Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

OCTOBER

13

$4.00/Summer 1980

Published by The MIT Press
for The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies

OCTOBER

OCTOBER is published quarterly
by the MIT Press for the
Institute for Architecture
and Urban Studies.
Subscriptions: individuals $16.00;
institutions $30.00. Foreign
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$10.00 for air mail. Prices are
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Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142.
Manuscripts, accompanied by stamped,
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OCTOBER is supported in part by
grants from the National Endowment
for the Arts, a federal agency, and
the New York State Council on the Arts.

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Cover photograph: Pier Paolo Pasolini. Salò. *1975.*

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Observations on the Long Take

PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

translated by NORMAN MacAFEE and CRAIG OWENS

Consider the short sixteen-millimeter film of Kennedy's death. Shot by a spectator in the crowd, it is a long take, the most typical long take imaginable.

The spectator-cameraman did not, in fact, choose his camera angle; he simply filmed from where he happened to be, framing what he, not the lens, saw.[1]

Thus the typical long take is subjective.

In this, the only possible film of Kennedy's death, all other points of view are missing: that of Kennedy and Jacqueline, that of the assassin himself and his accomplices, that of those with a better vantage point, and that of the police escorts, etc.

Suppose we had footage shot from all those points of view; what would we have? A series of long takes that would reproduce that moment simultaneously from various viewpoints, as it appeared, that is, to a series of subjectivities. Subjectivity is thus the maximum conceivable limit of any audiovisual technique. It is impossible to perceive reality as it happens *if not from a single point of view*, and this point of view is always that of a perceiving subject. This subject is always incarnate, because even if, in a fiction film, we choose an ideal and therefore abstract and nonnaturalistic point of view, it becomes realistic and ultimately naturalistic as soon as we place a camera and tape recorder there: the result will be seen and heard as if by a flesh-and-blood subject (that is, one with eyes and ears).

Reality seen and heard as it happens *is always in the present tense.*

The long take, the schematic and primordial element of cinema, is thus in the present tense. Cinema therefore "reproduces the present." Live television is a paradigmatic reproduction of something happening in the present.

Suppose, then, that we have not only one short film of Kennedy's death, but a dozen such films, as many long takes as subjectively reproduce the President's death. When, for example, for purely documentary reasons (during a screening for a police investigation) we see all these subjective long takes in sequence, that is, when we splice them, even if not materially, what do we have? A type of montage,

1. The Italian word for lens, *obiettivo*, also means "objective" and therefore establishes at once the framework for the play upon relations between subject and object which characterizes this text.—ed.

albeit extremely elementary. And what do we get from this montage? *A multiplication of "presents,"* as if an action, instead of unwinding once before our eyes, were to unwind many times. This multiplication of "presents" abolishes the present, empties it, each present postulating the relativity of all others, their unreliability, imprecision, and ambiguity.[2]

For the police—who are least concerned with aesthetics and strongly interested in the documentary value of the short film projected as eye-witness testimony to an event that must be precisely reconstructed—the first question to ask is: which of these films best represents the facts? There are so many unreliable eyes and ears (or cameras and tape recorders) which record an irreversible event, one which appears different to each of these natural organs or technical instruments (shot, countershot, establishing shot, medium shot, close-up, and all other possible camera positions). Each of these presentations of reality is extremely impoverished, aleatory, almost pitiful, if one realizes that it is *only one* among many.

It is clear that reality, in all its facets, is expressed in each: it speaks to those present (to be present is to take part, *because reality speaks only through itself*): it speaks its own language, which is the language of action: a gun shot, more gun shots, a body falls, a car stops, a woman screams, the crowd shouts. . . . All these *nonsymbolic signs* indicate that something happened: the death of a president, here and now, in the present. And that present, I repeat, is the tense of the various subjective long takes, shot from the various points of view where witnesses happened to be with their organs or instruments.

The language of action is thus the language of nonsymbolic signs in the present tense; but in the present it makes no sense, or if it does, it does so only subjectively, in an incomplete, uncertain, mysterious way. *Kennedy, dying, expresses himself in his final action*: falling and dying, on the seat of a black presidential car, in the weak embrace of his American petit-bourgeois wife.

But this extreme language of action with which Kennedy is expressed to the spectators remains indecisive and meaningless in the present in which it was perceived by the senses and/or filmed. Like every moment of the language of action, *it requires something more.* It requires systematization with regard to both itself and the objective world; it must be related to other languages of action. In this case, Kennedy's final actions need to be related to the actions of those at that moment surrounding him, for example, to those of his assassin, or assassins.

As long as such actions remain unrelated, be it the language of Kennedy's last action or that of his assassins, they are fragmentary and incomplete languages, all but incomprehensible. What is needed to make them complete and comprehensible? The relationship which each of them, groping and stammering, seeks with

2. Bruce Conner's *Report* (1964) in fact illuminates, through its serial structuring of such footage, Pasolini's speculations.—ed.

the others must be established. Not through a simple multiplication of presents—as in the juxtaposition of various subjective views—but through their coordination. Unlike their juxtaposition, their coordination is not, in fact, limited to destroying and emptying the concept of the present (as in the hypothetical projection one after the other of the various films at FBI headquarters) *but to rendering the present past.*

Only completed acts may be coordinated among themselves and thus acquire meaning (as I will demonstrate later on).

For the moment let's suppose that among the detectives who have seen these hypothetical films spliced end-to-end there is one with an ingenious analytical mind. His ingenuity might show itself only in coordination. Intuiting the truth from an attentive analysis of the various pieces, he could gradually reconstruct it by choosing the truly significant moments of the various long takes, thereby finding their real order. One has, simply, a montage. In the wake of such work of choice and coordination, the various points of view would be dissolved and subjectivity would give way to objectivity; the pitiful eyes and ears (or cameras and recorders) which select and reproduce the fleeting and none too pleasant reality would be replaced by a narrator, who transforms present into past.

The substance of cinema is therefore an endless long take, as is reality to our senses for as long as we are able to see and feel (a long take that ends with the end of our lives); and this long take is nothing but the reproduction of the language of reality. In other words it is the reproduction of the present.

But as soon as montage intervenes, when we pass from cinema to film (they are very different, just as *langue* is different from *parole*), the present becomes past: a past that, for cinematographic and not aesthetic reasons, is always in the present mode (*that is, it is a historic present*).

I must now tell you my thoughts about death (and I leave my skeptical readers free to wonder what this has to do with cinema). I have said frequently, and always poorly, that reality has its own language—better still, it *is* a language—which, to be described, requires a general semiology, which at present we do not possess, even as a notion (semiologists always observe distinct and definite objects, that is, various existing languages, codified or not; they have not yet discovered that semiology is the descriptive science of reality).

This language—I've said, and always badly—coincides with human action. Man expresses himself above all through his action—not meant in a purely pragmatic way—because it is in this way that he modifies reality and leaves his spiritual imprint on it. But this action lacks unity, or meaning, *as long as it remains incomplete.* While Lenin was alive, the language of his actions was still in part indecipherable, because it remained *in potentia,* and thus modifiable by eventual future actions. In short, as long as he has a future, that is, something unknown, a man does not express himself. An honest man may at seventy commit a crime: such blameworthy action modifies all his past actions, and he thus presents himself as other than what he always was. So long as I'm not dead, no one

will be able to guarantee he truly knows me, that is, be able to give meaning to my actions, which, as linguistic moments, are therefore indecipherable.

It is thus absolutely necessary to die, *because while living we lack meaning*, and the language of our lives (with which we express ourselves and to which we attribute the greatest importance) is untranslatable: a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations among discontinuous meanings. *Death performs a lightning-quick montage on our lives*; that is, it chooses our truly significant moments (no longer changeable by other possible contrary or incoherent moments) and places them in sequence, converting our present, which is infinite, unstable, and uncertain, and thus linguistically indescribable, into a clear, stable, certain, and thus linguistically describable past (precisely in the sphere of a general semiology). *It is thanks to death that our lives become expressive.*

Montage thus accomplishes for the material of film (constituted of fragments, the longest or the shortest, of as many long takes as there are subjectivities) what death accomplishes for life.

(1967)

What Is Neo-Zhdanovism and What Is Not

PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

translated by NORMAN MacAFEE and CRAIG OWENS

When the message exceeds a certain limit of transgression of the code, the automatic result is *nostalgia for the code.*

It might be argued that linguistic offenses have the same function as moral or behavioral ones: if carried to extremes, both give rise to nostalgia of this kind and, instead of resulting in a critical confrontation with the code, ultimately reconfirm it. An offended bourgeoisie thereby presumes the right to opt once again for the familiar, as if it were new.

In questions of morality or behavior, an extreme offense (suicide, martyrdom, or, today, rage) is justified by its association with and assimilation to—not through decision, will, or political consciousness—the "ultimate offense": being black, poor, Jewish, homosexual, etc. This makes the reaction of the bourgeoisie—nostalgia for the norm and reconfirmation of itself—wholly appropriate. This is not, however, true for an extreme linguistic offense, which cannot possess the innocence of a black's *face,* a beggar's *smell,* a Jew's *bewilderment,* or a homosexual's *provocation.* All this can have meaning only if experienced existentially (physically) and may or may not involve political consciousness (and thus become revolutionary and not merely "natural"). Linguistic investigations, however, poetic messages, are received on a cultural level; they are experienced in *consciousness, not physically.* The offenses which such messages provoke may therefore be refuted without existential terror, and the nostalgia for the code (*and its reconfirmation*) which results is cold, partial, ineffective.

It is naive simply to rely upon the list of theoretical infractions furnished by "communications theory"—like a painter representing atomic energy by covering a canvas with tiny dots. This mechanical means for transgressing the code according to its theoretical description by modern linguistics was, however, the ridiculous and presumptuous mistake of the avant-garde of the early sixties.

Today poetry has truly been returned to year zero. On the one hand, all possible mechanical and programmatic "infractions" have been exhausted (even if they are in practice as limitless as numerical combinations). On the other hand, nostalgia for the code—the result of those stupidly extreme infractions—now reigns supreme.

Poetry cannot possibly return—in this year zero—unless it situates itself in a sort of *pansemiological frame*, whose physical, existential integration will occur through action. Or so I deduce from the texts that have appeared since the "terror" instilled by false enemies of the code. In these texts I sense that aggression has been somewhat reduced: the codes transgressed are actually those of recent tradition (including—and why not?—every style and every proposition of the avant-garde), while a certain existential (physical) aggression against society's moral and behavioral codes has regained strength and vigor. In short, rage against linguistic codes has given way to rage against social ones. But the latter possess the personal (physical) characteristics mentioned above: the innocence of blackness, poverty, etc. If this implies political consciousness, so much the better. But meanwhile what counts most is the example transcribed by life itself. Life lived as a protest, as a slow suicide, as a strike, or a (petit-bourgeois) martyrdom. In Italy, such characteristics cannot escape a certain provincialism, a certain impoverished narcissism, a certain stench of the kitchen. Crepuscularism, literature as a little bit of salvation in a world of horrible greyness, humanism: these are inevitable. It is not true that international myths can release us from the stench of provincialism, from the marginal, which is "conservative" by definition when considered within history's grand scheme. Dario Bellezza is one example: a bilge-body of every abject sorrow; yet his head filled with every literary experience. Or Montovani and Facoetti, two lost sons of the lowest bourgeoisie. Or Garriba, who tries his best to be a desperado, parading about in his damned dirty linen. The continual reference of their petit-bourgeois, neohumanistic, neosemantic, neointimist, *neoexistentialist* poetry is to the pansemiological frame, in which the medium of communication—raw language—is the repeated daily action, the miserable *dasein*. Their poetry is thus located well within the limits of the subcodes of literary jargon; their transgressions of the code are apparent only in their desire to present themselves *as poetry*. They don't pretend to be American or African blacks, or students from San Francisco or Berlin, or Czechs or Vietnamese; they remain anonymous, but they identify themselves as particularly, historically Italian. To cite these names today remains a provincial affair, even though they relive, through historical analogy, life itself in the face of a new chapter of Italian poetry, a chapter of disagreeable reality, but of reality nonetheless. During the years of reaction against the fifties I firmly and impassively spoke of commitment; so today I repeat that commitment is *not* blackmail enforced by certain powerful intellectuals or by a certain fanatical wing of the ICP. I should perhaps apologize for such autotestimonials, but the cowardice and ignorance of our new culture (another legacy of the avant-garde) make them necessary. By the mid-fifties I had already incurred similar, if infinitely more naive, criticism from leftist youth movements: commitment, blackmail, officialdom, leftist conformism, etc. In short, in the frame of paroxystically invoked pansemiology, the language of action or simply of offensive presence (the black's face) is one stage of prerevolutionary contestation; it is even better if all this is registered directly, consciously, is "documented" by

literature, which is itself always (when it's good) protest. Passage from the natural prerevolutionary stage of offensiveness (the offensive life or work or, better, the offensive life which intersects with the offensive work) to the revolution itself requires but one small step and depends on external circumstances alone. "Commitment," or consciousness of all this mediates between (natural) protest and (conscious) revolution, between absolute ambiguity and relative amgibuity, between enigma and prophecy. *The revolution, then, is composed of actions;* and the semiological frame of human communication must be enlarged to include life itself (the unwritten ideological work of Camillo Torres, to cite but one example).

But why this emphasis on a phenomenon so simple as the reflection of one's life in one's work? Because we are dealing with the rediscovery of something that has been obscured. If these notes on the avant-garde and the void that follows in its wake (we can no longer lament the damage caused by four fools, jealous of a meager affluence, of a cynical disengagement, full of false alibis, progressives of an autocelebrative spirit) (and moreover this means that Italian literature, and above all its servants from the Left, was ready to submit to such damage; in fact, we might say it was waiting for it), if these notes are presented as a "reestablishment of the revolutionary spirit" (which is in no way exhausted), it's also clear to their author that the consciousness that is at present emerging is in fact a new Zhdanovism.

I don't claim that *all* the editors of *Quaderni Piacentini* or of other reviews along the same lines, the inspiration of the leaders of the student movement, or even of such specialized journals as *Ombre Rosse*, are neo-Zhdanovists, but some, and above all the groups that gravitate towards them, are. Obviously they are unaware that they are reproducing that cancer. Objectively, the critique of Stalinism, which the ICP never carried out in a thoroughgoing way, has ossified down the line, creating *ad absurdo* a type of neo-Stalinism: moralistic in reaction to "revisionism," fanatical in reaction to "tacticism," theological in reaction to "indifferentism," etc. This is the fascism of the Left, that new phenomenon, typical of '67, '68, and probably '69 *et. seq*. Were we writing a pamphlet, we might say: after flirting with the avant-garde, a large number of ill-informed youngsters, together with a clot of shamefully hoary elders, are now preparing to flirt with the neo-Zhdanovists in a commitment that is neither literary (protesting, prerevolutionary) nor active (revolutionary). It is, rather, an oratorical gesture, conformism masquerading as indignation, a collection of commonplaces, machismo, camaraderie, moral blackmail, creation of false tensions and prefabricated delays, demagogy, racism, moralism, inhumanity. The moralistic extremism of the young—which would be noble if practiced "globally" against the "system"—inevitably becomes neo-Stalinist when reabsorbed by the old Communist culture, whether through identification or competition with it: everything becomes part of the grand picture of industrial puritanism, on which a young man spoke, unheard, at a conference on psychoanalysis sponsored by a group of medical and architectural students at Turin. Certain canons have universal value and are

obeyed (unconsciously and therefore irremediably) by all: *industrial puritanism* is not a canon merely for those integrated into the capitalistic system, but also for those who dissent, who must also live within the system and expend their energies for it. The Stalinism of which I speak—Zhdanovism in literature—finds its profound rationale in industrial morality: in a conception of life in which each person must occupy his proper place, perform his proper function, identify himself with his proper duty. Thus the distinction between those who belong and those who do not. And the consequent racist condemnation (exclusion of the different): a condemnation that unites the integrated and the dissident within the same world, one which is not capitalist, but *industrial*. It is no accident that the integrated and the dissident demonstrate the same deafness when confronted with the phenomenon of poetry (which, in the hands of avant-garde technocrats, said nothing of the existence of its producers). If I hope for a "reestablishment" of the true revolutionary spirit, extremist but not fanatical, rigorous but not moralistic, I welcome as a positive symptom the appearance of neoexistentialist poetry, *which on the contrary tells us a great deal about the existence of its authors*: necessarily diverse, and thus "offensive for the integrated, stupid for the dissidents": a crack in the "industrial puritanism" that unites the directors of Fiat and the young extraparliamentary Communists.

(1968)

Pasolini: Murder of a Dissident*

MARIA-ANTONIETTA MACCIOCCHI

translated by THOMAS REPENSEK

Pasolini was killed November 1, 1974. Several days later I spoke out in *Le Monde:* "Crime is political. Pasolini was assassinated by society in a savage act of self-defense, a society which could not bear his defiance (of sexual, political, and artistic prohibitions), his undisguised equation of commitment and life. The hatred unleashed against him was expressed in the staging of the crime: a public execution, at high noon, so that everyone might see and learn." These remarks provoked anger from the church, from moralists, and from defenders of the established order, as well as the condemnation of the Italian Communist Party, of course. He couldn't have ended any other way, they claimed. He "sought," "willed" his death, almost ordered it, or, in the language of analysis, "acted in complicity with death." For two years everyone was content with this "explanation."

It wasn't until 1977 that Moravia, in the preface to his book, *Cronaca giudizia, persecuzione, morte,*[1] could write, "Pelosi and the others [the murderers] were the arm that killed Pasolini, but those who authorized the act are legion, in fact, all of Italian society."

This is why I must explore, in its obscurity, complexity, and subtlety, the dark political dimension of the crime, the collusion of those institutions which seek to establish an omnipresent social order and which, one year before the murder, took the form of a coalition between the Italian Communist Party (ICP) and the Christian Democrats (CD) known as the historic compromise. The sinister belief that Pasolini not only could but should be killed grew secretly in the same atmosphere that assigned the ICP the responsibility of maintaining moral order, of disinfecting a "horribly filthy country" (as Pasolini called it). Pasolini was Communist and homosexual. The Italian bourgeoisie hates Communists, yet respects them as the guardians of private morality, of "national" and "civic" virtues, which have been sacrificed to the profit of industry. Pasolini was hated,

* This essay was originally delivered at a conference, "Dissidence and Authority," in Paris, February 1978, and was published in *Tel Quel*, no. 76.

1. *Pasolini: cronaca giudizia, persecuzione, morte*, Milan, Garzanti, 1977.

therefore, not because he identified himself as a Communist, but because he attacked sexual prohibitions as a Communist, assuming the identity of artistic and political commitment, of art and life. The servile hypocrisy, the fascism of a conformist intelligentsia was outraged: in Italy, thinking has again become heresy. Hatred was not unleashed against Pasolini as a carrier of an assumed sexual aberration, but against "the dissident of dissidents" who ignored sexual and political taboos, publicly identified himself as a Communist, a homosexual, a mystic, as well as a poet and writer, filmmaker, literary critic, and novelist: the all-around artist. This was an intolerable breach of faith. The provocateur had become dangerous, and Italian society, under the banner of Communist morality, demanded revenge upon Pasolini for transgressing the limits of the established moral order—not middle class mores but official Communist ones: a crime more infamous than offense against the moral code of a bourgeoisie implicated in the fascism of Salò. The increasingly political and moral totalitarianism of the "historic compromise" effaces the endless dialectic between power and opposition. The death of the opposition sexualizes intensely the life of an entire society, from the dark bowels of fascism to the violence whose language is expressed—in the reality of the repression of the sexual nature of social relations—by the deadly call to aphasia. Is the social link paranoiac? At the time, Sollers wrote, "Affirming the perversity of social exchange, that is, *the intrinsically homosexual nature of social union*, he [Pasolini] became the Italian most threatened, because the least homosexual. The paradox even has its logic. Pasolini was killed so that the repressed homosexual center of society would remain so, sealed by the blood of someone able to *speak* of it. A ruthless sentence of aphasia."[2]

The history of recent art begins with a rape. In October 1949, with Zhdanov, the cultural czar, Pasolini's death sentence was foreshadowed at the age of twenty-seven by the Tribunal of the State and the Party. The first knot of the historic compromise was petit-bourgeois conformism to the moral order; its first spectacle, the condemnation of Pier Paolo Pasolini by both institutions, the first representing for him the enemy of class, the other the Red Spring. (He became a party member in 1947 and served as secretary of the Casarsa section in Friuli). He posted his *dazibaos* on the walls of his village, his own accounts of political events handwritten in slang or dialect—to disrupt the conventions of Italian lyric language—or diatribes against local Christian Democrats, or the parables in *Dialogue between Poor Communist and Unscrupulous Christian Democrat*. His fellow party members were suspicious of his hatred of the CD, of its ethical underpinnings, which they saw as an obstacle to political harmony. They suspected as well his appeal in his writings to the unconscious, to the irrational, to Freud, the interpretation of dreams, to psychoanalysis—modernist references that could only isolate him further. We are talking about the Zhdanov

2. Philippe Sollers, paper delivered at the "Congress on Sexuality and Politics," Milan, November 1975, and published in *Tel Quel*, no. 65.

era, when Fadeiev, an apostle of socialist realism and prophet of cultural decadence, called Sartre a "hyena with a typewriter." A cold war was launched against "decadent intellectuals" at the Congress of Wroclaw, where the Soviet delegation stated that "Monopolistic enterprise needs wild men to realize their goal of global domination: writers, philosophers, reactionary artists are ready to work for their pay. Schizophrenics, morphine addicts, sadists, and pimps are placed on pedestals along with agitators, spys, and gangsters. The pages of novels, poetry, paintings, films are populated by these bestial characters. They are the 'heroes' to imitate and follow."[3]

Togliatti, in turn, wanted a party purged of "artistic decadence," and after the Communists' defeat by the CD on April 18, 1948, wanted his "new party" to be able to provide a moral guarantee to the Roman Church: "the proletarian ethic." At the same time he wanted to support the Russian church's condemnation of "degenerate intellectuals." What has never been analyzed—at least from a psychoanalytic perspective—is the myth of virility incarnated by the Communist party ever since the International, Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Party, Patriarch, Power: Pasolini's initials, which he habitually used (P.P.P.). A party of males, for males. A party that therefore marginalizes all deviation, all singularity; which outlaws difference: women, homosexuals, the subproletariat.

The Male party, the self-constituted grey State of order. And Pasolini's battle against sexual taboos and moral violence is registered *everywhere* as a battle against the tyranny of the State. "The greyness of the State . . . a state of pure hypocrisy," founded on ". . . property secured/the horrible, animal greyness/that triumphs over light and shadow." In the name of this Moral/State, Togliatti wrote of Gide in *Rinascita* in 1949, "[He] would have done better to write about pederasty, his professional field." Pasolini's expulsion from the party for "moral turpitude" can be explained thanks to a letter he sent to a comrade by the name of Carlino and published posthumously, twenty-eight years later. It reveals his intense and unwonted despair. A simple story involving threatened blackmail by a priest: either renounce communism or his teaching career would be over. From pure "odium theologicum," according to Pasolini, the CD sent the Casarsa police to spy on him until a scandal developed and he was accused of "sexual aggression" upon his students. (In 1952 he was acquitted of this accusation by the courts,

3. This may sound like familiar Stalinism from the fifties, but it is not as quaint as it appears. I encountered this language again today in an account of a meeting that took place in Moscow on December 21, 1977 in the great hall of the Central Writers' Bureau. It was interesting in part for its anti-Semitic speeches authorized by old Michael Suslov, inveterate ideological high priest, who in the fifties insisted on "snatching Mayakovsky from the clutches of the Jews." The triumphant return of the repressed spirit of Wroclaw was verified in the "neo-Stalinist" speech of the "principal speaker of the evening," as he was described in *Le Monde*: "The principal speaker of the evening was Piotr Palievski, assistant director of the Gorky Institute of World Literature and editor of *Foreign Literature*. Palievski, who in 1975 in his book *The Art of Realism* still inveighed against artists like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Khlebnikov, calling them no better than swindlers and frauds, condemned once again the art of the avant-garde."

but never by the party.) The school relieved him of his job, and soon after the party relieved him of his card. "I'm out of work," he wrote to Carlino. "In other words, reduced to begging. Simply because I am a Communist. The treachery of the Christian Democrats doesn't surprise me; your inhumanity does. It's stupid to talk about ideological deviation. In spite of you I am and will remain a Communist. Someone else in my position might have killed himself, but I unfortunately have to live for my mother." A shamed, embarrassed homosexual, P.P.P. had solicited from the party a defense of his *normality*. His membership card was the symbol of his innocence/virility. Like a poet or child he appealed to the "religion of his time" to deliver him from anxiety. But the party, which claims for itself the right of masculine sexuality, publicly withdrew its certification of virility from P.P.P., the twenty-seven-year-old poet. It declared him homosexual, hence unworthy of the ICP. It identified him as the Other. An ab-normal, il-legal, in-organic intellectual, he was cast into the hell of sexuality. *Innocence is impossible* for the Moloch Party/State. Pasolini, officially accused of sin, was forced publicly to take responsibility for his abnormal sexuality, to carry it to frenzy, provocation, rage. The rage of a grand accuser, the indicter of the scientific rationalism of Marxism, of its "religious senility." And *rage* is the last word of "Wisteria,"[4] the epigraph he uses to initial the course of his heretical experience:

I've lost my strength;
I've lost the sense of *rational*;
cast off, silting up
—in your religious senility—
my life, sorry that the world
is only fierce, and my soul rage.

He no longer referred to his isolation after '49. A penniless exile, he went to Rome with his mother, and, in a bleak suburb on the bleak Tiber, found, "as in a novel," a teaching position in a private school. Violent, working-class Rome, first locus of his inspiration as a writer and director, accepted him. "Poor, magnificent city/you taught me what cruel and playful men teach children."[5] He quickly became known, but we, his Communist friends, knew nothing about what he had endured, about the wounds that would never heal, his relentless love/hate of the Male party, his enthusiasm for the promise of political revolution and distaste for obscurantist tactics, expressed in his poem "Le ceneri di Gramsci,"[6] written in 1954. "The shame of self-contradiction, to be/with you and against you in visceral darkness."

But during that period everyone, including the Communists, who alone knew the facts, began to praise the poetic imagination of Pier Paolo.

Yet it was as a poet that Pasolini was excluded. The October 28, 1949

4. "Il glicine," in *La Religione del mio tempo*, previously unpublished.
5. "The Ditchdigger's Tears," *Poems 1953–1954*.
6. "The Ashes of Gramsci," *ibid*.

headline of *L'Unità* announced: "The poet Pasolini has been expelled from the party." The term *poet*, used to mean irresponsible, extravagant, facile, corrupt, suggests the relationship between culture and the Communist movement better than a hundred abstract metaphors. "Consider the origin of the facts leading to this serious measure against the poet Pasolini," the article continued. "To condemn once again the negative influence of the philosophical thinking of Gide, Sartre, and other writers who wish to be considered progressive but who in fact assimilate the most sinister aspects of a degenerate bourgeoisie." The power of Zhdanovism, which is perhaps contained in Marxism and its negation of the irrational. In opposition to Marxism, Pasolini continually insisted on the "right of the irrational": "The chain has in effect been broken: the chain of free systems, since *Rimbaud*, since *Pound*, even the delicious dialectal poets. . . . Yet something of that Dionysiac intellectual drunkenness remains: it tends to be identified with *the pure irrational, the inalienable substance of poetic form*, so that in all poetry, however distilled, there remains a certain quantity of unattributable, indefinable expressiveness. *Marx* did not consider the irrational. I say *Marx* to mean Marxism" (*Ulisse*, September 1960).

Pasolini was the first heretic of the Marxist religion. He wrote not only against power, but also against those who, opposing power, represent the power of the future, "the powers that kill" in their schizoid manifestations: "archaic power . . . which dissolves the self's other, strips it of its essential freedom, freedom of the body." Freedom to think. The spirit of a Gramsci dominates his political life, "the more cut off from the world, the freer he was, . . . reduced to pure, heroic thought" (*Officina*, June 1957). Pasolini can be placed then within the opposition's opposition, continually displaced in a permanently critical state, inviting dissidence, appealing to heresy. He was committed, but as a criminal; his last collection of political articles is called *Pirate Writings*. He feared that every revolution, like 1968, would bring about the restoration of the Left. "We watch, terrified / in admiration and hatred of / whoever dares say something to oppose / the oppositional Establishment."

As years went by, the Left recognized him but continued to treat him with primitive tolerance. In 1960, I invited him to write a column of "dialogues" with readers for *Vie Nuove*—the weekly paper of the CC of the ICP, which I edited. His book *Le Ragazzi* had just been condemned for obscenity. The most distinguished Communist literary critic, Salinari, agreed once again with the official verdict, writing that the novel took "unhealthy interest in abasement, filth, decay, ambiguity." "What was immoral," Pasolini later wrote, "was of course the portrayal of the subproletariat whose existence was at the time universally denied."

His column at *Vie Nuove*,[7] which could have been titled "And you Com-

7. These columns were collected in a volume published under the title *The Beautiful Banner* by the party's publisher. Editori Riuniti, in 1977. The exchange of letters between Pasolini and myself at the beginning was censored.

munists, comrades/non-comrades," created a scandal, but the party wanted to show that it "welcomed well-known intellectuals." I tried to protect him from surveillance by the Party Supervisory Committee and from my editors, who amused themselves by calling him a queer, an anarchist, a madman, and so forth, as soon as he turned his back. Pasolini had chosen to attack Marxist orthodoxy and morality from within the columns of the party paper. I agreed with him, as a woman and thus, within the Communist party, also marginal, excluded or always susceptible to exclusion, different, other.

His first answer to a *Vie Nuove* reader addressed the unexplained question of his exclusion from the party in '49. He criticized the prudery, "the old-maid prohibitionist anxiety . . . of the Italian Communist press," that is to say, of Marxism. "The sexual problem is obviously not a moral one; but since the Catholic middle class is hypocritically used to considering it one, so do middle-level Communist authorities, how should I say it, out of laziness. . . . We need an 'irrationalist' Marxist offensive, yet Marxists equate the irrational with literary, artistic decadence. Irrationality (within which the sexual problem is inscribed) is a category of the human soul, and it is therefore always a current, pressing problem."

The trial against Pasolini continued: in photographs we see him, time and again, seated before judges seated beneath a crucifix, always the defendant, accused for his books, his films, his life. Even after his death, when Sartre wrote to the judges: "We hope the court will not be influenced by the prejudices of Italian male society, and that the murder trial does not become Pasolini's trial." Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts were called to deliver their diagnostic opinions during his trials and after his death: he was mad because he was homosexual, homosexual because he was mad. Even madder for calling himself an artist-Communist-mystic-inquisitor. The verdict gradually became the judgment of an entire society in search of moral order, and of political organizations of intellectuals who hated Pasolini's freedom. The case against him grew stronger every day, strengthening the justification of repression; little wonder that one day someone felt authorized to kill him.

