ROUTLEDGE

ALCHEMY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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URSZULA SZULAKOWSKA

ALCHEMY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Alchemy in Contemporary Art analyzes the manner in which twentieth-century artists, beginning with French Surrealists of the 1920s, have appropriated concepts and imagery from the western alchemical tradition. This study examines artistic production from *c*. 1920 to the present, with an emphasis on the 1970s to 2000, discussing familiar names such as André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, and Anselm Kiefer, as well as many little known artists of the later twentieth century. It provides a critical overview of the alchemical tradition in twentieth-century art, and of the use of occultist imagery as a code for political discourse and polemical engagement.

The study is the first to examine the influence of alchemy and the Surrealist tradition on Australian as well as on Eastern European and Mexican art. In addition, the text considers the manner in which women artists such as Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Rebecca Horn have critically revised the traditional sexist imagery of alchemy and occultism for their own feminist purposes.

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Dedicated to Max Stanley Warrington and his Babcia Matylda

Alchemy in Contemporary Art

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Introduction

From the beginning of the twentieth century the subject of alchemy has fascinated many international artists, especially those experimenting with innovative practices. The present study concerns the way in which avant-garde artists have adapted the historical alchemical discourse to the expression of liberal and leftist political ideals. The artists under discussion will include not only such well-known names as André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke and Francesco Clemente, but also more recent figures from Britain, Australia, South Africa, Eastern Europe and the United States.

In its origins, medieval and Renaissance alchemy involved practical chemistry, as well as introspective contemplation. The laboratory process was believed to purify both the chemical materials and the alchemist himself, along with his environment. The alchemists aimed to create the Philosopher's Stone, a mysterious entity that could transmute base matter into gold. The form of the Stone was said to be that of a 'glorified' matter transcending dualities of body – spirit in a manner comparable to the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. It was believed that in the course of this miraculous, quasi-religious process the alchemist would be rewarded by divine grace for his virtue and patience and he would be transformed into a superhuman being.

By the early twentieth century this superhuman image of the Renaissance alchemist and magician had been transferred onto the artist. From the eighteenth century, as Western society became secularized in response to the development of capitalism, religion was displaced from its ideological function at the heart of the socio-political order. The existentialist void resulting from the diminished importance of the Christian world-view was partially alleviated by an evolving concept of the artist as a seer and prophet and of his art product as an almost sacred artefact. This image of the artist-magus was developed in Britain by artists such as William Blake and John Flaxman, who were disciples of the Swedish mystagogue Emmanuel Swedenbourg. In France the same process occurred later in the nineteenth century under the

influence of the magus Eliphas Lévi. His ideas were the foundation of the innovatory aesthetic ideas explored by the art theorist Guillaume Apollinaire and the Orphist artists in Paris.

In short, by the early twentieth century the modernist artist considered himself to be a type of esoteric adept, radiating exceptional moral authority on the basis of his unique creative powers. According to historians such as John Moffitt, there was an intimate connection between the appearance of abstract forms in art in the years around 1875 and the increased public interest in esoteric practices such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, as well as Asian religions, most especially Buddhism.[1] The far-reaching influence of the Theosophical Society (founded 1875) and of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) on the avant-garde artists cannot be exaggerated. Arcane alternative spiritualities were the foundation of their experimentation with subject matter, form and material, as well as of their moral outlook and political allegiance. By means of their abstract paintings, Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1896), Kazimierz Malevich (1879–1935) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) sought to demonstrate the existence of an invisible spiritual order attainable through the mediation of the visionary artist and his talismanic art object.[2]

At the same time, these artists began to explore parallel themes to their esoteric interests in the scientific discoveries and new mathematical systems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia came to regard Einstein's model of space-time, or technological developments such as X-rays, as providing valid proof of the magical systems that engrossed them in their vision of a new art for a new world order.[3] Experimental artists were rejecting the ideological constraints placed on them by the economic and political conditions of the art market and its conventional audience expectations. Of equal concern to them in their subversive activities were the materials of art-making. They turned to non-traditional ephemeral practices such as performance art, the use of found objects and collage, as well as experimenting with the innovative technologies of film and photography.

Unfortunately, the history of the avant-garde's involvement with the esoteric tradition came to be deliberately obscured in the 1950s and 1960s by formalist art historians, critics and collectors, such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried in the United States. In their influential critical texts they placed the emphasis instead on the modernists' experimentation with innovatory forms and materials. The real history of the occultist influences on the avant-garde had to be eventually recovered by means of a ground-breaking exhibition held in 1986 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985*. It was this exhibition that revealed the original sources of modernism in the myriad streams of world spirituality, magic and religion.[4]

Of special importance in the present discussion is the pioneering role of women artists, whose appropriation of alchemy and magic was of an entirely

different order from that of the male modernists. They rejected above all the gender stereotypes of the occult tradition. In their inversion of medieval and Renaissance Hermetic motifs, women artists produced alternative esoteric texts to those of the male artists in which they demanded that notice be taken of women's own aspirations and desires. The most significant names in the present context are those of Leonora Carrington (b. 1917), Remedios Varo (1908–1963) and Rebecca Horn (b. 1944). Women have long had a serious involvement with alchemical work. Between the first and third centuries AD, for example, alchemical treatises were attributed to Maria Prophetissa (the spurious sister of Moses)[5] and Cleopatra (who could have been a real alchemist since there were many rulers of that name in late antiquity).[6]

More specifically, in the following chapters the main argument will examine the manner in which artists have employed the alchemical discourse in the promotion of radical liberal, or even leftist, political convictions. The intention is to demonstrate that the concerns of artists such as Breton, Klein or Beuys have not been 'spiritual' ones, removed from the pressing concerns of society. In fact, the esoteric artists of the past century have never been concerned with the alchemical discourse for its own sake. They were not 'magicians' as such, rather they discovered in alchemy an expedient strategy facilitating their own political programme. Recent research has shown that since the time of the Renaissance a surprising number of intellectuals, writers and artists, scientists and religious figures have employed alchemical iconography in putting forward radical political views. The scholar Donald Dickson, for example, has recovered the history of the integral relation in the seventeenth century between Hermeticism and political resistance to authoritarian rule in Church and state.[7]

According to Joscelyn Godwin (the historian of theosophical currents in Western intellectual history) there has always existed a close link between political liberalism and an interest in magic, alternative religions and mysticism.[8] He argues, moreover, against the serious objection that an interest in magic automatically assumes right-wing political sympathies. Godwin has remarked, rather, on the manner in which radical intellectuals seeking spiritual enlightenment beyond the framework of Christianity were intimately connected with the moral and philosophical 'Enlightenment' of eighteenth-century France.[9] In the development of political and cultural liberalism, the esoteric circles of London were foundational, chiefly those converging on Emmanuel Swedenbourg (1688–1772). Social connections with Paris led to the visits to London in 1787 of famous adepts and liberal thinkers such as Count Alessandro di Cagliostro (1743–1795) and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803). Godwin has recounted the number of ways in which these free-thinking esotericists were associated with the political theorist Thomas Paine and others who had exported American revolutionary ideas to France.[10] Scholars have conclusively established the critical importance of

freemasonry to the political history of the United States and France in the late eighteenth century.[11] In addition, the Continental Masonic degrees were particularly associated with political support for the Jacobite Pretenders to the English throne.[12]

In the opposite corner, the case of the occult involvement of the German Nazi party led by Heinrich Himmler has been definitively explored by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke.[13] His findings will not form part of the present study, which is concerned solely with liberalizing political and cultural tendencies.

One of the attractions of alchemy for many artists and writers in the twentieth century may be that its discourse facilitates the exploration of two themes that are almost taboo in a pessimistic and disbelieving secular society, namely those of Redemption and Utopia. The succeeding chapters of the present study will explore how German artists such as Joseph Beuys (1888–1958), Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), Sigmar Polke (b. 1941) and Rebecca Horn (b. 1944), despite repeated criticism, have continually re-entered the history of Nazism and the Holocaust by means of alchemical themes. For alchemical concepts of transmutation and transcendence offer a possibility that, amidst the traumatic memories, there might be found reasons for hope and for the redemption of evil. These are bitterly contested issues which require deeply sensitive analysis, as will be further discussed.[14]

It should be noted that the theme of Utopia has been a special concern for women artists such as Carrington and Varo who have envisaged a world reconstructed according to women's desire for self-knowledge, fulfilment and political authority.

In its very essence the alchemical discourse is concerned with the redemption of humanity and the material world. This was substantially reinforced during the Renaissance by the adaptation of Christian eschatology to alchemical purposes in anticipation of the coming of the New Jerusalem, of Heaven on Earth.[15] Such apocalyptic expectations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been transmitted to contemporary alchemical art as a subtle, yet powerful, trace.

It has to be admitted, all the same, that recourse to a metaphysical system such as alchemy can act to the detriment of just historical discourse. In alchemical allegory the use of such an indirect manner of verbal and visual signification can become problematic. Allegory serves to universalize historical reality, replacing individual history with myth, so that the pain of lived experience is anaesthetized, turning historical fact into an emotionally distanced spectacle, more palatable for the audience. The use of symbols in place of factual evidence may distance history, removing it to the secondary signification of myth, where it can be rendered harmless. This has been the accusation thrown by critics against Beuys' and Horn's work. It is an issue that has to be renegotiated by each artist within each particular artwork. In fact, artists who employ alchemical or other magical imagery have often been

castigated for their supposed escapism. Both Breton and Klein were also the subject of criticism by the French Communist Party and other radical thinkers due to their esoteric interests.

Some special attention at this point needs to be given to the ideas of critic and artist James Elkins and his interpretation of painting as an alchemical process.[16] Paradoxically, Elkins has also argued that the alchemical tradition has been an unimportant irrelevance to the artistic experimentation of the twentieth century. He asserts, for example, that Joseph Beuys did not use alchemical symbolism extensively and that his concern was not with alchemy, but rather with a conceptual critical practice. In addressing these views, it has to be remarked that Elkins has rather missed the point in his over-literal assessment of the manner in which contemporary artists have referenced alchemical symbols. In fact, whether in the arena of sexual power struggles or in pursuit of radical social change, alchemical symbology has been employed by artists such as Rebecca Horn and Joseph Beuys as an effective political tool. The major problem with Elkins' argument concerning the insignificance of alchemy in avant-garde experimentation arises from his unacceptable definition of 'important' and 'unimportant' art. His position in this regard can be described as retrogressive since he is arguing a defunct idea, namely that there has existed a single line of evolution in art practice which has been developed since the late 1940s largely by modernist artists in New York. Elkin's notion of progress is archaic in the light of over forty years of critical theory which has dismissed such a notion of progressive art as being the product of only two international financial centres, New York and London.

Elkins lists some contemporary artists who employ alchemical symbols, but he considers them to have only a minority appeal. He belittles their achievement, claiming that such artists are insignificant in the progress of experimentation. Among these he refers to Brett Whiteley (1939–1992), one of Australia's most important artists since the 1970s. His work has become a desirable commodity on the international art market, but Whiteley remains unknown to Elkins due to his own focus on the art market of the northern hemisphere. Another important international figure is Krzysztof Gliszczyński (b. 1962), a Polish artist who has engaged in reconciliatory political dialogues with German artists since the 1990s and has worked at a global level in different cultural contexts. These works will be examined in depth later in this study.

The scholar and artist Adam McLean in his indispensable *Alchemy Web Site* has recorded another group of international artists (both professional and enthusiast) who are dedicated to pursuing Hermetic themes. McLean is an international leader in alchemical scholarship, and it was he who pioneered the first digital research website for this subject area. McLean's own interests have included the Rosicrucians of the late Renaissance. The website now contains an extensive collection of the major alchemical treatises and visual imagery, as well as interviews

with experts. The *Alchemy Web Site* reveals the huge expansion of interest in the subject of alchemy over the past ten years, at both a scholarly and a popular level. McLean's 'alchemical' artists as an (unofficial) group are characterized by their production of densely constructed paintings and prints in a traditional format. Their imagery tends to be minutely detailed with jewel-like colours and the expressive use of texture and light. Most of their work is exquisitely illustrative, and they rely on the dream interpretation of Carl Gustav Jung.

These artists have no involvement with political causes, but are investigating the processes of their own individual psyche.[17] Hence, their work will not form part of the current argument concerning the political/occultist nexus in art. The work of these artists would be worth exploring further in a different context, one concerned with alternative spiritual practices and lifestyles.[18]

Returning to Elkins' critique of alchemical art, it has to be said that he seriously misinterprets alchemy in his relegation of the discourse to an introverted self-centred obscurity. Alchemy has never been unknown to the general public since the legend of the alchemist has exerted a constant fascination in popular culture. He was a familiar figure in medieval and Renaissance urban society. Although the essential secrets of the art were not circulated on the streets, nevertheless, references to the basic themes of alchemy were commonplace. From the early sixteenth century artists were mining a profitable subject in their depictions of the alchemist's folly, such as Pieter Brueghel's engraving of the alchemist's laboratory (1558). Alchemists are famously encountered in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1369/72), as well as in Ben Jonson's play *The Alchemist* (1610) and in Christopher Marlowe's drama *Dr Faustus* (1604/16). In the twenty-first century the discourse has become even more pervasive in the popular field. The term 'alchemy' has been appropriated by the mass media and commercial enterprise for the names of design and fashion houses, nightclubs, perfumes, popular music bands, record albums and films.

Elkins, however, has made one significant contention which is genuinely enlightening. He has suggested that alchemy could provide the closest analogy in explaining the specific process of painting in oils.[19] Alchemical hieroglyphics, he proposes, mediate between written and visual signs, and partake of the character of both. The imagery is a subtle form of sign capable of bridging the gap between words and visuals, between written text and pictures. This important issue warrants further investigation.

At this point in the present argument, it is necessary to ascertain the precise manner in which alchemical allegory may be adapted for purposes other than chemistry. The answer may lie in a consideration of alchemical allegory in the light of the dream analysis of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). In his interpretation of dreams Freud argues that the dream is a disguise in which material unacceptable to social norms is expressed and forbidden desires are fulfilled. Past experiences are replayed in the dream in a distorted manner due to the existence of a censorship mechanism that will not permit some

memories, or desires, to be replayed in their original form. These would be the memories that carry traumatic or taboo experiences, which are stored in the unconscious mind. The dream is an important way in which the psyche is able to defuse and render harmless any potentially disruptive content. Freud believed that repressed memories contained a certain charge of energy.[20]

Negative or traumatic memories insist on their recognition by the conscious part of the mind as an indispensable part of the process in which dangerous pent-up tensions are eventually released. The content of the subconscious memories forces itself into the rational mind by means of dreams, or even in slips within spoken language, automatic drawings and body language, especially those of hysterical states. Hidden traumas and desires may also be released creatively, sublimated into the artwork. This process by which forbidden desires are sublimated and released in another form is defined by Freud as a type of wish-fulfilment.

That alchemical imagery was, like the dream-work, an expression of unacceptable sexual desire was an insight discovered by the French Surrealists from their reading of Freud's dream analysis. They believed that extreme sexual desire could become an aggressive political instrument for destroying the bourgeois social and political systems. André Breton (1896–1966) proclaimed in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930) the return of a hyper-excited state of mind that he called the 'furor', which, supposedly, Agrippa, the Renaissance alchemist, had also perceived as existing in four different types. Breton asserted that Surrealism dealt only with this furor in 'the re-creation of a state which can be fairly compared to that of madness'.[21]

From one point of view alchemy could be regarded as the dream-work *par excellence* manifested in art and literature, the end product of the dream-works of countless individuals. By a process of sublimation the discourse of alchemy could be converted to purposes other than those of expressing sexual desire. These purposes could include ones of political and social liberation.

However, there is an important distinction to be made between the unconscious psychic dream-work of the private individual and the deliberated public use of alchemical iconography. This difference involves the issue of intentionality. Whenever writers or artists have referred to irrational alchemical symbols, they have done so in a conscious and rational manner, as will be examined further in the present study.

Artists and writers have used alchemy to discuss issues of national identity, power and violence. Mexican writers, in particular, have engaged alchemy in their analysis of post-colonial Latin America, most notably Gabriel García Márquez (b. 1928) and Paolo Coelho (b. 1947). In a similar post-colonial context, Australian artists have employed alchemical references in dissecting the history of European colonization and the repression of indigenous nations.

In addition, artists in Eastern Europe, such as Jan Švankmajer (b. 1934) and Krzysztof Gliszczyński, have found alchemical symbols to be effective

instruments of political attack on Soviet rule in their countries. Chapter 11 will examine how Gliszczyński has commemorated his own experience of the communist regime under the guise of alchemical allegory. In the communist era an independent moral self was unattainable since that system condoned only the autistic official man. Gliszczyński is deeply immersed in an alchemical engagement with the physicality of his art materials. He conceptualizes his practice as a laboratory work involving exhausting amounts of time, physical toil and undefeated patience. Alchemy, in fact, appeals to those artists who wish to explore matter and material culture in preference to a conceptualist practice with a diminished, or completely absent, art object.

A comparable artist in Britain is David Walker-Barker (b. 1947), who is based in West Yorkshire. He has initiated an account of art as a process of work, locating his own practice within the history of labour in northern England. His special concern has been to record the historic lead-mining landscape of Yorkshire and to re-present it in his artwork. He has created a parallel between the topography of the landscape and his art, between the hands of the miner and the hands of the artist. His studio is organized in the form of both an alchemical laboratory and a geological museum. Similarly, the Scottish artist Glen Onwin (b. 1947) has exhibited both his scientific and his alchemical discoveries in a deep concern for ecological conservation, siting his installations, photography and artists' books in the landscape of Scotland and northern Britain. Onwin is the most alchemical of all artists, and in his installation work he undertakes actual physical chemistry on an ambitious scale.

In proceeding to examine the history of esoteric influences on modernist art, it is important first to distinguish between the alchemical interests of the Surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s and the earlier modernist enthusiasm for Theosophy and Steiner prior to 1914. During the earlier period the alchemical interests of Apollinaire had been far less specific than those of the later Surrealists. At that time, alchemy had not yet become the focus of informed artistic curiosity. In contrast to their avid sympathies for Theosophy, Steiner and/or Spiritualism, visual artists prior to 1914 were less interested in alchemy. The subject entered avant-garde visual art as a substantial hermeneutic only as a result of its promotion by André Breton, André Masson and Max Ernst from the late 1920s.

Yet in the field of literature, alchemical themes had already been adopted by some of the major experimental French writers in the late nineteenth century. Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), Raymond Roussel (1877–1933) and Jean-Pierre Brisset (1837–1923)[22] referenced alchemical allegory, encountering within its terminology a parallel to their own irrational logophilia. The work of these writers had a decisive effect on the subsequent creative practice of both Duchamp and Breton.

Due to his interest in Freudian dream analysis Breton came to appreciate the alchemists' visionary universe. In the 1920s Breton read the alchemical

works of pseudo-Nicolas Flamel which provided him with analogies for his own concept of the creative subconscious in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930). From the late 1940s Breton developed still closer links with Hermetic circles in Paris, mainly through his acquaintance with the alchemist Eugène Canseliet and this association is evident in Breton's text *Arcanum 17* (1947). Unfortunately, there is a lack of detailed scholarly studies concerning the alchemical influences on Ernst and Breton, and the full extent of their engagement with the subject has still not been explored in depth. Neither of the two major authorities, Anna Balakian[23] and Celia Rabinovitch,[24] have undertaken any lengthy analysis of Breton's alchemical interests, although French secondary sources do offer more information concerning this issue.

Other Surrealists were equally as learned and competent as Breton to reference the original Hermetic texts. Georges Bataille (1897–1962), for example, was an exceptional classical scholar, and through his work as a librarian in the Bibliothèque Nationale he was deeply read in the original Renaissance manuscript and printed alchemical sources. The greatest connoisseur of the magical tradition in Surrealist circles was the poet Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). In the texts and drawings accompanying his exhibition *Cinquante Dessins pour assassiner la magie* (1948) he poetically recorded his lived experience of the innate kinship of art and magic.

In the present argument I have restricted myself to the discussion of politically engaged artists who have either been associated with Surrealism, or who are, in a broad sense, its heirs. My first task will be to examine the history of alchemy as it developed from the late Hellenistic period in order to identify those aspects that later contributed to the modernist image of the artist as magus and of his art as an alchemical procedure. The work of recent artists will be contextualized within this historical background.

Notes

1. John F. Moffitt, 'Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-garde', in Maurice Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 257–65.
2. Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Abo, Finland: Acta Academiae Aboensis, 1970).
3. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 'Francis Picabia, Radiometers and X-rays in 1913', *Art Bulletin* (1989), 112–23; Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 'X-rays and the Quest for Invisible Reality in the Art of Kupka, Duchamp and the Cubists', *Art Journal* (1988), 323–40.
4. Maurice Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville, 1986).
5. Raphael Patai, *Jewish Alchemists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 66.
6. Ian Plant, *Women Writers of Greece and Rome: An Anthology* (London: Equinox, 2004), pp. 145–7.
7. Donald R. Dickson, *The Tessera of Antilla: Utopian Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in the Early Seventeenth* Century (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

8. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).
9. Ibid., p. 24.
10. Ibid., p. 103.
11. Kent Logan Walgren, *Freemasonry, Anti-masonry, and Illuminism in the United States, 1734–1850: A Bibliography* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2003).
12. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucian Revival and the German Counter Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
13. Nicolas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology – the Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890–1935* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992).
14. Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; London: Eurospan, 2004).
15. Urszula Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body and the Day of Doom: Alchemy and Apocalyptic Discourse in the Protestant Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
16. James Elkins, 'Four Ways of Measuring the Distance between Alchemy and Contemporary Art', *HYLE –International Journal for the Philosophy of Chemistry*, 9/1 (2003), 105–18.
17. See Adam McClean, *The Alchemy Web Site*, www.levity.com/alchemy. In fairness to their committed practice, these artists should be recorded by name: the American painter Madeline von Foerster; Timothy C. Ely, an art bookbinder who has produced an alchemical book *Materia* (1995); Karena A. Karras, a Chicago-based Surrealist painter; Eleonore Weil, who works in Spain; John Eberly, a writer, painter and musician; Peter Proksch, who has produced a series of works, *Sieben Magische Blaetter*, in a more expressionistic style; Ann McCoy, an American artist; Vasily Kafanov, a Russian artist now resident in New York; Rick Grimes, who is a painter; Paul LeBlanc; Kurt Godwin and his work *Carousel/Alchemy*; Robert Ellaby and his series of paintings *The Cosmic Christ* which take the form of mandalas; Natalia Gerasimenko, a Ukrainian artist, and Miguel Calle, a Peruvian artist from Lima now working in São Paulo who employs pyrography to recreate alchemical emblems.
18. A wide range of both historical and more recent imagery can also be viewed in Matilde Battistini, *Astrology, Magic, and Alchemy in Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2007).
19. James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting using the Language of Alchemy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).
20. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, authorized trans. of 3rd German edn by A.A. Brill (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915), ch. 6, 'The Dreamwork' (available in various editions and online).
21. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 175.
22. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), pp. 17–27, 42–3.
23. Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 34–9, 59–65, 96–9, 104–5, 128–33.
24. Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

1

The alchemical legacy

An important link was forged in the course of the sixteenth century between alchemy and art. Art-making came to be regarded as a supernatural practice in its own right due to the peculiar nature of the artist's creative imagination, which was regarded as being a type of magical implement. This idea was taken from the Renaissance alchemists, influenced by the teachings of Paracelsus, who believed that through the magical qualities of their imagination they could manipulate the universe. The two types of imaginative activity, theurgic and aesthetic, were united in the magical rituals prescribed by the Renaissance philosophers Marsilio Ficino, Cornelius Agrippa and Theophrastus Paracelsus, all of whom were practising alchemists. Later alchemists such as Heinrich Khunrath, Michael Maier and Robert Fludd employed the elaborate illustrations in their books of alchemy as a ritualistic focus for private meditation in order to attain closer union with both God and Nature, thereby also enhancing their magical abilities.

The religious ideas of late Renaissance alchemists were based on the Paracelsian theosophical system, which was a half-pagan, half-Christian belief system, both a mystical path and a theurgic practice. Paracelsus had taught that the human-being, as a mirror of the universal cosmic order, had two bodies, one of which was physical and the other an invisible astral one. The imagination was a faculty of the astral body, whose function was related to intellectual and spiritual cognition.[1] Through the astral body it was possible for humans to comprehend all phenomena, both natural and supernatural. Human intelligence became merged with its object of study. Knowledge was gained through an empathetic union with the world, through gnosis, not by means of rational logic.[2]

The image of the alchemical magus was an important influence on the avant-garde artist of the twentieth century who plotted an ambitious trajectory in promoting his own political role to that of prophet, priest or shaman. He came to regard himself as a superior being, a political leader, spiritually elevated far above the bourgeois patrons of the academic art market. In their abstract

paintings, artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian sought to evoke the presence of an invisible spiritual order.[3] They believed that an artwork, like a sacred icon, opened a door onto the sublime, a superior level of being obscured from ordinary human sense. By the early twentieth century art had been transformed into a secular religion loosed from institutional control, while the artist had re-emerged onto the public stage as a medium with the powers of descent into the subconscious mind and of ascent to transcendental heights.[4]

The presentation of esoteric ideas in a blaze of publicity by the early modernists was a radical break with esoteric tradition. Until the early twentieth century alchemical symbols had appeared infrequently, if ever, in public art, being restricted to privately owned paintings, library copies of manuscripts and printed books. Some paintings by Hieronymus Bosch (*c.* 1450–1516) may exceptionally refer to alchemy, but even these were probably not intended for public display. The open use of alchemical images did not occur during the Renaissance, despite the fact that the existence of alchemy was common knowledge. The reason for this reluctance to visualize alchemical ideas in public is not clear. Surprisingly, in contrast, the painterly genre of the alchemist in his laboratory became very popular in the Netherlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.[5] Even so, in the domain of mainstream religious and political art, no alchemical references can be identified. Hence, although alchemy was a private obsession for a number of important Italian Renaissance painters such as Parmigianino (Francesco Mazzolo, 1503–1540), Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507), Piero di Cosimo (*c.* 1462–1521) and Benevenuto Cellini (1500–1571), these artists did not use alchemical motifs in their major commissions. A few painters working at the Florentine court of Grand Dukes Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–1574) and Francesco I de' Medici (1541–1587) did produce paintings with alchemical themes, but these were solely for the private studio of the Medici dukes.[6] Similarly, at the court of the Emperor Rudolf II (1576–1611) in Prague, his painters, such as the Bolognese Giuseppe Archimboldo (1527–1593) and the Fleming Bartholomeus Spranger (1546–1611), portrayed the emperor in fantastic forms composed of fruit, vegetables and plant matter as a sexually charged Philosopher's Stone, robust and procreative. It has been argued by Sally Metzler that Spranger employed alchemical sexual imagery in other private works for Rudolf.[7] None the less, the state portraits of the emperor are devoid of any alchemical, or magical themes.

The reasons for this silence concerning alchemy in public religious and political works may lie in the ancient origins of alchemy in beliefs and practices that were antagonistic to state authority and religion. Consequently, alchemical metaphors were more appropriate for the personal expression of ideas, rather than for official state rhetoric. Historically, the first alchemical texts are encountered in late Hellenistic Alexandria of the second century AD among religious groups expressing a variety of beliefs originating in the Near East and Asia. These groups, variously pagan and Christian, have

been loosely described by scholars as 'gnostic'. They incorporate all types of religious and mystical sources, as diverse as Buddhism, Christianity, the Hindu Vedas, Greek neoplatonism, neo-Pythagoreanism, Iranian star-magic, the cults of Zoroaster, Mithras and Isis, as well as hoary Babylonian star-cults from the most ancient times. Their bequest to posterity is a collection of 17 anonymous magical and theological texts grouped together by scholars as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The authorship of this corpus was traditionally attributed in late antiquity to a mythical author known by the pseudonym 'Hermes Trismegistus'. The *Corpus Hermeticum* lacks any rigorous theological structure. Instead, the authors emphasize direct individual communion with the divine. They teach that union with God can be achieved by various means such as prayer, chanting, meditation, as well as by magical rituals such as demonic star-magic and alchemy. Nature is stated to be the mirror image of a super-terrestrial divine order.[8]

Among the 17 texts of the *Corpus* is found the text known as the *Emerald Table* (2nd–3rd century AD). Although not overtly alchemical in content, the late Hellenistic and Arab alchemists adapted this short poem to their own purpose:

That which is above is like that which is below.[9]

The subject of the verse is the 'child of the moon' (gold in embryo) who is carried in the womb of the wind up to the heavens and down again to the Earth. The *Emerald Table* was interpreted by the Arabs as a description of the distillation process, during which volatile spirits were separated by heat from their material dregs.[10] Arabic scholars made important contributions to the evolution of Western alchemy and chemistry. They translated the Greek Hermetic texts into Arabic, and in their own experiments they developed the practical apparatus and procedures of chemistry, especially distillation. The first Latin translations of Arabic alchemy appeared in Western Europe in the twelfth century.[11]

Many of the forgotten Greek texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, either in their Arabic translation or in their original language, were rediscovered in the early fifteenth century by the early Italian humanists. In 1463 Cosimo de' Medici (1519–1574), the unofficial ruler of Florence, requested Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) to translate these texts from Greek into Latin. Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was published in 1471, going through 16 editions by the late 1500s. His encounter with these antique mystical and magical ideas led Ficino to devise the notion of a *prisca theologia* (a primeval religion) that had anticipated the revelations of the Christian faith. Ficino promoted the use of astrology, alchemy and magical rituals in a medical and psychological context, though being a Catholic priest, he sought to integrate these practices into his own Christian commitment.

