reception, or consumption, of the spectacle as epistemic matrix, I approached it through the notion of a politics of performance, from the side of productivity, as Lukacs's work suggests? The rhetoric of display also suggests itself in this connection, and in the climate of an "encounter" opened up by critical enquiry.

Postmodern practice traces the connections between identity politics and representation in a way that draws attention to and potentially disrupts the binary authority of the modernist aesthetic system, offering a multiplicity of reading positions and interpretative possibilities determined according to gender, class, or desire. I have already established this as the grounds of my discussion, and also referenced the counterhistory of mutation, appropriation, and simulacra the formal, descriptive and contextually driven architecture of Lukacs's visualism articulates as a "deforming" practice. Ultimately it is this self-reflective and ironic (also literal and metaphoric) world that in complicated ways precipitates me towards a change, if only momentary and provisionally, in my analytical point of focus. But I should add that modernism admits its potentialities.

What catches my eye, as a result of the mental and visual associations *Absorption and Theatricality* as a publication promotes, is that through the rhetoric of presentation the images in the text create a subtle formal analogy for the rational, coherent system that is Fried's philosophical and interpretative visualist model. And so I lift away from the attempt to create a private universe to creating one of my own. Which means that as a consequence of abstraction meaning can be defined as it seizes on poststructuralist, not modernist, critique. It provokes in me an arbitrary interpretation process and one that offers a parodic reinscription of the way the gaze (and through it images) hold power. A romantic notion, perhaps; but one I justify in the name of extending the compass of visual theory. I want, again, to reconfigure, and to diffuse Fried's absorptive aura from my position as a viewer, and through the filter of visual display, rather than to take it at face value as a historiographic document. For me the focus on display underscores, not at the

level of the image, but at the level of its symptom, that is to say obliquely and not directly, concepts that work to preserve the significant role artificiality plays in the dialectical and interpretative moment of absorption. So that which Fried envisions and presents as what threatens to engulf history, I can use as a tool for defining a limited perspective if I take the view that reciprocity is the condition of my involvement with the image.

What I'm coming to is that Fried's predilection for symbolic images of (visual) rupture, representational states of exhaustiveness, and so on (for example *Une Jeune Fille qui envoie un baiser par la fenêtre, appuyée sur des fleurs, qu'elle brise*; *Une Jeune fille qui a cassé son miroir*; *La Tricoteuse endormie*; *Une Jeune Fille qui pleure son oiseau mort*; *Un Enfant qui s'est endormi sur son livre*, and other works such as *The Card Castle* (Figure 3.12) all deliver an absorbing purity in a way that is not completely accidental. And so together they suggest -- through the encodation of nationalist politics, the idea of value, the hierarchies of exclusion and inclusion the area of modernism has already referred me to -- that the terms this accumulation of images enlarges refer it to the enterprise of collecting, so that the processes of the making of the collection represent pleasure in spiritually comforting images. Fetishes are also the residence of spirits. And as a transformation of the corporeal body into another point of representation they "give integrity," says Susan Stewart, "to "the self and at the same time overload the self with signification" (1993, 163).

Stewart's work *On Longing*(1993) brings collecting sharply into focus as a social process that, in an attempt to create a private universe, involves the collector in a satisfying enterprise of detaching or removing objects from the tensions of their existence in their contextual origins. Completion transforms the consolidated and potentially intimate motion of collecting into the consciousness that the dream of the collector is total control. It is this excess of signification -- articulated by a dialectic between possession and transcendence, existing outside nature, kept in check by a system of classification -- that gives rise to the theory that the collection "saturates the collector" through the exercise of the body in the world (ibid.); it helps me work towards what it is that Fried visually and symbolically charges with meaning in the defining and disassociated context he pieces together as absorption.

All the objects in the "magic circle" *Absorption and Theatricality* produces achieve the important but subdued connection between a trace of experience and use value. And they speak to a related and self-reflexive authorial function that is somehow adequate to thinking representation as an autonomous myth. For what the set of objects the book



Fig.3.12: Clockwise: After Jean-Baptiste Greuze, UNE JEUNE FILLE QUI ENVOIE UN BAISER PAR LA FÊNETRE, APPUYÉE SUR DES FLEURS, QU'ELLE BRISE (1769);

After Jean-Baptiste Greuze, LA TRICOTEUSE ENDORMIE (1759);

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon-Chardin, THE CARD CASTLE (c.1737);

Jean-Baptiste Greuze, UNE JEUNE FILLE QUI PLEURE SON OISEAU MORT (1765).

displays, orders, and classifies, constructs is a cultural sign. And in this it begins to elicit a taxonomy of paradigmatic preoccupations which, marked as fetishistic derealization, would subject them to analysis as souvenirs of a fascination with the forbidden. So: On the surface the images typify a zone of exclusivity creating a miniature collection for a reified past. On the level of collecting these portraits serve as reminder that the object of knowledge for the collector is always the self. A narrative of interiority obliterates origin. And a history of relations ultimately determines the interior of the self. These factors, determined by the boundaries of the book all serve my sense that particularities of memory, together with the singularity of detail the images evince, function symbolically in the images affording desire (Stewart 1993; Baudrillard 1994). Which makes things particularly interesting with respect to Fried's visualism. Indeed, as it turns out if I filter "authentic/absorptive" experience through the domain of that which admits voyeurism as transcendent and distanced in the language of modernist opticality, it becomes clear that the power of the display is to reveal a concealed truth. In Fried's case it is about the sum of intensities relative to a positive sense of idealism: What the purity of the image discloses as an aid to philosophical thought is the incantory power of "things." And this by means of a piling up of fragments. Hence what it delivers to my vision is a revelatory tension in the separation of art from life. Put another way, the devaluation of commodities in Fried's analysis constructs the fetishism of commodity value. It is revealed in cycles of incorporation and rejection that I can connect to several contemporary modalities of critique (psychoanalysis, cultural studies, for example) on semantic grounds. And so it raises questions about critical and social responsibility in the link to history.

### ***The Ends of Painting***

The argument that modernism constructs a culture of differentiated spaces isn't new. Douglas Crimp in "The End of Painting," relates it to the photographic activity of postmodernism. What are at issue are the norms of public contact in public spaces such as art galleries. He writes, "The end of painting comes about in the idea that art as autonomous is separate from everything else" (in 1993, 98). Thus in their potential to mobilize visual expression objects gather social and cultural force. This is what brings them into what we constitute as postmodernity. The popular creates a new order of relations between vision and space.

The work I think of in this connection is Lukacs's *The Tea House*, which resembles a public urinal (Figure 3.13). Made for the exhibition *Documenta X*, held in

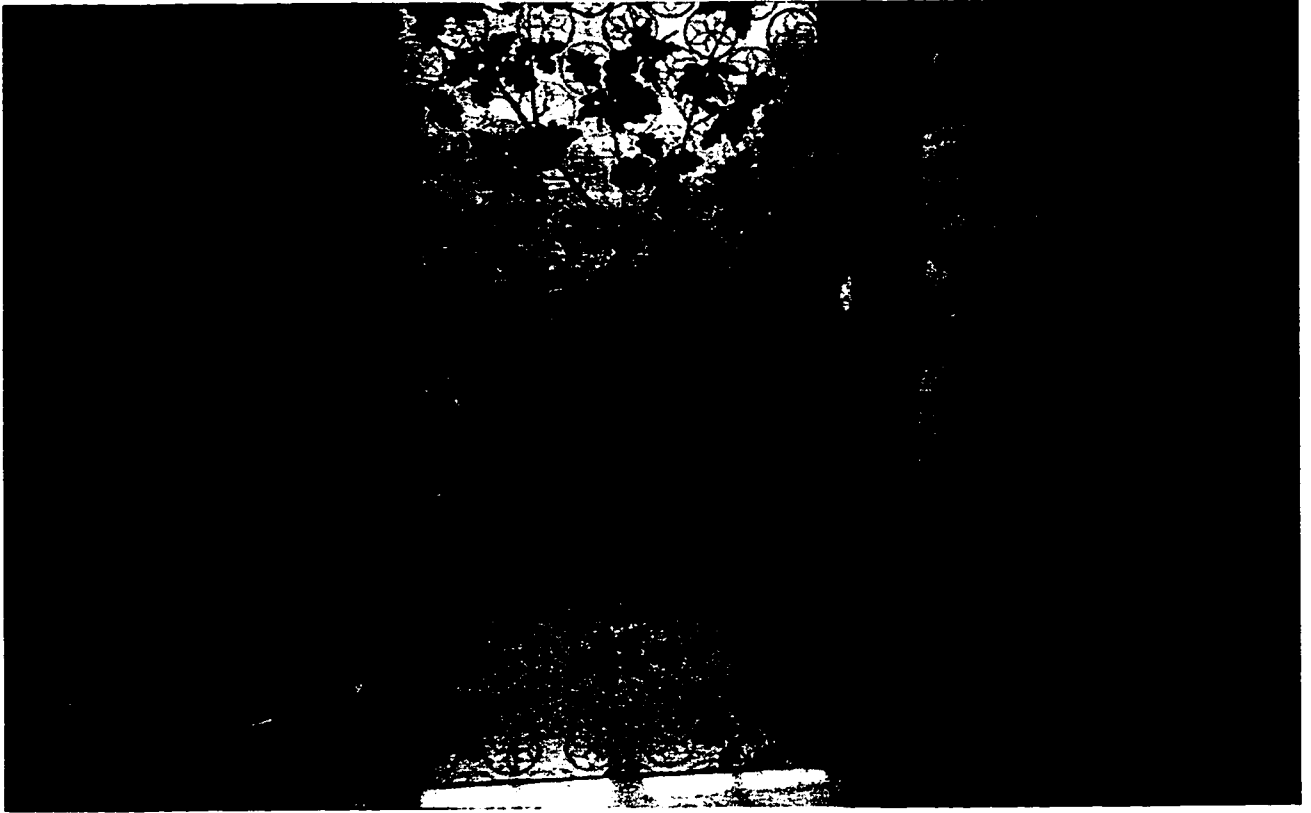
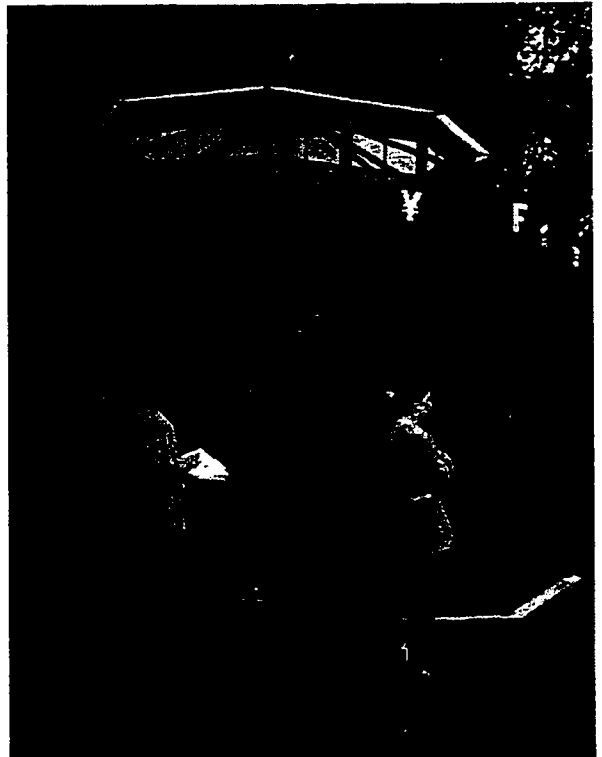


Fig.3.13. Attila Richard Lukacs  
THE TEA HOUSE (1990)



Kassel in 1990, it draws on the norms of public contact in public spaces such as parks, approaching cultural discourse through the potentialities of a cycle of exchange. In this way the installation catches on a territory of fluctuating significations recreated by a materiality that comes to be defined in the tension between aesthetics and popular culture. The interior alludes to the icons of western culture, prominently to the painter Hans Baldung Grien, thus referring back to aesthetic tradition in its association with the "old masters." But the *mise-en-scène* undercuts it, constitutes a prohibition. As a frame, it sets up a separation of the pure from the rough and the vulgar. Or, more precisely, Lukacs suggests that element of aesthetics in this representation has been absorbed into a terrain of ambivalence that is both seductive and potentially threatening. Which is to say that Lukacs's practice affords a glimpse into what comes to be apprehended, through the conceptualization of the queering glance relative to the absorptive gaze, as that which not only expresses a relation to materiality as an "outside" -- the unauthentic -- but also to something else.

On one level, it impresses not with the authority of visual tradition but in the differentiation between authority and its defilement. In this it engages an emerging representative tradition having to do with scatology. Works exploring primary processes such as bodily functions, and especially the physical need to excrete, emphasize the instinctual and, because they focus on basic instincts, are considered polluted or taboo among many in the culture. The linkage is with those practices using bodily fluids and waste products to generate contemporary art. Such as Andres Serrano, or Robert Gober, or Kiki Smith, or Linda Montano.

Representations that flaunt the critical and constructive potential of scatological references are perceived as generating a crisis reflected in emotional responses to this type of visual and performative art on the part of critics. Most obviously, they open up the possibilities of exploring the contradictory and liminal zones standards of taste and decorum afford. For Lukacs, the viscerally disturbing formulates a specific set of social, cultural and psychic relations set in motion by the opposition between the transcendent symbol and its fragmentary incorporation into a setting to which the operations of mass and consumer culture have given form. It is, after all, the commodified and technologized structures and materials of capitalist industry that (at least in part) form the hybrid culture that is queer, and its cultural identity in many respects develops from the kind of represented event Lukacs's dramatizes: the attempt on the part of "mainstream" culture to

negotiate the complexities of cultural prejudice by obscuring or occluding the other. Hence the irony of the "out" house.

In this it should be clear from what I said earlier that the question of marginalization in its relation to an imagined center is never negotiated by queer culture as an experience of transference, that is to say an immediate or transparent substitute reality, but always as a recycling of a "reality effect." This could be represented relative to the spatial and temporal relations *The Tea House* constitutes as a confounding of representation that is being used to pry at what it means to be simultaneously absorbed and driven out of language. And it is, of course, the fluidity of reading positions the physical texture of the artefact determines that also constitutes the "fast forward" or "freeze-frame" representational premise of a queer visuality. The necessary negotiation of and between multiple and culturally diverse viewpoints in turn dramatizes my experience with images, which implicates me as a spectator, whether I am still before them, as before paintings or moving relative to them, like the women in the picture do around *The Tea House*. For, the undoing of categories at another level engages historical processes of production which come into view not as the terrain of the "proper" but rather as they register a value within a sense of contemporaneousness.

