HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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Ronald Bladen:

Sculpture of the 1960s & 1970s **Jacobson Howard Gallery, New York October 16 - November 26, 2008**

THE PLUMMET-

The **Geometries of**

Geometries of Ronald Bladen MEASURED



FACE

by Mark Daniel Cohen

The place where optimism most flourishes is the lunatic asylum.

—Havelock Ellis

o understand that which we see, we see ourselves. To know the nature of what we encounter, we invent its nature—we create the sense and insight into something that seems like us, and instigate ourselves that we have found a truth, that we have discovered in depth. But all we have done is fabricate a fairy tale, conjure ourselves into speciously perceiving that all we witness is secretly, inwardly like us-rife with and driven by an inner self that observes and wills, and responds, and lives. And so thereby, we delude ourselves into knowing that we are not alone.

But we are alone. We observe a mirror and perceive it a window—we are walled by glass. We propound a universe that appears to look back as we look at it, which is a close definition of the uncanny. Despite Freud's rejection of the role of intellectual uncertainty in the affect,

it seems inescapable that the inability to determine what is living and what is inanimate—what is staring back and what is not—is inherent in the flavor of the fear as it would seem to be in the revisiting of the "superannuated" belief in animism to which Freud attributes the condition. And the irrevocably ambiguous is unnerving—the line that is not so much crossed as it is smudged to an edgeless and infinite width. Yet with an irony that bears no touch of ironic sensation, it is we who decorate the uncanny to feel we are among the familiar, and the universe withholds and protects its secret: that it is mysterious, that it is incomprehensible, but there is in no sense in which it is specifically uncanny.

None of it is comparable to us. None of it has a soul acknowledging our own presumed souls as it gazes back. What we see when that is what we see is merely us, reflected. And we impute intent, an attitude, a purpose, a role in the drama through which we live, the drama we invent to understand ourselves as alive, imbue it all with import of significance to our lives—with "meaning," as if it meant something in our regard—with ramifications for us, as we become the measure of all things. In all we see, we inject implications of hope and despair, possibility and frustration, promise and denial, optimism and dejection—judgment and judgment. But none of it is real. It is merely us: alone and fearful that we are alone, incapable of perceiving that there is nothing like us other than us, and that our uniqueness signifies nothing. Beyond our inner lives, it is just a stockpiling of facts.

The attitude of the animistic belief is the very soul of narcissism—the felt dilation of the potency and range of one's own thoughts such that they become environmental, the sense of living within the omnipotence of one's own thinking, roughly as Freud put it. And it is, of course, infantile and primitive.

And it has also been the business of art to a great extent. Much of art has gathered its power and applied its effect through anthropomorphization—through treating that which is inanimate as alive and that which is not human as like the human. Literature in particular distinguishes figurative writing from the purely and dryly descriptive through the application of human attributes to that which does not possess them—it is where much of the imagination in the composition goes. Even the passage above, while arguing the insipidity of the practice, practices it—"the soul of narcissism" "enacts" the opposite of its own assertion; "a stockpiling of facts," as if the facts were being stored by, well, whom?

If one studies the techniques of literary composition—artful composition—one finds that, almost without exception, the more ambitiously and recklessly the author animates and humanizes, the better his rank, the higher his standing, and none did it so well or inventively as Shakespeare. ("The morn, in russet

mantle clad.") The mode services well when the subject is insight into the human condition, into the subtleties of the rules of life and the secrets of the human heart, but it seems the argument must run the other way. With everything possible, under heaven and in the imagination, nothing other at its best than a symbol for human concerns, what else is there to speak of? Where else could we go?

Even painting is, through its history, largely little better: trees spilling with mood, often sinewy, mountains that appear magnificent, Expressionistic cities distorted by bad temper, and even the sublime begins to seem little more than a narcissistic glower, pretending profundity. And music—what else is it but temperament made audible, articulated, scaled?

And it is also the Phenomenological Error: any argumentative ploy by which fact is transposed into experience, by which events are significant only in their perceptions, and the human mind is indispensable to the existence of that which it is not, which is to say there is nothing it is not. It is under this aegis that linguistic analysis, of that which is not linguistic, makes sense. For to examine that which is named by investigating its name is not to explore that which is named, or the individual mind that deploys the name, but group mind—the source of the linguistic application—which is the background condition for the Phenomenological Error. Linguistic analysis made sense for Freud, for his concern was not the Phenomenological conditions of experience but psychology. However, outside of psychological science and its rigors, something insidious is afoot.

And the scientific viewpoint is quite different. There, the specifications of the quality of experience are the warp in the glass, the exploit is for the cracks in the mirror, and there are no meanings—only objective, and perhaps ontological, implications of events: if something happens, what preceded it and what will follow? How does it occur, of its own—even when it is us? There, the world is what it is, whatever it turns out to be, and the truth is the truth, even if it is eternally elusive.

For in the end, Phenomenology is of necessity a subspecies of Idealism. The essential Berkeley position is acquired: all that can be asserted is, not the existence of a fact, but the perception of the fact. To assert a fact is rather to assert the assertion of a fact, nothing more can be inferred, and so there is no truth, which by sleight of intellectual hand becomes again ontological at the last moment, in order to be denied.

It has been the business of art, until the beginning of the last century. Abstraction was specifically an attempt to scrape the backing from the mirror, a try to see through to something not us—to elude the prison house of the personal. Non-representation was a project to drop what was presumed—out of a distinctly Kantian view—to be human constructions and reveal what

our own images had been obscuring. One can note the ambition to such "spiritual" advancement towards insight in the writings of Kandinsky, who saw non-representational abstraction as part of a progress of humankind away from "the nightmare of materialism" and towards increasingly refined, subtle, and incisive emotional states, of which his abstract art was intended to be expressive. From his time and until the advent of Formalism—by which abstraction became simply a continuing experiment in new patterns of composition—abstract art continued to pursue roads to the revealing of a reality beyond the apparent, beyond quotidian human constructions.

After something on the order of half a century, Minimalism arrived with largely the same ambition—at least within the aesthetic program of Donald Judd, whose objectives were focused. The intention of his work is to eschew relational perception—to install a kind of *Gestalt* awareness that would perceive the work in its entirety rather than as a relation of parts. The purpose is to avoid the "a priori systems" he felt typically underlie the art we have inherited and that "express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like."

Certainly it can be said that, in a broader context, Minimalism is a palpable reaction to the extreme self-projection of the Abstract Expressionism that preceded it, not to mention the Kandinsky program that has artists looking inward—to themselves, to their feelings rather than turning to the world, to the *a priori* authentically—a procedure as much open to the charge of invoking human-generated imagery and conception as the art it replaces. It can also be noted that Minimalism, by its most basic qualities, is a Platonic exercise, for the formula is clear: to elude the human image transposed onto the world, to find out "what the world's like," the artist turns to mathematics, to the imagery of volumetric geometry.

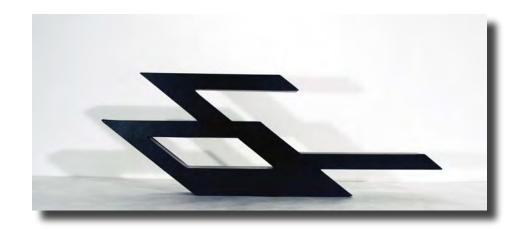
And that brings us to Ronald Bladen, one of the principal sculptors of Minimalism and one of the originators of the mode. Bladen is also another of a number of artists, and a number of recent sculptors in particular (see "The Form of Feeling" in this issue), whose reputations are nothing comparable to what they were and what they should be, and are at risk of being omitted from the art history books and their works forgotten. (Or limited in general exposure to their small number of public works, such as Bladen's *The Cathedral Evening*, 1969, which is installed on the Empire State Plaza in Albany. And it should be noted that one website referred to *Sonar Tide*, which is in Peoria, as having been created by "architect Ronald Bladen." The site also observes that the sculpture "holds the distinction of being voted 2005's #1 biggest Peoria eyesore by readers of the *River City Times*." And so goes the tale.)

Bladen, who died in 1988, is nevertheless something of a legend among those adept enough in their awareness of recent art history to be familiar

Ronald Bladen, Flying Fortress (Model), 1974 – 1978
Painted wood, 11 1/2 x 33 x 3 inches

with his work, and a periodic sequence of exhibitions is at continual effort to give him back his name.

The exhibition at Jacobson Howard Gallery is the latest instance, and it is, as were all those this writer has visited, a joy to behold, as well as a

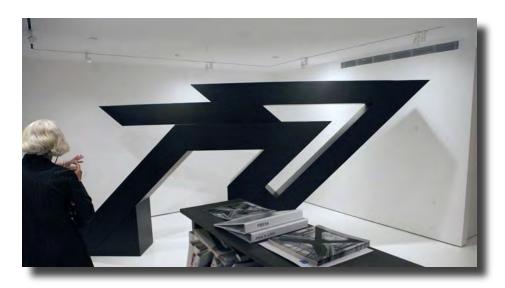


revelation of the ways in which the simplest structures of volumetric geometry can spark the imagination of an artist who was evidently born to work with them. The exhibition contains 14 works: nine sculptures, both small (models and maquettes) and full scale (standing or stretching up to 156 inches), four drawings, and one painting from Bladen's time as an Abstract Expressionist painter in the 1950s, before he turned to sculpture. The sculptural works are, without exception, exhilarating things to see. There is a dynamism about them, a sheer verve and feeling of velocity and moment, of momentousness, a quality that is distinctive among the broader range of work of sculptural Minimalism.

The essential reason is easy to note. Bladen worked in diagonals, whereas typical Minimalist sculpture was done in right angles. Judd worked strictly in boxes, ingenious arrangements of blocks. Carl Andre typically works in square panels laid on the floor, as well as cubes and wooden beams. There are other examples of Minimalist angularity—Andre does employ triangular panels, sometimes in triangular arrangements, and Tony Smith owns the reputation for infusing Minimalist works with seeming gestures through the simulation of stances and actions. There are others, but none of them has the sense of inner drive and force of Bladen.

Of course, in this, Bladen—or this response to his work—is relying on an easy and hoary formula that is the chestnut in every basic drawing class, or should be: horizontal lines imply stability and stasis, vertical lines imply growth, diagonal lines imply movement and action. It is supposedly innate in us to react that way, and perhaps it is, but there is something else here.

It is the quality of moment, as if each of these works had selected the perfect millisecond in a continuously changing action to represent the action in its essence—despite the fact that these are abstract works, works of pure geometric form and not representations of figures in identifiable actions. The principle of the perfect moment applies to figurative work, and most



notably, potently,
Michelangelo—to
select the moment that
embodies the intention
and meaning of the
action represented.
(Think of the David,
in the midst of turning
towards his enemy—a
second's difference
either before or after,
and it would not be the
David.)

It is difficult to say,

perhaps it is impossible to say, how this can be with Bladen—as abstract works, these sculptures create no fictional world, they do not portray an action we see a figure in the midst of, we do not know what would precede this moment or follow it, we don't know what this moment typifies as a continuous gesture. With Black Lightning (Model), 1981, the form is, of course, ready made for Bladen. He created (in the full-scale work) a monumental lightning bolt on pedestals. But in the other works here, he had no such support, no such prepared reference. And for that, they are more stunning in their effect. Flying Fortress (Model), 1974-78, looks nothing like a fortress. Yet, one can feel the warrior-like impetus and assault and pure power of righteous defense, the knowing that one is battling for a just cause, in its slanted-forward, recklessly thrown configuration. Light Year (Garden), 1979, seems a revelation of a portion of the substructural grid work of dynamic space, the space of light waves and galactic distances, and colliding nebula and exploding stars. Cathedral Evening (Model), 1971, is nothing of a cathedral. Yet, you don't need to be told. It appears the very essence of striving aspiration to reach beyond our limitations, beyond our earthly confines, to the place where secrets are revealed and purposes shown.

And most impressive, despite the fact that it is the "quietest" of such works here, is *Coltrane (Model)*, 1970. (Also shown is *Coltrane (Structural Model)*, 1970, which reveals the wooden armature of the final work.) It is simply a rectangular box resting on one of its points, which is set into a pyramidic base that has had the top cut off. Little enough it would seem, yet it also seems the very essence of Coltrane's manner, of his, as it was called among jazz musicians, "scrambled eggs" style—for no reason one can think to name, despite the fact that it is undeniably so.

One can easily dismiss the effect of these works by claiming that this is merely a talent for design, for developing what amount to emblems, like logos that

strangely bespeak the identity one wishes to assign to something. One can claim these are just augmented chevrons, devised one by one to fit the titles Bladen gave them. But they are not so easily explained, or explained away, because their sense of moment, of portentousness, ought to make them seem somewhat human, somehow figurative, but it does not. It opens a door to seeing, or beginning to sense, precisely the opposite.

The nearly figurative, the gestural, is how Bladen often is taken. In the catalogue essay to this exhibition, Irving Sandler quotes Bladen in remarking on the development of his style, "I desired something in the grand manner since I'm still a romantic." Sandler assents: "He rejected their [other Minimalists] anti-romantic attitude and what they termed 'anti-



anthropomorphism,' that is, their purging of any sign of the human body and its gestures. . . . If *Three Elements* was Minimalist in appearance, it was anything but anti-romantic and anti-anthropomorphic in spirit." (*Three Elements* was the work Bladen showed at the influential 1966 exhibition "Primary Structures," which was the first comprehensive survey of the new artistic mode.)

Mark Stevens takes much the same tack in "Maximal Minimalism," his review of the 1999 exhibition of Bladen at P.S. 1. "There is no better example of an artist escaping the straitjacket of a movement than Ronald Bladen (1918-88), who is typically identified as one of the cool 'fathers of Minimalism' but looks more and more like an American Romantic." Stevens goes on to note that Bladen sought to achieve what he called "presence," that he wished to "create a drama out of a minimal experience," and that he said his own works "seem very human to me." For Stevens, the ultimate achievement of Bladen's work is "to recover earlier—even ancient—patterns of feeling."

But it is not this we are provoked to see, not when these works are taken at their best—the way we ought to take all works of art—seen for what they might be claimed to disclose, what they might spontaneously reveal, regardless of

On left: Ronald Bladen, *Coltrane (Structural Model)*, 1970 Wood and nail construction, 30 x 17 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches Unique life time

On right: Ronald Bladen, Coltrane (Model), 1970
Painted wood, 30 x 16 x 16 1/2 inches
Edition 2 of 3
Ronald Bladen, Coltrane (Structural Model), 1970

what has been said of them, even by the artist. The challenge they present is to see in their atmosphere of moment, of presence, something that is not figurative, not human (at least not the normally human), not us (or at least what we think we are). The challenge is not to "overwrite" the works by seeing figures that are not there, just as Sontag warned us not to overwrite works of any art, of any mode, with interpretations designed to install our own intended meanings in place of those of the artist.

Look at these sculptures with an innocent eye, with an eye cleansed of expectation and the urge to see something responsive, something like us, and you will discover something quite different from what has been written about these works. Relax into seeing the diagonal linearity without associating in the human strain, the craning, the stretch, the reaching towards. They start to become something else, something alien, something remote but immediately accessible, something detached, withdrawn, inwardly turned, and austere, inwardly turned away from us for all their moment and immediacy, for all their presence. They begin to seem the detailing of an alien landscape, the artifacts from somewhere else, the deposits of some other life form, almost the result of another physics, of another world, of another reality.

But they are not, for nothing could be more here and now, more ordinary even, than geometry, than rods and boxes, triangles and chevrons. These works become familiar and strange, intimate and unapproachable, embracing and overbearing. They become us and not us, and that is perhaps a more pertinent and authentic conception of the uncanny.