His younger contemporary Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) created a new version of the Jewish kabbalah on the basis of Ficino's Christian

Hermeticism.[12] The Jewish kabbalah had probably originated in North Africa during late antiquity. The term *kabbalah* ('received tradition') is first encountered in thirteenth-century southern France, the full system being developed in Spain.[13] Kabbalistic texts were based on the biblical books of Genesis and Ezekiel, but further ideas may have been co-opted from Christian neo-platonism. The oldest kabbalistic work is the *Book of Formation* or *Book of Creation* (*Sepher Jezirah*) (600 AD), which teaches that the fundamental principles of all things are numbers, letters and sounds.[14] Although God is transcendent, he appears in his immanent form as the *sephirah* (spiritual station) Ayin. This emanates another aspect of himself as Ayin Sof (Eternal), who is the Creator-God. He withdraws a part of his being in a contraction termed *zimzum*, which permits a void to appear. God's divine will emanates in the form of ten *sephiroth* composing the 'Tree of Life'. Grace is its central axis, Mercy its right-hand pillar and Severity its left.[15]

Under the influence of Pico della Mirandola, the German physician and magus Cornelius Agrippa von Hohenheim (1486–1535) in his *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533) provided the major historical source for information concerning kabbalistic magic.[16] This treatise has been the supreme authority concerning the Western esoteric tradition for nearly five hundred years. Drawing on Agrippa's kabbalistic texts, the most important alchemist of the Western tradition Theophrastus Paracelsus von Hohenheim (1493–1541) popularized further the use of kabbalism and astral magic in medicine and surgery. In fact, he transformed alchemy into a primarily medical practice.[17] Paracelsus claimed that the 'virtues' of the stars could be captured in a medicine called the *arcanum*.[18] He also stressed the importance of inorganic substances, stressing the importance of the metals mercury, antimony and iron salts, and advocating, in addition, the medical use of poisons such as arsenic.[19] Each substance was composed of three principles – mercury, sulphur and salt.

Paracelsus insisted that each object in the material world had its equivalent form in a particular ethereal star. The microcosmic lower world of man and nature was a mirror in correspondence with the macrocosmic universe. The theory of correspondences subsequently re-emerged in the mystical theology of Emmanuel Swedenbourg, influencing in turn William Blake, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1876) and eventually Guillaume Apollinaire (Wilhelm Albert Włodzimierz Apolinary Kostrowicki, 1880–1918).

Due to the influence of Agrippa and Paracelsus, a Christianized form of kabbalah was introduced into alchemy by Heinrich Khunrath in the 1590s and amplified by Robert Fludd in the early 1600s. From the sixteenth century, knowledge of the Hebrew language and of kabbalism became the major tools in the magician's apparatus.[20] His magical power depended on his successful ability to manipulate the original names of things as they were first spoken in the Hebrew language by God himself.

According to Michel Foucault, in the sixteenth century no distinction was made between the empirical observations of the natural philosophers and the abstract speculations of the theologians or occultists. Both types of knowledge depended on the ability of scholars to read the inscriptions pre-existent in the physical world. Foucault argued that the taxonomy (classification system) of Renaissance signs arose from their organization into a conceptual structure consisting of three qualities, namely the marks of the sign, the things designated by those marks, and the similitude (*aemulatio*) between them. Similitude was judged according to adjacency (*convenientia*), analogy (*aemulatio*) and sympathy (*concordia*).[21] By the eighteenth century the quality of similitude had been abandoned as an aspect of language. The signing systems of modernity did not tolerate the existence of any magical similarities between sign and signification. Accordingly, from this time onwards, magic went underground as a counter-cultural world-view. Down to the miasmic flux of the subconscious drifted all that had been abandoned by the hegemonic order, including those socio-political aspirations and personal desires that were too radical for the mainstream culture to tolerate for another couple of hundred years.

However, any successful conceptual structure is able to tolerate socio-political threats to its existence, and can adapt and mutate its forms in order to survive. Renaissance alchemists such as Heinrich Khunrath, for example, sought to escape persecution by accommodating the conflicting beliefs of his two religious opponents, the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics, themselves bitterly opposed.[22] The development of alchemical allegory has been in response to such specific historical situations, as the studies of Barbara Obrist[23] and Pamela Smith[24] have demonstrated. Despite the political pressures, the alchemical discourse has maintained its organic integrity and coherence throughout the historical changes in its symbolic forms and meanings. The mythographer Mircéa Eliade has coined a term, 'multivalence', to describe such a successful symbolical system which can express, simultaneously, a number of different, seemingly unrelated, meanings. Eliade claims that this type of system produces symbols that manage to integrate heterogeneous realities into a whole.[25] Eliade has argued that all successful spiritual systems (whether officially validated or having an outsider status) tend to absorb into themselves 'all manifestations of the holy, to incorporate all the immense morphology of the sacred'.[26] He suggests that it is possible, in fact, to speak of a 'logic of symbols'. Symbolism thus functions as a language that is understood only by members of the same community.[27] This is an appropriate description of alchemical discourse, which is an archaeological site containing remnants of all historical Western religions and cultures, as well as their Middle Eastern, or Asian, prototypes.

In a different context, the historian of religion Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega has argued that some types of sacred symbol have the qualities of

impacted signifiers, whereby each symbol is capable of containing, 'through 'compression' or 'condensation', the entirety of a community's religious beliefs, so that 'each symbol contains all the others in that discourse'.[28] Rephrasing this argument in another way, alchemical signs could be considered as mythic secondary-level signifiers in which the sign enunciates not only its immediate signification, but also the history of its previous use. Roland Barthes has described the manner in which the signified element of a sign becomes, in its turn, a sequence of proliferating signifiers with an ever-amplified meaning.[29]

The impossibility of reducing alchemical visual imagery to a single signification, the insistence of the pictures on speaking in a multitude of voices, the fragmented and paradoxical alchemical texts have all provided artists with a fabric rich in semiotic potential. Alchemical symbolism operates in a twofold manner so that the system signifies both in a syntagmatic mode, as in a conventional linear argument, and in a paradigmatic manner, one in which the symbols project simultaneously any number of different meanings. The historian of alchemy Francis Sherwood-Taylor has remarked on the frustrated effort to decipher and decode alchemical texts which are in a totally chaotic state: 'No literature is so maddeningly and deliberately obscure.'[30] The authors of the alchemical treatises write that they have deliberately confused the meaning of their texts and pictures so that they will not fall into the hands of the uninitiated.

Alchemy, it seems, has always been a type of 'gnosis', an anti-rational, intuitive philosophy, as well as an oral system of knowledge. The epistemic changes in alchemical theory cannot be recovered in their entirety by contemporary historians, even from the considerable amount of evidence available to them. This fact explains the awkward problems in maintaining objectivity when interpreting alchemical texts and visual imagery. Even the most empirical historian is left guessing many of the meanings in the dense allegories. Sherwood-Taylor has concluded that only a very small minority of alchemical recipes could ever be interpreted in a scientific manner that would permit their repetition. He concludes that the alchemists were certainly performing real experiments, but they did not reveal the nature of their chemicals and they describe physical results that are simply not possible. For all that, he concedes, 'their works indicate that they were men of intelligence and seekers after truth'.[31]

The confusion and the guesswork can result in perfectly rational scholars becoming unwillingly absorbed into their object of study. The absence of rational equivalents for most of the alchemical symbols has led some scholars to produce a parallel alchemical treatise to the original text, rather than an objective commentary on it. This is especially true in Jung's development of a new school of alchemy which is as much a continuation of the alchemical tradition as a critique of it.[32] It is equally true of contemporary artists using the traditional imagery. They simply produce more alchemy.

Perhaps some lost oral alchemical tradition (if one such ever existed) may have provided an authentic key to the meanings of the symbols. Lacking any such key, the contemporary scholar can only approach alchemical signifiers with circumspection. Indeed, there have appeared controversial twentieth-century figures who have claimed to be the heirs of the ancient adepts. They have included 'Fulcanelli' (no [rational] dates), Jean-Julien Hubert Champagne (1877–1932), Eugène Léon Canseliet and Frater Albertus (Albert Richard Riedel) (1911–1984). How should their claims be assessed? Genuine adepts might possibly reveal the rational element of physical chemistry in the visual and verbal allegories. However, Sherwood-Taylor has concluded that the alchemists did not have a solely material purpose, since they also developed a theory of natural philosophy, a world-view which eventually came to be displaced by modern science.[33]

Of course, there do exist a few alchemical texts which describe clear chemistry, among these ones by Geber (Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan) (*c.* 721–815), by John of Rupescissa (Roquetaillade) (d. 1362) concerning his alcoholic medicine, or by Arnald of Villanova (*c.* 1238–*c.* 1310) on the distillation of blood.[34] Paracelsus (1493–1541) had also described a practical inorganic chemistry which could be used to create pharmaceuticals. Nor should it be forgotten that Michael Sendivogius (1566–1636) described the manufacturing of nitric salts, used for explosives and fertilizer, and possibly, he also discovered oxygen.[35] Regardless of this evidence, historians of chemistry such as James Partington have argued that modern chemistry and medicine owe little in their development to the alchemists, but that they are the product of the practical work undertaken by miners, metallurgists, distillers, cloth-dyers, pharmacists and barber-surgeons.[36] Contradicting Partington's argument, Daniel Merkur has argued for the large amount of practical chemistry in alchemical texts, and he has proceeded to criticize Jung for failing to recognize this.[37] In similar vein, William Newman in his studies of the early modernist chemist Robert Boyle (1627–1691) has argued that alchemy was the precursor of chemistry and that its texts do, indeed, contain rational science.[38]

These arguments have to be qualified due to one important fact. It should be noted that Newman, like another alchemical historian, Lawrence Principe,[39] has examined primarily alchemical texts, rather than the visual imagery. On the other hand, Jung has given equal weight to both texts and pictures. In comparison with the textual evidence, a quite different view of alchemy emerges from a study of the pictures, since they cannot easily be reduced to rational chemistry. Instead, they evidence a concern with political and cultural issues. For example, the richly illustrated treatise of Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605) is a polemic in favour of religious dissidence from the established state Church.[40] Earlier illustrated alchemical works, such as *The Book of the Holy Trinity* (early fifteenth century) were intended to advance the cause of the Holy Roman Emperor in his battle against the papacy.[41]

During the early sixteenth century, in German cities associated with the Protestant Reformation, there developed a large market for literature on alchemy, astrology, kabbalism, mystical geometry and mathematics. Printing had become a lucrative industry in Strasbourg, Frankfurt, Augsburg and Oppenheim, where astrological and alchemical works were supplied for general sale in surprisingly large print runs.[42] From 1595, alchemical illustrators such as Mathieu Merian, on the pay roll of printing firms such as Luca Jennis and the De Bry family, invented a rich repertoire of alchemical and other magical engravings.[43] The first of these luxurious editions was Khunrath's alchemical *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* ('Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom') (Hamburg, 1595).[44] The interest in such esoterica was increased a hundredfold after the publication in Kassel of two anonymous 'Rosicrucian' Manifestoes called the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1615) and the *Confessio* (1616).[45] They announced the existence of a secret society created by one Christian Rosencreutz. The existence of such a society has never been proven. In fact, the Manifestoes were written by a secret group of Lutheran Hermeticists intent on defending their beliefs against the forces of the Catholic Counter-Reformation led by the Jesuit Order. The earliest alchemists to write in support of the Rosicrucians were the German nobleman Michael Maier (1568–1622) and his English contemporary Robert Fludd (1574–1637). Maier published a legendary collection of alchemical emblems known as *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheim: de Bry, 1617; 1618),[46] while Fludd authored a massive alchemical encyclopaedia, the *Utriusque Cosmi … Historia* (1617–26).[47] Fludd's illustrations are unsurpassed in their visionary invention.[48]

André Séguenny, a historian of religion, has demonstrated how dissenters from the established Churches were to become important precursors of a secular democratic society.[49] In the midst of the political turmoil of the Reformation there could be found many educated laymen (among them alchemists) who were demanding toleration of different beliefs and an end to the religious wars. They launched spirited public attacks on entrenched religious prejudice.[50] For example, George Fox (1624–1691), the founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), was a keen follower of the mystic alchemy of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a dissenting Christian theosophist working in Lusatia (south-eastern Germany).[51] At the cost of severe persecution and martyrdom, the Quakers have been in the vanguard in their promotion of a liberal society with equal rights for all citizens. Abraham von Frankenberg, a Lutheran alchemist in Silesia and a disciple of Boehme, had also rejected doctrinal controversy in his public attacks on the Lutheran faction for their bigotry:

> You say you have called People to Liberty, but to this very day you are speaking against Liberty … you have stirred so many Zealots, and now have made them worse than yourselves and fitter for the Damnation of Hell ….

That is not the one thing needful to know how to resist an Adversary whose Principles perhaps, if rightly understood, may be better than yours ….[52]

It can be argued that the followers of Renaissance esoteric traditions were in the forefront of the development of democratic political systems that would eventually enshrine religious toleration at the heart of a humane social order. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in the Protestant countries, religious beliefs gradually became a matter of personal concern for individual citizens, instead of being prescribed by the state. In this process, the writings and visual imagery created by the alchemists were an important element in the promotion of a private spirituality outside the control of the institutionalized Churches.

From this consideration, the heterodox alchemical discourse could also be usefully defined as a pre-eminent example of a *heterotopia*. Michel Foucault has proposed that there exist real places in every culture which are counter-sites, a kind of utopian space in which all the real sites found within the culture are represented, critiqued and inverted.[53] He cites obvious ones such as theatres, funfairs, carnivals and cemeteries. Art practice is another such space. The heterotopia brings into a single space several others that are otherwise incompatible, as in the case of theatre, which unites disparate times and spaces on a single stage. Certainly, on the stage of the lurid and louche theatre of alchemy the action is fantastic and sexually explicit, violating immutable cultural taboos. Alchemical texts and pictures describe scenes of patricide, infanticide, cannibalism, mutilation, castration, incest and homosexuality. Mothers re-ingest their sons into their wombs. Fathers devour their offspring.

In turn, sons kill their fathers. A stage of the male infant's development is explored by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, namely his wish for the death of his father.[54] In the primeval father–son struggle, the father represents the symbolic order. The desire for the father's death is encountered in the alchemical treatise of Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, *Pretiosa Margarita Novella* (1546). Here, there are illustrated six princes (the imperfect metals) praying to their father-king for their inheritance. On being refused, an unidentified male warrior appears and kills the father. Both warrior and dead father are laid in the tomb (alchemical vessel, or furnace) by yet another figure which represents the alchemist. In the alchemical vessel-tomb the corpses of the son and the father putrefy together. The alchemist removes the bones from the tomb and reconstitutes the skeletons. They both receive a new soul from Heaven, and the resurrected king and his six crowned sons are depicted quite alive and thriving in the last illustration.[55]

Another variant of this theme of the murder of the father is encountered in the early seventeenth century in an illustrated book written by the German nobleman Lambsprinck. He tells the story of a father-king who devours his

son, as in the myth of Saturn. The devouring of the son is equivalent to the alchemical stage of sexual union of male and female principles in other works. The father subsequently develops an illness, during which he prays that his son may be led out of his body. In answer to his prayer, God sends down rain which fertilizes the father's body in an astonishing display of 'womb-envy' (the masculine gender of both father and son is unstable). According to the text, the father is now transformed into liquid and a new father and new son are duly created out of this embryonic fluid.[56]

Within this particular alchemical imagery there exists a proto-homosexual discourse in which the son is feminized and plays the role usually reserved for the feminine principle. The son becomes the bride of the father, undergoing the *coniunctio* with him through the process of the father's death. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity was the prototype for this alchemical myth.[57]

In the seventh century AD the alchemist Zosimos provided the most savage account of the brutal treatment of mercury, the 'Son of the Philosophers' who was the prime matter of alchemy. Mircéa Eliade derived the origins of this alchemical allegory from the fertility practices of ancient metal-smiths, as well as from shamanistic, drug-induced dreams.[58] Zosimos in his treatise *Of Virtue* relates a narrative in which a sacrificing priest, Ion, claims to have suffered 'intolerable violence'. In his story an unidentified assailant attacks Ion in the morning, dismembering him with a sword and tearing his body apart 'according to the rigour of harmony'. The head of Ion is flayed with his enemy's sword. Then his bones and his flesh are mingled together and burned in the fire, 'until I learned by the transformation of the body to become a spirit'.[59] Sherwood-Taylor phlegmatically interprets this sadistic drama as an allegory of the chemical reaction produced when metals are placed in a chemical reagent and their subsequent return to their original metallic condition. He compares Zosimos to an artist who experiences the pathetic fallacy on viewing a landscape which appears to be expressing his own emotional state. In like manner, Zosimos sees 'the rigour of death and pains of purgation in the turbid seethings of the alchemical vessel'.[60]

Elsewhere in the alchemical theatre, brother and sister couples mate and murder one other. They are buried in one grave, blacken and are reborn as a hermaphroditic unity:

> If you Marry the White Woman to the Red Man, they will be Conjoyned and Imbrace one another, and become impregnated. By themselves they bring forth what they have conceived, whereby the two are made but one Body …. The Philosopher's Stone is converted from a vile thing, into a precious Substance: for the Semen Solare, is cast into the Matrix of Mercury, by Copulation or Conjunction, whereby in the Process of time they be made one.[61]

Sun and Moon are the male and female sexual principles, the parents of the Philosopher's Stone. They can also represent the chemical materials, so that

the Sun may be sulphur and the Moon may be mercury, or silver, or Earth. Moreover, these chemical terms 'sulphur' and 'mercury' refer to still more mysterious occult substances, or spiritual principles, whose real identity is known only (perhaps) to the adept. The 'Mercurius Philosophorum' is an entire discourse in its own right, being both male and female, both original prime matter as well as the final Philosopher's Stone, both earthly and heavenly. The image is an example of the manner in which the dream-work has produced a coherent form out of conflicting elements.

The killing of the Prime Matter (father, Saturn or lead), the union of the mother and son (or brother and sister) are the major scenarios illustrated in treatises such as the fifteenth-century *Aurora Consurgens* ('Dawn Rising') or the *Rosarium Philosophorum* ('Rose Garden of the Philosophers'). The contemporary alchemist Bernard Trevisan (1406–1490) explained that:

> This stone then is compounded of a Body and Spirit, or of a volatile and fixed Substance … nothing in the World can be generated and brought to light without these two Substances, to wit, a Male and Female … although they appear and are said to be two Substances, yet in truth it is but one … *Argent vive* [mercury] … of this *Argent vive* a certain part is fixed and digested, Masculine …. But the other which is the Female, is Volatile, crude, cold and moyst ….[62]

The first step in alchemy involved purifying prime matter, which was identified with the most abject materials as the *materia vilis*. Alchemists experimented with faeces, urine, menstrual blood and other organic detritus containing pungent and explosive chemicals such as sulphur, phosphoric salts and nitrates, the products of decay. Matter was purified through the fiery process of calcination (burning to a white powder), and by means of liquid distillation its spirits were released. Purified matter and spirits were reunited in the form of a white crystalline liquid known as the *quintessence*. This was further processed until the Philosopher's Stone was produced, consisting of a spiritualized matter.[63] In the fourteenth century the alchemical process was further amplified by the Continental physicians Arnald of Villanova (1235–1311)[64] and John of Rupescissa (?–1362),[65] who introduced the idea of a water of life, *aqua vitae*. It was regarded as a universal panacea, the 'fifth essence' or 'quintessence'. The concept of the elixir of life had originated in Chinese alchemy,[66] which was in turn historically related to Indian Tantrism.[67]

From the 1370s the alchemists began to introduce Christian theology into their symbolism. Jesus Christ was equated with the Philosopher's Stone as the Christ-Redeemer of the microcosmic mineral world. Just as Christ had died in torment on the cross, so was base matter tormented in the laboratory flask. As the resurrected Christ had arisen in a glorious body, so the Philosopher's Stone transmuted dead base-matter into living spiritual gold.[68] Most important, the alchemical process was believed to be the equivalent of the Roman Catholic mass, in which bread and wine were

transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ. The alchemist believed that he was a priest and his laboratory-bench an altar on which he performed a miraculous sacrifice and resurrection. The alchemists appropriated imagery of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as symbols of the alchemical process. In the early fifteenth-century *Book of the Holy Trinity* the Moon principle was represented by an image of the Virgin Mary and the Sun-sulphur principle by the crucified Christ, as if they were engaged in an incestuous union. The political texts in this work swim in a sea of sexual confusion, as in the Freudian dream-work. The images are so violent and confrontational that knowledge of the original political text of the treatise was forgotten until its rediscovery by contemporary scholar Barbara Obrist.[69]

In the transmission of these ideas to twentieth-century art practice and literature it has been the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) who has been the major authority. Jung regarded alchemy as the historical ancestor of his psycho-therapeutic system. He believed that alchemical allegory was the symbolic product of the 'Collective Unconscious' of the human race.[70] In *Psychology and Alchemy* (1953) Jung examined the psychic significance of the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum* ('conjunction of opposites') in the 'divine marriage' of two principles, male and female, who engendered the Philosopher's Stone.[71] He considered the Stone to be the central psychic paradigm symbolizing the union of individual rational consciousness with the Collective Unconscious. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1936) alchemical imagery is said to consist of 'archetypes', primal mythic figures which recur throughout world culture.[72] The archetypes symbolically re-enact the drama of the process of individuation, the realization of integrated self-hood. They include alchemical icons such as the androgyne (mercury), Jesus Christ in the form of the Philosopher's Stone, the king and queen (gold and silver principles) and the old man (Saturn, prime matter) among others.

Jung argued that the concept of the Philosopher's Stone and the alchemical process necessary to achieve it were no more than an illusion, a projection of the unconscious mind onto matter causing visionary experiences that were not really occurring. Specifically, the alchemists were projecting the process of individuation into the chemical materials. The numinous character of the psychological process and its material projections encouraged the formation of the symbolic imagery.[73]

Unfortunately, the work of Jung has been unjustly rejected by psychologists and historians, who view his interpretation of ancient myths as unverifiable and purely subjective. It is time to reclaim Jung for serious scholarship and rescue him from the proprietorship of the Glastonbury counter-culture. He is overdue for an acknowledgement of his pioneering recovery of original alchemical sources, as well as for his promotion of esoteric systems as a subject worthy of academic study. His knowledge of the history of occultism remains

unparalleled. Of considerable importance, moreover, has been the work of Jung's female followers in their studies of World religion and spirituality. His wife, Emma Jung (1882–1955), examined the legend of the Holy Grail and the construction of the specifically female psyche.[74] Her analysis was at the forefront of feminist psychology. Jung's prime disciple, Marie-Louise von Franz (1915–1998), made Jungian theory accessible to a wider public through her studies of the symbolic languages of world myth.

A dominating factor in the development of Jung's psychological system was his concern for the survival of the human race after the carnage of two world wars and the advent of nuclear power. The refusal of the rational ego to acknowledge the forces of the Unconscious, Jung observed, had the negative effect of causing the contents of the lower levels of the mind to mutate into forms of evil. These had manifested in Nazism, and in the form of nuclear weaponry were threatening all existence on Earth. Yet, within the unconscious mind there also pre-existed 'archetypes of order' which could organize and defuse atavistic violent impulses. For this to happen, the Unconscious had to be allowed free play and self-regulation without interference.[75]

The unconscious mind was constantly projecting feminized symbols of itself, as in the alchemical imagery of the Moon, mercury, Prime Matter, Earth and, in Catholic religion, the form of the Virgin Mary, as well as earlier female pagan deities. Jung perceived these images to be evidence of the desperate attempts of the unconscious mind to draw attention to itself. Its opposite, the conscious rational ego, was a masculine space symbolized by the forms of the Sun, soul, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Trinity. If the Unconscious was rejected by the ego, its projected self-images would transmute into their negative polarity as Satan and proceed to wreak destruction in the collective psyche.

Earlier than Jung, there were other crucial figures who inspired artists to take recourse to esoteric ideas and practices. The foremost among these was Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), who had an extraordinary influence on early twentieth-century artists (such as Mondrian and Kupka) in their interest in ancient Egyptian religion and magic, and subsequently in Hindu and Buddhist spirituality. Blavatsky had vehemently rejected the Western Christian and Judaic inheritance, and in 1875 she had founded the Theosophical Society in Brooklyn, in association with Colonel H.S. Oscott (1832–1907) and William Quan Judge (1851–1896).[76] Central ideas in her teachings included the existence of occult human powers, the need to submit to a guru who was guided by hidden Himalayan masters, and the idea of the evolution of the human species on the lost continents of Lemuria, Mu and Atlantis. The Theosophical Society has supported (and continues to support) the positive acceptance of religious difference and experimentation with esoteric ideas drawn from all world cultures.

Of substantial importance have also been the Armenian esoteric teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949) and the Russian magus and scholar

Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878–1947). Gurdjieff produced an influential method of spiritual and physical training involving innovative forms of theatre and dance. His course of training was exceedingly tough and demanding, but it influenced major figures such as the poet T.S. Eliot. Ouspensky had more effect through his scholarly written works.

Such novel mystical concepts and lifestyles spread like fire throughout Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with major centres of influence in St Petersburg, Moscow, Paris, Munich and New York. Theosophical and Buddhist influences are perceived, for example, in the paintings of Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), Odilon Redon (1840–1916) in the 1890s, Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) and Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947).[77] This torrent of occultism and alternative spirituality became intertwined with the artistic experimentation of Malevich, Arp, Kandinsky and Mondrian.[78]

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) joined the Amsterdam Theosophical Society in 1909. In connection with such ideas, he evolved a rigorous abstract style based on the discipline of geometric forms that he regarded as sacred signs.[79] Other artists such as Jean Arp (1886–1966) and Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) regarded their artistic ability to turn shoddy material into an aesthetic object as a form of magic. During the First World War the Dada group in Zurich – Hugo Ball (1886–1927), Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) and Richard Huelsenbeck (1892–1974) – were experimenting with the supposed existence of a superior metaphysical order which they sought to manifest through their experimental practice. The existence of this unknown dimension was evidenced through games of chance, for example, and it had been alluded to by the Chinese philosophers Lao-Tsu and Chuang-Tsu, as well as the Japanese Zen masters. Arp and Ball also read the alchemical and theological writings of Paracelsus.[80]

It was the master-mystic Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), in collaboration with the former socialist leader Annie Besant (1847–1933), who was the first to apply Theosophical ideas to art in a powerful book, *Thought-Forms* (1905).[81] Leadbeater additionally published *The Astral Plane: Its Scenery, Inhabitants and Phenomena* (1895) and *Man Visible and Invisible* (1903). These particular books supplied artists with the spiritual rationale in their innovatory work with abstract and semi-abstract form, colour and geometry. Leadbeater and Besant attributed a spiritual or emotional meaning to different abstract shapes and colours. They argued that the function of art was to promote the spiritual evolution of both artist and audience.