Thus, in taking up a level of autobiography the artist confronts his self-image, not just with the bravado of a decorative and extravagant statement diagramming the decline of modernism as a punctual beat but with the symbolized value of representation as just another novelty in the catalogue of consumer goods. Which not only implies that powerful discriminations constitute a "system of objects" (Baudrillard 1994), but also that, in structuring an environment, images reflect their historical, political, and ideological conditions of production. Overall, then, the fluctuating meanings the novelty of the present symbolizes as expendable, relative to a subject with "insider" knowledge of an explicitly negotiated and sexed sociality, and laminated onto a network of relations shaped by the thematic of the popular culture, as well as situated on the institutional axis of the official exhibitionary space, culminates in a rhetoric of display that foregrounds the object's power to fixate.

Not that *The Tea House* is the sum of Lukacs's production practice. But, and I would insist on this point, as an exemplary object it is indicative of foundational assumptions that would embody a theoretical "revenge" perpetrated on high modernism. It is not by chance that the artist cannibalizes the principles of kitsch for the end of painting. Matei Calinescu (1987) defines kitsch as that which, being based on imitation and copy,



defines a forbidden area of the avant-garde. It is for this reason (its fakeness, its artificiality) that it was found to be unacceptable by modernist criticism. As well, kitsch is characterized by the recycling of ideas, a rejoicing in surfaces; this is what differentiates it from a previous belief in authenticity, originality, and symbolic depth.

Kitsch as a discursive practice functions, then, at many levels. It becomes for me the symptom of how modernism is finally integrated into the features of postmodern visualism. In many respects the desire for kitsch, especially in its relation to contemporary urban culture is problematic, but the visual saturation it affords is widely understood (Olalquiaga 1992). For example, there is Stewart's citation of it as "an ironic display of overmateriality" that "marks the complete disintegration of materiality" wherein in kitsch's interiority "bursts its bounds and presents a pure surface of the outside" (1993, 169). And as a consequence, because it is visually seductive, kitsch touches on an expanded sense of reality: countering notions of it as decorative, or supplementary, in the nineties it constitutes a new way of seeing, an antidote to the "regime of truth." Another way of saying this is that currently it is no longer felt as artificial or secondhand relative to a "sensitivity or mode of being in the present" (Fried, "Art and Objecthood") but rather as an independent, sensible, dimension of the real; this is what facilitates its valorization in postmodern representation. In short, theoretically, as well as practically, everything is to be gained by kitsch, because its intelligence is bound up with aestheticization, discursive rationalization, and with reception.

The term, incidentally, comes from the German *kitschen* signifying "put together sloppily" (Stewart, *ibid.*). It is the impurity of the compound that leaves us with a self-referentiality that is self-consciously about the loss of innocence. Thus located, the sense of a jettisoned object brings me back to the problem of the framing of perception and the framing of consciousness holding Fried and Lukacs's respective visualism's in association, but especially tension.

### *Summing Up*

I would advance that, as the concept of aesthetics is an integral feature of Lukacs's critical visualist practice, so modernism is in some way always integrated into the newer discourses of visual culture. Sometimes, modernism serves as an explanation for contradictions in the scopic field. Thus it works for Fried's absorptive model. But more often, it serves as a theoretical justification for more audacious claims. In this chapter, first, pure opticality facilitates the materialization of the transcendence of the spiritual in

modernity, documenting a period's knowledge and taste. For modernist critique, it has to do with preservation, objectification, and finally revival in the modalities of "absorption." I have argued that Fried's "absorption" preserves formalist high modernism as a progressivist taxonomy culminating in the achievements of an impressively displayed past. Accordingly it would not be exaggerated to say: Scratch the surface of the rhetoric of progress it imposes and you expose the imperial display of power of a sovereign gaze. Or, substitute the display context (the regional negotiation, a local narrative) and you come up with the same ideological foundationalism. Derrida puts this very well in another context when he states that: "The fact remains that here [aesthetics] art is studied from the point of view of its end. It's pastness is its truth" (1987, 26).

The aesthetic moves into the foreground the conditions of the work of art as autonomous, and self-determining which as visualism shapes the form into a harmonious binding of the artist's appetites and inclinations with the gratifying compulsion of the connoisseur/critic's self-identity. And more, when Fried writes that "presentness is grace" he references visualism with the limited gaze of one whose presence as a witness before the transcendental object not only possesses the capacity to authenticate power but also from the position of "father knows best." Symbolic law, and semiotic authority are collapsed at this juncture. And because the implied ideal of scopic reciprocity (the co-presence of the subject and the object of representation) provides an uninterrupted view, from the vantage point of postmodernity it emerges as abstract, totalizing -- and more, it interpellates a reading subject whose own consciousness leads "inevitably" to a dominant aesthetic order. Fried's visualism admits this. And not only that, the argument goes, but the aesthetic would serve philosophically and practically as an instrument by which the subject's consciousness might be elevated. So one may ask at this point: What relevance has a theoretical and intellectual high modernity for a postmodern critique of representation?

If it is true that high modernism and its reconfiguration in the principle of the absorptive gaze can be regarded as eternal and untouchable, then it is also true that without pure opticality there would no "disorderly," "contaminating," postmodern visualist discursivity. In my understanding, Lukacs's visualism is a response if not directly to modernism as an institution, then at least theoretically to its exclusion of all those elements that, from its strict representational premises, signify misrule. And in this it will work to overtake, metaphorically speaking, the fullnesses (as well as the deficiencies) of structuralist relations. And so it will take up modernism as a representational premise. It

will work especially with the way modernism sets up the illusion of a disembodied eye, and develop (with flourish) its own peculiar, fragmented sense of embodiment, of time and space. So that, moving from the distance of ideal reflection to the critique of culture, with regards to visualism Lukacs's perspective obtains the gradual twisting of aesthetics away from its moorings in the realm of the senses. Which means, very specifically, that the faculty modernist critique favours as superior to explain the finalization of meaning will be rendered in a post-referential age as one more device to provoke defamiliarization.

A poststructuralist visualism is one that resolves to strategically confront and displace a dominant gaze. In Lukacs's it is one that achieves its "effects" via an affirmative identity politics; where the body and sexuality expose the "constructedness" of a mediated representation, then, a transparent representation of "pure," disembodied opticality must be rethought.

Hence, while it is true that the degree to which Lukacs plays into the notion of the "death of the Author" remains an open question, since at least to some extent he profits from the economy his form of painting is associated with in the market place (namely, "virile" success), it is also true that by desublimating the body Lukacs relays an important feature of postmodern painting that is relevant to visualism. And it is that, from a critical perspective, the work articulates a broader situational context. Thus, where the absorptive ideal would render the artwork visible as a presence estranged from historical production processes, contrastingly, Lukacs's practice makes it clear that production practice is inescapably tied to its context. And on many levels -- for instance, the language of a contested paradigm of medium-specificity, the contextualizing textualities and sexualities of a queer "alien/nation," and the cannibalization of "ready-made" culture. In this it gains a sense of itself as coded. So too with visualism. And twice so, as its discourses in this picture emerge as self-reflexively fictional, and self-consciously reflexive; the perceptual and cognitive model visualism affords is therefore one that presents intervention as a condition of possibility.

## Chapter 4

### The Textured Wor(l)d: Houle/Alpers

"For we cannot reinvent vision; it was already there before us."<sup>1</sup>  
Mieke Bal 1996

This section is concerned with knowledge production within the ocularcentric discursivity that I am reading through and around. Fried articulated in his linkage with Lukacs has produced the necessary sense of visualism as a precondition of mediated representation. While at a basic level "history" raises pertinent questions for contemporary critique, art practice emerges in the context of a postmodern critical structure as a fresh destination for theory: it is committed to the cultural necessity of "thinking" the institutions and publics that generate critical discourse within the range of issues questions of representation and politics touch. Even so, the task of cultural criticism needs to be extended if it is to continue to address the problems of formulating a new response to image and text. As far as I'm concerned, to say that cultural criticism can be endlessly refracted and revalued is to suggest that if visualism is to be properly understood, its analysis must be seen not only to dispute the ideological grounds of cultural, political and artistic representation in theory and visual culture, but to speak to its contradictions and complexities as well. Only then will it be a truly polyvocal discursive fabrication capable of redirection rather than the static and dialogical representation it tends towards now.

Visualism, like other knowledge systems has to do with a history of exclusions that always hold the philosophical and the ideological in tension. What this comes down to is a history of exclusions, and a set of historical, cultural, social problems that go with defining its terms. The practice of Manitoba Salteaux multi-media artist Robert Houle becomes meaningful in this connection. Within the terms of a discussion of a visualist discursivity that is seen as making inroads on the projects and conventions of a dominant European tradition of art history, his work forcefully shows itself in the context of vexing questions of textual politics as the grounds of the reterritorialization of the social field. In its

<sup>1</sup> *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 287.

articulation with the record of a visualism invested in notions of culture and community explicated by Svetlana Alpers's text *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Houle helps designate a fruitful area of modifications to the visualist gaze. Even without the knowledge of Houle's historical, cultural and ideological legacy as a North American Indian the beginning of a more broadly defined critical approach to aesthetics and representation would have to be registered as a paradigmatic presence in his work that functions in such a way as to suggest that, at an analytical level, it is pertinent and necessary to produce a new methodology for explaining visual culture. Or, at least, to resituate it for the Canadian context.

This chapter will provide two different histories of material culture and attempt to account for them in their specificity and interrelatedness as they stand relative to artistic culture in general and, specifically, the problem of vision and visibility. I want to begin by recognizing a sense of their critical difference. In what will seem like a turn towards the descriptive, and the tangible, as opposed to the conceptual, in what could be termed a theoretical discourse, at this juncture I want to fold over the structure of my text so as to take account of art objects before the precision of words. This obeys two imperatives. First, and most importantly, it relates directly to the commonsense notion that in postmodernity language invades the domain of the object; in this respect it acts as a counter. Second, and most personally, the articulation of artistic practice to theory attains the value of an act of subversion within my own narrative structure. A fluid and reversible text, then, for the fluid and reversible components of a debate between late twentieth-century art and a discourse that at places appears to lend it the weight of academic intelligibility and at others would appear to add up to no such. Reality, of course, lies somewhere in-between. This idea will be clarified by looking directly at Houle's production practice.

### ***Description and Exploration: The Art of Robert Houle***

As you stand in the entrance to Houle's installation piece *Hochelaga* (Figure 4.1-4), you can see a circle of sweetgrass, and smell its distinct aroma permeating the room. It seems like a small detail, but it's not. In the native perspective, sweetgrass (with sage, cedar and other fragrant grasses) convey cultural and spiritual information about the power of religious ritual, and with it societal and community reality. For me it implies the insufficiency of just looking from the dominant, provincial, and linear western perspective at critical questions pertaining to history, memory, culture, language, art and identity.

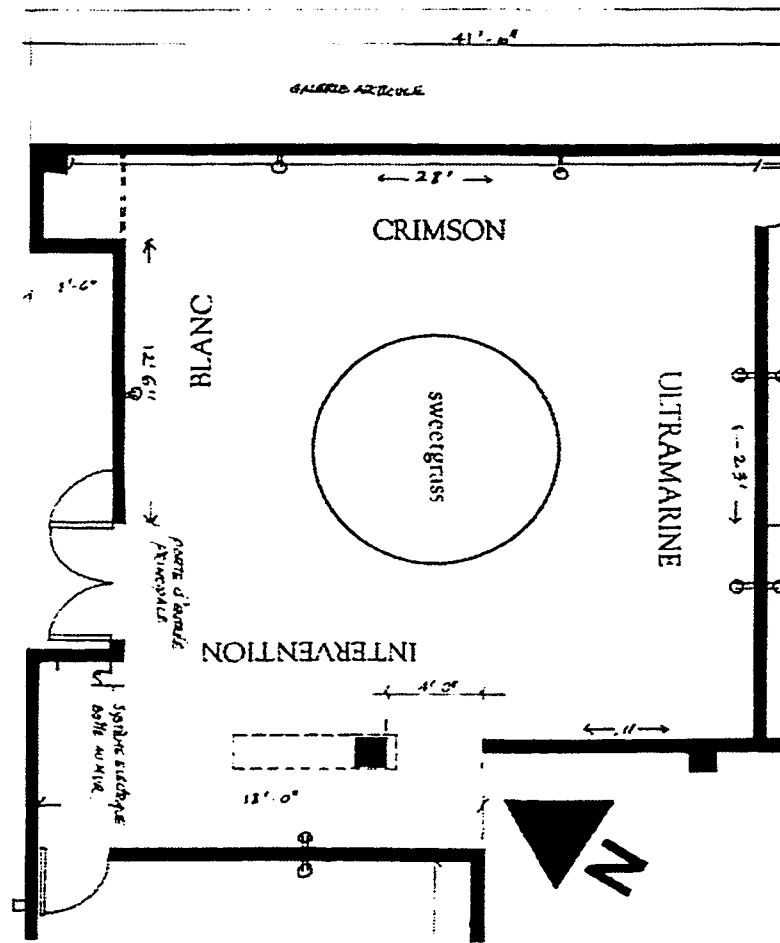


Fig.4.1 Robert Houle, HOCHELAGA: PLAN (1992)