Both us and not us—perhaps that is our first step away from the intellectual reflex action that paints our image on everything we see. Perhaps it is merely the us we did not know, not something ultimately beyond us. Perhaps that is all we are capable of—to see something of us that astonishes us, and we will never escape the prison we make of ourselves. Even if so, it requires the best of us to achieve it, it takes the most penetrating of our artists to bring us that far, and Bladen showed us something few have seen since.



Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing To lords and ladies of Byzantium Of what is past, or passing, or to come. -W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"



Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.
—W. B. Yeats, "The Statues"

The Form of Feeling

Raoul Hague: Selected Sculptures 1962 - 1975

Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York September 11 – October 25, 2008



by Mark Daniel Cohen



There is no whole self. Any of life's present situations is seamless and sufficient. Are you, as you ponder these disquietudes, anything more than an indifference gliding over the argument I make, or an appraisal of the opinions I expound?

I, as I write this, am only a certainty that seeks out the words that are most apt to compel your attention. That proposition and a few muscular sensations, and the sight of the limpid branches that the trees place outside my window, constitute my current I.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality"

ne can strike hard and deep, and not make a dent. One can aim true and drum up falsities for every move one commits—for every truth one has voiced, or sung, or carved. One can dedicate a life to blowing the dust from piling estimates of dulling wits and be greeted at every turn by nothing but the nullity of the dead eye and the soundlessness of the mincing ear. One can clarion the foment of insight and be handed only the fearful yawn of the vacuum of marketplace thought and the haggle of pedestrian value.

One may do everything right, and reap the benefit of nothing. It is something many are learning now, at a time of failing promises in the pale, ever graying corner of material maintenance. The absence of guarantee is the expenditure we commenced from the start, for it is the toll at the gates of freedom. There is no one to insure our outcomes, and no expenses we can pay that reserve our due, for nothing is owed us, and no one would save us who would not control us. And if we feel we have been assured of our success, it was a self-assurance, and hushed in a false breath.

Which is to say that artistic reputations and registers of worth are worldly and keep no faith. There have been artists of all periods, no doubt, and most to the point, for we know the victims, ours who have been overlooked, who have committed works of extraordinary accomplishment, who have fulfilled the demands of both their personal visions and the requirements of the general acknowledgement of the vocation and have suffered ignorance and the barbaric disregard of simple inattention. And that is to say that, in all likelihood, we bury many of our Michelangelos, our Shakespeares, our Beethovens, unknown. There is a stubborn, ill-mannered obliviousness of appreciation that the manners of keenest vision accrue—the redemption for their volunteerism to Herculean labor.

We should all know better, and yet there is no reason we should—or should be able to. Artistic reputations are made, and the histories of art are written,

by dint of marketing, promotion, and self-promotion. Our attention is turned to where someone turns it, and few of us—we among those who make an avocation of observing and learning from the art being made around us—choose to focus our scrutiny on that which has been selected from among all that is being created. We examine what has been put before us, what has been previously portioned out, and what has been chosen is what the art market throws up, what someone at some point has placed his money on. Because our attention is curtailed, regardless of what we dismiss, whatever we applaud almost invariably is what someone has shown us for the sake of his bet. And to say anything, or nothing, is to work for him or for one of his competitors.

The superb, inspiring, much-missed art writer Arlene Raven once told me that, to know anything about contemporary art, one must visit the artists' studios, not the galleries, for the galleries by and large show only what the market has already approved, or derivatives thereof. To know what artists are doing, one must go and see what artists are doing, not what the market is selling. But even this approach has devastating implicit limits. If to know anything, one must know everything—not merely what has been previously winnowed by someone else's judgment or by blind circumstance—what can one credibly know? And, even seeing all that is humanly possible, is it possible, are we prepared, to refuse to select anything? It is not a logical absurdity, not even an unlikelihood, that all works of art at a given moment would be worthless. Are we in a position to say so? And if not, what can it mean even to say that something is the best we have when something has to be selected? What can "best" mean, and how would we know? It is comparable to saying that we have made a free choice in an election or in an award that must have a winner on schedule. We are, at best, making the best of a bad situation, for what can it mean to anoint something as worthy when we are not capable of saying everything is worthless? Value becomes an accident, a byproduct of circumstance. It is all a matter of situational ethics-excellence a matter of what is best under the circumstances, in a circular argument that fails to make even a single revolution.

And so history is the tale of salesmanship, and excellence is an orphan, hoping for recognition and adoption in a world in which every well-intentioned person is unwittingly waiting for someone else to go first. One would like to think that philosophers of art would be those dedicated and best positioned to exercise freedom of judgment, to manage an estimation of value without slavishly following the demands and directives of the art market, would establish the clear vision out of which an authentic history of art could be composed and mean something significant by the judgment "good," with the definition of the term preceding that to which it applies. For of all the attributions one might think to apply to the occupation, seeing clearly, one might consider, would be the single defining characteristic of a philosopher—

that alone would be enough. But, it appears more likely they are often the most ready victims of the labyrinthine vagaries of value calls and have created the industry of spinning marketing ploys into theories of ostensible aesthetic innovation. And to observe a truly free choice in the name of intrinsic merit—that would be an astonishment.

Art is a market-driven story, a function, in its very definition, of what must be said for profit. Yet, there are galleries that follow their own visions, not of what should be exhibited for keeping up with the times, but what should be exhibited for the sake of merit, of intrinsic worth. And there are, time and again, individual exhibitions that are lessons in what we have overlooked and should have noticed, should have given our attention, for the good sense of having done so.

The exhibition of five sculptures by Raoul Hague is an instance, one of a series of shows of Hague's works over the years that have been attempting the same goal—to bring attention and an appropriate degree of regard to the work of a sculptor who has unfairly and through mere circumstance fallen out of the story of art, a story in which he should have a certain pride of place. The reason for his obscurity is not difficult to understand, and it is a situation facing a number of recent artists of one-time stature: all of them were sculptors, and sculpture does not sell, so there are few galleries devoted to sculpture, so little attention is paid by anyone else. Along with Hague, one can think of Reuben Nakian and Ronald Bladen, as well as a host of sculptors in the last stages of their careers who need now to concern themselves with retaining their place in the story of contemporary art, for without marketing themselves even at this stage of their work, their achievements become eclipsed, because those who compose the story are concerned with recounting what has happened which means what has been made to happen—rather than what should have happened. (But then, many advanced thinkers of our time, and of most periods, have a particular problem with the issue of the "should.")

Raoul Hague was an abstract sculptor of the generation of the Abstract Expressionists. He began his art career in the 1930s and was included in the 1933 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "American Sources of Modern Art." By the 1950s, he had turned to sculpting in wood exclusively, making his body of work a distinctive contribution to the high point of American Art and of the American contribution to abstraction, the principal accomplishment of visual art in the twentieth century.

The five works in the current exhibition—which are accompanied by a video on Hague's life and art—are prime examples of his mature sculpture. Carved from boles of trees and standing roughly from four to six feet high, the works are enhanced and purified composites of natural forms, compounded sweeps and interactions of wood, as if individual growths had intersected and passed

through each other, fashioning an impossible but entirely plausible architecture of timber.

Thus appears the quality of Hague's principle of abstraction, but as with all abstraction, it is not the quality of the non-representation that is revealing of artist's aesthetic, but rather the quality that vitiates the evident abstract intent—the quality that worms to the heart of all ambitions not to represent.

Abstract sculpture, when it has been raised to the point of a true aesthetic efficacy, operates according to a principle of reference, as, in the end, all abstraction must. Sculpture that holds no clear resemblance to anything in observable nature reflects rather a resemblance to what is not to be found in nature. There is—presumed by the practice and voiced overtly by Henry Moore—a catalogue of forms available to the imagination that is universally shared: shapes, as Moore wrote, "to which everyone is subconsciously conditioned and to which they can respond if their conscious control does not shut them off." There is a vocabulary of pure form that the sculptor may rifle and exploit, and to which the witness of the work may refer.



And from those forms come associations, connections to meanings and feelings that become evident only when the artist has reified them and raised them to conscious attention. Those connections are what Herbert Read called "correspondences": "real but irrational associations between disparate objects." "Irrational" is difficult to construe in this claim: if the associations are reproducible, then they are rational; if they are not repeatable, then they are indiscernible. However, what can be detected is that "correspondences" are relationships between things which are otherwise unrelated, relationships that exist only under the aegis of the artistic mood—and that is a principle of organization which is of the essence of Modernism, in all the arts.



Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité, Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté, Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

—Baudelaire, "Correspondances"

Baudelaire knew of it, perhaps inaugurated it, and was closer to the heart of the matter. Perfumes, colors, sounds—the roster of forms universally shared need not be visual, just as the associations and that which is associated need not be visual. These are configurations of the imagination, and they may be anything the conscious mind can perceive. For the sculptor, as Read remarked, "they are always of shape," but shape is not inherently a visual matter, for it is not inherently a matter of solidity, of stabilized, observable structure. It is simply pattern, pattern of any kind, pattern perceived in any way, pattern even of intangibles, pattern that may be felt rather than conceived—an emerging regularization of otherwise indeterminables, a formulation in the imagination.

The correspondence is the form, or a discernable "edge" of it, like what one of the blind men may grasp of the elephant. For Hague, the legibility of his shapes—the universality of them, which is the only possible principle of legibility in abstraction—is not that of observable structure, not that of simultaneously and completely exposed form conceivable to the mind's eye and coming out of a catalogue of inherited spécial architectonics. Hague found a language that is evident and legible to the senses of the sensitive witness, a lexicon ready for recognition, but it was not a fund of given "shapes"—it was a wellspring of gestures.

There is, it may be loosely called, an archetype of the gesture as much as of the established form: a configuration of motion, grasped as much as a proprioceptive sensation—an awareness of muscular action—as a track cut in the air. There is a language of such actions. It is the stuff of ballet, the articulation of movements that seem to be of an elegant profundity although they are indecipherable as purposive movements, as gestures intended to commit some intent. It is the stuff of magicians, as we know them from storybook tales and legend, sorcerers who worry the air and conjure as much by the slow and sliding intricacies of their hands as by the hypnotic intonations they voice.

These are motions that possess an hypnotic aura, that of themselves seem to conjure a spell, that throw the trance. There is a space that can be opened by the exacting, slow, lyrical, sinuous motions of the limbs and the body, a mesmerizing area of the imagination, a suffusion of the mind in which the thoughts become merely configurations of that dense medium which is the atmosphere of the thinking. The quality of that atmosphere, the near aroma of it, is not a quality of transport but rather an aspect of character after one has been transported—an altered fiber of mind, altered by an extremity of mood, like a chemical change of the spirit, an alchemical alteration: a potency of disposition. That space is a volume of which art is a natural denizen, in which art is the automatic outcome.

Hague's sculptures are the forms of essential gestures, standing as if Platonic moments of movement committed in wood, as if eternally in motion and infinitely encased in the trunk of a tree. They enact gesture as a language unto itself: sweeping and tortuous lines of shifting effort that draw the eye along their traces even as they stand still and fully visible to the fixed gaze. They are ballets frozen, dances that do not move, dances with no dancers. And as pure gesture, they are pure art—there is no message, no "concept," no meaning. And they are impervious, indelible forms that ultimately are not forms at all but the active creation that could result in a form, and they are impenetrable to the interpreting mind. There is nothing one can say of the intention that is behind them, except that it and they are sui generis—they are unique elements and are not of a type with anything other than each other. And they cast an aura like a conjuring.

Although Hague denied that he observed the grain of the wood as he worked it—"I do not see the graining at all, throughout my working with the wood"—there is no mistaking that the waving actions into which the artist has carved his works follow and often enhance the intrinsic formations of the growth of the tree. The flow of the lilting movements of the sculpted forms is of a piece with the lilt of the growth of the wood.

It is a rule of sculpting in marble that the form must be sensitive to the material and must not look forced upon the stone—the form must seem to have grown out of the rock, must match and follow its natural action and principle of breakage. Despite his protestation, Hague followed the same law. In each instance here, the wood could well have grown just this way, could have developed from the soil in exactly this manner. And yet, the wood could not have grown this way. These works are nothing natural, they are implicitly artificial, they are as blatantly made sculpture as they are palpably responsive to the natural events of the wood. They embody a human response to the movements of nature. They are the intersection of the human and the natural, the overlapping of the touch of intention and that which has been untouched by intention—the automatic and the imposed. They are neither pure artifact nor pure natural object, neither of humankind nor of nature's kind. They are some third thing, something pure and unlike anything else, something without a reference—works of art with no decipherable meaning in any other activity of thought. They are pure unto themselves, as is the character of Hague they are marked by and effuse.

They are purely the actions they configure, and that fact raises a significant question. If they mean nothing in any conventional sense, if they are only the forms that appear out of the actions they commit, why then are they not simply pure design? Why are they not just enormous bric-a-brac, or pieces of furniture to no realistic purpose? Are they art at all, art in any sense that warrants serious respect?

But, why is ballet not merely a cavort? How is it that a manner of movement the body can adopt, one that has no reference outside the contingencies of its own art form, no ties to anything other than its own inner laws, can be something more than a prancing about? Yet, it clearly is far more, and by that alignment, one can know there is an answer to the question of Hague.

The answer begins with the air of portentousness that accompanies these works, and that acquires one's senses the moment one enters the gallery. There is a livid presence to them, a density of impression and a looming quality in more than their literal, physical stature. They impart a sense of a deep significance—of significance devoid of meaning.

As pure gesture—motions captured in wood that signify no thought, no motivation, no purpose—they are thoughts of a different order. These works, like ballet itself, are the thought that gesture is, the language of the unintended reflex, the thinking of a mind that moves us when we are not aware of our movements, when we are not cutting them to plan. They are of the mind that breathes us, that orchestrates our stances, that designs and tailors in intricate details our expressions and postures. They are the thoughts we do not know we have, or rather, that have us. For, what is the meaning of a gesture? It is the natural expression of the mathematical computations, the ticking calculations, of our involuntary responses—the lyricism of our other selves.

And, what is emotion other than gesture, other than a caliber of movement? Consider how we talk about feelings—there is the language of gesture everywhere in it. We speak of a sobbing sorrow, of a wringing anguish. We refer to a giddy happiness, and a fuming anger, and a swelling pride, swelling like a chest. And bitterness is a taste in the mouth. We feel no feeling without feeling it through the body, and the body feels no feeling without its commission as an action, and that action is as much of our inner selves as the subjective sensation we prefer to "think" a feeling purely is. But that is merely what we think. We speak of it differently from the way we think it. The gesture is the emotion, and the sculpture of Raoul Hague is the essential expression of emotions, emotions too complex for the simplicity of names, wrought in their natural forms of actions. His works speak not the language of concepts but the articulations, in dactylic measures, of the dense suffusions of moods.



In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of "world history"—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.—

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.

—Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense"

Philosophers like to talk of thought as deliberate, as meaningful, as "meant," for that is the warrant of their authority, the stipulation for the significance of what they do—it is their unexamined assumption, their Achilles heel. Or it is for most. Some got it right.

For there is the growing possibility, the increasing likelihood, that thought is not the carrier of content, or representations of that which is not thought adhesived by something or other that is pure and non-representative thought, but rather merely actions of mental life, movements of something intangible, or what appears intangible to us as we think of it—pure gesture, simple activity like insect feelers lacing and unlacing, simple reflex action of the organism. There is the mounting chance that thought is not a receptacle, not a housing for meaning, but a meaningless "rumination" of muscular reactions proceeding by organic impulse—simply happening. That thought is just steam over the kettle—mere byproduct.

The most advanced "thought" during the last hundred years or so can be seen to have sensed a crisis coming, to have intuited the approach of the breakdown of any possible belief that thought has insight, has implication, has content—a meaning. In the sciences, we have had to confront the growing eradication of established categories of conceivable



being—we have encountered cosmological facts of incomprehensible power and scale, beautiful images of cosmic events that have been photographed with an arbitrarily selected, arbitrarily limited band of light waves and wear imposed colors for they have no colors in themselves, that have no human reference, subatomic particles that are precisely understood but inconceivable as material entities, electrons that "exist" without mass, that possess at any moment either position or velocity but not both, that are waves unless they appear as particles and are particles unless they appear as waves. We find our computations are fully capable of encapsulating "entities" that we cannot begin to present to ourselves through our mind's eve.