Another critical intellectual determinant on the thinking of the early avant-garde was the writing of the philosopher and visionary Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). He rejected the orientalizing ideas of the earlier Theosophists in favour of his own mystical, neo-Christian, system called Anthroposophy. Steiner developed the colour theory of the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) in which the colours of the spectrum harboured a mystical significance.[82] Steiner was instrumental in transmitting Goethe's ideas to the

colourists Frantisek Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky, Robert Delaunay and Sonja Delaunay.

In the years between 1907 and 1915 there appeared the first fully abstract paintings produced by Kandinsky and Kupka. Kandinsky had read the works of Blavatsky and Steiner, as well as Besant and Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms* and, in addition, Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible*. There is evidence of his careful study of Steiner's *Luzifer-Gnosis* (1904–1908), which provided the basic ideas for the writing of his own text, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912). From his Theosophical sources Kandinsky gained the idea that the soul creates human emotion by means of its vibrations, and that these are the sources of artistic inspiration. In these same years Kazimierz Malevich (1879–1935) also produced his spiritual Suprematist paintings *Black Square* (1914–15) and *White on White* (1918) and published his manifesto, *The Non-objective World* (1926).

On the foundation of the mystical ideas drawn from East and West, the French poet and critic Apollinaire emerged as the mentor in Paris of the spiritual movement in art known as 'Orphism' which included the artists Frantisek Kupka (1871–1957) and Robert (1885–1941) and Sonja Delaunay (1885–1979). Apollinaire publicized his views widely concerning the character of the artist as a visionary and of his artwork as an epiphany. From the work of the magician Eliphas Lévi in his *Dogme et Ritual de la Haute Magie* (1856) Apollinaire had gained his self-image of the initiated artist. In *The New Spirit and the Poets* (1913) he described the creative process of art in terms of alchemical transmutation.[83] Writing for the journal *Les Arts à Paris*, he signed his articles as 'Paracelsus', and even produced a review of a new edition of the alchemical picture-book known as the *Mutus Liber* (1677) which had been reissued in the esoteric circles of the French adept Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916). Apollinaire regarded art as comparable to the *grande oeuvre* of alchemy. Yet, in spite of this flurry of mystification, he cannot be regarded as an adept, since he did not expend much energy on the study of alchemy in any great detail. In fact, he confused the practice with other esoteric philosophies and magical systems.

Between 1905 and 1910 there emerged yet other French artists who were attracted to the esoteric tradition and who mined its historical resources with spiritual (if not material) profit. Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973), for example, based his exploration of the esoteric properties of images on his readings into magic and alchemy. In addition, to a greater or lesser extent, Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), Georges Rouault (1871–1958), Georges Braque (1882–1963), Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Juan Gris (1887–1927) were similarly exposed to magical ideas.[84] Francis Picabia (1879–1953) became particularly engrossed in investigating the occult connotations of the alchemical androgyne, as well as the mystical forms of the geometrical spiral. He also read in depth into astrology, kabbalism and alchemy. His paintings depict machines which act as metaphors of the alchemical sexual act

(*L'enfant cabureuteur*, 1919; *La machine tourne vite*, 1916–18). In a similar manner to Duchamp, Picabia interpreted the new scientific, technological and mathematical discoveries in the light of the ancient occultisms.[85] The contemporary Australian artist and scholar Tom Gibbons has offered a valuable insight into the response of various Cubist artists to the science of the fourth dimension, space-time, and seeming parallels in esoteric thought.[86]

However, it was only during the 1920s that alchemy became a significant force affecting innovative art practice, due to the enthusiasm of the French Surrealists. It is this history which will be considered next in the present study. André Breton (1896–1966), André Masson (1896–1987) and Max Ernst (1891–1976) were the first leaders of the movement, and they promoted a view of art as a Freudian dream-work. Breton perceived the symbols of alchemy as being innate to the structure of the dream.[87] In the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) he defined Surrealism as based on the belief in the 'superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations' and 'the omnipotence of dream'.[88] Breton proposed this intuitive sensibility as a solution for the problems encountered in life.

Alchemy was to become an important tool for the Surrealists in their revolutionary intention to transmute the world into spiritual gold, and at the same time they were attempting some sort of concord with the Marxist ideas of the French Communist Party.

Notes

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2

The French Surrealists and alchemy

Surrealism had its origins in the anti-war theatre, music and art of Dada in Zurich. From February 1916 Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) and his fellow Rumanian Marcel Janco (1895–1984) produced the Cabaret Voltaire in collaboration with Hugo Ball and Jean Arp. Subsequently, in post-war Germany Arp and his wife Sophie Taeuber-Arp worked with Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters in continuing Dadaist activities with an even more bitter political tone, critical of militarism and bourgeois hypocrisy. In 1925 Jean Arp moved to Paris, and in 1919–24 he and Tzara joined forces with Breton.

In its origins, Surrealism was essentially a literary movement, the equivalent visual practices being developed more slowly, primarily by André Masson and Max Ernst. From 1919 to 1924 Breton edited the journal *Littérature* in collaboration with Louis Aragon (1897–1982) and Philippe Soupault (1897–1990). Breton went on to produce another journal, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, between 1925 and 1929, also publishing his novels *Nadja* (1928) and *L'amour fou* (1938).

André Masson (1896–1987) joined the Surrealist circles around 1924. He pioneered automatic drawing and sand painting in 1926–27. After an argument, he abandoned Breton for the oppositional camp of Georges Bataille (1897–1962), Michel Leiris (1901–1990) and Georges Limbour (1900–1970), who were publishing a rival journal, *Documents* (1929–32). Masson eventually rejoined Breton in 1937–41. The poet Michel Leiris had a particular interest in alchemy and its visual imagery, and he produced various papers for the journal. The texts published in *Documents* took the form of anthropological studies. Other artists significant for the development of Surrealist experimentation in the 1920s included Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitsky, 1890–1976), who had worked with Picabia and Duchamp from 1921. There were also an important number of women artists associated with the Surrealist group who had esoteric interests, such as Leonora Fini and Leonora Carrington.

The Surrealist movement was a response to the catastrophic condition of post-war Europe, in particular to the social and cultural predations of

capitalism and the seemingly positive example offered by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. These provided the political background to Surrealist experimentations with psychological theory, as well as to their revolutionary social and political activism. Rejecting the limitations of the rational mind, they sought to create poetry and visual artforms produced freely by the subconscious. Breton himself had undergone a professional training in psychiatry, and like his friend the poet Louis Aragon, he was the son of a freemason. Their associates, the poets Paul Eluard (1895–1952) and Philippe Soupault, similarly announced their allegiance to the ideas of Freud, at first apparently compatible with those of Karl Marx.

Breton argued that if there was to be a genuine intellectual and psychological revolution, then it had to be an integral part of a political and social one.[1] In 1929 the Surrealist journal was renamed *Le Surréalisme à la service de la révolution*. In actuality, Breton never permitted his artistic and literary movement to be entirely consumed by his communistic allegiances. The Parisian communists distrusted Breton, and doubts were cast on his sincerity and class loyalties. In the eighth issue of *La révolution surréaliste* Breton attacked the Communist Party for its disregard of cultural revolution as an integral necessity. In the 1920s he altered the emphasis of the Surrealist programme from that of political engagement to one of experimentation with psychic states. He hailed the recourse to extreme forms of emotional experience and excessive modes of expression, locating analogies in the esoteric teachings of Cornelius Agrippa in his *Occult Philosophy* (1533).

In contrast, Louis Aragon rejected Surrealism in favour of full-time service to the Communist Party. In 1933 Breton, Eluard and Crével were expelled from the party due to its increasingly Stalinist character. Breton and other Surrealists, however, participated in a Communist Party symposium in 1935, the *Congrès internationale pour la défense de la culture*. Breton defended the need to experiment with cultural forms of expression, such as art and literature, in revolutionary activism. In response, the communist critic Ilya Ehrenbourg severely attacked the Surrealists.

This was largely justified since Breton's sources for his Surrealist experimentation had nothing to do with the Marxist dialectic of the forces of history. His ideas derived rather from the artists and writers of the Decadent period in late nineteenth-century Paris, a bourgeois connection utterly laughable in the minds of regular party members. It was the Decadents who had pioneered the use of occultist imagery in the context of avant-garde experimentation. The innovatory experimentation with symbol and poetic form of Charles Baudelaire (1821–1897) had been influenced by Swedenbourg's visionary accounts of visits to the other worlds of Heaven and Hell, and these ideas are reflected in Baudelaire's poems, such as *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). Breton's interest in manipulating literary semantics in the production of uncanny and disturbing narratives was also an inheritance from

Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891). Rimbaud's linguistic experiments in *Une Saison en Enfer* ('A Season in Hell') (1873) had a decisive effect on Breton. Another crucially important source for Breton was the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, in particular *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1865) and *Hérodiade* (1896).

In the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930) Breton compared the literary 'Word' to the magical words of the kabbalists as that 'in the image of which the human soul is created'. He seems also to be thinking of the first verse of the New Testament book of St John, where the Evangelist writes: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word.' Breton perhaps refers to this in his statement that the Word has been 'traced back to the point of being the initial example of the cause of causes'. The Word, he wrote, in the kabbalistic-Surrealist sense, is present as much in 'what we fear as in what we write, as in what we love'.[2]

Additional ideas were developed by Breton on the model of Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). In 1891 Jarry had studied with Henri Bergson at the Lycée Henri IV, where he had encountered the works of Rabelais, Shakespeare, Poe, De Quincey and Coleridge. The first performance of his absurdist play *Ubu Roi* took place in 1896, followed by *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll, 'Pataphysician'*. Pataphysics became one of the foundations of twentieth-century absurdist narrative. Jarry defined pataphysics as 'that which is superinduced upon metaphysics'. It was a science of 'imaginary solutions' which symbolically attributed the properties of objects to their phenomenological appearance alone, not to any other properties deduced by scientific enquiry. Pataphysics dealt with the laws governing exceptions, and described a parallel universe preferable to the one commonly experienced in empirical everyday living.[3]

Echoing Jarry's ideas, Breton in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) stated that Surrealism was based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought, the resolution of dream and reality into a kind of 'absolute reality, a surreality'.[4] Thanks to Surrealism, it was possible to return to the state of childhood, the real life. Surrealism was defined as 'psychic automatism in its pure state' in which written, or other creative expression, was produced in the absence of the control of reason, being 'exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern'.[5]

The content of this automatically dictated product, however, was derived from classical myth, as well as from esotericism. Whitney Chadwick's study of the role of myth in Surrealist art has revealed how it provided a common language for political and social revolutionary discourse. She has argued that Breton was not interested in individual myth-making, but in a collective myth that could serve the needs of the social group. To this end, the Surrealists explored the classical myths of the Greeks, most of all Orphic and Dionysian ecstatic sexual rites. They reconciled the concept of the Freudian dream-work with the antique

heritage of myth. André Masson was especially drawn to Friedrich Nietzsche's study of the Greek tragic theatre, and as in the case of Georges Bataille, he drew on Nietzsche as a significant source for papers published in the journal *Acéphale* (January 1937). Nietzsche had elevated emotion above reason, stating that the artwork itself was the product of a dialectical process between Apollonian reason and Dionysian ecstasy in which the dream was far more important than the waking state.[6] James Gordon Fraser's anthropological study of ancient religious rituals, *The Golden Bough* (1890), revealed the influence of Nietzsche. In turn, *The Golden Bough* became a source for Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, in which he argued that myths are collective wish-fulfilments and that they act to reconcile primordial social conflict.[7]

The main source for Breton's occultist interests was the work of the French magician Eliphas Lévi (Louis Constant) (1810–1875), who was the major transmitter of alchemical and kabbalistic ideas to nineteenth-century Europe. His most influential work was *L'Histoire de la Magie* (1860), translated into English in 1913 by Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942). Lévi published another famous text, *La Dogme et Ritual de la Haute Magie* (1855), translated by Waite in 1896. Lévi's kabbalism had been closely modelled on Antoine Fabre d'Olivet's (1767–1825) erroneous *La langue Hébraïque restituée* (1816). The poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Max Jacob (1876–1944) were deeply committed followers of Lévi's doctrine concerning the monistic unity of Divine Being with the mundane world. Max Jacob's alchemical interests made a strong impression on Georges Braque (1882–-1963), Juan Gris (1887–1927) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), and also ensured the adoption of the alchemical corpus by Breton and the Surrealist group.

In addition, John Moffitt has argued for the influence on the French avant-garde of the Hermeticist Albert Poisson (1868–1893), particularly in his edition of pseudo-Nicolas Flamel's *Book of Abraham the Jew*[8] and his *Théories et Symboles des Alchimistes* (1891).[9] Moffitt has also cited the alchemical influence of an earlier author, Antoine-Joseph Pernéty (1716–1801), in his *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique* (1787).[10]

Yet another mystogogue of the early twentieth century caused even more of a sensation in Parisian artistic and intellectual circles. In the 1920s there were published the writings of an anonymous adept calling himself 'Fulcanelli' whose identity has never been established. In his book *Les Mystères des Cathédrales* (Paris: Jean Schmidt, 1926) Fulcanelli claimed that European cathedrals were three-dimensional texts whose geometric plans and decoration were a coded description of the making of philosophical gold. He interpreted Christian symbology as a Hermetic language that concealed pre-Christian knowledge, the cruciform plan of Christian cathedrals, for example, alluding to the alchemical crucible. Fulcanelli's second work, *Les Demeures Philosophales* (Paris: Jean Schmidt, 1929),[11] offered a similar interpretation of medieval chateaux and mansions as being Hermetic textbooks.

Apart from his intense interest in the writings of Fulcanelli, Breton also read the original seventeenth-century manuscripts of Nicolas Flamel's *Book of Abraham the Jew*, located in the Arsenal library. Supposedly authored by the late fourteenth-century scribe Nicolas Flamel, *The Book of Abraham the Jew* was actually a fabrication dating from the mid-seventeenth century.[12] No such book exists in the well-known literature of the kabbalistic tradition, and it is not itself kabbalistic in content. The Abraham of the title cannot be identified with any of the medieval Jewish authorities, none of whom had been alchemists and none of whom had called themselves 'the Jew'. The authentic biography of the original Flamel is securely documented in the Parisian archives, but the story of his discovery of Abraham's book and of his making of the stone was invented much later. The original Flamel had made his wealth through his work as a scrivener and advocate to the Jewish community in Paris. In the later enduring myth, he is said to have discovered a copper book illustrated with emblems of a violent character. On journeying to Spain, its meaning was explained to him by a member of the Sephardic Jewish community. On his return to Paris, Flamel and his wife Péronelle are said to have made the Philosopher's Stone and to have endowed many charities and religious institutions, including the Hospital and Cemetery of the Innocents for foundling children.

The most ancient of the Flamel texts is manuscript Arsenal 3047 (mid-seventeenth century), which was Breton's source for his *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930). It contains seven illustrations, each accompanied by a written description. The illustrations take the allegorical form of biblical stories, particularly imagery from the Book of Revelation such as the Woman Clothed with the Sun. Flamel's book had been published unillustrated by Veuve Guillémot in Paris in 1612. There also exists a further eighteenth-century copy attributed to the Chevalier Molinier which includes a longer interpretation of the coloured figures (BN fr. 14765). In 1750 a new fabrication was the anonymous *Traité des figures hiéroglyphiques d'Abraham le juif* (in the possession of Stanislas de Guaita, then in the Duveen collection, and currently in the Paul and Mary Mellon collection at Yale). In 1777 the last of the Flamel books was published as the *Cléf du Grand Oeuvre, ou lettres du Sancélrien tourangeau, à Madame L.D.L.B.* (an interpretation of the seven illustrations).[13]

Flamel's alchemical imagery became the foundation of Breton's concepts of the creative unconscious in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930). He refers to the 'alchemy of the word' and refers to the story of Flamel, Abraham the Jew and the mysterious manuscript as a parallel equivalent to the Surrealist project. He relates the alchemical myth to the work of Rimbaud, Lautréamont and others. In particular, he refers the reader to the analogy between Surrealist work and that of the alchemists. The Philosopher's Stone 'is nothing more or less than that which was to enable man's imagination to tale a stunning revenge on all things'.[14] The revenge of the stone, in Breton's meaning, was to manifest

dream as material reality. In the *Second Manifesto* he described in detail some of the Flamel imagery which he saw as being essentially Surrealist in character, such as the story of the massacre of the Innocents, pictured in the alchemical treatise in the form of a king with a cutlass who is killing babies. Their blood is gathered by soldiers and poured into a large vessel in which the alchemical Sun and Moon come to bathe. Breton then refers to the image of a 'young man with winged feet, with Mercury's wand in his hand, wherewith he struck a salade which covered his head'. In the opposite direction came 'flying with wings outspread a tall old man who wore a clock affixed to his head'.[15]

The imagery and narrative of Breton's prose poem *Poissons Solubles* (1924) echo Flamel's symbols, without copying them. The emblems allude to streams of blood, the alchemical menstruum, fountains, streams and rivers, young children and mercury. Breton provides an account of a large watering trough on the Montagne Sainte-Genévieve, where at night 'the disturbing animals and surprise-plants still left in Paris come to refresh themselves'. From this fountain there flows a little red stream 'that nothing can dry up'. He compares this to precious blood, rose-blood with 'its thirst-quenching virtue' which is communicated to the sky, 'while on a milestone a young child counting the stars shivers'.[16]

The 'alchemical' art of the Surrealists differed from its historical antecedents in its emphatic concern with the psychopathology of sexual desire. Whereas the old alchemists had drawn their metaphors from human sexual behaviour, however, they intended these to be symbols of chemical changes in their work. In contrast, Surrealist artists, influenced by Freud, inverted this metaphorical relationship, so that alchemical symbols were employed instead as allusions to sexual activity. One particular alchemical treatise has provided an important source for sexual imagery throughout twentieth-century art. This is the late fourteenth-century *Rosarium philosophorum* ('Rose-garden of the Philosophers'), whose pictures have often been reprinted in popular books on alchemy and the occult arts.[17] The emblems in the *Rosarium* depict sexual union, birth, death, putrefaction and fantastic figures such as the hermaphrodite.

In addition, Breton revealed his acquaintance with the sexualized cosmos of the seventeenth-century alchemist Jacob Boehme. He also acknowledged in *Fronton Virage* (1953) yet another work referring to the alchemical marriage, the seventeenth-century *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* by Johann Valentin Andréae which he had read in the French translation (Paris: Jouve, 1928). *Fronton Virage* was the title of Breton's preface to Jean Ferry's study of Raymond Roussel (1953).[18] Ferry was proposing an alchemical interpretation of Roussel's work, to which Breton responded eagerly in kind. Breton argued that the 22 scene changes in Roussel's *La Poussière de soleil* formed a kabbalistic progression. (The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, and 22 paths link the sephiroth of the Tree of Life. This is also the number of the major arcana of the Tarot).

Earlier, in *Arcane 17* (1947), Breton had produced an interpretation of the major arcana cards of the Tarot, contending that the reign of the patriarchy was in the process of being replaced by the superior values of female consciousness. Breton's interest in magic and alchemy had intensified from 1945, and *Arcane 17* reveals the influence of Jungian psychology.[19]

Breton's interpretation of Roussel's text was based to a large extent on Fulcanelli, who had maintained that the symbols of medieval gothic architecture, as of alchemy, corresponded to a street language, 'argot', a slang impenetrable to the outsider. This was the language in which the medieval alchemists had communicated with each other, and it provided the key to the meaning of their allegories. Fulcanelli repeated the idea that late medieval culture delighted in word-play, rebuses, symbolism and allegorical expression. Hostelries, for example, would display a golden lion ('un lion d'or') which also signified 'au lit on dort' (a homophonic phrase meaning 'one can spend the night there'). According to Fulcanelli, argot was also known as 'the language of the birds', this disguised homophonic speech being primarily used for kabbalistic purposes.[20] Breton suggested that one of Roussel's possible sources had been Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire des Oiseaux*, since he was an aficionado of alchemy. In the 1940s such arguments encouraged Breton to experiment with word-association, and he abandoned his earlier Symbolist allusions in favour of multi-layered texts based on homophones.[21]

French scholar Richard Danier has clarified Breton's interpretative procedure in *Fronton Virage*, whereby he transposes Roussel's cryptic metaphors and allusions into an alchemical mode. Breton is deciphering the homophones in the sounds of Roussel's key words and phrases in order to locate an alchemical equivalent. For example, he interprets Roussel's allusion to Ambrosi's skull ('le crane d'Ambrosi') as the 'death's head' (*caput mortuum*), a reference to the black stage (*nigredo*) of the alchemical sublimation. He relates the phrase to the word 'sepia', recalling cuttlefish producing a cloud of black liquid. Similarly, Breton transposes Roussel's phrase 'la Pierre de Pterodactyle' into an allusion to 'la pierre au noir, au blanc, au rouge' (the colour stages of alchemy). The pterodactyl becomes the 'black dragon' of alchemy, the corrosive prime matter. Roussel's phrase 'la bergere albino' is transformed into the white work of alchemy (the process of making silver). The shepherdess, according to Breton, is the proximate mercury of pontic water. Breton quotes from Fulcanelli in his mention of the Arabian alchemist Artephius on the powder of gold which, projected onto base matter, transmutes it into gold.

The theme of bloody sacrifice re-emerges in Breton's reading of Roussel's phrase 'le bonnet phrygien'. He inter-relates this image with that of the Pope, the fifth Arcanum of the Tarot cards. Breton quotes from his friend Gaston Puel that the magic of the Phrygian cap was totemic. It was a component of the Mithraic rituals of initiation in which neophytes were baptised in blood. The central myth of the Mithraic cult concerned the slaying of the primordial

bull by Mithras, the Sun god. Blood, in this case, suggested the masculine genital energies of the bull, the Sun and the solar plexus. The Phrygian cap was placed on the head of the adept when he had accomplished the slaying of his own sexual desires. It symbolized the bloody foreskin of the bull. Through another complex symbolic sequence, passing from King Louis-Phillipe through to pears, Breton arrives at the notion of redness as a sign of the perfect fixation of the Philosopher's Stone. In this context he mentions the name of Heinrich Khunrath.[22]

Breton's monograph *L'Art Magique* (1957) was a major statement concerning the historical relationship between art and magic.[23] Within its pages he included a series of 76 interviews with contemporary artists, critics and art historians, as well as with the occultist Julius Evola (1898–1974) and the alchemist Eugène Canseliet (1899–1982).[24] Breton questioned both of them in regard to the exact nature of art's relation to magic. Canseliet claimed that both the magician and the modern artist were progressing towards the same end, that of 'universal enchantment'. Magic art put the viewer through an initiation (partial though it was) into a visionary world. In this book Breton focused his attention on the work of Hieronymus Bosch, whom he described as 'le visionaire intégral'.[25] He believed that Bosch's paintings described heretical alchemical and sexual beliefs which were fundamentally anti-Christian. In the medieval period the practice of magic was a heretical action. According to Breton, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* enshrined the concept of sexuality as an alchemical process, setting into action a dream-like sequence of perpetual transmutation. Sex was a universal principle that coloured all material and psychic manifestations.

For Breton and the Surrealists, sex is a sacrificial act that has the power to re-formulate human psychology and its material environment. Their work engages with sacrificial metaphors throughout. In his early work some of Breton's most recurring visions involved massacre and blood, as in *Poissons Solubles*, but he explored the specific theme of self-sacrifice with increasing urgency in his later writing, especially in *Arcane 17* (1947). The ideas expressed there were derived from Gerard van Rinjberk's *Le Tarot* (Lyon: P. Derain, 1947).[26] A Tarot card provides Breton's central icon, that of the Star, a female figure pouring a libation into a stream. Her vase contains the dew of the stars associated with menstrual blood, and she is engaged in a sacrificial rite. By this action a common material object is remade ritually into an extraordinary supernatural entity. Henceforward it exists on two levels simultaneously, both spiritual and material, both of which bear connotations of the 'sacred'.

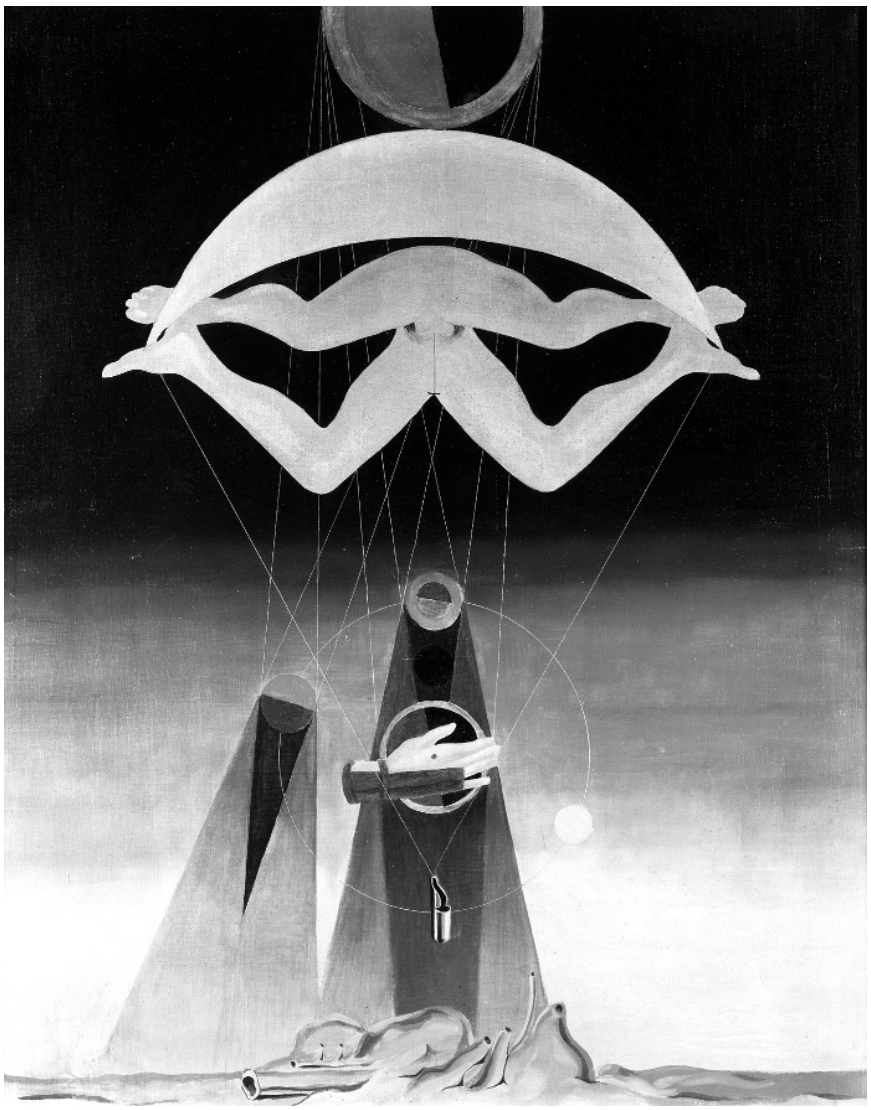
In her study of the role of the sacred in Surrealist art, Celia Rabinovitch[27] discusses Bruno Bettelheim's accusation that English translators had implicated Freud's account of the human psyche within a materialist concept of human psychology that Breton had not intended. In supporting Bettelheim's objection, Rabinovitch makes it possible to argue that certain aspects of Surrealism, most

especially the sexual mysticism, were not founded on a materialistic Freudian interpretation of desire, but arose from an intuition related to that of religious belief and practice. The least satisfactory aspect of Rabinovitch's thesis is her broad definition of the 'sacred'. She examines such notions as the fetish, the taboo, the daemonic and uncanny. Eventually she settles on the idea of an object and a space that is set apart from everyday consciousness within a frame, or an exclusionary boundary. Frames fix an object in 'imaginal space'. The notion of the 'sacred' is employed as a term to inter-link the material world with the spirit. A 'sacred' object is the meeting point of these two opposite states.

There are problems with Rabinovitch's concept of the sacred space. It is necessary to consider the notion of the sacred from a different point of view, linked to the idea of sacrifice. The term 'sacred' comes from the term *sacer* ('sacrifice'), while a priest is a *sacerdos*, one who makes the sacrifice. The concept of the sacred implies a preceding sacrificial action. It is this act alone that consecrates the object, space or person. A cursory review of world religions reveals that there are few, if any, exceptions to the requirement of a primary sacrifice in order to sanctify action.