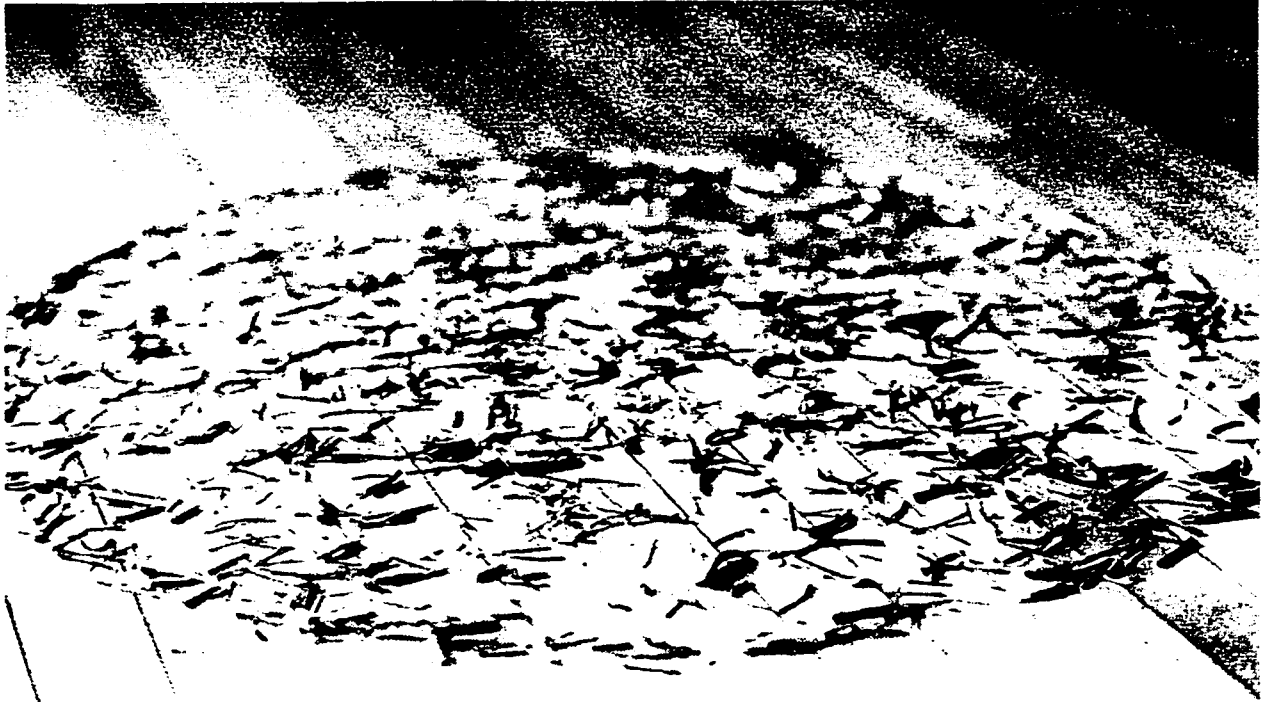


Fig.4.2 Robert Houle, HOCHELAGA: CIRCLE OF SWEETGRASS (detail)

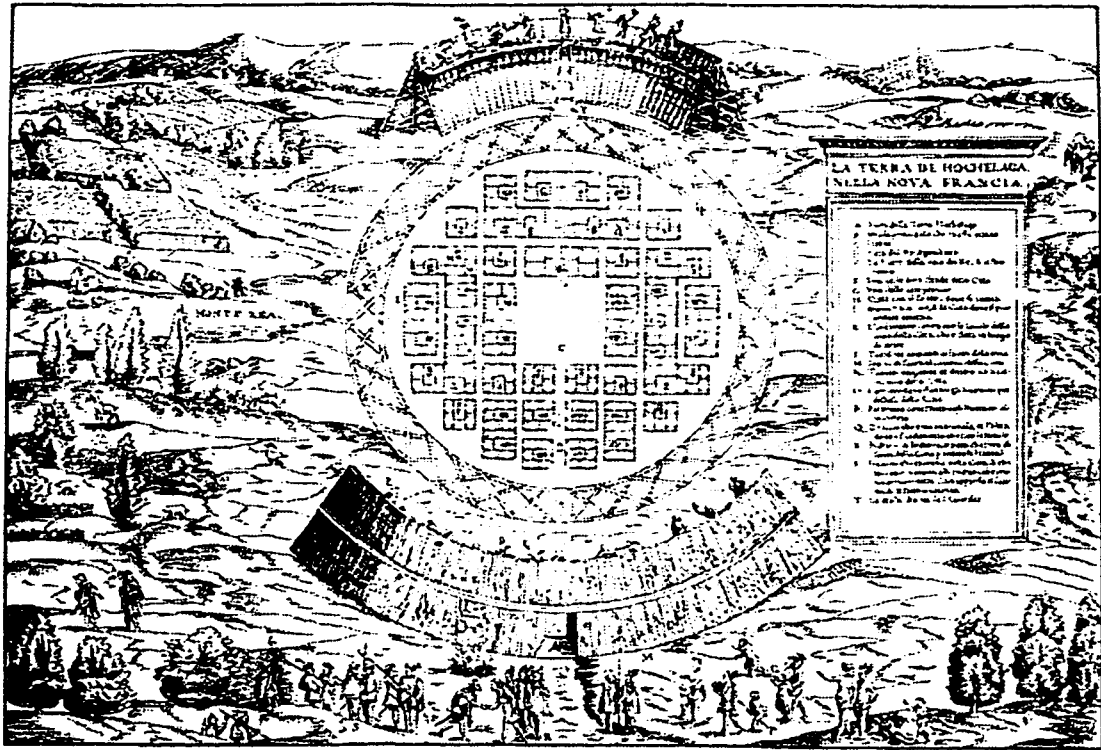


Fig.4.3 Robert Houle, HOCHELAGA: HOCHELAGA



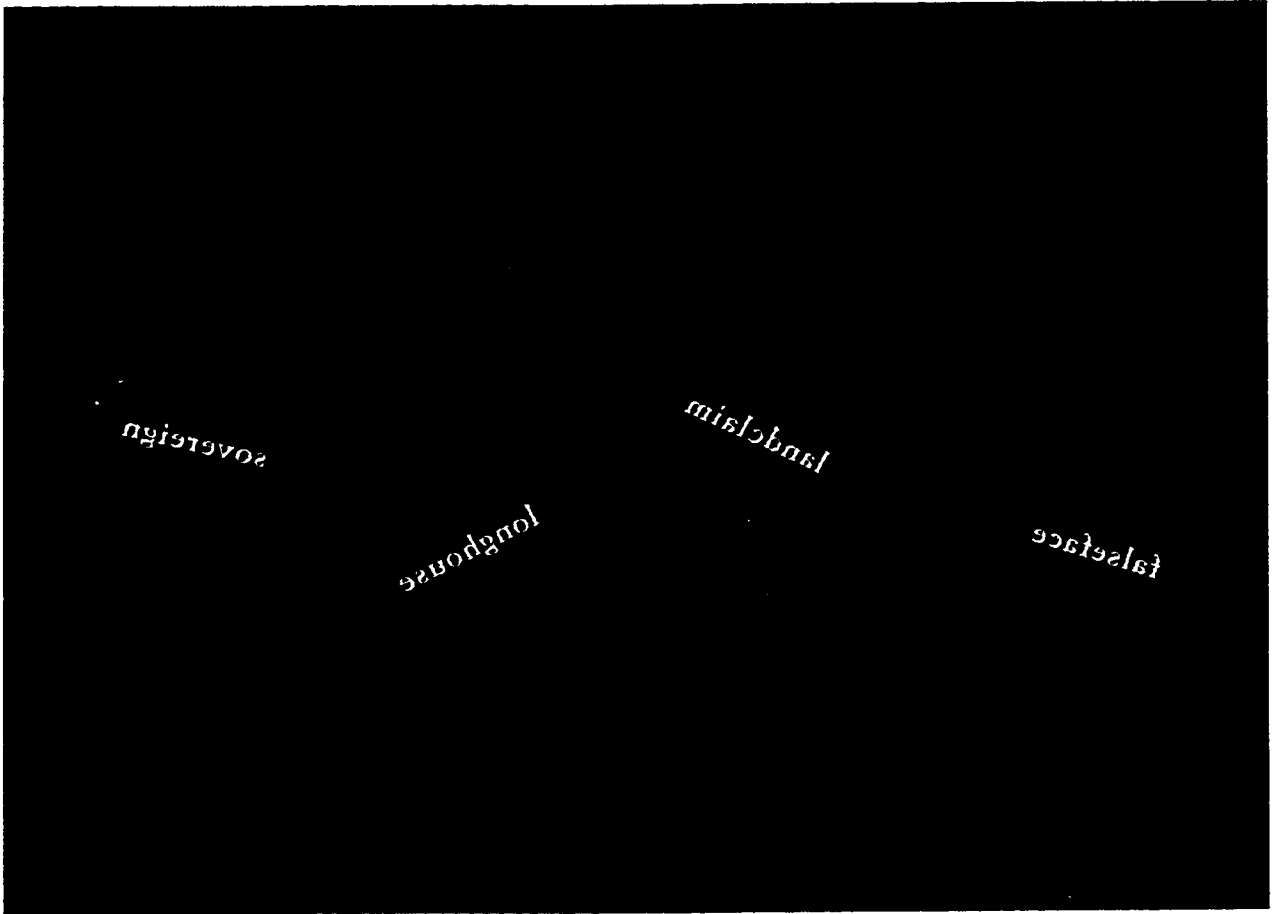


Fig.4.4 Robert Houle, HOCHELAGA: MOHAWK SUMMER 1990

Consider the elements of the work: an engraved map of the geographical area known as "Hochelaga," a circle of sweetgrass, references to painting as an imitative expression of meaning ... *Hochelaga* renders series of aesthetic and representational elements that might be read as they define a totality or as fragments of a larger whole. The titular piece, *Hochelaga*, shows a map of an ancient Iroquois village overlaid with the names of three living Mohawk communities arranged in a cruciform shape. The map is a transcription of Giovanni Ramusio's 1563 plan of Hochelaga, based on an account of his encounter with the Iroquois inhabiting Montréal roughly one hundred years after the "discovery" of the Americas. The rest of the installation consists of other images and texts exploring collective notions of historical memory and social displacement, these ideas are investigated especially in terms of references to indigenous peoples whose history includes persecution by colonial occupational forces and the erasure of aboriginal memory from "official" culture. Facing *Hochelaga*, the part of the installation titled *Mohawk Summer 1990* implies that this past is subject to the logic of time. On a wall of ultramarine blue appear the words "sovereign," "longhouse" "landclaim" and "falseface." A level of meaning is communicated in the principle of assertiveness and non-cooperation signified by the subtle and self-referential device of textual reversal. The words are isolated to be studied as visual, ideological, cultural or cognitive forms, they appear as if they were seen through a glass: one thinks of them, then, relative to the regime of the scopic, as if they were a screen of signs establishing a specific set of pre-determined personal and political conditions governing the relations between subjects. In inviting the spectator to engage in a strategy of what might be termed dialectical negation, this part of the work speaks to the problem of cultural agency in the larger structure of history. The same process is operative in the experience of the whole installation which Houle himself has qualified as "an appropriation of previous violent eruptions in the linear unfolding of events, redeeming a past dominated by exploitation and oppression" (Houle in Collins 1992, n.p.). As the installation unfolds it becomes clearer that Houle is exploring a sense of how aboriginal experience has been nullified by the disrespect towards the traditions and values of the "other" in Canada and within the majority of society. In this perspective, the ethics and values of the colonial process adhere to a cultural critique. And its meaning shifts accordingly. The political material of *Mohawk Summer 1990* signifies also the oppositional position of the Indians and dominant society during a disturbing episode in recent Canadian and Quebec history, the events of the Oka crisis. What touches me now is

how the idea of native self-determination is imparted through received wisdom of a mainstream visual tradition.

Guido Molinari comes to mind in connection with a space transformed by the plastic qualities of large vibratory areas of colour. *Visual Premises for Self-Government*, another segment, activates white plastic numbers by setting them on a crimson field. The dates -- 1763, 1867, 1876, and 1982 -- make reference to the construction of historical events by the practice of appropriating Native territory to a situation of exploitation initially prompted by European exploration and travel. The first date corresponds to historically significant piece of legislation which, taken with others, represents the constitutional basis upon which First Nations's peoples are currently negotiating self-government. As stated in the catalogue:

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 (MDCCLXIII), by King George III of Great Britain, declared that: "And whereas it is just and reasonable, and essential to our Interest, and the Security of our Colonies, that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with Whom we are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of Our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded or purchased by Us are reserved to them, or any of the, as their Hunting Grounds." It was this piece of legislation which established the concept of aboriginal liberties, that was adopted by the Canadian government in the British North America Act of 1867 (MDCCCLXXXII), the Indian Act of 1876 (MDCCCCLXXXVI), and the Constitution Act of 1982 (MCMLXXXII) (Collins 1992, n.p.).

How might this knowledge qualify the differences between cultures that go to social, economic, political, and ideological representational practices? The last section of the site-specific work answers this question rendering the historical record of North American Indian tribes now extinct. Positioned so as to intrude in the gallery space, an architectural column bears the following list of the tribal names: Beothuk, Mohican, Natchez, Neutral, Timucua, Tobacco and Yamasee. One way to account for it is to read it as signifying the termination of a race as the cause for rethinking how the preoccupations of European practices of appropriation and exploitation impacted directly on the physical and social environment of non-Europeans. Quite emphatically for the visitor, then, what the exhibition admits is a new logic of discovery described in the operations and effects of a series of highlighted theoretical parameters negotiated in tension with visual and spectatorial practices of space. In other words, a series of core issues are foregrounded together with the healing properties of medicinal plants.

*Hochelaga* provides for a tentative exploration on the part of the beholder -- and especially if she or he is assumed to be non-aboriginal -- of what becomes through the

work recognizable as the articulation of a critical vocabulary within the description of wider artistic and cultural debates. Take the visual components of the piece, for instance; they provide the sense of a rewriting of aesthetics from a native perspective. *Visual Premises of Self-Government*, in particular, recalls Piet Mondrian's designs in which the artist balanced areas of pure pigment on a rectilinear grid (Collins 1992, n.p.). Bound up with the conditions of production that Houle argues cogently for in *Hochelaga*, this "reported" figure culled from modernism's discourses as a preexisting category of representations now explicitly works against them, appropriated for a more pointed act of cultural intervention. Committed to both providing access to native tradition and contemporary artistic issues and debates, Houle makes clear the aesthetic techniques and plastic qualities of western tradition can be made to emphasize the unequal power relations between two social groups by means of a reverse discourse of cultural appropriation. It all goes to drawing attention to deconstruction as an important feature of the artist's work.