After one of Pasolini's first appearances in court, on the charge of attracting boys on the beach at Anzio to "wrestle with him, and paying them for it" (July 9, 1960; he was later acquitted), Togliatti forced me to cancel Pasolini's column, since "responsible comrades" considered it intolerable that a homosexual write for a newspaper read by working-class families. Togliatti's "party-of-the-masses" ethic reflected the deeply rooted and dominant ideas of a country that, within a few centuries, had given birth to two counter-revolutions: the Counter-Reformation and fascism. The contemporary press describes Togliatti's fury: "Moreover, [he] didn't consider Pasolini a great writer; on the contrary, his judgment in the matter was rather harsh." In the party memo to cultural section heads, Togliatti reaffirmed that Pasolini was not to be considered one of the party's "fellow travelers," and that his eventual ruin could not be construed as a loss. The dispute

between Togliatti and myself over Pasolini began with a letter to me expressing his objection to Pasolini's analysis of D'Annunzianism in *Vie Nuove* as a rhetorical cancer of the Italian language, and insisting that I publish a critical reply from a reader/professor in Fiume. I published it. Pasolini replied. What was really at issue was Pasolini's quiet dismissal, the end of his column. I refused. Several months later I was no longer the editor of *Vie Nuove*.

My former editors at *Vie Nuove* and the head of the Cultural Commission at the time now deny that disciplinary action was taken, arguing that Pasolini continued to write his column after I left, until 1965, which is typical procedure. The dissident is eliminated from within while the appearance of tolerance is preserved. And afterwards, well, you die. The Communists are always looking for a corpse; they build a mausoleum over it and put a mummy inside, which they treat like a benevolent god. The concept of the mausoleum in Marxism should be studied. Every religion has its simoniacs. Now posters of Pasolini's tragic head are sold at the Festival of *Unità*, and films of "our comrade Pasolini" are shown at party meetings. The card taken from him in 1949 was returned with proper solemnity, with seniority, during the funeral rites over his swollen corpse. . . . Superb elegies transformed indomitable enemies on all sides into psalm-singing priests. In 1961, aware of what was going on and refusing to resign out of so-called solidarity, Pasolini used *Vie Nouve* to launch his most violent political attack against the Marxologists; he even included the scripts of films like the satirical and epic saga, *Uccellacci e uccellini*. There is an ironic dimension to political discourse, which was a valuable lesson to me. With saturation comes satire. The wise crow, instructing two derelicts, speaks with the voice of the master Marxist, the voice of Togliatti. Bored with hearing him rattle on, they wring his neck and eat him. "Masters are made to be eaten with relish," Pasolini wrote sweetly in *Vie Nuove*. First murder of the Great Thinkers. And through the character of Toto, Pasolini explains that he also wants "to talk about free love in the early years of communism, about the renunciation of that theoretical position, about Marxist morality, Stalinism, and the crisis of Marxism in the 1960s."

Eighteen years ago Pasolini was the first dissident to welcome the "crisis of Marxism," who wanted it to continue in spite of its own institutionalization, who expected from it a "courageous vision of disorder." He believed there was a genuine crisis of "Marxist cultural politics":

> Realism is dead and Italian and non-Italian Marxism has invented nothing to replace it.
>
> To see Marx quoted, as we face the continuing evolution of the world, is annoying . . . while the base is left unexplored for fear of allowing the critical function to consume too much.
>
> In socialist countries, the Marxist vision is authoritarian: the revolution is over. . . . The contradiction between Marxism in the embrace of authority, between culture and power, is reduced to a painfully vacant exchange of words (1962).

Again, in 1963, "The ICP has earned its distinguished reputation; nevertheless, I sense the presence of ghosts: conformity, Stalinism, party patriotism, absence of criticism, self-criticism that is merely verbal."

In the "grey half-light of tolerance," as Foucault has called the sixties, Pasolini denounced Italy as a middle-class country, a Fascist state called consumer society, a shark, a pig: "A barracks, a seminary, a nude beach, a brothel populated by millions of circumspect bourgeois who discover they are pigs." This first detonation against the establishment was repeated almost verbatim by the revolutionary Italian "Automata" on Radio Alice, as Foucault, writing about Pasolini, recognized: "It was also around 1963 in Europe and the United States that people began once again to question the multiple forms of power, which judicious minds call fashionable. . . . So it is: a fashion that may last a while, as it was then in Bologna" (*Le Monde*, March 23, 1977).

The Fascists stalked Pasolini as long as he lived, waited for him around every corner, ready for a fight. Ten years after our "pirating" of the column in *Vie Nuove*—I had become a deputy in Naples in 1970—I invited him to Castellamare, a working-class town outside of Naples, for a screening of *Medea*.

He took this opportunity to speak of the "sexual nature of the social bond." As Pleynet writes,

> The nature of this bond, which Pasolini clarified for a vast public that only half understood him, preyed on the imagination of the twentieth-century mind. Obsession and fear occupy the ground abandoned by religion, and where religion relinquishes its control, women take their stand. When religion relents, repression escapes from reality, and the law is unable to ignore it because it represents at least half of humanity: women.[8]

The Fascists descended on the little town that night, calling for Pasolini's death. He was sheltered from the mob in a working-class hostel. The next day I was severely reprimanded by the Naples federation of the ICP, and the conservative *Il Mattino* castigated me in similar terms. An old story. In *Salò*, Pasolini concludes that the violence of power is pervasive, and that society, grounded in that power, accepts its laws only in a fundamentally perverse, immoral exchange. In this sense his aesthetic (heretical) experience corresponds to that of all the great dissidents of the last two centuries.

The last time I saw Pasolini was in Paris, at Vincennes, in November 1975, at a screening of Naldini's film *Fascista*. In the audience was a group of kids who threatened to beat him up. They objected to his poem "May 68" (where he had said that although "daddy's boys" were allowed to "play" at revolution, this wasn't the case for a farmer's son turned policeman). But what he really feared was that every rebellion would be followed by the reestablishment of the Left, that

8. Marcelin Pleynet, "Le tombeau de Pasolini," *Art et Littérature*, Paris, Seuil, 1977.

the act of recovery would be the last act of revolt, a theme he developed in three poems the year following '68.

> The classic Left began its revival
> . . .
> Children discovered their first wrinkle and life
> claimed from them its first victory.[9]

> The party still broods us like a mother hen
> . . .
> So, the tail a little between the legs
> after running free, boys come home to the CLN
> to fight the repression, they say, of a wicked power:
> every alliance conceals deferment, and so a weakness . . .[10]

> In 1961, 1962 in New York
> appeared the first challengers of Power
> and its Past,
> called "beats," a fanciful, dated name;
> the invisible Masters saw with satisfaction
> that THEIR Past was beginning to be destroyed by animal sounds
> . . .
> The Communist parties and the unions waited,
> then their turn came,
> the vacuum was filled and now bosses and workers
> are positioned a little further distant face to face.[11]

His heretical rage against inevitable restoration continues today in our exhilaration in the slogan "'68 good, '77 better." He spoke to students with that soft anger and naked courage that for him was worth more than aggression. No one knew that he had dedicated a poem to Rudi Dutschke: "It's clear/I am a father after you." That he had made a film to raise money for *Lotta Continua*. Nor that he had assumed the editorship of that daily when Pannella was sent to jail. That he had signed the radicals' referendum on abortion, although irritated by feminist extremists who failed to understand that men are also controlled by it. He told students what he thought about their terrorist violence, extinguished intelligence—bored with consumption and perhaps tired of their own violent rhetoric. There was no violence in him. He once explained: "I have never in my

9. "The Restoration of the Left," 1969.
10. "More on the Left Establishment," 1969.
11. "The Restoration of the Left and Who," 1969.

life performed a violent act, physical or moral; not because I am fanatically nonviolent, which, if it is a form of ideological self-restraint, is of course violence . . . but simply because I have let my nature or more likely my culture take over." But he saw violence rising around him, and in his last political articles, the word *lynching* often appears. When Maurizio Ferrara, the editor of *L'Unità*, accused him of "irresponsible remarks," Pasolini agreed that his ideas had been "caricatural and reductive. It's more appropriate to call it a lynching. . . . You lynch someone when you take one of his ideas, alter it to suit you, and make it an obvious target of public contempt and ridicule." *La Stampa* was accused in almost the same words: "Without thinking, he objected to *lynching* and didn't realize what he had done" (1974, in *Pirate Writings*).

Pasolini found himself at the intersection of three great protests against State power: political, sexual, and mystic, that is, the protest of the unconscious itself, which is perhaps "heresy without a goal, for its own sake." "But who ever loved heresy/in a disinterested way? heresy without end: for the sake of itself?/No, no, everyone looks for ORTHODOX TRUTH/it's this that first creates unrest,/then revolt against power . . . The struggle has always been between the old orthodoxy and the new/That's what takes my spirit away, and makes me want to refuse to play" ("Reworking of 'orthodoxy,'" April 15, 1970).

What could he do politically? He voted Communist, but he felt alienated, a dis-organic intellectual, dis-organic in function in order to have organic reality. His "Testament," so called because it was written several hours before he was murdered, is a political agenda which was to be presented at the Radical Party Congress in Florence, November 2, 1975. It ends with these words: "Quickly forget successes and continue about your business in a stubborn, contradictory, demanding, willful way, undistinguished, setting snares, speaking evil. . . ."

I don't know how to conclude. I know that this poet of the apocalypse, who slipped through consumer society, received from that same society a funeral like a Roman circus. Italian intellectuals—the noisy puppets who hated him—the ruling class, the Left, and the ICP outdid themselves in the oratorical stylishness of the form known as "funeral elegy." But who is alive and who is dead? What is death? Pasolini wrote in his last book of poems:

I am like a cat that's been burned alive
Run over by a truck
Hung from a tree by the kids in the street
But with still at least six
Of its seven lives . . . Death isn't
Not being able to communicate
But no longer being understood.
I see with the eye of an image
lynching officials
watching my own extermination
with a still scientific heart.

> In the appeal in the sentence passed upon Pelosi, the fundamental question remains. Was he alone? Or was he used as bait, an accomplice in a planned, ruthless attack? The Juvenile Court, sentencing him to nine years in jail, concluded that Pelosi had committed the crime "with the help of other unidentified persons" . . . The conviction was influenced by medical/legal testimony to the effect that the young man showed no evidence of injury, although he said he had been attacked and had struggled with the victim for a long time. His hands were clean, as were his clothes, which should have been stained with blood.
>
> —*Repubblica*, November 2, 1977

Pier Paolo Pasolini. Salò. *1975*.

Merde Alors

LEO BERSANI and ULYSSE DUTOIT

> *Et le scélérat, en enconnant Adélaïde, se figurait comme le duc qu'il foutait sa fille assassinée: incroyable égarement de l'esprit du libertin, qui ne peut rien entendre, rien voir, qu'il ne veuille à l'instant l'imiter!*
>
> —Les 120 journées de Sodome

The vagina is a logical defect in nature. "By and large," the Duke warns his female slaves just before the orgies of sex, violence, and storytelling get under way in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, "offer your fronts very little to our sight; remember that this loathsome part, which only the alienation of her wits could have permitted Nature to create, is always the one we find most repugnant."[1] Sadean misogyny is based on the libertine's view of the female genitalia as a scandalous offense to reason. Nature orders us to live only for the pleasure of our senses at the same time that she continues to produce millions of creatures sexually equipped to repel us.

This repulsion need not be explained in the most familiar Freudian terms. It is unnecessary to think of the libertine's distaste for the vagina as a disguised fantasy of female castration. Instead, it is a logical consequence of some rigorous speculation about sexual intensities. The most intense Sadean—and sadistic—sexuality depends on symmetry, and with women Sade's men enjoy the diminished pleasures of asymmetrical sex. In arguing that it is always better to have sex with boys than with girls, the Bishop in *The 120 Days* explains: "Consider the problem from the point of view of evil, evil almost always being pleasure's true and major charm; considered thus, the crime must appear greater when perpetrated upon a being of your identical sort than when inflicted upon one which is not, and this once established, the delight automatically doubles" (p. 458). The appeal of pleasure is inseparable from the appeal of evil, and a crime against

1. The Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, New York, Grove Press, 1966, p. 252.

another version of ourselves—against someone "*absolument de* [*notre*] *espèce*"—doubles our pleasure. The female victims easily outnumber the male victims in Sade, but it might be argued that the torture and murder of women is merely a preliminary to the more enjoyable torture and murder of other men. The most spectacular sadism is specular sadism.

In what sense does a symmetrical partnership provide the highest sexual pleasures? Sexual excitement is a *shared commotion*. Sade suggests that we do not have sex with others *because* they excite us; excitement is the consequence of sex rather than its motive. And this is because it is essentially a replay in the libertine of the agitation he produces in the other's body. In the funny physiological terms in which Sade sums up the Duke's ideas in *The 120 Days*: "He noticed that a violent commotion inflicted upon any kind of an adversary is answered by a vibrant thrill in our own nervous system; the effect of this vibration, arousing the animal spirits which flow within these nerves' concavities, obliges them to exert pressure on the erector nerves and to produce in accordance with this perturbation [*ébranlement*] what is termed a lubricious sensation" (p. 200). The missing link here would seem to be the means of transport from the other's "commotion" to the libertine's "vibration." But the latter can only be the agitated perception of the former. The "vibration" which produces recognizable signs of sexual excitement is the spectacle of the other person's commotion. Sexual excitement must be represented before it can be felt; or, more exactly, it *is* the representation of an alienated commotion.

Sadism is the necessary consequence of this view of sexuality. If erotic stimulation depends on the perceived or fantasized commotion of others, it becomes reasonable to put others into a state of maximal commotion. The libertine's erection-provoking vibrations increase in direct proportion to the visible intensification of his victim's suffering. These remarks will remind many readers of Freud's genealogy of sadomasochism in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," as well as of Jean Laplanche's reading of that passage in *Vie et mort en psychanalyse*. A rereading of Sade in the light of these texts suggests, first of all, that the pain inflicted by the sadist on others may, as Freud writes, "be enjoyed masochistically by the [sadistic] subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object" and, secondly, that *mimetic sexuality is essentially sadomasochistic sexuality*.

These two points are intimately related. The libertine's pleasure depends on the transmission of his victim's "commotion" to his own "nerves." In one sense, crime is life-preserving in Sade; it creates spectacles of movement without which individuals might remain dangerously inert. "Crime is a natural mode," Durcet proclaims, "a manner whereby Nature stirs man" (p. 427). Sexuality is a psychic mobility which depends on scenes of mobility in others; the libertine's movements are a kind of imitation of *their* movement. In a profoundly ironic way, Sade's sadism is consistent with the theories of benevolent sympathy which he scornfully rejects. For what he rejects is not the mechanism of sympathetic projection

assumed by theories of benevolence, but rather the pious view that we are stirred by *virtuous* identifications with others. Virtue is irrelevant to the agitation induced by the suffering of others. It is the identification itself—that is, a fantasmatic introjection of the other—which appears to be intrinsically sexual. Such introjections make us "vibrate"; they destroy psychic inertia and shatter psychic equilibrium. Interestingly enough, both Sade and Laplanche use the word *ébranlement* to describe this psychic shattering which produces what Sade calls *"une sensation lubrique"* and which for Laplanche characterizes our inescapably fantasmatic sexuality.

Laplanche emphasizes that sexual pleasure in the Freudian scheme "resides in the suffering position." The activity of fantasy which constitutes sexuality in human beings is inherently an experience of "psychic pain"—or, in other terms, a psychically disruptive or destabilizing experience. From this perspective, sexuality would not be an exchange of intensities between individuals, but rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world. The introjection of the other (the transmission of his "violent commotion" to the libertine's own nerves) is a movement away from difference and toward replication. The ontological justification for the Sadean preference for boys over girls is that boys present the libertine with an anticipatory image of this reduction of the world to a replica of the self. Masochism is the exciting pain of such psychic *dédoublements*. And since sexual excitement (according to Sade, Freud, and Laplanche) depends on the fantasmatic circuit by which the subject appropriates the other's "violent commotion," sexuality—at least in the mode in which it is constituted—might almost be thought of as a tautology for masochism.

It can now be seen that Sade's famous "order of nature" is really a movement toward universal destruction. The destruction is, however, both a function and a consequence of mimetic orders. The libertine's most intense *jouissance* comes from a murderous relation with "a being of [his] identical sort"; it is a phenomenon of suicidal symmetry. Nature, in order to move men, incites them to crime. In the Sadean scheme, psychic mobility depends on scenes of destruction which, once internalized, are the "vibrations" necessary for sexual excitement. The system which must always be followed, as the Bishop puts it in *The 120 Days*, is that "the more pleasure you seek in the depths of crime, the more frightful the crime must be" (p. 364). Nature's strategies for stimulating human desires lead, ideally, to Curval's annoyance with the modest range of crimes available to us, and to his thirst for cosmic havoc: "How many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world?" (p. 364). The teleology of nature's order in Sade is the destruction of nature itself.

In the Sadean cult of mimetic violence, the appropriation of the other's "commotion" makes the other ultimately unnecessary. In Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò*, the transposition of *The 120 Days of Sodom* to a Fascist enclave in Northern Italy toward the end of World War II appropriately suggests that modern fascism

is the (belated) form of political organization most congenial to Sade's theory of sexuality. The political setting in *Salò* is not exactly a "comment" on Sade but rather gives to the Sadean epic an important dose of verisimilitude lacking in the fairy-tale kidnappings and the Black Forest slave palace of *The 120 Days*. The Sadean argument which *Salò* implicitly makes is that if sexuality is intrinsically masochistic, it *requires* a Fascist state. That is, to the extent that sexual excitement depends on the "sympathetic" appropriation of the "violent commotions" experienced by others, the only truly erotic society is the Sadean *and* fascistic society of masters and slaves.

Pasolini argues far more effectively for the connections between sex and power than does Cavani in her much acclaimed and consistently mediocre *Night Porter*. The latter film, in which Dirk Bogarde treats us to the same portentous twitching with which he made low comedy of *Death in Venice*, carries what Cavani clearly takes to be an illuminating and shocking message about the sexual appeal of politically enforced violence. (The message is not only banal; any shock it might have is also conveniently dissipated in the sentimental conversions toward the end of the film.) Pasolini's—and Sade's—statement is more radical. Neither *The 120 Days* nor *Salò* is at all about the complicity between torturers and victims. In both works, there are slaves who more or less ally themselves with the masters—Julie in Sade, and the boy who becomes the Duke's favorite in *Salò*—but in none of these cases is it a question of the irresistible appeal of being tortured. This appeal doesn't even have to be denied; it would simply be a superficial point, and in works so profoundly investigative about sadomasochistic sexuality and politics as *The 120 Days* and *Salò*, it can be ignored. The larger point in Sade, as we have suggested, has to do with the use of violence in order, quite literally, to make the victim give birth to sexuality in the torturer.

In a sense, there is no relation at all between the Sadean libertines and their victims. It is precisely the illusion—deeply characteristic of our culture—that every contact produces what we repulsively call a relationship which makes the sentimental denouement of *Night Porter* inevitable. In Sade and in Pasolini, a potential masochistic complicity on the part of the victims would be superfluous to a view of masochism as already *in* the sadistic operation. There is a perfect identity between the masochistic and the sadistic impulses: the slaves are killed so that the masters may, as it were, appropriate their suffering as their own sexuality. Pasolini has the Duke in *Salò* say that ideally one should be both the executioner and the victim; sex is limited by the need for a partner. Fascism is the political system best suited to Sadean sex because it allows for the elimination of partners; the agony of the victims is refined into their executioners' sexual vibrations.

Perhaps the only way to escape from such conclusions would be to present a convincing theory of nonmimetic sexuality. By that we mean a theory which could account for sexual excitement in terms no longer dependent on the fantasy-representations of the excitement of others. In a sense, such a task is enormously difficult, for it involves proposing an alternative not merely to Sade, but also to

Freud—and ultimately to the massive training which we receive in the art of mimetic stimulation, a training which surely provides the cultural "ground" for psychoanalytic theories of fantasy as a sexualizing replication of the world.

Pasolini's treatment of Sade depends, it seems to us, on his having recognized such cultural continuities. Thus the fascistic setting is by no means intended to help us judge the Sadean imagination as aberrant or alien to us. Such judgments could only make us feel comfortable: both Sade and the Fascists are monsters and can therefore be historically sequestered. But Pasolini brings Sade close to us by placing him in a historically familiar context, and this is one of the ways in which *Salò* diminishes the grotesqueness of the literary text. Pasolini's mistrust of the alienating aspects of *The 120 Days* even leads him to a certain embellishment of Sade's work. No one in *Salò* has the physical grotesqueness of Sade's characters; it is, for example, symptomatic of Pasolini's emphases that the four impressively disgusting servants of *The 120 Days* have simply disappeared, and none of the jazzy women-narrators even vaguely resembles La Desgranges, *"cette généreuse athlète de Cythère,"* as Sade calls her, who had lost one nipple, three fingers, six teeth, and an eye in her many "combats." Even more crucially, the four friends are all rather ordinary-looking. The cross-eyed President is hardly a match for Sade's Curval who, it may be remembered, is described as having in the way of physical charms "drooping buttocks that rather resembled a pair of dirty rags flapping upon his upper thighs; the skin of those buttocks was, thanks to whipstrokes, so deadened and toughened that you could seize up a handful and knead it without his feeling a thing" (p. 205). The acceptable appearances of Pasolini's characters makes it impossible for us to ignore their considerable intelligence and their considerable elegance—both of which, while they also characterize Sade's friends, are somewhat obscured (and may therefore even be dismissed) by all the reminders in the book of their sensationally repellent bodies. By making his libertines presentable, Pasolini corrects Sade's own willingness to allow us not to recognize them.

In *Salò*, these recognitions are mainly the result of various aesthetic seductions. Both Pasolini's film and Sade's text are very self-consciously "works of art." At least half of both works is devoted to stories within the main story. And, particularly in Sade, the account of the libertines' activities is organized according to the principles which govern the reminiscences of the four female narrators. As a result of this dependency of the Sadean narrative on other narratives within it, Sade's work is exceptionally instructive about the affinities between violence and the ways in which we organize experience in order to make sense of it. The carefully constructed stories of Mme Duclos and her colleagues have an aphrodisiac effect on the libertines. But storytelling is valued because it is *already* a certain type of erotic activity. Like much erotic literature, *The 120 Days* moves from comparatively mild sexual anecdotes to orgies of erotic violence. But Sade points out that this is not the order in which his characters have the experiences being related. We are told that on a particular day, for instance, Sade's heroes were

engaged in activities which will be narrated only as part of the record of a later day. In other words, the progress from one day to the next in Sade's book is not determined by "real" chronology (by the lived experience of the characters designated as real people by this fiction); rather, the work is organized in order to produce a certain type of narrative progression which is itself erotically stimulating. The purpose of the book is, we might say, to create its own narrative.

While Sade's narrative doesn't reproduce the "actual" simultaneity of fellatio, flagellation, and coprophagia, it does reproduce the pacing which is more deeply characteristic of Sadean sex than the sexual content of any one day's adventures. That pacing could be characterized as a calculated movement toward explosive climaxes. This movement is made possible by the isolation and imprisonment of the object of desire: the Sadean master removes his victims from the world, or a particular desire "removes" a part of a body from the rest of the body. The master's authority and self-possession in Sade depend on the limited relations available both to his own desiring fantasies and to the "detached" object of desire as a result of such removals. In other terms, the calculation, preparation, and control of climaxes results from the establishment of foregrounds (objects of desire) and backgrounds (insignificant, undesired reality). This is also a narrative strategy: the climactic significances of narrative are made possible by a rigidly hierarchical organization of people and events into major and minor roles. In narrative, coherent orders are the privilege of a world in which relations have been limited to precisely those forms from which a central coherence can be made to appear "naturally" to emerge.

Narrativity sustains the glamour of historical violence. Narratives create violence as an isolated, identifiable topic or subject. We have all been trained to locate violence historically—that is, as a certain type of eruption against a background of generally nonviolent human experience. From this perspective, violence can be accounted for through historical accounts of the circumstances in which it occurs. Violence is thus reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated. Having been conditioned to think of violence within narrative frameworks, we expect this mastery to take place as a result of the pacifying power of such narrative conventions as beginnings, explanatory middles, and climactic endings, and we are therefore suspicious of works of art which reject those conventions. In short, we tend to sequester violence; we immobilize and centralize both historical acts of violence and their aesthetic representations. A major trouble with this is that the immobilization of a violent event invites a pleasurable identification with its enactment. A coherent narrative depends on stabilized images; stabilized images stimulate the mimetic impulse. Centrality, the privileged foreground, and the suspenseful expectation of climaxes all contribute to a fascination with violent events on the part of readers and spectators. As Sade spectacularly illustrates, the privileging of the subject of violence encourages a mimetic excitement focused on the very scene of violence. All critiques of violence, to the extent that they conceive of it in terms of scenes

which *can* be privileged, may therefore promote the very explosions which they are designed to expose or forestall.[2]

In Sade, the libertines' violence is both provoked and monitored by carefully constructed verbal narratives. In *Salò*, violence is at once served and kept at bay by a minor festival of the arts: in addition to the Sadean stories, we have some dancing (Signora Vaccari does a few campy steps on her own, Signora Maggi dances with the Monsignore), music (a pianist accompanies the narratives, and we also hear "serious" and popular music over a radio), and a small gallery of modern painting. Finally, we come closest to cinema itself when, like the libertines, we watch from inside the house the scenes of torture and murder in the courtyard through a pair of binoculars. Pasolini almost succeeds in making sadistic violence part of an entertaining spectacle, and in so doing he appears to have accepted an extraordinary degree of complicity with his fascistic libertines. The horror of the film's narrative progression—from the Circle of Manias to the Circle of Shit and finally to the Circle of Blood—is considerably diminished by the lateral divertissements of dance, music, and painting. By pleasantly scattering our aesthetic attention, *Salò* keeps us from focusing directly on narrative centers of violence. What we referred to a moment ago as a tendency to sequester violence is continuously frustrated, and as a result Pasolini deprives us of the narrative luxury of isolating the obscene or violent act and rejecting it. He turns us away from sadism gently—in order, it would seem, to prevent us from turning away from it violently. Horror is almost constantly forestalled by a multiplication of aesthetic appeals.

Pasolini gives us the model for such an easy and radically frivolous turning away from torture and murder in the President's jokes. These jokes are not in Sade. They are a debased but nonetheless significant version of a major strategy in the film. Immediately after each of three scenes of murder or mutilation, the President tells a terribly corny joke. (Example: What is the difference between the number 8, a gate, and the family? An 8 is always closed, a gate is sometimes open. "And the family?" asks the other person. "They're fine, thanks," answers the President, overwhelmed with glee.) If the pattern were just psychologically illustrative, its heavy-handed repetition would hardly be necessary. Rather, this diversion from violence through a (supposedly funny) little story is an anecdotal replica of a rhythm which characterizes the entire film. It parodistically reflects a visual mobility which would seem to indicate Pasolini's refusal to be fixed—better, to be transfixed—by his subject.

In *Salò* there is almost always something else going on, something which prevents us from focusing for very long on any one aspect of a scene. Our attention is divided between the content of the stories told by Signore Vaccari and Castelli and the coquettish campiness of the former and the considerably harsher camp of

2. We have made a similar argument in the context of a discussion of neo-Assyrian palace reliefs. See "The Forms of Violence," *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 17–29.

the latter. The three libertines putting the finishing touches on their dresses before going down to their marriage ceremonies are set against the massive, austere, abstract Léger paintings on the walls around them. The drag diverts us momentarily from coprophagia and murder, and Léger diverts us from the drag. The most intricate example of the film's distancing tactics is Pasolini's presentation of the tortures at the end only through binoculars. The President and His Excellency go between the courtyard and the chair from which they watch the burnings, scalpings, etc., through the glasses. One might say that by removing themselves from the sadistic festivities below, the men gain a greater control over them. They are no longer subject to the contingencies and distractions of actual participation. Now they perceive only what they are focusing on; the binoculars create a frame which excludes everything but the visual subject of violence. But Pasolini exploits the very strategy designed to isolate and contain scenes in order to distract us from those scenes. The instrument itself occupies a large part of the screen, both in the dividing lines between the two halves of the image and in the dark ellipse surrounding each image. And this elliptical frame is, of course, itself framed by a rectangular movie screen; the libertines' framing instrument is included within Pasolini's. Thus the doubled voyeurism of the sequence (both the President's eyes and the camera's eye are looking at the scene through binoculars) is undermined by the supplemental vision of the cinematic eye.

Pasolini's most original strategy in *Salò* is to distance himself from his Sadean protaganists by going along with them. He duplicates that from which he wants to separate himself. There is no Brechtian distancing from Sade; the relation of *Salò* to the literary text is one of subversive passivity. The duplicating intent of Pasolini's film is pointed to by several curious repetitions within the film itself. *Salò* frequently displays a kind of mimetic attachment to its own devices. The music during the two boys' dancing at the end, for example, is the same song that accompanies the titles at the beginning. The boys' dancing also reminds us of the sequence during which the Monsignore and Signora Maggi briefly dance. In the earlier scene, the camera itself seems to be imitating the dancers' steps as it moves with them around the room. In the final sequence, the elliptical shape of the back of the chair is repeated in the ellipse made by the shaded area in the scenes viewed through the binoculars. And in one of the most curious touches in the film, Pasolini has placed a statuette of a woman fixing her stockings in front of the table mirror in the room where Signora Maggi dresses before going downstairs to start her narratives. The object is reflected in the mirror, and the scene it depicts is repeated by Signora Maggi, who stops to arrange her stockings a few feet from the dressing table. Finally, the Sadean libertines' habit of acting out the passions which excite them after they are narratively described by one of the women storytellers is, toward the end of the film, adhered to in a manner which makes the subversive intent of all these repetitions, duplications, and symmetries especially clear. We refer to the pianist's suicide: her death leap from a window into the courtyard "illustrates" Signora Castelli's anecdote about girls being brutally

pushed across a room and out of a window into a cellar torture chamber. More exactly, the pianist's leap refers us to Signora Castelli's story, but the two are, so to speak, imperfectly symmetrical. One event evokes the other, but with a disquieting difference—in somewhat the same way as the cross-eyed President reminds us of the symmetry of the human face by virtue of that which violates it, a comically displaced eye.