The force of this idea affected the whole Surrealist group, but it is evidenced particularly in the paintings and collage of Max Ernst and in the films and painting of Salvador Dalí (1904–1989). Ernst had formed Cologne Dada in 1919. He was a friend of the poet Paul Eluard, through whom he joined the Surrealist group at a time when its focus was literary rather than visual. Ernst's unique contribution to their experimentation included the invention of the automatic techniques of *frottage*, *grattage* and *decalcomania*, as in *The Robing of the Bride* (1938). He regarded these methods as the equivalent in painted form of the literary automatist process devised by Breton, Eluard and other Surrealist poets.[28] His imagery was created by pressing wet sheets of paint-soaked paper against other sheets, or transferring rubbed textures onto paper.

Ernst created books of collaged forms, such as *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929)[29] and *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934), which are alchemical novels (in the interpretations of M.E. Warlick[30] and Evan Maurer).[31] They were composed from fragments of nineteenth-century engravings, recombined seamlessly into grotesque forms and narratives. *Une Semaine de Bonté* treats of the themes of birth, sexual identity, violence, ageing and death.[32] Elsewhere Ernst also employed alchemical motifs, such as in the painting of the sexual conjunction of Sun and Moon in *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (1923)[33] (fig. 2.1). Evan Maurer has suggested that Ernst's primary intention in his art was to increase the visionary faculties of artists and audience by manifesting the play of chance in subject matter, materials and composition. By means of the psychic processes involved in the practice of visual automatism, the creativity of the artist would be liberated. According to Maurer, this is the secret underlying the imagery of the Hundred-Headed Woman, the secret of the illuminated artistic consciousness.[34]



2.1 Max Ernst, *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (1923) (painting, oil on canvas, 80 × 64 cm), ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2009. © Tate, London 2010

With their meticulous realism, exaggerated perspective and melancholy landscapes expressing the impermanence of form, the paintings of Salvador Dalí explore sexual themes, specifically the morbid experience of sexual masochism. His film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), co-directed with Luis Bunuel (1900–1983), is filled with alchemical imagery of mutation, gender disorientation, mutilation and ritual murder. Dalí devised a method of art

practice that he called 'paranoiac-critical', whose purpose was to facilitate the emergence of his obsessive subconscious complex, as in the autobiographical imagery of *The Great Masturbator* (1929).

The same theme of castration is depicted alchemically (according to Javier Perez Andujar) in his painting of *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937), based on Ovid's Latin poem *The Metamorphoses*. Dalí had shown the picture to Freud during his sessions with the psychiatrist, but Freud had dismissed it as being a product typical of common neurosis.[35] Both Andujar and Rafael Santos Torroella argue that the work is evidence of Dalí's obsessive nature and that this is centred on something other than a neurosis – in fact, on an integral aspect of his real nature, namely his homosexuality. This was unpalatable to Dalí's concept of manhood, and he spent most of his life fleeing from his real sexual desires. In the *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* a giant hand is depicted, elevating a cracked alchemical egg from which there flowers a narcissus. This action recalls the elevation of the Eucharistic host. This motif is echoed further back in the painting by the body of a human being with bent head, sitting in a pool of water. Both the hand and the human entity are formed out of phallic genitalia. It has been suggested by Torroella that, since the motif of the hand recurs in other pictures from this time, therefore, its reference to masturbation is indicative of Dalí's sexual impotence and his suppressed homosexual nature.[36]

It was the group around Georges Bataille and his journal *Acéphale* which developed such pathological sexual discourse to an extreme. Bataille's erotic mode hovers between life and death, a decayed subconscious mind in the process of alienation from itself. Bataille sought for the liberation of the subconscious through his writing, especially in *L'Histoire de l'oeil* (1928), in which he adopted a bizarre and sadistic pornographic style and content. It is said by its apologists to be a profound philosophical work in the genre of the 'transgressive text'. His image of the eye is a metaphor in the process of transmutation – from eye, to egg, to Sun, to earth, to testicle. This progression is alchemical, both in the selection of the specific metaphors as well as in their sequence within the tumultuous narrative. Bataille had been introduced to alchemy by his lover, Laure, the self-chosen name of Colette Peignot (1903–1938), selected specifically for its homophonic resemblance to the word *l'or* (she also wrote as 'Claude Arax'). Laure and Bataille were sexually involved in an intense relationship, and his work *Blue of Noon* describes their affair. Among the alchemical influences on Bataille's studies were Robert Fludd and Jacob Boehme. Boehme had described a violent, erotic cosmos in which desire was the central force stimulating nature, while the passions of anger and frustration were the material whose consummation empowered the act of creation.[37]

The contemporary alchemical scholar and adept Stanislas Klossowski da Rola has emerged directly out of these French occultist and artistic circles.

In the late twentieth century he has been an effective popularizer of alchemical literature, a major factor in the current revival of interest in this esoteric science. Klossowski contributed the alchemical volume for the Thames and Hudson *Art and Imagination* series in the early 1970s[38] which sparked off the enthusiasm of a younger international audience. His work *The Golden Game* (1988) is a compendium of seventeenth-century German alchemical treatises.[39] It remains an irreplaceable reference for both creative artists and scholars.

As an authority, Klossowski occupies an interesting position between the empirical historians of the Hermetic tradition and the line of French adepts who acknowledge the magistry of Fulcanelli and his disciple Canseliet. As in the case of the latter, Klossowski has insisted on the veracity of the Fulcanelli myth.[40] Klossowski's interpretations of alchemical history are those of an initiate, an image that he has maintained in published interviews. As a result, his books can become maddeningly obscure in their cryptic allusions to obscure procedures, presumably known only to the initiates of the French Hermetic lineage.

Stanislas Klossowski is the son of the writer and artist Pierre Klossowski (Kłossowski) (1905–2001), who had collaborated with Bataille on the journal *Acéphale* in the 1940s. In turn, Pierre's elder brother was the internationally celebrated artist Balthasar Klossowski (Kłossowski) de Rola, known as Balthus (1908–2001). Originating in a noble Polish family from the Prussian-controlled areas of partitioned Poland, the Parisian-born Klossowski children were given a distinguished education. Pierre's mother remarried the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who had a significant effect on Pierre. He studied anthropology and languages, at a young age becoming secretary to the distinguished author André Gide. Pierre Klossowski's membership of the inner circle around Bataille was critical to his development, and he contributed important papers on anthropology to *Acéphale*. Klossowski wrote learned apologia in favour of both the Marquis de Sade (*Sade mon prochain*, Paris: Seuil, 1947) and Friedrich Nietzsche (*Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1969). He also produced several novels including *Roberte ce soir* (Paris: Minuit, 1954), an erotic novel based on the members of his own environment, most especially his own wife Roberte. This work and his *La Révocation de l'édit de Nantes* (Paris: Minuit, 1959) revealed his obsession, quite as extreme as that of Bataille, with the institution of the Catholic Church. Both had explored a mistaken vocation to the religious life.

Critics have commented on the emblematic qualities of the body of Roberte, which bears alchemical connotations of the Eucharistic bread and wine. She is portrayed as an erotically charged sacrifice to desire. Her sexual animal potency is an alchemical force. Klossowski made life-size erotic pencil drawings of Roberte on cheap paper.[41] Due to his associations with Bataille, Klossowski's drawings were considered to be icons of international importance in post-modernist circles of the 1980s, along with those of his brother, Balthus.[42]

However, among all these various experiments with alchemical and magical allegories and emblems, perhaps the greatest connoisseur of the magical tradition was the poet Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). In his book *Cinquante Déssins pour assassiner la magie* (1948)[43] he developed a theory concerning the relationship of magic to art, eulogizing the revolutionary consequences of this joint enterprise in destroying the stale academies of the visual and dramatic arts. This subject forms the theme of the next chapter.

Notes

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3. Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-garde in France 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage, 1968).
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10. Antoine-Joseph Pernéty, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique …* (Paris: Bauche, 1787).
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20. Rayner Johnson, *The Fulcanelli Phenomenon*, pp. 211–19
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23. André Breton with Gérard Legrand, *L'Art Magique* (Paris: Editions Phébus, 1991; 1st pub. Paris: Amis du Club Francais du Livre, 1957).

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25. Ibid., p. 169.

26. Breton, *Arcane 17*, pp. 152–3.

27. Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, pp. 117–43.

28. Evan M. Maurer, 'Images of Dream and Desire: The Prints and Collage Novels of Max Ernst', in Robert Rainwater (ed.), *Max Ernst Beyond Surrealism* (New York: New York Public Library; Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 58.

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31. Maurer, 'Images of Dream and Desire', pp. 63–91.

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3

The theatre of alchemy: Artaud, Duchamp, Klein

This chapter will identify a less common type of 'alchemical' art practice, that of Artaud, Duchamp and Klein, which has drawn on aspects of religious ritual and theatre with the intent of liberating the human psyche within its social and political context.

In his concept of the *Theatre of Cruelty* (*c.* 1938) Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) pioneered Dionysian performances of a semi-magical and cathartic nature. Through the arousal of feelings of ecstasy and violent rage, as in antique religious ritual, viewers would be purged of their obstructive egos and awakened to the latent potential of the subconscious mind.[1] The forms of the *Theatre of Cruelty* were modelled on the performance arts of south-east Asia, specifically Balinese dance performance, in which the human body was the expressive medium. Artaud rejected the text-based classical French theatre of Racine and Molière.[2]

In 1938, during his stay in the asylum of Ville-Evrard, having read deeply into the history of magic, Artaud began to produce numerous visionary drawings on scraps of squared-up school paper accompanied by texts. He called these images *gris-gris*, and regarded them as magical spells and exorcisms.[3] Armed with this occult weaponry, he aimed to damn rational academic conventions in art such as single-point perspective space, geometrical proportion and aesthetic harmony. In 1948 Artaud re-edited the drawings and published them as *Cinquante Déssins pour assassiner la magie*.[4]

He had always considered art-making to be a magical procedure, a ritual performance. From this point of view, he conducted an exhaustive investigation of the history of Asian religions, Western esotericism and Hermeticism, including alchemical texts, specifically those of Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767–1825). His alchemical, theological and philosophical writings had influenced earlier occultists such as Eliphas Lévi and Gérard Encausse. Fabre d'Olivet had undertaken research on the Hebrew language, attempting to create a concordance between Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Hebrew language. He had also involved himself in the study of the mystical mathematics taught

by the neo-Pythagoreans in Alexandria of the late antique era. As well as developing his acquaintance with ancient mystical practices in the Middle East, Artaud drew further afield on Hindu scriptures such as the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as on Tantric Yoga cults, including the Tibetan yogic school of Milarepa.[5]

Artaud had re-discovered the primeval relationship of art and magic, in recognition of which he created his emblematic anagram: *Image/Magie*. He felt that Western culture had lost the ability to create images, and that its artists lacked the spiritual authority to transform their audience by magical means. During his stay in Dublin in August–September 1937, Artaud produced a magical signing system which has been explained as a mystification of the process of inscription by critical theorist Paule Thévenin:

> Writing no longer has as its sole function that of transmitting a message or a thought; rather, it must act by itself and physically. Everything is studied, calculated so as to strike the eye, and through it the sensitivity, of the person for whom the spell is destined: the disposition of the lines on the page, the very careful calligraphy, the variations in size or height of the letters, the frequent use of capitals, the way the words are underlined. Lines are sometimes displaced and signs are added. At times, especially when the spell is an aggressive one, the paper is intentionally spotted in places, and, in others, burned and perforated with a lit cigarette.[6]

Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* was a sacred laboratory in which performers and audience were transmuted into a single psychic entity. This alteration in phenomenal reality was promoted by means of substituting physical action for verbal text. The bodies of the performers took the forms of hieroglyphs, adding weight and substance to the poetic incantations of the text. The concept for these actions originated in Artaud's personal experience of mental illness, in which he had encountered the psycho-pathological condition of glossolalia. He heard inner voices enunciating streams of irrational syllables. Artaud drew on this experience for the text of his poetry and theatrical scripts.

He believed that magic could heal him of his severe schizophrenia, and in the 1920s he sought the aid of both allopathic medicine and psychiatry, as well as of magicians, fortune-tellers and acupuncturists. Thereby, he hoped to discover a way to communicate with his alienated subconscious, reuniting the components of his fractured psyche:

> That these spells have a strong emotional charge is undeniable: they responded to a necessity, to the imperious need of showing – though death is felt as possible, and even imminent … that one is not completely dead …. Antonin Artaud will declare himself subsequently to have died at Ville-Evrard in August 1939, thus shortly after the casting of the spells – and there is no doubt that one of their goals is to protect him against disappearance, to affirm his combative will ….[7]

Considerably impressed by André Masson's creative experiments and visual effects, Artaud had first attempted to become a painter, but he gave up in

favour of writing plays and poetry when he became disillusioned with his own artistic abilities. However, his recourse to drawing on paper displays the continuing influence of Masson's automatist techniques. Artaud's act of drawing was a ritualistic gesture, and his materials carried symbolic and theurgic meanings. The sheets of paper were a metaphor of the material human physiology which he regarded in the nature of a prison. This physical body was an illusion that held entrapped within itself another more 'real' body which was both physical and somatic. He termed this entity 'the body without organs'. It was a symbol of the liberated human psyche.

In his graphic procedure, Artaud would first of all draw the outlines of objects intended to represent the hegemonic physical 'body with organs', the structured human frame that he regarded as a metaphor of social and spiritual imprisonment. Secondly, he would draw savagely over these outlines, producing his own psychic self-portrait in imagery such as one in which swords penetrate a coffin. Artaud's forms were hybrid, fusing together human, beast and bird. The accompanying text was not directly related to any particular drawings. Disparate images and words occupied the same spaces, their oppositional forces disorientating the visual text. Essentially, he was seeking to re-design the physical body in order to break open the cage of his own mind:[8]

> The goal of all these figures drawn and coloured was an exorcism of malediction, a bodily vituperation against the obligations of spatial form, of perspective, of measure, of balance, of dimension, and, through this vindictive vituperation, a condemnation of the psychic world encrusted like a louse on the physical world that it incubuses or succubuses while claiming to have formed it. These strange objects, Antonin Artaud lets it be understood, these kinds of amulet also have a curative function, counteracting an unhealthy power that the psychic wields over the physical. Like their offensive powers, their defensive powers are evident, suffused with the energy of their fabrication, the violence of their intentions, their devastating effects.[9]

Artaud's drawing practice was an alchemical action aimed at transmuting the actor and audience. The artist, like the alchemist, would become his own Philosopher's Stone, both the subject and the object of his performance-work. The alchemical body would be spiritualized and the spirit materialized, the world transmuted into a more perfect psychic form.

Artaud was attempting to realize the dream-work by bridging the conventional semiotic divide between sign and referent, image and word. He was deeply suspicious of abstract, disembodied symbols, and he battled to enflesh the sign. Like other Surrealist artists and writers, Artaud wanted to reify the sign, to actualize the symbol. Jacques Derrida, in his study of Artaud's work, has struggled to express its essence:

> This language is no longer a language. It should at least no longer sublimate itself or make itself subtle toward some sense or some object. It should express itself without

> delay, without relay, without tardiness. In the bodily struggle where a breath throws itself against the subjectile, it makes itself literal and material …. A literal matter beyond transposition, translation, figuration, rhetoric. We were saying before how a pictogram, this one, should be understood literally. It was necessary to make it precise: to the letter of an emancipated letter, of a letter that, even in words, even in verbal language, no longer obeys the conventional law of meaning, of reference, of representation. Artaud calls the letter subjected to this law simply the 'written letter'; he opposes it to the 'letter' as such. He does not propose to abandon words, sentences, nor the letters that are caught up in them. But he means to bend them to a new relation, a new 'comportment', a new destination, and it takes strength ….[10]

It is revealing to compare Artaud's theurgic alchemical art practice with that of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). In contrast to Artaud's character as a haunted, possessed shaman, Duchamp manipulated the irrational tradition coolly through his intellectual powers alone. He too had been exposed to the enduring influence of alternative spiritual systems such as Theosophy and Hermeticism, both in Paris and in the French provinces, as well as during his sojourn in Munich in the years around 1910. The result was that in 1912 he rejected painting as a creative practice and jettisoned Apollinaire's aesthetic theory of form and colour as symbolic emblems. Instead, Duchamp began to favour a radical conceptual practice employing found objects and performative actions.

Henceforth, he had no further concern with the aesthetics of pure form and he began to appropriate ready-made objects such as the urinal, bicycle-wheel and enamel signs. From 1912 Duchamp began to investigate linguistic structures and visual emblems as a type of condensed text. The subconscious mind of the audience was left to make the connections between the different contexts. His works now incorporated punning titles and visual forms such as his 1921 photographic self-portrait, cross-dressed as Rrose Sélavy (1921–1964), an identity related also to his assemblage *Why Not Sneeze, Rrose Sélavy?* (1921), consisting of a cage with sugar cubes. The original French title is a pun on the word for sexual orgasm.

Duchamp claimed that from 1912 he had fallen under the influence of Roussel's *La Poussière de soleil*. Henceforward, he too constructed visual texts structured according to homophonic similarities between French words, as in *L.H.O.O.Q* (1919), or *Apolinère Enameled* (1916–17) in which he appropriated the name of a brand of paint, Sapolin Enamel. He pursued an alchemy that was dependent on the transformation of words one into another. It was not the symbolic forms of the bride and groom in the alchemical conjunction that would signify the transmutation, but the word associations and clash of mixed media in the assemblages, collages and found objects.

Into these meanings Duchamp introduced allusions to the new sciences and mathematical disciplines, chiefly to the fourth dimension. His large oil-painting *Tu m'* (1918) was made for his American patron, the Theosophist Katherine Dreier, in recognition of her fascination with scientific concepts

concerning the multi-dimensional structure of the universe.[11] Into the surface of *Tu m'* Duchamp incorporated tracings of shadows cast by found objects, such as the coat-rack which he had previously displayed as a found sculpture. These shadow-forms alluded to the existence of an invisible fourth dimension. Superimposed on the imagery of this shadow-world are eye-charts and cards used in ophthalmology.

It may be that the transparent background of the *Large Glass* (1915–23) (fig. 2.2) is intended to make the same reference to the fourth dimension. In both paintings the spectator witnesses two orders of reality, the illusory one of the painting and the physical world. Duchamp was attempting to reify the symbolic order by eliminating the division between sign and signifier, uniting them by means of a transposition into the fourth dimension of space-time. The active participation of the spectator, as in theatre, was essential to the work in order to conjure into action these invisible dimensions.

Moffitt has suggested that the first evidence of Duchamp's alchemical interests is found in his *Nude Descending a Staircase*, both in a preliminary drawing of 1911 and later in the painting of 1912.[12] Moffitt has argued that these works illustrated Jules Laforgue's poem *Encore à cet astre*, in which his yearning for spiritual illumination is metaphorized by an image of the Sun. In Laforgue's poem, the Hermetic union fails because the rays of the Sun are unable to penetrate the brute materiality of the crowd. No true gold is produced. Another influence on Duchamp's *Nude*, according to Moffitt, is Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) in his *Sonnet des voyelles*, as well as Apollinaire's *Le Bestiaire* (1911). Alchemical themes can be perceived further in Duchamp's painting of the *Bride* (1912–13), a figure constructed out of alchemical equipment. Moffitt also interprets the *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14) and the *Elevage Poussières* (1920s) alchemically.[13]

From May 1913 to May 1915 Duchamp worked as a librarian in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Génèvieve, where he had direct access to the original Renaissance magical and alchemical sources, such as the *Mutus Liber* (1677).[14] Moffitt suggests that in these years Duchamp would have read F. Jollivet-Castelot's *Comment en deviant alchimiste* (Paris, 1897), as well as Caillet's *Manuel Bibliographique*, which listed all esoteric publications. Other sources may have been Albert Poisson's *Théories et Symboles Alchémiques, Le Grand Oeuvre* (Paris: Chacornac, 1891) and Dom Pernéty's *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermètique*. In the early 1900s new editions of works by historical alchemists such as Paracelsus, Agrippa and Boehme were being published in Paris. Much later, in 1967, Pierre Cabanne on a visit to Duchamp's New York studio had viewed books on the occult, although Duchamp neither admitted the influence of alchemy on his art, nor did he deny it.

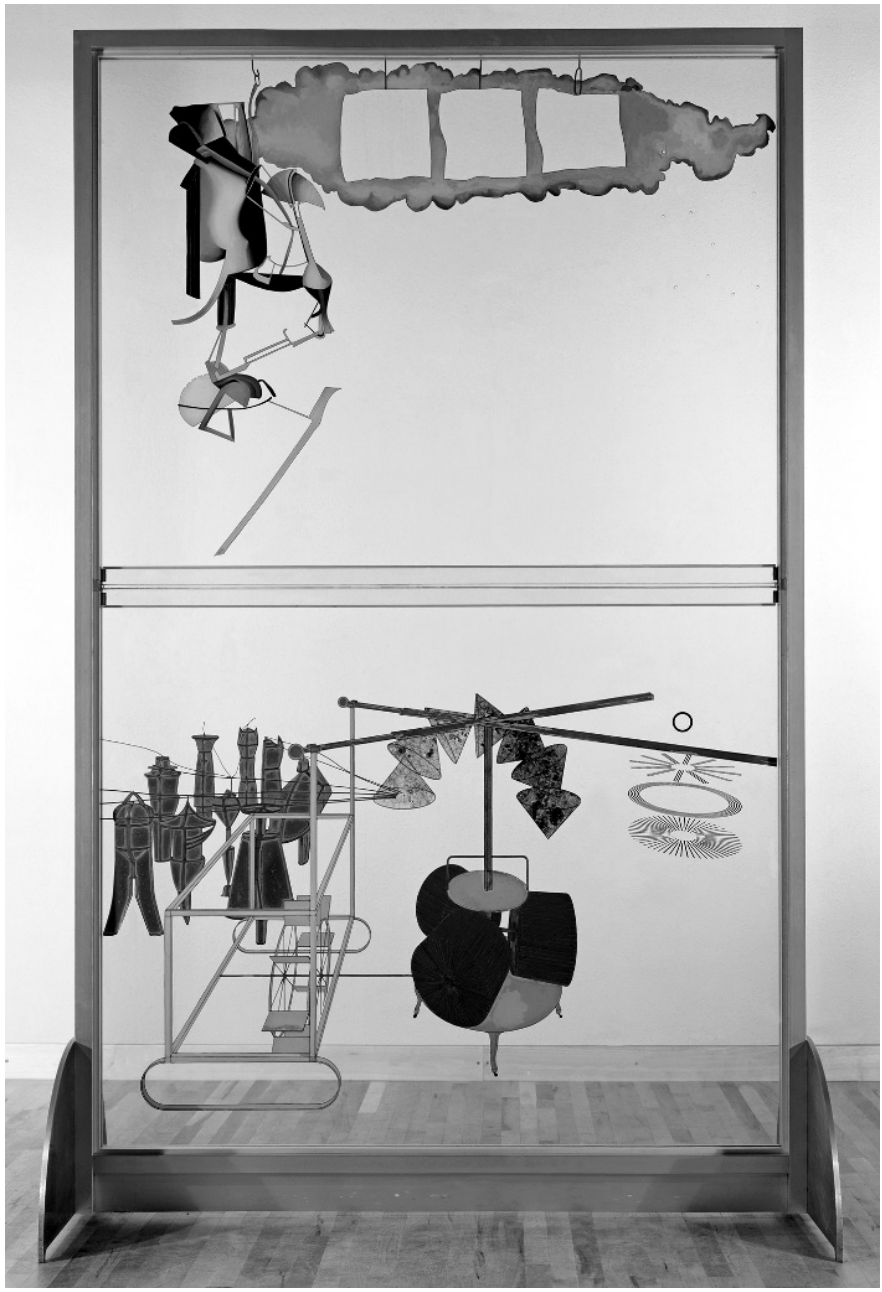
In November and December of 1911 Duchamp investigated the mechanism of the rotating wheel in assemblages such as *Coffee Mill* (1911), *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *Precision Optics* (1920), *Roto-Reliefs* (1923–35) and the

film *Anaemic Cinema* (1925–26). This rotating form may have symbolized the alchemical circulation of the elements known as *circulatio*. The wheel could also have represented the Hermetic sign of the Ouroboros, a serpent biting its tail. Duchamp's interest in contemporary scientific and mathematical discoveries, according to Moffitt, showed the influence of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* (1911). Duchamp's Hermetic works were aimed at a small audience of American patrons with esoteric interests, in particular Louise and Walter Arensburg and Katherine Dreier.[15] In 1920 Walter Arensburg had read the works of the Renaissance scientist and magus Francis Bacon, as well as those of the Rosicrucians and alchemists. He was a cryptographer with a specific interest in the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum*. From his association with Arensburg, Moffitt has concluded that Duchamp had intended a similar sexual alchemical meaning for both the *Large Glass* (1915–23) and the installation *Etants Données* (1946–66).

The Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors. Even) (1915–23) (fig. 3.1) is composed of two broken glass panels, wedging together dust and paint in a complex topography. The transparent ground permits the real gallery space to be incorporated into the fictitious artwork. Thwarted sexual desire is the theme. The 'bachelors' in the lower space are separated from the insect-like 'bride' above them by a murderous apparatus of cutting and grinding machinery.[16] Duchamp's later installation *Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas (Etant Données)* (1946–66) depicts a sexually spent female body sprawled across the grass in a garden, locked away behind closed doors. This setting recalls scenes of an alchemical wedding in a garden which is described in the Rosicrucian novel by Johann Valentin Andréae *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (Strasbourg, 1616). Moffitt relates Duchamp's image to another text, the *Parabola* written by Hinricus Madathanus Theosophus (1625) (included in the *Museum Hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum*, 1677).

In a recent study Demos has argued that Duchamp's work from the 1940s was the product of a 'spirit of expatriation', the result of exile, constant travel and his deep sense of dislocation.[17] Demos takes as his starting point the work *La boîte-en-valise*, which was in the process of being made during his exile from German-occupied France. From 1942 Duchamp was living a transient life, flitting between New York and Buenos Aires. The *boîte-en-valise* ('Box in a Suitcase', 1935–46) contained 69 images of Duchamp's entire oeuvre in a portable art gallery, while Duchamp himself adopted the role of a 'travelling salesman'. Demos regards this work as being both a celebration and a mourning of displacement, a state of both freedom and grievous loss.

Duchamp used his 'alchemical' installations and performance-works to question the role of art in the political order of Western capitalism. Demos has concluded that Duchamp's self-image in the 1940s was a political one. His later works express a view of art as creative action, pressurizing the audience to become complicit. His rejection of home and nation was transformed into



3.1 Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23), reconstruction by Richard Hamilton (1965–66), lower panel remade 1985 (oil, lead, dust and varnish on glass, 278 × 176 cm) © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2009. © Tate, London 2010

an anti-nationalist political manifesto. Moreover, the valises were a complex, paradoxical and contradictory response to the consumerist marketing of the art object. Even in some of his earlier work, Demos has detected a strong leftist political allegiance, as in Duchamp's exhibition designs of the 1930s and 1940s. In these he produced a statement criticizing the Surrealists' rejection of politics in their abandonment of the Communist Party. With the intention of revealing the system of capitalistic production that supported Surrealism, Duchamp had suspended 1,200 coal sacks from the ceiling of the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*. In 1942 he attacked the apolitical character of the Surrealist exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* held in New York by swamping the show in thousands of metres of string. Thereby, he separated the audience from what he believed to be the decorative escapism of Surrealist painting.

The work of Marcel Duchamp served as an important prototype for the conceptual practices in New York during the 1960s, as well as in European developments such as the international Fluxus group to which Joseph Beuys belonged.

However, a different rationale for conceptual and performance art was being developed independently during the 1950s and 1960s in France and Italy. Artists such as Pierre Restany and the School of Nice were the main influences on the work of Yves Klein, whose outstanding achievement lay in his experimentation with minimalist painting and outrageous forms of performance art and installation. In his theatres of art, Klein was inspired by contemporary reinterpretations of Renaissance Hermeticism and magical arts, as well as by Eastern religions and lifestyles. His rationale was not only aesthetic and self-publicizing, but also most earnestly political and democratizing.[18] Thomas McEvilley has identified Klein's artistic mission as a visionary quest for the sacred and the absolute, testing the law of 'reciprocal balance between the mundane and the divine, between man and nature'.[19]

The critical historiography concerning Klein's involvement with alchemical ideas is limited. The most recent retrospective of his work at the Hayward Gallery in London (1995) has underplayed the influence on his ideas of magic and alchemy in favour of an emphasis on his innovatory use of form and material in their subsequent effect on the international avant-garde.[20] At present, the most important source for Klein's alchemical motives remains the catalogue to the retrospective at Rice University in 1982 which travelled on to Chicago, the Guggenheim and the Centre Pompidou. In particular, the contributions by Thomas McEvilley present a picture of Klein's ever-intensifying dedication to the European Hermetic tradition.[21] In contrast, the recent Hayward exhibition has placed the emphasis on Klein's interest in Japanese paths of spiritual development, specifically that of judo.[22] The following account follows closely the lines of Thomas McEvilley's analysis.