The aspect of taking control over and celebrating a sense of native history and identity using fixed representations of native culture and the parodic re-appropriation has been a politically efficacious tool by which artists, including Houle, have questioned mainstream representations of themselves and their culture. Like his previous installation titled *All the Good Indians I Ever Saw Were Dead* (1985), *Kanata* shows Houle framing the referential, pictorial, and material object in the language of the social. Irony and paradox link the failure of language to the forms of postmodern representation, establishing a confrontation between the historiographical metafiction of mainstream culture, and the social and political realities that are introduced as its "outside" via an entity that explicitly works against existing categories of representation as an exemplary subject position. This narrative of the "knowing subject" (essentially in the native situation the description of a subject who responds to the world by filtering the suppositions of "experts" through lived, historical experience [see McMaster and Martin 1992, 11-23]) is ultimately bound as a political instrument to a convention that emerges in the indigenous situation out of an insistence that discourse as a (pre)condition of representation is inadequate to explain the complexities of the aboriginal moment in the culture. Consider for instance, Ron Noganosh's 1989 self-portrait *I Couldn't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit*, and Gerald McMaster's use of fictional narratives, and the painted blankets of Bob Boyer (for example, *Trains-N-Boats-N-Plains: The Nina, the Santa Maria, and a Pinto* 1991), or Carl Beam's *Burying the Ruler* 1991, shown in the exhibition *Indigena* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The role and importance of language as a creative

and conceptual tool in Houle's work within the projects of an artist who is a teacher at the Ontario College of Art, and has worked as a co-curator of the exhibition *Land Spirit Power* (National Gallery of Canada), and practiced as a curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization over a period of years, raises significant questions about recurring patterns of omission, exclusion, suppression and/or sublimation in the symbolic and under the name of the dominant culture that confirm prevailing standards and need to be addressed. They suggest too that *Hochelaga* is a sociopolitical operation evolving around notions of difference, crude misrepresentation, and varying modalities of social commitment. As I said before, these adhere to the installation according to specific textual, visual and representational traditions. Houle's installation establishes the conditions of a spatial logic that gives rise to doubts about the myth of two founding cultural extremities in the "common culture" while at the same time making it clear that vision expresses diffuse cultural biases in the form of the particular social, political and ideological values it exposes and conserves. As it explores and stimulates different approaches to issues made effective by the relationship between cultural, ideological, and political interests, and the order of the museal qualifying a paradigmatic and selective tradition that I think it is important for vision and visibility to consider, Houle's practice comes to my attention as a genre of criticism. As such it begins to illuminate and clarify the more literary discourse of Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*.

### ***"Reading" the Visible: Describing Svetlana Alpers***

The part of Alpers's socio-cultural theory I find useful to think about in the context of visualism's discursivity is that which contributes a materialist understanding to the development of art history. To a significant degree, the theoretical and methodological critiques and debates of social art history represent a new form of recognizing the ontological and epistemological stakes of ocularcentrism. In general terms, seeing art as a social practice means theorizing artistic activity as cultural production. As a condition for visualism's emergence this means socio-cultural theory's main job is to scrutinize the various levels of activity (economic, political, social, aesthetic) with which questions of the visible might be entangled. Beyond the analysis of the discrete and sometimes enmeshed cultural procedures, practices and conventions in both the public and the private sphere that visibility and invisibility are assigned by socio-cultural theory, at another level it resists simple formulations and authoritative statements that insist upon setting up a hierarchy among forms of historical practice. What Alpers's book works to confound is

the authoritative art historical account of artistic tradition that, in taking the Italian Renaissance as a matrix, has formulated a totalizing view of visual culture. Relative to an Albertian tradition of visual space in painting, the sense of a passive recording of the material world in Dutch representation suggest for Alpers the construction of a dominant tradition.

The entire sense of Netherlandish art in the best-known art historical accounts is that this can only contribute illusions of people and things as if they were identical with nature. Hence, the practices and texts of socio-cultural theory point to a canon whose concern is the history of style and whose object of investigation is the individual author whose work is seen to circulate free of any ideological ties or historical context. Accordingly, and recognizing the role of taste as it functions to differentiate and sustain a sense of straightforward logic that emerges in art history to make classical determinations about bodies of objects and fields of investigation, Alpers's text begins to break apart the view that the ground of Dutch representation is empirical (a view traditionally held by art historians such as Panofsky, Gombrich, and Riegl to dismiss northern representation) in putting forward the argument that the aim of Dutch representation is to place a figure in space by the device of detailing the surfaces of objects. It is essential to understand how this is made available through the southern ideal of projective space in painting.

According to commentators such as those referred to above, Italian Renaissance art is to be granted a level of significance because it is essentially detached (distanced) from objects. The architecture upon which aesthetic view is constructed is perspective theory. In reifying the object as separate from the viewer, perspective teaches a justification of unity that is theoretically essential to the idea of identification. By contrast, the flood of detail caught on the surface of the artwork in northern art from van Eyck to Vermeer crucially suggest that Netherlandish artists lucidly document a sense in which, as Alpers puts it, "the maker is absorbed into the work and measured, as it were, by myriad objects of the world among which he is seen as a tiny part" (1987, 110). It is not, then, as has been proposed by mainstream writers, that northern art lacks measure, the condition of perspective representation, but that the privilege of what Martin Jay terms "deep focus over surface texture" (1993, 61), has cast aside the potentialities of thinking viewers as ambulatory presences within the visual field. The ubiquity of Alpers's practice affords an implicit threat to art history's insularity that is also worth attention.

Against a notion of the artist as the originator of unique artifacts portrayed as having a non-participatory relationship to the world in the handbooks of art history, the

critiques and debates of social art historians will explain art practice as a cultural complex in which objects play a part. Socio-cultural theory attempts to take account of a specific set of differences and expectations surrounding questions of cultural production by defining a context for art. It speaks to the problem of visual experience in culture by defining a particular identity for the object as it at the same time attempts to analyze the conditions under which meanings are produced in relative to relations outside the visual field. For example, when Alpers writes that, regarding "the description of Holland and Dutch life" in contrast to "an Albertian definition of the picture" (p. xix), such a statement indexes that Dutch painting practices took place within a complicated series of social and cultural formations and identities emergent in seventeenth-century Holland. Now what Alpers focalizes are not only the ways and means by which Dutch art reveals itself, but the larger implications of particular art historical claims to the supremacy of southern expression over its northern counterpart as well. In this figure, Dutch art becomes a matter of representations and myths.

Authors such as Alpers help to explicate the question of ideology as it destabilizes the assumed centrality of the bourgeois aesthetic text that for the art historical canon functions as a condition of possibility. By contrast, social art history establishes new centers of conceptual and theoretical interest. The important insight, then, is that art is fundamentally political. As far as social history writers are concerned, the present, metered in the form of what amounts to a denial of history, constitutes the past in its own features. This is what prevents traditional art history from being the subject of its own gaze. Alpers is preoccupied with a critique of power that also concerns other scholars in the field.

The tradition of a social art history that is inescapably entangled with social institutions such as aesthetics includes Arnold Hauser as a well-known marxian theorist whose engagement has been with convention-breaking. Hauser developed social art history by responding to the canon with a critique of the contingency of values and judgements involved in art history as an institution. His main task was to provide the discipline with a critical survey of the history of art produced in the light of a Marxist theory of ideology. Participating with others engaged in destabilizing art history's deep-seated discursive tradition of connoisseurship and style, he took up the object as inherently referencing, by means of tacit and explicit codes, a dialectical relationship between form, and important social and cultural factors. As Hauser envisioned ideology's imbrication with the artwork and the mind-set of any given time, he developed and

communicated a methodology that recuperated the formal aspects of representation from the naturalization of stable contextual conventions. According to Hauser, in the best of cases, art interpretation would evolve for the model reader out of the complex articulation of ideology, history and language on the premise that artist's personal ideology meets the ideology of the consuming public in at the site of the object of consumption. Stated another way, social history opens up a way of understanding how significant subjects function through a continually fluctuating reading of how society, and culture as a whole functions. The main drive of social art history in this perspective is to render the processes of contradiction, discontinuity, and transformation that through the personal investment of artists and the membership of particular interpretative communities account for the axiology of culture. In sum, social art history helps to establish art history as a discursive institution (Burgin 1986, 192). Accordingly, if I have written of Hauser here it is because, in providing a specific instance of the possibilities of context in art's theory by interpreting art history as a discursive fiction, he enables an encounter with a sense of objectivity that functions for Alpers as an object of critique throughout *The Art of Describing*.

The critique of a creative individualism that, on the side of the social art historian are taken to hypocritically mask support for bourgeois values, strikes me as on par with issues of representation in Alpers's *The Art of Describing*. A very brief mention of Hauser's contribution to the formation of a methodological programme is suitable to understanding the active engagement between artistic, social and political forces within a more generalized socio-cultural environment. It will have been sufficient at least to provide a sense of how committed social art history is to the overlapping of aesthetic experience, contemporary consciousness, and consumerism. With this "communal-personal" articulation of typical "impartial" interests and prejudices in mind, Alpers's even broader formulation of ideas and subjects in Dutch culture provides for a radical interrogation of the politics of representation as the ground for resituating cultural and aesthetic knowledge respectively. It is the process of allowing for the reading of texts to prompt a range of conscious and unconscious responses without assigning them fixed priorities that might limit their capacity to stage their engagement with the social order as resistant or self-determining, that returns me to Houle's practice of shaping image clusters as multilayered, contingent and continuous ways of entering social space.



### *Visibility as/and Practice*

As a visualist practice, Houle's *Parfleches for the Last Supper* (Figure 4.5), if elicited as conceptualized according to knowledges analogous to that which Alpers's critical text explicates, reveals the correspondence of historically specific and socially determined forces. This series, which numbers thirteen works, speaks to the role and function of Christ's disciples as medicine men in the culture. Iconographically, Houle has adapted the aesthetics and specific meaning of the Plains Indian *parfleche*, or folded carrying bag, an item that structurally and visually creates a linkage between Native and Judeo-Christian culture. According to Gerald McMaster, "The parfleche form as a 'medicine bundle' contains sacred objects. Following an extended period of isolation, an individual acquired spiritual power through a dream or vision. The dream often showed him which personal medicines or charms to assemble into a bundle. These containers held sacred paraphernalia, which together with the painted designs, were understood to refer to the owner's vision power" (in Phillips 1990, 37). I infer from this that, within the construction of a postmodern and self-reflexive pictorial practice, the use of the parfleche as technique that makes intelligible a sense of the relations of production that for native culture produce symbolic meaning (Figures 4.5, 4.6). Currents of cultural circulation are implied in Houle's work by the incorporation conceptual elements to express abstract ideas common to both Native and American/Canadian culture. Specifically, design elements such minimal structures, pictographic signatures, and the investigation of colour whose origin cannot be completely determined, as well as the use of dyed porcupine quills (which reach back to aboriginal embroidery techniques) closely align the work with aboriginal culture, while the use of colour relationships and the painterliness of each segment ensures simultaneously an association with the images and tangible means of a modernist consciousness. William Sturtevant (1986) has succinctly argued that the infinite plurality of Indian art makes a weave of meanings tangible, thus being part of a larger cultural move that admits a complicated mode of participation in the world. The juxtaposition of the aesthetic and the symbolic as a way of bringing a historical past to future generations through the experience of a discontinuity in the present also corresponds, in the words of Shirley Madill, to what is felt in the artist's life as a "dual state of being" (in Phillips 1990, 21). This is to say that for Houle the parfleche dramatizes an embodied political discourse by which he proposes to explicate and uncover "global" frames of knowing. It is in this sense that his work will be most productive here.

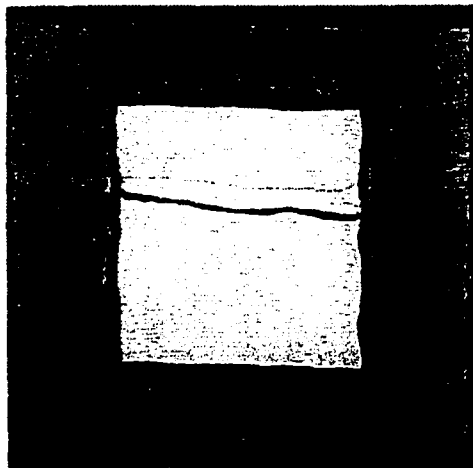
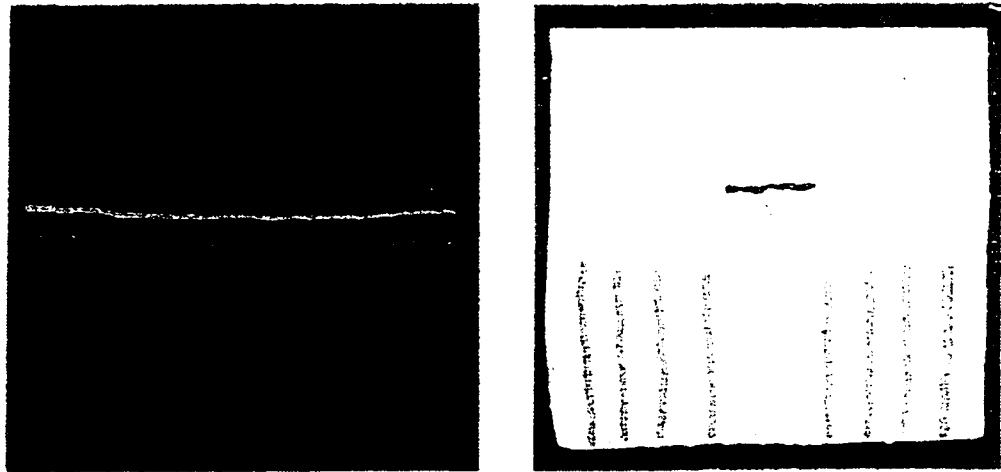


Fig.4.5 Robert Houle, PARFLECHES FOR THE LAST SUPPER:  
JUDAS, JESUS, PETER (1983)

The idea that artworks can disturb or "trouble" epistemological, figural, or ethicopolitical effects and forces is problematic because it can be used to forestall other preoccupations that result from a truly critical approach to cultural analysis via the inferred substitution of preferences for truth. Even so, in *Parfleches for the Last Supper* as elsewhere (Figure 4.6), and by the way of the formal and symbolic associations of objects, Houle presents the conceptualization of a self-conscious or purposeful gaze, one that communicates the object of representation as a vehicle for a disjunctive, rather than cohesive, aesthetic of intervention. That it at the same time communicates a multiplicity of perspectives in the idea of an encounter with aboriginal vision for late twentieth-century thought contributes the experience of opposition as a strategic philosophy of representation to the various discourses with which it collides. As evidence of a provocative and at the same time complex intellectual project, this multiplication of perspectives within the scopic achieves the enfolding of social agency into the "traumatic terrain" of personal identity and national affiliation. Again, to the extent that in this process the recognizable artifact functions as to formulate a personal definition of the relativization of the artwork, the artist, and the observer in the culture, political process operates as a cultural critique that shares affinities with socio-cultural theory. It is worth recalling that precisely the proliferation of visibilities is what Alpers's theory is about.