Pasolini's brilliant trick in *Salò* is to use repetition and replication as distancing rather than imitative techniques. It is as if a fascinated adherence—to Sade, to Pasolini's own cinematic libertines, to the techniques of his film—were, finally, identical to a certain detachment. Pasolini exploits film's potential for a vertiginous passivity (its eagerness merely to *register*), and then, having allowed his work to abandon itself to all sorts of submissive doublings and pacifying symmetries, he creates a type of nonimitative recognition which is his distance from Sade and sadistic violence. But what we recognize is nothing more than our pleasure at being carried along as spectators. It is as if the ease with which we "go along" with *Salò*'s sadists included a folding movement of cognition—a *repliage* which constitutes our simply recognizing that ease. Thus the distance Pasolini takes from his subject consists in an excessive indulgence toward his subject; he moves away from images and styles by duplicating them rather than "criticizing" or "opposing" them.

The logic of this strategy could be defined in these terms: *moral consciousness is the replication of aesthetic consciousness.* Or, to put this in another way, the folding back we referred to a moment ago is also an *enfolding*, a thorough assuming or taking on of the pleasures of mimetic spectatorship. The Sadean libertines are experts in this type of pleasure, but their activities are also designed to rid them of the very "vibrations" which they seek in torturing others. The appropriation of the other's "commotions" in Sade is meant to serve a narrative denouement which kills excitement: the great test by which all acts are measured in *The 120 Days* is *la perte du foutre.* Sex in Sade is essentially the loss of cum, the coming to a loss, the climactic explosion which confirms the success of an aesthetic limited to the madly rigorous schedules of Sade's narrative orders. In the Sadean system of phallic machismo, nothing is viewed more contemptuously than the weak orgasms of modestly endowed males. Sadism is an aestheticized erotic, but the aesthetic is limited to the controlled movements of narrative progressions. *Salò* multiplies aesthetic seductions and, appropriately, almost neglects the orgasm. Pasolini has simply let all that prideful Sadean *foutre* drop. . . . He makes us into more willing, less purposeful spectators than his sado-fascistic protagonists. In a sense, this means that we never tire of being spectators; but it is the very limitlessness of our aestheticism which constitutes the moral perspective on sadism in *Salò.* The saving frivolity with which we simply go on looking creates a consciousness of looking as, first, part of our inescapable implication in the world's violence and, secondly, a promiscuous mobility thanks to which our mimetic appropriations of the world are constantly being continued *elsewhere*

and therefore do not require the satisfyingly climactic destruction of any part of the world.

The four friends in *Salò* kill Ezio for sleeping with a black servant-girl. The Duke then approaches the girl, who is crouched by a chair, and shoots her in the head. When the Duke steps away, Pasolini shows us the dead girl. There is no blood, there are no signs of a violent death; instead we have the beautiful lines of the girl's nude, lifeless body propped against the chair, with one arm gracefully thrown over its seat. This potentially sentimental but, in fact, healthily cruel little scene is a fine example of the way in which Pasolini is always helping us to see that we are not blind. The effects of violence—like any other scene in the world—can always be viewed with a certain pleasure. The morality of the scene consists in our having been compelled to see the nonmoral nature of our interest in violence. It is as if Pasolini had divided an act of violence into two parts—or, more accurately, doubled it, let us see it twice—in order to make us experience more vividly the wholeness of our perception. The first shot is the pistol shot, the shocked perception; the second shot is the pleased perception of a beautiful human design. Of course the point—and it could be thought of as a major point of the entire film—is that two is always in one. But it is perhaps precisely because the purely agreeable perception is isolated and emphasized that our aesthetic awareness is, so to speak, saturated into an acceptance of itself. That acceptance is a replica of Sade's horrendous appropriation of others; it is our sensuous enfolding of the Sadean imagination, with, however, the supplemental pleasure of our knowing that there is no reason to destroy the world in order to conclude our perceptions of it. *Tu vois*; you see.

*

Pasolini's pianist is the logical defect in a Sadean world. *Salò*'s near duplication of *The 120 Days of Sodom* involves in this instance the presence of four women, as in the book, but in the film only three of them narrate stories. The fourth is their silent musical accompanist, the enigmatic piano player who throws herself from a window at the end of the film, presumably immediately after seeing the tortures in the courtyard. That jump is perhaps the most shocking movement in the film, but it is also somehow outside the film. Pasolini has changed a narrator into a portentous but impenetrable blankness. Each of Sade's four women has an absolutely clear narrative function: each takes one of a predefined group of passions, thus advancing our knowledge of the human heart, as Sade would have it, and also providing the boundaries for each part of Sade's own account of the libertines' behavior. In contrast to this, Pasolini's pianist doesn't help to move anything forward. Somewhat like ourselves (and like Pasolini's camera), she simply goes along with things; quite literally, she plays along. She is an extra entertainment.

The pianist's strangely haggard yet also childlike face tells us nothing. It is

tempting but useless to try to interpret her look the few times she turns from her piano, as if struck (why? how?) by something that has been said or done in the room. The only time she speaks is to enliven the three libertines' wedding ceremony; she drops the accordion which has temporarily replaced her piano and, with Signora Vaccari, does a vaudeville number designed to cheer everyone up. The performance ends with the pianist screaming; even Signora Vaccari has trouble deciding if it's part of the act or not. Perhaps it is; at any rate, they both laugh raucously, stop abruptly, and the enigmatic musician returns to her place, all signs of agitation gone. She picks up her accordion to accompany the wedding with a look one is almost tempted to read as a cretinously benevolent attitude toward the sacrament of marriage.

Pier Paolo Pasolini. Salò. *1975.*

The pianist not only resists interpretation; she also resists touch. Alone in the midst of these Sadean feasts of bodily penetrations and assaults, she appears to have a kind of negative magnetism which keeps everyone at a certain distance from her. The Duke rushes among the "guests" at the young people's marriage in *Salò* (what would the orgy be in Sade without the respectable ceremony which it transgresses?), hugging, kissing, feeling up everyone in sight. He ends by mildly assaulting the three giggling, delighted narrators; but he only extends a hand toward the pianist's breasts as he is already moving away from the group. It is a brilliant scene: there is no sign of revulsion on either side, merely the immobile, unlaughing woman, and the Duke's vague, mechanically sensual gesture in her direction—that is, toward the only body in the film which is acknowledged by a gesture of neglect.

It is with this unassimilated, alien, taboo, compliant, insignificant, and unsignifying presence that Pasolini gives us the only "pure" narrative sequence of the film. We follow her from the piano she suddenly stops playing to her suicidal window upstairs, across rooms and on the staircase, as she moves toward her startling denouement. Walking in films creates narrative suspense; people almost never walk around in movies, they walk *to*. The narrative tension generated by the pianist's walking is strictly formal: nothing indicates either where she is going or how she feels about going there. She sits at the window, looks out, puts a hand to her mouth, and then, expressionless again, coolly steps out the window to her death.

So it turns out, after all, that the pianist has her story too, a narrative of violence enacted by her body. But now there are no lateral divertissements, no dancing, no humming, no piano playing, merely the movement toward a violent death. And in a sense her death-walk is so faithful to the formal rhythms of the film's (and Sade's) progress toward murderous violence that the shock we feel at her death may in fact be the shock of not having been shocked by her jump. How could we be astonished that her walking ended in a climactic event which it promised from the start? The pianist sacrificially assumes the film's horror so that we may finally *see* how natural and easy and smooth it all has been. She has until now merely accompanied the film; her playing follows the stories, gives a kind of musical replica of the tales. She gives herself over to an embellishing passivity not unlike Pasolini's in front of Sade. Like *Salò* itself, the pianist has no "attitude" toward sadism; she is simply ejected from it at the very moment and by the very perception which saturates her in it.

The pianist does, however, bring a certain finality to the endless recommencements of narratives. In Sade, the end is never enough, and Pasolini's Fascists, interestingly, ask how torture and murder might be repeated indefinitely. The guignolesque final sequence of *Salò* is, in a sense, the natural end of all narratives, but its satisfying finality is only an illusion. It ends nothing more than that which has been in the narrative machine all along, and the Sadean libertines angrily aspire, as we have seen, to schedules of destruction which their schedules

can never include. One of the last images in *Salò* is of the Monsignore cracking his whip in the courtyard and screaming (but we can't hear him) with an expression of pained, almost tearful fury on his face. As if he couldn't do enough to his victims, as if they were always somehow partly somewhere else, as if even they had the pianist's simple and maddening capacity to stay outside the plot while they are in it, and to have a death which cannot be entirely appropriated as the torturer's own orgasmic explosion. The angry, cultivated, rigorously rationalistic children of Sade can only carry on—in both senses: scream and start again.

The pianist in *Salò* may remind us of the anomalous vagina in Sade, of a body stubbornly outside, perversely resistant to the symmetrical designs of Sade's masochistic men. She is also the death which the men of *The 120 Days* and of *Salò* cannot accept not having. We may now understand why coprophagia is so important in Sade. In the last story of the Circle of Shit in *Salò* (a story we also find in *The 120 Days*), Signora Maggi tells of a man whose greatest delight was to eat the excrement of a woman condemned to death. With the feel of death in her very bowels, the condemned woman can perhaps transmit its taste to the enthralled, deprived, hungry libertine. Sade's biographer, Gilbert Lely, referring to the fact that of "the six hundred abnormal cases" described by the *historiennes* of *The 120 Days* "more than half offer the image of an ingestion of excrements," complains about "la suprématie gratuite d'un égarement hideux entre tous." This excessively harsh judgment of the unsavory little perversion of coprophagia may surprise us—especially if we remember the murderous ingenuities of La Desgranges's 150 clients. But we would perhaps be wrong to accuse the biographer of a misplaced fastidiousness. Coprophagia in both Sade and *Salò* comes before what Pasolini aptly calls the Circle of Blood, but in a sense it is also after all the rest, the childish (re-) (per-) version which may be both our first retort and the last resort. In coprophagia, the Sadean libertine appropriates the dying which eludes him even in the *jouissance* of murder. The somber satisfaction of eating shit is that of eating death.

Poststructuralism and the "Paraliterary"

ROSALIND KRAUSS

Last fall Partisan Review *conducted a two-day symposium under the general title "The State of Criticism." Although various sessions were designed to treat a variety of topics, most presentations were dominated by one continuing theme: structuralist and poststructuralist critical theory and the threat that it somehow poses for literature. My own role in these proceedings was limited to that of discussant; I was to comment on the main paper, written by Morris Dickstein and delivered as the substance of a session dedicated to the influence of recent critical theory on the vehicles of mass culture. As will become obvious, Dickstein's paper was yet another statement of the general sense that literary criticism (understood as an academic discipline) had fallen hostage to an invading force, that this force was undermining critical practice (understood as close reading) and, through that corrosive effect, was eating away at our concept of literature itself.*

My comments had, then, a very particular point of origin. But the views against which those comments were directed are extremely widespread within the literary establishment—both inside and outside the academy—where a sense of the pernicious nature of poststructuralism has led to more recent projects devoted to "How to Rescue Literature."[1] *Thus, despite the specific occasion that gave rise to my discussion of the "paraliterary," I believe this is of much wider conceptual interest. I therefore reproduce in full my remarks.*

The title of this morning's session—"The Effects of Critical Theories on Practical Criticism, Cultural Journalism, and Reviewing"—suggests that what is at issue is the dissemination, or integration, of certain theoretical perspectives into an apparatus of critical practice that reaches well beyond the graduate departments of English or Comp. Lit. at Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins. The subject appears to be the effect of theory on what Mr. Dickstein describes as "the mediating force between an increasingly difficult literature and an increas-

1. Two particularly vociferous attacks on poststructuralism have appeared recently in *The New York Review of Books*: Roger Shattuck, "How to Rescue Literature," *NYR*, XXVI, 6 (April 17, 1980), 29-35; and Denis Donoghue "Deconstructing Deconstruction," *NYR*, XXVII, 10 (June 12, 1980), 37-41.

ingly diverse audience," a mediating force represented in this country by a long list of magazines and journals, headed, undoubtedly, by *The New York Review of Books.* Now this is a subject on which Mr. Dickstein's paper—obsessed by what he sees as the deepening technocratization of graduate studies—does not touch. If by this omission he means to imply that he thinks that advanced critical theory has had *no* effect whatsoever on that wider critical apparatus, then he and I are in complete agreement.

But the question would seem to be—Mr. Dickstein's laments aside—*why* has there been no such effect? In order to broach that subject I would like to recall briefly two lectures I attended by two of the technocrats in Mr. Dickstein's account: Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. Derrida's lecture was the presentation of part of an essay called "Restitutions," which, in examining the claims Heidegger makes in "The Origin of the Work of Art," focuses on a painting by Van Gogh commonly thought to be the depiction of a pair of shoes. In that lecture, Derrida placed special emphasis on the role of a voice that continually interrupted the flow of his own more formal discourse as it spun out the terms of philosophical debate. Enacted in a slight falsetto, this voice was, Derrida explained, that of a woman who repeatedly breaks into the measured order of the exposition with questions that are slightly hysterical, very exasperated, and above all *short.* "What pair?" she keeps insisting, "Who said they were a *pair* of shoes?" Now this voice, cast as a woman's, is of course Derrida's own, and it functions to telegraph in a charged and somewhat disguised way the central argument which for other reasons must proceed at a more professorial pace. But aside from its rather terroristic reductiveness, this voice functions to open and theatricalize the space of Derrida's writing, alerting us to the dramatic interplay of levels and styles and speakers that had formerly been the prerogative of literature but not of critical or philosophical discourse.

This arrogation of certain terms and ruses of literature leads me to the lecture by Roland Barthes entitled *"Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure"* in which, by analogizing his own career to that of Proust, Barthes more explicitly pointed to an intention to blur the distinction between literature and criticism. Indeed, much of Barthes's recent work—I am thinking of *The Pleasure of the Text, A Lover's Discourse,* and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*—simply cannot be called criticism, but it cannot, for that matter, be called not-criticism either. Rather, criticism finds itself caught in a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides, divigations. And what is created, as in the case of much of Derrida, is a kind of paraliterature. Since Barthes's and Derrida's projects are extremely different, it is perhaps only in this matter of inaugurating a paraliterary genre that their work can be juxtaposed.

The paraliterary space is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of literature. For both Barthes and Derrida have a deep enmity towards that notion of the literary work. What is left

is drama without the Play, voices without the Author, criticism without the Argument. It is no wonder that this country's critical establishment—outside the university, that is—remains unaffected by this work, simply cannot use it. Because the paraliterary cannot be a model for the systematic unpacking of the meanings of a work of art that criticism's task is thought to be.

The creation of the paraliterary in the more recent work of these men is, of course, the result of theory—their own theories in operation, so to speak. These theories run exactly counter to the notion that there is a work, x, behind which there stands a group of meanings, a, b, or c, which the hermeneutic task of the critic unpacks, reveals, by breaking through, peeling back the literal surface of the work. By claiming that there is not, *behind* the literal surface, a set of meanings to which it points or models to which it refers, a set of originary terms onto which it opens and from which it derives its own authenticity, this theory is not prolonging the life of formalism and saying what Mr. Dickstein claims "we all know"—that writing is about writing. For in that formula a different object is substituted for the term "about"; instead of a work's being "about" the July Monarchy or death and money, it is "about" its own strategies of construction, its own linguistic operations, its own revelation of convention, its own surface. In this formulation it is the Author or Literature rather than the World or Truth that is the source of the text's authenticity.

Mr. Dickstein's view of this theory is that it is a jazzed-up, technocratized version of formalism, that its message is that writing is about writing, and that in a work like *S/Z*, "Barthes's purpose is to preserve and extract the multiplicity of the text's meanings." Here we arrive not only at the point where there is no agreement whatsoever between us, but also at the second reason why this theory has left the wider critical establishment of this country in such virginal condition. For where that establishment has not been largely ignorant of the work of Barthes or Derrida or Lacan, it has misconceived or misconstrued it. To use the example that Mr. Dickstein has provided, *S/Z* is precisely not the preservation and extraction of "the multiplicity of the text's meanings." Nor is it what the jacket copywriter for the American edition claims: the semantic dissection of a Balzac novella, "in order to uncover layers of unsuspected meanings and connotations." For both these notions—"extraction" and "dissection"—presuppose an activity that is not Barthes's own, just as they arise from a view of the literary object that Barthes wishes not so much to attack as to dispel. For *extract* and *dissect* assume a certain relation between denotation and connotation as they function within the literary text; they assume, that is, the primacy of the denotative, the literal utterance, beyond which lies the rich vein of connotation or association or meaning. Common sense conspires to tell us that this should be so. But Barthes—for whom common sense is the enemy, due to its unshakable habit of fashioning everything on the model of nature—demonstrates the opposite: that denotation is the effect of connotation, the last block to be put in place. *S/Z* is a demonstration of the way that systems of connotation, stereotype, cliché, gnomic utterance—in

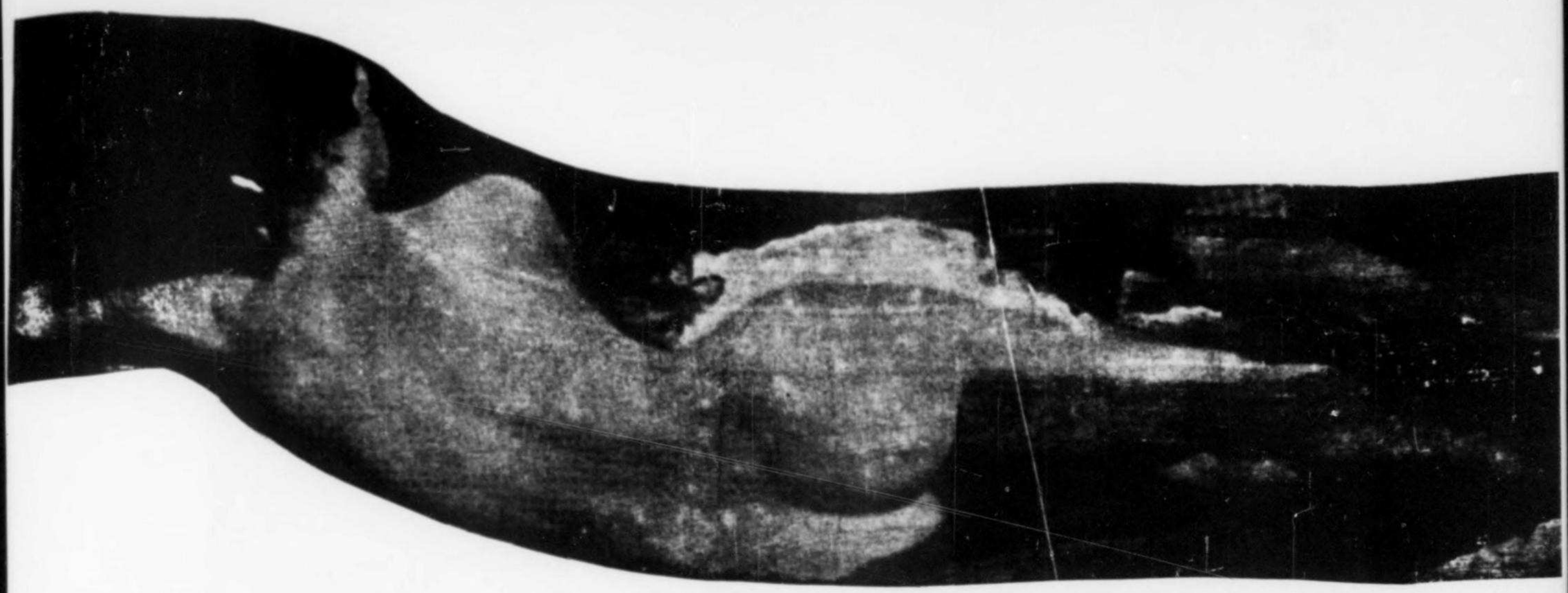
short, the always already-known, already-experienced, already-given-within-a-culture—concatenate to produce a text. Further, he claims that it is not only this connotational system that writes the text, but that it is, literally, what we read when we read the literary work. Nothing is buried that must be "extracted"; it is all part of the surface of the text.

Thus, in introducing the three women who surround the narrator of *Sarrasine*, Balzac describes Marianina as "a girl of sixteen whose beauty embodied the fabled imaginings of the Eastern poets! Like the sultan's daughter, in the story of the Magic Lamp, she should have been kept veiled." To this description Barthes responds, "This is a vast commonplace of literature: the Woman copies the Book. In other words, every body is a citation: of the 'already-written.' The origin of desire is the statue, the painting, the book." Then Marianina's mother is introduced with the question, "Have you ever encountered one of those women whose striking beauty defies the inroads of age?" To which Barthes's response is: "Mme de Lanty's body is drawn [with the words *one of those women*] from another Book: the Book of Life." Again, after the opening description of Mme de Rochefide as a woman "delicately formed, with one of those faces as fresh as that of a child," Barthes pounces again on the term "one of those faces": "The body is a duplicate of the Book: the young woman originates in the Book of Life, the plural refers to a total of stored-up and recorded experiences." The text's invocation of those books, those vast storehouses of cliché, creates what Barthes refers to as the "stereographic space of writing," as well as the illusion that there is a denotational object—Marianina, or Mme de Lanty—that precedes the connotational system signaled by "one of those faces." But if writing sets up the pretense that denotation is the first meaning, for Barthes denotation is "no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to close the reading)." Identifying these connotational systems as codes, Barthes writes, "To depict is to unroll the carpet of the codes, to refer not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another. Thus, realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real. . . . This is why realism cannot be designated a 'copier' but rather a 'pasticheur' (through secondary mimesis, it copies what is already a copy)."

The painstaking, almost hallucinatory slowness with which Barthes proceeds through the text of *Sarrasine* provides an extraordinary demonstration of this chattering of voices which is that of the codes at work. If Barthes has a purpose, it is to isolate these codes by applying a kind of spotlight to each instance of them, to expose them "as so many fragments of something that has always been already read, seen, done, experienced." It is also to make them heard as voices "whose origin," he says, "is lost in the vast perspective of the already-written" and whose interweaving acts to "de-originate the utterance." It is as impossible to reconcile this project with formalism as it is to revive within it the heartbeat of humanism. To take the demonstration of the de-originated utterance seriously would obviously put a large segment of the critical establishment out of business;

it is thus no wonder that poststructuralist theory should have had so little effect in that quarter.

There is however another place where this work has met with a rather different reception: in graduate schools where students, whatever their other concerns might be, are interested in reading. These students, having experienced the collapse of modernist literature, have turned to the literary products of postmodernism, among the most powerful examples of which are the paraliterary works of Barthes and Derrida. If one of the tenets of modernist literature had been the creation of a work that would force reflection on the conditions of its own construction, that would insist on reading as a much more consciously *critical* act, then it is not surprising that the medium of a *post*modernist literature should be the critical text wrought into a paraliterary form. And what is clear is that Barthes and Derrida are the *writers*, not the critics, that students now read.



On the Museum's Ruins

DOUGLAS CRIMP

> *The German word* museal [*museumlike*] *has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art.*
> *—Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum"*

In his review of the new installation of nineteenth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum, Hilton Kramer attacks the inclusion of salon painting in the André Meyer Galleries. Characterizing that art as silly, sentimental, and impotent, Kramer goes on to assert that, had the reinstallation been done a generation earlier, such pictures would have remained in the museum's storerooms, to which they had so justly been consigned:

> It is the destiny of corpses, after all, to remain buried, and salon painting was found to be very dead indeed.
>
> But nowadays there is no art so dead that an art historian cannot be found to detect some simulacrum of life in its moldering remains. In the last decade, there has, in fact, arisen in the scholarly world a powerful sub-profession that specializes in these lugubrious disinterments.[1]

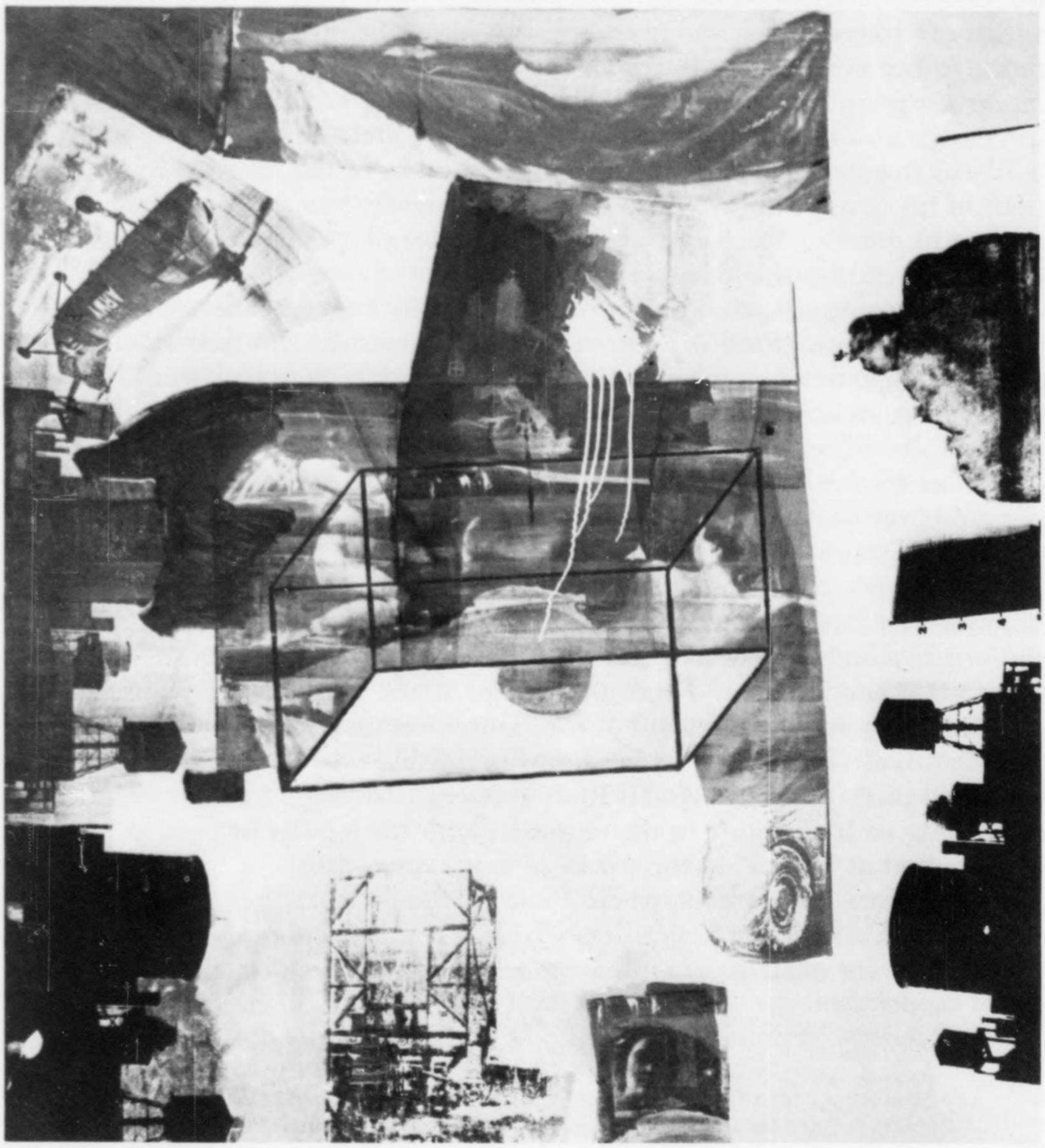
Kramer's metaphor of death and decay in the museum recalls Adorno's essay, in which the opposite but complementary experiences of Valéry and Proust at the Louvre are analyzed, except that Adorno insists upon this *museal* mortality as a necessary effect of an institution caught in the contradictions of its culture and therefore extending to every object contained there.[2] Kramer, on the other hand, retaining his faith in the eternal life of masterpieces, ascribes the conditions of life and death not to the museum or the particular history of which it is an instrument, but to artworks themselves, their autonomous quality threatened only by the distortions that a particular misguided installation might impose. He therefore wishes to explain "this curious turnabout that places a meretricious little picture like Gérôme's 'Pygmalion and Galatea' under the same roof with masterpieces on the order of Goya's 'Pepito' and Manet's 'Woman with a Parrot.' What kind of taste is it—or what standard of values—that can so easily accommodate such glaring opposites?"

> The answer [Kramer thinks] is to be found in that much-discussed phenomenon—the death of modernism. So long as the modernist movement was understood to be thriving, there could be no question about a revival of painters like Gérôme or Bouguereau. Modernism exerted a moral as well as an esthetic authority that precluded such a development. But the demise of modernism has left us with few, if any, defenses against the incursions of debased taste. Under the new post-modernist dispensation, anything goes. . . .
>
> It is as an expression of this post-modernist ethos . . . that the new installation of 19th century art at the Met needs . . . to be understood. What we are given in the beautiful André Meyer Galleries is the first comprehensive account of the 19th century from a post-modernist point of view in one of our major museums.[3]

We have here yet another example of Kramer's moralizing cultural conservatism disguised as progressive modernism. But we also have a very interesting

1. Hilton Kramer, "Does Gérôme Belong with Goya and Monet?" *New York Times*, April 13, 1980, section 2, p. 35.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London, Neville Spearman, 1967, pp. 173–186.
3. Kramer, p. 35.

puzzle, whose pieces are not, in my estimation, fitted together right, perhaps because a crucial one is missing. The pieces Kramer has assembled are the museum, art history, modernism, and postmodernism. To which I would add photography, and complete the puzzle to look, I would say, something like this:



For I want to claim that Rauschenberg's art, using the medium of photography and at the threshold of postmodernism, enacts a deconstruction of the discourse of the museum, of its pretensions to anything we could possibly call knowledge.

Robert Rauschenberg. Transom. *1963*.

One of the early instances of the term *postmodernism* as applied to the visual arts occurs in Leo Steinberg's "Other Criteria," in the course of a discussion of Rauschenberg's work and its transmutation of the picture surface into what Steinberg calls a flatbed, referring, significantly, to a printing press.[4] This flatbed picture plane is an altogether new kind of picture surface, one that effects, according to Steinberg, a radical shift from nature to culture. That is, it is a surface which can receive a vast and heterogeneous array of cultural images and artifacts that had not been compatible with the pictorial field of either premodernist or modernist painting. (A modernist painting retains a "natural" orientation to the spectator's vision, which the postmodernist picture abandons.) Although it is doubtful that Steinberg had a very precise notion of the far-reaching implications of his term *postmodernism*, a term now used extremely promiscuously, his reading of the revolution implicit in Rauschenberg's art can be both focused and extended by taking this designation seriously.

Presumably unconsciously, Steinberg's essay suggests important parallels with the "archeological" enterprise of Michel Foucault. Not only does the very term *postmodernism* imply the foreclosure of what Foucault would call the *episteme*, or archive, of modernism, but even more specifically, by insisting upon the radically different kinds of picture surfaces upon which different kinds of data can be accumulated and organized, Steinberg selects the very figure that Foucault uses to represent the incompatibility of historical periods: the tables upon which their knowledge is tabulated.