Klein worked in collaboration with the artists of the School of Nice founded by Pierre Restany (1930–2003), who included Arman (Armand Pierre

Fernandez, 1928–2005) and Martial Raysse (b. 1936). In turn, they influenced Jean Tinguely (1925–1991), Raymond Hains (1926–2005), the Zero group in Dusseldorf and Piero Manzoni (1933–1963) in Italy. In 1960 Restany founded the group known as *Nouveau Réalisme* with Martial Raysse and César (Cesar Baldaccini, 1921–1998), and soon after Klein joined them. The motivating inspiration uniting these artists was their antagonism to the cultural dominance of American abstract expressionism.

After the war, New York had replaced Paris as the world centre for advanced modernism, fuelled by the economic strength of the United States, which had emerged out of the war with a growth economy and a booming commodities investment market. In the 1950s American modernist art was forced into a complicit role within the capitalistic system. It was used as political propaganda during the Cold War against the Stalinist bloc of countries in Eastern Europe, also being exported to Latin America. The *Nouveau Réalisme* movement paralleled the work of artists at Black Mountain College, most especially Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who were leading a similar critique of the painterly signifying modes of the abstract expressionists. The use of non-traditional materials (found objects of all kinds), violent action, performance art, photography, media debris, sound and dance were common factors in a political antagonism to American abstraction and its role as commodity and politicized artefact.[23] Klein aligned himself to the same rejection of transatlantic cultural hegemony, and he joined the French Leftist avant-garde.[24]

In spite of such political sympathies, Klein's intention for his artwork was not Marxist-materialist, nor did he support any socialist revolution. Instead, he had a spiritual vision which was magnificently apocalyptic in its expectations that the time was imminent in which humanity as a whole would achieve a divine nature with god-like abilities. Such an attainment would be democratically available to all who were interested in the new forms of art. Art would evolve a new type of language, one of pure emotion and intuition, to serve the people of the new millennium, and Klein would be its prophet. The advent of this mystical Third Millennium would be facilitated by technological advances. To this end, Klein explored various types of esoteric arts and belief systems. In 1947 he met Claude Pascal and Arman Fernandez, with whom he discovered the dominating concept of his life, that of spiritual space.[25] He read the writings of the Rosicrucians with Louis Cadeaux, from whom he also learned about astrology, meditation and spiritual work.

In June 1948 Klein and Claude Pascal (but not Arman) joined the Rosicrucian Society and worked on bi-weekly lessons sent from California. These were based on the prolific writings of Max Heindel (1865–1919), specifically his *Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception: or Mystic Christianity* (Ocean Park, CA: Rosicrucian Fellowship, 1911), which Klein read in French translation. Heindel's teachings had only a tenuous relationship with the original

seventeenth-century movement. Even so, Heindel drew his ideas from most of the same original sources – Plato, the neo-Platonists, the Orphists, Egyptian magic and shamanism. Heindel provided the foundation for Klein's aesthetic philosophy through his vision of a psychological alchemy that would free the spirit from its material shell. Klein adopted Heindel's belief that the Age of Matter was ending and that the Age of Open Space was commencing, in which the ethereal human body would be able to levitate and fly. Art would become a form of magic, and the artist would be god-like.[26] Klein believed himself to be the messianic 'highest initiate' prophesied by Heindel who would be the first to attain the condition of ethereality, and would then teach others. Accordingly, he worked at his Rosicrucian correspondence course for five years and regarded himself as being perfected.[27]

As evidence of his advanced spiritual state, Klein produced the monochrome paintings, fields of colour that represented spiritual space, and he carried out performance-work in the form of ritualized sacred actions. His first performance action in 1948 was to sign the sky. Klein claimed that he had commenced his series of monochromes in 1947, but the fact is that he invented the monochrome in Madrid only in 1951.[28]

In 1954 Robert Godet became Klein's adviser on occultism, and at the same time Klein came under the influence of Gurdjieff and Asian religions.[29] In 1956 Klein and Arman were invited to join the order of the Knights of St Sebastian, which enabled them to indulge in rituals adapted from medieval chivalry, Masonic ritual and Rosicrucian symbolism. Tinguely recalled that Klein read comic books and talked about knights and the Holy Grail. As an adult, he remained a captive in the magical world of the child.[30]

Klein had fallen under the influence of Gaston Bachelard and his phenomenological system. Bachelard referenced alchemy as an internal process that purified and liberated the spirit. In his text *Mono Adventure* Klein echoed the same notion that alchemical gold could be extracted from anything. The most difficult aspect of the artist's task was to uncover 'the gift of the Philosopher's Stone' which Klein believed existed in each human being. He concluded that painting was an alchemical act 'beyond time. It represents nothing.'[31] He called this a 'pure pictorial sensibility', injected into the artwork by the artist-alchemist, which could be experienced by a viewer whose own sensibility had been developed. Art was ultimately an extrasensory experience. Klein claimed that he had identified the location of the Philosopher's Stone as a psychic entity within his own being.

From 1946 colour had played the dominant role in Klein's aesthetic, reduced eventually to three forms: pink (the rose of the Rosicrucians), gold and ultramarine. Using pigment of the highest quality, Klein fixed high-grade powdered lapis lazuli onto a special base of his own devising which preserved its blue intensity. From 1947 International Klein Blue symbolized the spiritual potential of the human psyche and the universal energies of the cosmos.

In 1960–62 Klein produced assemblages in which sponges were soaked in International Klein Blue and set upright on steel poles, or were stuck onto canvases and walls. In 1962 he cast the first of 12 proposed plaster body-casts of his friend, intending to represent 12 of his own friends in the role of Christ's disciples. He succeeded in making two, which he painted with International Klein Blue and mounted onto a panel covered with gold leaf.[32]

Klein explained, however, that the real blue colour was that of the interior psyche of a human being, as well as the 'blue of the profundity of space' which was the kingdom that all humanity was destined to inherit, 'the immaterialization of blue'. It was the invisible coloured space that 'we impregnate ourselves with', a blue sensibility which also existed within the white gallery walls.[33]

In his soft-porn, anthropometric performances, young women coated their naked bodies with International Klein Blue and then, to Klein's choreographic instructions, pressed themselves suggestively against large sheets of paper laid on the floor or hung from the wall. This quasi-sexual action took place to the sound of a chamber orchestra. What made the whole event ridiculous was the stone-faced audience perched on little gold chairs, with *grandes dames* in diamonds and their consorts in black tie.[34]

For Klein (following Heindel), pure colour represented the astral body. The adept, supposedly, could exist in the form of pure colour as vibrations and wavelength. Shortly, Klein was to move beyond all such material representation under pressure exerted by his dealer, Iris Clert, who urged him to go to the limit of the immaterial. Accordingly, in April 1958 Klein painted the Clert Gallery white, and at the preview he drank blue liquid in the manner of the wine at the Eucharistic mass, stating that the blood of the 'body of sensibility' was blue.[35] He argued that the painter, like Christ, says the mass while painting, and gives his body and soul as nourishment for other people. In each one of his paintings the artist realizes, to some extent, the miracle of the Last Supper.[36]

Klein's third Rosicrucian colour was gold, applied as pure gold leaf. It represented the highest spiritual state, that of the artist's genius and his ability to elevate human perception and transform physical reality.[37] In 1960 Klein exchanged certificates of 'Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility' for gold leaf which had to be lost or destroyed in order to validate the certificate. Among those buying his genius was the alchemist Eugène Canseliet.[38] In 1960 he also began to work with the alchemical prime element, fire, turning industrial coke torches on sheets of Swedish cardboard treated with asbestos.[39]

Klein's works culminated in his *Leap into the Void* (1960). In this action he published a fake newspaper, *Dimanche: The Newspaper of a Single Day*, on Sunday 27 November 1960. It took the exact format of *Journal du Dimanche* (the Sunday edition of *France-Soir*). In this form he revealed the news that an artist had learned to fly. A photograph was enclosed in which Klein was seen

launching himself from a window on the first floor of a house, his chest flung out as if he was about to take off into the sky. This action, it was stated, had inaugurated the new Age of Space, of infinity, of the release of the human spirit. Most scholars have regarded the photograph as a fake. Strangely, there exist two images of the same event. One of these shows a cyclist in the background. Klein had revealed to Arman that the photograph was a montage, but he insisted that he was able to perform this feat anyway. His colleague Bernadette recorded that Klein had made a similar leap from the window ten months earlier, not once, but twice, without a safety net. He managed to perform a judo somersault in the air that had enabled him to land safely.[40]

Klein regarded all of his artworks and performances as cosmogonies, and himself as a prophet, a manifestation of a Christ-type through whom the world would be transmuted into pure Spirit. In 1959 Klein's collection of writings was published as *Le depassement de la problématique de l'art* (La Louvière: Editions de Montbliart, 1959). He described his concept of the artist performing a Christ-like self-sacrifice. Although Jean-Paul Sartre had initially expressed his public approval of Klein due to his promotion of Bachelard's ideas, the French left as a group interpreted his ideas as fascistic and disowned him.[41] There was opposition from the intellectual materialists Roland Barthes (1915–1980) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908). Another leading leftist writer, Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008), denounced the concept of the role of the spirit in art in his essay *Nature, Humanism, Tragedy* (1958).

It is impossible to distinguish where the initiate ended and where the charlatan in Klein began. How much of this mythology did Klein use merely to publicize his art? Was he really aiming to bring about a social revolution on the model of the earlier avant-garde, or was he only a showman acting the clown – an egoist seeking public adulation? Certainly, Klein cannot be accused of elitist attitudes since he envisaged the possibility of universal redemption for all humanity. All people would become magi with superhuman powers. Edward Lucie-Smith has argued for Klein's political sincerity and for the purposeful nature of his practice, arguing that Klein intended to purify the historical tradition of art-making and to rid artists of corrupting concerns with status and finance. For Klein, this debasing materialist attitude was metaphorized by the use of material form in art, which had to be lightened and even eliminated altogether if art was to serve a regenerative purpose.[42]

Minimalism and performance art were further developed as a political arena in the later 1960s and 1970s. In particular, Joseph Beuys adopted the same theme of the artist as Christ-like redeemer, atoning for the negative actions of society, but his role was not inspired by Yves Klein. Indeed, it may be said that although Klein's experimentation with conceptualism and performance had a significant influence on late European modernism, yet his central myth of sacrificial action and ritual theatre progressed no further. Beuys drew his own ideas concerning ritual actions not from Klein, but from the original

Rosicrucian alchemy of the Renaissance, from Goethe and the German Romantics, and above all from the spiritual teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Beuys redirected his spiritual alchemy towards redressing the historical catastrophe that had been Nazi Germany and towards the ecological disaster resulting from the capitalistic misuse of natural resources.

Before proceeding to a discussion of Beuys' practice, the present argument requires that some attention be paid to the effects of the European esoteric tradition on American art in the 1950s and beyond, even though this was not as extensive as in Europe. Of far greater significance to American artists was Zen Buddhism and Taoism, as well as Native American religion and culture.

Notes

1. Antonin Artaud, *Le Théatre et son double* (Paris, 1938).
2. Antonin Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre*, ed. Claude Schumacher (London: Methuen Drama, 1989).
3. Antonin Artaud, *Cinquante Dessins pour assassiner la Magie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 5.
4. Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud*, exhibition, Bibliothèque Sainte-Génèvieve Nationale de France, director Guillaume Fau, 7 November–4 February 2007 (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 96–124, 51–93, 125–33, 189–99.
5. Artaud, *Cinquante Dessins*. p. 6.
6. Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. and preface by Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1998), p. 12.
7. Paule Thévenin in ibid., p. 7.
8. Artaud, *Antonin Artaud*, exhibition Bibliothèque Sainte-Génèvieve Nationale, pp. 134–41; Stephen Barber, 'A Foundry of the Figure: Antonin Artaud', *artforum* (1987), 88–95.
9. Thévenin in Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, p. 13.
10. Derrida in ibid., p. 76.
11. Tom H. Gibbons, 'Cubism and "The Fourth Dimension"' in the Context of the Late Nineteenth-century and Early Twentieth-century Revival of Occult Idealism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 44 (1981), 130–47.
12. John F. Moffitt, 'Hermeticism in Modern Art: An Introduction', *Cauda Pavonis: The Hermetic Text Society Newsletter*, 6/1 (1987)', 1–5.
13. John F. Moffitt, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Données*: How Walter Arensberg Explained its Alchemical Iconography', *Cauda Pavonis* (Fall, 1996), 8–9.
14. John F. Moffitt, 'Fin-de-siècle Parisian Hermeticism: Hermetic and Alchemical Publications in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Génèvieve Sainte-Genevieve', *Cauda Pavonis*, n.s. 14/2 (1995), 10–15.
15. Moffitt, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Données*', 1–13.
16. Arturo Schwarz (ed.), *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass* (New York: Abrams, 1969); Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, *Marcel Duchamp* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art; New York: MOMA, 1973), pp. 81–98; Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, a typographic version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box* (London: Lund Humphries, 1960).
17. T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), *passim*.
18. Jacques Caumont and Jennifer Gough-Cooper (eds), *Yves Klein 1928–1962: Selected Writings* (London: Tate Gallery, 1974), pp. 55–67; Thomas McEvilley, 'Yves Klein and Rosicrucianism', in Yves Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Houston, TX: Institute for the Arts, Rice University; New York: The Arts Publisher, 1982), pp. 239–54.

19. Ibid., p. 12.
20. Sidra Stich (ed.), *Yves Klein*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995); Mark Rosenthal, 'Assisted Levitation', in Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, pp. 91–135.
21. Thomas McEvilley in Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, pp. 13–134.
22. Stich, *Yves Klein*, pp. 32–41.
23. Ibid., pp. 67–72.
24. Rosenthal, 'Assisted Levitation', pp. 91–135.
25. McEvilley in Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, pp. 25–34.
26. McEvilley in ibid., pp. 26–7.
27. McEvilley in ibid., pp. 27–9.
28. McEvilley in ibid., p. 30.
29. McEvilley in ibid., p. 41.
30. McEvilley in ibid., p. 48.
31. McEvilley in ibid., pp. 45–6.
32. Stich, *Yves Klein*, pp. 81–130.
33. McEvilley in Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, p. 41.
34. Stich, *Yves Klein*, pp. 171–91.
35. McEvilley in Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, p. 50.
36. McEvilley in ibid., p. 50.
37. Stich, *Yves Klein*, pp. 192–201.
38. Ibid., pp. 155–7.
39. Ibid., pp. 223–31.
40. Ibid., pp. 210–21; McEvilley in Klein, *Yves Klein 1928–1962: A Retrospective*, pp. 62–73.
41. McEvilley in ibid., pp. 59–60.
42. McEvilley in ibid., p. 80.

4

Alchemy in American art?

Esoteric trends had entered the literature and visual art of the United States from the legacy of the Romantic poets and philosophers with their nature-centred spirituality – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) and Edmund Burke (1729–1797) – and the Romantic poets in Britain. The Romantic Movement was adapted to the conditions of the United States by the metaphysical poets Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who had been influenced additionally by the Hindu scriptures and their concept of the universal presence of Being. In the 1920s other alternative spiritualities were explored, such as Theosophy, astrology, kabbalism, as well as indigenous native traditions. Georgia O'Keefe (1887–1986), for example, was interested in the existence of the fourth dimension as expressed in Einstein's equations of space-time. She also practised numerology (the esoteric interpretation of numbers).[1]

The impact of esoteric ideas on the later post-war American modernists was due to Kandinsky's theoretical text *On the Spiritual in Art* and the exhibition in 1945 of 200 of his paintings in New York. Moreover, the presence of artists such as Duchamp and Breton in New York during the Second World War had a decisive effect on the development of modernist principles and on the esoteric interests of some major experimental artists. In 1939–45 Breton, Masson, Ernst and Matta fled to New York from the German occupation of France. The architect Roberto Matta Echaurren (1911–2002) had joined the Surrealists in 1936, but he was expelled by Breton in 1947, though later reinstated. In 1941–42 Matta's explorations of automatism inspired the work of young painters, notably Hans Hoffman (1880–1966), Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). Breton himself publicized his own Surrealist precepts and political affiliations throughout the length and breadth of the Americas. Artists in New York were also exposed to the occultist theories of Kurt Seligmann (1900–1962) in his *History of Magic* (New York: Pantheon, 1948),

where he placed a heavy emphasis on alchemy.[2] Seligmann had left Germany for New York during the Second World War.

James Elkins, however, has argued, quite reasonably, that there was only a passing interest in alchemy on the part of younger artists resident in New York in the late 1940s and 1950s. Any such interest was restricted to merely one moment inspired by the reading of Jung and Seligmann. Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), for example, experimented with Jungian psychology, although his interest (it has been argued) was superficial.[3] He did produce one work called *Alchemy* (1947), but this title was given to the work not by himself, but by his neighbours in East Hampton, Ralph Manheim and his wife.[4] Similarly, Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974) produced just one image based on this topic entitled *The Alchemist* (1945). Yet the lack of interest in alchemy does not mean that the American modernists in New York were not interested in other mystical or religious systems. In the 1940s they were experimenting with a broad range of spiritual practices. A major influence on New York experimentation had entered the New York art scene from the creative work being undertaken at Black Mountain College, whose effects pervaded the artistic scene of the 1950s and into the 1960s. Zen Buddhism, in particular, had been a foremost inspiration from the 1940s on artists such as the musician John Cage (1912–1992), the dancer Merce Cunningham (b. 1919) and a younger generation of artists, most specifically, Jasper Johns (b. 1930) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008). They had encountered Zen religion in Eugene Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), as well as in the teachings of the Japanese Zen master D.T. Suzuki (Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, 1870–1966).

In contrast to the superficial interest in mysticism on the part of the abstract expressionists in general, Barnett Newman (1905–1970) had a profound commitment to the Jewish mystical tradition. In his abstract paintings such as *Abraham* (1949) and *Adam* (1951–52) the invisible geometry of the picture plane is governed by the ratios of kabbalistic numerology. There had been no detailed discussion of Newman's esoteric interests in earlier accounts of his work, and it was not until 1994 that the historian Matthew Baigell proposed a kabbalistic interpretation.[5] Baigell's interpretation is underplayed even in the latest critical literature,[6] despite the fact that Newman named many of his early paintings after figures in the Old Testament who play a symbolic role in kabbalism. The prime concern in the majority of critical essays, nevertheless, remains formalist, engaged with Newman's topographical organization of the painted surface.[7] Newman himself, having encountered the severe resistance of audience, patrons and critics to his metaphysical concerns, ceased to employ such titles in the 1960s. In addition, it may be that he himself doubted that any symbolic system could express the traumatic conditions of the second half of the twentieth century. By the 1960s, most critics concur that Newman was restricting his ambitions solely to the investigation of materials.[8] None the

less, his earlier writings on the theme of the Sublime reveal its personal and spiritual significance for him.[9]

Esoteric influences have been associated with a number of other important members of the American avant-garde of the 1960s, even though their grasp of such ideas was tenuous and not deeply explored. Scholars such as Suzanne Delehunty, for example, have suggested that the drawings and sculptures of Cy Twombly (b. 1928) were influenced by alchemical theory, chiefly in his self-image as an artist magically creating order out of chaos.[10] Further, there have been suggestions that an alchemical meaning may also be ascribed to the enchanting, but delicately menacing, assemblages of Joseph Cornell (1903–1972).[11] Cornell made what he called 'white magic' out of precious but discarded artefacts that he retrieved from second-hand shops. He re-assembled these objects in glass-lidded boxes, attributing them with the quality of fetishes, somewhat like the magical talismans used in casting spells.

In a later generation and in a different conceptual context, the sculptor Carl André (b. 1935) has displayed a substantial interest in chemistry in his installations such as *Steel-Magnesium Plain* (1960). Typically, this consists of a series of steel and magnesium tiles placed on the floor in a chequer-board pattern which the audience is expected to breach. André attempted to energize the installation space through this specific combination of materials. In another context he has recalled how he used to own a chemistry set as a child, whose memory has left a permanent impression on him. He used to collect rocks and other minerals and read about the properties of chemical elements and chemical reactions when powders of different minerals were combined together.[12]

From these relatively slight allusions to alchemical symbology it cannot be said that alchemy has been a substantial interest on the part of the New York avant-garde. Yet it is not surprising to find that it has attracted more attention from artists based in California. Since the 1960s the activities of the West Coast American counter-culture have generated an engagement with a bewildering variety of occultist practices and alternative religious beliefs. There have been two particularly influential artists who have adopted alchemical ideas, both of them in an individualistic manner that has owed little allegiance to any conceptual grouping. Both have worked on an ambitious physical scale.

Working in an international arena has been Eric Orr (1939–1998), whose sculptures and installations are the very epitome of 'alchemical art'.[13] The critic Thomas McEvilley has worked in collaboration with Orr, and has acted as his spokesperson in presenting his work to an international audience.[14] The raw materials selected by Orr have inclined towards primal atavistic substances such as blood, fire, iron and natural lightning bolts. Orr created arresting works that looked back to the Renaissance alchemical tradition, as well as making a futuristic statement with substantial dramatic impact. In Los Angeles from 1966 he collaborated with artists such as James Turrell and Robert Irwin in a movement that they called 'Light and Space Art'.

Unlike the minimalist artists of New York, Orr's dominating interest lay in ancient religious and magical systems, shamanism most especially, as well as in Egyptian magic and Western occultism. Orr intended the effect of his work to be that of an emotional and mystical catharsis. To this end, he believed that it was vital to recover the lost esoteric knowledge of the past and of world culture. During his travels to Zaire and the New Hebrides he made contacts with shamans and discovered the practice of using blood as a sculptural material.[15] This led to a series of paintings in which he mixed blood with the pigments in order to create works that would have a theurgic effect on the audience. Blood was often regarded by the alchemists as the mystic prime matter, specifically in the fourteenth-century alchemy of Arnald of Villanova.

Alchemy was the specific theme in much of Orr's installation work in the 1970s and 1980s. In his *Silence and the Ion Wind* (1981) the materials of the work consisted of light, shadow and space, along with gold and lead. Air was fed through an aperture of lead into a gold accumulator containing an ion wind. The audience was conducted through several different rooms which culminated in one the colour of gold. Orr was aiming to produce an effect of profound silence. The first room contained an acoustically active space, but the silence increased as the viewer proceeded onwards through the different spaces. The final Golden Room itself was approached through an ion wind which increased in force until in the Golden Room it was at its most intense. At this point a visual loop was formed in which the gaze of the viewer was returned to the original starting point.[16]

During the 1990s Eric Orr installed a number of gigantic installations in public spaces, such as *Fire Window* (1996), located in Viaduct Harbour in Auckland, New Zealand, along an outdoor sculpture trail. It consists of a cast-iron window frame standing on a two metre-high black granite base. A window pane is created out of the heat waves exuding from gas jets hidden in the frame. Water flows over the window. A timing device causes the gas jets to burst into flame. The sculpture alludes to the unpredictable forces of nature. Another even more spectacular sculpture is also located in New Zealand. This is *The Electrum Project* (1998), commissioned by a private patron and installed on a farm outside Auckland. In this undertaking Orr worked in collaboration with Greg Leyh, a high-voltage engineer from Lightning on Demand (LOD), a firm based in San Francisco. The material used is gigantic bolts of electricity. Standing 11.5 metres high, the work consists of a column with a sphere on the top. Inside the pillar is a 130,000 watt Tesla coil, the largest in the world. Lightning is discharged 15 metres in all directions from the sphere at the top.[17] Like some atavistic object of worship from the time of the Assyrians, or Egyptians as depicted in old Hollywood epics, it references the pillar of flame in the Book of Exodus. The nearest comparison is Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, in which lightning rods are set in a field outside de Maria's house so that they trap the excess electricity of Midwest hurricanes,

a spectacle that recalls creation myths and the forces of the Big Bang. Both of these installations can be regarded as alchemical works *par excellence*, using massive electrical charges to transmute matter by means of actual chemical reactions. The ancient alchemists could only have envied them.

Eric Orr's work, however, lacks any overt political content, and in many respects his practice has been a continuation of avant-garde interests in abstract form and innovatory materials. For all its dramatic intensity, *The Electrum Project* does not speak any text other than that of its own material presence as hyper-epic poetry. The alchemical connotations of the metals and the electronic forces employed are subsidiary to the presentation of the visual spectacle. The works have the tremendous atavistic authority of prehistoric megaliths transposed into the materials of the twentieth century.

A more Hermetic presence within American art has been that of Jess Collins (Burgess Frank Collins, 1923–2004) known simply as 'Jess'. He was born, lived and exhibited his collages and assemblages mostly in California, although his international importance as an artist is increasingly being acknowledged. His work is complicit with the irreverent, live-for-the-moment lifestyle of the 1960s counter-culture, yet it also has a serious political edge. Initially, Jess had trained as a chemist. He was employed on the Manhattan Project, and after the war, on the Hanford Atomic Energy Project. He abandoned this career in horror at the effects of nuclear weapons, enrolling instead at the California School of the Arts (San Francisco Art Institute) in 1949. From 1951 he had a life-long relationship with the poet Robert Duncan (1919–1998). They inaugurated the King Ubu Gallery with painter Harry Jacobus in 1952, which was of crucial importance in promoting experimental art forms.

Jess was foremost in working with Popist-style collage in the 1950s using book illustration and comic strips such as *Dick Tracy*, remodelled as *Tricky Cad*. His ideas were taken from alchemy, the occult and chemistry, while a constant theme was that of homosexual culture and its fetishistic concerns with youthful masculine beauty. Throughout his life Jess fought for gay political and cultural liberation. His first important series of paintings was the *Translations* (1959–76). The last of his works was *Narkissos* (San Francisco MOMA), distantly referencing Dalí's painting. This was begun in 1959, and it comprises a graphite drawing with collaged elements on a large scale, 1.8 × 1.5 metres. The imagery is copied by hand from found elements that Jess had accumulated over twenty years. Like all of his work, the style subscribes to a 1960s-style hallucinogenic imagery incorporating luminous (dazzling) colour and obsessive graphic detail. His work reached a national audience in 1993–94 through his retrospective touring exhibition *Jess: A Grand Collage, 1951–1993*.[18]

The question has to be asked why the alchemical discourse has roused so little interest on the part of avant-garde artists based in New York. The answer lies in the fact that alchemy has never been an integral part of American culture historically in the same way as it has in Europe. This does not, however,

explain the engagement of West Coast artists with the subject. The reasons for their preoccupation with alchemy are probably the same as those of some Australian artists on the other side of the Pacific Rim. Lifestyles reliant on a hot climate play an important role in the pursuit of alternative spiritualities which have evolved independently of the commercial hub of New York.

The lack of interest on the part of New York artists may be due to a peculiarity in the character of alchemy itself. For, whether as a spiritual path, a science of matter or an artistic trajectory, the alchemical tradition has never been an independent historical phenomenon in its own right. The alchemists have created their texts and imagery in the shadow of a strong institutionalized religion and its dependent culture, whether this has been Christian, Islamic, Indian or Chinese. Within their respective geographical areas, the different alchemical traditions have enacted the role of a shadow culture into which there has overflowed everything lacking a place in the hegemonic discourse, whether religious or political. In contrast, the cultural context in which the New York avant-garde of the 1960s operated was vacuous, lacking any indigenous cultural inheritance. The artists had mostly gravitated into the city from other regions and nations. This is what makes the production of Barnett Newman so exceptional, in that his own Jewish heritage was the dominating factor in his kabbalistic art practice.

The situation had been very different during the 1920s, when the early modernist avant-garde in New York had maintained intimate contact with European culture. In the post-war product of the late 1940s through to the 1960s, this European influence was deliberately discontinued by critics, historians and investor-patrons. Consequently, where occultism, and specifically alchemy, has emerged in American art, it has done so away from the international commercial centre of New York and has manifested in the context of more private belief systems and aspirations.