And in the arts, Modernism complicated to the point of conundrum the relationship between content and form, or style, to such a degree that the idea of content, or a meaning, to a work of art began to become inconceivable.



To me style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and the inside of the human body. Both go together, they can't be separated.

-Jean-Luc Godard



What is "content"? Or, more precisely, what is left of the notion of content when we have transcended the antithesis of style (or form) and content? Part of the answer lies in the fact that for a work of art to have "content" is, in itself, a rather special stylistic convention. The great task which remains to critical theory is to examine in detail the formal function of subject-matter.

—Susan Sontag, "On Style"

Content raises now the question: what formal function does it serve, what does it do, what shape does it take, what action does it commit? The "thought" that a work of art "contains" a thought, conveys a message, carries an import, passes beyond the brinks of obscurity. This, as much as anything, is what Modernism reached towards—not an insight, but a relation of parts, a

demonstration of interaction, of correspondence. This, as much as anything, was the lesson of abstraction.

And so meaning becomes an illusion of reflex action, an appearance of what thinking is when it triggers thinking, which is what it does—merely the forced appearance from the inside of the thing. It becomes mere effect, a mark made, an indentation caused by a collision of an intangible, mental gesture with itself, a bruise of "intellectual" clumsiness—an accident. In short, the mind becomes mindless.

And Borges was right. With the loss of consciousness as that which is authentically conscious—conscious "of" something—comes the loss of the center of consciousness. Without awareness, there is, in no "meaningful" sense, no mind, no self, no soul. No one is there. There is only the fleeting play of sensation, even when it is the apparent sensation of a "thought."

And Nietzsche saw the matter, as well. Those who occupy a place in the Nietzsche industry tend to interpret him in the very sense that Sontag objected with regard to art—frequently they over-write what he said for the sake of what they think, of what they would have him say. Nietzsche's demotions of thought are too often taken as qualifications of the standard understanding, rather than redefinitions of what we believe. And there is a great peril in that approach. Anyone of Nietzsche's caliber—assuming for the moment that everything said so far is put by the boards and there can be someone of Nietzsche's caliber: a thinker who really thinks—"means" what he says. And Nietzsche's "meaning" could not be more plain. Thought is an accident of evolution, signifying nothing.

As he did when he wrote, "We need 'unities' in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we must suppose that such unities exist. We have borrowed the concept of unity from our 'ego' concept—our oldest article of faith." This is, as it is with Borges, simply the Hume hypothesis: going beyond Berkeley's dismissal of existence as anything more than perception, his limitation of the existence of objects to that which is known, Hume relegated the mind of the perceiver to nothing more than "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement." The "perpetual flux" should be familiar to anyone who has spent time poring over Nietzsche's ontological theories—it should be familiar to anyone who has made his way through *The Birth of Tragedy*, wrestled with the Dionysian, and considered the implications of Nietzsche's rejection of the *principium individuationis*—a position he never abandoned.

Which is to say that in his ontology, Nietzsche adopted the Idealist posture on this matter, the matter of the status of the subject, to this extreme. It is a posture not a great deal different from that of Schopenhauer, although the further back to intellectual foundations one tracks, the more their, well, "thinking" diverges. Schopenhauer's *Will* is greatly what Nietzsche thought it to be—too object-like, too stabilized, too capable of interactive causation, too able of initiating action. Nietzsche had a better feel for flux, for the lack of self-identity, for indefiniteness—he simply had a better conception of the inconceivable.

But both take a significant stand at this time, when seen from this time, for they achieved prescience for, they arrived early at, the foundering of the specifically human version of knowledge. The human reference in all our knowledge is fast becoming meaningless. We study light waves as the network that binds the universe and that travel through the vacuum of space, where there is nothing that can wave—but that is how we understand waving, out of our direct, *human* experience. We encounter particles (objects) that persist without possessing mass—but that is how we understand objects, out of our direct, *human* experience. And we discover, through scientific experiment, that we physically begin to commit our intentional actions microseconds before our brains register our decisions—but that is how we understand decisions, out of our direct, *human* experience. Our subjective lives are becoming immaterial to what we are coming to know.

And our knowledge increasingly has a mathematical precision, in algorithms that describe what we cannot conceive in any way more directly—but "more directly" means by the mind's eye, which is how we believe we properly understand, out of our direct, *human* experience. (And one might well ask, who invented the mathematics? But perhaps it was not "invented" at all.) And what we learn, more and more, makes a mockery of our sense of sublimity, which is tied to the "monumentality" of mountains and oceans, measured against *us*, of our understanding of significance, which is tied to the effects of events on *us*, in our small corner of the universe, of our comprehension of survival, which evidently means nothing to us beyond our own survival, which ultimately makes all our judgments a matter of convenience to *us*.

Theirs is all the more significant, for we can be seen to be, philosophically, in a period of reaction, in a time struggling to hold the back the wave threatening to submerge the remaining vestiges of distinctively human thought. For what is Phenomenology but the last terrified shriek before the destruction of human consciousness—an attempt to insist on the pertinence of the human center to all things, of human experience positioned "as if the world pivoted around it," of the concerns of living as if they were issues of existence in a universe that dwarfs us, of "facticity," which, for all its inconceivability, ratifies and reinforces us as the matter of concern for existence itself, as if the existence that matters is our own.

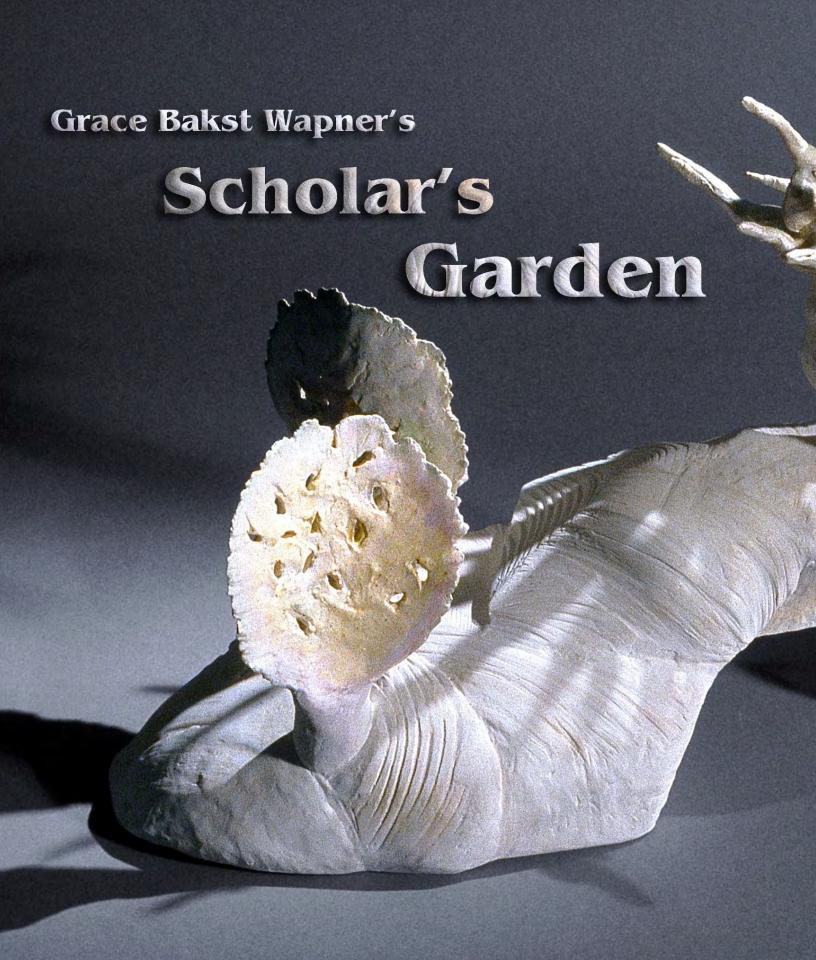
We are coming to a time in which philosophy may not survive, may become

consumed by science as the only knowledge worthy of the name, as the only knowledge that is not a surreptitious self-justification—not a fairy tale. Unless we learn the lesson from Nietzsche—that we must think of what is without concerning ourselves with ourselves, perhaps that we must learn authentically to think for the first time, if that even is an option and not merely another of our naiveties.

And art may not survive, for how much art has there been that is not a presentation, a recounting, of specifically human concerns, of the world as viewed by human beings, throwing up our naïve sense of what is important of the human drama? And yet there has been much, for this too is the achievement of Modernism, of abstraction—an art project that has attempted to look beyond the human, to incorporate the larger world, to comprehend the "drama," if that is what it can be called, of the world beyond ourselves. What is non-representational is specifically non-representational of what we have known. What it may well represent we have not yet learned to say. Perhaps we are finding that we know better than we "know."

That attempt has certainly been made, and it has certainly been tried in the sculpture of Raoul Hague, in which the disembodied gestures of mental life, the sweeping moves of fleeting impressions, the feeling forms of mere flux in place of endowed and self-aware selfhood, is embodied like a natural growth—as natural, as simply organic, as a tree.

His may be among the few bodies of work that, at this late date, survive—that, specifically, survive us.





Grace Bakst Wapner: A Scholar's Garden

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, **New Paltz, NY**

January 23 -March 16, 2008

race Bakst Wapner has made her own scholar's garden—well, she didn't directly make a Chinese garden but rather created a number of sculptures that come out of her own development and out of a stunning encounter with Chinese scholar's rocks that she saw at the Metropolitan Museum and Asia Society in 2000. (Several are still on view at the Metropolitan, and there is a fine New York Chinese Scholar's Garden available to see at the Staten Island Botanical Garden.) Wapner's current sculptures, created over about a five-year period, were brought together for an exhibition at the Samuel Dorsky Museum, SUNY New Paltz, NY. Individual pieces were placed on separate pedestals to carry on a dialogue with each other and with the viewer, mirroring aspects



of the experience of a Chinese scholar's garden. Individual sculptures were also vividly inflected by the configurations and life energies of the Chinese scholar rock art form and more deeply, intuitively, by traditional Chinese aesthetic modalities. These Chinese forms and aesthetic principles go a long way to illuminate her current work, and also to reveal the nature of an East/West dialogue that yields great potential and some significant contemporary differences.

The installation of Wapner's show was suggestive of the experience of a Chinese

garden; it provided a walkthrough of separate vegetal-seeming works, each on their own pedestal, presenting different heights, placements, viewpoints, exoticisms, and even eccentric fantasy. The Chinese garden tradition dates back about 2,000 years—to the Han Dynasty (c. 2100 BCE-1600 CE)—most dating from the more recent Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties. Such individually crafted gardens were created as a place of refuge and contemplation for retired scholar officials, who had enormous prestige and power, but also who might face public flogging, imprisonment, even banishment for perceived shortcomings in the performance of their official duties! This cultured class sought the vitality and harmony of the garden

and what it stood for.

Wapner's work shares in the organic finesse of this engaged mode but reveals a frisson of angst that is more characteristic of a contemporary art modality.

Some of Wapner's individual sculptures were fashioned as chunks of a seeming environment, where one can visually explore and traverse a small terrain. In one such sculpture, Scholars' Garden XI (medusa tree

Nanjing Friendship Chinese Garden, Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, Missouri

Above: View of The Margaret Grigg

Below: Grace Bakst Wapner, Scholars Garden XI (fleshy oriental tree with flower heads), 2004



through rock with club foot), 2003, the "medusa" tree in extremis is caught in a muscular hill. The viewer approaches through two sentinels, standing like perforated undersea plants. The high-fired clay is striated as if delineating nature's processes, reminding one of the "bone method" (ku-fa yung pi) of Chinese brush rendering with structural strokes, whereby an inner structural truth is delineated. This bone quality for the Chinese was also echoed in the wrinkled undulations of the scholar rocks placed in the gardens. To the Chinese, this inner structure is "li," or universal principles—the order and rhythmic structural flow in all things. As George Rowley explained it, the bone method makes clear the li by elimination, simplification, and suggestion until only essence remains. 1 As one of the most important Northern Song Dynasty artists Guo Xi (c.1000c.1090) said: "Each scene in a painting, regardless of size or complexity, must be unified through attention to essence. If the essence is missed, the spirit will lose integrity. It must be completed with spirit in every part. Otherwise the essence will not be clear."2 Wapner set out to create with similar structural essence and rhythm, both organically and emotionally.

Most of Wapner's works in the show were individual vegetal/body figurations with forms that reach, join, entwine, and stretch as if animated beings, as in Scholars' Garden XIV (three tall white forms from rock with root), 2004. These works participate in a trend in American art of the last couple of decades that could be called "Animate Sculpture," including the work of James Surls, Bryan Hunt, David Nash, Martin Puryear, John Duff, Elisa D'Arrigo, Tamiko Kawatra, and Deborah Aschheim. These artists have responded to motifs and materials as if they were alive. Their works are animate in the sense of seeming to possess life or even to embody an inherent spirit or "soul." This mode of art has developed as a nature underground in the contemporary scene—not fully isolated or defined. One can see further discussion in the author's essay for her exhibition, "As if Alive; Animate Sculpture" for the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, 2000.3





Dynasty, 17th-18th century. Lingbi limestone

Ming-Qing

Perforations.

Large

<u>_</u>

Rock with

Stand: early twentieth century, Southern openwork

Above: Grace Bakst Wapner, S*cholars' Garden XIV (three tall white forms from rock with root*), 2004 Previous Page

Clay, 8 x 17 x 9 in.

Wapner's encounter with Chinese scholars' rocks propelled her yet further than she had in 2000 to discover the vitalist potential of her hand-fashioned clay medium. Like the elaborate stones collected by the Chinese literati, Wapner's seem to be shaped as much by nature's forces as by the artist. Her beings undulate out of a seeming earth base, which echoes the pedestals of the Chinese specimen rocks. Such Chinese pedestals were a reverberation and amplification of the life forces manifest in the stones, as seen in Rock with Two Large Perforations, (c. 17th-18th century). Such supports were often elaborate sculptural enhancements in their own right. By contrast Wapner's pedestals play two roles: they can act more demonstratively as a descriptive chunk of earth, much like Albrecht Dürer's Great Piece of Turf, 1503, suggesting both the above ground and the nurturing below ground. Second, her pedestals can function emotionally as core undulations of intense feeling. One can see both modalities in her Scholars' Garden XIV (three tall white forms), 2004, with its electric root extensions and the expressive billowing earth.

Chinese scholars' rocks were actually naturally occurring, found in earth pits or taken from lake and river beds. Originally, huge stones were brought into the scholar's gardens beginning with the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The connoisseur enthusiasm was so great that one Emperor Huizong (reign 1101-1126) ordered the whole populations of two towns to dredge the lake beds for rare Taihu rocks for his fabulous gardens, which set out to reproduce the mountains and rivers of the world! In doing so he exhausted the imperial treasury and contributed to the downfall of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127).4 Scholar officials by the Song-era found that they could bring small table-top versions of the stones into their study for contemplation. Although in their natural state, these smaller rocks were often "chiseled, ground, and polished" and sometimes submerged again into water or allowed to be "scoured by wind and rain to restore the living appearance." What engaged the Chinese collectors would also leave a contemporary artist like Wapner thunderstruck; these are the flowing, changing, ascending, reaching, attenuated forms, the projections and cavities that seem to delineate the very forces of nature. To the Chinese these small chunks of nature were literal embodiments of nature's structural forces [/i] and vital energies [qi]. The forms are reminders of mountains, valleys, plateaus, clouds, grottos, caves, also of fantastic dragons, phoenixes, tigers, and even more rarely vague human figures (e.g., Rock in the Form of a Mountain with Peaks, Grottos, Stalactites, and Stalagmites, Ming, 14th-15th centuries).6 Some of the rocks suggested to connoisseurs the land of the immortals, a place for the journey of the soul.7 Such aggregations of forces and suggested figurations could indicate the very functioning and primal qualities of the universe; to some Chinese, the Dao itself, understood as the power that permeates the whole universe, the dynamic "path" or "way" of this power, the flow of nature.