Foucault's project involves the replacement of those unities of humanist historical discourse such as tradition, influence, development, evolution, source, and origin with concepts like discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation. Thus, in Foucault's terms, if the surface of a Rauschenberg painting truly involves the kind of transformation that Steinberg claims it does, then it cannot be said to evolve from, or in any way be continuous with a modernist picture surface.[5] And if Rauschenberg's flatbed pictures are experienced as effecting such a rupture or discontinuity with the modernist past, as I believe they do, and as I think do the works of many other artists of the present, then perhaps we are indeed experiencing one of those cataclysmic ruptures in the epistemological field that Foucault describes, a rupture as thorough as that which separates the age of classicism (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) from the age of modernism, the analysis of wealth from economics, natural history from biology, general grammar from philology.[6] But it is not, of course, only the

4. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 55–91. This essay is based on a lecture presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in March 1968.

5. See Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the radical difference between cubist collage and Rauschenberg's "reinvented" collage in "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum*, XIII, 4 (December 1974), 36–43.

6. These are the subjects analyzed by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon, 1970.

epistemological field that is unrecognizably transformed at certain moments in history. New institutions of power, as well as new discourses, arise; indeed the two are interdependent. Foucault has concentrated on modern institutions of confinement: the asylum, the clinic, and the prison; for him, it is these institutions that produce the respective discourses of madness, illness, and criminality—not the other way around. There is another institution of confinement ripe for analysis in Foucault's terms: the museum; and another discipline: art history. They are, together with photography, or perhaps more precisely the repression and selective use of photography, the preconditions of the discourse that we call modern art. Foucault himself has hinted at the way to begin thinking about this analysis.

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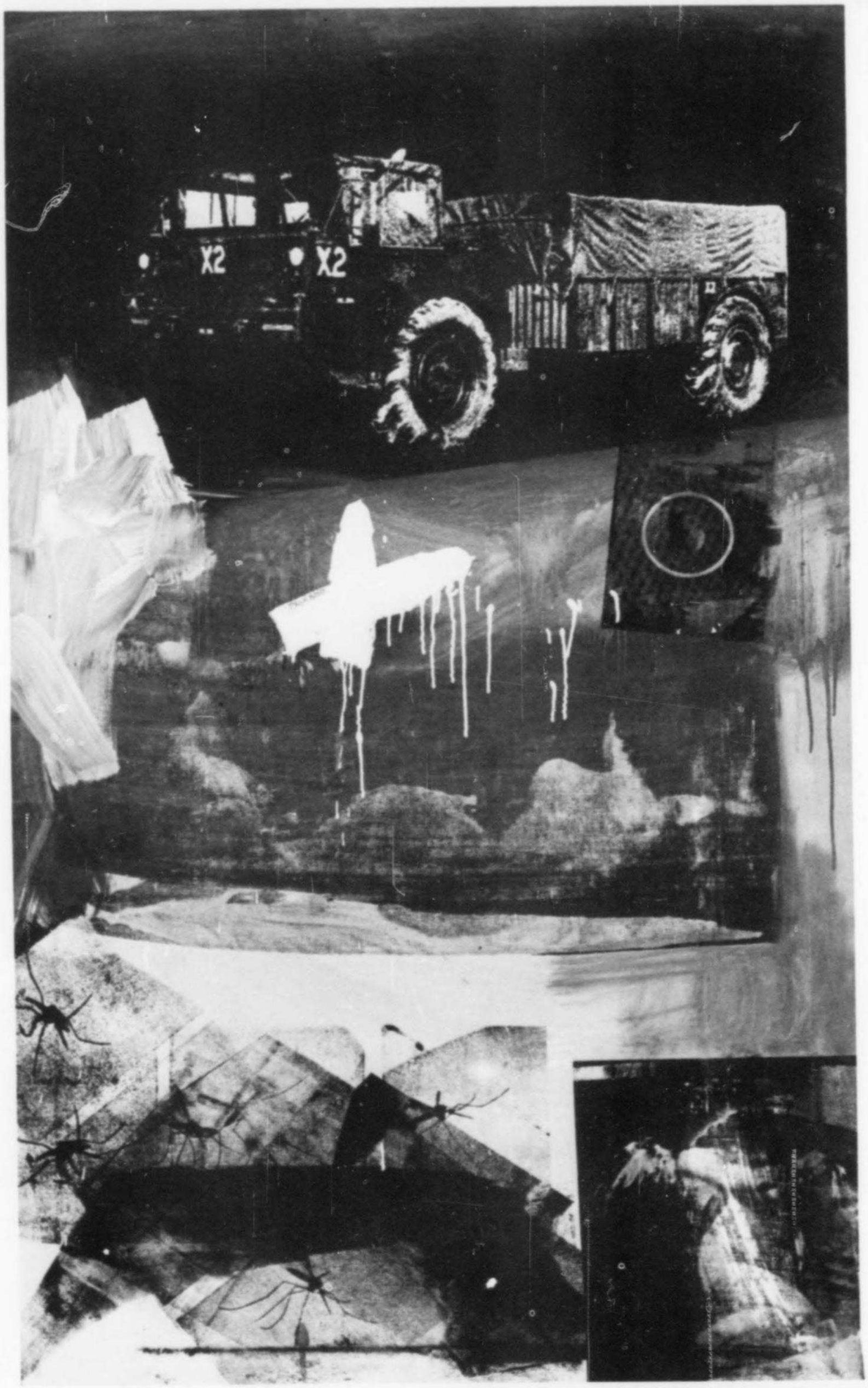
The beginning of modernism in painting is usually located in Manet's work of the early sixties, in which painting's relationship to its art-historical precedents was made shamelessly obvious. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* is meant to be as recognizable a vehicle for the picture of a modern courtesan in Manet's *Olympia* as is the unmodeled pink paint that composes her body. Just one hundred years after Manet problematized painting's relationship to its sources,[7] Rauschenberg made a series of pictures using the images of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Rubens's *Venus at Her Toilet*. But Rauschenberg's references to these old-master paintings is effected entirely differently from Manet's; while Manet duplicates the pose, composition, and certain details of the original in a painted transformation, Rauschenberg simply silkscreens a photographic reproduction of the original onto a surface that might also contain such images as trucks and helicopters. And if trucks and helicopters cannot have found their way onto the surface of *Olympia*, it is obviously not only because such products of the modern age had not yet been invented. More crucially, it is because of the structural coherence that made an image-bearing surface legible as a picture at the threshold of modernism, as

7. Of course, not all art historians would agree that Manet problematized the relationship of painting to its sources. This is, however, the initial assumption of Michael Fried's "Manet's Sources: Aspects of his Art, 1859–1865" (*Artforum*, VII, 7 [March 1969], 28–82), whose first sentence reads: "If a single question is guiding for our understanding of Manet's art during the first half of the 1860s, it is this: What are we to make of the numerous references in his paintings of those years to the work of the great painters of the past?" (p. 28). In part, Fried's presupposition that Manet's references to earlier art were *different*, in their "literalness and obviousness," from the ways in which Western painting had previously used sources led Theodore Reff to attack Fried's essay, saying, for example, "When Reynolds portrays his sitters in attitudes borrowed from famous pictures by Holbein, Michelangelo, and Annibale Carracci, wittily playing on their relevance to his own subjects; when Ingres deliberately refers in his religious compositions to those of Raphael, and in his portraits to familiar examples of Greek sculpture or Roman painting, do they not reveal the same historical consciousness that informs Manet's early work?" (Theodore Reff, "'Manet's Sources': A Critical Evaluation," *Artforum*, VIII, 1 [September 1969], 40). As a result of this denial of difference, Reff is able to continue applying to modernism art-historical methodologies devised to explain past art, for example that which explains the very particular relationship of Italian Renaissance art to the art of classical antiquity.



Robert Rauschenberg. Crocus. *1962*.

opposed to the radically different pictorial logic that obtains at the beginning of postmodernism. Just what it is that constitutes the particular logic of a Manet painting is discussed in an essay by Foucault about Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony*:

> *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia* were perhaps the first "museum" paintings, the first paintings in European art that were less a response to the achievement of Giorgione, Raphael, and Velazquez than an acknowledgement (supported by this singular and obvious connection, using this legible reference to cloak its operation) of the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums. In the same period, *The Temptation* was the first literary work to comprehend the greenish institutions where books are accumulated and where the slow and incontrovertible vegetation of learning quietly proliferates. Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They both produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings or texts—or rather to the aspect in painting or writing that remains indefinitely open. They erect their art within the archive. They were not meant to foster the lamentations—the lost youth, the absence of vigor, and the decline of inventiveness—through which we reproach our Alexandrian age, but to unearth an essential aspect of our culture: every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of writing.[8]

At a later point in this essay, Foucault says that "*Saint Anthony* seems to summon *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, at least to the extent that the latter stands as its grotesque shadow." If *The Temptation* points to the library as the generator of modern literature, then *Bouvard and Pécuchet* fingers it as the dumping grounds of an irredeemable classical culture. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is a novel that systematically parodies the inconsistencies, irrelevancies, the massive foolishness of received ideas in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed a "Dictionary of Received Ideas" was to comprise part of a second volume of Flaubert's last, unfinished novel.

Bouvard and Pécuchet is the narrative of two loony Parisian bachelors who, at a chance meeting, discover between themselves a profound sympathy, and also that they are both copy clerks. They share a distaste for city life and particularly for their fate of sitting behind desks all day. When Bouvard inherits a small fortune the two buy a farm in Normandy, to which they retire, expecting there to

8. Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 92–93.

meet head on the reality that was denied them in the half-life of their Parisian offices. They begin with the idea that they will farm their farm, at which they fail miserably. From agriculture they move to a more specialized field: arboriculture. Failing that they decide upon garden architecture. To prepare themselves for each of their new professions, they consult various manuals and treatises, in which they are extremely perplexed to find contradictions and misinformation of all kinds. The advice they seek in them is either confusing or utterly inapplicable; theory and practice never coincide. But undaunted by their successive failures, they move on inexorably to the next activity, only to find that it too is incommensurate with the texts which purport to represent it. They try chemistry, physiology, anatomy, geology, archeology . . . the list goes on. When they finally succumb to the fact that the knowledge they've relied upon is a mass of contradictions, utterly haphazard, and quite disjunct from the reality they'd sought to confront, they revert to their initial task of copying. Here is one of Flaubert's scenarios for the end of the novel:

> They copy papers haphazardly, everything they find, tobacco pouches, old newspapers, posters, torn books, etc. (real items and their imitations. Typical of each category).
>
> Then, they feel the need for a taxonomy. They make tables, antithetical oppositions such as "crimes of the kings and crimes of the people"—blessings of religion, crimes of religion. Beauties of history, etc.; sometimes, however, they have real problems putting each thing in its proper place and suffer great anxieties about it.
>
> —Onward! Enough speculation! Keep on copying! The page must be filled. Everything is equal, the good and the evil. The farcical and the sublime—the beautiful and the ugly—the insignificant and the typical, they all become an exaltation of the statistical. There are nothing but facts—and phenomena.
>
> Final bliss.[9]

In a recent essay about the novel, Eugenio Donato argues persuasively that the emblem for the series of heterogeneous activities of Bouvard and Pécuchet is not, as Foucault and others have claimed, the library-encyclopedia, but rather the museum. This is not only because the museum is a privileged term in the novel itself, but also because of the absolute heterogeneity it gathers together. The museum contains everything the library contains and it contains the library as well:

9. Quoted in Eugenio Donato, "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*," *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 214. I wish to thank Rosalind Krauss for bringing this essay to my attention and more generally for our many discussions of the issues raised here.

> If Bouvard and Pécuchet never assemble what can amount to a library, they nevertheless manage to constitute for themselves a private museum. The museum, in fact, occupies a central position in the novel; it is connected to the characters' interest in archeology, geology, and history and it is thus through the *Museum* that questions of origin, causality, representation, and symbolization are most clearly stated. The *Museum*, as well as the questions it tries to answer, depends upon an archeological epistemology. Its representational and historical pretensions are based upon a number of metaphysical assumptions about origins—archeology intends, after all, to be a science of the *archēs*. Archeological origins are important in two ways: each archeological artifact has to be an original artifact, and these original artifacts must in turn explain the "meaning" of a subsequent larger history. Thus, in Flaubert's caricatural example, the baptismal font that Bouvard and Pécuchet discover has to be a Celtic sacrificial stone, and Celtic culture has in turn to act as an original master pattern for cultural history.[10]

Not only do Bouvard and Pécuchet derive all of Western culture from the few stones that remain from the Celtic past, but the "meaning" of that culture as well. Those menhirs lead them to construct the phallic wing of their museum:

> In former times towers, pyramids, candles, milestones and even trees had a phallic significance, and for Bouvard and Pécuchet everything became phallic. They collected swing-poles of carriages, chair-legs, cellar bolts, pharmacists' pestles. When people came to see them they would ask: 'What do you think that looks like?' then confided the mystery, and if there were objections, they shrugged their shoulders pityingly.[11]

Even in this subcategory of phallic objects, Flaubert maintains the heterogeneity of the museum's artifacts, a heterogeneity which defies the systematization and homogenization that knowledge demands.

> The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguis-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 220. The apparent continuity between Foucault's and Donato's essays here is misleading, inasmuch as Donato is explicitly engaged in an attack upon Foucault's archeological methodology, claiming that it implicates Foucault in a return to a metaphysics of origins.
11. Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, New York, Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 114–115.

> tic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world. Should the fiction disappear, there is nothing left of the *Museum* but "bric-a-brac," a heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects which are incapable of substituting themselves either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representations.[12]

This perception of the museum is what Flaubert figures through the comedy of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Founded on the disciplines of archeology and natural history, both inherited from the classical age, the museum was a discredited institution from its very inception. And the history of museology is a history of all the various attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogeneous system or series. The faith in the possibility of ordering the museum's "bric-a-brac," echoing that of Bouvard and Pécuchet themselves, persists until today. Reinstallations like that of the André Meyer Galleries, particularly numerous throughout the past decade, are testimonies to that faith. What so alarms Hilton Kramer in this particular instance is that the criterion for determining the order of aesthetic objects in the museum throughout the era of modernism—the "self-evident" quality of masterpieces—has been broken, and as a result "anything goes." Nothing could speak more eloquently of the fragility of the museum's claims to represent anything coherent at all.

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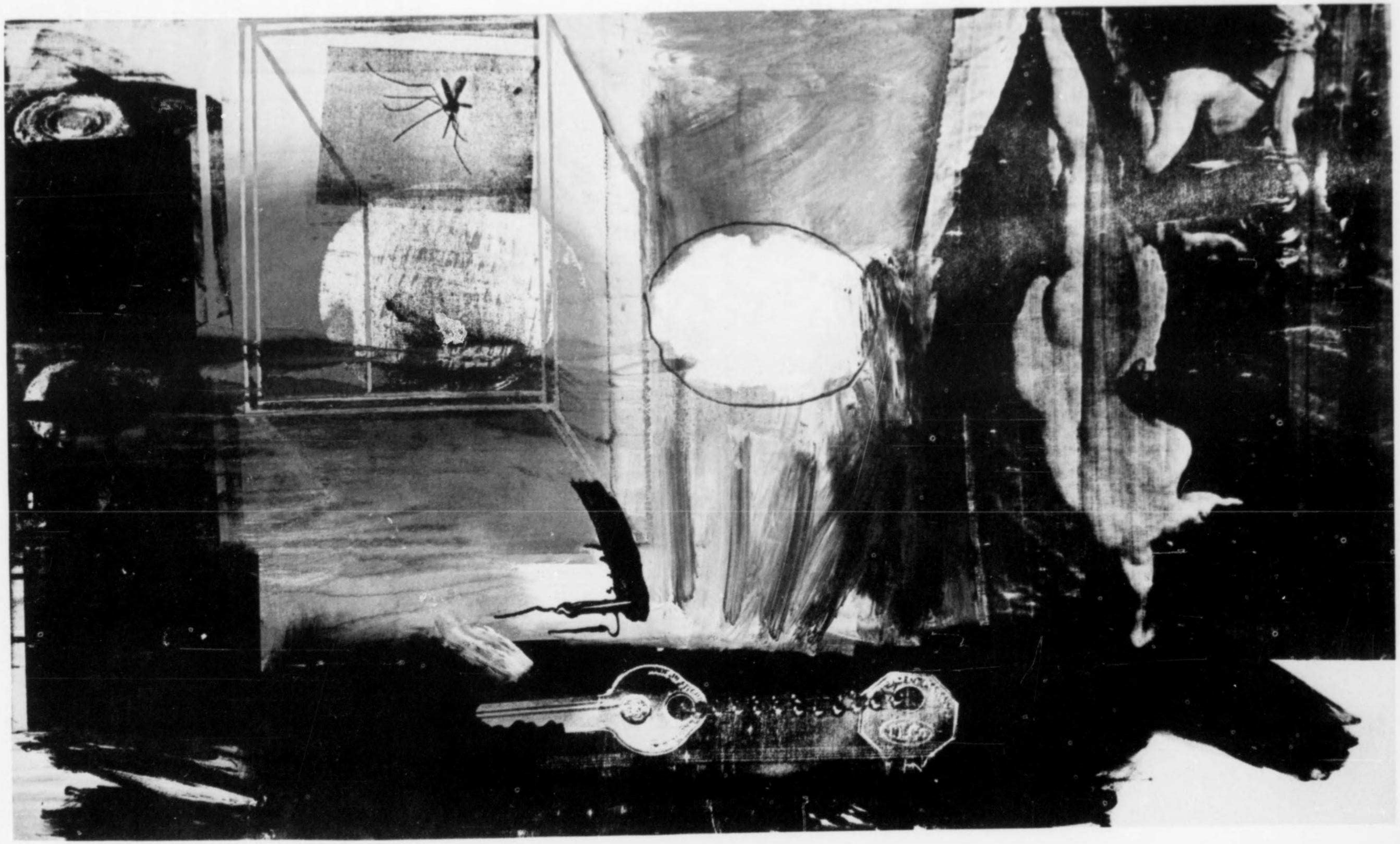
In the period following World War II, perhaps the greatest monument to the museum's discourse is André Malraux's *Museum Without Walls*. If *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is a parody of received ideas of the mid-nineteenth century, the *Museum Without Walls* is the hyperbole of such ideas in the mid-twentieth. Specifically, what Malraux unconsciously parodies is "art history as a humanistic discipline." For Malraux finds in the notion of style the ultimate homogenizing principle, indeed the essence of art, hypostatized, interestingly enough, through the medium of photography. Any work of art that can be photographed can take its place in Malraux's super-museum. But photography not only secures the admittance of objects, fragments of objects, details, etc., to the museum, it is also the organizing device: it reduces the now even vaster heterogeneity to a single perfect similitude. Through photographic reproduction a cameo takes up residence on the page next to a painted tondo and a sculpted relief; a detail of a Rubens in Antwerp is

12. Donato, p. 223. No distinctions are made in Donato's essay, nor in my own, between the art museum and its prototype, the natural history museum. The reasons for removing art to its own special museum and the particular history of that institution must be the subject of another essay.

Robert Rauschenberg. Exile. *1962.*



compared to that of a Michelangelo in Rome.The art historian's slide lecture, the art-history student's slide comparison exam belong in the museum without walls. In a recent example provided by one of our most eminent art historians, the oil sketch for a tiny detail of a cobblestone street in *Paris—A Rainy Day*, painted in the 1870s by Gustave Caillebotte, occupies the left-hand screen while a painting by Robert Ryman from the *Winsor* series occupies the right; and presto! they are revealed to be one and the same.[13] But what kind of knowledge is it that this artistic essence, style, can provide? Here is Malraux:

> Reproduction has disclosed the whole of world's sculpture. It has multiplied accepted masterpieces, promoted other works to their due rank and launched some minor styles—in some cases, one might say, invented them. It is introducing the language of color into art history; in our Museum without Walls picture, fresco, miniature and stained-glass window seem of one and the same family. For all alike—miniatures, frescoes, stained glass, tapestries, Scythian plaques, pictures, Greek vase paintings, "details" and even statuary—have become "colorplates." In the process they have lost their properties as *objects*; but, by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to *style* that they can possibly acquire. It is hard for us clearly to realize the gulf between the performance of an Aeschylean tragedy, with the instant Persian threat and Salamis looming across the Bay, and the effect we get from reading it; yet, dimly albeit, we feel the difference. All that remains of Aeschylus is his genius. It is the same with figures that in reproduction lose both their original significance as objects and their function (religious or other); we see them only as works of art and they bring home to us only their makers' talent. We might almost call them not "works" but "moments" of art. Yet diverse

13. This comparison was first presented by Robert Rosenblum in a symposium entitled "Modern Art and the Modern City: From Caillebotte and the Impressionists to the Present Day," held in conjunction with the Gustave Caillebotte exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in March 1977. Rosenblum published a version of his lecture, although only works by Caillebotte were illustrated. The following excerpt will suffice to give an impression of the comparisons Rosenblum drew: "Caillebotte's art seems equally in tune with some of the structural innovations of recent non-figurative painting and sculpture. His embracing, in the 1870s, of the new experience of modern Paris . . . involves fresh ways of seeing that are surprisingly close to our own decade. For one, he seems to have polarized more than any of his Impressionist contemporaries the extremities of the random and the ordered, usually juxtaposing these contrary modes in the same work. Parisians in city and country come and go in open spaces, but within their leisurely movements are grids of arithmetic, technological regularity. Crisscrossing or parallel patterns of steel girders move with an A-A-A-A beat along the railing of a bridge. Checkerboards of square pavement stones map out the repetitive grid systems we see in Warhol or early Stella, Ryman or Andre. Clean stripes, as in Daniel Buren[!], suddenly impose a cheerful, primary esthetic order upon urban flux and scatter." ("Gustave Caillebotte: The 1970s and the 1870s," *Artforum*, XV, 7 [March 1977], 52). When Rosenblum again presented the Ryman-Caillebotte slide comparison in a symposium on modernism at Hunter College this past March, he admitted that it was perhaps what Panofsky would have called a pseudomorphism.

> as they are, all these objects . . . speak for the same endeavor; it is as though an unseen presence, the spirit of art, were urging all on the same quest. . . . Thus it is that, thanks to the rather specious unity imposed by photographic reproduction on a multiplicity of objects, ranging from the statue to the bas-relief, from bas-reliefs to seal-impressions, and from these to the plaques of the nomads, a "Babylonian style" seems to emerge as a real entity, not a mere classification—as something resembling, rather, the life-story of a great creator. Nothing conveys more vividly and compellingly the notion of a destiny shaping human ends than do the great styles, whose evolutions and transformations seem like long scars that Fate has left, in passing, on the face of the earth.[14]

All the works of what we call art, or at least all of them that can be submitted to the process of photographic reproduction, can take their place in the great super-oeuvre, Art as ontological essence, created not by men but by Man. This is the comforting "knowledge" to which the *Museum Without Walls* gives testimony. And concomitantly, it is the deception to which art history, a discipline now thoroughly professionalized, is most deeply, if often unconsciously, committed.

But Malraux makes a fatal error near the end of his *Museum:* he admits within its pages the very thing that had constituted its homogeneity; that thing is of course photography. So long as photography was merely a *vehicle* by which art objects entered the museum, a certain coherence obtained. But once photography itself enters, an art object among others, heterogeneity is reestablished at the heart of the museum; its pretentions to knowledge are doomed. Even photography cannot hypostatize style from a photograph.

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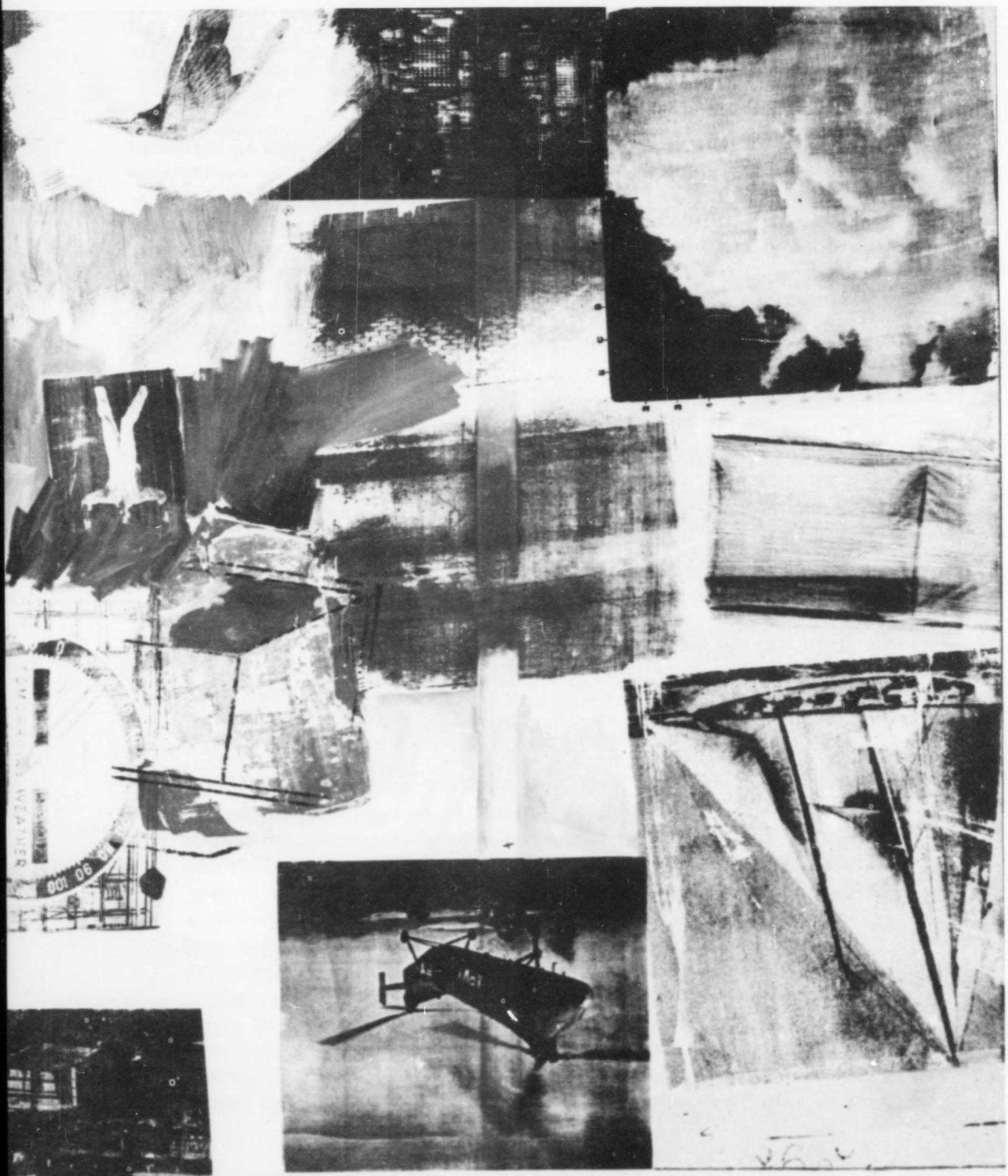
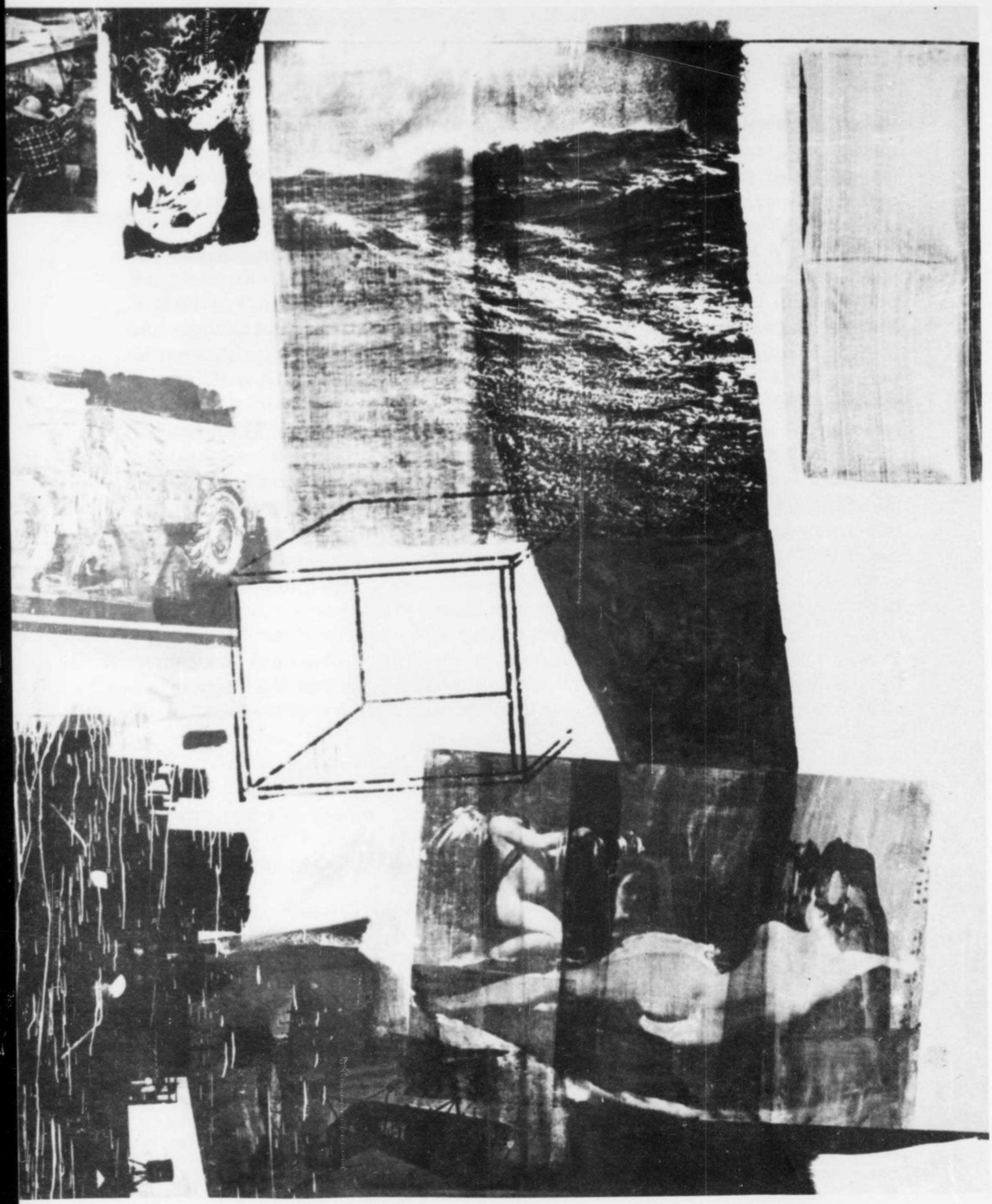
In Flaubert's "Dictionary of Received Ideas" the entry under "Photography" reads, "Will make painting obsolete. (See DAGUERREOTYPE.)" And the entry for "Daguerreotype" reads, in turn, "Will take the place of painting. (See PHOTOGRAPHY.)"[15] No one took seriously the possibility that photography might usurp painting. Less than half a century after photography's invention such a notion was one of those received ideas to be parodied. In our century until recently only Walter Benjamin gave credence to the notion, claiming that inevitably photography must have a truly profound effect upon art, even to the extent that

14. André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls, The Voices of Silence,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XXIV, 1978, pp. 44, 46.
15. Flaubert, pp. 321, 300.