Within the European intellectual sphere, it is possible to argue that the indigenous German Hermetic tradition has left an important legacy in the work of Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Rebecca Horn and Sigmar Polke, among others. Their alchemical products may even be interpreted as a new type of Hermetic text, a contemporary alchemy which is an inheritance from the past, one that could not exist outside that native historical framework. The reason for the deployment of this German intellectual inheritance is to salvage and redeem the bitter legacy of that country's more recent history.

Notes

1. Janet Souter, *Georgia O'Keefe* (New York: Parkstone, 2005).
2. John F. Moffitt, 'Hermeticism in Modern Art: An Introduction', *Cauda Pavonis: The Hermetic Text Society Newsletter*, 6/1 (1987), 1–5.

3. Claude Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: Psychoanalytic Drawings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); J. Wolfe, 'Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock's Imagery', *artforum*, 11/11 (1972), 65–73.
4. Lucy Flint, 'Jackson Pollock *Alchemy* (1947)', Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection, www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/piece/?search=Alchemy&page=&f=Title&object=76.2553.150.
5. Matthew Baigell, 'Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take', *American Art*, 8/2 (1994), 32–43.
6. In the standard texts there is no mention of any esoteric interests, just references to a broad interest in metaphysics: for example, Ann Temkin (ed.), *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art; London: Tate Publishing, 2002).
7. Ibid., pp. 164, 192, 229.
8. Ibid., pp. 94–9.
9. Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', in 'The Idea of Art: 6 Opinions on What is Sublime in Art?', *The Tiger's Eye*, 9/10 (1949), 122–6. See also Lawrence Alloway, 'The American Sublime', *Living Arts*, 2/6 (1963), 11–22.
10. Suzanne Delehunty, 'The Alchemy of Mind and Hand', *Art International*, 2 (1976).
11. Charles Simic, *Dime-store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1992); Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination – Joseph Cornell's Dreams* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
12. James Meyer (ed.), *Cuts: Carl Andre Texts 1959–2004* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 140–41, 148.
13. Eric Orr, Thomas McEvilley and James Lee Byars, *Eric Orr: A Twenty-year Survey* (San Diego, CA: SDSU Art Council, 1984); Eric Orr and Thomas McEvilley, *Zero Mass: The Art of Eric Orr* (Lund, Sweden: Anders Tornberg Gallery, 1990).
14. Thomas McEvilley, 'Journeys In and Out of the Body: Proto-materialism of Eric Orr', *Images and Issues*, 1 (1981), 18–20.
15. Rory Johnstone, 'A Journey of Discovery on the River of Life: Blood and the Art of Eric Orr', *eSharp*, *Issue 4: Journeys of Discovery*, 4/1 (2005), www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41157_en.pdf.
16. Eric Orr and Thomas McEvilley, wall label for the installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980.
17. Eric Orr, *The Electrum Project* (1998), www.lightninglab.org/Projects/electrum/index.htm.
18. John Ashbery, Thomas Evans and Lisa Arnot, *Jess: To and From the Printed Page* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2007); Jess Collins, *Jess, a Grand Collage, 1951–1991*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Fine Arts and Albright Knox Art Gallery, 1993).

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5

Redemption

In the manner of the early avant-garde, Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) regarded his practice in the light of a spiritual activity, as an alchemy that would contribute to the development of human consciousness.[1] His art, he believed, was a ritual action tantamount to an act of redemption for the atrocities of the war period. History could be cleansed, not by belittling its tragedy, but by re-engaging with it symbolically. Beuys' art is a penitential act reconstituting and re-consecrating contemporary German society.[2] The critic Donald Kuspit has argued that Beuys' art had a Utopian aspect that involved the audience in a process of the healing of wounds and renewing of strength. His work was an attempt at social therapy, 'the afterbirth of a magical attempt at self-and world-renewal'.[3]

Influenced by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, Beuys restored the modernist notion of the artist as Christ-typos for whom self-imposed discipline and emotional isolation were the price to be paid for individual and universal salvation. Beuys stated that his intention was 'to stress the idea of transformation and of substance'. He identified himself with the shaman, whose work was to cause change and development. By his very nature, the shaman was a healer.[4] To this end, Beuys adopted a variety of primitive substances with atavistic associations such as fat, as well as abject materials such as used batteries and other domestic and medical debris[5] (fig. 5.1).

He abandoned aesthetics altogether as a factor in his work, substituting ritualized actions and emblematic structures. Kuspit has commented on Beuys' deliberated regression to the use of primitive materials, identifying his intention as being ethnographic, rather than 'primitivistic' as in historic modernism.[6] In fact, Kuspit denies that Beuys' artefacts can be identified as art at all, for they regress to an era when art objects were magical, communal fetishes.[7] The ritualistic character of his performance work and installation is defended by Kuspit, who denies that it was in any way 'gratuitously theatrical'. Beuys' work was a development of currents within the Arte Povera movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, whose rationale was expounded

5.1 Joseph Beuys, *Fat Battery* (1963) (sculpture, felt, fat, tin, wood and board)

by the critic Germano Celant in his Turin exhibition (1970).[8] The central idea of Arte Povera was the use of 'poor' materials, initially simply pencil and paper and basic geometrical form.

Unfortunate ambiguities have arisen concerning Beuys' specific aim both in his actions, *Aktionen*, and in his installations. He has been roundly criticized for authoritarian, even fascistic tendencies, since he seemed to be proclaiming himself as the spiritual messiah of contemporary Germany. Kuspit has defended Beuys, arguing that the introduction of alchemical allegory into his work has altered it in an ideologically acceptable manner so that it has become less rhetorical and more specific to his own personal life history. The alchemical content converted his practice into an expression of individual myth-making in which he was not aiming to speak for the collective whole, as had the historic fascistic cults. Beuys performed actions in which the concept of spiritual birth and death were central. However, as Kuspit admits, spiritual death and rebirth is not freed from the political misuse of the idea in which people are sacrificed so that a few can be reborn.[9]

In Hannah Arendt's study of the effects of Nazism and Stalinism, she argued that such totalitarian regimes had caused permanent fractures in

historical continuity, resulting in the disintegration of humane moral codes in the body politic. Arendt perceived that modernity was characterized by what she termed the loss of the world – that is, the elimination of individual involvement in the public sphere in favour of a retreat to a private world of economic concerns. Politics and action had been replaced by bureaucracy, laborious toil and the manipulation of public opinion. Arendt argued that significant fragments had to be redeemed from the past by means of a selective, critical appropriation. This process could revivify the past and re-establish some degree of continuity with history so that it could serve as the foundation of a positive future political order.[10]

Arendt's model, in fact, effectively describes Beuys' intentions as well as those of two other artists born immediately after the end of the war, Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) and Sigmar Polke (b. 1941). They have addressed the history of the recent past in order to interrogate the issue of their own culpability. Like Beuys, they had an obsessive desire to make sense of that which is void of all sense. For their attempt, they have been similarly criticized on account of their seeming naivety, romanticism, flawed ideological structures, and not least, their voyeurism as spectators at an atrocity.

The recourse of these three artists to alchemy is revealing. Speaking through the forms of the alchemical allegories, they are empowered to address that which is otherwise denied to them as subject. Alchemy provides a condensed set of images, richly textured, with multi-faceted and paradoxical meanings. By means of indirect references to historical events, the symbolic alchemical texts avert the pollution and de-sacralization of history, helping to preserve the distance between the spectator and the historical figures.

In recording traumatic events, the concept of history itself has to be rewritten. Walter Benjamin has criticized the notion of linear causal history and he has rejected linear temporality for another formation, that of a constellation, or a cluster of events and meanings which inter-relate the past with the present. Benjamin emphasizes, moreover, the history of the individual, in which can be found the truth of history.[11] Hence, it is within the oral history of trauma, such as that of the Holocaust and its archive, that the possibility of redemption exists. Each individual must make sense as they can, or cannot, of what they have endured. This cannot be done on their behalf by another agent. No one can usurp the right of historical witnesses to describe their own history and their continued endurance of its memory.

Historical encounters with genocide may assume that, rather than the discourse of secondary authority, a more appropriate response to trauma would be silence, leaving a void within the text. There exists a danger, however, that a historical event may thereby be rendered sacrosanct, untouchable, resulting in a mystification that reduces both its historical significance and its authority as witness. Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) called for the maintenance of silence in art's response to historical trauma. He argued that the artist deals

with unavoidable conflicts arising from the socio-historical process. In the ensuing artwork such conflicts are communicated to the viewer, leading to lack of clarity in their interpretation of it.[12] According to this line of argument, it is evident that the artefacts made by artists such as Beuys and Kiefer are fated to be riddled with unresolved ethical problems.

In comparison to Adorno's silence, Beuys' performances and installations were vocal concerning the major political issues of his time. From the outset he asserted his public role as spiritual leader and educator in devising strategies that were oppositional to capitalism. To this end, he eliminated the artefact, using instead conceptual modes as banal as hours, days and weeks of chalk, talk and blackboard, or woefully-inept piano-playing. His highly publicized *Coyote* performance took place in New York in May 1974 as a critical rejection of American culture. Beuys was delivered to the gallery in an ambulance, covered in felt and lying on a stretcher. He flatly refused to look at the country of his destination. A coyote lived with Beuys in a cage for a week, their sojourn together being punctuated at one point by an action in which Beuys covered himself entirely in felt, thereby deeply disturbing the animal. In this performance, Beuys was referring to Native American shamans and their spirit companions who take the forms of wild creatures. It was an action in defence of ecology and Native American culture, and an attack on the destruction of land and peoples by the capitalistic profit motive.

Beuys was a member of the Fluxus group, an international network of experimental artists, performers, musicians and writers whose political intention was to challenge capitalism. Hence, in his concern to democratize art practice, Beuys produced multiple versions of his works so that they would be cheap enough to be purchased by ordinary people. Most of the multiples had the theme of healing by alchemical means, such as the Sun-disk (1973) coated in gold-coloured plate that alluded to the medicinal philosophers' gold. Other healing references were found in his multiple *Mirror-piece* (1975), a glass bottle which contained an iodine crystal. Iodine is an inexpensive universal medicine used in both folk medicine and in orthodox treatment. The crystal was placed in a bottle painted silver on the inside and dark brown on the outside. A small peep-hole was left, through which the viewer could view the crystal. The colour was reflected in the silver walls of the bottle, colouring them a radiant yellow. The healing references were continued in a variety of other works related to alchemy through its colours of yellow-gold and silver (Sun and Moon, male and female). In these installations Beuys presented himself as a Paracelsian physician and a socialistic chemist.

Other assemblages were deliberately associated with the history of the death camps as a type of archaeological specimen, most especially the installation *Concentration Camp* (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1958). It includes a photograph of a starved girl, charred remains, bottles of poison, pieces of German sausage, a dead rat and blocks of fat on electric plates. In other works

the same reference was made through the use of decaying materials, such as army medical equipment, hospital rolls of bandages in metal containers dating from the 1940s, chipped white enamel hand-bowls, ancient bottles of dried-up iodine and other medicines used for treating wounds. He made several sets of these, doubling the elements so that they reflected each other across the space of a glass vitrine, which recalled a glass coffin, as in *Vitrine Double-Object* (Tate Modern, 1974–79). Another work was a sulphur-painted zinc box with a corner into which a used bandage was inserted like a tampon, *Untitled* (1968). Beuys plugged the corners of gallery spaces with used bandages and hospital lint, disrupting the conventions of gallery display and 'healing' the commercial space by these actions.

Felt provided one of his most important emblems, signifying his apocryphal salvation by Tartar nomads when his Stuka plane was supposedly shot down on the Russian front in the Caucasus. Works in which this material has been forefronted have included *Stripes from the House of the Shaman* (1962–72), in which he displayed objects made of felt. In the large installation *Plight* (1986) at the Centre Pompidou, Beuys enclosed a grand piano in bales of felt, both protecting the instrument and stifling its sound. He designed pyjamas made of felt which, like the *Fat Chair* (1964),[13] have associations with the pyjamas worn by the camp prisoners.[14]

Beuys used fat as an alchemical material. It was both chaotic prime matter and a healing substance. The assemblage *Fat Chair* (1964) consisted of an old chair on the seat of which had been placed a large wedge of fat, tinted a gold colour with sulphur (fig. 5.2). It recalled the harvesting of human flesh and bones in the death camps for industrial purposes. The fat on the chair took the anthropomorphic form of a melted human body. Referring to Paracelsian homeopathy, Beuys argued that like must be healed with like. The history of the massacred victims would be redeemed through this ritualistic art practice. Beuys was referencing the alchemical furnace as the site of the purification of prime matter. It would transform death into life, warming the coldness of prime matter. Kuspit comments that this position certainly has its dangers, almost as if, on occasion, Beuys was arguing some sort of justification for the Holocaust, as had the Nazis themselves. The question arises as to whether Beuys believed that Germany had emerged from the war in an improved condition.[15] This issue is left ambiguous, and has left a taint on his practice.

Beuys had an equally strong interest in the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, which, according to John Moffitt, were his dominating inspiration. It was due to his interests in Anthroposophy that Beuys determined to transform the idea of sculpture and of art itself. Steiner had rejected the material manifestations of the modern world in favour of a quest for self-knowledge leading to cosmic consciousness. Accordingly, Beuys stated that the nature of his sculpture was never fixed and finished, but that chemical processes continued in them, decay, desiccation, colour changes.[16]

5.2 Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair* (1964–85) (mixed media, 183 × 155 × 64 cm) © DACS 2009. © Tate, London 2010

Science, art and religion were the three elements of Beuys' art.[17] On this basis, Beuys developed the idea of 'social sculpture', in which the moulding processes of art are a metaphor for the reshaping of society.[18] Steiner, in his book *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss* (1909),[19] had taught a concept of human evolution in which new organs of perception and higher sensory faculties would be developed, leading to the vision of a totally different world. He believed that humanity would regress eventually to the conditions of the Golden Age. In his doctrine, the figure of Jesus Christ was central since he could lead humanity

back to the remembrance of its own divine origins. Steiner believed that humans had descended from a god-like state, and had become physically hardened and condensed into material form. In 1977 Beuys used Steiner's terms in discussing the nature of fat, which was lighter and more mobile and tending towards the condition of fluidity, 'a material which, in the end, refers to EVERYTHING, to ALL forms in the world and not only to artistic forms'. Beuys believed that all the problems of the human race were related to the issue of specific form, 'and that is the totalized concept of Art'.[20]

According to Moffitt, Beuys was reinterpreting the role of art-making according to three categories, those of Process, Conceptual Art and Performance Art. Art was the high point of all human endeavour, whether spiritual, psychological, scientific or empirically activist. Beuys appropriated the role of Christ-Messiah, the healer in Steiner's terms. The new humanity would be Christ-like.[21] In his *Action Show Your Wounds* (February 1976) Beuys presented visual metaphors of sickness and death, such as a dissection table, two zinc boxes coated with translucent fat and other objects.[22] In another action, *How to Explain Art to a Dead Hare* (Schmela Gallery, Dusseldorf, November 1965), Beuys, his face covered in gold leaf, lectured on art to a dead hare cradled in his arms. The hare was a form of alchemical Mercury-Christ, Beuys' animal familiar, a creature belonging both to Heaven and Earth. He explained that for him the hare was a symbol of the Incarnation of Christ in human form. Gold and honey indicated the transformation of the brain and of thought.[23]

However, an accurate assessment of Beuys' artistic achievement should be carried out within a broader text than that of magus and shaman. In the late 1980s the critic Hal Foster, writing in *artforum*, demanded that the modernist avant-garde be acknowledged for its genuinely radical social values, rather than being dismissed for its bourgeois romanticism.[24] Of central importance to Beuys was his political involvement with the radical politics of the late 1960s in Dusseldorf, as well as his Green Party activities in the 1970s and 1980s. As well as being a convincing political agitator, Beuys regarded education as the most urgent aspect of his work as an artist.[25] Moffitt has traced this sense of public duty and leadership to the influence of Rudolf Steiner. He was an activist, and to him inactivity was no more than ignorance.[26]

Joseph Beuys became the mentor for a generation of artists born in Germany immediately after the Second World War similarly seeking to re-enter history and retrieve the cultural gold buried in its ashes. The paintings and sculptures of Anselm Kiefer have been a direct response to Beuys, taking the form of a critical enquiry into German history and myth. Kiefer simultaneously maintains and denies Beuys' discourse of hope and redemption. Although born after the Second World War, Kiefer accepted the blood-guilt of the preceding generation. He was in contact with Beuys from 1971 in Dusseldorf, and paid visits to the older artist until about 1973. He has acknowledged Beuys as his mentor in art, spirit and politics. Although Kiefer adopted from Beuys

the notion of the socially regenerative role of the artist and his artwork and has retained this vision throughout his working life, none the less the contrast in the working method of the two is striking. In effect, he is producing a new type of history painting, the traditional genre in which great public affairs are displayed for moral edification. Kiefer, however, finds that there is no longer any shared mythology or spiritual belief system, and his purpose is to re-create such a common language.[27]

Mark Rosenthal argues, none the less, that Kiefer is not a history painter as such and has no real interest in recording history in documentary mode.[28]

The mood of his paintings and installations is black and dejected. Kiefer, like Beuys, employs commonplace materials (sand, lead, glass) in an atmospheric of loss and death. Despite his allusions to the occult, alchemy, the Tarot and the kabbalah, Kiefer's pictures are not luminously spiritual. On the contrary, the canvases are grey and colourless with unfocused images. He employs dead materials such as sand, dried flowers, dry straw and iron. There are few figurative elements. Unlike Beuys, Kiefer avoids organic materials and any human bodily references, nor does he forefront his own persona as a character in the work. The mood is that of the depressed materialism of the 1980s, not of the humanistic counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

From 1969, commencing with a series of artists' books containing staged photographs, Kiefer began to explore and adapt in an ironic manner the iconography of Nazi Germany. Simultaneously, he was referencing the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic landscape tradition, such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and the work of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). In a series of watercolours around 1970 he first introduced imagery of native German land and forests.[29] Subsequently, from 1973 he worked with the theme of the artist's studio, which he located in the context of German Romantic and Nazi iconography. In the painting *Vater, Sohn, Heiligen Geist* ('Father, Son, Holy Ghost') (1975) Kiefer depicts three fires burning on three stools in an attic studio constructed out of deeply grained wood, recalling archaic Teutonic architecture. The fires refer both to the alchemical forces of energy and life as well as to the destructive forces of the Holocaust. Rosenthal comments that Kiefer's studio is a metaphysical space, the equivalent of the thinking mind, and in this space the artist performs rituals in order to re-organize history.[30]

In the early 1980s Kiefer began to incorporate fascist myth into a series of paintings and assemblages on the theme of Nazi architecture and myth, as in *To the Unknown Painter* (1983). He simultaneously engaged Aryan cults of German earth and German blood (*Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe*, 1984–86),[31] exploring the Teutonic iconography of the medieval sagas in their dark forests and wooden halls with flaming hearths. He inter-related such imagery with that of the Holocaust, as in his giant woodcut collage of photographs and painted portraits *Wege der Weltweisheit – die Hermannschlacht* ('Ways of

Worldly Wisdom – the Battle of Arminius') (1978). In his paintings of Teutonic and Wagnerian myth, such as *Parsifal I* (1973), he incorporated other icons of Germanic folk culture, addressing the question of whether such myths could ever be redeemed. Could they be emptied of their fascistic history, or would they remain forever a complicit part of Nazism?

In the early 1970s Kiefer had abandoned minimalism and conceptualism, as well as photography and performance, in favour of a return to painting. This revival of expressionistic painting was simultaneously affecting other German artists, such as Georg Baselitz (b. 1938), A.R. Penck (Ralf Winkler, b. 1939) and Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). They can be accused of abandoning the radical politicized practices of the 1960s for the production of commodity artefacts, the painting being the foundation of the investment art market. Moreover, Kiefer's change of direction in the 1970s towards the investigation of nationalist myth led to vehement accusations of fascism. Certainly, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Kiefer was sailing very close to the wind. Among his most problematic works were those relating to the loss of German territory in the east to Poland in 1945. In a lengthy sequence of paintings of dark burnt fields, such as *Markischer Sand V* (1977) (incorporating straw and sand), he mused on the transient historical borders of the German state. He reworked the same theme in books of photographs chemically treated and collaged.

Arguably, the most effective of his paintings have been his reworkings of Albert Speer's projected monuments for the conquered territories in the east, intended to commemorate the dead heroes of the German army. Kiefer reclaimed these in a ritualized alchemical action, repainting the original photographs and re-dedicating the buildings instead to art, as in his *Monument to the Unknown Painter* (1983). He was aiming at a redemptive action in which his inversion of the original Nazi myth would promote recovery from traumatized memory. Kiefer identified himself with the mythological smith Weyland in the Icelandic *Edda* sagas (*c.* 1220), who possessed magical powers. Weyland became Kiefer's alter ego, a personification of his own self-image as an alchemist, the purifier of the dregs of history and forger of a new moral order.[32] Weyland was signified by the symbol of wings in works such as *Wolundlied (mit Fugel)* (1982), a landscape painting in oil with a bird's wing made of lead laid across the canvas.

Kiefer has stated his belief in the power of the artist to represent in art those forces of nature which are imperceptible to others.[33] His alchemical works were constructed with the same intent as those of Beuys, to promote healing in a process of redemption. Kiefer's painting *Athanor* (1983–84), as one example, was based on Speer's design for the outer courtyard of the Reich Chancellery (1934). He re-painted the original design in oil over a photograph on canvas, adding other materials, such as straw. Rosenthal comments that this is the first time that Kiefer had alluded openly to alchemy, although the subject had interested him for several years before. The painting is integrally related to

that of the *Monument to the Unknown Painter* (1983). Rosenthal perceives a process of degeneration in the newer image in which the fabric of the building appears as if burnt and partly disintegrated. Burn spots occur on the canvas. Kiefer believes that the artist is a master of fire, like the alchemist, but this picture of the athanor also recalls the furnaces of the Holocaust in which the Nazis had believed they were purifying the German race.[34]

Other overt allusions to the Holocaust entered Kiefer's imagery from the early 1980s in his recourse to the poem *Todesfuge* ('Death Fugue') (1944), written in a labour camp by a Romanian Jew, Paul Celan (Paul Antschel, 1920–1970). The figures of the Arian Margarethe and the Jewish Shulamith are the focus of a number of Kiefer's works involving the history of the gas chambers and cremation furnaces in paintings such as *Dein goldenes Haar, Margarethe* (1981). In *Shulamithe* (1983) Kiefer referenced a photograph of Wilhelm Kreis' *Funeral Hall for the Great German Soldiers* in Berlin (1939). The name of the Jewish victim Shulamithe is written across Kiefer's painting, and he has blackened the windows and darkened the roof as if it had been burnt. The *Hall of Heroes* is transformed into a cremation oven.

Kiefer's iconic installation *The High Priestess/Zweistromland* (1985–87) comprises 200 lead books, signifying the alchemical prime matter, which are located in two steel bookcases. *The High Priestess* is the name of the second card of the Tarot pack of cards,[35] while the term *Zweistromland* is an allusion to the 'land of two rivers', Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization bounded by the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Kiefer is referring in addition to Jorge Luis Borges' novel *The Library of Babel*. The left-hand bookcase represents the Tigris, and the right-hand the Euphrates. The materials include copper wire (recalling Beuys' work) and glass which is generated in a nuclear reaction. The size of the whole installation is about 4.3 × 8 × 9 metres.[36] These bookcases stand at right angles to each other in the form of an open book. Some of the lead volumes on the shelves are empty of content, while others contain images and objects such as glass, copper wire and peas. The imagery consists of aerial photography of cities and communication systems in a state of decay, scenes being taken from the Middle East and Germany. The lead materials symbolize Saturn, both as alchemical prime matter and as god of the Golden Age. Lead also offers some physical protection from nuclear fall-out. Kiefer has included two test tubes containing water.

The exploration of nationalistic icons in the 1990s eventually caused Kiefer to develop a type of black alchemy which he explored in *The High Priestess* and in his later drawings of black sunflowers. Unlike Beuys, Kiefer remains ambivalent concerning the possibility of transmuting evil into spiritual gold. His alchemical world-view is one in which everything eventually decays. If there is a spiritual world, then its contact with this world is peripheral, glimpsed through a glass darkly. Given human character and circumstance, the Sun has to darken, gold to decay.

Since the 1980s, in fact, the theme of the abject nature of human life, history and culture has dominated the practice of many other artists. Certain photographers in particular, retaining an interest in traditional chemical procedures, have explored the theme of the decay and degeneration of the socio-political order. In the chemical work of the darkroom they have adopted for themselves the character of alchemist and magician. Artists such as Sigmar Polke and Christopher Webster, for example, picture the loss of hope in Western society as the stage of the *nigredo*, the blackening prior to the purification of consciousness by the alchemical fire of self-knowledge and necessary political change.

Notes

1. Donald Kuspit, 'Beuys: Fat, Felt, and Alchemy', in *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1986), p. 349.
2. Ibid., p. 350.
3. Ibid., p. 348.
4. Ibid., p. 352.
5. Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys: We Go This Way* (London: Violette Editions, 1988).
6. Kuspit, 'Beuys: Fat, Felt, and Alchemy', p. 347.
7. Ibid.
8. Germano Celant, *Arte povera* (Turin: U. Allemandi, 1989).
9. John F. Moffitt, *Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-garde* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003), pp. 354–5.
10. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, [1951] 1958); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
11. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; German vol. ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999).
12. Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
13. In fact, there exist several versions of the *Fat Chair*, a theme which absorbed Beuys *c.* 1964–85. The best-known example is that of 1964, located in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. There exists another in the Tate Gallery, London, dated 1964–85 (accession no. AR00088).
14. Joseph Beuys, *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*, compiled by Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990).
15. Kuspit, 'Beuys: Fat, Felt, and Alchemy', p. 354.
16. John F. Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-garde Art: The Case of Joseph Beuys* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1988), p. 109.
17. Ibid., p. 110.
18. Ibid., p. 115.
19. Ibid., p. 116.
20. Ibid., p. 123.
21. Ibid., pp. 143–4.

22. Ibid., p. 147.
23. Ibid., p. 154.
24. Hal Foster, *Recodings* (Washington, DC: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 121ff.
25. Beuys' self-assessment is recorded in a commemorative text issued soon after his death in 1986; see Joseph Beuys, *In Memoriam Joseph Beuys: Obituaries, Essays, Speeches* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1986).
26. Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-garde Art*, p. 11.
27. James N. Wood, 'Foreword', in Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Chicago, IL and Philadelphia, PA: Art Institute of Chicago and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987), p. 7.
28. Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 10.
29. Ibid., pp. 14–22.
30. Ibid., p. 22.
31. For a synopsis of Kiefer's practice, see the catalogue to the Anselm Kiefer exhibition *Isis: Land of the Two Streams* (London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1989). A recent assessment of his practice is Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
32. Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 89.
33. Ibid., p. 99.
34. Ibid., p. 115.
35. Ibid., p. 11.
36. Ibid., p. 9.

6

Black alchemy: The photographic laboratory

In the 1980s the image of the magisterial artist was rejected by many practitioners who had come to regard modernism as defunct, for art was corrupted by its complicity with the international investment market (in the 1980s artworks had become more valuable than gold in an investment portfolio).[1]

In reaction to the erosion of art's political function by its collusion with capitalism, a significant number of artists began to investigate the abject aspects of contemporary society. They rejected the concept of the finely crafted artefact that advocated some elevated spiritual values. Instead, there emerged a type of practice that could be described as a 'black alchemy', in which the decaying fabric of the political order became the *prima materia* of the discourse, with faint hope of its transmutation into any higher moral and spiritual order.

The German artist Sigmar Polke prioritizes the laboratory photographic process so that his chemicals provide the subject matter of the artworks. The literally decaying fabric of his imagery is a metaphor of the social and political fabric of human society.[2] Polke has confronted savage political history such as the Nazi Holocaust and the French Revolution during the years of the Terror.[3] His interest in chemicals extends to the effects of hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD, peyote and 'magic mushrooms'. In the early 1970s he visited the Indian sub-continent, where he photographed abject subjects such as Afghani ganja (hashish) smokers at a bear fight, as well as opium smokers in Pakistan. A painting from that period, *Alice in Wonderland* (1971), is concerned with the hallucinogenic effects of 'magic mushrooms'. Lewis Carroll's Alice was an icon of the counter-culture, and the story was interpreted as a hallucinogenic experience.