The principle that would allow a Chinese artist or connoisseur to connect to the universe was "spirit consonance [resonance], life movement" (qi yun. sheng-dong), the first of Xie He's "Six Laws," dating from the sixth century. These laws or principles were the fountainhead of traditional Chinese art theory and were commented upon throughout the centuries.8 This first principle has been the most open to varied interpretation and translations, yet it is the most telling in relation to Wapner's art for what it says about her own intuitive connection with the Chinese works and where she differs "Qi," most often translated as "spirit," is more specifically the vital principle or natural energy of all nature—animate and inanimate—not just of living beings, as "spirit" would indicate in English. In fact to the Chinese all is gi. As philosopher Hyo-Dong Lee puts it, "...a dog is qi, a tree or plant is qi, mountains and rocks are qi, oceans and rivers are qi." Such vital energy literally "constitutes both mind and matter." One form of qi is constantly changing into another form." There are in fact "occasions in which the change/transformation of qi is so extraordinary, subtle and mysterious that it transcends our grasp...." At such moments "qi" becomes "shen" or spirit in Chinese. This can be the moment when the artist's mind and body become perfectly attuned, and resonate with the creative source of the Universe, usually understood to be the Dao (Tao).¹⁰ It is this latter concept of qi that certainly prompts the frequent translation of "qi" as "spirit" in English. The phrase "qi yun" or "spirit consonance" suggests agreement or harmony and the translation "spirit resonance" suggests an amplification produced by a sympathetic vibration. One cannot here sort out the intricacies of how this concept has been interpreted over the centuries. One can only note that the emphases have ranged from a) the artists own qi as entering into the painting, b) the artist as connecting with the qi of objects, or c) the motifs in the painting as resonating with the universal qi, the source of the Universe. Beginning with the Song-era (960-1279 CE), the primary outlook considered that there was no separation between the life of nature and the experience of the individual. 11 As Guo Ruo-hsu (Kuo Jo-hsü), the most influential art writer of the Song-era wrote (c. 1080), spirit consonance' (qi yun) necessarily involves an innate knowledge....It is an unspoken accord, a spiritual communion: 'something that happens without one's knowing it'". 12 This opening up of the self and the expression of it within the nature art context is best stated in a comment attributed to the most famous Song artist, Fan Kuan (960-1030 CE): "... for me to take people as my teachers cannot compare with learning from natural phenomena." "It is better to study nature and better still to follow one's own heart [heart-mind]."13

This is where we find Wapner, not only responding to the forms, scale, landscape qualities, and energies of the Chinese scholar's rocks, but also intuitively to their qi resonance and life movement. She works as well with her heart-mind in her creative process. Comparing one of her works, Scholars' Garden II (human/tree form with blue cloud), 2002, to a scholar's rock, reveals



some differences in form and content, differences that go to the core of her work and to some contemporary Western tendencies. Compared to the Rock in a Form of a Mountain with Peaks. Wapner's sculpture looks to be as much human body as plant and earth. The structural formation of the ascending "stems" have a muscular, limb-like energy, almost an acrobatic juggling of directions, elements, and gravitational poise; heliotropic, yes, but more a reaching of two figures. This is true of other of Wapner's works as well, e.g., Scholars' Garden VII (cantilevered entwined forms), 2003. Frequently they present a human pas de deux of two reaching, entwining, connecting, and separating figurations, as if they were fraught with relational desire or distress.

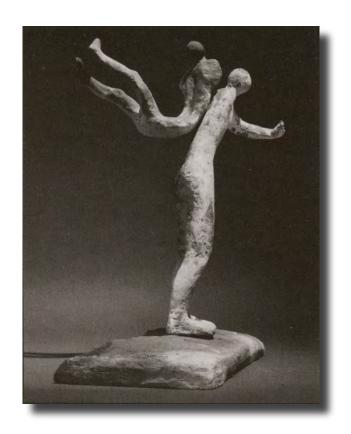
Wapner's current sculptures are a transformation of her Dyad Series of 1993, where abstracted figural pairs connect yet creatively push and pull against each other (*Risk*, 1993), through seeming emotional interactions. These relational

dances metamorphose into the more complex, suggestive vegetal place of the current series. What is interesting regarding Wapner vis à vis the traditional Chinese modalities is the primary impetus of the human body as the vehicle of movement, rather than more exclusively from natural growth. As well, the primary measure of content is most often inner personal emotion rather than the formative forces of nature. Certainly the Chinese nature tradition was sometimes greatly infused by the artist's expressiveness (e.g., the artist Wen Zhengming, 1470-1599 CE), and Wapner's personal emotion is subsumed into the natural forms. But the difference is that in Wapner, the personal expressiveness is the primary vehicle of signification and experience. Traditional Chinese artistic training involved the rendering of rocks, trees, and bamboo, and the artists were not attuned to tangible, three-dimensional body forms and movement, whereas Western training has been primarily focused on the human body, with vestiges of this body center as carrying on into contemporary art.14 Add to that Wapner's long time love and participation in dance, and we find that her works move out from such an expressive body core. As she said of her Dyads, "I am swimming in the water of my own body temperature."15 This body aspect is part of the delicious complexity of her Scholars' Garden series in that the forms obtain a rich animate, hybrid vegetal/ human life through the dialogue with the Chinese. One needs to note one more aspect of several of Wapner's pieces—the element of struggle. This is seen in the anthropomorphic twists of her central stalks and the extensions of

Grace Bakst Wapner, *Risk*, 1993 Clay, 12 x 12 x 8 in.

painful branch/limb-like forms with vivid termini, like restive hands, as in her Scholars' Garden V (large flower with tree and red tips), 2002.

One could consider that she functions in a contemporary expressiveness that has roots back to the Romantic F. W. J. Schelling. As in Schelling's "On the Relationship of the Creative Arts to Nature" (1807), 16 Wapner participates as artist in the "ever-creative original energy of the world, which generates and busily evolves all things out of itself." To Schelling "art stands as the unifying link between the soul and nature and can be apprehended as the living soul of both." In contrast to the Chinese, this process is more of a struggle, an unpredictable dialectic fraught with the novelty of self-arising spirit, rather than the relaxed attention and the receptiveness to flowing qi of the Chinese artist. For example, the Song artist Guo Xi (11th century) would "lay out a fine brush and ink, wash his hands, and clean the ink slab as



though he were receiving a major guest. His spirit at ease and his interest settled, only then did he proceed."¹⁷ By contrast, to Schelling, "nature meets us everywhere at first with reserve, in form more or less severe...." The artist spiritually melts "this apparently rigid form, so that the pure energy of things may flow together with the force of our spirit." The force of individual human spirit is what will allow these nature energies to become self reflective. Schelling's formulation is more spirit-oriented than the present day, where the self becomes more central as vehicle and content, whether it be the emotional self, the deconstructed self, or the cynically self-absorbed narcissistic subject. Wapner lodges in the positive personal emotive present and also, as many contemporary artists, Wapner, unconsciously resonates with Schelling's dialectic of "the formative science in nature and art."

In Wapner's art this struggle emerges from a subjective emotional center, which comes out of her own heart and her own body. We can see this in *Scholars' Garden XIII (wine budded tree through ledge)*, 2004, where the undulating body/tree emerges from an expressive rocklike ledge to spread its branches/limbs and disquieted leaves/hands. Now this is the special place of Wapner, both in relationship to the Chinese tradition, to Schelling, and to the Animate Sculpture mode. This is the place of the heart-mind filled with the most intense emotion. For Wapner, such a focus is an intense emotion that is part of her relationship with other people and with the world around her. She once guoted to me the Jewish proverb that only a broken heart can be filled.



Grace Bakst Wapner, Scholar's Garden VI (pink/red flower with green



This notion of breaking open the heart to be filled is part of her work, but this heartedness is neither maudlin nor sentimental. Felt relationships are one of the meta-phenomena of her art. One can look to the contemporary Buddhist teacher of the 1970 and 1980s in the U.S., Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987), who bridged the gap between East and West, in order to understand this. Trungpa talks about the heart and about searching for the awakened heart: "...if you put your hand through your rib cage and feel for it, there is nothing there except for tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the rest of the world, you feel tremendous sadness."18 Now this sadness is interesting; it does not come from being mistreated. "You don't feel sad because someone has insulted you or because you feel impoverished. Rather this experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely exposed." It is this kind of exposed heart that is in Wapner's work. Trungpa says of this heart: "There is no skin or tissue; it's pure raw

meat. Even if a tiny mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched." One can see a glimmer of this in such works as Scholars' Garden VI (pink/red flower with green snake out of rock), 2003. Here a flower stalk and a snake intertwine. They stand on a pedestal of clay earth, showing the above ground and below. The below is striated and exposed with reddish color rubbed into a knotted central "heart," the throbbing center of the whole. Above ground the snaky stalks are flushed with pale pink and green and the flower head suffused with a poppy pink. Color is one of Wapner's means for effecting life qualities. One finds in her figural tensions and directness of expression, an honesty, even a fearlessness to her opening up. As Trungpa said, because you feel your heart is full, you would like to spill it out and give it to others.

Wapner can also be celebratory as in her Scholars' Garden VIII (multiple forms with feet on rock face), 2003. Here is a lineup of fledglings on an earth base. They stretch their stalks from a row of feet, with nascent heads on stalks, mouths open, instinctively stretching in various directions for nourishment. Part of the vibrant life quality in them is a sense of humor that potentiates their exuberance. This contrasts with the deep seriousness of the Chinese Scholar's rock tradition, which discerns monumental landscapes and mythic beasts in the found configurations. Wapner's image emerges more directly, more intimately, from her personal body-heart core of emotion.

So Wapner learns from the Chinese, extends her means, vibrates with a

19 x 15 x 10

similar resonance, life movement, but transforms it through her own heart/ mind/ body that locates a personalized poignancy, a tender vivid feeling at the center of each of her works.

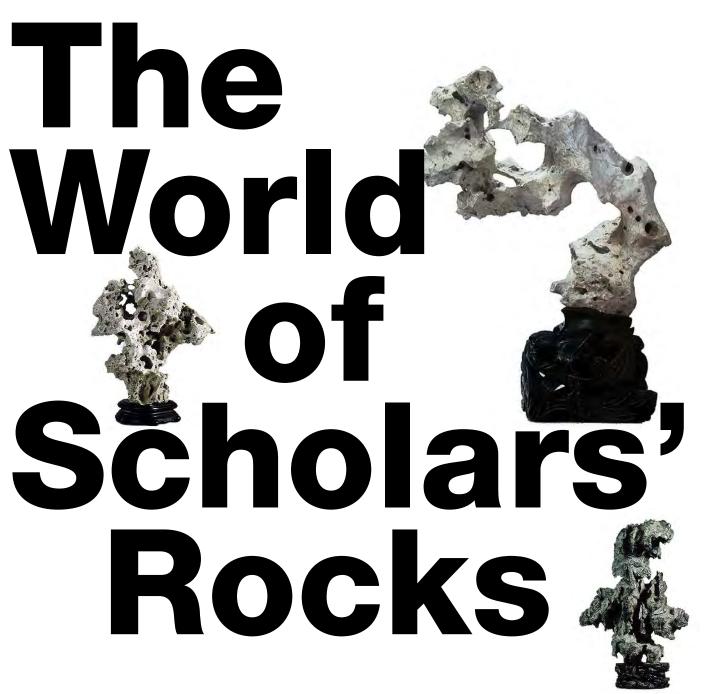
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- ¹ George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting*, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, revised edition, 1959, 35-37.
- ² Kuo Hsi [Guo Xi], ed. Kuo Ssu, "Advice on Landscape Painting" and "Meaning of Landscape Painting," with comments by Gu Xi's son Kuo Ssu, 1110-1117 CE; translation in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, ed., Early Chinese Texts on Painting, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, 156.
- ³ Sara Lynn Henry, As If Alive: Animate Sculpture, exhibition and catalogue with essay, Summit, N.J.: Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, 2000.
- ⁴ Kemin Hu, The Spirit of Gongshi: Chinese Scholar's Rocks, Newton, MA: L..H. Inc, n.d., 23.
- ⁵ Du Wan, Yunlin shipu, 12th century; quoted in Robert D. Mowry, Worlds Within Worlds, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Art Museums, 1997, 21.
- ⁶ Mowry, 21.
- ⁷ Claudia Brown, "Chinese Scholars' Rocks and the Land of Immortals: Some Insights from Painting," in Mowry, 59.
- 8 See the following and their sources for the scholarly discussion of the translations and commentaries: Bush and Shih, 10-16, and Victor H. Mair, "Xie He's 'Six Laws' of Painting and their Indian Parallels," in Zonggi Cai, Chinese Aesthetics: the Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties, Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, 81ff.
- ⁹ Wapner agrees with the author's assessment, here and below; conversation Aug. 22, 2008.
- ¹⁰ Quotes and discussion defining qi are primarily from conversation with Hy-Dong Lee, philosopher, Drew University, in emails 8/18/2008-8/21/2008. Professor Lee has published on Hegel and is working on a book on the concept of qi.
- ¹¹ Rowley, 6.
- 12 Kuo Jo-hsü in "On the Impossibility of Teaching Spirit Consonance," translated in Bush and Shih, 95.
- ¹³ First sentence of Fan Kuan quote from Robert Thorp and



Richard Ellis Vinograd, Chinese Art & Culture, New York: Prentice Hall and Abrams, 2001; continuation of the quote from Wen C. Fong, "Monumental Landscape Painting," in Wen C. Fong, et al. Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, N.Y.: Metropolitan Museum and Abrams, 1996, 125.

- 14 Rowley, 40-42.
- 15 Quoted in Ellen Handy, Grace Bakst Wapner: Dyads, New York: Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, 1994.
- ¹⁶ Schelling guotes from "On the Relationship of the Creative Arts to Nature (1807), translation in Lorenz Eitner. Neoclassicism and Romanticism 1750-1850, Vol II, Restoration/ Twilight of Humanism, Englewoods Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970, 43-47. Helpful perspectives on Schelling also from philosopher Robert Corrington, Drew University Professor Corrington has published several books on his own philosophy of "ecstatic naturalism," which has roots both in Western and Asian thought.
- ¹⁷ From Guo Xi, "Advice on Landscape Painting" with comments by his son Kuo Ssu, translation in Bush 157.
- ¹⁸ Trunpa quotes and discussion from Chögyam Trungpa, Shambhala the Sacred Path of the Warrior, Boston; Shambhala Publications, 1984, 45-46.



Gardens, Studios, and Paintings • The Metropolitan

by Mark Daniel Cohen

The following review covers the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition of Chinese Scholars' Rocks that Grace Bakst Wapner saw in 2000 and that, in part, inspired the work examined by Sara Lynn Henry in "Grace Bakst Wapner's Scholar's Garden: An East West Aesthetic Dialogue" in this issue of *Hyperion*. The review was first published in Review magazine, March 15, 2000.

In the Ming Scholar's Retreat

Museum of Art • New York • through August 20, 2000

in the Astor Court at The Metropolitan Museum, there is a small pool of delicately swimming water. The pool is set at the back left corner of the garden, is surrounded by rocks and quietly tempered foliage, and filled with intricately colored, slowly roaming fish. At regular moments, a stream plunges in a miniature waterfall, spilling from suspended stones to splash in the pool below. And the pool's water is like a fluid diamond, gleaming and precise, and transparent with a crystalline clarity.