Robert Rauschenberg. Bicycle. *1963*.

the art of painting might disappear, having lost its all-important aura through mechanical reproduction.[16] A denial of this power of photography to transform art continued to energize modernist painting through the immediate postwar period in America. But then in the work of Rauschenberg photography began to conspire with painting in its own destruction.

While it was only with slight discomfort that Rauschenberg was called a painter throughout the first decade of his career, when he systematically embraced photographic images in the early sixties it became less and less possible to think of his work as *painting*. It was instead a hybrid form of *printing*. Rauschenberg had moved definitively from techniques of *production* (combines, assemblages) to techniques of *reproduction* (silkscreens, transfer drawings). And it is that move that requires us to think of Rauschenberg's art as postmodernist. Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of a creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images.[17] Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined. Rauschenberg steals the *Rokeby Venus* and screens her onto the surface of *Crocus*, which also contains pictures of mosquitoes and a truck, as well as a reduplicated Cupid with a mirror. She appears again, twice, in *Transom*, now in the company of a helicopter and repeated images of water towers on Manhattan rooftops. In *Bicycle* she reappears with the truck of *Crocus* and the helicopter of *Transom*, but now also a sailboat, a cloud, an eagle. She reclines just above three Cunningham dancers in *Overcast III* and atop a statue of George Washington and a car key in *Breakthrough*. The absolute heterogeneity that is the purview of both the museum and of photography is spread across the surface of every Rauschenberg work. More importantly, it is spread from work to work.

Malraux was enraptured by the endless possibilities of his Museum, by the proliferation of discourses it could set in motion, establishing ever-new series of iconography and style simply by reshuffling the photographs. That proliferation is enacted by Rauschenberg: Malraux's dream has become Rauschenberg's joke.[18]

16. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 217–251.

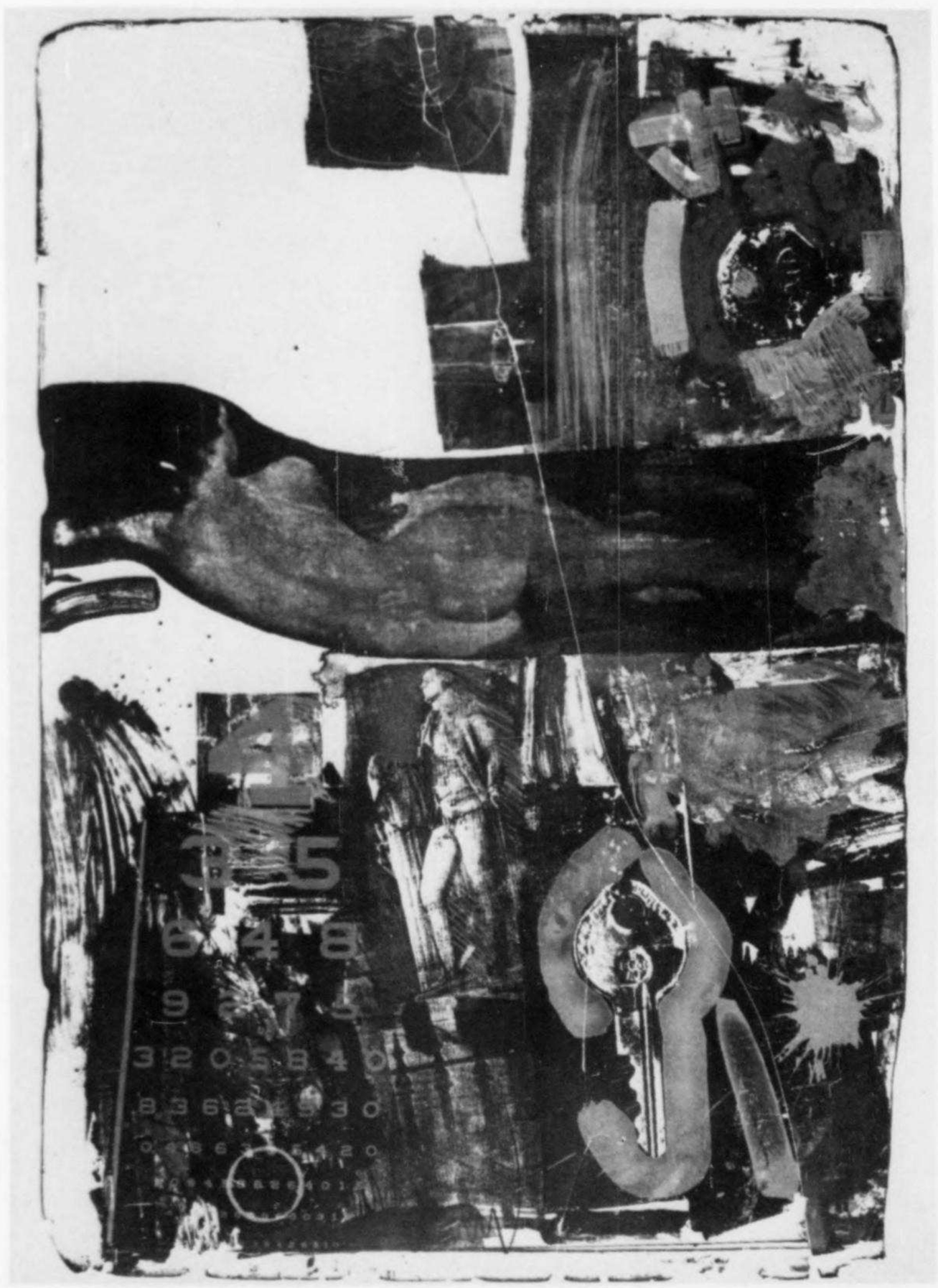
17. For further discussion of these postmodernist techniques pervasive in recent art, see my essay "Pictures," *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 75–88; and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, 12 (Spring 1980), 67–86. That we are now experiencing the "decay of the aura" that Benjamin predicted can be understood not only in these positive terms of what has replaced it, but also in the many desperate attempts to recuperate it by reviving the style and rhetoric of expressionism. This tendency is, needless to say, particularly strong in the marketplace, but also in museum exhibitions.

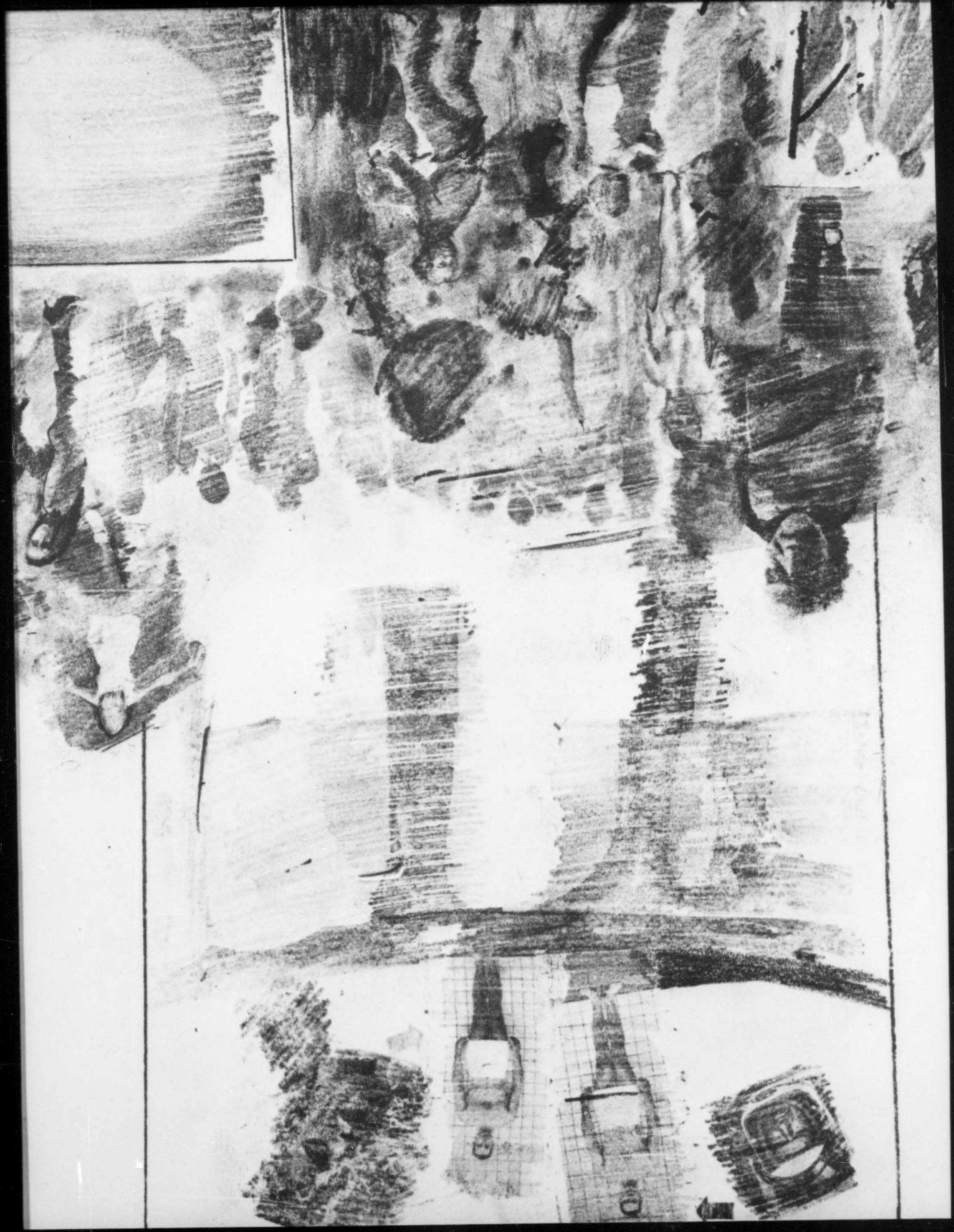
18. Just how little inclined to agree with my analysis of the museum Rauschenberg would be is clear from the proclamation he composed for the Metropolitan Museum's Centennial Certificate. It reads: "Treasury of the conscience of man. / Masterworks collected, protected / and celebrated commonly. Timeless in / concept the museum amasses to / concertise a moment of pride / serving to defend the dreams / and ideals apolitically of mankind / aware and responsive to the / changes, needs and complexities / of current life while keeping / history and love alive." The poster was signed by the Museum's officials.

But of course not everyone gets the joke. And so we are still told that order can be made of this stuff; the *Rebus* can be read. It reads, in fact, "That reproduces sundry cases of childish and comic coincidences to be read by eyes opened finally to a pattern of abstract problems."[19] Bouvard and Pécuchet would surely be confused.

19. This reading of Rauschenberg's *Rebus* appears in Charles F. Stuckey, "Reading Rauschenberg," *Art in America*, 65, 2 (March-April 1977), 82. I reproduce it here as a fairly typical example of the blind application of traditional art-historical methodologies to contemporary art.

Robert Rauschenberg. Breakthrough II. *1965*.





The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism
Part 2

CRAIG OWENS

> *We write in order to forget our fore-knowledge of the total opacity of words and things or, perhaps worse, because we do not know whether things have or do not have to be understood.*
> —*Paul de Man,* Allegories of Reading

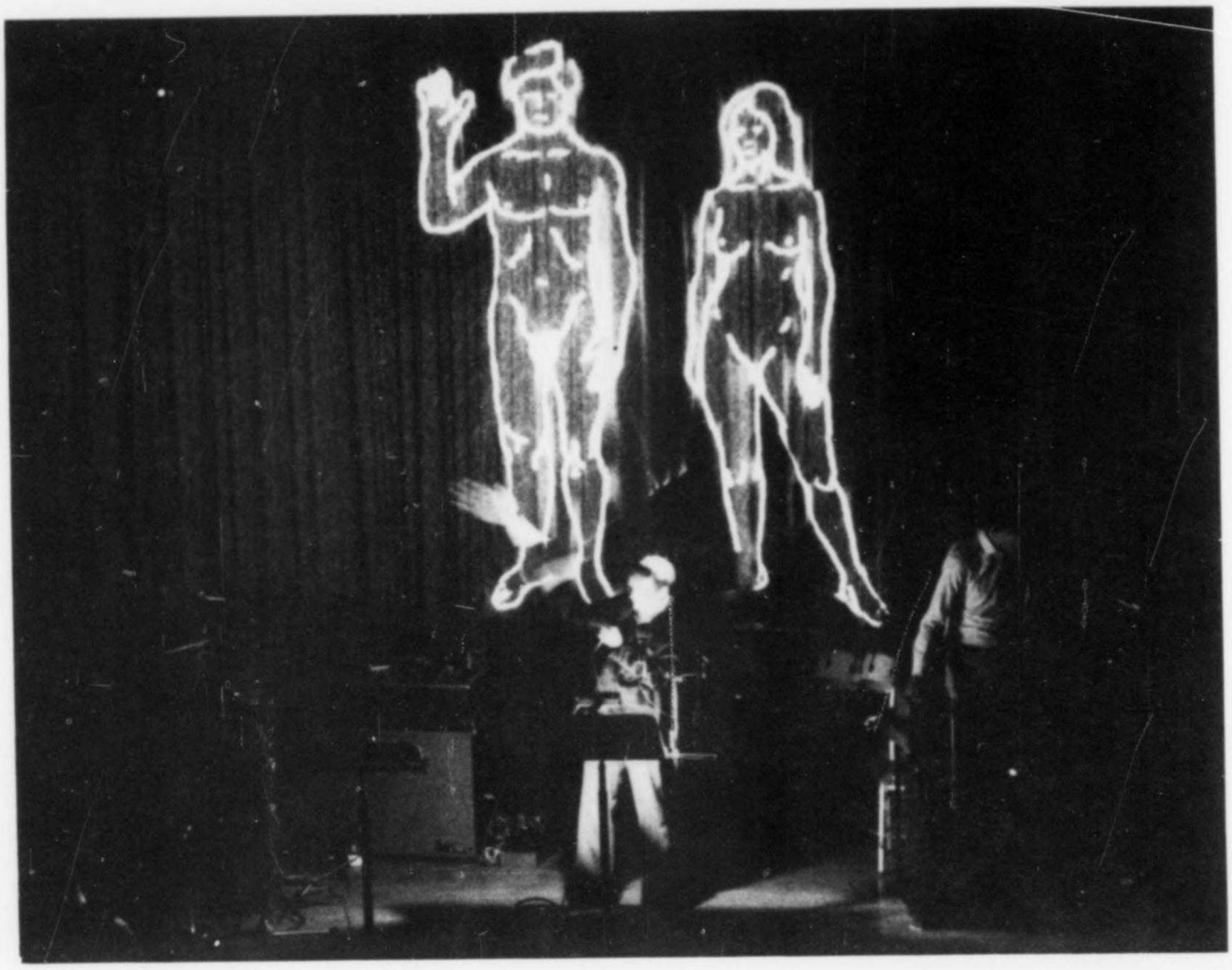
Here is the beginning of an allegory, a brief parable of reading from the opening of Laurie Anderson's *Americans on the Move*:[1]

> You know when you're driving at night like this it can suddenly occur to you that maybe you're going in completely the wrong direction. That turn you took back there . . . you were really tired and it was dark and raining and you took the turn and you just started going that way and then the rain stops and it starts to get light and you look around and absolutely everything is completely unfamiliar. You know you've never been here before and you pull into the next station and you feel so awkward saying, "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?" . . .

This passage, with its images of driving (Anderson's metaphor for consciousness: "I am in my body the way most people drive in their cars") and obscurity, is reminiscent of the opening of *The Divine Comedy* ("Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai per una selva oscura/che la diritta via era smarrita. . . . Io non so ben ridir com' io v'entrai,/tant'era pieno di sonno a quel punto/che la verace via abbondonai"[2]), or rather of that state of perplexity which initiates so many allegories. And Anderson's night driver soon encounters her

1. *Americans on the Move*, a performance by Laurie Anderson, was presented at The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance in April 1979. Several texts from it were published in *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 45–57. All quotations are taken from this source.
2. "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. . . . I cannot rightly tell how I entered there, I was so full of sleep at that moment when I left the true way . . ." (*Dante's Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair. New York, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 23).

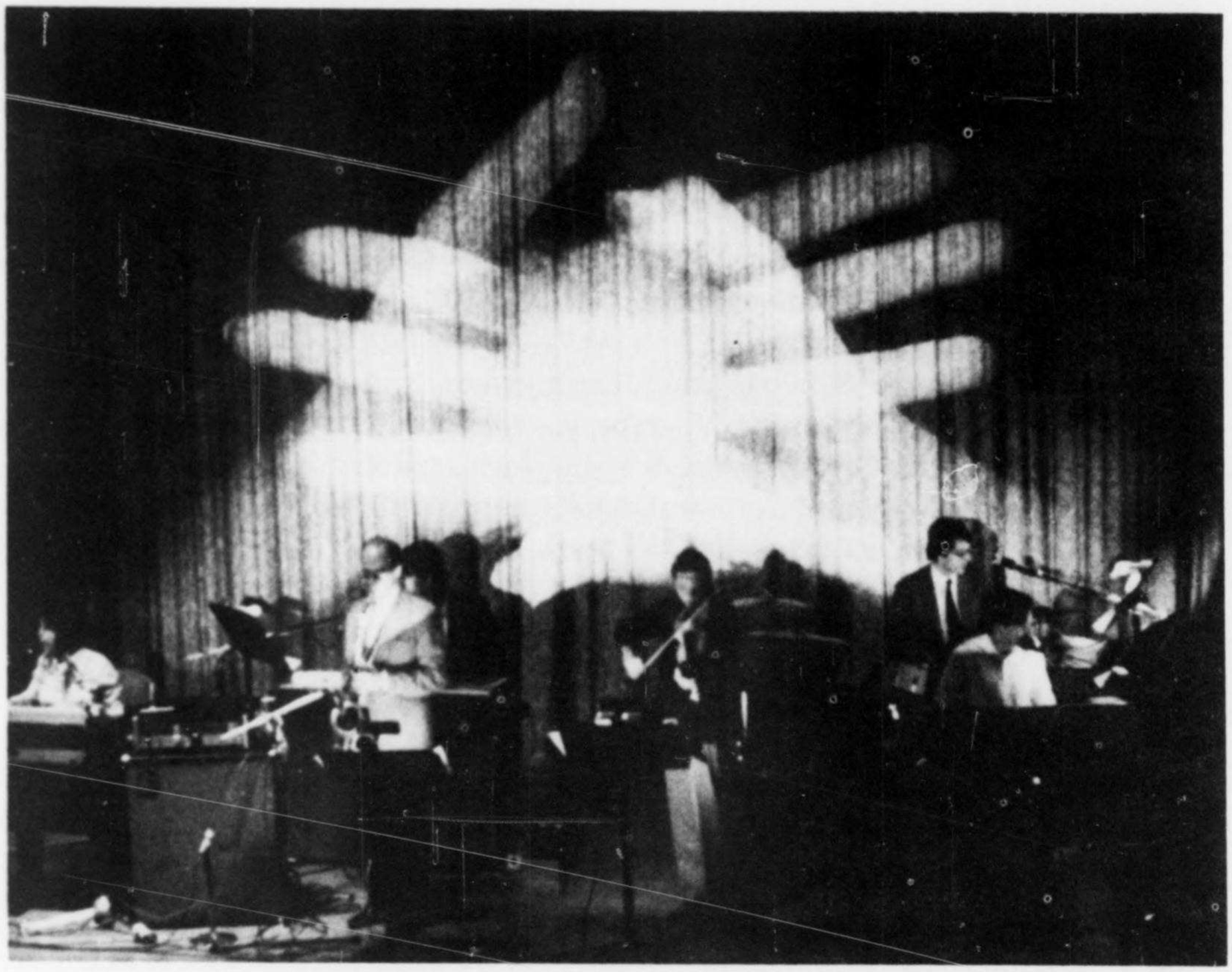
Robert Rauschenberg. Dante Drawing, Canto XX.
1960.



Laurie Anderson. Americans on the Move. *1979.*

Virgil in the guise of a grease monkey, who reveals that her befuddlement is the result of her failure to "read the signs"—a failure which is not, however, attributed to a subject who has either neglected or misread directional signals, but to the fundamental unreadability of the signs themselves. Commenting on a projection of the image that was emblazoned on the Apollo 10 spacecraft—a nude man and woman, the former's right arm raised at the elbow, palm proffered—her Virgil in overalls inquires: "In our country, we send pictures of our sign language into outer space. They are speaking our sign language in these pictures. Do you think they will think his hand is permanently attached that way? Or do you think they will read our signs? In our country, good-bye looks just like hello."

Two alternatives: either the extraterrestrial recipient of this message will assume that it is simply a picture, that is, an analogical likeness of the human figure, in which case he might logically conclude that male inhabitants of Earth walk around with their right arms permanently raised. Or he will somehow divine that this gesture is addressed to him and attempt to read it, in which case he will be stymied, since a single gesture signifies both greeting and farewell, and any



reading of it must oscillate between these two extremes. The same gesture could also mean "Halt!" or represent the taking of an oath, but if Anderson's text does not consider these alternatives that is because it is not concerned with ambiguity, with multiple meanings engendered by a single sign; rather, two *clearly defined but mutually incompatible* readings are engaged in blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them. It is, of course, in allegory that "one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice,"[3] and this works to problematize the activity of reading, which must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty.

"In the illusory babels of language," Robert Smithson wrote, "an artist might advance specifically to get lost."[4] Anderson is such an artist, and her

3. Karl Giehlow, *Die Hieroglyphenkunde . . .*, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London, NLB, 1977, p. 174.
4. Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art," *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 67. I discuss the centrality of this passage to Smithson's enterprise in my review, "Earthwords," *October*, 10 (Fall 1979), 121–30.

performances are narratives of losing one's way in labyrinths of signs. Although she employs, in addition to lyrics and spoken texts, photographs, drawings, films, and music, all of these are implicated in a general thematics of reading that extends far beyond the limits of the written text. For Anderson, the world is a vast network of signs and, as such, continually elicits reading, interpretation. Consciousness, being in the world, is in fact identified with reading—an identification which is not, however, unproblematic, for the legibility of signs is always uncertain. And it is to the problem of *illegibility* that Anderson's work is addressed.

Americans on the Move continually returns to the fundamental ambivalence of signs and to the barrier they thereby erect in the path of understanding. A photograph of a woman shrugging her shoulders, palms turned upwards, elicits the conundrum: "Does this woman think its raining? Or do you think it's all the same to her?" An earlier version of the work included the following story about consulting a palmist (a *Reader* and Advisor) in Albuquerque:

> The odd thing about the reading was that everything she told me was totally wrong. She took my hand and said, "I see here by these lines that you are an only child . . ." (I have seven brothers and sisters) ". . . I read here that you love to fly . . ." (I'm totally terrified of planes) and so on. But she seemed so sure of this information that eventually I began to feel like I'd been walking around for years with these false documents permanently tattooed to my hands. It was very noisy in the house, family members kept walking in and out speaking a high clicking kind of language that sounded like Arabic. Books and magazines in Arabic were strewn all over the carpet. Suddenly I realized that maybe it was a translation problem—maybe she had been reading from right to left instead of left to right—and thinking of mirrors, I gave her my other hand. She didn't take it, but instead, held out her own hand. We sat there for a minute or two in what I assumed was some sort of strange participatory, invocatory ritual. Finally I realized that her hand was out because she was waiting . . . waiting for money.

In this passage, which treats the metaphor of communication as economic exchange—the exchange of meaning balanced by an exchange of currency—Anderson proposes that the same "text" read backwards and forwards might engender antithetical meanings. It thus recalls her palindromes, which rarely read the same in both directions: in her *Song for Juanita,* the first syllable "Juan-" is reversed into "no," producing a rhythmic oscillation "no-one-no-one"; morphemes are thus revealed to contain the seed of their own contradiction.[5] Palindromes, puns, and "translation problems" recur throughout Anderson's

5. Laurie Anderson, "Song for Juanita," *Airwaves* (record album), New York, One Ten Records, 1977. Liner notes by the artist.

works, allowing us to identify them as what Paul de Man, in his recent *Allegories of Reading*, calls "allegories of unreadability." De Man recognizes allegory as the structural interference of two distinct levels or usages of language, literal and rhetorical (metaphoric), one of which denies precisely what the other affirms. In most allegories a literal reading will "deconstruct" a metaphorical one; recalling medieval schemas of textual exegesis, de Man identifies such readings as tropological. Yet because literal language is itself rhetorical, the product of metaphoric substitutions and reversals, such readings are inevitably implicated in what they set out to expose, and the result is allegory:

> The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or third) degree allegories. *Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read* whereas tropological narratives . . . tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference in degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading—a sentence in which the genetive "of" has itself to be read as a metaphor.[6]

De Man illustrates his thesis of allegorical illegibility with examples drawn from both literary and philosophical discourse (although allegory tends to blur this distinction), from Rilke and Proust to Rousseau and Nietzsche. The way in which attention to the incongruence of literal and figurative language upsets our presumed mastery of canonical texts is succinctly demonstrated in his introductory reading of Yeats's "Among School Children," which concludes with the famous line "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"—a line frequently quoted as testimony to the indissoluble unity of sign and meaning that characterizes the (symbolic) work of art. Yet this "meaning" hinges upon reading the line as a rhetorical question, that is, as a rhetorical *statement* of their indissolubility. But what if we read it literally, de Man asks; and the result, not surprisingly, is allegory—the distance which separates signifier from signified, sign from meaning:

> It is equally possible, however, to read the last line literally rather than figuratively, as asking with some urgency the question we asked earlier in the context of contemporary criticism: not that the sign and referent are so exquisitely fitted to each other that all difference between them is

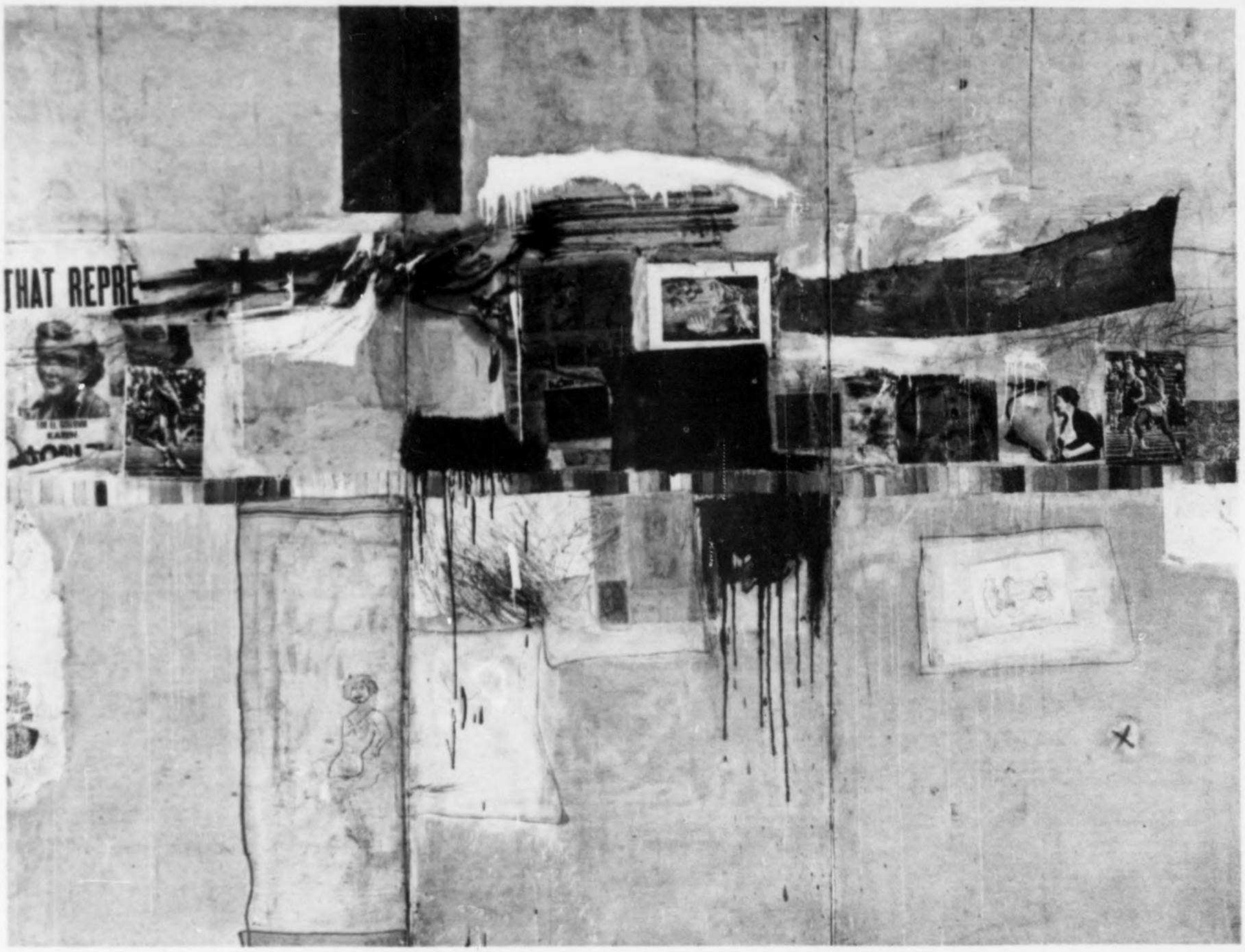
6. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 205, italics added.