### *Theory and/as "Mapping" Dispersed Visibilities*

A fascination with socialized figures, and with visual experiences, as with a more narrow sense of rendering ideology through the politics of time and place adjoins Houle's and Alpers's texts in allowing for the idea that history has "thickness." As noted earlier, social theory offers "cultural production" as a complex comprising social activities and production practices of which objects are but a single component. Such a history, upon which Alpers draws, renders meaningful the exploration of the ideas, beliefs and/or social theories, spurring further questions of discourses whose political objectives lie in the purview of claiming a space for a unitary or organic model of knowing. Against simple identifications, the projects of a socio-cultural art history begin to explain the necessity of looking to specific, heterogeneous, and sometimes difficult interpretative positions as a way to take account of the diversity of cultural communities. And, as they do, they necessarily articulate the demand for new models through which to engage with the interpretations, strategies, demands, and resistances of culture. In the sense of a negotiation Alpers participates in ongoing debates around what Griselda Pollock terms

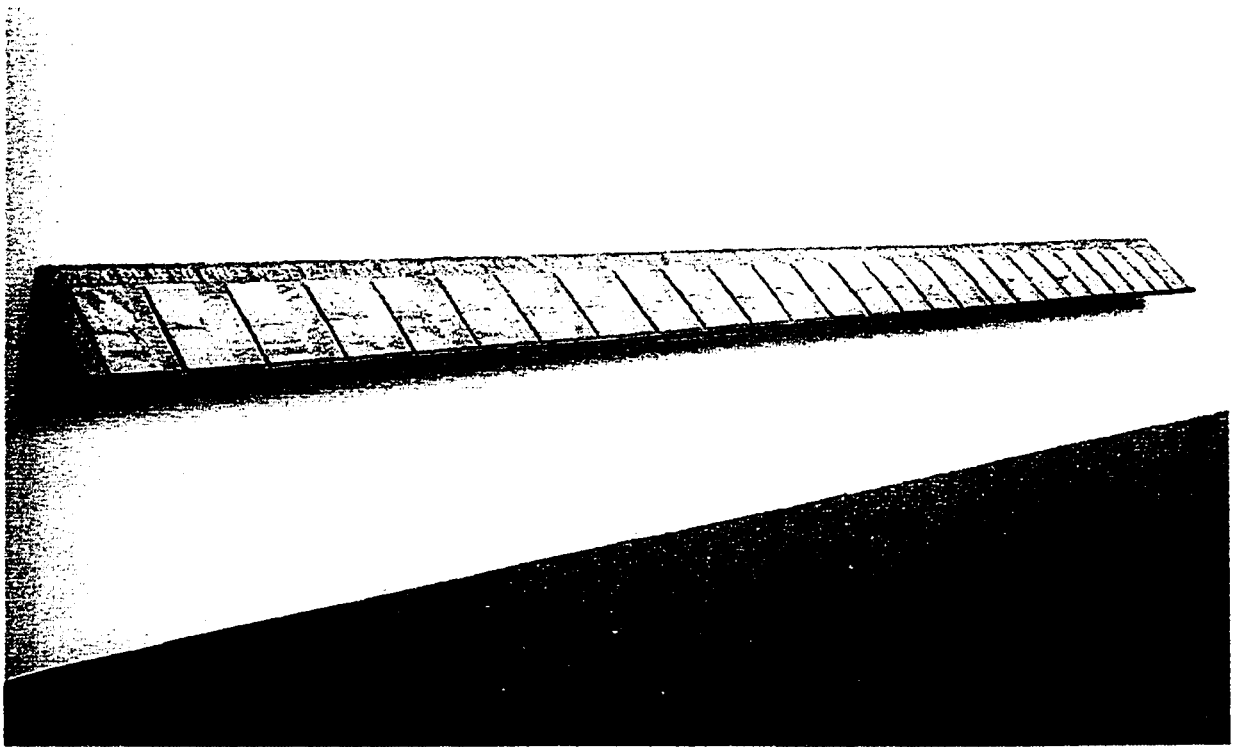


Fig.4.6 Robert Houle, EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT INDIANS FROM A TO Z (1985)

"the regime of representation" (1988, 14). I want to examine this side of vision and visuality as a line of thinking that pluralizes the status quo by effectively resituating artworks, creating new cultural histories.

All of which is to say that in this reading the notion of the artworks's observable function relative to the culture comes to the fore. While it would be simplistic to state that, as Alpers identifies it, visualism unfolds a system that belongs with historical struggles and takes account of identity relative to models of perception and difference as the ground of cultural comparison, it would nonetheless be true that, on a par with Houle's practice, *The Art of Describing* at first glance makes me aware of how concepts of culture participate in making the linkage between perception and regimes of reason. And fields of learning, or cognition, reveal themselves embodied in a pictorial world whose content is to be regarded as the outcome of crucial perceptual devices.

The relationship between reality and materiality as the operation of habitual activities of describing in Dutch culture is embodied in the paintings of the Baroque artist Jan Vermeer. During the seventeenth-century, a large number of northern artists were engaged in the production of maps including Vermeer; for Alpers cartographic practice constitutes the linkage between different modes of spatial and temporal focalization. To the cartographic tradition the Dutch brought a vigorous sense of creativity and mastery. Alpers's argument is that Dutch pictorial practices render a surface-oriented, or map-like awareness; her position implies the co-presence of images and texts as complex features of the culture. It is significant in this connection that her opening example is taken from Constantijn Huygens's commentary on contemporary painters: by way of the archive, the conceptualization of mapping focusses attention on the edge between the institutional and the private for cultural critique. Again, the art of describing is the site of an exchange between optics and artistic production. Achieving definition through Vermeer's eyes, and by means of the inventories of maps, books and prints made in the painter's shop and for commerce, for Alpers it is resituated by technological transformations specific to the camera obscura.

The one at the observatory in Greenwich enabled me recently to find out first hand how it produces the description of a planimetric and "universalizing" visual experience. One of its operations is to emphasize meaning production by transmitting visual information as if it were circumstantial evidence rather than the effect of calculated sensibility. In Alpers's text, the measure of the world as the delight of the eye is rendered

through Huygen's account of the practice of his contemporary Paulus Potter, whose images figure an unconventional dislocation between near and far as if suggesting the understanding of a relative scale of values and proportions. The experience of Greenwich's observatory, which allows for the subject's control of signification within its legislation of a panoramic view from a "correct" viewing position, also made me think about what happens when the canvas surface is simultaneously foregrounded as a physical and reflexive body for the viewing subject: In this relation, the temporality of a persistent subject introjects itself within the infinite interpretative possibilities of a circuit of vision. By inference the world of the camera obscura directs attention to an excess of signification. This complex, hybrid structuration of the world is also that of the map as a descriptive system.

What happens when the picture is presented from an unsubscribed point of view is that the eye seems to rest on no particular moment in "objective" reality so that, as a screen of signs, form blurs the edge of between fiction and reality. This can also present consciousness or self-reflexivity as resulting from explanatory procedures in the culture wherein visual meaning is structured as impossible to secure. The aesthetic elements of this scenario are present in Vermeer's *View of Delft*. This image is so well known as to not require illustration. Widely considered to have been created with the aid of a camera obscura, it can also be recognized through Alpers's reading practice as the outcome of aesthetically and ideologically significant choices on the part of the artist that, by the strategy of "dispensing" with a strict sense of a perspectival support, direct attention towards neither a historical nor a geographical reality. Additionally, the "invisibility" of a perspective substructure operates as a magnetic nodal point which, in introducing the viewer to a sense of Dutch representation, designates a variable experiential situation. In other words, via a description of what is apprehended as a view looking down and across the painted landscape simultaneously, vision becomes a phenomenon which entails thinking consciously about sensible boundaries. In consequence, as a source for understanding how the eye structures knowledge, seventeenth-century Dutch representation creates the possibility of conceiving not only how reference to external authority can be utilized as an explanatory procedure for the analysis of culture in general, but also what it means to make the link between corporeality, the natural order, the mechanisms of knowledge.

This argument gains power by way of the paintings titled *The Geographer*, and *The Astronomer* (Figures 4.10, 4.11) also by Vermeer. These offer an example of how



Fig. 4.10 Johannes Vermeer, THE GEOGRAPHER (n.d.)

Fig. 4.11 Johannes Vermeer, THE ASTRONOMER (1668)

discourse constitutes a reading subject in paintings whose aesthetic interest resides in the technique of visual dematerialization. The figural in these images functions through disfiguration in such a way as to demonstrate new science as an efficient mechanism for distinguishing essences from appearances. Each image draws the eye towards point of focus deep in the middle ground, the clarity of the center contrasting with a certain blurriness experienced around the edges of the canvas. To Alpers this would suggest that Vermeer, like other Dutch artists, was preoccupied with describing the world as information for the eye. The interest in seeing as optical data translates in his representations into daubs and dashes around the edges of the frame, a phenomenon accountable through the experience that objects positioned closer to the eye blur perceptually. The absorption of the maker -- and by extension the viewer -- in the work signifies for Alpers that, "Observation is not distinguished from the notation of what is observed" (1983, 168). Again, such a treatment of the canvas justifies Alpers's claim for an entanglement of the self with the materiality of texts at the site of representation. The images are interesting, then, because the emphasis on the body as the site of a self-contained and self-referential confrontation with universal mechanisms emphasizes the principle of human rationality in conjunction with the technologies of sight. Of more direct relevance however is the fact that these images can be read to question the myth of connectivity from which perspective as a tradition derives. Within this sense, the art of describing operates to focalize a sense of image-making as an agentless structure whose purpose is the ordering of objects. Hence the part of representation comprises an element of doubling which a historical overview reveals to introduce the heterogeneous character of vision.

All this is to be qualified by the direct experience and existential presence of a specifically Dutch set of cultural interests and concerns. Vermeer's *Soldier and Laughing Girl* (Figure 4.12), a typical genre picture depicting a domestic interior, transforms geographical description into visual information through the introduction of a cartographic chart as the trope of a metaphorical connection between the parties involved in the picture. All the qualities of the map in the background (its flat surface, its segmented arrangement in the composition, its identifiable source) mirrors contemporary knowledge as discontinuous and fragmented in keeping with the Dutch idea of history; looking at them framed within the temporality of a more complex historical statement about European culture, however, make this document more than a fleeting image of the past. Performing a function that is no longer structural in its prescription of the limits of corporeal agency,





Fig. 4.12 Johannes Vermeer, SOLDIER AND LAUGHING GIRL (n.d.)

or material in commanding the discursive, this description of the map-as-metaphor speaks to the correspondence between the collective body politic and the artist's memory and imagination. A question of public and private interests is traced then in the identical organization of maps as a belief system and charts as an essentially arbitrary arrangement in pictorial practice. Documenting this, Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (Figure 4.13), through the hesitations between two distinct yet coextensive moments in northern representational practice, requires of the spectator a continually shifting bodily attitude in his or her encounter with the object. In the "corrections" of vision this constant refocusing of attention articulates, the art of describing offers a way to theorize a world in which everything is known in the incorporation of multiple perspectives rather than in isolation. Accordingly, the address of the eye implicates culture as a site where theory and art might (at least conceptually) be encountered if not transposed.

The conceptualization of the cultural capacity to synthesize or at least struggle with signification and representational discontinuity is important. But I think that what is fundamentally at stake in *The Art of Describing* is a certain sense of *invention* ushered in against more canonical claims that the phenomenon of painting in Dutch representation is the apotheosis of *discovery*. To explain: in a historicist and teleological model of art interpretation, Dutch art is a practice which, in being concerned with describing the physical and material aspects of the world rather than its most dazzling and confident feats of perspectival illusionism, can be thought as "democratic" in the sense that it renders the entire surface of the canvas with equal attention. Effectively dismantling this notion from within for a social history of art by proposing that, in its historical development, the canon has traditionally relied on the idealist spaces of Florentine representation to uphold the enterprise of an organic articulation of representational practice, in her text Alpers demonstrates how the ideological positions of subjects interact with objective matter to constitute a system of representation. This is pertinent because, to Alpers, the structure of Dutch representational practice productively reveals what it means to think about "describing" as a movement that takes account together of the body, signification and the material world.

As *The Art of Describing* advances a formulation of the modal nature of art presented in the guise of a sustained exploration of the distinct individuals, cultural commentary, and pictorial problematics of northern representation in the seventeenth-century, what becomes clear is that "describing" ushers in the interrogation of relative power not only at the level of representation, but also at the level of conscience. This was



Fig. 4.13 Johannes Vermeer, THE ART OF PAINTING (n.d.)

examined earlier in her professional career by means of a focalization on aspects of gender and culture. In "Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art" (1983), she identified Dutch representation as exemplary of the way art history, despite the appearance of scholarly objectivity, has organized and negotiated stylistic categories according to a hierarchy that privileges Italian art as male. The problematization of the place of difference and of the "other" as a vital quantity in socio-cultural critique will emerge again as the valorizing function of the comprehensible through the appeal to the history of images in an article titled, "Style Is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again" (1987).<sup>2</sup> What can be learnt about visualism from the drawing together of the relationship between power and signification? The arrangement of discourse according to a socio-familial construction (one that situates the subject relative to a signifying chain) and relative to given historical movements is what determines Alpers's work for me as a theory of practice. In this, operating on the registers of cognition and perception simultaneously, the art of describing offers the possibility of thinking the problem of the Dutch visual culture as a founding philosophical move in which the question of the object is taken up as it positions itself for the act of interpretation. Broadly speaking, what this opens up is the issue of multiplicity as a question for visualism's discursivity (Jay 1993, 62).