One Sunday afternoon not long ago, I saw a fish in that pool raise itself to an astonishment. At a time when the waterfall fell, a marble white fish covered with alabaster orange spots swam directly under the churning plash. It hovered there for a moment, then drew itself up and lifted its head out of the water to bathe in the air under the glistening spell of the spilling shower. Like a transformative figment of legend, the fish entered the air to feel the cleansing of the falling of water.

The scholar's retreat is like a fairy tale kingdom. It is a place I have visited for years, a place of relief and enthusiasm and restorative charms. It is a magical place, in which lost chances seem to return and impossibilities appear to be likely. And it is also something else. It is a place most appropriate for study and thought, and for following the bread crumb trail of the mind. It is a place for the magical appearance of inklings and implications, for unsuspected notions arriving unbidden, where secret thoughts dart and levitate, as if another and a better mind had preceded you there. Another mind that is also your own is just out of view, just behind the foliage and around the edge of a stone, moving everywhere here as it did in the rose garden of T. S. Eliot, "moving without pressure" through the vibrant air, like "the unheard music hidden in the shrubbery."

Study is meet for the scholar's garden, for study is a descent into the mind, and the depths of the mind are where magic transpires. The rigorous chain of logic is as conjuring as a dance, as Lewis Carroll revealed when Alice stepped through the looking glass. It brings to mind the unpredictable; its predications raise the unpredicated. The reason dreams in the sparks of unexpected thoughts, in a cascading blaze that levitates like a suspicion, that tickles the skin like an inkling, that rises like a fish leaving water to bathe in water, in a plummeting of liquid jewels, in the shimmering facets of the pour.

The scholar's garden hovers thoughts like magic. It seems the natural home for such thoughts, the appropriate scenario, the stage set for translucence to imaginings, for the aura of such feelings made visible and tangible, physically real and open to the touch. The heart of the garden in the Astor Court is in the rocks that stud it—extraordinary stones beautifully gnarled with intricate attitude, contorted and driven with pockings and riven with holes that appear as natural as water-markings and yet as unnatural as the sculptor's impositions. They crop up from the floor and sit among the foliage

like legendary presences contemplating the intrusion in their realm of such ordinary mortals as we.

The stones mark the scholar's garden as the natural home for thought, for they seem somehow the intrinsic embodiment of thought itself. And so they have seemed to Chinese scholars for more than a millennium, as is revealed by "The World of Scholars' Rocks." Organized by Maxwell K. Hearn, curator in the Department of Asian Art at the museum, the exhibition fills all the Chinese art galleries surrounding the Astor Court and contains 36 scholars' rocks—many from the Met's holdings and 15 of which are promised gifts to the museum from the Richard Rosenblum family. The display of stones is accompanied by over 90 Chinese paintings, drawn largely from the museum's collection, which feature images of such rocks and landscape scenes inspired by their idiosyncratically lyrical forms.

None of the rocks and only a few paintings are dated—several more of the paintings can be located roughly in time by reference to the birth and death dates of the artists cited, in those cases in which the artist is known. Nevertheless, some sense of the range of history represented can be drawn from the information provided on the museum's web site, information that is unfortunately far more abundant than what is available in the galleries. The scholars' rocks themselves date, in one instance, from as far back as the Song dynasty (960-1279) to, in another instance, the reign of the emperor Qianlong (1736-95). According to the paintings that have dates, they range from at least 1460 to as late as 1940.

A fair degree of information is available on the web site, and to some extent in the museum, regarding the history of scholars' rocks and their influence on Chinese painting. According to the story the museum tells, rocks of fantastic shape were first collected for display in the studies of scholars during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Especially prized were stones that had been sculpted by natural erosion, or at least that gave the impression of having been shaped entirely by nature, even though they were often "artfully enhanced" by human intervention. The stones generally were displayed vertically and were filled with and shot through by cavities, furrows, striations, and dimples. They were valued for their resemblance to mountains, caves, and grottos, and their suggestions of magical peaks and subterranean paradises in which immortal beings reside. Largely, the rocks were made of limestone, and the most valuable were of a stone so dense as to ring when struck. (To this day, we judge the quality of marble for carving by the same standard.) By the 16th century, scholars' rocks were made of, or made in, jade, turquoise, soapstone, and malachite.

It was during the Tang dynasty, as well, that larger examples of scholars' rocks began to be featured in gardens. In the eighth century, paintings

of fantastic rocks started to appear, works in which the image of a single stone was combined with a tree or flower to imply a garden setting. Such paintings soon developed into a distinct pictorial genre and by the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) had become the principal mode of pictorial artistic expression. From the 14th century on, the extraordinary forms of scholars' rocks determined the stylistic treatment of landscapes in painting—landscape paintings often resembled scholars' rocks to a greater degree than actual landscapes. By the 17th century, the aesthetic standards of paintings and rocks had become indistinguishable, and the distribution of scholars' rocks in gardens often were inspired by the compositional designs of painted landscapes. As is obvious from the exhibition, the tradition of painting such rocks continued into the 20th century.

The multitude of paintings on display in the exhibition gives an ample sense of the range of such work, as described in the exhibition materials. They include beautiful examples of painted scrolls with single rocks and foliage, such as Bamboo in Wind, ca. 1460, by Xia Chang (1388-1470); landscapes of nearly ambient and animated scenery that bears the look of scholars' rocks, as in Twin Pines, Level Distance by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322); garden images dominated by a large and guietly imperious stone, as with Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician, 1551, by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559); and studies of individual rocks, such as the strikingly expressive and serpentine Red Friend by Lang Ying (1585-ca. 1664). Perhaps the painting most indicative of the values and insight harbored in the heart of these rocks and held forth for the people who treasured them is Scholar on a Rock by Ren Yi (also known as Ren Bonian, 1840-1896)—a painting on a folded fan mounted on an album leaf, which shows a scholar in a yellow robe sitting on a large scholars' rock and poring intently over a book. The plaque next to the work describes the rock and scholar as "kindred spirits," and the assertion seems right. The rock and the mind of the studious scholar, intensely focused in its inquiry and inevitable meanderings, seem somehow to be much the same thing. The scholars' rock is like a scholar set to reading.

This is an impression that comes all the more clearly from the examples of the rocks themselves, which are clearly the core of the exhibition. They possess an immediacy of fascination, a beckoning fluidity that seeks through their cavities and ingresses, their recessions and permeations that seem to hold within them suggestions and soft impressions that will flow forth only given the most delicate of pressures, only given the gentlest of touches that can brought by the inquiry of the eye and the hovering instigation of the most fleeting of thoughts—a touch as gentle as a whisper. The titles of the rocks—for which we are given no provenance; we have no way of knowing if the titles have accompanied the rocks through the centuries or are merely conveniences endowed by a collector or a museum—seem thoroughly misleading in the impressions they grant. The titles are either purely descriptive—such as *Rock*

With Large Perforations and Vertical Rock With Numerous Perforations—or evocative of metaphoric suggestions—such as *Three Mountains At Sea*. Grotto, and the fanciful and remarkably accurate Rock In The Form Of A Seated Tiger. Despite the traditional nature of the metaphoric suggestions. there seems something off about the visual allusions. The resemblance to a tiger or a mountain seems less the matter than some intrigue in the pure and literal nature of the rock, some mesmerizing power in the look of the stone for its own sake.

Obviously, there is something perilous in the drawing of inferences and the propounding of responses to art from a foreign tradition. No one but a resident of the culture from which an artistic genre originates—the cultural milieu in which it was created and by which it was nurtured and within which it took its meanings and granted its indigenous reactions—can possibly understand the intrinsic nature of such works. To respond for our own sakes is to ride roughshod over other people, over their ethos and their frameworks of significances, over their very minds, their very hearts. But within our confessions of ignorance, we may respond and in our response, search for a commonality of feeling and imagination, seek a spontaneous lingua franca of the imagination, a bridge language of the spirit. We may respond from our hearts if we are intent to look for the commonality of responses, if we are intent to research as much as we may after we come to recognize the way we respond—if we seek in a full sincerity to find what there may be of a common heart among us all.

In that acknowledgment, personal reactions to these stones may have some meaning. They appear, and have always appeared to me in their display in the Astor Court, to be not merely the erosions of water but, by that erosion, of the very essence of water—the essence of water translated into the rock it has ground. The look of these permeated, lyrically craggy, and lunar-looking stones is like the sound of splashing water. They have about them a sense of an ease, like the natural ease of water that seeks its own level, that does not fight against the natural processes but succumbs to them and takes from them their strength. These stones are the opposites of machines, the opposites of human intrusions upon nature. They do not harness the natural power, they follow it. And they have imbued into them, and recorded upon them, not the movements of water, but the nature of the movement of water. They seem to flow, not with the look of water rushing in a stream, but with a lithic equivalent of such a movement. They have in them the passion of water, for water does have a passion. Water moves, it is not pushed, it is driven from within itself, and as such, it is something much like life.

That passion infuses the mind which beholds it. The tenor of the movement of the stone carries to the imagination, for the movement of water is keyed to a movement of the mind, a motion re-invoked by the vision of the scholars'

rocks. It is the movement of reverie, of the easy chasing of the mind after the phantoms of its own making, a pursuit like the pleasure of water following itself—a natural motion, for the mind is a natural thing. The mind fabricates and forces within the world of its own making, within the world of its own visions, but within the natural world itself, the mind is an object of nature, as natural as a cloud, as a waterfall, as a fish seeking air, as a moisture-invested rock. In its every gesture, its every investment, the mind dreams in a pleasure of reverie, discovering what is unexpected, finding magic around the edge of every stone.

The scholars' rocks are images of the mind, images of something that is not visual, images in the sense of likenesses of a different kind. They are images that are like what they concern, that reflect by calling to what they do not resemble. They call to the mind and draw it to an entry—an entry into them, and into itself. These rocks cause you to enter yourself, like the scholar in the painting who poured his soul into his book, the book over which he pored as he sat on the rock.

The power of these rocks to capture the imagination is something strange, and it is something not so strange, something deeply familiar. The clue is given in the observations made in the historical material the museum has provided. We are told that the stones were often products of erosion—they were "sculpted by natural processes"—or at least they gave the impression of having been fashioned by nature, though they were "artfully enhanced" by artisans and "oriented to maximize their expressive potential." Consider those phrases carefully. "Sculpted by natural processes"—"sculpted" in what sense, at least in what sense different from the way in which all natural objects are "sculpted" by such processes? "Artfully enhanced" how? How could they have been made more natural than nature made them? What is there to enhance? "Expressive potential"—expressive of what?

What they are expressive of, what a human artisan could judge the rocks by and enhance them to become even more evocative of, is their capability to pull the imagination—their aesthetic potential. That is the lesson these scholars' rocks have to teach—that the aesthetic quality is inherent in natural formations. That it exists in nature, exists as it were when we are not looking—exists whether we are looking or not. The aesthetic aspect is real, real in the sense that it is there to be discovered. It is not dependent on us to create it. It is as natural as a cloud, as a waterfall, as a fish seeking air, as a moisture-invested rock. We may enhance it if we may think how to do so, but we do so by making the natural formation come to seem all the more natural, or to seem so to us.

And one of the places in which the aesthetic experience is to be found most readily is precisely where those people who selected and fashioned the

scholars' rocks sought for it—in limestone, the original material of the scholars' rocks, and the base material of marble, the material that rings when it is packed dense enough and is flawless in its density. The art historian Adrian Stokes wrote about the intrinsic imaginative power of limestone in his book The Stones Of Rimini, and it has been said nowhere else so well:



Limestone is the humanistic rock. The spectacular witness of limestone weathering or natural sculpture has inspired many of the comprehensive images on which civilizations have been based. . . . The interaction of limestone and water is always poetic, always appealing to the imagination. . . . The story of limestone and water has many further chapters that are palpable to the senses, many variations: and the men who obtained nourishment from this environment soon conceived those many aspects of life and death which, when forming some calm or "objective" whole, we name culture.

There is no accident to the finding by Chinese scholars of the aesthetic appeal in formations of limestone. Stokes found the same recognition in the architecture and sculpture of cultures throughout the Mediterranean, as he found that the artistic images of those cultures are rooted in the natural formations of limestone. What is most significant here is the testimony we receive from the Chinese scholars who displayed the stones, and the Chinese artisans who finished them, and the Chinese painters to portrayed them—testimony to the perennial nature of the aesthetic, to the objective fact of it. The aesthetic may be difficult to define, it may be ultimately impossible to specify and may elude forever our efforts to theorize it. But it is a fact that we pursue, a stable reality that we may harken toward or dismiss, and if artists turn away from what such scholars found in these rocks, then they turn away from art itself. And artists may do so, for art is hard. It is hard for art is everywhere about us, and what is all about us is what is hardest to find. But to falter in the face of the difficult is not to deny it, it is merely to avoid it.

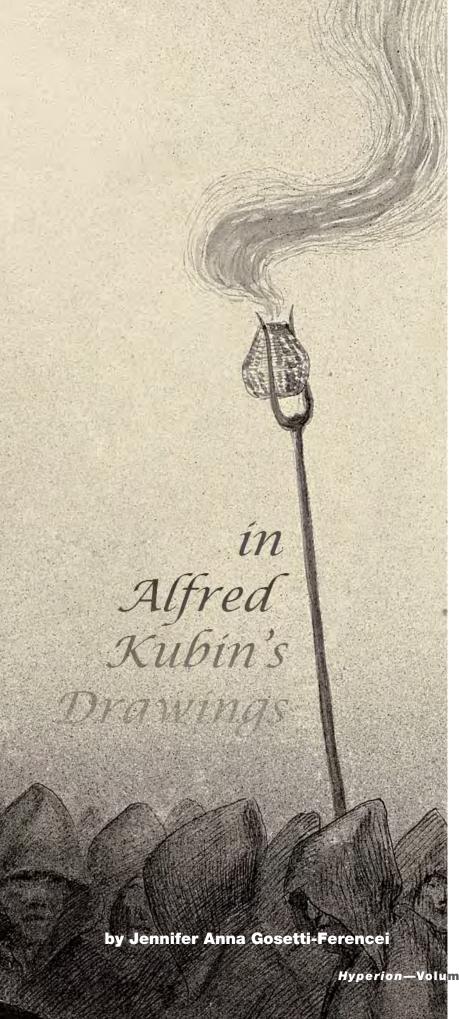
The stones in "The World of Scholars' Rocks" offer one of the more intense and intensively focused aesthetic experiences to be obtained at this moment in New York, and there was not a single artist involved in their making. It tells us that whether we choose to pursue the aesthetic in the perennial sense of the word, it will not disappear. It will be there, for it always is there—as permanent, as fluid, as solid as a rock.