> at times blotted out but, rather, since the two essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined in the imagined "presence" that the poem addresses, how can we possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified? The clumsiness of the paraphrase reveals that it is not necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one . . . ; here the figural reading, which assumes the question to be rhetorical, is perhaps naive, whereas the literal reading leads to greater complication of themes and statement. For it turns out that the entire schema set up by the first reading can be undermined, or deconstructed, in terms of the second, in which the final line is read literally as meaning that, since the dancer and the dance are not the same, it might be useful, perhaps even desperately necessary—for the question can be given a ring of urgency, "Please tell me, how *can* I know the dancer from the dance"—to tell them apart. But this will replace the reading of each symbolic detail by a divergent interpretation. . . . This hint should suffice to suggest that two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line, whose rhetorical mode turns the mood as well as the mode of the poem upside down. Neither can we say . . . that the poem simply has two meanings that exist side by side. The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence. There can be no dance without a dancer, no sign without a referent. On the other hand, the authority of the meaning engendered by the grammatical structure is fully obscured by the duplicity of a figure that cries out for the differentiation that it conceals.[7]

I have quoted this lengthy passage in full not only because it illuminates the structure of Laurie Anderson's art and allows us to identify it as allegorical, but also because it demonstrates that modernist texts such as Yeats's contain within themselves the seed of their own allegorization. Allegory can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work. In modernism, however, the allegory remains *in potentia* and is actualized only in the activity of reading, which suggests that the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading. It is not surprising, then, that we should encounter Robert Rauschenberg, on the threshold of postmodernism, executing works which transform our experience of art from a visual to a textual encounter, and entitling these works *Obelisk, Rebus, Allegory.*

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

Robert Rauschenberg. Rebus. *1955*.



The displacement enacted by Rauschenberg's art was first acknowledged by Leo Steinberg, who identified it as a shift from nature to culture.[8] But Steinberg presumes the nature/culture opposition to be a stable one, a presupposition that postmodern artists—not to mention their poststructuralist counterparts—are determined to subvert. In postmodernist art, nature is treated as wholly domesticated by culture; the "natural" can be approached only through its cultural representation. While this does indeed suggest a shift from nature to culture, what it in fact demonstrates is the impossibility of accepting their opposition. This is the point of a recent allegorical project by Sherrie Levine, who has selected, mounted, and framed Andreas Feininger's photographs of natural subjects. When Levine wants an image of nature, she does not produce one herself but appropriates another image, and this she does in order to expose the degree to which "nature" is always already implicated in a system of cultural values which assigns

8. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 84f.

it a specific, culturally determined position. In this way she reinflects Duchamp's readymade strategy, utilizing it as an unsettling deconstructive instrument.

This reference to Duchamp suggests that the postmodernist "shift" should not be characterized as from nature to culture, but as a shift in elocutionary mode, from history to discourse, the terms which Émile Benveniste uses to distinguish between impersonal, third-person narration and direct address, which he associates with the personal pronouns *I* and *you*.[9] In her "Notes on the Index . . ." Rosalind Krauss demonstrates that this shift of pronominal emphasis is characteristic of all of Duchamp's work, and that it signals a "tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, a breakdown of . . . the linguistic sign."[10] All of Duchamp's works read as messages addressed to the spectator—explicitly in *Anemic Cinema* and *Tu m'* and *To be Looked At (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour*; implicitly in the readymades *Fountain* and *Trébuchet*[11]—and it should be remembered that allegories are frequently exhortative, addressed to the reader in an attempt to manipulate him or to modify his behavior. It is on the basis of this shift to a discursive mode that a reading of what Duchamp himself identified as the "allegorical appearance" of the *Large Glass*—itself an elaborate *psychomachia*—should proceed.

This shift from history to discourse, from a third- to a second-person mode of address, also accounts for the centrality which postmodernist art assigns to the reader/spectator;[12] significantly, Steinberg frequently refers to Rauschenberg's reorientation of the conventional picture field from a horizontal to a "flatbed" position as a form of "spectator modification." Krauss observed that Rauschenberg's art follows a discursive model by compelling a part-by-part, image-by-

9. Émile Benveniste, "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français," *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, pp. 237–50. There is an interesting application of Benveniste's distinction to film theory in Christian Metz, "Histoire/Discours (Note sur deux voyeurismes)," *Le signifiant imaginaire*, Paris, Union Générale d'Editions (Collection 10:18), 1977, pp. 113–20.

10. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October*, 3 (Spring 1977), 77.

11. In *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Rosalind Krauss describes the readymades' interrogative structure: "The readymades became . . . part of Duchamp's project to make certain kinds of strategic moves—moves that would raise questions about what exactly is the nature of the work in the term 'work of art.' Clearly, one answer suggested by the readymades is that a work might not be a physical object but rather a question, and that the making of art might, therefore, be reconsidered as taking a perfectly legitimate form in the speculative act of posing questions" (New York, Viking, 1977, pp. 72–3).

12. Consider Krauss's treatment, in *Passages . . .*, of the emblem in abstract expressionism: "All these qualities—frontality, centralization, and literal size and shape—characterize the developed work of most of the abstract-expressionist painters; even those who, like Pollack and Newman, eventually dropped some of these emblematic features continued to work with the most central aspect of the sign or emblem. And that is its mode of address. For while we can think of a traditional picture or a photograph as creating a relationship between author and object that exists independent of an audience, addressing no one in particular, we must think of a sign or emblem as existing specifically in relation to a receiver. It takes the form of a directive addressed *to* someone, a directive that exists, so to speak, in the space of confrontation between the sign or emblem and the one who views it." (*Ibid.*, pp. 150, 152.) Like de Man's reading of "Among School Children," Krauss's passage suggests that abstract-expressionist painting may indeed contain the seed of its own allegorization.

Sherrie Levine. Photograph by Andreas Feininger.
1980.

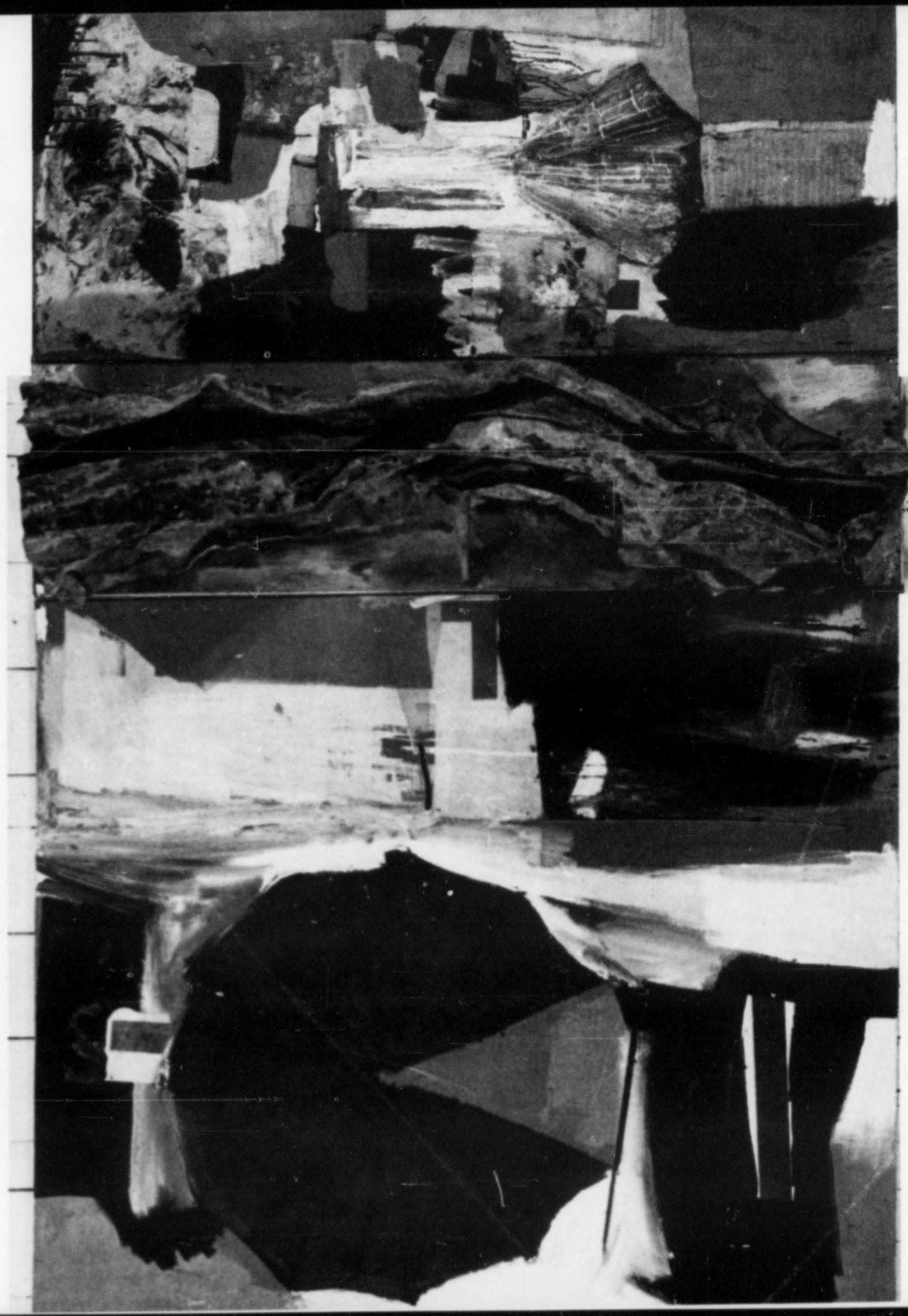
image reading that is temporal in character.[13] Yet it remains impossible to read a Rauschenberg, if by reading we mean the extraction from a text of a coherent, monological message. All attempts to decipher his works testify only to their own failure, for the fragmentary, piecemeal combination of images that initially impels reading is also what blocks it, erects an impenetrable barrier to its course. Rauschenberg thus confounds the attitude towards reading as an unproblematic activity—which persists, as we know, under the dubious banner "iconography" in art-critical and art-historical discourse, which are thereby paralyzed when confronted with his work, and with postmodernism in general—substituting for it something remarkably similar to Roland Barthes's "stereographic" view of the text:

> A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.[14]

Here, then, is Rauschenberg's *Allegory*, a "combine painting" executed in 1959–60, exactly one year after the artist began his series of illustrations for *The Divine Comedy* (the project during which the transfer process characteristic of his subsequent work was "discovered"). Couched in its flatbed surface there is a random collection of heterogeneous objects: a red umbrella, stripped from its frame and splayed like a fan; rusted sheet metal, crumpled into a cascade of metallic drapery and mounted on mirrors; red block lettering, apparently from a broadside that has been ripped apart and dispersed; swatches of fabric; bits of clothing. It is difficult, if not impossible to discover in this inventory any common property that might coherently link these things, justify their bedding down together. The only metaphor that suggests itself is that of a dumping ground, and it is hardly a new one: with his customary precision of language, Steinberg described Rauschenberg's typical picture surface as "dump, reservoir, switching center." Krauss also characterizes Rauschenberg's art in terms of place: discussing the "equal density" which disparate images acquire in *Small Rebus*, she is "struck by the fact that the surface of this painting is a *place*, a *locale*, where this kind of

13. Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum*, XIII, 4 (December 1974), 37.
14. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 148.

Robert Rauschenberg. Allegory. *1959–60.*



equalization can happen."[15] Both Steinberg and Krauss describe the work in this way in order to analogize it to the human mind; Rauschenberg's works thus become allegories of consciousness or, perhaps, the unconscious.

Is this then what makes *Allegory* an allegory? By making works which read as *sites*, however, Rauschenberg also seems to be declaring the fragments embedded there to be beyond recuperation, redemption; this is where everything finally comes to rest. *Allegory* is thus also an emblem of mortality, of the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject. But can we in fact be certain that this is an allegorical image; might it not be an image of allegory itself, of the disrepute into which it has fallen? All three readings are correct, but only in part; if, however, we were to superimpose them then the work would become the narrative—the allegory—of its own fundamental illegibility.

In his essay "On the Museum's Ruins," Douglas Crimp proposes another locale suggested by Rauschenberg's art: the museum, the dumping grounds of culture.[16] If we accept for the moment—and I believe we must—this identification of Rauschenberg's works as "museum paintings," in the sense that Michel Foucault attributes to Manet—painting as "a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums"[17]—then it follows that they will acquire their fullest measure of significance only when seen *in situ*. Rauschenberg's art remains *in potentia* until it is seen in the museum, where it opens a dazzling *mise en abyme* reminiscent of Husserl's Dresden Gallery passage in *Ideas*:

> A name on being mentioned reminds us of the Dresden Gallery and of our last visit there: we wander through the rooms, and stand before a picture of Teniers which represents a picture gallery. When we consider that pictures of the latter would in their turn portray pictures which on their part exhibited readable inscriptions and so forth, we can measure what interweaving of presentations, and what links of connexion between the discernible features in the series of pictures, can really be set up.[18]

The illegibility of a Rauschenberg, however, works to deny the possibility of precisely such "links of connexion" as Husserl proposes, which hinge on the *readability* of the "inscriptions." There is no escape from this situation, no clear route back to the "reality" it purports to describe, as Jacques Derrida, in his Borgesian critique of this passage, indicates: "The gallery is the labyrinth which includes in itself its own exits."[19] The acquisition of Rauschenberg's canvases by

15. Krauss, "Rauschenberg," p. 41, italics added.
16. This essay is published in this issue of *October*.
17. Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," *Language Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 92.
18. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*, trans. W. R. B. Gibson, New York, Collier, 1962, p. 270.
19. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 104.

museums of modern art is thus their final, ironic triumph. They become that term in the series of works exhibited there that permits the allegorization of the entire series. But this triumph is ultimately an equivocal one, for in order to function as deconstructions of the discourse of the museum, of its claims to coherence, homogeneity—the ground of its alleged intel-legibility—they must also declare themselves to be part of the dumping ground they describe. They thus relapse into the "error" they denounce, and this is what allows us to identify them as allegorical.

What I am imputing to Rauschenberg, then, is a peculiar form of site specificity: museum painting for the museum. This gesture is both economic and strategic, for if, in his works, Rauschenberg enacts a deconstruction of the museum, then his own deconstructive discourse—like Daniel Buren's—can take place only within the museum itself. It must therefore provisionally accept the terms and conditions it sets out to expose. This is of course the constraint to which any deconstructive discourse is subject, as the deconstructors themselves frequently remind us: Derrida, for example, speaks of the methodological necessity of preserving as an instrument a concept whose truth value is being questioned. (Significantly, his example is Claude Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic discourse, which must utilize the nature/culture opposition even while rejecting it.[20]) There is thus a danger inherent in deconstruction: unable to avoid the very errors it exposes, it will continue to perform what it denounces as impossible and will, in the end, affirm what it set out to deny. Deconstructive discourses thus leave "a margin of error, a residue of logical tension" frequently seized upon by critics of deconstructionism as its failure. But this very failure is what raises the discourse, to use de Man's terminology, from a tropological to an allegorical level:

> Deconstructive readings can point out the unwarranted identifications achieved by substitution, but they are powerless to prevent their recurrence even in their own discourse, and to uncross, so to speak, the aberrant exchanges that have taken place. Their gesture merely reiterates the rhetorical defiguration that caused the error in the first place. They leave a margin of error, a residue of logical tension that prevents the closure of the deconstructive discourse and accounts for its narrative and allegorical mode.[21]

Reading Rousseau's *Second Discourse* as the narrative of its own deconstruction, de Man concludes:

> To the extent that it never ceases to advocate the necessity for political legislation and to elaborate the principles on which such a legislation could be based, it resorts to the principles of authority that it under-

20. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play . . . ," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 282ff.
21. De Man, p. 242.

> mines. We know this structure to be characteristic of what we have called allegories of unreadability. Such an allegory is metafigural; it is an allegory of a figure (for example, metaphor) which relapses into the figure it deconstructs. The *Social Contract* falls under this heading to the extent that it is structured like an aporia: it persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do. As such, we can call it an allegory.[22]

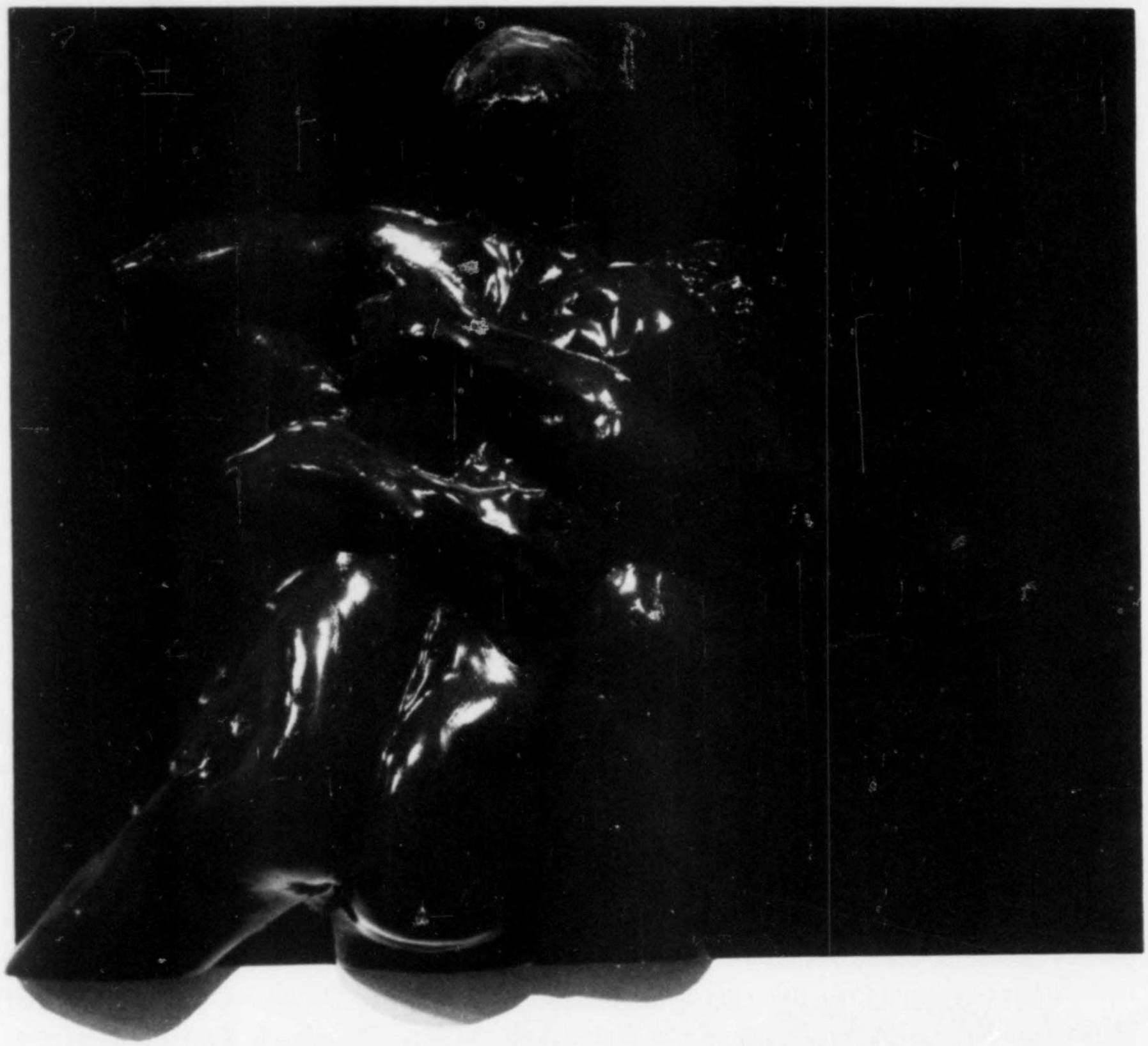
The "figure," then, deconstructed in Rauschenberg's work is that which proposes the substitution of the "heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects [contained within the museum] . . . either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representations."[23] Exposing this substitution to be impossible, Rauschenberg imputes the same impossibility to his own work, thereby opening it to criticism that it merely perpetuates the confusion it sets out to expose. Postmodernist art is frequently attacked on exactly this point; for example, it is said of Troy Brauntuch's reproductions of Hitler's drawings that, because they lack captions or identifying labels that might inform us of their origin, the work remains mute, meaningless. It is, however, precisely this opacity that Brauntuch sets out to demonstrate, and this is what enables us to identify his works as allegories. Whether or not we will ever acquire the key necessary to unlock their secret remains a matter of pure chance, and this gives Brauntuch's work its undeniable *pathos*, which is also the source of its strength.

Similarly, Robert Longo's work, which treats the aestheticization of violence in contemporary society, participates of necessity in the activity it denounces. In a recent series of aluminum reliefs, entitled *Boys Slow Dance* and generated from film stills, Longo presents three images of men locked in . . . deadly combat? amorous embrace? Like Anderson's parables, Longo's images resist ambiguity; they might, in fact, serve as emblems of that blind confrontation of antithetical meanings which characterizes the allegory of unreadability. Suspended in a static image, a struggle to the death is transformed into something that "has all the elegance of a dance."[24] Yet it is precisely this ambivalence that allows violence to be transformed into an aesthetic spectacle in photographs and films, and on television.

Longo's manipulation of film stills calls attention to the fact that, despite its suppression by modern theory—or perhaps because of it—allegory has never completely disappeared from our culture. Quite the contrary: it has renewed its (ancient) alliance with popular art forms, where its appeal continues undiminished. Throughout its history allegory has demonstrated a capacity for widespread popular appeal, suggesting that its function is social as well as aesthetic; this

22. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
23. Eugenio Donato, "The Museum's Furnace: Notes toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*," *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 223.
24. Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, New York, Artists Space, 1977, p. 26.

Robert Longo. The Wrestlers. *1979.*



would account for its frequent appropriation for didactic and/or exhortative purposes. Just as Lévi-Strauss's structural (allegorical) analysis of myths reveals that the function of myth is to resolve the conflicts which confront primitive societies by maintaining them in paralogical suspension,[25] so too allegory may well be that mode which promises to resolve the contradictions which confront modern society—individual interest versus general well-being, for example—a promise which must, as we know, be perpetually deferred. The withdrawal of the modernist arts from allegory may thus be one factor in their ever-accelerating loss of audience.

25. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf, New York, Basic Books, 1963, p. 229. Lévi-Strauss, however, seems to consider this suspension of contradiction to be perfectly logical: "The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)." Rosalind Krauss, however, has properly described it as "paralogical" ("Grids," *October*, 9 [Summer 1979], 55). On the allegorical character of structuralist analysis, see Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *October*, 12 (Spring, 1980), 47–66.

The Western, the gangster saga, science fiction—these are the allegories of the twentieth century. They are also genres most intimately associated with film; that film should be the primary vehicle for modern allegory may be attributed not only to its unquestioned status as the most popular of contemporary art forms, but also to its mode of representation. Film composes narratives out of a succession of concrete images, which makes it particularly suited to allegory's essential pictogrammatism. (As stated in Part 1 of this essay, "In allegory, the image is a hieroglyph; an allegory is a rebus, writing composed of concrete images.") Film is not, of course, the only medium to do so, as Barthes has indicated:

> There are other 'arts' which combine still (or at least drawing) and story, diegesis—namely the photo-novel and the comic-strip. I am convinced that these 'arts', born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier. . . . This is acknowledged as regards the comic-strip but I myself experience this slight trauma of *signifiance* faced with certain photo-novels: *'their stupidity touches me.'* There may thus be a future—or a very ancient past—truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture.[26]

Borges condemned allegory as "stupid and frivolous"; yet for Barthes its very stupidity functions as an index to its potential "truth." He goes on to designate a new object for aesthetic investigation: "And there is an autonomous 'art' (a 'text'), that of the *pictogram* ('anecdotalized' images, obtuse meanings placed in a diegetic space); this art taking across historically and culturally heteroclite productions: ethnographic pictograms, stained glass windows, Carpaccio's *Legend of Saint Ursula*, *images d'Epinal*, photo-novels, comic-strips."[27]

These remarks on the pictogram occur in a footnote to the essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in which Barthes attempts to locate and define the specifically "filmic," which he discovers not in the movement of images, but in the still. Despite the essentialist undertones of this project, and whether or not we agree with Barthes's characterization of film as static in essence, or with his interpretation of Eisenstein's work, this essay remains extremely important because, in order to describe the still, Barthes elaborates a three-fold schema of interpretation highly reminiscent of the three- and four-fold schemas of medieval textual exegesis—a parallel of which Barthes himself is not unaware. This schema is necessitated by a description of the still in terms traditionally associated with allegory: it is a fragment, a quotation, and the meaning it engenders is supplementary, excessive, "parodic and disseminatory." An arbitrary cut, the still suspends not only motion but also story, diegesis;

26. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," *Image Music Text*, p. 66.
27. *Ibid.*

engendered by the syntagmatic disjunction of images, it compels a vertical or paradigmatic reading. ("Allegory is the epitome of counter-narrative, for it arrests narrative in place, substituting a principle of syntagmatic disjunction for one of diegetic combination. In this way allegory superinduces a vertical or paradigmatic reading of correspondences upon a horizontal or syntagmatic chain of events"—Part 1.)

In Barthes's allegorical schema, the first level of meaning is informational, referential, to make its parallel with exegesis more apparent, *literal.* This is the level of anecdote, and it comprises setting, costume, characters and their relations. It unproblematically assumes the reality of what it denotes, that is, that the sign is transparent to a referent. The second level is *symbolic*—Barthes calls it obvious, relating it to theology, in which, "we are told, the obvious meaning is that 'which presents itself quite naturally to the mind.'"[28] Significantly, Barthes describes this level in terms that allow us to identify it as *rhetorical:* "Eisenstein's 'art' is not polysemous, it chooses the meaning, imposes it, hammers it home. . . . The Eisensteinian meaning devastates ambiguity. Here, by the addition of an aesthetic value, emphasis, Eisenstein's decorativism has an economic function: it proffers the truth."[29] Rhetoric, which is always emphatic, is both decorative and persuasive, a system of tropes frequently employed in oratory to manipulate the listener, to incite him to action. All of the Eisenstein stills analyzed by Barthes function simultaneously on both rhetorical levels: a clandestinely clenched fist, for example, a metaphoric synecdoche for the proletariat, is meant to inspire revolutionary determination.

In contradistinction to the literal and rhetorical meanings, the third, or "obtuse" meaning is difficult to formulate; Barthes's description of it is elusive, vague:

> The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it. *My reading remains suspended* between the image and its description, between definition and approximation. If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything—how do you describe something that does not represent anything?[30]

Nevertheless, the third meaning, Barthes tells us, has "something to do" with disguise; he identifies it with isolated details of make-up and costume (which properly belong to the literal level) which, through excess, proclaim their own artifice. If Barthes refuses to assign such details a referent, he does accord them a function: they work to expose the image as *fiction.* Barthes's reluctance, even inability to specify obtuse meaning cannot be considered an evasion, a ruse; it is a theoretical necessity. For as de Man observes:

28. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 61. italics added.

> What makes a fiction a fiction is not some polarity of fact and representation. Fiction has nothing to do with representation but is the absence of any link between utterance and a referent, regardless of whether this link be causal, encoded, or governed by any other conceivable relationship that could lend itself to systematization. In fiction thus conceived the "necessary link" of the metaphor [of the symbol, we might add, recalling Coleridge] has been metonymized beyond the point of catachresis, and the fiction becomes the disruption of the narrative's referential illusion.[31]

The obtuse meaning differs not only in kind (since it refers to nothing, copies nothing, symbolizes nothing) from the literal and the symbolic; it is also *sited* differently: "Take away the obtuse meaning and communication and signification still remain, still circulate, still come through."[32] The *absence* of obtuse meaning is, in fact, the very condition of communication and signification, but its presence works to problematize these activities. Since the obtuse meaning has no objective, independent existence, it depends upon the literal and the rhetorical, which it nevertheless undoes. An unwelcome supplement, it exposes the literal level of the image to be a fiction, implicating it in the web of substitutions and reversals properly characteristic of the symbolic. The actor is revealed as the (metaphoric) substitute for character; his facial contortions, the emblem of grief, not its direct expression. Hence every image that participates in what photography criticism calls the directorial, as opposed to the documentary, mode is open to the intervention of obtuse meaning. And the symbolic dimension of the image, which depends upon the univocity of the literal, is thereby disfigured; erected upon an unstable base of substitutions and displacements, it becomes metafigural, the figure of a figure. The "necessary link" which characterized it as metaphoric is rendered contingent, "metonymized," as de Man has it. The projection of metaphor as metonymy is one of the fundamental strategies of allegory, and through it the symbolic is revealed for what it truly is—a rhetorical manipulation of metaphor which attempts to program response.

> The presence of an obtuse, supplementary, third meaning . . . radically recasts the theoretical status of the anecdote: the story (the diegesis) is no longer just a strong system (the millennial system of narrative) but also and contradictorily a simple space, a field of permanences and permutations. It becomes that configuration, that stage, whose false limits multiply the signifier's permutational play, the vast trace which, by difference, compels . . . a *vertical* reading, that false order which permits the turning of the pure series, the aleatory combination (chance

31. De Man, p. 292.
32. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," p. 60.

> is crude, a signifier on the cheap) and the attainment of a structuration which *slips away from the inside.*[33]

Insofar as Barthes claims that the third meaning is that in the image which is "purely image," and because he identifies it with the "free play" of the signifier, he is open to charges that he is merely reiterating, in semiological jargon, aesthetic pleasure in the Kantian sense, delight in the form of a representation apart from the representation of any object whatsoever. And since the concept of a "signifier without a signified" presupposes that the referential function of language can, in fact, be suspended or bracketed, Barthes in fact repeats the postulate that lies at the base of every formalist aesthetic. The obtuse meaning does indeed appear reducible to the aesthetic; but I am interested in what motivates Barthes to insert it into the slot left vacant by the allegorical in an ancient interpretive scheme.

Barthes's interest in the theoretical value of the film still is paralleled today by several artists who derive their imagery from stills—Longo and James Birrell, who work to isolate that in the image which is purely image—or whose works deliberately resemble stills—Suzan Pitt's Disneyesque treatments of surrealism; Cindy Sherman's "untitled studies for film stills." These latter treat the subject of mimesis, not simply as an aesthetic activity, but as it functions in relation to the constitution of the self. Sherman's works are all self-portraits, but in them the artist invariably appears masked, disguised: she first costumes herself to resemble familiar female stereotypes—career girl, ingenue, sex object . . .—and then photographs herself in poses and settings reminiscent of the cinematic culture of the 1950s and '60s. Her "characters" frequently glance anxiously outside the frame at some unspecified menace, thereby implying the presence of a narrative even while withholding it. This—the "still"—effect prevents us from mistaking Sherman's women for particular human subjects caught up in narrative webs of romance or intrigue (a reading which would correspond to Barthes's first, or literal level, which indicates the position of the image in the anecdote). Instead it compels a typological reading: Sherman's women are not women but images of women, specular models of femininity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification; they are, in other words, tropes, figures. (In works which appropriate images of maternity from popular magazines, Sherrie Levine deals with the same rhetorical function of images: it is the picture which inspires imitation, mimesis, not the other way around.)

And yet the uncanny precision with which Sherman represents these tropes, the very perfection of her impersonations, leaves an unresolved margin of incongruity in which the image, freed from the constraints of referential and symbolic meaning, can accomplish its "work." That work is, of course, the deconstruction of the supposed innocence of the images of women projected by the media, and this Sherman accomplishes by *re*constructing those images so

33. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

painstakingly, and identifying herself with them so thoroughly, that artist and role appear to have merged into a seamless whole in such a way that it seems impossible to distinguish the dancer from the dance. It is, however, the urgent necessity of making such a distinction that is, in fact, at issue.