Polke was born in East German Silesia in 1941, but in 1945 he resettled in Thuringia. From 1961 his work displayed some influences from American pop art, although a more significant stimulus to his ideas was his encounter with Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus group. As a result, Polke began to produce critical work directed against consumer society. From the outset he adopted

a photographic process involving figurative forms, rather than following international conceptual trends. Photography seemed to be a suitable medium due to its apparent physical connection with its object, thus bridging the gap between sign and signified. Polke, however, was not concerned merely with the image captured, but was more interested in the laboratory photographic processes. He distressed his photographs by incorporating faults such as camera shake and double exposures.[4] Polke reworked his imagery continually, deliberately leaving his prints unfixed so that they continued to develop. He stated that 'a negative is never finished'.[5] He mixed together the developer and the fixer, producing hazy and uneven effects in order to produce accidental expressive effects.[6]

In the darkroom he increased the scale of the prints to a metre in width and then folded them so that the imagery was stained with chemicals. Occasionally, he used paper the size of bedsheets. It was thin technical paper, rather than the usual photographic paper whose surface was covered with silver emulsion in gelatine. In the late 1970s he reworked his earlier negatives by placing silver and gold leaf over the scratches and fingerprints that he himself had caused. In 1978 he returned to his original photos of opium smokers (1974) in Afghanistan, overlaying them with precious metals to indicate the hallucinogenic effects of opium.[7] His negatives of the street people of the Bowery in New York (1973) displayed a world of distress and unnatural displacement. Due to the stains left by the chemical process the prints inscribe an image of the instability of this world, its decaying impermanence.[8]

Polke understood photography in terms of a magical process, not merely as a tool for recording reality. His most ambitious works have been large-scale installations, completely abstract in form, referencing the mineral kingdom and alchemy. For example, in an installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1990) he decorated a niche with a painted canvas covered with precious and semi-precious materials – azurite, cinnabar, malachite, jade and gold. Polke also experimented with heat- and light-sensitive chemicals for the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1986, whose subject was alchemy. Here he showed a set of murals called *Athanor* (1986), in reference to the alchemical furnace.[9] In the semi-circular niche of the pavilion he painted murals with cobalt chloride pigments that reacted to humidity and light. These produced a series of constantly changing effects in reaction to both the climate and the visiting crowds of people. In the midst of this installation he placed a meteorite weighing 455 kilograms and a large crystal. When the press reporters entered the space they were sprinkled with gold leaf. Polke had transmuted the installation into an alchemist's furnace in which he reproduced his darkroom process.[10]

In his works of the 1980s and 1990s Polke even experimented with radioactive materials, in a parallel to Kiefer's discourse on nuclear fall-out. He created photographs using radium in which the rock was placed on photographic

paper, then chemically processed and the prints arranged in a grid-like form. Polke also took photographs of crystals and gold nuggets, studying their geometry through a microscope and entitling them *Wunderkammer* (1990), after the Renaissance cabinet of marvels.

In the 1980s Polke became interested in the history of political disruption when Germans had to deal with the upheavals consequent on the reunification of the eastern communist and western sectors. Polke's concern to interrogate political realities manifested in a series of 22 paintings (1988–99) on the theme of the French Revolution.[11] The bicentenary of the Revolution had occurred in 1989. He found prints made at the time of the Revolution that described the bloody events of the Terror, such as children playing with a severed head. Polke inter-related these with medieval manuscripts illustrating the Book of Revelations. He was intending to demystify the concept of the Revolution, and to this end he read the *Centuries*, a prophetic text written by the sixteenth-century seer Nostradamus which seemed to predict the events of the Terror. At the same time, Polke looked back to the twelfth century in his discovery in a manuscript of some illuminated capitals that incorporated violent imagery. These wildly varying historical viewpoints expressed Polke's distance from all political ideologies and his deep distrust of them and their effects.

In 1982 he painted *Camp* (1982), the first of a number of works dealing with the theme of surveillance and slaughter. It was huge, 4.3 metres high × 2.4 metres wide. The picture showed two inwardly curving fences of barbed wire, one with electric lights against a dark-yellow sky, painted over a purple fabric. The fabric is exposed so that it seems to become clouds against the sunset. At the lower edge of the painting there is a black mist penetrated by holes. The viewer is effectively locked inside the camp.[12]

In the mid-1980s a series of paintings depicted a wooden watchtower that recalled both the death camps and also the more recent history of communism, when towers for hunting game were sited on the borders of East Germany, *Watchtower* (1984). They were used by communist guards for hunting fugitives from the Soviet regime. The tower is composed from lines of unpainted canvas, while the rest of the painting is covered by silver oxide. The shimmering surface is mobile, and it changes colour from purple to green like a darkroom negative. Moreover, the visibility of the image depends entirely on the light in the gallery and the viewer's position. The image of the watchtower is deliberately elusive. It is almost impossible to view properly, and cannot be reproduced by photography.

Polke's works have become something other than paintings and photographs. They are chemical processes created almost entirely by chance. Eventually, they will turn black through the process of oxidation.[13] His work is a reverie on death, as in his five paintings on Native American themes *The Spirits that Lend Strength are Invisible* (1988) for the Carnegie International Exhibition. His materials were sourced naturally in the Americas, substances such as tellurium,

meteoric dust from Tocopilla, nickel, resin, silver nitrate, silver leaf, Neolithic tools and canvas. The resulting effects occurred naturally. The dust caught the light and reflected as gold. The work was created by alchemical processes and could not be photographed, thus remaining a unique event rather than becoming an artefact. Polke's alchemical experiments can be regarded as an effort to empower art by returning it to its primeval ritualistic origins.[14]

Since the 1980s, although in a very different manner, a younger photographer and video artist, Christopher Webster (b. 1965), has similarly interrogated criminal political systems by means of symbols of the occult and the uncanny. He has produced a critique of the former system of apartheid in South Africa, whose authority was based on genocide.[15] Webster has acknowledged the influence of Surrealist art and of the alchemical tradition, whose chemical processes he regards as being essentially the same as those of the photographic darkroom.

Webster's origins are in Runcorn in Cheshire, but his family moved to South Africa in 1982, where he trained in art at the Vaal Triangle Technikon before returning to Britain in 1996. He has described his intentions as those of retrieving the lost historical detritus of 'a mass produced medium'.[16] In his photographic practice he prefers to use the traditional silver-gelatine print, rather than adopting newer digital modes. He claims, however, that this does not indicate any nostalgia for lost cultural traces: 'Rather, they are a process of re-assessing the value of such analogue ephemera, time ghosts, light-laden silver debris.'[17]

Since childhood, Webster has instinctively perceived a magical quality in the nature of the photograph, and he seeks to evoke the feeling of the uncanny in an attempt to build: 'on a language that could relate this experience of strangeness through an encoded construction consisting of photo-collage and a predominance of dream inspired imagery'.[18]

He uses Hermetic metaphors in his allegories to picture the nature of fragmented memory, both personal and communal, with its uncanny transformations. Webster reworks both found images and his own photographs with light-sensitive chemicals, subsequently inscribing them with texts and drawings. The art curator Eve Ropek has commented that his work is not directly political, being rather an evocation of the emotive human response to political conditions, specifically those involving traumatic states:

> In truth it is possible for photography to communicate complex political realities only tangentially; but what it can elicit is a deeper human response which embraces both the aesthetic and the political.[19]

Webster is rejecting the conventional assumption that a photograph can mirror reality in an objective manner. Instead, he constructs artificial visual and conceptual spaces which permit a dialogue to be initiated between the rational mind and the Unconscious. Originally, Webster had produced

relatively simple assemblages of images with text describing his experiences as an artist in South Africa. However, from the 1980s, in direct response to the martial law enforced on the civilian population in a regime of escalating violence, his images became darker in mood and more complex in their manufacture. Symbolic forms entered the visual field, and the surfaces were chemically manipulated in the darkroom:

> The shadow of the pervading presence of a draconian political hegemony saw the emergence of an underlying current to the work with themes relating to dark power, the grotesque, memory, magic and the irrational.[20]

Webster began to employ cryptic texts and collaged elements that created a hybridized surface, inter-woven with multiple fragmented narratives. He also incorporated other materials such as oils, acrylics and pastels, printing the image onto aluminium panels: 'my initial focus was on the psychological effects of living with "Big Brother"'.[21]

He wanted to create images that comprised an uncanny content, 'both ominous and strange'.[22] Webster's recourse to the realm of the irrational was a specific reaction to the political conditions of South Africa, which he had encountered as a dark and menacing atmospheric. As he came to understand more specifically the perfidious nature of the dominant political structure and its brutal execution of power, he felt compelled to inscribe his impressions into the photograph. He evoked a 'spirit' presence in his photographs by constructing half-erased and distressed surfaces as a way of expressing his own sense of being an outsider within the political state of apartheid.[23] The South African political system had transformed within his perception into a 'dark numinous and ruinous Mephistopheles-like presence': 'This omnipresent force buffeted lives continually on a day-to-day basis in both traumatic as well as banal ways.'[24]

Webster began to comprehend the magical forces that seemed to permeate the photograph, and that these were not entirely a product of a rational course of action. He wanted 'to evoke a feeling of uncanniness' in his work:[25]

> I had begun by setting out to make work that underlined the absurdity of the apartheid state, a rejection of the racist bourgeois … while simultaneously evoking allusions to other presences and feelings related to the uncanny. Originally, this experimentation had begun with images attempting to evoke the sense of outsider within the political state of Apartheid.[26]

Among the works concerning South African history there is one which presents the Afrikaaner myth of colonization, *Those Who Die Dancing* (2005) (oils and pastels on aluminium) (fig. 6. 1). On this picture Webster has inscribed the words 'ek is die Koning van die dood' ('I am the king of the dead'). He has collaged together two images: the one on the left depicts dancers at a ball in the 1950s or 1960s. It is almost erased. On the right there is a picture of the enormous

6.1 Christopher Webster, *Those Who Die Dancing* (2005) (photograph, oils and pastels on aluminium, 105 × 300 cm). With the kind permission of Christopher Webster

national *Voortrekker Monument*, commemorating the trek of Afrikaaner families into the bush to establish new settlements in order to avoid British rule. This had become a secular icon of white rule in South Africa.[27] Another image of the same date is *ons vir jou* ('we are thine') (2005). A photograph of an older bearded man with emphatically blue eyes is located on the right, while the left-hand panel depicts a shooting star with the phrase written beneath. It is taken from the former national anthem of South Africa. Webster distrusted and disliked this notion of total surrender to a god-like state.[28]

Webster is continuing to work with esoteric symbols, intent on developing a visual language capable of encompassing this unspeakable sense of 'strangeness'. He uses photomontage and 'dream-inspired' imagery, 'using the photograph to suggest something beyond the frame'. It is a medium for recording anything other than physical reality. Through the use of discontinuous narrative, Webster provokes into existence another level of experience, that of 'the sublime, numinous or uncanny'.[29] He aims to evoke a series of sublime presences. To achieve this purpose, the psychological theories of Carl Jung are of central importance. Among recent works there have been specific allusions to Renaissance alchemical sources such as Johann Valentin Andreae's *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. He has also referenced ideas from the eighteenth century, such as the poetics of Alexander Pope and the classical writer Longinus.

There is a troubling sense of displacement in Webster's pictures. Although the scenes portray familiar social activities, the membrane of the work is heavily distressed with chemicals and graffiti. The figures are those of unknown persons whose real identity has been lost, or jettisoned. They rise out of the frames like ghosts, or like floating pieces of memory that cannot be secured by the mind. Erased, blurred out of recognition, they seem to have endured a deluge. Webster has described the character of his images as 'staged photographic space'[30] in which the photograph becomes a spectacle,

a fabrication which plays with the idea of photographic reality. A strong influence on his mode of photographic collage has been the work of film-director David Lynch, who employs fragmented and discontinuous narratives in order to promote a sense of the uncanny. The evocation of the mysterious is the actual aim of the work, rather than the story in itself. Webster describes his work as the production of spaces in which: 'the photograph as *memento mori* merges with the suggestion of other presences'.[31]

More recently, Webster has begun to work with manipulated 16 mm film, such as *Pearl* (2008), in which he continues to reference the occult tradition.[32] His work has reached an international level in group and solo shows, including exhibitions in Johannesburg, Lancaster, Cape Town, London, Tel Aviv, New York, Chicago, Berlin, Baltimore, Cardiff and Pretoria.

The chemical process of photography has often been compared to that of alchemy, but it is rare to find alchemical artists such as Sigmar Polke and Christopher Webster who also engage in such clearly directed political-activism through their work.

The topic of abjection will be continued further in a discussion of the manner of its use in the paintings of Francesco Clemente and in the work of yet another photographer, Joel-Peter Witkin. However, in contrast to Polke and Webster, the intention of these two artists is far more obscure and their visual texts are de-politicized. Instead, problematic sado-masochistic themes are explored without any sense of gaining a convincing resolution to the ethical conflicts. Or maybe this is a strength? In either case, the visual imagery generated by Clemente and Witkin reveals a series of important questions concerning the theme of gender, sexual desire and violence.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Deitch, 'The Art Industry', in Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (eds), *Metropolis*, exh. cat., Walter Gropius Bau (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 39–45.
2. Jutta Nestegard, *Sigmar Polke: Alchemist*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2001).
3. Maria Morris Hambourg, 'Polke's Recipes for Arousing the Soul', in Sigmar Polke, *Sigmar Polke, Photoworks: When Pictures Vanish*, exh. cat., curator Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art: Zurich, Berlin and New York: Scalo, 1996), pp. 37ff.
4. Polke, *Photoworks*, pp. 68–72.
5. Ibid., p. 48.
6. Ibid., p. 9.
7. Ibid., p. 72.
8. Ibid., p. 52.
9. Sigmar Polke, *Athanor*, exh. cat., Pavilion der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, XLII, Biennale di Venezia (1986) (Dusseldorf, 1986).
10. Polke, *Photoworks*, p. 81.

11. Sigmar Polke, *La Révolution Française*, exh. cat. (Vizille: Musée de la révolution française, 2001).
12. Sigmar Polke, *Sigmar Polke*, exh. cat. (San Francisco, CA: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 11.
13. Ibid., p. 14.
14. Ibid., p. 13.
15. Christopher Webster, website http://users.aber.ac.uk/cpw/site/welcome.html.
16. Christopher Webster, *Chris Webster: Cypher*, exh. cat. (Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 2005), p. 24. I would like to thank Christopher Webster for permission to read his doctoral dissertation submitted to the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds.
17. Webster, *Cypher*, p. 24.
18. Ibid., p. 25.
19. Eve Ropek, 'Introduction', in Webster, *Cypher*, p. 2.
20. Webster, *Cypher*, p. 25.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Brian Paul Clamp, 'Messages Written in Secret Codes: The Art of Christopher Webster', in ibid., p. 5.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 25.
30. Ibid., p. 24.
31. Ibid., p. 27.
32. See Christopher Webster, website, www.cpwebster.co.uk.

7

Gender and abjection

Since the 1970s the paintings of the Italian artist Francesco Clemente (b. 1952) have displayed an emphatic and unresolved masochistic element for whose exploration he has adopted metaphors from medieval and Renaissance alchemy, as well as from Indian Tantrism. His paintings are, at least partly, a reaction to feminist attacks from the 1970s on the concept of masculinity and the related notion of the heroic male painter. Other Italian painters in the late 1980s, such as Sandro Chia (b. 1946) and Enzo Cucchi (b. 1949), similarly tried to cope with the new threats to the cultural territory of male potency.

Clemente explored the male and female qualities of his own psyche using the symbol of the alchemical androgyne in self-portraits where he located himself in difficult visual relations to portraits of his own mother. In frescos of the 1980s he depicted himself as cocooned and bandaged to his mother so that together they took the form of a two-headed alchemical hermaphrodite. Clemente's visual ideograms inevitably reference Freud's account of the Oedipal complex, in which the repressed incestuous desires re-emerge in the dream-work. In a later series of oil paintings on the subject of the Passion of Christ, *The Fourteen Stations* (1981–82), Clemente re-uses this same multiple-headed, male-female motif so that the imagery becomes autobiographical, with Clemente taking the place of Christ.

Clemente's first mentor had been Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994), who developed Arte Povera trends that rejected the traditional forms of painting and sculpture in favour of minimalism and found objects.[1] Clemente, however, did not join the Arte Povera group of artists since he continued to be interested in painting. He was especially inspired by Cy Twombly, who had made drawings of an alchemical nature, invoking a process that produced meaning out of a state of chaos. Like Twombly, Clemente responded to the Italian classical past. He also found an additional resonance for his ideas in the work of Joseph Beuys, whom he first met in Italy in 1974.[2] Clemente's working process was less theorized and more emotive than that of Beuys, but he agreed with his view of the spiritual role of the artist in society. Between

1970 and 1980 Clemente experimented with the minimalist materials of paper and pencil, creating scatological human and animal forms in a state of metamorphosis.[3] He also followed the practice of American-language artists such as Joseph Kosuth (b. 1945), Douglas Huebler (1924–1997), Robert Barry (b. 1936) and Lawrence Weiner (b. 1942). Of equal significance to Clemente's development were the body art and performance work of the *nouveau réaliste* Piero Manzoni and his use of abject materials, including human excrement.

Clemente's interest in figurative imagery intensified after his visit to India in 1978, and he changed his painting style into a type of dream-work with Surrealist connotations.[4] In this development he was inspired by the emblematic paintings of the Italian metaphysical artists Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), Alberto Savinio (1891–1952) and Filippo de Pisis (Luigi Filippo Tibertelli, 1896–1956). Clemente's scatological compulsions continued to be forefronted in his gouaches, *Whether the Holes in the Body are Nine or Ten* (1977) for example. He also introduced his atavistic interest in the twinning of the self, which he depicted in a gouache of twins displaying holes in their heads and buttocks (*Twins*, 1978). Another work of this time, *Self Portrait the First* (1978), depicted Clemente naked, with owl finches and snake-birds perched on his shoulders. A whole series of self-portraits ensued in 11 drawings, *Codex* (1980), that showed him in an abject state, reduced to crawling around on the floor. In these he appeared with animals, a severed head and a Cyclops. Raymond Foy calls Clemente's art practice 'a way of unknowing'.[5]

During the 1970s he was working with an Indian guru in Madras, where he became interested in Tantrism, with its explicit sexual imagery as depicted in historical manuscripts.[6] Clemente took advantage of the libraries of the Theosophical Society and the Krishnamurti Foundation located in Chennai. In 85 pastels made in Pondicherry, his references included Western and Asian sources, invoking the astrology of the Renaissance magus John Dee, as well as Tantric sexual yoga.

Self-portraiture became the dominating theme of Clemente's work in his enquiry into the process of male gendering. In his *Untitled* (1985) an image of the naked Clemente is gazing into mirrors. He has two heads. On the right the Sun and Moon are depicted in a male–female alchemical duality.[7] Further alchemical references appear in a self-portrait in gouache in which Clemente is accompanied by a giant alchemical serpent, the Ouroboros devouring its own tail. The title *Caduceo* (1981) is an allusion to the caduceus sceptre carried by the alchemical god Mercury, in which two serpents inter-twine around a central rod. In the 1980s Clemente also produced a book, *The Gold Paintings*, illustrating the poems of Gregory Corso with photographs by Adam Fuss, in which he dealt with the primeval elemental world of early humanity – fire, ice and darkness.[8] The Earth was conceptualized in the form of both womb and grave. Clemente used the form of a crystal, representing the vulva of the Indian Tantric goddess Shakti.[9]

Abjection and infantilism are insistent themes. In the gouache painting *La mia ginnastica* (1982) Clemente is shown as sitting on the ground, raising his legs to display his anus, while in a series of 24 Indian miniatures (1980–81), bodies are shown decapitated, limbless, hands bereft of fingers.[10] In another one of this series there are two naked figures. A person lies in the branches of a phallic tree that grows out of the genitals of the other figure lying on the ground. This particular symbol recalls an alchemical emblem which originates in an alchemical manuscript located in the Laurentian Library in Florence (MS BL Ashburnham 1166. d. e, *Miscellanea d'Alchimia*, *c.* 1470s).[11] From the 1990s Clemente increasingly used anal imagery in referring to neonate, pre-Symbolic stages of being, depicting himself as a chaos of mouth, eyes and anus, or feeding himself with a spoon through his anus.[12] In one image an alchemical egg drops out of the anus of a crouching figure and is caught in a spoon.[13] A comparable figure defecates gold coins into the mouths of two figures while simultaneously balancing on an alchemical egg and holding two other eggs, one to each ear.

According to Julia Kristeva, the manner in which the individual body is conceptualized as an integrated whole is the same process by means of which a speaking subject is produced, one who has access to the symbolic system of the dominating socio-political order. Immediately prior to the child's entry into the symbolic order, the child undergoes the stage of the 'semiotic', in which the raw materials of both language and of the child's body are simultaneously explored. These materials are abject in character, unformed and faecal. This abject stage, like the semiotic, precedes the entry into the symbolic, and it is used to describe a series of paradoxical conditions encountered by the child prior to its ability to structure its reality in a uniform and rational manner.

Referring to Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz has explained that abjection is a condition of the proto-subject related to its attempts to differentiate itself from the world and others.[14] Thus, Clemente's retreat to the abject is a regressive act, though one probably intended to have a cathartic action leading to a creative insight. His attempts at self-identity are bound up with various abject bodily cycles. Abjection is a consequence of the fact that in ingesting and expelling objects out of the body, these objects are never completely distinct from the subject. Objects such as tears, faeces, urine, vomit, food, according to Jacques Lacan, are expelled from holes with rims. Grosz argues that abjection is a culturally variable by-product resulting from the transgression of the boundaries constituting the subject's 'clean and proper' body and its psychological self-image in the mind of that particular subject.[15]

In fact, Clemente's fixation with the abject body is comparable to the still-life photography of Joel Peter Witkin (b. 1939), in which he has notoriously re-used real human body parts. Witkin's main influences have been the work of the French Surrealists, especially Max Ernst, as well as Baroque art. He arranges parts of bodies, feet, hands, straight out of the morgue, alongside

fruit on dishes, printing the final photograph in exquisite sepia tints, recalling the art photography of the late nineteenth-century daguerreotypes and the work of E.J. Bellocq (1873–1949). The photographs are processed in the darkroom using bleach and tones, and he ages the negative by distressing it with scratches.

The *Portrait of Nan* (1984) alludes to alchemical symbology in a black and sepulchral manner. Depicted is an image of an obese young female whose face is a collage of different elements. Her hair is strung up behind her like the rays of the Sun. She represents an alchemical hermaphrodite. The dead foetus of a calf is lying in her lap, a dead Philosopher's Stone, while behind her hangs a human skeleton. In the condition of the infantile abject consciousness the mother's body is amorphous, inconstant in shape, leaking fluids and giving birth. The vaginal canal is perceived as a castrating instrument, confused with the mouth. To be re-engulfed by the womb is the ultimate castration. This image suggests that the Philosopher's Stone is made not in the aethereal realms, but in the Inferno. Witkin's *Nan* recalls sixteenth-century Flemish Mannerist paintings of Hell with their erotic hybrid forms and their morbid atmospheric.

Women Surrealists such as Leonora Fini and Leonora Carrington, in their adoption of the esoteric tradition, rejected the stereotype of women's bodies and lived experience as abject. Instead, they evoked new symbols in an experimental visual linguistics in which the theme of transformation of gender was an integral part.

Notes

1. Ann Percy and Raymond Foye, *Francesco Clemente: Three Worlds*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New York: Rizzoli 1990).
2. Ibid., p. 20.
3. Ibid., p. 21.
4. Ibid., p. 22.
5. Ibid., p. 51.
6. Ibid., pp. 52–4.
7. Ibid., pp. 59.
8. Francesco Clemente, *Clemente: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum; London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).
9. There ensued another series of pastel self-portraits, *The Four Elements* (1982), that referred to the four elements of ancient physics and alchemy.
10. Percy and Foye, *Francesco Clemente: Three Worlds*, p. 104.
11. This image may be viewed in Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge, 1993), fig. 131, and also in Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), fig. 39.
12. Michael McClure, *Francesco Clemente Testa Coda* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 89.

13. Percy and Foye, *Francesco Clemente: Three Worlds*, p. 106.

14. Elizabeth A. Grosz, 'Language and the Limits of the Body: Kristeva and Abjection', in Elizabeth A. Grosz et al. (eds), *Futur*Fall: Excursions into Post-modernity* (Sydney: Sydney University, Power Institute, 1986), pp. 106–17.

15. Ibid., p. 110.

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Women's alchemy

Like other women artists involved in the Surrealist Movement, Leonora Carrington (b. 1917) and Remedios Varo (1908–1963) were undermining the stereotyped image of the male artist as spiritual arbiter of society.[1] Instead, fuelled by their own sense of magical artistry, they produced a critique of the social forces determining subjectivity and controlling sexual desire, revising the original esoteric symbols and producing narratives expressing women's experience. The historical alchemical discourse had been based on concepts of the feminine realm as magical, alien, essentialist, wild, primal, material, unstable, lunatic, infantile and uncontrolled. Carrington and Varo redirected this scenario for their own purpose, that of empowering womanhood.

The prime effort of women associated with the Surrealist movement was an attempt to repossess the imagery of the feminine. The notion of the *femme enfant* was the pivotal factor in André Breton's theory of the masculine creative unconscious in the 1930s, although by the late 1940s he was favouring the concept of an independent female consciousness as an active and positive force. Influenced by Eliphas Lévi, Breton in the 1930s believed that women were elementally united to the mindless forces of nature. Their supposedly intuitive and hysterical qualities could serve the purpose of stimulating male creativity. From the late 1930s Carrington was eliminating this negative image of femininity so that qualities such as woman's innate psychic authority and wisdom could be promoted.

Carrington accepted the idea that women were born with numinous magical powers. Despite the problems involved in re-using this ancient female stereotype, the concept seems to have an enduring political and emotional vitality for women. Whereas this was the same idea that was used against their interests by the male Surrealists, the women artists converted it into an assertion of their independent creativity and the intellectual validity of their own work. In her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974),[2] Carrington relates the story of Dona Rosalinda, a Spanish aristocrat who possesses the cup of the Grail. She integrates her story with that of the Knights Templar and with Irish

myth. Rosalinda is a form of the goddess Venus, pregnant with Cupid, both an alchemical witch and an abbess in an order of pregnant nuns. In this novel Carrington has explained the mystic and magical character of her domestic laboratory, of the traditional 'women's world'.

Carrington's discovery in 1949 of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1948) was, as she described it, the greatest revelation of her life, although she had already been using the same original sources as Graves for many years. She devised an effective strategy to usurp the place of the magus by introducing her own Mother Earth figures such as *The Late Mrs Partridge* (1947) or Rosalinda.

Similarly, in Remedios Varo's paintings she depicts herself as magus, scientist, celestial geometer, alchemist and explorer. In 1953 Varo began to collaborate and work alongside Carrington. Whitney Chadwick has commented that it was the first time in the history of Surrealism that two women had worked together in the attempt to develop a new pictorial language that spoke more directly to their own specific needs as women.[3] Carrington has stated that working with Varo changed her life, although there were significant differences in the visual imagery used by the two artists. Whitney Chadwick has noted that Varo depicted women as alchemists, scientists, magicians and engineers, while Carrington's figures were sibyls, sorceresses and priestesses engaged in mythical voyages into magical worlds.[4]

Remedios Varo was born in Catalonia in 1913, moving to Barcelona in 1935, where she associated with Surrealist artists, especially Esteban Frances (1913–1976). She left for Paris in 1936, along with the Surrealist poet Benjamin Peret (1899–1959), and they became active members of the Surrealist group between 1937 and 1942, after which they moved to Mexico. In her new country Varo was able to collaborate also with Wolfgang Palen (1907–1959), Alice Rahon (1916–1987), Luis Bunuel (1900–1983) and Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). She later married Walter Gruen, a businessman and a keen promoter of her career.[5]

In her paintings Varo identified herself with the alchemist, presenting a self-image as a commanding, unemotional scientist, skilled in meticulous laboratory work, relentlessly pursuing a self-determined objective.[6] She rejected the manic Surrealist image of woman as primitive in character, incoherent and uncontrolled. For example, in *The Creation of the Birds* (1958) Varo portrays a figure, half-woman, half-bird, working in an alchemical laboratory in which magical processes take place by means of Earth magic, or through the power of the stars. Nature breaks through the walls, and tendrils and grasses penetrate the space. The light of the stars shines onto the distillation flasks which produce the coloured paints. The birds fabricated with this astral paint come alive and escape.[7] Varo alludes to the magical geometry of the heavens. In the Pythagorean cosmos of late antiquity the geometrical pattern traced by the stars and planets was believed to produce a heavenly music, audible only to highly evolved adepts such as Pythagoras himself. In another work,

Solar Music (1955), Varo depicts herself playing a stringed instrument whose chords are projected as rays of light from a source in the heavens.