Foreshadowings of the Kafkaesque

Alfred Kubin: Drawings, 1897 – 1909

Neue Galerie, New York

September 15, 2008 – January 26, 2009



he isolation of a mind that has crossed to the 'other side' of consciousness finds expression, in tones of the absurd and the macabre. in the art of Alfred Kubin (1877-1959), a fin de siècle Austrian artist and writer whose works have been assembled in a major exhibition at the Neue Galerie in New York. Kubin's drawings break open the life of dream and fantasy with a disturbingly vivid momentum: literalizing visualizations of the pathology of sexual desire and the self-negating reflexivity of human consciousness give a provocative edge to his works. The exhibit, the first major presentation of Kubin's work in America, is compellingly arranged and informatively notated, and features drawings in pen and black ink on paper, and several larger works frugally colored in tempera, oil, or watercolor, executed between the fin de siècle (1897) and the 1909 publication of Kubin's only novel, Die andere Seite (The Other Side). The drawings evoke the haunting of a mind, and of a very unhappy life (as a child Kubin had witnessed his mother's death, among other tragedies), given over to chronic fantasies of the grotesque. Their topography is as hallucinatory and disturbing as the expressive violence of Goya, often as uncanny as Freud's interpretations of Hoffmann's 'The Sandman.' There are echoes of Poe and of Nietzsche (of whom Kubin was an avid reader in his youth), and suggestions of the radical insomnia



of mind captured more recently in Blanchot's attempt to think 'disaster.' The titles alone provide a taxonomy of Angst, evoking such situations as 'dying,' 'epidemic,' 'the entrance to hell, 'suicide,' 'illness,' 'tortured man,' 'fear,' and 'dread.' One image entitled Selbstbetrachtung, ca. 1901-02 ('self-observation') shows a severed head that seems (paradoxically) to be observed by its abandoned body. The threat of animalistic hunger is amplified by distortions of scale: Fledermaus, ca. 1902-03 shows a swarm of people fleeing from a bat; Eisbär, ca. 1901-02 shows the polar bear as a giant weasel-like figure about to devour a tiny house in the snow, an innocent warmth emitted from its smokestack. Truth (Die Wahrheit), ca. 1903 is represented as a giant faceless slug. Sexuality is not only violent but parasitic, sometimes rendered as a site of damnation: the female figure is literally devoured, dead, or mercilessly dominating (in The Lady on the Horse, ca. 1900-01, a woman on an all-too-real rocking-horse, itself seemingly frightened, crushes men's bodies like tiny broken puppets scattered on the nursery floor).

In a few more serene pictures, however, a melancholy whimsy prevails, as if the artist were marveling at an insight that must be won by distortions of realism—so that, as in Arcimboldo's representations of human decay, the sanity with which realism takes sides is ruptured and the strange beauty of extreme fragility emerges. In *Der letzte König*, ca. 1902, the last king (somehow foreshadowing Kafka's 'last' hunger artist) is a dainty mimelike figure in white sleeping or perhaps daydreaming above the dark-robed and possibly ill-intentioned subjects; the ghostly horse in an illustration for the novel half-turns in an awkward gallop against a black-etched ground, its eyes toward heaven; in *Die Gasse (The Alley)*, ca. 1905, a madman glides barefoot among cloaked passers-by, evoking more familiar figures of Munch, and a dark spindly tree haunts the wintry foreground.

One room is devoted to photographs and letters, where a postcard from Kafka confirms foreshadowings of the dark undercurrents of Kafka's fiction. Yet it is also the vacancy and anonymity suggested by some of the human figurations in Kubin's images that relate an abstraction Kafka found essential to his art. Kubin's figures of animals incongruously coupled with human figures (an erotic counterpart of Joseph K. has webbed fingers), the gestures and physical arrangements of torture (the flailing scene in the office closet), the alignment of violence, fear, and senselessness with the visible estrangement of the individual, are familiar to readers of Kafka. But in Kubin even the immaterial natural forces, like the wind (in *Der Wind*, ca. 1902-03), take part in some sad comedy of human pain: a huge human-like figure draped in

Alfred Kubin, *Der letzte König*, 1902 Image courtesy of Neue Galerie New York

flowing white garments is pulled as if by threads through a dark abandoned field. When they evoke natural topographies and mingle natural forms, these spaces of Kubin's imagination pulse with Hieronymus Bosch and foreshadow Surrealism. The ink sketches and washes render dark, only tonally differentiated images in most of the works, leaving a sense that a dream-world to which they belong is only provisionally differentiated from reality.

Many of these images are related to Kubin's novel *Die andere Seite* (*The Other Side*) originally published with 52 illustrations, a selection of which constitutes the initial segment of the exhibit. The novel posits a dreamworld established by a demi-god figure, Patera, in deep in Central China, a realm distinguished by its nostalgic refusal of any evidence of modernity and its governance



by the will of an Asiatically-inspired dream-life (Kubin was not only a reader of Nietzsche but of Schopenhauer). The protagonist, an illustrator like Kubin, makes his 'passage' to the other side by train—a passage rendered in one of Kubin's touching sketches of a lone locomotive crossing dark rivers of space and he gradually adapts to the half-light, the foggy world ruled by the forms and movements of Patera's dreams. These forms eventually dissolve into an apocalyptic morass of destruction, where the last echoes of human morality and reason die out, and the natural order giving distinction in nature falls to chaotic and destructive intermingling of species through sexual devouring and pestilence. Perle, the capital city of the Traumreich, is gradually overtaken by epidemics, moral and pathological, and by the animals that creep in from the surrounding jungle, rendered almost playfully in Kubin's illustrations. It is unsurprising that Kubin's protagonist's most creative insights are produced at the moment of immanent destruction, as he discovers a 'Psychographik' that could easily describe that of his author. The drawings of Kubin's narrator push imagery toward linguistic expression: this fragmentary style is more 'written than drawn.' In the thrall of this creativity the narrator leads a hybrid life, both drawn to the destruction and pulled toward visual enlightenment. The relation to language of Kubin's narrator reflects, it can be said, Kubin's own artistic development; while principally a painter and graphic artist, the novel itself initiates the transformation of Kubin's own visual surrealist aesthetic into literary form. The new aesthetic energy found in the 'other side' draws on the



Dionysian instability that is revealed to operate beneath the apparent order. The dissolution of the order of the familiar, rational world unleashes primitive creative energies that are rendered inevitably violent.

Kubin's imagination, both in the novel and its illustration, is resiliently topographical: in the drawings we are offered maps of Perle, and sketches illustrating scenes that are meant to allow us an imaginative venture into the dream-city. But Kubin's pictures, like his prose, fluctuate between fantasy and commentary on a recognizably human world. In one sketch, *Mann (Der Zeichner)*, 1909, the draftsman is bent over his work at a café, his cape and hat hanging on the coat rack, the loneliness of the figure nevertheless recalling the cafés of Berlin and Vienna and Munich. The café table's spidery legs

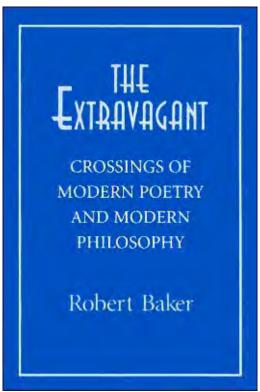
and curving, linear shadows suggest some existence that hovers between the familiar world and the troubling dream-world of the artist. The map of Perle, of which there are several on view in the exhibit, bears a European topography, the castle above the city clustered around the river below not unlike the arrangement of Salzburg or Prague. Yet the tonal pressure in the pictures, and gradually in the novel itself, is ever toward the dream-like irreality that breaks through the order of the recognizably European world of its author.

It may be no coincidence that minor episodes from Kubin's novel become magnified in motifs of Kafka's writing, and the relationship between their narrative styles may help to illuminate the innovative nature of Kubin's break with realistic mimesis. While scholarly speculation about the source for Kafka's castle in *Das Schloß* has focused on such diverse possibilities as the South American plantation in Schafstein's *Der Zuckerbaron* and the German castle looming above a Bohemian town, there is no more obvious—though entirely overlooked until this essay—literary forebearer than the *Palast* and *Archiv* of Kubin's *Traumreich*. Patera resides in a monstrously large castle that looms over the capital of the dream city Perle, presented in several of the illustrations, but the narrator, despite persistent attempts and a personal invitation to the region, is unable for much of the narrative to gain access to him. Just as Kafka's land surveyor fails to gain an audience at the castle, and wastes much effort in a bureaucratic labyrinth, Kubin's narrator is frustrated in his attempts: an *Audienzkarte* must be obtained from a nearby archive

that is stocked to the brim with documents. These occupy the attentions of the bureaucrats, but are revealed to have nothing whatsoever to do with the Traumreich; they have been merely imported, presumably out of date, from various archives around the world. Absurdly ineffectual, the archive is attended by sleeping and over-decorated officials writing with inkless guills. The narrator is led through a seemingly endless labyrinth of deserted passageways, halls, and offices which are filled to the ceiling with irrelevant documents and maps, only to find that the real government is housed somewhere else. The narrator finally receives a ticket for entrance to the palace, but it arrives the day after its expiration, as it has been circulating in an extended and fruitless postal exchange. The transpositions of scale, the literalizing imagery of absurd deferral of telos, and the abstracting distortion of spatial realism ring in Kubin's images with what we now call the Kafkaesque.

Not only the imagery of the palace, archive, and its bureaucracy, but the existential tonality of the absurd evoked by the best moments of Kubin's novel anticipate some of Kafka's major motifs. The inhabitants of Kubin's dreamcolony depicted in the illustrations wildly defer to the anachronistic commander Patera, represented in a drawing as a classical Greek statue with vacant eyes. who is overwhelmed by the power of a modern capitalist from America, just as Kafka's penal colony is ruled by an archaic command losing power to the intervention of modern sentiment and its new norms. In Kubin, as in Kafka, illegible writing and cryptic symbols (for instance within the clock-tower) hold power over subjects, who respect an ever-present but nowhere localizable authority. What differentiates Kubin's novel is its expression of the conflict in the dream-life between creation and dissolution, a conflict expressed that seems a subtext of nearly all of the illustrations on view in the exhibition. Kafka takes departure from Kubin, and marks out his singular genius, when he insists that his Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis 'was no dream': 'Es war kein Traum.' Yet Kubin's novel, and his illustrations devoted to it, affirm the dream as both means to explore and the material of the mind's interior landscape. Kafka, we might speculate, transliterates Kubin's own literalizations of the radical instability of being human, while in Kubin they remain dream-images (in one illustration, an ape devours a woman head-first, in an image that could only be a nightmare, while Kafka has his ape physically and discursively 'report to the academy'). Yet the relationship between language and the visual imagination is crucial for both writers (thinking of their connection one cannot help but call to mind Kafka's illustrations in ink for The Trial). Kubin's art gives visual form, just as Kafka's language is said to do, for the violence as well as the occasional, if also tragic, majesty of the absurd that emerges from some darkest region of the imagination's 'other side.'

Ex-silentio Eloquence poetry and philosophy in the middle of it



a review of

The Extravagant:

Crossings of Modern Poetry

and Modern Philosophy

Robert Baker

University of Notre Dame Press, 2005

by Camelia Elias

x-tra-va-gant. This is how we should render graphically

this adjective. The idea of extravagance itself is made up of paratextual elements: 'ex' for out; 'tra' for crossings, 'va' for forward, 'g(r)ant' for reward. Extra-vagrancy. Drift some more. Drifting aimlessly towards the margins is a rewarding act, although as it often goes for margins, they are not for everybody. A simple dissection of the word, such as the one above, gives us a brief, yet illustrative insight into what is at stake in the extravagant, namely, the desire to be different, the desire to transcend, transform and crisscross the mundane, and the desire to occupy a liminal space from whence the experience of something excessive can be thought of as gratifying. Nowhere is the extravagant better represented than in poetry. Ever since the ancient Greeks have defined the *peritton*, the extravagant has formally been associated with poetry. At the level of content the extravagant has been associated with prophesy. As the prophet's language is a language of imitation—the aim is to have the divine reveal itself through language—the primary concern of the prophet is not how to put the divine into words, but how to experience it, and then pass it on.

In its more modern connotative form, the extravagant suggests a highlighting of the emotional aspect inherent in extravagance—the extravagant is extravagant also because it is conscious of itself being extravagant. Extravagant emotion conjures a sensual experience that goes beyond the intellect but not before crossing it, traversing it. The extravagant opens itself onto the kind of poetic language that hammers excess into prophetic genius. Here I like what the extravagant among extravagant poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins, has to say about the act of prophesying as it ties in with poetic language and philosophy—the latter concerned with the question of the form and function of the extravagant. A prophet's language is "that language which genius speaks as fitted to its exaltation, and place among other genius, but does not sing in its flights" (Letter to A. W. M. Baillie, 10/11 Sept. 1864).1 All writers concerned with the question of genius point to the necessity of form as style to carry their messages through. Baker quotes Hopkins in passing: "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil" (31). The often vagrant prophets, often prophesying about some ominous vagary, have the extravagant built into their very nature. As they often perceive themselves in terms of wholeness, they thus also embody margins, or extremes. As such they can be thought of as being the product of their own interpretations, of what is marginal or central, what is extravagant or conventional. These interpretations in turn can be said to produce their own literatures (of exegesis one might add), poetics, and style.

Here it is interesting to note that existing studies on the concept of the extravagant, the most recent and the object of this review, Robert Baker's *The Extravagant: Crossings of Modern Poetry and Modern Philosophy*, tend to emphasize a period, rather than a sense of continuation where the manifestation of the extravagant is concerned. (I'm thinking here also of M.

E. Edes and Dudley Frasier's study from 1954, The Age of Extravagance: An Edwardian Anthology, which Baker incidentally doesn't mention in his survey).

Any study of the extravagant that focuses on periodization is bound to answer the charge with constraint and take issue with the tension inherent in the definition of the extravagant as that which resists being contained. As the extravagant suggests wandering, escaping time, floating aimlessly, and probing poetic vision from the vantage point of prophetic power, the extravagant contaminates rather than lets itself be conjured up by a container.

Baker's book does a good job in showcasing this awareness that the extravagant, while restricted to modern manifestations, is always articulated against the background of transcendence, and hence it is a-historical. Thus, while the book emphasizes the modern period, it also treats with equal measure concepts such as the sublime (in Kant, Wordsworth, and Lyotard), visionary quests and revisions (in Rimbaud, Nietzsche, and Bataille), and apocalyptic negativity (in Kierkegaard, Dickinson, Mallarmé, and Derrida).

At first eye glance, one is tempted to ask how Baker would pull off juxtaposing thinkers who have been influenced by Romanticism and avant-gardist concerns, on the one hand, with modern takes on concepts that have resisted becoming part of the instrumentalization of discursive and critiquing frameworks, on the other hand. But Baker anticipates this question guite early on. Especially Habermas and Allan Megill (author of the seminal study, Prophets of Extremity (1985)) are squared off against and criticized for not being very specific in their theories of how both modern art and philosophy have been influenced by the Romantic tradition. In their broad claims, argues Baker, about the ways in which Romanticism has been appropriated by philosophers but only so that they can formulate dystopian views of modernity. neither Habermas nor Megill engage in analyses of specific art works. Against this background, says Baker about his own project, which is central to his book:



I place poets and philosophers in close communication with one another in order to elucidate some of the similar paths they've pursued in their ambivalent engagements with modernity. Poets are not simply "myth-makers" who come along to seduce irresponsible philosophers, as both Megill and Habermas tend to suggest. They are writers who think and engage the world in their poems, which is a primary reason why they've had much to say to a number of Continental philosophers over the last two centuries. (10-11; author's emphasis)

I like this idea. However, I wouldn't dismiss so quickly the notion that poets are primarily, indeed, in the business of seducing—not irresponsible, as that would be rather uninteresting, but especially responsible—philosophers. Megill, for instance makes this point when he takes a poet such as Edmond Jabès to show how the poet embodies the philosopher and the philosopher embodies the poet, all in one, in that vision of excess which situates itself at the extremity of what one might call the limits of prophesying. Megill's book *Prophets of* Extremity—whose subtitle directly engages philosophers by their names, and in an order that suggests performative contradictions: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida—is more concerned with what philosophers perform when they don't really say anything, when they let their texts become their own interpretations. For Megill, someone like Jabès creates the link that Baker would like to see enforced between the rational, or responsible, philosophers and the emotional, or irresponsible, poets. For Megill, the site of extremity that the above mentioned philosophers embody is mediated by poets such as Jabès who have articulated philosophical positions for poetry as poetry and philosophy par excellence. For instance, Jabès's statement in his supremely poetic and prophetic The Book of Questions leads the way in Megill's book and functions also as a specific 'artwork' in itself which invites the reader to consider what a poem does in its philosophical thrust: namely, run a risky business—seducing philosophers being one of them. More poignantly and concretely, "a poem always runs the risk of being meaningless, and would be nothing without this risk."