For in Sherman's images, disguise functions as parody; it works to expose the identification of the self with an image as its dispossession, in a way that appears to proceed directly from Jacques Lacan's fundamental tenet that the self is an Imaginary construct, "and that this construct disappoints all [the subject's] certitudes. For in the labor with which he undertakes to reconstruct this construct *for another*, he finds again the fundamental alienation which has made him construct it *like another one*, and which has always destined it to be stripped from him *by another*."[34] (Significantly, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan describes mimicry, mimesis, as the mechanism whereby the subject transforms himself into a picture.) By implicating the mass media as the

34. Jacques Lacan, "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis," *The Language of the Self*, trans. Anthony Wilden, New York, Delta, 1975, p. 11.

Cindy Sherman, Untitled studies for film stills, *1980*.

false mirror which promotes such alienating identifications, Sherman registers this "truth" as both ethical and political.

But there is also an impossible complicity inscribed within Sherman's works, a complicity which accounts for their allegorical mode. For if mimicry is denounced in these images, it is nevertheless through mimetic strategies that this denunciation is made. We thus encounter once again the unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced *precisely in order to denounce it.* All of the work discussed in this essay is marked by a similar complicity, which is the result of its fundamentally deconstructive impulse. This deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism. Modernist theory presupposes that mimesis, the adequation of an image to a referent, can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent. This is the rhetorical strategy of self-reference upon which modernism is based, and from Kant onwards it is identified as the source of aesthetic pleasure. For reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay, this fiction

has become increasingly difficult to maintain. Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence. It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred; as such, its deconstructive thrust is aimed not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. As Barthes has written elsewhere:

> It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked (the doxa now takes care of that), it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols, but to challenge the symbolic itself.[35]

35. Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself," *Image Music Text*, p. 167.

Against Intellectual Complexity in Music*

MICHAEL NYMAN

Stockhausen's notoriously arrogant aside to Morton Feldman—"[I] once told Feldman that one of his pieces could be a moment in my music, but never the other way around"[1]—is indicative of an attitude that cannot comprehend true simplicity in music. A simple "moment" can be recognized as such only when posited against another, more complex moment. In Stockhausen's music *simplified* moments are either set against other moments of greater complexity, or they fulfill a complex role in the total structure of the work; whereas Feldman's *simple* work is a complete field in which moments of greater and/or lesser simplicity, if they occur at all, have no intended relational significance in the traditional sense. In what we call experimental music—loosely speaking, the music of the Cage "tradition"—simplicity is something approaching a constant, an absolute, although there are obviously degrees of simplicity, just as there are degrees of complexity. Still, simplicity is not one alternative to be selected from the vast reservoir of means of expression or techniques upon which the avant-garde composer can draw as occasion, instrumentation, or compositional situation demands. The straightforwardness of most experimental music, which usually finds the most direct route to the effective presentation of the chosen sound material, might be interpreted by an outsider as a reaction to traditional and modernist intellectual complexity. But it has not *simplified* the complex technical paraphernalia which makes European art music respectable; it has quite bluntly ignored that paraphernalia, since the aesthetic, structural, and expressive requirements of the so-called New Simplicity demand the development of a totally different, independent (some might say naive, innocent, and simple-minded) compositional methodology.

Reaction against complexity is, in fact, a characteristic of intellectually complex music itself, as Stockhausen himself noted when he observed that in the

* This text is a revised version of an address delivered at the "New Simplicity in Contemporary Music" conference at the Aspen Institute, Berlin, June 13–16, 1977.

1. Jonathan Cott, "Talking (whew!) to Karlheinz Stockhausen," *Rolling Stone*, July 8, 1971.

early days of total serialism in the fifties . . .

> . . . all elements had equal rights in the forming process and constantly renewed *all* their characteristics from one sound to the next. . . . If from one sound to the next, pitch, duration, timbre, and intensity change, then the music finally becomes static: it changes extremely quickly, one is constantly traversing the entire realm of experience in a very short time and thus one finds oneself in a state of suspended animation, the music "stands still." If one wanted to articulate larger time-phases, the only way of doing this was to let one sound-characteristic predominate over all others for some time. However, under the circumstances then prevalent, this would have radically contradicted the sound-characteristics. And a solution was found to distribute in space, among different groups of loudspeakers, or instruments, variously long time-phases of this kind of homogeneous sound-structure.[2]

In the revolving brass chords in *Gruppen*, for instance, this simplification, a demonstrable reaction against a complex statistical rather than musical process, bears absolutely no relation to the simplicity described by John Cage in 1961 when discussing the music of La Monte Young:

> Young is doing something quite different from what I am doing, and it strikes me as being very important. Through the few pieces of his I've heard [presumably such minimal classics as *X for Henry Flint* and *Composition 1960 No. 7*], I've had, actually, utterly different experiences of listening than I've had with any other music. He is able either through the repetition of a single sound or through the continued performance of a single sound for a period like twenty minutes, to bring it about that after, say, five minutes, I discover that what I have all along been thinking was the same thing is not the same thing after all, but full of variety. I find his work remarkable almost in the same sense that the change of experience of seeing is when you look through a microscope. You see that there is something other than what you thought was there.
>
> On the other hand, La Monte Young's music can be heard by Europeans as being European. For example, take the repetition of a tone cluster or a single sound at a seemingly constant amplitude over, say, a ten-minute period. The European listener is able to think, "Well, that is what we've always had, minus all the elements of variation." So they imagine, you see, that something is being done to them, namely a simplification of what they're familiar with. My response is not that he

2. Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Music in Space," "Two Lectures," *Die Reihe*, 5, Bryn Mawr, Theodore Presser, 1961, p. 69.

> is doing something to me, but that I am able to hear differently than I ever heard.[3]

Consider Young's chord of B and F sharp in *Composition 1960 No. 7*, or the dominant eleventh extended from one beat to over 200 beats by Steve Reich in his *Four Organs*. If we take these "primitive" musical materials as reductions or concentrations of traditional tonal occurrences, then we are indeed talking of simplification. It is possible, of course, to analyze (rather than to hear) them in this way, especially if yours is a symbolic or metaphoric view of music. Reich, for instance, employs the dominant eleventh in such a way that it "contains" both tonic and dominant chords, and could therefore be said to "represent," in digest form, the tensions of the tonal system. As the dominant eleventh extends itself, we may perceive the tonic/dominant pull, that is, the dominant in the chord appears to "resolve" onto its tonic element. It would, however, be incorrect to believe that when Reich sat down to compose *Four Organs* he had anything more in mind than the material itself (a "preferred fragment" taken not from traditional music but more likely from Dizzy Gillespie) and the most suitable process for articulating this fragment over a comparatively long period of time.[4]

In the instance of the dominant eleventh, it should be remembered that one of the most fundamental lessons of Cage's aesthetic is the principle of not reducing the whole of music—or culture—to a single set, but the opposite: beginning from nothing, building from zero or, as *4′ 33″* shows, from silence. This is perhaps the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, an avant-garde whose intellectually complex music builds on, grows from, develops, and extends traditional compositional techniques and concepts and, on the other, experimental music, in which apparent straightforwardness and lack of *notated* complexity derives from principles alien to European music, at least since 1600.[5]

While the material of a work—the open fifth or the dominant eleventh—appears to arise from zero, this new compositional attitude actually arose out of serialism. In Reich and Young, specific, if unconventional, musical attitudes revealed themselves to be at work *within* serialism, rather than as a blanket reaction *against* serialism. Writing serial music for Berio at Mills College, Reich avoided transposing his rows in order to retain some sort of tonal feeling. And he

3. Roger Reynolds, "Interview with John Cage," *John Cage*, New York, Henmar Press, 1962, p. 52.

4. Two points of clarification are necessary: first, twenty or so minutes may not be a long duration for a piece of "new music," yet it may (or may not) be a long period for the gradual augmentation of a single chord; second, "sitting down to compose" is a metaphor taken from traditional composition. It usually has little to do with the process of producing experimental music, which effectively bypasses the traditional idea of the "craft of musical composition" and all that it involves.

5. My own music, which I consider to fall into the experimental category as defined in my book, *Experimental Music, Cage and Beyond* (New York, Schirmer Books, 1974), is, however, related to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century variation forms, while systems music in general is related, however distantly, to serialism.

approached the row itself as a repeating constant to be regrouped each time it recurred.

A totally new attitude towards duration arose out of Young's serial writing in the fifties; individual pitches began to extend themselves from within the serial context, so that in his *Octet for Brass* (1957) long notes would often be held for three or four minutes. Nothing else would happen, apart from the overlapping of other occasional long notes, and rests which lasted for a minute or more. From the viewpoint of traditional composition, we may justifiably speak of simplification, since there has been a significant reduction in pitch information and rhythmic complexity. This is emphasized even more in Young's subsequent *Trio for Strings*, where according to the composer there is a greater emphasis on harmony than in any other music, "to the exclusion of almost any semblance of what had been generally known as melody."[6] But once this new emphasis on extended duration as the *subject* of the composition emerged out of the old serial organism—leading naturally to the exclusive use of sustained notes, the melodyless harmony which Young continued to explore in his temporally all-embracing *The Tortoise, His Journeys and Dreams*—we can no longer speak of reduction, reaction, or even rejection, but of entirely new musical concerns and materials demanding entirely new methods of structuring and articulation.

In sketching this background to the so-called New Simplicity, it is also useful to distinguish two different reactions to one of the main exponents of intellectually complex music—Anton Webern. Both Reich and Young (as well as Christian Wolff in the "first generation" of experimental composers in the early fifties) heard the results of Webern's serial manipulations in an entirely selective way. Reich has spoken of the "intervallic consistency" of the *Orchestral Variations*, which "give[s] a kind of harmonic sound to his music."[7] And Young, noting Webern's practice of repeating the same pitches in the same octave positions whatever their position in the different forms and transpositions of the row, remarked that while on the surface this represented "constant variation," it could also be heard as stasis, "because it uses the same form throughout the piece. . . . We have the same information repeated over and over and over again."[8] This kind of selective hearing, which depends, of course, on the hearer's individual musical interests and perceptions, is the obverse of the situation outlined by Cage. In Webern one perceives sameness out of (apparent) variety; while in Young's, Glass's, or Reich's music one perceives variety out of (apparent) sameness—a variety of a different order, demanding a different mode of listening and of experiencing musical time.

At times the question of variety-in-sameness poses problems for the per-

6. Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with La Monte Young," in La Monte Young & Marian Zazeela, *Selected Writings*, Munich, Heiner Friedrich, 1969.
7. Personal communication to the author.
8. Kostelanetz, "Conversation with La Monte Young."

former as well, as Cornelius Cardew indicated in his analysis of Young's seminal *X for Henry Flint.* Young's work exists only in oral form and concerns a single, dense, heavy, decaying sound repeated as uniformly and regularly as possible. Cardew asks:

> What is the model for this uniformity? The first sound? Or does each sound become the model for the one succeeding it? If the former, the first sound has to be fixed in the mind as a mental ideal which all the remaining sounds are to approach as closely as possible. (In practice the first sound too is an attempt to approach a mental image that exists before the piece began.) If the latter method is chosen, constant care has to be taken to assimilate the various accidental variations as they occur. David Tudor has approached the piece in this way and tells how, on noticing that certain keys in the centre of the keyboard were not being depressed it became his task to make sure that these particular keys continued to be silent. The task of assimilating and maintaining accidental variations, if logically pursued, requires superhuman powers of concentration and technique. . . . It must be remembered that although uniformity is demanded ("as far as possible"), what is *desired* is variation. It is simply this: that the variation that is desired is that which results from the human (not the superhuman) attempt at uniformity.[9]

Written in 1963, such minutely detailed analytical sophistry may be somewhat outdated in terms of contemporary musical practice; yet it does show that there are forms of complexity other than the intellectual at work in experimental music, which, generally speaking, reveal creative and perceptual areas neglected in traditional and avant-garde music, and which have changed the accepted emphases in the conception-composition-performance-perception chain.

To return to the experimental composers' response to Webern: How are we to judge the reaction to Webern's intellectual complexity as it manifests itself in the work of Morton Feldman, for example? It was through Webern that Feldman first met Cage—after a performance of the *Symphony,* which both found "beautiful." Feldman's interest in the early fifties was, he claims, in sound rather than structure. Abstract-expressionist painting suggested a sound world "more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed before." Varese, he felt, had searched after this ideal, "but he was too 'Varese' "; Webern also glimpsed it, "but his work was too involved with the disciplines of the 12-tone system."[10] It is well known that Feldman's first "experimental" pieces had certain improvisational or free elements, since "the new structure required a concentration more demanding than if the technique were that of still photography," which is what

9. Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise Handbook,* London, Peters Editions, 1971.
10. Cited in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music,* p. 44.

precise notation had become for him. In a piece like *Projection No. 2* for flute, trumpet, and cello, he said that his desire was not to "compose" but to "project sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric that had no place here. In order not to involve the performer [Feldman himself] in memory [relationships], and because sounds no longer had an inherent shape,"[11] he allowed for certain indeterminacies in pitch. This was certainly a heretical idea in the face of a serial system which was then, as it is now, more or less exclusively pitch oriented. In a later statement, Feldman made his attitude towards serialism startlingly clear:

> It appears to me that the subject of music, from Machaut to Boulez, has always been its construction. Melodies of 12-tone rows just don't happen. They must be constructed. . . . To demonstrate any formal idea in music, whether structure or stricture, is a matter of construction, in which the methodology is the controlling metaphor of the composition. . . . Only by "unfixing" the elements traditionally used to construct a piece of music could the sounds exist in themselves—not as symbols, or memories which were the memories of other music to begin with.

The radical concept is, of course, that of *unfixing relationships*, since all post-Renaissance music has been concerned with fixing with increasing exactitude the relationships between sounds. Cage's attitude towards unfixing relationships was—and unfortunately remains—as rigorous and strict as the serialist's towards fixing relationships. It might be useful to recall Cage's approach, even though it might appear to be only indirectly related to the so-called New Simplicity. In 1970 he remarked that he would assume . . .

> . . . that relations would exist between sounds as they would exist between people and that those relationships are more complex than any I would be able to prescribe. So by simply dropping that responsibility of making relationships I don't lose the relationship. I keep the situation in what you might call a natural complexity that can be observed in one way or another. Now it used to be thought that the function of the artist was to express himself and therefore he had to set up particular relationships. I think that this whole question of art is a question of changing our minds and that the function of the artist is not self-expression but rather self-alteration, and the thing being altered is clearly not his hands or his eyes but rather his mind. . . .
>
> Given a particular situation, one person will observe certain relationships, another will observe others. If we have the view we used to have, that there was only one right way of observing the relationships of things, then we have a situation that really doesn't appeal to

11. *Ibid.*

> me. We have, in other words, one thing that's right and all the rest are wrong. I would like to have a multiplicity of rights.[12]

Compared with the music of La Monte Young, Cage's music appears, at its most characteristic (and he would say its best), to be "complex"; but this non- or even anti-intellectual complexity is only apparent, since any relationships that emerge are only skin deep, like the relationships between strangers who happen to pass on the street. This, then, is just one extreme of the New Simplicity, where all musical events, devoid of intentional relationships, are of equal importance (or, in Cage, of equal unimportance). The opposite extreme, represented in America by the music of Terry Riley, Reich, Glass, Young, and Jon Gibson, and in England by Gavin Bryars, John White, Christopher Hobbs, and myself, is closely related conceptually, methodologically, and structurally to Cage, even when its purposes and methods appear to contradict this relation. Cage himself perceived the similarity; his own music may be antistructure, yet if one of these younger composers "maintains in his work aspects of structure, they are symmetrical in character, canonic or enjoying an equal importance of parts, either those that are present at one instant, or those that succeed one another in time."[13] Once Cage had attempted—and succeeded—in removing the glue from musical relationships by resorting to chance methods of articulating a multiplicity of sounds in combination and sequence, younger composers found themselves free to explore and to realize the potential of extending *single* sounds or limited sets of sounds and to create relationships between different aspects of these restricted sets.

The equality of vertical and horizontal compositional aspects is fundamental to experimental music. Simplicity is an absolute, a constant, not part of a scale of values, textures, techniques, dramatic structure, or whatever, spanning the entire gamut from absolute simplicity to frightening (and usually self-defeating) complexity. Nor are there moments of greater or lesser simplicity during a work, unless they result naturally from the chosen process, as for example in Reich's *Pendulum Music*, at the conclusion of which all the microphones come to rest—reach unison, so to speak—after the more "complex" interaction of independent and gradually elongated feedback pulses. Similarly, simplicity is not a dualistic or multiple quality (in the end, the apparent complexity of Cage's multiplicity is simple, since no structural relations are established between successive parts); only in rare cases, such as Gavin Bryars's *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, are melody/harmony polarizations aimed for or achieved. When they are—in my own music, for instance—repetition guarantees that such overt background/foreground focus is either destroyed, negated, or reassessed in some way. Similarly, the parts of a sectional work, such as Reich's *Drumming*, relate to each other in a 1:1, or 1:1+1. . . relationship.

12. Frank Kermode, "Is an Elite Necessary?" (interview with Cage), *The Listener* (London), November 5, 1970.
13. John Cage, *A Year From Monday*, Middletown (Conn.), Wesleyan University Press, 1967, p. 31.

In this new, simple experimental music the given material of a piece is its *only* material and relates only to itself; there are no contrasting, complementary, or secondary ideas. The single, unitary musical idea, usually of immense and deliberate simplicity, is extended through the composition by means of repetition, augmentation, phase shifting, imitation, accumulation, rotation, number permutation, vertical stacking, addition, layering, etc. These basic techniques are not used, as they are in "complex" music, to transform, disguise, transubstantiate, or intermodulate either themselves or the initial musical idea; where change is an important part of a work (in the old terminology, when the work is more "developed"), the systems, procedures, and processes guarantee that the identity of the material is always audibly retained.

Perhaps the reaction of experimental composers to the so-called intellectual complexity of avant-garde music is not a reaction against intellectual complexity itself, but against what brings about the need for such complexity, as well as its audible result. We should perhaps speak of the qualities that serial music denied and which have resurfaced in experimental music: symmetrical rhythms (i.e., regular beat); euphony; consonant, diatonic, or modal materials; absence of theatricality and grandiloquence, of drama, of sound used as symbol.

In discussing experimental music as a whole, we should perhaps read "New Objectivity" for "New Simplicity," since composer-publisher-publicist Dick Higgins found Cage's emphasis on chance procedures significant as a means of distancing oneself from one's materials; the composer no longer feels the necessity of consciously influencing the creative process at every moment. According to Higgins, "What Cage did was to place the material at one remove from the composer, by allowing it to be determined by a system which he determined. And the real innovation lies in the emphasis on the creation of a system."[14] This "emphasis on the creation of a system" applies both to the mechanical acceptance of a system (in the percussion music of Hobbs and White, for example) and to the music of Steve Reich, who has increasingly sought to make personal "aesthetic" interventions which seem to contradict the principles laid down in the 1968 statement *Music as a Gradual Process.* Despite the intervention of personal decisions which to some extent override the abstract mechanics of the system, Reich's music still retains the basic nontraditional characteristics shared by all experimental music: that of stasis and a nondirectional, nondramatic, nondynamic approach to musical structure; there are no hierarchies, no transitions, no tension, no relaxation, and change is quantitative rather than qualitative.

In 1948 Cage wrote, "We may recognize what may be called perhaps a new contemporary awareness of form: it is static, rather than progressive in character."[15] This was unconsciously echoed some twenty years later by La Monte Young when he distinguished his music from that of the Western tradition:

14. Dick Higgins, *foew & ombwhnw*, New York, Something Else Press, 1969.
15. Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage*, New York, Praeger, 1970, p. 81.

"Climax and directionality have been among the most important guiding factors [in music since the thirteenth century], whereas music before that time, from the chants through organum and Machaut, used stasis as a point of structure a little bit more the way certain Eastern musical systems have."[16] And just as pre-thirteenth-century and non-Western music often present surprisingly complex perceptual problems for the listener reared on European classical music, so too does this "simple" music that I have chosen to call experimental.

16. Kostelanetz, "Conversation with La Monte Young."

"Son of a Bitch": Feminism, Humanism, and Science in *Alien*

JAMES H. KAVANAUGH

> "*. . . One can and must speak openly of Marx's* theoretical anti-humanism, *and see in this* theoretical anti-humanism *the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to* know *anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.*"
>
> —*Louis Althusser,* For Marx

An aesthetically effective mass-cultural production, *Alien* cleverly fuses a number of disparate cultural semes into a cinematic narrative that has considerable visual and emotional impact. At the same time, it cannot entirely conceal its own internally overdetermined and contradictory construction, which allows criticism to expose its attempt to resurrect a specific ideological figure. For the death of the alien, as *Alien* has it, is the triumphant rebirth of humanism, disguised as a powerful, progressive, and justifying feminism.[1]

The concept of humanism which functions as a crucial ideological trope in *Alien* is similar to that suggested by the Althusserian reflection above. Within a rigorous Marxist theory of history, society, and culture, it is a theoretical error to found a transformative program for social liberation on the pseudo-concept "man"—an ideological notion that conceals differences, contradictions, and struggles in the real under the sign of a generalized, shared essence. For Marxism, there is no such thing as man; there are specific men and women, distributed as differentially functioning agents into specific *classes*, with *class* standing as the significant category of an effective theory of social transformation. Whatever their good intentions, humanist theories are, in this Althusserian construction, inevitably ineffective and self-defeating grounds for transformative social practice. Even Stalinism is understood, in part, as an effect of irruptions of pre-Marxist humanist

1. For a theoretical reflection on the text's reworking of cultural-ideological semes, see Thomas E. Lewis, "Notes Toward a Theory of the Referent," *PMLA*, 94, 2 (March 1979).

ideological categories into Marxist political theory and practice. In this problematic, the word *science* designates those forms of theoretical activity capable of producing knowledge that can actually be effective in various social practices, including revolutionary political practice. The Althusserian distinction between science and humanism thus signifies something more rigorous and challenging than the nasty/nice opposition it tends to register for those held within apparatuses whose task is precisely to reproduce a humanist ideology.

Alien initially figures humanism and science in terms that disrupt and even reverse the usual science fiction reproduction of humanist ideologies, in which reason-calculation-logic is inflected as bad, or at least *inhuman*, and in need of the good, corrective *human* figure who signifies emotion-passion-concern. *Star Trek*'s Spock and Kirk are the most familiar recent mass-cultural version of this humanist ideological couple reconstructed in signifying practice. In its earlier version, in the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, this split is reproduced with the even more stark assertion that the *only* distinguishing feature of those who are "snatched"—that which is all of their horror—is lack of emotion. The obvious Cold War images of *Body Snatchers* and the more mediated, post-Cold War *détente* images of *Star Trek* suggest that fears about communism lurk behind certain typical humanist fears about science and rationality.

Thus, the ideological semes that *Alien* takes as its raw material tend to inflect negatively, for example, the signifying unit "workers," whose black male voice insists that they want nothing to do with a rescue mission, which will only consume more of their time, unless they are paid for it: "Our time is their time; that's the way *they* see it," one of the workers says. There is no figure more offensive to an ideological humanism than this: workers attempting to withhold labor from ostensibly humanitarian services for mere material demands, and so implicitly marking humanism as a class luxury. Unless it be that other form of calculation, speaking here in the voice of a woman who firmly refuses to open the air-lock through which a stricken friend and two other colleagues might pass to safety (including a man to whom she seems attracted); this refusal speaks from the theoretically antihumanist grounds of correct scientific procedure, assumption of legitimate authority, willingness to sacrifice friends, loved ones, the individual, on the basis of a rational definition of possible consequences, etc. Her stand implicitly marks humanism as irrelevant. And the viewer held within a humanist ideology (as we all are) asks: "Where are her feelings?"

Indeed, at first viewing one tends to sympathize with Ash (the science officer): his anxiety while monitoring the activities of the rescue team seems symptomatic of genuine concern; he takes a chance, makes the seemingly human, spontaneous gesture in opening the air-lock hatch; and he seems genuinely hounded by Ripley when she complains about his acting inconsistently with his responsibilities as a science officer. All of this is visually reinforced by images of him wringing his hands, or on the verge of breaking into a sweat. Caught up in sympathy for Kane's (Cain's?) plight, the viewer cannot yet identify Ash's anxiety—and perspiration—as signs of anything more sinister than compassion.

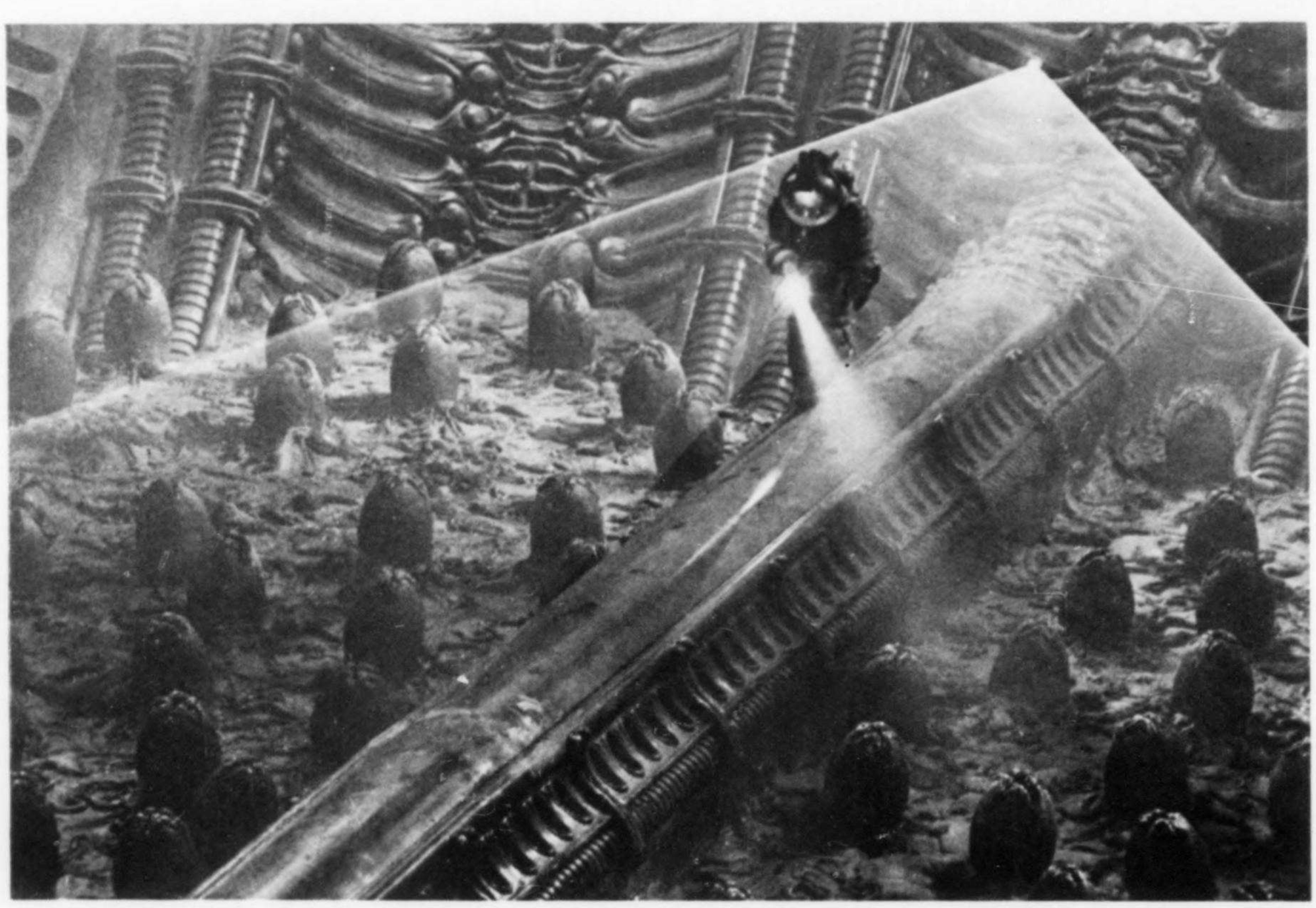
As the nature and extent of the danger become clearer, however, the viewer gradually registers that the real heroes are not Ash, for all his seeming humanitarian concern, nor even Dallas, the strong and attractive male figure who would normally function as the narrative's ego. The heroes are, rather, Ripley, the "strong woman," and Parker, the "black worker." Theirs will be an uneasy alliance: "Why don't they come down here?" Parker complains. "This is where the *work* is." And Ripley does come down—to supervise and be teased. But Ripley's hard line on opening the air-lock hatch was right after all, and her assertive bickering with Ash stemmed from a proper suspicion of his stubborn scientific incompetence with the alien rather than, as we first suspect, an authoritarian pulling of rank. Parker's resistance to answering the distress call now seems more sensible than heartless; he too identifies Ash's failure to act in a scientifically correct—and safe—manner with the alien parasite: "Why doesn't he freeze him?" Parker asks. To which Dallas replies, "Shut up, and get back to work." It is Dallas and Ash who act on behalf of power and greed. They accept protocols that have nothing to do with science or rationality but only with final obedience to the demands of the "Company." "The money's safe!" is Dallas's exclamation of relief as they leave the "Mother" ship to explore the alien planet. The film ultimately projects Ripley alone as its surviving hero, her authority now definitely seen by the viewer as grounded in intelligence and strength of character rather than any intrinsic power hunger. When the alien kills Dallas, whose image inflects a deep cultural seme—nice, strong, attractive male; must be hero, can't be killed—the viewer registers definite subliminal surprise in realizing that the woman actually will be (and has been all along) the strong center of the film, the ego through which the story will be resolved and our identification made.