I have, in other words, substantiated my sense that Alpers's constant juxtaposition of aesthetic and political values goes beyond a simple reorientation of difficult and epistemological questions on the grounds of an "antagonistic" cultural tradition. This might be said to afford the sense of describing as a complex relationship within the world. It is a long way from the disengagement that the act of looking has frequently been accused of in the past. And, at the level of cultural representation it constitutes the structure by which Houle and Alpers are fastened. But there are two conditions that must be brought into play.

I want to draw attention to them as they mark out a response to the question of the visual and vision by re-articulating Alpers's linkage between empirical knowledge and art practice. Back, then, very briefly, to Vermeer: Pictorially, Vermeer's well-established preoccupation with the truth of representation in his paintings functions to develop the sense of an unfolding of perception on two mobile levels sufficient to the registers of cognition and exposition Alpers explicates. Accordingly, maps and charts in Dutch

<sup>2</sup> In this Alpers explores art objects as a discursive category developed by art historians to serve as explanations for the "proper" interpretation of culture (p. 96).

representation suggest the linkage between the level of competence required to think of the aesthetic as a station on the way to broader cultural issues, and the immediate syntax visual practices in seventeenth-century Dutch culture required. From it can be inferred that Alpers approaches the subject of her text through the connection of place with and metaphorical location. Be that as it may, she proceeds in the spirit of the archivist who, surrounded by fragments taken from visual, literary and institutional sources, attempts to identify and order the material of culture. It is the strategy of contrasting references which provides an opportunity to explore the experience of vision as lying within the manifold of the senses rather than cut away from them. In other words, on the register of consciousness, a wide range of cultural experiences and diverse viewpoints are enfolded into the character of Dutch seventeenth-century definitions of the social order, where they await interrogation by the authority of socio-cultural theory. But what is more interesting here is the sense that the Dutch ability to representationally capture a sense of looking down and simultaneously across a particular pictorial field, its tendency to construct the world as if the picture plane were a mirrored surface, and the enmeshing of perception and cognition (Alpers 1987), inhere in a sense of visibility in which the proliferation of visual experiences refuses to deliver plenitude. The play of absence and presence constitutes the first condition of possibility for engaging Houle and Alpers for the theoretical conceptualization of a network of representations.

The contrast between what the northern visualist model offers and that which the southern perceptual point of view admits makes Alpers's formulation compelling and delivers the second condition of emergence for the articulation of Houle's and Alpers's respective discursivities. Where the art of the Italian Renaissance is comprehensible at a glance, conceptually establishing a distance between subjects and their world and at the same time binding vision up with recognition in an absolute subject-object relation, its northern counterpart admits a sensuous connection that at the same time can be posed as contingently discontinuous. This would suggest a close correspondence between Dutch representational practice and the actual human experience of seeing. Thus, as the running together of two parallel sets of formal concerns in Dutch paintings that include maps or charts in their representational embrace suggests, perception requires the fusion or incorporation of discontinuous aspects of experience. Hence the second condition of possibility that should be added here; it designates and locates the varying positions of the viewing subject: To the extent that Dutch picturing exhibits the modality of the visible and of the body as being closely intertwined, it exhibits the embeddedness of perception and

the phenomenological world admitting the oscillations and mobility of the physical body as a condition of sight. Accordingly, in the circularity of culture, already at the level of apprehension what is privileged is a language of abrupt shifts. For the subject of representation, like the subject of aesthetics, is contingent. What this delivers to visualism is the suggestion that it is no longer possible to experience the visual field without taking account of the part that, in image-making at least, begins to describe two kinds of "flatness" delivered one to another. One way to think of this as canvas/chart combination that reports on what is inevitably a political arena in socio-cultural practice. But it might also be thought of relative to the acutely ambiguous position of planes in a work by Picasso or Braque. In sum, Alpers's model ultimately affords a perspective in which "no single view dominates" and knowledge is assembled piece by piece (Alpers 1983, 163). A model of "and/also" as opposed to "neither/nor." In this, as I begin to think again of Houle's practice, I realize that the constant movement of absence and presence implied in the structural metaphor of mapping amplifies a point of scepticism about western art's ability to provide referential coordination for an exemplary visual field.

### *Art and Indians*

I am investigating how, on the axis between what is socially and what is culturally constructed, the possibility that the study of vision and visibility can most productively locate a necessary shift of emphasis in the interplay between postmodern critical positions. So far, accepting the possibilities given by a loosely defined materialist account of visualism has brought the idea of sociality and subjectivity to bear on the problem of defining culture. Critical theory shapes a sense of self that is complicated, and at the same time internally and externally articulated through difference. Emergent through a Dutch seventeenth-century model of perception taking account of how aesthetic and representational practices self-consciously shape painting and society at once, it is formalized and rendered as a contradictory, self-determining project possessing the capacity to authenticate power, but also the capacity to turn against it. There is always an element of doubling. And then some. This is the "and/also" "situatedness" of a pleated visualism that, in complicating the bottom line, opens opportune sites for the pursuit of pertinent new debates and critiques.

Coming back to Houle with all this it is possible to state that the pictorial activity of postmodernism owes itself, in a time of mechanical reproduction, to two significant paradigms: that of parodic reflexivity, which I will discard for the moment as a fugitive

conduit that demands the reformulation of aesthetics, and that of (in)formal experimentation, which includes by degrees notions of appropriation in cultural production. Both are complicated by an impasse between visual and verbal texts. Even so, evolving assumptions concerning the conceptualization of self and experience, and about the presentation of relations between social convention and private belief, have often heralded the production of an aesthetic of distortion or radical discontinuities. Simply, what Linda Hutcheon identifies as "bicultural" or "two-fold vision" of the post-colonial (1991, 52) brings the question of the body to artworks in the relative and problematic interrogation of both community and difference. The politics of representation interest me as they complexify a postmodern visualism whose issue is with referential truth.

The doubleness of the postcolonial has been rendered in the literature as implicitly hybrid and productive of a metaphysical clash (ibid.). It is expressed in the theme of historical destiny versus personal experience in Houle's *Kanata* (Figure 4.7). I noted earlier that as the autonomous source of a system of representation Houle is involved with representing "otherness" through the politics of race and ethnicity as this admits the viewer's body through operations of legibility. Alongside language, images localize signifiers in their linkage with the corporeal body. And, in this poststructuralist view, knowing and seeing point to subjectivity as coincident with social presence. Such that, as *Shield for Aboriginal Tittle* (1990) and *Indian History* (1991), and other artworks by Houle make clear, sometimes there is a constant tension between what historical events materialize and what social discourse determines. Houle's *Kanata* does not signal this quality in advance, but in setting a historical and social field for engaging an outside subject through the disposition of elements in the painting, can similarly be rehearsed as an eclectic construction in the activity in postmodernity.

From the outset the representation acknowledges a critical distance as it mobilizes politics and representation towards a critique of misrecognition and domination. The image renders what at first glance appears to be a photo-based reproduction of Benjamin West's canvas *The Death of General Wolfe* (Figure 4.8); it is set between planes of french blue and crimson. Described is the rivalry between the British and French supported by an Indian witness. In this connection, it is important to know that West served himself of eye-witness accounts of native culture and a collection of artefacts stored in his studio from 1738 to 1829 for the purpose of lending his picture the equivalent of photographic objectivity. A starting point towards reading the image is thus to consider the nature of representation as something that is closely bound to empirical evidence in visual

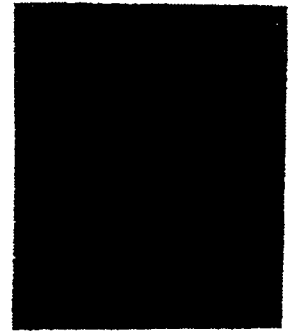


Fig. 4.7 Robert Houle, KANATA (1992)

Fig. 4.7.1 Robert Houle, KANATA (detail)

Fig. 4.8 Benjamin West, THE DEATH OF GENERAL WOLFE (1770)



practice. To the contemporary critic, this history painting reads as the predominance of western culture to master through representation. The overall composition of Houle's image borrows from historical material to trouble what presents itself as a "colonial" postcard to his eyes. Hence, what especially characterizes Houle's image is the way the device of isolating particular details taken from the source can recontextualize them to make present a new sense of history, memory, and theory. By tackling the idea of narrative transparency Houle activates a counter-reading wherein the appearance of the work is related to the notion of "Indianness" as cultural object. In this, the ethnographic determinants of the central figure -- namely, tattoo, parfleche, stereotypic Mohawk haircut -- are read back by the artist relative to individual tribal artifacts and the physical attributes of given tribal groups rather than generic cultural markers. Which is to say that within the terms of perceived reality Houle communicates a description of non-Indian society as tourists and ethnographers who create, by the imposition of foreign interests and rule, a special and separate place for aboriginal culture.

It is within the context of the development of a visual practice that challenges the privileging of vision as the faculty of revelation and purveyor of empirical evidence that Houle mobilizes the idea of embodying culture to a more ideated realm. Ironically, Houle draws on modernism as a template for the totalizing modes of art and western thought in moving against a notion of representation as an available, pellucid field. I say this is ironic because it was modernist painting practices that pointed out the illusory nature of representation and hence visual credibility in the first place. The part of modern art practice, on a formal level, is to provide the beholder with a mental image through the dynamic interaction of the abstract and the patterned. This operates as a vehicle by which to simultaneously open up the image and threaten its seemingly photographic objectivity for Houle. Certainly, aboriginal aesthetic values include a style of painting that emphasizes flat areas of pigment and discrete colour areas (Warner 1986, 190). And, the element of patterning, such as the monochromatic areas of the central part of the image suggest, can also be read as a feature typical of aboriginal pottery, sand paintings, and blanket designs. But the literal flatness of the pictorial surface itself used to emphasize the depicted flatness, or shallowness, of western conventions of representation relative to aboriginal peoples as subjects comes back to the question of credibility most forcefully in the notion that it is a daily understanding of occidental technology that produces and reproduces the cultural acceptance of myth through image manipulation.

Modernism as generative of a simulation of the "real" has still another reading position to offer. As a visual field *Kanata* essentially involves relations between opposites, and especially the notion of expansion/limitation that gathers force around the logic of the "white square." To explain: Starting with the symmetry of the grid, artists such as Barnett Newman in the 1950s used planes of colour to give definition to the canvas as an expanded field of abstract difference in what came to be regarded as an institution of American practice, and one that universalized American ideology. Painting as a construction within modernism is based on successfully orienting and organizing representational space. More than that, a non-objective planar network, in becoming undifferentiated, will also generate the impression of an artificial object, that is, one created by conscious effort and stating standards that are teachable (Baxandall 1972, 37). Hence, in creating a kind of spatial movement back and forth across the canvas by the correspondence between hues internal and external to the frame, Houle implies that aesthetics and politics are not distinct, but reinforce one another to support and rationalize a particular view of history and contemporary ideologies. In saying this I am not suggesting he doesn't himself use the authority of art history for the purpose of generating another, different, set of myths. Quite the contrary, I am situating the way in which the representational and painterly aspects of the image pull towards a sense that he is "speaking in quotations" to strategic ends. In the process the image points on one hand to the artist's identification with and proclamation of traditional native values, and on the other to the mendacity of the visible by means of the underlying ideology of modernist structures. It all comes to the conjoining of distinct knowledges in a single image.

The geometries of a flexing surface recall Mieke Bal's critique of the discursivity of cultural studies as a theoretical stance that currently fails to take adequate account of "how the subject of inquiry contributes to the object" (Bal 1996, 290). Bal proposes that the viewer's active participation constructs an interpretative framework through the layers of reference and/or illusion provided by the artwork. Intersubjectivity, then, enables the linkage between objects and cultural analysis. The visual and the verbal, in a postmodern evocation of shifting perspectives, basically intersect. And as they do, art production emerges to display what is for Bal the "unresolvable" dilemma "irresolution" poses as the subject connects "the specific problems of the possibility to know" (Bal 1996, 299) to "an unconscious investment in indeterminacy" (p. 286). I am offering this up as a gesture by which to redelineate the bounds of representation as they are shaped by Houle. Present in his artwork, in other words, is the enactment of textuality in and through the performance

of looking. This dynamic cross-textual movement, at once generative and functional, recognizes the engagement of vision and power as well as knowledge and subordination in theory as elsewhere. Visualist discursivity is not, then, to be taken as a simple matter of merging two zones or regions of knowledge, or even of problematizing their relations in terms of how they might be conceived as they blur one into the other, but rather of conceiving a situation in which two differing sites might function independently through a self-conscious sense of connection and interruption. At least, this how it emerges through Houle.

### ***Theory, Incompleteness, Tricksterism***

So far, the histories I have sketched out have been two-fold: it has been important to elaborate a sense of what social art history achieves for visualism's discursivity, and also to explore a somewhat different picture that emerges by way of the particulars of indigenous expression. For visualism, this assessment operates as a challenge to binary thinking and its inferred hierarchical structure of knowledge. The advantages should be clear: The process of simultaneously looking "across" and "between" the cracks of history articulates a space for thinking visualism's discursivity in the "and/also" interval between theory and representation. It provides for those who identify themselves as tricksters. In the liminal space of visualism, tricksters are those who "dream of another social space" and think visual culture as an exemplary performative situation (see Phelan 1997, 16). Supernatural entities signifying the outlaw and unbound, and frequently characterized as the coyote, tricksters afford a new angle on visualism by sending everything up, and by mixing things around.