While the point here is not to offer a double review of Baker and Megill's works, I want to stress the significance of the thought that sees extravagance and extremity not as contained within any one period but transcending time precisely through their inherent and meta-performative (extravagant and extreme) nature. Thus, the tension between containing transcendent thought within a certain period must be considered. Megill does it. In Baker's scheme, the poem as a risk is seen as a rite of passage that philosophy has to go through if it wants to stand the chance of articulating anything interesting. The intersection between poetry and philosophy can thus only be made sense of at the juncture where the extravagant paves the way.

On a larger scale, Baker's concern with the extravagant is not so much in terms of what is at stake—the risqué element in modern poetry—but in terms of the power of agency that the "translocative" function of the extravagant exerts on both poetry and philosophy. By way of quoting Osip Mandelstam, Baker defines the translocative thus: "What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road"

(5). For Baker, the stretched middle position via coercing words, as it were, in addition to other forms of transitions invests poetry with a negative kind of energy. Thus, creativity must be understood against the background of the negative. For instance, the transition from rural to urban concerns, agrarian to industrial machines, marks the displacement of older forms of cultural and religious manifestations and beliefs. As Baker rightly points out, the tensions that arise from these transitions create discourses of dispersing and erring through "the languages of unmaking and undoing, of dislodging and decentering, of negativity and indeterminacy" (13). As these are central aspects within negative dialectics. Baker proposes to unfold the notion of the extravagant through the prism of dedication—the assumption is here that any extravagant act must involve a degree of dedication that here we encounter both as a paratextual exercise and also as a performative. Following Yves Bonnefoy, again by way of quoting, Baker thus states in the beginning: "I dedicate this book to the improbable, that is to say, to what is" (3). The extravagant is not only "what is," but also what we can't figure out: the excess. the flamboyant, the extreme, the wandering beyond.

In the first cluster of texts, Baker analyzes the sublime through Kant, Wordsworth, and Lyotard—the latter because his work combines romantic and modernist poetics. Baker argues that through a reading of Lyotard the modernist project of setting in motion invention, metamorphosis, and otherness becomes more apparent when seen against the background of Kant's romantic dialectics of unsettling and recovering the subject. As the poetry and philosophy of these three reflect the subject in motion as it departs from traditional models of representation, imagination takes over. But while Wordsworth, for instance, identifies the imaginative power as a subversive potential, for Kant imagination encompasses the thinking of an unrepresentable alterity. Baker makes a clear point here regarding the relation between transcendence, the sublime, and the notion of vocation—the latter as it also gets picked up by later (more modernist than romantic) poets and philosophers who rename it as "nomadic" thought. One need only think of Jabès again, a poet who, although peculiarly absent from Baker's study, has influenced philosophers such as Derrida, whose poetic vision Baker, however, brilliantly charts in his last chapter. So the point in the first chapter is to demonstrate that if thought wanders and is in search of words to represent the poet, the poet's task is in turn to find a voice that would articulate the relation between dangerous solipsism and ethical objectivity. The experience of the sublime, which Kant, Wordsworth, and Lyotard are trying to uncover, remains, however, just that: an experience that a drifting subject articulates within the boundaries of displacement and indeterminacy. Thus, insofar as boundaries constrain thinking, even if it's the thinking of what can be imagined, it is informed by constricting instrumentality and is therefore not so radical. Insofar as Baker is interested in tracing just how extravagant radical thought can be,

he shows that from the "dialectic of instrumental reason and creative negativity which has been at work throughout modern culture" (45; author's emphasis), there is a necessary move towards visionary metamorphosis (discussed in the second part/chapter of the book) and thence on to the "sounding of boundless negativity" (discussed in the third part/chapter of the book).

Baker's second chapter deals with another cluster of three authors: Rimbaud, Nietzsche, and Bataille. Here, Baker takes his cue from Nietzsche's Zarathustra when he decides that the translocative function of the extravagant assumes other proportions. For instance, quite literally, Baker allows Zarathustra to speak through him, and as befits Zarathustra he then puts words in Baker's mouth thus dictating: the dynamics of the three mentioned above must be that of "going under" and "crossing over." Words in this chapter wander from volatile imagination to concrete faces: of destroyed idolatry (in Nietzsche), of transfiguration (in Rimbaud), and of ecstatic and ruinous eroticism (in Bataille). The word of illumination passed through such disfigured and transformed mouths can only be a word of Faustian prophecy. What I myself find wonderful in the three poet-philosophers discussed is their irreverent approach to the notion of the sublime. I try to imagine them as 60s trendsetters, getting high on drugs, smashing love and procreation myths, and instituting a state of "rapturous crisis." The only thing missing from their aesthetic program is championing women's liberation movement. Baker is at his best in this middle passage, and it is clear that he deliberately lets his heroes channel his own language through the discourse of the negative.

Unlike in the first three, Kant, Wordsworth, and Lyotard, for whom the message is the medium—thought itself as mediated by imagination is sublime—for Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and Bataille, the medium is the message: bring in the hammer, off with their heads. Such concreteness doesn't go unnoticed. The extravagant here thus gives itself through a level of concreteness that surpasses abstractness. The stoned prophet limits his world to experiencing it through simple articulation, as if saying: 'the sublime, that's beautiful, man!' The tension between high and low collisions and crises of representation—between that which cannot be represented, the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and that which can be known by way of repetition (vernacular wisdom is usually passed down through lots of swearing)—is eased first by Nietzsche's craft—he paved the stone road with the smashed pieces from solid thought edifices—then by Rimbaud's metaphysics, and then by Bataille's insistence on bringing theology close to one's underwear—no priest's black vestment here, only pink bodies.

With Zarathustra leading the way, Baker suggests that Nietzsche invests energy in the fragment, Rimbaud in the ruin, and Bataille in the remains. The consequence is that they thus produce "crisis texts" all the way through. But the crisis text itself creates a certain kind of energy in turn—an energy that

can only be channeled through dialogue. Here it's interesting to note how Baker himself engages in dialogue not only with the authors he discusses but also with their protagonists. I quote an exchange to illustrate. First says Zarathustra:



Verily, my friends [...] I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men. This is what is terrible for my eyes, that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcherfield. And when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents—but no human beings. (Z, 138) (94)

And then says Baker:



All three, therefore, affirm that a movement destroying the structures that have ruined us-structures at once internal and external—is inseparable from a movement unloosing buried powers. A destructive voyage through the dark, a Faustian version of the "dark night of the soul," is imagined as the path leading to a creative light and an altered horizon. This is of course a familiar mythic and religious pattern, one of particular importance in apocalyptic, gnostic, and mystical traditions. (95)

What is well demonstrated in this chapter is that the Faustian quest leaves from a premise that the creative and metamorphic horizon towards which all movement is made is necessarily made up not by the wandering of the figure of the One but by the Other.

In the third part, which is also the third and last chapter of the book, Baker talks about "apocalyptic soundings of abyssal negativity" in Kierkegaard, Dickinson, Mallarmé, and Derrida. So things can only get better. If the previous three authors had a solid ground on which to unfold their philosophies—with Zarathustra's walking up the mountain to have a better view of the horizon as a concatenation of heights of despair—here the operative wandering word is "boundless." Baker is good at emphasizing the seminal keywords in the abysmal four authors, yet it is interesting to note that in spite of what the word "abyss" conjures in terms of intangibility—the 'nothing' that is—the images are always very graphic. Thus, we have in Kierkegaard the phrase "keeping the wound of the negative open"; Derrida goes solo in an act of self-representation

manifested in the figure of "the last of the eschatologists"; and Dickinson and Mallarmé perform an active "unmooring" of subjectivity from earlier stale metaphysical ideas.

Although Baker doesn't mention the phrase, "the law of the excluded middle" is what informs the whole of this chapter. This foundational principle in logic states that something must be either A or not A, but not both. The 'both' is the middle position that is excluded by the law. Baker sees particularly Dickinson and Mallarmé as embodiments of both the romantic and the modernist traditions, and he aligns them with Nietzsche. The trio of the excluded middle opens the door for "going where you cannot go." Baker quotes this phrase from Angelus Silesius² and points to Derrida's identifying this topos en passage, as it were, as "a 'messianic' expectation emptied of any concrete 'messianism' " (44). One can make the inference that this is the law of the excluded middle in action.3 Baker's claim is that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy draws both on Nietzsche and avant-gardist "rhetorics of hyperbole" when he emphasizes the extravagant as occupying the counter-paradoxical middle position (in opposition to the high point of a hyperbole). As Baker puts it, in Derrida: "there is a drift that drifts through things" (256). What is suggested here is that apocalyptic negativity—one wanders and wanders from end to end, not from beginning to end, or through the "Desert of the Promise" as envisaged by Derrida's eschatological vision—is a form of liberating freedom.4 Says Baker in a central passage:



Derrida's discourse of the "ruin of presence" can be read as an inventive turn in a long tradition of prophets and poets who whether in despair, elation, or both at once—have explored the "ruin of the finite" as bafflingly disclosive, enigmatically promising. "Not only is there no kingdom of difference but difference instigates the subversion of every kingdom" (MP, 22). This sort of language [...] belongs not only to a tradition of modern poetry but also to a tradition of prophetic or apocalyptic expectation within both Judaism and Christianity. The crossing of freedom, according to a tradition reaching back to the biblical prophets, begins with a shattering of the many idols of our bondage [...] It is a tradition that in modern culture has been reinvented, above all, in passages of the extravagant in romantic and modernist poetry and in critical philosophies written in communication with these passages. And these passages frequently evoke a movement of exodus [...] This movement often sounds like an invocation of some opening toward which we are able to reach only in riddles. Kierkegaard calls it the passion of the infinite. Dickinson figures it as a

participation in the mystery and the distance of vanishing. Mallarmé explores it as a virtual death of the poet passing through a ghostly play of words in echo. Derrida characterizes it as the ruin of the present obliquely disclosing the impossible. They are all going where they cannot go. For that (among other reasons) we were given words. (257-258).

As a natural consequence of going where one cannot go, being both here and not here, a Messiah and Faust, a prophet and a profaner of the gravity of thought, Baker's book ends with an epiloque (after a concluding chapter that detours through a host of other authors, notably, for instance, André Breton and T.S. Eliot) called "The Miracle of Place." This is a brilliant move to considering poets such as Paul Celan, George Oppen, and Geoffrey Hill, for whom the radical, the extreme, and the extravagant situate themselves miraculously not in the margins but right in the middle of things. If Kierkegaard has been famously known for his attempts to understand the meaning of making a leap of faith, if Nietzsche has been notorious for his saying that, in Baker's rendition, "not everyone has the right to his prophetic thought" (163), if Rimbaud has achieved celebrity status for always posing disturbingly right questions, such as this one: "What is my nothingness compared to the stupor that awaits you?" (Oeuvres, 264), in the epilogue, Celan, Oppen, and Hill make eloquent the silence that necessarily institutes itself after faith is rendered in skeptical terms, prophesy in visions of metamorphic power rather than an unknown yet ruinous future, and nothingness as a potential for movement.

George Oppen kept silent 25 years after having written some very interesting essays and poems in the 30s. He became a political activist and did not return to poetry until the late 50s, when his writing career also culminated with the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. Thus, one reads his line in one of the poems "the open/ Miracle// Of Place" as a sounding of his name beyond the boundless. What the open miracle of space suggests is that the place where we cannot go. but do go, is a locus where questions are posed beyond skepticism: "Belief?/ What do we believe?/ To live with? Answer./ Not invent—just answer—all/ That verse attempts./ That we can somehow add to each other?" (Collected Poems, 52) Baker chooses to juxtapose the Structuralist framework of the oppositional and ultimately adversarial pair, question and answer, with the suggestion that silence, as it passes through poetic vision, is articulated against a throwing movement. The epigraph to the whole book, a quote from Celan, clearly indicates that much: "Discus,/ Starred with premonitions,/ throw yourself out of yourself." This is how poetic language works: through ex-locutio eloquence. Baker quotes Geoffrey Hill, who enhances this thought:



Even now, I tell myself, there is a language to which I might speak and which would rightly hear me; responding with eloquence; in its turn, negotiating sense without insult given or injury taken.

Familiar to those who already know it elsewhere as justice, it is met also in the form of silence.

(The Triumph of Love, XXXV, 18-19)

The point is that, in poetry, it is impossible to create too much narrative. If one comes close to that, one can blame it on quotes. My quoting the poets, here, instead of Baker, is a demonstration of the fact that if extravagance occurs, it does so by virtue of "spacing," as Derrida would have it. Via Keats, for whom Psyche without Eros is at a loss, Baker makes the final point that vision without companionship is like an abiding openness that does not allow for the mystery of 'nothing' to reveal itself as a miracle of place. The miracle of place, and by extension also space, is itself an extravagant passage between the kind of articulation that comes out of nothing and its elaboration within the framework of what Baker calls "abiding interanimation." Ex-locutio eloquence thus becomes an open space where ex-silentio eloquence can unfold itself. In her seminal work, The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt elaborates a notion of a community that constitutes itself through active reasoning. Through action, Arendt, intimates, a community is able to create better dilemmas for itself. Such a community of reason is a boundless community. 5 Although Baker does not engage with Arendt, however useful that may have been, he does make a similar point in his linking the boundless with a strong sense of a 'reasoning' community when discussing Oppen's poetics of appropriation through quotation. Oppen's master opus Of Being Numerous is an example of 'being in the world' through interanimation and through networks of connections. I would suggest here that what an 'interanimated' community does, in terms of action, is articulate a middle position for the proliferations of relations. Being 'in the middle of it,' inhabiting "all limitations" and "all boundaries," is not a static relation but a traversing action or form of becoming one of the numerous. Thus, spoke the poets, and the philosophers follow.

In conclusion, and in good extravagant fashion, I'll say this: Baker's book is absolutely fascinating, interesting, and compelling, in spite of its forcing the reader to wander almost to exhaustion—but then such is the nature of both the extravagant and the negative. (Note: I feel tempted to quote Emperor Joseph

II in the film *Amadeus* who, although clueless, insists on pointing out to Mozart what he thinks is wrong with one of his pieces: "too many notes.") (That being said in parenthesis,) Baker's study furthermore is not only an intelligent read but also a tool which enhances any reader's capacity to think the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the unrepresentable, and the unsaid. This is no small accomplishment. In the days when ad hoc solutions to all things are more valued than the imaginative way we take to get there, or the ingenious process we devise in order to heighten our sense of language, a book such as Baker's is a reminder of the fact that what makes the world go round is not saying yes to everything, but saying no to all affirmations of conventionality. One must thus praise not only the writer but also the publisher for daring to perform extravagant acts—such as posing the question and its answer in the form of a counter-question: poetry or philosophy?—is there is difference? In thinking this difference itself, "for that, we were given [more] words."