As the power of the woman-signifier is foregrounded, the film's complex investment in the alien-signifier can be seen more clearly. The first part of the film, leading to the shocking birth of the alien, actually projects three images of birth, each with an increasingly confused and frightening set of sexual associations. The first is the lingering exploration of the inner body of the spaceship—and the ship is the computer is Mother—by the first-person camera that implicates the viewer as I/eye; this ends with a long tracking shot down the smooth, clean electronic corridor into an inner chamber, where six curiously unsexed bodies slowly come to life. The second birth scene—more a conception—involves two men and a woman collectively imaged as three clumsy spermlike figures entering the vaginal opening between the upstretched "legs" of an alien spaceship. Entering a corridor that exudes the ooze of biology, they establish an effective visual trope: the confusion of organic and mechanical textures which gives the alien his camouflage. The three clumsy seekers find, in one chamber, death gigantic, and in another, the expectant egg of a new life grotesque. This conception—in which male and female, life and death are confused—is then reversed as the egg forces its own tenacious fertilizing instrument on the man, who as a passive receptacle must ingest its seed. Finally, the particularly horrifying confusion of the sexual-gynecological with the gastrointestinal is patched onto the life-death, male-female

confusions as Kane dies in agony enduring the forced "birth" of the razor-toothed phallic monster that gnaws its way through his stomach into the light—a kind of science fiction *phallus dentatus.*

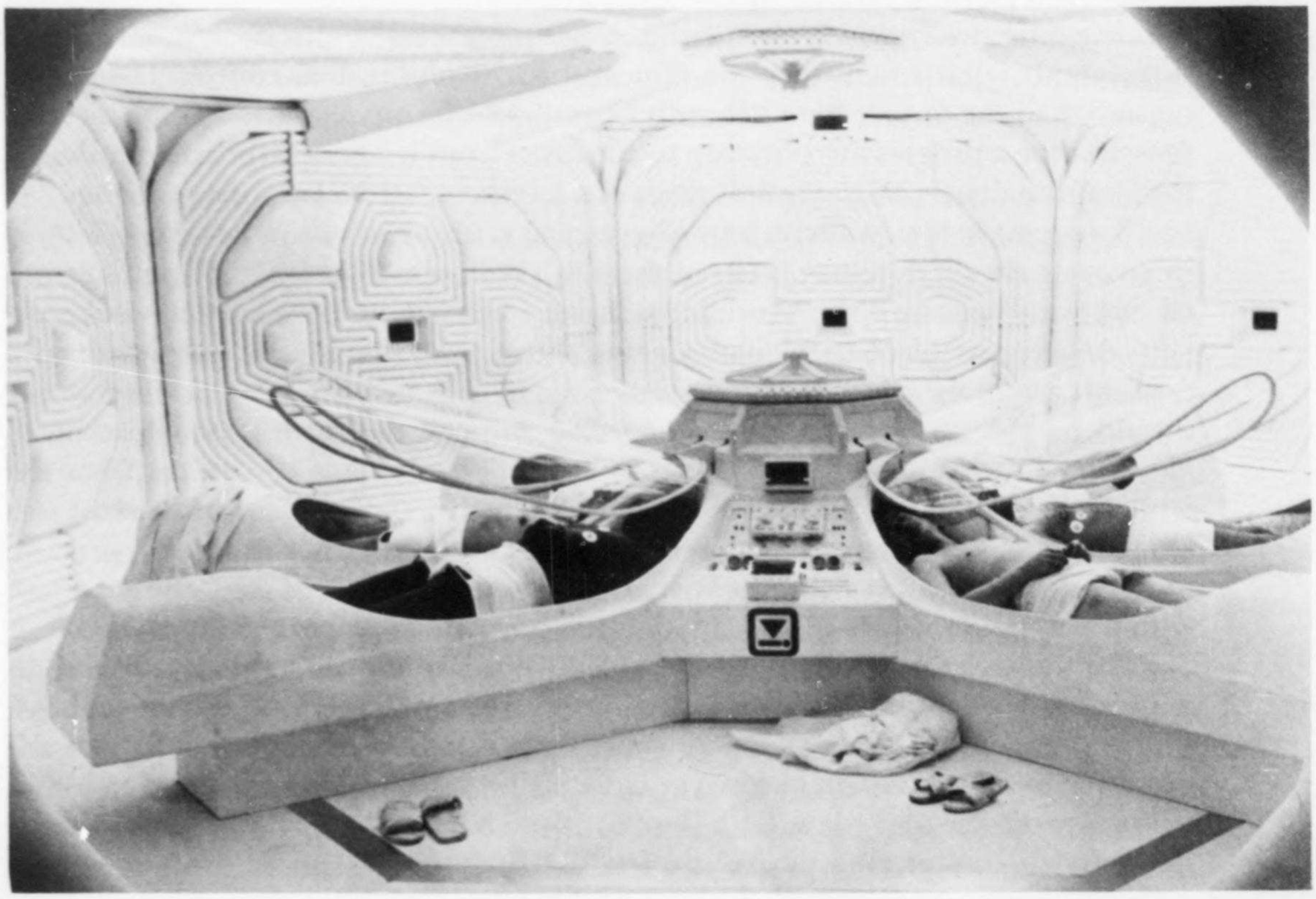
This patchwork of confusion serves on one level no other purpose than to invest the image of the phallus born from the stomach of the man with as many unconscious fears as possible, so as to produce more dramatically the horror effect. But precisely by so attempting to intensify fear, the film produces a monster in the image of a vicious phallic power articulated in a complex and contradictory relation to the female. Through grotesquely emphasized erectile images, the alien insistently registers psychosexually as a threatening phallus: it unfolds itself from a seemingly inert mass into a towering, top-heavy menace; extends its insidiously telescoping jaws; slithers its tail up the leg of its fear-paralyzed female victim in a shot that visually and emotionally connotes rape as much as death. And the film sets up a final confrontation in which the strong woman alone must confront and obliterate this menace, assuming for herself the counterphallic power of the "gun."

Along the way, Ripley must also confront another enemy—one which leads the crew to, harbors and nurtures within itself, and assigns absolute priority to the



alien; this other enemy, the alien's life support, is the ship itself, the computer Mother. Mother is the filmic presence that gives both life and death—freezing and resurrecting the crew in one womblike chamber, dispensing futile advice to the good boy and girl leaders in another—until Ripley confounds this oracle with a question that elicits its priorities. When its soothing, insistent female voice ignores her attempt to deactivate the self-destruct program, Ripley finally addresses this presence as "Mother, you bitch!" A minute or so later, screen time, Ripley prematurely addresses the alien she thinks she has destroyed: "I got you, you son of a bitch!" The film thus presents a rather complex feminist version of the strong woman who must mobilize all her autonomous intellectual and emotional strength to resist and ultimately obliterate the voracious phallic monster forced on her by Mother as the representative of the will of the appropriately absent Father (the Company).

Interestingly, then, *Alien* operates as a feminist statement on a symbolic level that avoids both the trivializing, empiricist condemnation of men (typically, the men or man in her life) and the puritanical condemnation of sexuality and sexual attraction. Indeed, the film can be seen as almost postfeminist in its image of the relations between the men and women of the Nostromo's crew. There are strong



and weak women and men on the ship, but the woman's right to assume authority is not even an issue; authority and power are ceded to persons irrespective of sex, solely in regard to their position and function. The way the film takes for granted Ripley's assumption of command, her right to order and even shove the men around, registers strongly as the absence of an expected problematic. The parallel assumption—again felt as an unusual noninsistence—that she is a sexually active woman, suggested in her understated but definite attraction to Dallas, avoids both the romantic tendency to turn every story about a woman into a love story and the repressive tendency to insist that every strong woman must be asexual (or at least aheterosexual, which is the same thing for Hollywood). *Alien* presents an image of an autonomous woman who has perfectly reasonable relations with men at all levels and who finds her most effective ally in a black male worker (with whom she is not sexually involved), even while she increasingly assumes the necessity of making her own stand against a threatening phallic power pressed on her through the agency of apparatuses called Mother and Company as much as by any particular man or group of men.

Alien seems to take up rather enthusiastically the ideological semes of feminism and to reproduce them in an interesting form. I would disagree with an ideological denunciation of the film as simply another exercise in conventional sexism on the basis of the scene in which Ripley removes her uniform to appear in T-shirt and panties. Such criticism would be hard-pressed to avoid repressive and self-defeating assumptions about what constitutes sexism, and irrelevant assumptions about what constitutes the film and its ideological discourse. The image presented to the viewer here is hardly sensational by any standards, and it seems senseless for a progressive criticism to construct from it a general condemnation of the film that denies all the other effects of a fairly consistent feminist statement. As I will suggest below, a suspicious ideological critique might more appropriately interrogate the discrepancy between the film's embrace of the woman-signifier and its more ambiguous, uncomfortable relation to the figure of the black worker.

An effective ideological analysis, and the more telling formal and substantive points it can make about *Alien*, do not reside in denunciation. A Marxist critique should be able to clarify the film's specific and contradictory production of an ideological reality, rather than focus on a single image that allows identification with some abstract, politicized evil. One first catches the ideological work of *this* film, and the generation of its formal and thematic contradictions in the process, in the attempt to alloy the rather consistent positive images of the strong woman with a contradictory set of messages on the humanism/science problematic.

In the scene in which Ash is revealed to be a robot, he suddenly appears at Ripley's side in Mother's womb; he first accepts her anger and trivial violence against him and then begins to lose control. In Ash's crazed pursuit of Ripley, the viewer senses a pathological force at work. Is he in some way possessed (another cultural seme the film plays with) by the alien? No, but he certainly possesses the same destructive phallic power: he forces Ripley onto a counter under a wall

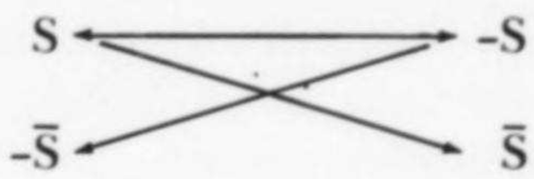
plastered with nude centerfolds, rolls up one of the magazines, and begins to shove it relentlessly down her throat. A scene that opens as a twist in a lagging plot becomes a forceful image relating pornography to violence against women. Parker, the black worker, rescues Ripley from this perverse rape, and we discover that Ash is *not* a man, but a robot sent by the Company to bring back the alien for their "weapons research." The film's throwaway anticorporatism and antimilitarism are thus strengthened: the Company as bad Father is now identified with the Company as imperialist (Nostromo, mining, etc.). But the terms in which Ash's head now reveals the secret of the alien's power and horror are more interesting: the alien is "without remorse, conscience, morality . . . a survivor."

Here the film takes precisely those qualities associated with Ripley when she refused to open the air-lock for her friends, and with Parker when he resisted being drafted for the rescue mission—qualities which were inflected positively—and reverses their value; it is now negative, bad, antihuman, to be a survivor, to use knowledge and power in a way that renders morality and guilt irrelevant. But this is exactly why we admire Ripley. The reversal of these inflections through the image of the science officer as robot reinvokes the entire *ideological* humanism/science problematic. The scene thus attempts an *impossible* fusion of contradictory and heterogeneous ideological materials, a fusion whose impossibility is concealed by cinematic sleight of hand: Parker chased and strangled by a body with its head hanging off its neck—a startling image indeed. But the seam cannot be totally effaced: the slight flicker of that splice in the film where the robot's dummy head is exchanged for the actor's talking head is a reflection in technical practice of the central seam which marks the film as a specific aesthetic and ideological production.

Awareness of the film's contradictory ideological representation of humanism allows us to see the substantive importance of Ripley's last-minute return for a cat. This peculiar rescue mission is more than an annoying plot device to build suspense (although it is certainly that too). It achieves the suspense effect by presenting a supercharged image of that "I brake for animals" ideology which signifies its humanism in a displaced concern for little furry creatures. Ripley's concern for the cat functions as a final sign of her recovery for an ideological humanism. The woman who would have let her friend(s) die rather than take a scientifically unacceptable risk in opening the air-lock now risks disaster in order to be reunited with her pet. And the film insists, through the Macduffy effect, that no harm results from this gesture: it has no effect on Parker or Lambert's fate; the cat was not taken over by the alien; etc. Of course, Ripley's decision about the air-lock was difficult and courageous precisely because the same arguments *might* have been made later. The film inflects the character, *against* the habitual humanist ideological reactions, as positive for making a decision on scientific, theoretically antihumanist grounds in the air-lock situation and then reverses itself, against its own previous work, to approve her decision about the cat on contradictory grounds. This ideological double reverse marks a schizophrenia, not

in the character's psychology (which does not exist), but in the film's relation to a dominant humanism.

A Greimasian semantic rectangle will foreground the structural importance of the cat in the complex of signifiers generated from the notion "human":



The founding term in the film is *human* (S), represented by the image of Ripley as the strong woman. The antihuman (-S) is, of course, the alien, and the not-human ($\overline{S}$) is Ash, the robot. The cat, then, functions in the slot of the not-antihuman ($-\overline{S}$), an indispensable role in this drama.[2]

Alien's "game of semiotic constraints" is thus played entirely around the problematic of humanism, with the strong woman now chosen over the attractive male captain (*and* the black worker) to represent the human. Humanism is smuggled back in with the cat, after the film has pivoted around the robot's speech—which turns the film from an implicitly antihumanist statement on the worker's class-interest and the intelligent woman's scientific knowledge into a vehicle for producing a newly adequated relation to that reality in which morality, remorse, etc., are signs of the good. Now that the viewer is assured that Ripley really does have feelings, she is ready to go one-on-one against the alien in a scene which reconstructs the classic American cultural image of the gunfight. In the space Western of the future, the sheriff is replaced by a woman, while what is important for ideological humanism is preserved—a tough gal, rather than a tough guy, but still with that soft spot in the heart. Gary Cooper goes home to his little boy, and Sigourney Weaver goes to bed with her kitty-cat.

Something of the good, of course, remains in this idyllic reconstruction of a radical feminist humanism: the black worker. For parallel with Ripley's sudden reversal from decision based on knowledge to choice based on feelings and impulse, the film also has Parker contradict his previous relation to humanist ethics. The worker who would not be drafted for a rescue mission unless his contract was redrawn suddenly throws down his weapon for a suicidal hand-to-hand combat with the alien, so as not to endanger the woman who cannot move from his line of fire. As with the strong woman, the film folds its positive inflection of the figure of the black worker back into ideological humanism. Unlike the strong woman, however, the black worker is hung up for meat by the alien. Like the Nostromo's shuttle craft, the ideological system of bourgeois humanism can sustain only a limited number of living signs; nowhere are the class determinations of these limits more visible than in this film's willingness to present the

2. This application of the Greimasian semantic rectangle was suggested to me by Richard Astle.

strong woman as the good survivor—smarter than that mean old phallic monster—and the black worker as the good sacrificial victim—nice guy, but not as tough as he thought he was.

If it appears that all these narrative and ideological threads do not finally coalesce very well, that is because they do not. The film organizes a complex set of heterogeneous ideological and cultural semes into an overdetermined visual text that produces disparate, even contradictory ideological effects, making it a terrain of potential ideological struggle. The film *attempts* to construct an imaginary unity for all these effects, and to efface that potential under the sign of the strong woman as a new type of humanist hero—this, after literally chewing up all other differences existing within the space of the human. One cannot assign *Alien*, then, to some pseudo-Marxist category of good or bad on the basis of an oblique anticorporate reference, or the portrayal of a woman in her underwear. Marxism seeks knowledge of the film as a specific aesthetic production, the specific ideologies to which it relates, and the transformative work it does with those ideologies to construct the *illusion* of a seamless reality. This illusion is dispelled precisely in those shifts, contradictions, and slippages that reveal the pressure of ideologies in and on the work of the text. To say that *Alien* is reactionary and/or sexist can give no new knowledge of either the film or those ideologies. To say that *Alien* broadcasts a very sophisticated set of overwhelmingly feminist signals articulated in contradictory relation to other signals about class, and about humanism and science, opens the way to knowledge of how this film, *and* those ideological raw materials it extracts from a specific field of social discourse, operate.[3]

To suggest, finally, that a cultural discourse on humanism is the *à dominante* with which this film finally sanctions for the viewer its specifically structured ideological reality is to indicate the potential allure, power, *invisibility* of humanist ideological semes, even for the radical critic. For distance from reaction or sexism comes easily enough. But there is a somewhat more difficult theoretical labor—one which perhaps carries less of the satisfying feeling of shedding and

3. Nothing in this essay is meant to deny the necessity in certain contexts of ideological practice to promote a certain politically skewed reading or evaluation of the film. Indeed, within such a practice, I would argue that the film, for its strong feminist signals as well as its vague anticorporatism, should be construed as generally positive and progressive. This must be distinguished, however, from the necessity within a theoretical practice to understand how the film *works* as an aesthetic and ideological production.

Nor is anything here meant to suggest a denunciation of humanism, which in many contexts can be as indispensable as it is insufficient. The attempt is rather to emphasize the theoretically absolute distinction between the problematic of humanism and that of knowledge of social relations: "Marx's theoretical anti-humanism . . . recognizes a necessity for humanism as an *ideology*, a conditional necessity. . . . When (eventually) a Marxist policy of humanist ideology, that is, a political attitude toward humanism, is achieved—a policy which may be either a rejection or a critique, or a use, or a support, or a development, or a humanist renewal of contemporary forms of ideology in the *ethico-political* domain—this policy will only have been possible on the absolute condition that it is based on Marxist philosophy, and a precondition for this is theoretical *antihumanism*."—Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, New York, Vintage, 1970, p. 231.

assigning guilt—in confronting the necessity to negotiate the theoretical (and potentially political) distance between the problematic of humanism and empathy and that of science and knowledge. That *Alien* can be seen as provoking such considerations makes it a very interesting film indeed.

Acknowledgments for a Book Not Yet Begun

LEO STEINBERG

A mischievous satire wherein the author's name is ingeniously anagrammatized fifty-eight times; composed with the aid of Scrabble tiles for the diversion of readers who, in the perusal of scholars' acknowledgments, have been sometimes struck by a certain self-addressed puffery amidst the ostentation of thanks.

Among the pleasures of completing a book, there is none more gratifying than that of advertising the favors received at home and abroad. First and foremost, my thanks go to Lester Boeing and Gert Eisenlob for their selflessness in applying themselves to my needs. It was the former's attention to my agent Rose Tengible that speeded my flight to Brussels, where the brevity of my stay was warmly applauded by Ibert Genoels, Stereo Belgin, and Leerens Bigot; as my subsequent sojourn in London as houseguest of Reg Tinsel, O.B.E. was hastened by his famulus Ernest Oblige. In Paris, where a meeting of minds with Tesile Borgne and Bêtise Lorgné exerted a lasting influence, I was everywhere well received, and recall with satisfaction the hospitality of Bénite Legros, Besoin Legret, Lésine Bergot, and Règne Bestiol. At Montpellier I had the eager cooperation of Gilbert Nosée; in Bonn, the solid support of Gretel Osbein and Tilger Ebenso—a splendid team whose insights, embodied in *Oberst Liegen*, underlie some of my own. To Stigeon Berle and Elgin T. Erebos, excavating in Greece, I am beholden for the results of their digs; and am grateful to Renée Bigslot and Niobe Legrest for relief after fatiguing itineraries. Through Inge Stroebel of Zurich I became friendly with Terens Goebli and gained access to the international set, fraternizing freely with Sir Ego Blenet, Elite Bergson, Boris Genteel, Ingle Ste.-Bore, Gen'l Rob't Leise (retired), the excellent Ignoster Beel, and the redoubtable Telegrin Böse. Lured to Italy by Gentile Borse and stationed at Leges-on-Tiber through a grant from the Treble-Genios Foundation, I was fortunate in my tutor Berto Inglese and in the solicitude of the three catering cousins, Lesbe Genitor, Lesbit Erogen, and Lieb Estrogen who, at their Elenge Bistro downtown, introduced me to E. Ting Soberle. I further wish to thank dear Elsbet Origen for showing me proofs of her prolegomena *Let Eros Begin*.

Of Goneril Beest, my editor at Nigel, Este & Rob, Publshrs., the less said the better; as also of Anna Gram, head of publicity, whose penchant to head off publicity, and whose regrettable association with the likes of Irene Goblets, Berte Sloe-Gin, Sot Greenbile, Elboe Stinger, Osteler Binge, etc., allowed my name to get lost in the shuffle. Winding down, I must thank my comrade-in-arms Legs Bête-Noir for the shady retreat afforded me by his company. Lastly, for making their presences felt in one way or another, I salute Oleg Tenebris and Terese Goblin, Obese Ringlet and Generos Blite; moreover, Egbert Lesion, Teborg Senile, and Elstir Begone.

Ort Eigenselb, 1978

MULTIDISCIPLINARY ASPECTS OF PERFORMANCE: POSTMODERNISM

Montréal, October 9-10-11, 1980

CONFERENCE ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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INSTALLATIONS/PERFORMANCES/FILMS

October, November

Marina Abramovic/Ulay, Laurie Anderson, Stuart Brisley, Daniel Buren, Colin Campbell, Marc Chaimowicz, Elizabeth Chitty, Max Dean, Richard Foreman, Dan Graham, Robert Hamon, Bruce McLean, Yvonne Rainer, Tom Sherman, Bob Wilson (list to be completed).

Coordinators: Bruce Ferguson, Jean Papineau, Chantal Pontbriand

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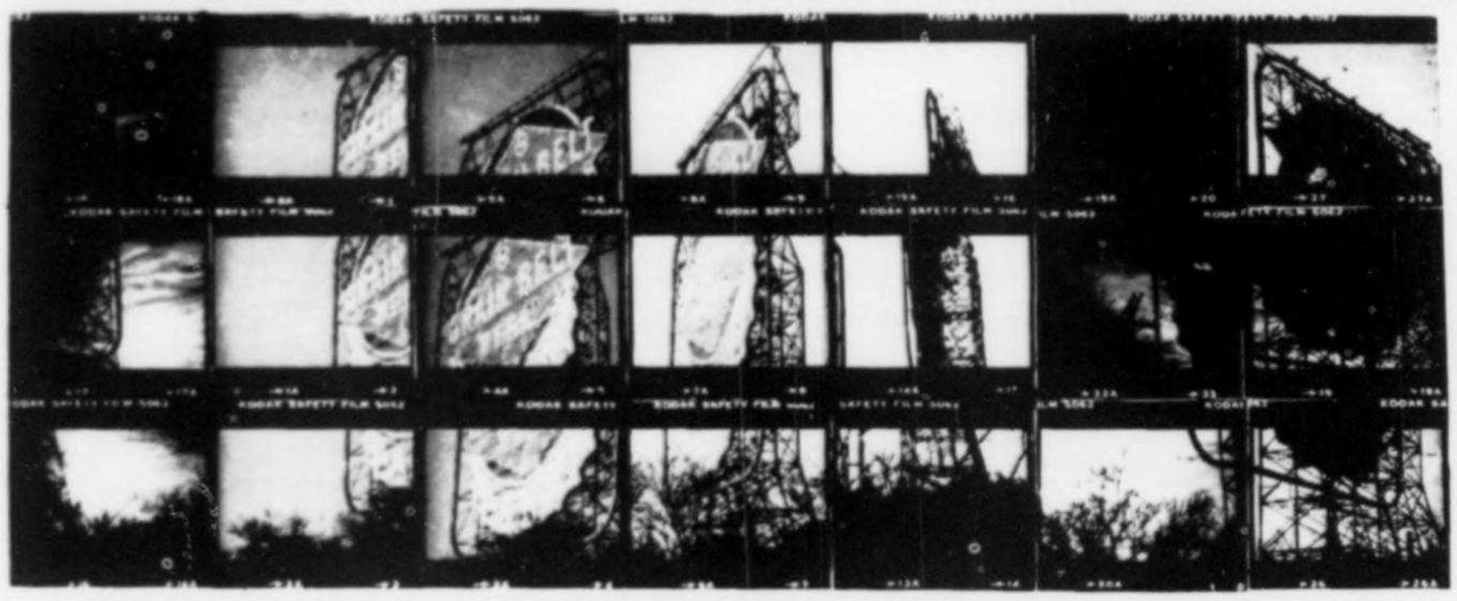

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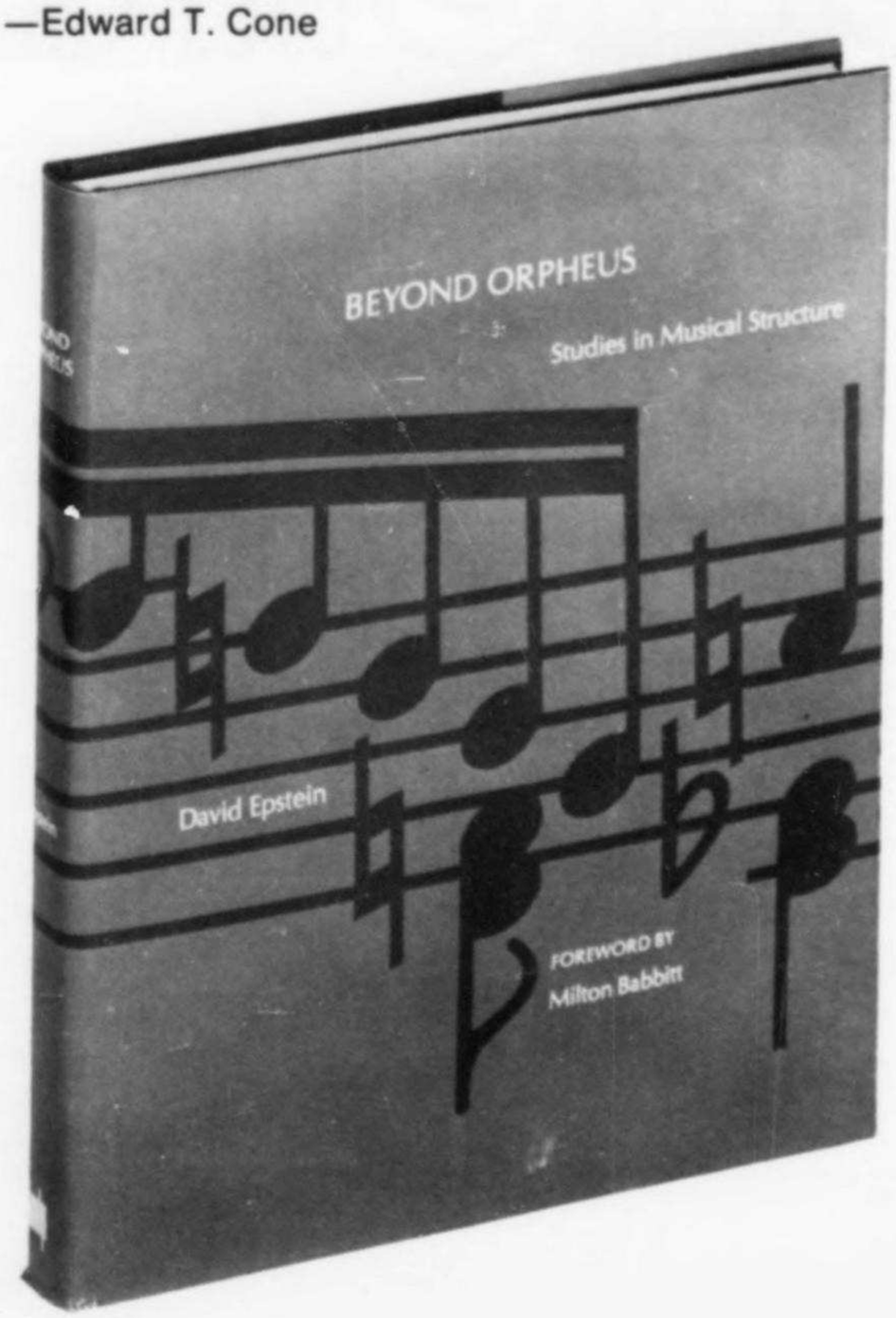

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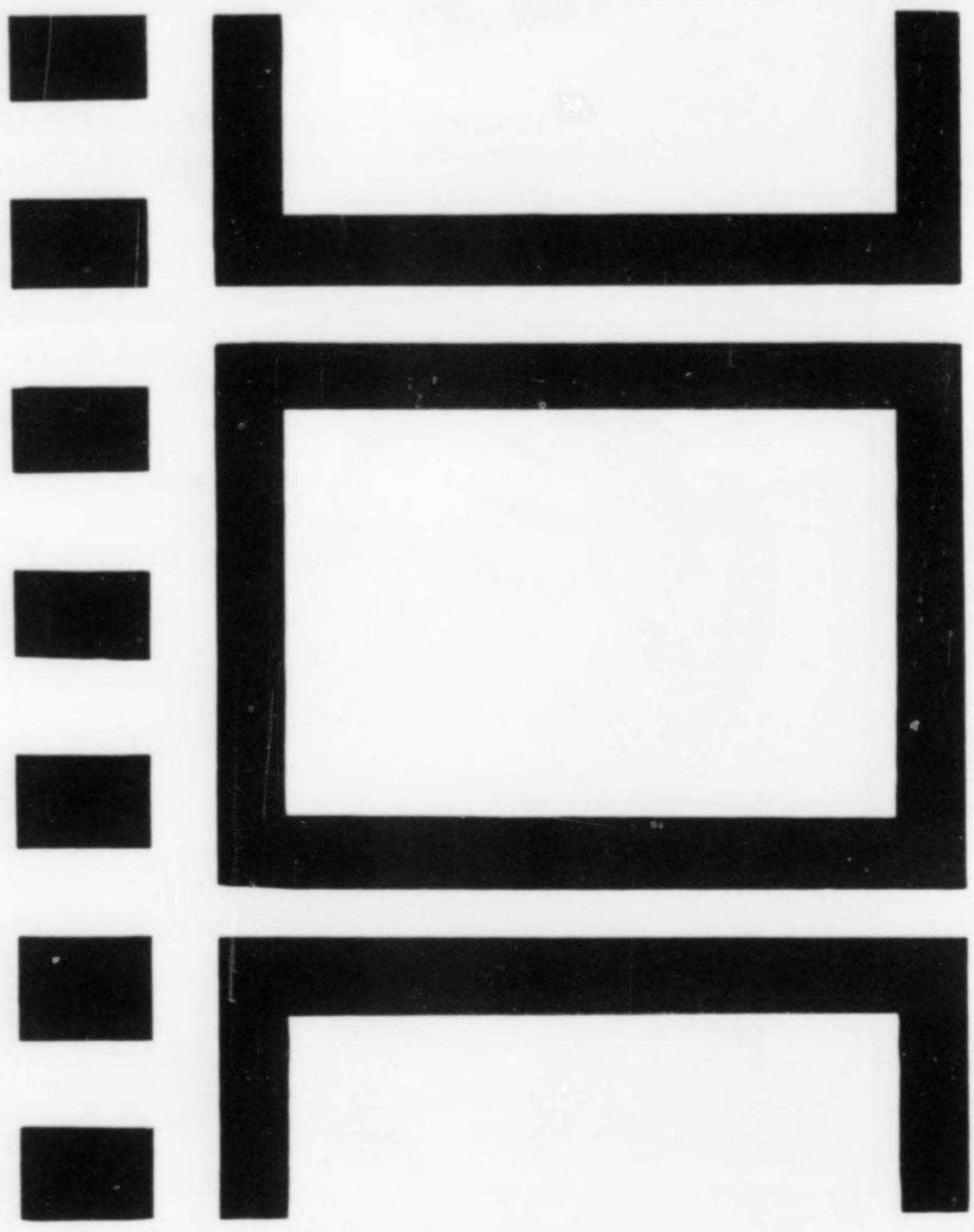

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