With liminal tricksters the whole idea that textual forms and practices are separate from other forms of creative production can no longer be sustained. In art, Edward Poitras pulled a number on the Venice 1995 *Biennale* by reminding spectators --by and through the work of the trickster -- that the idea of native dependency is bullshit. Ojibway artist Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, in her poem "Trickster Beyond 1992: A Relationship," makes clear that for First Nations peoples Trickster's story is one of strategic adaptation: "Heck, we make mistakes too, but we're told to learn from our mistakes, our goof-ups, our screw-ups and we do. Tradition tells us to" (in McMaster and Martin 1992, 110). In this structure of struggle and renewal tricksterism, developed by Gerald Vizenor for the literary arts, from the point of view of those who wish to take history into their own hands and seek to work from within Native tradition, offers itself as the uneven and

nonsynchronous model of a critical indigene discourse. In Vizenor's view it is pertinent to recognize that Native art must not be approached from within already established theory since it does not adhere to institutionally sanctioned protocols, vocabularies, or modalities. I read this to mean that Native texts must be recognized as differing in intent and technique from others. Yet this is not necessarily to reserve for them special status. Rather it is to discover the precarious complexities of indigenous situations, representations, and politics in the attempt to develop procedures and languages to form an appropriate critical discourse for addressing Native art. Patterning itself in the relations between texts, then, tricksterism provides for the enactment of an unexpected and uncertain situation that admits oscillations in the representation of other cultures. Accordingly, by introducing the element of disruptive play, as a method tricksterism opens out theory and practice into the realm of the uncertain and the unexpected. This does not mean throwing up into the air how Native projects can be ideologically implicated in mainstream definitions of culture and society, however. Rather it means that, in catching on the horns of the representational dilemma, tricksterism remains in every way formless and indeterminate. Thus an immense distance separates epic adventures and the perilous routes of trickster from the critical position and works described by the socio-cultural history displayed by Dutch culture. Connected with the discourses of the "Other," the gaze, and problems of representation that have become urgent, tricksterism supports the idea of a postmodern practice, Houle's in particular, that spins a story by double dealing.

### ***Field Study: The Place Where God Lives***

The painting *The Place Where God Lives* (Figure 4.9) is an interesting mediating figure here: As a consequence of form the visual field becomes the place of a returned look and an unexpectedly critical gaze. The specific regional reference is to *Manitowapah* or Manitoba, a geographical site rescued from a narrow provinciality by Houle's spatialized embrace of everything that is native social life. The edge of the pictorial field is thus also the land rendered as a series of territorialized parcels by the white man but textured by First Nations yarns of the land as birthright and spiritual home. Here there is a slide between truth and fiction that speaks to the permeable boundaries and expandable margins motivating tricksterism. While some pioneering scholars encourage the recognition that the history of adapting to change of indigenous cultures includes the reality that land "ownership was recognized" and those "who trespassed on someone else's territory were attached and killed" (Webster 1992, 26), others show how, since First Nations peoples

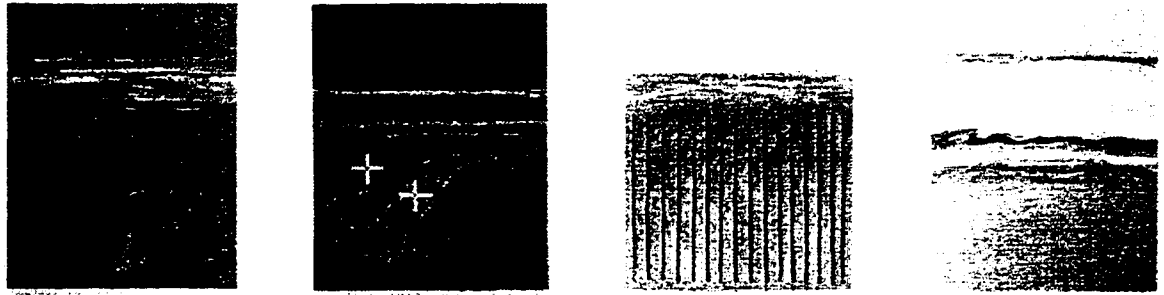


Fig. 4.9 Robert Houle, THE PLACE WHERE GOD LIVES (1989)

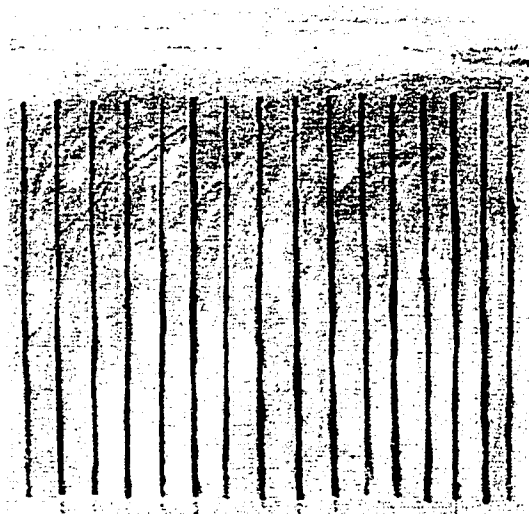
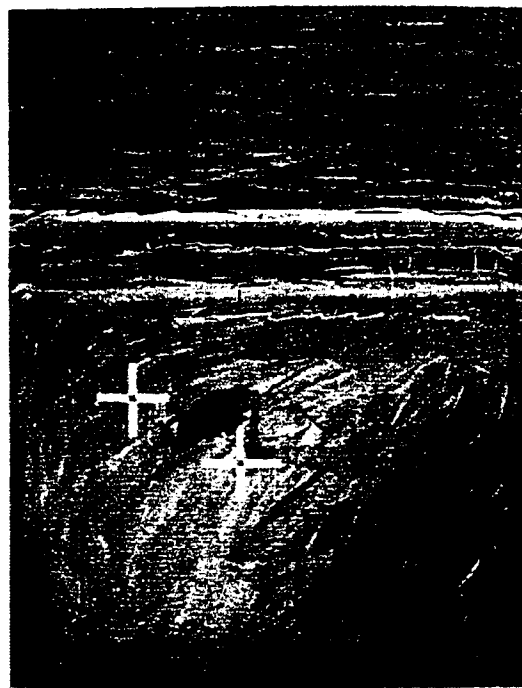


Fig. 4.9.1-4 Robert Houle, THE PLACE WHERE GOD LIVES (details)

hold in common the belief that land is held in common by all members of the community in perpetuity, and that communal ownership guarantees an interest in the land as a patrimonial birthright, a sense of identity emerges from the correspondence between knowing subjects and the idea of land. This last is marked by the words of Aleut elder Walter Soboleff spoken at Tenakee in 1984:

No matter what the weather may be like, to know that we own land gave us comfort, gave us refuge. It was home. From it we gained food. From it we gained medicine. On it, we performed ancient ceremonies. It gave strength to the clan, it gave strength to the family life, and courage and pride to carry on their way of life. And strange as it may seem that, in 1984, that kind of thought still prevails, and it surprises me that the culture is not extinct, like in Egypt or in other parts of the world. It is very much alive.

In some accounts indigenous peoples also share the view that their birthright relative to the land is unalienable. For them, the systematic overrunning and consequent reduction of the lands they originally occupied by European settlers destroyed social relations and subjectivities by effectively silencing people together with the experience of cultural convergence (see Todd in McMaster and Martin 1992). Hence, in the optic of a sensual, sense-making subject, *The Place Where God Lives* exists a sensuous materialization of a place sacred and full of mystery while it might maintain a historical-cultural situation as the product of global interactions and the site of local resistances. In this it becomes hard to imagine that Dutch mapping practices, with their typology of technological as well as artistic innovations, could for a moment be outside a like constellation of knowledge, power, and race.

### ***Eye Contact: Description and the Art of Mapping***

In the Canadian situation, for indigenous cultures ethnocentricity has most often meant the outside imposition of European tastes and values upon a what native peoples would rather define for themselves as their philosophies and traditions. In connection with the conceptualization of an "imagined" world, British army officers, Thomas Davies for instance, sketched out the topos of a militarily strategic landscape in the wake of French and Spanish cartographers, such that the history of map-making comes into being by superceding hunting patterns long established in the minds of the native population. As the chronicles of exploration and conquest developed, drawings were also used for the purpose of navigation and for overland expeditions; they would later become mementos of military campaigns. The visualization of cultivation, and hence of settlement as an

institutional manoeuvre, produced images in which the physical features of the terrain described are clearly secondary to the composition. Evident in early Canadian landscape painting and in the maps of New France (for example, Marc Lescahot's chart dated 1609), the point of reference was always one that could be sent back to Europe as a record of potential or successful colonization. Implicitly defining themselves as subjects positioned before a work in progress, British military officers trained in the art of topographical drawing and watercolour painting depicted the "New Dominion" as a garden whose flowers were about to be picked. Thus a common tradition unites topographical vistas with the art of cartography: it presents an ethic of intervention with specific discursive forms. Based on this history, the idea of a charted surface articulates to the demise of native expression. What this means for artists such as Houle is that, while analyzing contemporary ideological and figurative representations, it should be kept in mind that the construction of a sense of nationhood through "place" has to do with the resources colonizers once sought and are still seeking. The differing goals and different history of cultures mean that under the header of "inventing a tradition" errors, lies and illusions with "profits" will be uncovered. They are to be taken account of in the critical dismantling of what Dutch cartographic practice reflects and expresses.

Coming back to Holland, by the seventeenth-century, Dutch map-makers were already recognized for the accuracy of their bird's-eye view topographical charts, and for their panoramic profile vistas. Often executed on a grand scale, such maps identified towns, located tulip gardens, allegorically situated the Netherlands as the meridian of a vital commercial exchange. During its golden age, Amsterdam was the storehouse of Europe and the Dutch navy was a world power, its fleet embracing India, Japan, Indonesia. As the basis of this phenomenon of combining navigational science and mathematical practice for the embrace a vast sphere of knowledges including cosmography, astrology and natural magic, was the belief that human beings could transform the world. The dawn of the age of cartography coincided also with the rise of a contemporary sense of excitement about scientific investigation. Although the trajectory was neither immediate nor direct, knowing geography and having at one's disposal a visual model of the world facilitated the construction of new technologies of power, technologies stimulated by the fifteenth-century's fascination with westward exploration.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See David N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in a History of a Contested Enterprise* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992) for an expanded reading of this topic.



Subtly, then, wall maps in the pictures of Pieter de Hooch and Jan Vermeer signify not only a personal sense of worldliness, but also a collective sense of cultural mastery, especially over the seas. Since artists were not outside political events, and the Dutch at this time were fighting the British on the waters, I would think that the ties between cartographic practice and war-mongering expansionism at this stage were clear, at least to the extent that they circled back to allegorical referentiality as mimetic representations of cultural intelligence rendered in the disposition of wall maps clearly discernible in Dutch art.

The question of the native is reframed by the knowledge that, broadly speaking, maps and charts extend the power of the ocular apparatus. Given this, the mapping impulse may be viewed as less straightforward than theory alleges. Although theorists such as Alpers champion maps as passive visual mode of reasoning, the philosophy of culture teaches that at various moments culture operates in complicity with transactions whose identity belongs with the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. In this, the intellectual historian Samuel Edgerton has gone as far as to propose a linkage between cartography, Columbus, and perspective art (see Jay 1994, 63). But, can a simple causal connection between maps as traditional forms of representation and the modalities of political oppression be traced? And, could new visual configurations ever credibly establish spatial ordering systems away from the social transactions which generate them?

The practice of putting an abstraction before a mental picture is another register where perceptual experience and expressive existence can be thought of as causal but are not. Remember that Alpers's analysis is for both pictures and texts, focussing on the interactions between them. And now Loretta Todd, aboriginal artist and activist:

In the appropriation of Native cultural expression and images, the issue begins with origins and who has the right to name whom.... In court, the issue of Aboriginal Title versus colonial ownership often comes down to naming. The colonizers named the land Canada, British Columbia, Vancouver and in naming the land justified the theft. Yet, there were names before those names, and in court the evidence often involves Aboriginal Nations stating those names of mountains, rivers, lakes, plains; in signifying use, occupancy and jurisdiction are thus signified.<sup>4</sup>

Todd's words gain depth in the perspective of a culture whose study cannot be undertaken without careful consideration of the history of imperialism, a history of dispossession of

<sup>4</sup> Loretta Todd, "Notes on Appropriation," *SightLines: Reading Contemporary Canadian Art*, ed. Jessica Bradley and Lesley Johnstone (Montréal: Artexte editions, 1994), p. 415.

peoples from their land, and what is ultimately a history of genocide in the Canadian context; in these formations colonialism is now slowly becoming familiar for a native voice.<sup>5</sup> Relative to this historical body, the iconicity, symbolism, and following Todd, the meaning of map-making adheres to a sense of how textuality determines and interferes with visual culture by means of rhetorical effects that are discursive as well as figural. The words of Don Gill echo this sentiment when he asks:

But what do we make of a town named "Britannia Beach," a town reached by travelling north across the coast from the city of Vancouver. Nothing about the physical appearance of the place indicates a relationship to "Britannia," the allegorical figure of Britain. The rocky shore separating the town from the water seems to provide the "beach" portion of Britannia Beach. According to a gazetteer, the town was named for the adjacent mountains, the "Britannia Range." Further research indicates that the current name of the mountains dates to about 1859. A Captain Richards of the Royal Navy survey vessel "Plumper" named the range after the H.M.S. Britannia, a Royal Navy battle ship which had distinguished itself in various European conflicts. The Britannia had, however, never actually been anywhere near the area designated "Britannia Beach." There is no indication that Captain Richards inquired about preexisting names for the site. Instead he apparently believed (or was commanded to believe?) that the area was uninhabited. By labelling it as a marker of the presence of "Britain," he overlaid a map on the region. Richards put the site "on the map" -- a map of empire.

He goes on later to reason that cultural expression articulates to language in specific ways:

Maybe the word I'm looking for is "filter:" naming is a filtering process. Rather than a layering of information that can be excavated or read in a uniform manner like the rings of a tree, perhaps naming processes act the mesh of an information filter. References that fit the sieve become separated from the context and slip through the grid while the mass of information is reduced to circulating in a jumble against the wrong side of the filter. Fragments torn from context and juxtaposed with other decontextualized fragments creating new meanings and new references. The raw material of historical construction is derived from the commonplace.<sup>6</sup>

I interpret this to mean that, for the postcolonial critic, naming signifies as an act of manifest destiny and expansion relative to what to him is experienced as a brutal time of colonization and imperialism. To point to cultural geography is to admit that the geographical survey tracing the contours of newly-discovered terrain always at least potentially traces in the same gesture the extent of conquest. Naming is vital to

<sup>5</sup> Here I'm referring to the massacre of the most resistant of Native groups in the Americas: the Plains Indians, Sioux, Mapuche especially.