NOTES

- ¹ The context for Gerard Manley Hopkins is a meditation on three kinds of poetic language induced by inspiration on different levels. (We find here Hopkins's notions of different kinds of moods, or poetic idioms, such as the Parnassian and the Castalian (the lowest kind of inspiration).) "The second kind I call Parnassian. It can only be spoken by poets, but is not in the highest sense poetry. It does not require the mood of mind in which the poetry of inspiration is written. It is spoken on and from the level of a poet's mind, not, as in the other case, when the inspiration, which is the gift of genius, raises him above himself. For I think it is the case with genius that it is not when quiescent so very much above mediocrity as the difference between the two might lead us to think, but that it has the power and privilege of rising from that level to a height utterly far from mediocrity: in other words that its greatness is that it can be so great." (Letter to A.W. M. Baillie)
- ² Silesius (1624-1677) was a German mystic and poet from Silesia (Poland). His view of aesthetics, the claim that the experience of the infinite can only be experienced in a finite form, has influenced authors interested in formal experimental literature such as Jorge Luis Borges and Geoffrey Hill, whose theological vision employs some of Silesius's Catholic imagery. Notable in this sense is Hill's collection of poetry The Triumph of Love (2000). One of Silesius's most often quoted phrases is one that alludes to the phenomenology of things that can be contained by a decision not to explain anything: "Die Rose ist ohne warum; Sie blühet, weil Sie blühet . . . "
- ³ The temptation here is to go even more formalistically and at least mention the work of Nicolai A. Vasiliev who in 1910 presented a lecture, "On Partial Judgements, on the Triangle of Opposites, on the Law of Excluded Fourth," in which he advanced a theory for logic to go the imaginative way as against Aristotelian logic which is constrained to laws of contradiction. What is fascinating about Vasiliev's theory is that his notion of "imaginary logic" is free of the law of the excluded middle. As such, it is applicable and valid for other worlds and beings having other types of sensations that do not submit to contradiction laws. More current and interesting work in this area is done by Jaakko Hintikka. See for example Hintikka's The Principles of Mathematics Revisited (1996) and Vincent F. Hendricks (ed.) Philosophy of Mathematics: 5 Questions (2006).
- ⁴ In an analogy to physics, we find a correlate in quantum mechanics. Not only has quantum mechanics done away with the law of the excluded middle, but it has also done away with both ends.

⁵ Says Arendt: "boundless [community] because action, though it may proceed from nowhere [...] acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. [...] This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, [...] the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation. Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries" (Arendt, 190-191). I particularly like what Lynn Hejinian has to say about this in her essay "Reason," from The Language of Inquiry (2000): "Authority over being is thus dispersed, not because of the boundlessness, but in the boundlessness. We don't—as writers or as persons—go beyond "all limitations" and "all boundaries" we enter and inhabit them" (352).

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

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Hermann Nitsch and David Kilpatrick Conversation

Introduction by David Kilpatrick

Hermann Nitsch began his Orgien-Mysterien [Orgies-Mysteries] Theater in the 1960s when, along with Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, the Viennese Actionist movement tested the limits of performance and body art while facing the wrath and condemnation of civic and cultural authorities. Although he and his collaborators were seen as such a threat to the cultural order that they were at times incarcerated for their art, today, his place in the world and history of art is secure, celebrated in prestigious museums and galleries throughout the world and in the pages of



histories of contemporary art and performance. Nonetheless, his works retain their ability to shock and provoke, violating conventional genre distinctions and threatening the secured position of the subject perceiving the object of art. On February 19, 2005, at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia, Nitsch sat down to discuss his work and its philosophical underpinnings.

DK: The Orgien-Mysterien Theater stages decontextualized rituals outside or after any unified or coherent cultural reference. With the emphasis on sacrificial imagery, is this aimed at a (re-)production of the sacred?

HN: Ritual for me is not only a thing of religion. Ritual is also something about form. For me, the leitmotif of Richard Wagner, that's a ritual. When Andy Warhol repeats his prints a hundred times on the wall, that's also a ritual. When Monet paints a cathedral in the morning, at noon and the afternoon and the evening, it's also ritual. Many things in music have to do with ritual. Ritual is for me not only a thing which belongs to religion. It's also something of form, of the architecture of art.

DK: The form is such that even though the context changed the form is still there for us to engage with so there's a trace of the sacred? Are you concerned with the sacred or engaging with forms of the sacred?

HN: We can learn from the sacred way of art. We can very much learn. But that's not only a thing of religion, to repeat something, to repeat it and repeat it again. That's also the problem of having an addiction. You repeat it so long so that everybody understands it. Well, ritual has to do also with meditation and with praying, whatever, but I'm against that [notion] that ritual is only understood in connection with religion. But anyway, I'm very interested in the ritual of all kinds of religions. You have also ritual in the military, ritual in the psychopathology of illness, the ritual of neurosis. Ritual is a special thing and this has a lot to do with art and religion.

DK: Are you concerned about the relation to the divine, even if that relation is one of absence? Is that a precondition of your work, the withdrawal of the divine?

HN: I never imitate rituals but I use them. I think the roots of art are in religion and mythology but anyway, ritual belongs not only to religion.

DK: My engagement with your work, the way that I receive and understand it is in the wake of the death of God.

HN: That is very complicated because the death of God—you know Nietzsche and I'm sure you know every word from Nietzsche, what he had written, and I would say I know it also, I'm a great, great admirer of Nietzsche—but the

death of God is a kind of history.

I'm very interested in the development of God and then the development from God to Being.

Not especially the Being of Heidegger, how he understands it. I like him very much, he was a great philosopher. I'm not interested in his fascistic... that was a very, very bad mistake because he had not the objectivity. He was looking to myth but not to the situation here. And because of this reasoning is his mistake. For me, what's interesting is what he had written, his works Sein und Zeit, I like Was ist Metaphysik?, Einführung in die Metaphysik, then I like (for me it's his second important work) Beitrage zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis), it's very great, and also its a kind of ritual, with religious language.

Anyway, I'm very interested in the development of art. At first you have animism, and then there comes polytheism, and then monotheism, and after that comes pantheism. The idea of God changed. Nietzsche for me was a very, very religious man. But he didn't believe in one person is a God.

I believe in the creation and everything and in eternity, in life, in love. I would say I believe in Being. For me it's not necessary to use a God. And also it isn't necessary for me to use "God is dead." It's a fight of Nietzsche but, for me, transcendence is very important. Being is without transcendence, of course, but that's not the person.

DK: But is this a finite transcendence?

HN: Being is ... around it and in it is transcendence. Around it and in it. And when we hear—when we very, very intensely hear—then transcendence is waking up to Being.

DK: I use the term post-theological when I discuss your work. Some use the word "postmodern." Do you see yourself more in the modernist tradition?

HN: At the beginning I thought of myself as avant-gardist, as a very modern artist but I always had a deep connection to the great masterworks. Let's say to Richard Wagner, to Scriabin, to Bruckner, to Mahler, to Flaubert, Balzac and the paintings of the Renaissance. From the beginning I was interested in the expression of "Gesamtkunstwerk." Later, many people used the expression "postmodern" and at the first time I was against it but then I saw that maybe I was one of the first postmodern artists because I was so interested in the past and I tried with my work to continue all these great projects of the past.

DK: So you're more comfortable with the word postmodern?

HN: It's more fashion than reality, but anyway a little bit more comfortable. A little bit.

DK: To return to this question of the divine, for me the way that Hölderlin talks about the withdrawal of the Gods, in your work there's the form, but it is as if the Gods have withdrawn. Is there ever any concern...?

HN: I told you before about the development of god—maybe he's dead—and I tried also to describe the development of art and I would say the first art is life of a religious feeling. The beginning of art is very deep in mythology and religion and ritual and all these things. Then you have in Greek tragedy, you have in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides... Euripides was the first who destroyed a little bit in Greek tragedy, he opened up himself in the direction of psychology, of modern psychology, of Shakespeare and all the other things written for theatre. Even in the Greek tragedy you have the art becomes more to itself. With Euripides, don't misunderstand me, I like much more Sophocles and Aeschylus, but he was more modern. And for me after the Greek tragedy there's no theatre with such power because the Greek poets, they had a healthy feeling for nature. So you see the development of every kind of art, in music, in painting, sculpture. At first, it was very deeply connected with religion and then it comes to itself. In the position of the Renaissance, and then you have Beethoven, before there was Bach—he was in the path of religion, but then Beethoven, he composed his own drama, his psychology was very interested in his problems. Art in the beginning was very sacral but then it lost it. With the French Impressionists then art lost absolutely the connection to religion, it was not anymore connected with mythology and religion.

DK: Dionysus certainly dances in your works, yes?

HN: I hope so! But Dionysus is much more a principle than a god. There's a very big misunderstanding that we repeat the old rituals and old sacrifices. That's absolutely not true. I use our senses and I go with our senses very deep. I go back with the sacrifice, to animism and what else, and use the intensity of the feeling of our senses but I absolutely do not imitate, let's say, religious rituals or religious sacrifices.

DK: There seems to be now a great acceptance of your work in the art-world but the objects in the galleries and museums are off-shoots or after-effects of the theatrical event or action. How do you see your legacy in terms of genre? You create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* but that's ephemeral. Do you see your own work being judged in terms of drama, film, music, painting, relics...?

HN: Let's use the expression *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is what I try to do. I tried to explain the development of art away from mythology and religion. We reached the stage or the situation where art is the same as everything, like a train station or whatever. Philosophy comes at the point that there was the birth of the expression of Being. And then I use the freedom of art, again, to connect it with Being and with a new kind of religion. You have this when you see the artists of the fin-de-siècle.

The whole project of Dionyism, I would say there's a new kind of contact of art and religion. And so you can understand with my art there is a godlessness, a Mass without God. It's Mass for us, a Mass for me, and a Mass for nature.

DK: A Mass without God?

HN: Yes, a Mass without God. A Mass without the Word of God. I would say a deeper feeling of God. For me, that is Earth.

DK: You say "Mass without the Word of God"; given the emphasis on spectacle in your work, what is the role of language?

HN: I started my work at the time where language was coming to its end. For me there was no more reason to use words. At first when I started my *Six-Day-Play* I wrote with normal language and then I used very much my senses for words and then I was coming to this point where I said "it isn't necessary anymore to describe the intensity of our senses, I will show it." That was a moment when I would not any more use the word, I use the senses directly. If you have a poem of Walt Whitman he uses the senses, he describes something and you have to remember; so with Stefan George, or with Ezra Pound, whatever, they always describe the function of our senses. I want to use, directly, our senses. Now, just now, and I use typically a smell of incense, or a taste of warm bread or a smell of wine, or whatever...

DK: You spoke already about the influence of Nietzsche. Is Georges Bataille an influence?

HN: Yeah, but the influence of Nietzsche was much deeper. Georges Bataille influenced me a lot; I have great respect for him. A little bit of the development, these French guys, it's funny, I picked up on the pain. Much more, I would say, what did influence me (because all of these things were coming out of me) was Antonin Artaud, his Theatre of Cruelty was very deep in me.

DK: So Artaud is the greater influence than Bataille?

HN: Artaud—I would say he was my brother. I was not able to read French and very late, in the seventies, after I had written most of my basic theory, there was a German translation of Bataille and I was absolutely happy that there exists this kind of true-ness.

DK: Do you see yourself in relation to other German language dramatists, like Heiner Müller or Werner Schwab?

HN: I have respect for Schwab and respect for Heiner Müller but I have the feeling that [their works are] more traditional theatre. Especially Schwab is a genius, but my work is much more constructed, and is much more philosophic architecture. It's very different.

DK: So you don't think the rubric of the history of drama is the proper context in which to understand your work?

HN: Oh, I think the history of theater is no context at the moment for my work. I'm very alone.

DK: At whose consciousness is the action directed? Is it at yours, at the performers, or the audience?

HN: This is a little bit difficult... A dream for me is the whole audience, working with me—let's say one week, or two weeks, or three weeks (it depends on how long is the performance)—and then we find who is very in the performance and who is more out of the performance, but we know what everybody has to do. That's my dream. For me it would be great if there is no border between spectators and workers. Maybe in the future it would be possible.

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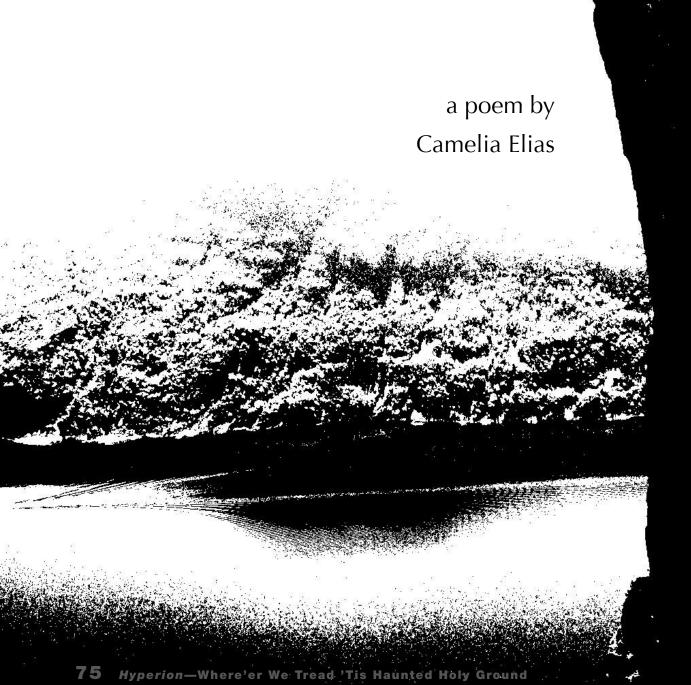
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Where'er We Tread 'Tis Haunted Holy Ground



Where'er We Tread 'Tis Haunted Holy Ground

For Zarathustra

I think I look beautiful in my Lagerfeld creation of a white silk dress that goes all the way to the floor spilling over my brown Birkenstock trekking boots. I have a rendez-vous with Zarathustra on top of Predikestolen. He sees me from atop, waves at me and shouts: "you look like a parachute in all that mass of soft satin. Off somewhere?" He's jealous of my beauty. He's thinking of ways to possess it, but the whiteness blinds him. With his eyes closed he can't think properly. So it's very easy for me to just fuck him, and get it over with. But I have come for the natural solutions that lead to singularities. He wants gravity in vacuum. He speaks "Of the Virtue that Makes Small." I lose my native tongue, and start speaking in one I don't understand: "Das Wandern" "Wohin?" — "Der Neugierige" — by the time I get to — "O Bächelein meiner Liebe, how silent you are today" — oops, language is back — I see Jack Kerouac down on the road translating: "Ungeduld" — "Dein ist mein Hertz," but then he also gets it mixed up: "Behold, think of Dean Moriarty!" Did I say "Behold," he asks, horrified? "Yes," I say. "That's Zarathustra's line," and then I explain: "when he's sexually frustrated he stops prophesying all that nonsense about unholy simplicity, and starts singing Schubert songs instead." I take off my dress, and all the men go: "mein, mine, mein." I follow the gravity. The transvestites go with the vacuum.

5 Poems Georges Bataille

Translated by Mark Daniel Cohen



"Je revais de toucher..."

I'd dream to touch the sadness of the world the bog of unenchant upon the eaves I'd dream the waters' grave from I'd retrieve the lonely channels of your mouth's inter

I've felt to hand corruption's caudal fur the night of harrow wood it had elide and saw this were the sinister you died I limn it laughing sadness of the world

lucific crack in mad a thunder scree your limit licking laugh long nudity immense in splendor last illumine me

I saw your sad as if a charity in radiant in night long morphic sheen and tears the tomb of your infinity.

"De la bouse dans la tete..."

For sake the dung among the head I detonate I execrate the sky the clouds expectorate it's bitter to immensity my eyes are pigs my heart is ink my balls become dead suns

the fallen stars gone fathomless grown grave I weep my language leaks it imports no immensity's a round and rolled and bound in sound I passion death petition it in Holy Father's butchery.

"Immensite criminelle..."

Criminal immensity break vase of immensity ruin without boundaries

immensity that down and whelms me I am fleece the universe is felon

madness alar my insanity talons to immensity immensity to talons me

I am alone about the blind will read these lines in that of interminable tunnels

I down in deep immensity immensity devolves to she she's blacker than demise

the sun is black the beauty of to be is bottom hollows of a cry definitive of night

this that loves in light the shudder sheet of which she's glazed is desire of the night

"le neant n'est que moi-meme..."

the nothingness is Selfsame me the universe is tomb to me the sun is solely death

my eyes blind lightning hearts the sky there thunderstorms ignites

in me at the bottom of abysm immensity of universe is death

"je mens..."

I lie the universe is tacked to my dement mendacities

immensity and I dement mendacities from one the next

the truth dies I cry that way truth lies

my confectionery head that draws the cup of fever is the suicide of truth

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All submissions should be accompanied by a copy of the translated poetry in its original language.

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