<sup>6</sup> Don Gill, "Sites of Production," artist's statement, included with the exhibition *Displaced Histories* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995).

colonization. And, in this construction, as maps come to present and represent the trajectory of intentions and interests shaped by particular relations in and of the world, it is not incidental that problems of "race" should touch on the organization of looking. In this questions of territory end up being implicated in the processes we use to negotiate culture.

### *The Textured Wor(l)d*

At times the reformulations of cultural theory are analogous to the complexities of interconnectedness the present study focuses on and makes palpable. In socio-cultural theory the idea I've encountered is that visualism responds to its own experience and in doing so responds to a conceptualization of the relations between objects and beholders by coming at the question from within the specialized experience of a white, Eurocentric tradition. The limit of theory is the impossibility of a admitting a position of privilege. But this is my reading, perhaps trickster understanding. It connects, however, to the more general critique of power produced by postcolonial criticism.

Postcolonial theory is a way of beginning to understand the means by which radical critique disputes contemporary institutional practice. One of the ways in which the postcolonial distinguishes itself from other areas of cultural analysis is in combining empirical investigation with cultural, political and sociological theory to engender a transformation of race-thinking. And, towards a future of studies in discourse theory, colonial discourse suggests (as the systematic study of how the west produces and codifies non-metropolitan areas and cultures, especially those under colonial administration) the salutary task of debating and contesting "the point of origin of the theorizing" (Williams and Chrisman 1994, 5). In offering an encounter between ethnic identity, ethnicity and race on one register, and social, political, and cultural legitimation on the other, postcolonial discourse theorization becomes an important resource for the sometimes contradictory relations of debates and critiques around the conceptualization of a hegemonic ocularcentrism.

This is what Houle offers to a visualist discursivity. It makes me think of one working definition of postcolonial cultural analysis situating it as a "history and a periodicity in relation to post-colonialism (sic)." Overlaying the spatiality and temporality that define the principles and methods of postcolonial practice, recent scholarship suggests that for some it locates "a post-independence historical period in once-colonized nations," while for others it speaks to "a specifically anti- or *post-colonial discursive* purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that the colonizing power inscribes itself onto the

body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occluded tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations" (Williams and Chrisman 1994, 12). This emphasis on construction, on action, made by way of defining the variety of culture and language in the very act of rejecting sign systems as natural or absolute, even in the complexities of its discursive arrangements makes it clear that postcolonial texts work in a connected rather than the separate mode to theorize resistances to the political significance of vision. Again, postcolonial critique is the structure by which the orthodoxy of the gaze is disrupted.

It is for this reason that I can advance that postcolonial practice insists on the theoretical necessity of uncovering cultural activity in its coincidence with writing. Especially in the fields of sociology and anthropology, the debates and critiques of postcolonialism constellate within the diasporic situation of the "hybrid," through which, in the studies of James Clifford and Homi Bhabha, it becomes a structural metaphor of a space "in-between" constituted in the spread of language. Clearly, as Bhabha reflects in his attempt to achieve a personal standpoint regarding the traditional and the postmodern view of race and ethnicity, this goes to the question of representation as something more than a signifying of norms as something closed in the institutional manner. By a conviction that culture might be theorized in the contestation of the problematic among races, nations, genders and classes against stereotype and prejudice in the uncovering of the authority of structure rather than the description of its effects, according to Bhabha one comes to representation as the alpha and not the omega of struggle (1994). In this, the margin, and the periphery, locates for theory a site from which it is hard to establish with any certainty where epistemological boundaries begin and end. What notions of the margin demand as versions of postcolonial and postmodern theory that insist on constantly drifting between conceptualizations of the constitution of difference through a positive sense of identity and a sense of the representational theory of language as the textuality in which such concepts "play," is that the aesthetic dimension be perceived as that which, via the graphic sign on the canvas, is greeted by the spectator as a provocation. Accordingly, as a type of intervention the art object is re-discovered, through a confrontation with the modern social gaze that is to be classified as the disrespectful gesture of liminal tricksters, i.e. as contingent in every sense.

In the realm of critiques of the visual, it casts a shadow over functionalist aesthetics as it transmits the interconnected components of a contemporaneous re-organization of visualism with compelling vitality. In the process, where mainstream

theory speaks to and for the material conditions and epistemological concerns of the already privileged, operating from within a body of established ideas and for a paradigmatic community, the controlled indolence of tricksterism works "against the grain" attesting to a differentiated cultural ambient. What remains is to speak not of opposition as that which presses hard to review subjectivity and identity in culture, but to think of it as a process by which gestures become indeterminate. Houle alludes to the field of culture through the "lightness" afforded by the "clumsiness" of native vision.

A similar sensibility emerges with respect to a theory of the subject for the historically displaced by means of the rhetorical humour and absurdity of Ron Gill's native representation:

History is montage; a multiplicity of voices considering, remembering, testifying, proposing, talking, reminiscing, writing, speaking, arguing, attacking, lying, dismissing, agreeing, negotiating, correcting, threatening, demanding, honouring, disagreeing, plagiarizing, disputing, wheedling, flattering, resisting, noting, misconstruing, observing, regulating, whimpering, authorizing, disallowing, sanctifying, eviscerating, blackballing, blacklisting, attesting, investing, cheating, whining, bitching, complaining, fawning, shouting, screaming, revising, prophesying, scheming, calming, reasoning, begging, rejecting, forgiving, condemning, pleading, accepting, theorizing, shredding, whispering, singing, relating, recording, re-recording, disappearing...<sup>7</sup>

The only thing I would say as I try to filter the predicament of establishing meaning within the terms of the images and through the raw material of historical signification a native sense of culture provides is that this structure of counter-identification renders a sense of meaning to the culture as a whole rather displaying the passive celebration of a personal history. Perhaps this means that the postcolonial imagination, reflective of an aesthetics in which meaning participates as it is structured by an intelligent and active reader, is capable of divesting itself of thinking that in order to leap from experience to knowledge one needs to engage with sense. In any event, it is at least in part as a reaction to a sense of the self as a theory of the subject for the historically displaced that a postcolonial sensibility will become entwined with a more complex response to visualism's discursivity.

As a final observation in this developing theme of visualism and cultural hegemony I want to add that the imposition of culture might in this emerge as less secure than its advocates think. The contributions of artists such as Houle, that examine what it

<sup>7</sup> Don Gill, "Sites of Production," artist's statement, included with the exhibition *Displaced Histories* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995). Typeface shifts in the original. The document includes a list of the titles given by Gill to each of his photographic works.

means to represent other cultures by means of boundaries that shift and dissolve, present conditions for the circulation and deployment of new identifications that are as well strategic. As recent debates and studies in culture have begun to acknowledge (Wade 1986), within the framework of a very necessary reconstruction of institutional practices in postmodernity, individual speakers must themselves acknowledge a strategic complicity with changing definitions of success and recognition. In consequence, elective displacement, like self-imposed exile, will always be an option. Hence as theories of the subject and of identity redefine these debates and critiques in gestures of incoherence, incompleteness, or by pointing to the gaps between scholarship and experience, fresh investigations of established conventions in the field of history and cultural geography, but especially its pragmatic opposition of the dominant center from a margin whose insights and material resources suggest the necessity a strategic move "beyond," will have to be analyzed, assessed, mastered, and refolded.

### ***Summary***

The theoretical as an impersonal mode of practice which has its historical root in the development of a socio-cultural critical methodology has in this chapter been distanced from practices which find expression in a reaction to the implied rhetoric of repeated acts of self-imitation. This pivotal moment is considered in its emphasis on the concept of "social space" as the cusp between a visualism that exists as a space of description, and one that explores the broader realm of discourse through postcolonial studies as a cluster. The constitutive significance of tricksterism as a "wild" meaning grounding the specificities and intelligibility of socio-cultural theory relies on an effort to make representation accessible as a visualist discursivity whose participation in the relations between artists and spectators is on a modest scale. The example of native attitudes makes apparent that basic conceptual divisions in the culture point to the strategic necessity of allowing a space for disruption within what visualism conventionally offers. An adequate understanding of visualism can only be reached if, rather than assume a totalizing or monolithic structure of representations, the potentialities of theoretical, discursive, political confrontation are admitted as possibility for cultural critique.

## Endpoint

Touching on cultural studies, literary criticism, philosophy and history as well as on the social relationship between vision and representation, this dissertation has explored the problematic of the visible to suggest it is theoretically necessary to take account of the “enmeshedness” among and between ideas and artistic phenomena – in other words, to keep in tension interpretation and practice. The argument has been explored by reference to a diverse range of contemporary critical writings and artistic expressions. First, an investigation into the complexities of aesthetic/theoretical conjunctions was articulated by means of the theoretical entwining of deconstruction, as represented by Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, and the Canadian/Quebecoise contemporary artist Geneviève Cadieux’s photographic practice. Second, an investigation into the way visualism locates itself between theory and art was played out in the conjoining of Michael Fried’s modernist/formalist repudiation of vision’s theatricality in his text *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* and the paintings of Attila Richard Lukacs. Then, an investigation into visualism as a condition of possibility for relations of power/knowledge was mobilized by the encounter between Svetlana Alpers’s context-oriented analysis of perception as presented in her book *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, and the multi-media practice of First Nations artist/curator Robert Houle.

Thus the dissertation at one level represents a practical exposition of the most urgent debates in contemporary art history. It starts out from the hypothesis that the predominance of the visual needs to be thought, since it remains an issue. But, as it intersects with questions of power and knowledge in the culture, it embodies a series of possibilities beyond conventional aesthetic and discursive reductions. A process, a theory, and a method, its best description is as a conduit for new alignments, conditions and effects. The work can be seen, then, as a strategic conjoining of several mutually informing elements: the linguistic and graphic elements at work in the interpretation of visual texts, the materiality of art-objects, and the “situatedness” of experience, among others. Each and all of these co-determine, I argue, both artistic production and the reception of meaning. It is the process of a mutual enfolding that renders theory as contingency, indexing it as

indeterminate, mythical, and continually in flux. A complex praxis is my contribution to the field of postmodern critical theory.

From the perspective of new enquiries, visualism emerges as a key category of postmodern analysis. The pages of this dissertation have established that, as a discursive field whose key terms emerge as representation, reception, and identity politics, vision and visuality in the literature refers to four things: a critical standpoint, a rejection or retreat from authority, a symbol or iconology, visibility as alterity. So that it has been important to establish a series of dynamic juxtapositions in order to start to problematizing the limits of discourse. As a discourse, then, vision and visuality shapes the contingencies that in this analysis would productively reformulate the relation of theory to the artwork. My assumption throughout has been that the problem of the visual is at the same time of the split between art and cultural theory, also between art production and the theory of art. Hence it can be productively reformulated as a model for performing or negotiating a form of disruptive linkage; this is what brings to this study a critical sense of the potentialities of thinking beyond postmodern representation as a strategic counterproduction.

For me, it is the conjoining of the object with signification which raises visualism as the necessary condition of a concept of culture. The moment of visualism is the poststructuralist, post-referential moment: instantiated by deconstruction, it can be said to account for the visual as a resistance to a theory of presence, in the encounter with the transcendental signifier. The notion of the sign, and of identity, together with the presuppositions of relativism, produce the critical re-examination of how traditional form and meaning functions as a system of equivalence. This is ascertained in the second chapter. But, while it can reproduce itself, deconstruction cannot satisfactorily account for the productivity of history. So its extension is by way of the political register of experience; this is made readily apparent in the work of Cadieux. Her exploration of the specific intensities of the visual arts admit a crucial reconceptualization of the Derridean gaze.

The sense of dominant, “purified” opticality existing prior to visualist discursivity constitutes as fundamental the task of elaborating its history, not with the end of suggesting a problem of origin or its theoretical culmination, but with the idea of opening a route towards the fuller understanding of its complications and potentialities. The forms of its interrelation with visual culture are argued in this dissertation as having developed in tandem with modernist ideology. Accordingly, Lukacs’s representations provide a lucid guide through the theoretical complexities Fried’s study of eighteenth-century absorption presents. This model, I argue in the third chapter, synthesizes the discursive space of pure



opticality for a substitute problematic that leaves the sense of a traditional theory of aesthetics intact. The lesson to be learned is that for visualism to remain vital it must not only critically re-examine and recuperate the canon, but consciously struggle with its own intellectual critical tradition.

There is no question that this is where Svetlana Alpers's socio-cultural analysis of seventeenth-century modalities of Dutch and Flemish visuality sets out from. The idea of social and cultural relations offers a concrete or material response to the kind of experience a more semiological approach to concepts of the visual afford. And yet, productively entwined with more progressive areas of cultural analysis it raises problems that, in the last chapter, I accent by contrast to Houle's postcolonial critique. One of its shortcomings is that it overlooks the power of institutional frameworks. But my point in pleating the verbal with the visual is that what the historical subject/agent position Houle's personal voice and social discourse exposes is one whose processes not only correspond to the physical realization of the artwork but, more pertinently, also make it available to contradictory, or potentially disruptive interpretations.

These, then, are some of the issues addressed in this study: artistic practice, language, perception, consciousness, meaning, history, and theory. It all points to a situation of visualist discursivity whose broader ramifications are to be found in the theoretical and necessary spaces-between. Upon reflection, the constant emphasis throughout this study (albeit in a redefined way) is on the socio-cultural dimension. Relative to Derrida and Cadieux, it emerges in the discussion of the local, and questions of identity. Relative to Fried's senses of modernism, it emerges in the senses of a "queer" subjectivity. And in the last section, postcolonialism. What is important, I think, is to consolidate and complexify the social realm, so that visual discourse might come to new discoveries. From this prospect, I am prompted to address contemporary culture again but this time as it functions to identify the text as a site for private and public interactions. I have found that the triangular relationship between the artist, the critic, and the art-market also bears implications for a cultural critique in the process of acknowledging social determinations and ideological positions as a standpoint from which to begin discussion of the mutual enfolding of artistic and intellectual critical practices. In offering visualist discursivity new references it sustains, but incompletely, the potential of theoretical and productive new meanings, all the while acknowledging that intentions and interests shape our relations to the world. Clearly, to start out on this would be to begin a different story.

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