Alternatively, in *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* (1959) she adopts the character of an explorer, recalling her trips as a child into the wild with her father, who had been a hydraulic engineer. She sets sail in formal explorer's suit and hat in an egg-shaped boat with sails. Her face expresses nothing but serious intent and single-minded purpose. Woman as alchemist and as magus is also the theme of the painting *Alchemy or the Useless Science* (1958). A building stands in the background, composed of three towers containing mechanical gears and crankshafts, as well as a glass distillation still. Rainwater is caught in a filter leading to the still. The female alchemist cranks a wheel that sets the mechanism in motion, concluding in the ringing of a set of bells mounted on the tip of the tower holding the alchemical still. The themes of the work allude to Pythagorean music and geometry, alchemy and mathematics. Varo often set her scenes over a chequer-board floor of the type found in fifteenth-century Renaissance paintings which employ the single-point perspective system. These floors also had an emblematic function as a reference to the play of white and black in games of chance, good and evil in archaic ritual.

In a rather different manner, Carrington also examined the site of the alchemical laboratory. Her own personal life was the prime matter of both her painterly and her domestic alchemy, for in her view, woman in her essential nature was an alchemist. In *The Night-nursery Everything* (1947), as one example, the nursery is a metaphor of the primal mother, the source of death as well as birth, of pain as well as pleasure. In fact, Carrington rarely used any traditional alchemical symbols, preferring to formulate her own signs from the contents of her life-history.[8] In her interview with Breton for *L'Art magique* (1957) she stated that the alchemical athanor was her own 'Body-Psyche'.[9]

Born in 1917 to a rich upper-class family in the north of England, Carrington escaped to London to study art. After she had viewed Herbert Read's exhibition of Surrealist art (1936) in London, she moved to Paris to work on her painting. During the war, in 1941–42, she was involved with the Surrealist group in exile in New York.[10] She settled in Mexico after the war, married Chiko Weisz, a Hungarian journalist, and had two children by him. Carrington also wrote a number of Surrealist novels, short stories and plays.[11] Her first publication was *The House of Fear* (1938), followed by *The Oval Lady* (1939), illustrated by Max Ernst. Her most important writings were her autobiographical account *Down Below* (1944) and *The Stone Door* (1977), as well as her best-known work, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974).

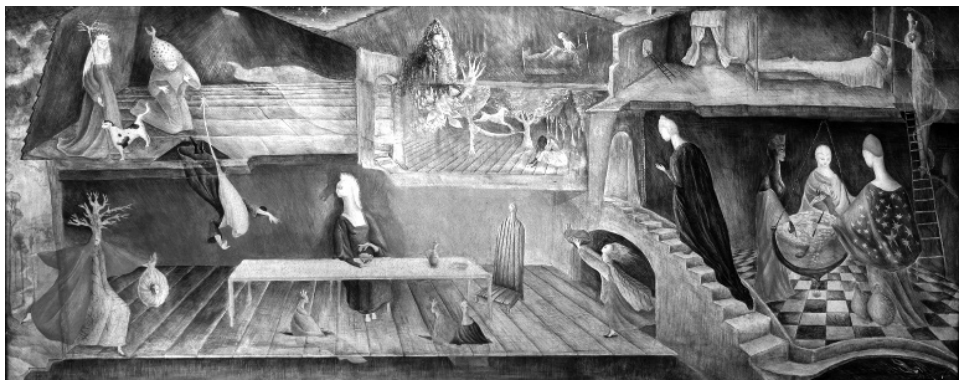
Carrington's approach to the occultist tradition was unique. She alchemized both the domestic world of women and their gardens along with nature itself, transposing the mystical symbols into everyday life. Her treatment of nature is much like that of Hieronymus Bosch, whose work she discovered in Madrid in 1940. Unlike Varo, Carrington does not use the image of the alchemical

laboratory directly, but as in *The House Opposite* (*c.* 1945) (fig. 8.1), she subsumes the Great Work into her female history of kitchens, cauldrons, alchemical tree-spirits, nurseries and gardens within a narrative sequence of stories. Her pictorial topography is densely layered. The house is a female body, linking the microcosm with the macrocosm. The hearth is instrumental in the process of transmutation since the four elements of air, fire, water and earth are united there. It signifies the organization of chaos into life-enhancing forces, such as warmth, light and nourishment. The home as a womb, a sacred locus generating the future, is also a space of memory recording the passage of time in its stores of personal archives. Carrington's archival taxonomies are derived from the personal history of a woman's spiritual life as transmitted from mother to daughter, creating a microcosmic universe, a world mirroring that of the patriarchy. In this alternative universe rituals are constructed from daily minutiae and preoccupations. These are the alchemical prime matter whose proper manipulation will ensure the spiritual and material regeneration of the universe itself.

Integral to the structure of her imagery is the concept of metamorphosis from human to animal to plant. For example, in *The House Opposite* a vegetation goddess stirs the cauldron of the magic lake, while in the scene downstairs at centre-stage there appears a little girl in a pink skirt running out of the kitchen into the room. The wings on the child turn her into an insect, a symbol of Psyche (the human soul), who was depicted in late antiquity as a moth. The little girl carries a golden soup-bowl, a Celtic Grail in which there nests a blue partridge. The partridge in the picture is one of Carrington's most cherished symbols signifying female fertility and home, as well as spiritual regeneration and resurrection. Traditionally, the partridge was also identified with the Sun or Moon, which relates it to an alchemical context. In Carrington's *Portrait of the Late Mrs Partridge* (1947) the bird is the woman's atavistic self. She also carries a handbag in the form of an egg. The partridge was the sacred bird of the ancient fertility goddess whom Mrs Partridge seems to represent.

Similarly, in *The House Opposite* the blue partridge along with two more partridges in the kitchen symbolize the alchemical egg with its meanings of resurrection and wholeness. The cosmic egg is the prime matter of the All, containing both matter and spirit, female and male.

This meal has been dispatched by the three kitchen witches or goddesses to another female figure seated at the table, horsey-faced and casting a horse's shadow. According to Susan Aberth, this scene depicts the Roman Catholic Eucharistic rite (Carrington was raised a Catholic).[12] Aberth has suggested that the image of the three figures in the kitchen refers to the Christian Trinity, while the bowl carried by the girl is the communion cup. The cauldron of the Celtic mother-goddess produced a potent brew in which ambivalent magical children such as Taliesin the bard, the all-powerful redeemer, were born. The cup in Celtic myth is the womb bearing the resurrected hero-god. To drink from the Grail is to gain immortality and salvation.



8.1 Leonora Carrington, *The House Opposite* (*c.* 1945) (painting, oil on canvas) © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2009. Photograph by courtesy of Edward James Collection, West Dean

In yet another detail in *The House Opposite* an amorphous wraith-like creature, also coloured pink, rises up a ladder out of the kitchen into the room above to a girl, sick in bed. The head of this pink phantom takes the shape of an alchemical still, from which runs a tube to feed the sleeping girl. This ritual is an act of healing. A small ladder leads out of the sick girl's bedroom into a landscape in the upper storey, where the same child is sitting up in her bed – a dream within a dream. Yet another female sits at the bottom of the cauldron lake, watching the nature goddess at work. This scenario suggests that knowledge of her female heritage and its independent authority is empowering to a psychically enfeebled woman.

Jung had considered the antique myth of the Nature-Maiden, or Kore (such as are depicted in various forms in *The House Opposite*), concluding that this image arose from a purely female realm unconnected to that of the male psyche. The Kore often appeared in women's dream imagery as an unknown young girl, an 'unmarried mother, dancer, maenad, nymph, nixie or water-sprite, cat, snake or bear, or black monster of the underworld'.[13] Jung believed that the feminine aspect of the psyche had a natural affinity to animals, which symbolized her qualities. In *Little Francis* (1938), the boy Francis grows a horse's head when he is abandoned by Uncle Ubriaco, signifying that his instinctual nature has risen to the surface.[14] Whitney Chadwick suggests that for women, animals played the symbolic role of mediators between the conscious and subconscious worlds, a role they themselves were playing for the male Surrealists as the *femme enfant*. Carrington also redefined the concept of the *femme enfant* so that 'through her intimate relationship with the childhood worlds of fantasy and magic' she was empowered creatively by her mental powers, not her sexual energies.[15]

Jung's essay concerning the maiden ('Kore' or Persephone)[16] was published in 1951 and could not have influenced Carrington, who did not begin studying his work in earnest until the 1960s. Even so, some points indicated by Jung are applicable in the reading of Carrington's *The House Opposite* since they are based on his studies of the same Hermetic and mythical sources which were pre-occupying Carrington in the 1940s.

The startling violence in Carrington's fiction, a sacrificial ritual of deliberated and exquisite cruelty, is explainable by recourse to Jung's ideas. In Carrington's story of Miraldalocks in *Little Francis* (1937–38), an ugly little girl with beautiful hair has been transformed into a plant. She subsequently meets the hero, Francis, also in her human-form, and proceeds to entertain him with a banquet. In the course of this orgy another angelic little girl as well as various birds and animals are obscenely tortured and killed. Kore-Miraldalocks in Carrington's story has become the mother-goddess Cybele, responsible for bloody orgiastic rites since her nature was chthonic, related to the dark side of the Moon. Her colour in this form was dark, black or red, with a primitive or animal expression of face.

According to Jung, 'Demeter and Kore, mother and daughter, extend the feminine consciousness both upwards and downwards.' They open up the limited conscious mind, 'giving it intimations of a greater and more comprehensive personality which has a share in the eternal course of things'.[17] Every daughter, in other words, contains her mother within herself, and vice versa, thus (according to Jung) both the mother and her daughter feel that their lives are spread out over generations. They have a concept of time which parallels and often usurps the conventions of linear historical time. The atavistic intuition of a feminized time pervades Varo's paintings and is the foundation of Carrington's work. It consists of a sense of immortality and contact with her ancestors. Carrington pictured this deeply embedded knowledge in her painting of *The Ancestor* (1964).

In the development of Carrington's fluid and densely layered mythology, the image of the girl-child and the androgyne were fundamental. They provided the ground for her attempt to build a new level of discourse that could accommodate the specificity of female experience, yet which would go beyond biological facts to a neutral symbolic ground. In these efforts the first gain had to be the rescuing of the girl-child from the corrupt image of the *femme enfant*. The shape-shifting, numinous beings evoked by Carrington, like the deities described by Jung, tend to be androgynous or a-sexual. Carrington's treatment of androgyny, however, has to be carefully distinguished from that of Breton and his male colleagues. The crucial difference is established in Carrington's story of *The Stone Door*, written to celebrate her marriage to Chiki Weisz in 1946. It concerns a spiritual journey by the boy Zaccharias, who seeks to unite with the female White Child so that he may pass through the Stone Door to enlightenment. Carrington uses the terms of both the kabbalah and

alchemy in this work, but she reverses the alchemical signifiers commonly ascribed to the respective genders. Thus the female White Child is given the quality of fire and is represented by the astrological sign of the Ram, although these are always masculine attributes in historical alchemical sources. On the other hand, Zaccharias' quality is air, and he is equated with the female sign of the Scales associated with Venus. In this reversal of gender-roles Carrington has firmly asserted the active character of the female alchemical principle, the White Child, thereby negating the passive character of the *femme enfant*.[18]

Carrington changed her own gender on occasion in her fictional persona, such as turning herself into the boy Francis in her novel *Little Francis* (1937). This story reflects her stay at Saint-Martin-d'Ardeche with the artist Max Ernst. Ernst became 'Uncle Ubriaco', and their real passion was turned into a non-sexual relationship between an older 'guru' and a young acolyte. Thereby, Carrington was able to investigate her own frustration at being a girl due to the contemporary constraints placed on women. Warner has quoted Carrington's habit of referring to herself as a *puer aeternus* ('eternal boy').[19] Her early painting of *The Inn of the Dawn Horse* (1936) expresses this longing for a freedom which was possible only by adopting a dual gender, or by regressing to the amorphous nature of a child.

She denied the cultural expectation that ego has to be a rational and consistent entity.[20] This permitted her to adopt a variety of personal viewing-points and to transcend and use the contradictions. In *The House Opposite* a number of figures are in halfway stages, for example the nature goddess in the central scene on the top storey, while a woman at the bottom left appears with a tree as her head. There are also barely identifiable snake-like/bird-like (chthonic) creatures under the table of the horsey-woman in the dining room. A trio of figures in the left-hand room of the upper storey strongly recall Bosch's figures from *The Haywain* (*c.* 1510). One of them falls through the floor like a white-spider dangling from a thread. Other alchemical themes in the play include the cooking of eggs. Similar references may be found in her sculpture *Personaje* (undated) of a figure bearing a star-like, half-human, half-animal figure within her body. The concept is similarly inferred in the standing figure of the *Cat Woman* (1951), on whose loins are painted a swaddled pair of twins.

A vivid account of Carrington's feminist alchemy may be obtained from her own record of her mental breakdown in 1940 subsequent to the arrest of Max Ernst in France in 1939. Held in an asylum in Santander in Spain and subjected to injections with the drug cardiazol, Carrington experienced a vision of herself as the Universal Alchemist, a supreme deity in specifically female form who had the power to transmute the chaos created by the male trinitarian god into spiritual gold. In her text *Down Below* (begun in August 1943 in Mexico and published in 1944) she describes the powerful but somehow sad and child-like alchemical ritual that she performed when her

personal items were returned to her. She seeks no less than to replace with her own person the Holy Ghost, or even Christ himself in the masculine Holy Trinity, reckoning that it was failing in its governance of the world due to the absence of a female component. She writes that she realized that she had to perform a specific ritual with the objects in her make-up kit. This was to combine 'solar systems to regulate the conduct of the World'. She interpreted the various items in terms of esoteric symbols – for example, her box of Tabu powder, 'with a lid, half-grey and half-black meant eclipse, complex, vanity, taboo, love'.[21] Her two jars of face cream signified night (the one with the black lid) as well as 'the left side, the moon, woman, destruction', while the other (with the green lid) was 'man, the brother, green eyes, the Sun' (to which interpretation may be added the alchemical symbol of the green lion, as well as the pagan image of the Green Man).

Carrington determined that she would alchemically restore the androgynous nature of the Trinity by inserting herself as a woman into its structure. On going Down Below in the form of the third person of the Trinity, she felt that through the agency of the Sun she had become an androgyne, the Moon, the Holy Ghost. Her hands were Eve (the left one) and Adam (the right one), and they understood one other. She states that she knew that Christ was dead and that she had to take his place 'because the Trinity, minus a woman and microscopic knowledge, had become dry and incomplete'. Christ was replaced by the Sun. She was now Christ on the Earth in the person of the Holy Ghost.[22] Carrington viewed this performance as an act of alchemical redemption in which she took the character of 'the Sun-Christ-Holy Ghost, as the Divine Androgyne'. In effect, she saw herself as being no less than the Philosopher's Stone, whose traditional androgynous character now favoured the female gender.

For Carrington, the rituals of socialized femininity had taken on a cosmic significance, becoming the redemptive alchemy of the world. By the 1960s she had an arcane knowledge of Celtic myth, magical ritual, alchemy, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, Mayan culture, Jewish culture and Jungian psychology, which were woven seamlessly into her daily life of cooking, sewing and childcare. *The House Opposite* is one of her earliest visual works, promoting the proto-feminist stance of 'difference-in-unity'. The painting was Carrington's alchemical laboratory in which she distilled the Surrealists' concept of masculine creativity. Her re-articulation of the symbolic order transmuted avant-garde sexual stereotypes into a more open and dynamic ground of negotiation between the protagonists of the gender divide. It was shifting, dangerous ground, but enticing in its candour.

In the 1980s another answer to the problem of identifying a liberated ground between the polarized discourses of masculine and feminine was developed in the work of Rebecca Horn. Most especially, Horn's investigation into the nature of the alchemical androgyne has been an innovative, though

inconclusive, venture in attempting to re-negotiate the theme of sexual difference.

The German alchemical tradition has provided Rebecca Horn with critical tools for analysing the causes of sexual conflict. Her starting point has been her own specificity as a female artist, although she has not created a uniquely personal alchemical symbolic system in Carrington's manner. Instead, Horn has used the readily recognizable vocabulary of filters, distillation equipment, the four elements (chiefly fire and water), the chemicals of mercury, sulphur, red and black powders, as well as the sexual imagery of eggs and sperm.

Her theme is that of sexual conflict. In her work any attempt to harmonize the dualistic opposition of masculine and feminine desire is doomed to fail. In the installation *High Moon* (1991), for example, there are two interlocked Winchester rifles hanging above a long trough with a blood-red pigment that spills out onto the ground. Red cords intertwine with the black cords from which the rifles are suspended. These lead to the 'nipples' of two breast-shaped glass filter dishes, just under 1 metre wide, also hanging from the ceiling. The cords have a visceral quality, their form recalling both intestines and nerves. The alchemical process explodes and dies during the first stage of the conjunction. Unlike Carrington's fertile, verdant world, intensely alive with minute narratives, Horn's alchemical universe, for all its sexual hyperactivity, is barren.[23]

In the mid-1990s Horn projected her view of sexual passion onto a vast theatrical arena in the installation *River of the Moon* (1992), exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1994.[24] The work (one room of a series originally shown at the Guggenheim Museum) held huge lengths of writhing black electrical cables, chaotically intertwined and filling the expanse of the Tate Gallery's central hall. The cables spilled out of a vertical steel slab set against the far wall, on whose surface there stood three alchemical glass stills. The other end of the cables led to seven horizontal black cabinets, lying like coffins on the floor and covered with sheet glass. Their contents were electronically programmed pools of mercury which, in the course of their flow through the cabinets in silver streams, broke into wriggling, sperm-like forms. Another adjunct to the cables and cabinets was a large black drill, installed in such a manner that it appeared to be slowly drilling through the base of a pillar supporting the building. The whole work, in its inhuman scale and references to chaotic energy, death and sexual chemistry, seemed to reflect Horn's awe at the powerful excess of human passion, as well as her despair at its destructiveness.

Yet Rebecca Horn does offer one tentative answer to the problem of insufficient self-knowledge and sexual antagonism. This lies in her exploration of the myth of the androgyne. Her early performance work was haunted by an image of a heterogeneous sexual being, a creature of the pre-Symbolic realm. She dressed young female performers in exotic bondage/bandage-like fabric constructions, the most striking of these being the dual-gendered garment of

the *Unicorn (Einhorn)* (1971).[25] The outfit comprised a white leotard which left the female breasts exposed, while the head-piece featured a prominent phallic horn, nearly as tall as the woman beneath.

In her films *Der Eintanzer* (1978) and in *La Ferdinanda: Sonate für eine Medici Villa* (1981) the central protagonists are emaciated, androgynous ballerinas in early pubescence whose physical form has not yet matured.[26] In *La Ferdinanda* the main character is a young girl aged about 12 or 13. She is a passive witness to the play of adult sexual passions that eventually leads to murder. Horn uses the girl to enact a criticism of the empty relationship being played out by the girl's emotionally cold mother and her ineffectual lover. The girl's strength is suggested in her refusal to betray her own integrity. She makes independent, unusual choices in her own incipient emotional life which indicate possible alternatives to conventional sexual relations. The narrative of the film is closely structured as an alchemical allegory throughout, from the purification of base matter through to the conjunction and the death of the two lovers.

Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement have analysed the psycho-pathology of the bisexual subject as being innately related to an occult context. In Jules Michelet's original account of hysteria, he had associated its manifestations with sorcery, since the poses of the hysteric resembled the actions employed in the rituals of witchcraft. Freud re-engaged the same theories in his studies on the condition of hysteria, claiming that the image of the sorceress 'reincarnates the inscription of paganism that Christianity had repressed'. The social feminine role is that of sorceress and hysteric. Cixous regards bisexuality as 'the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes … the non-exclusion of difference or of a sex'. Starting with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the effect of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body 'does not annihilate differences but cheers them on, pursues them, adds more'. Cixous argues that in a certain way a woman is bisexual. In contrast, a man is 'over-committed to the phallus and fears homosexuality'.[27]

Both Leonora Carrington and Rebecca Horn have returned in their imagery to the pre-Symbolic order, the pre-sexual, androgynous state of the child. In their work an attempt is made to elevate this bisexual infant into a poetic symbol of complete integrity of being.

As in the case of Beuys, the history of fascism has become a significant interest in Rebecca Horn's latest work, and she has similarly approached it by means of alchemical imagery. One added consideration in reading her work is the fact of her German Jewish origins, although so far she has not directly referenced her own family history. Horn was given the opportunity to work with a historical site dating from the time of the war, but like Beuys, she has also encountered the criticism that her art has compromised history in an unacceptably romantic manner.

The installation *Das gegenlaufige Konzert* (1987) was built at Munster in Der Zwinger, an ancient tower used during the war by the Gestapo for torturing

Russian and Polish prisoners. In her personal response to the site she used strong acoustic elements such as knocking hammers and dripping water. She transformed the tower into an alchemical alembic which forced the viewer to enact a ritual penetration into the interior of the torture chambers, various rooms arranged around a central space. These were lit with candles evoking a dramatic chiaroscuro whose uneasy quality of flickering, eerie light was accentuated by harsh sound effects. Critics complained that the use of alchemy and the theatrical effects of light and sound served to insulate the viewer against the impact of memory, turning horrific history into gothic moodiness. The same accusation was levelled against Horn as against Beuys, namely that she was attempting to redeem history through her creative interaction with it. Many felt that this was a betrayal of the memory of the events at Der Zwinger, and that it would have been more appropriate to document the history by creating an artwork that would commemorate, rather than intervene.

In their recourse to esoteric imagery these three artists have addressed the possibility of developing a socio-cultural Utopia. Carrington and Varo viewed such a future as integral to the liberation of women since it would replace the sterile male order of reason by a magical world that would encompass both logic and paradox. In her own practice, Rebecca Horn has sought for a resolution to the emotional brutality resulting from everyday human interaction. She has also been drawn to myth and the Hermetic tradition, attempting to develop a visual language for the expression of passion and desire.

In addition to these artists who have referenced alchemy metaphorically, there have been some other women artists who have employed physical chemistry in seeking to express aspects of their personal history. In particular, British artists Helen Chadwick (1953–1996) and Sutapa Biswas (b. 1962) have made (in very different ways) works that are objective studies of chemical change. Chadwick has been fixated on the process of material decay, whereas Biswas in her films has studied the effects of light and time on physical manifestation.

The work of Helen Chadwick has sometimes been attributed with an esoteric quality. She was interested in alternative spiritual systems, particularly in mystical geometry, as in her autobiographical paper sculpture *Ego Geometria Sum: The Laborers X* (1984). Chadwick's obsession with the chemical process of decay and human effluent warrants some discussion of her work in the present context, even though she did not specifically reference the historic alchemical tradition.[28] Allocated an important place within radical feminist discourse, Chadwick experimented with photographic, film and installation formats. The central issue for her was her problematic relationship with her own female body. Much of her work is a meditation on her own physicality, as in her bronze sculptures *Piss Flowers* (1991–92), cast from plaster impressions of the hollows made by Chadwick and her husband urinating into the snow.

This concern with the abject body and its transmutations could be described as an alchemical vision, but one which has been ruptured, Utopia deflected from its realization by the transient human condition. Chadwick tackles this theme of the inevitable death of all flesh in a poetic manner in which the alchemical mortification is manifested in physical chemistry. She crammed glass cases with fruit and vegetation, leaving it to rot away in all the glory of its colour changes and its sad stench. In this mode of practice Chadwick was one of the protagonists introducing an international trend in which the abject held centre-stage. (In the late 1980s Chadwick was a lecturer at Goldsmiths College and the Royal College of Art.)

Chadwick's experiments with bodily residue included *Viral Landscapes*, a set of photographic images from the late 1980s in which magnified cells from her own body were superimposed over landscape scenes. In *Meat Abstracts* (1989) she juxtaposed photographs of meat with strips of leather and fabric. She was interrogating the classical tradition of the female nude in which the body was seen as a decorative object, a sexual spectacle, passive and unresponsive. From 1988, however, she ceased to represent her own body in her work since she no longer wanted to focus solely on the theme of the specifically female body. This caused her to move inwards, making Cibachrome transparencies of her internal flesh and its spaces, interiority rendered exterior, the vulnerable turned inside out and exposed in its all fragility. She made the transient and frail into something iconic, eternalized.

Chadwick continued to return to her previous themes of female desire in the Cibachrome light-box *Eroticism* (1990), showing a human brain resting on luxury fabric. In *Self Portrait* (1991) she displays a photograph of a brain cradled in her hands. The Cibachrome *Loop My Loop* (1991) consists of imagery of intestines mixed with golden hair.

Her work was followed in the 1990s by the era of Damien Hirst's pickled cows and calves in formaldehyde and his glass cases of decaying flesh and flies. (Warhol had already made his piss paintings on bronze sheets in the 1970s.) In the same years the artists Sam Taylor-Wood, Marc Quinn and Tracey Emin showed installations incorporating detritus, dirt and human effluent such as blood and semen. However, the latter artists, in their engagement with the abject, were intent on regressing to the irresponsible condition of the neonate – pre-ego, pre-speech. Chadwick, on the other hand, was not interested in such infantile regression, rather she was re-addressing the Renaissance tradition of the *memento mori* in a long series of contemplations on desire and death as the stark facts of human life. In this manner she was also engaging with the meditations of the alchemists on corporeality and the quest for the elixir of life.

The work of another influential British artist, film-maker and teacher, Sutapa Biswas, is a significant development in a mode of practice that aspires to the meditative and interventionist modes of poetry. Biswas currently teaches at

Chelsea College of Art and Design. As in the case of Helen Chadwick, the work of Sutapa Biswas has been favoured by leading feminist writers, most notably Griselda Pollock.[29] Yet, in its essential structures and primary intent, it eludes categorization. It is certainly not overtly political. As an artist, she deals with issues of life, death and memory in a more universal context, musing on the passing of time as a visible material presence in the poetic structures of her filmic text.

Comparable to the family background of Remedios Varo, that of Sutapa Biswas was firmly rooted in the sciences. All of her siblings, as well as her father, were trained in the sciences, and she had expectations of doing the same. In spite of this family history, however, she moved into creative art-practice, training at the Royal College of Art, the Slade School of Fine Art and at the University of Leeds.

Biswas describes her films as being informed by a strong painterly aesthetic. She draws from various literary and visual sources, such as the work of Marcel Proust, Edward Lear, Frantz Fanon, as well as the paintings of George Stubbs, Jan Vermeer and Edward Hopper. Poetry has been a major source of her inspiration. The narrative structures of her films negotiate ideas concerning time and duration, and she interrogates conventional cinematic narrative structures. She works with 35 mm format, as well as with drawings.

The films *Birdsong* and *Magnesium Bird* were shot with 16 mm film in 2004. Her earlier scientific interests are evident in the *mise-en-scène* selected for the filming of *Magnesium Bird*. Not only the materials employed in the stage set but also the symbolical references correspond with alchemical themes. The ideas for the films arose from the grief of personal history, her presence at her father's deathbed. He had belonged to a distinguished northern Indian family of scientists, writers and philosophers. Sutapa Biswas herself was born in Shantiniketan, a residential colony of writers, artists, scientists and educators originally founded by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. At her father's deathbed he was speaking about birds in his last words, an unusual reference for him, so it was this imagery that she selected for her two films. In *Magnesium Bird* she made a sculpture of a bird out of magnesium tape, a substance that illuminates with a blinding flash when lit, leaving an imprint on the retina of the viewer's eyes. Biswas has never forgotten her first encounter with this material in the chemistry labs at school.

The term *magnesia* (coincidentally) is one of the names of the alchemical prime matter in the accounts of Paracelsus, Khunrath and Fludd, although Biswas was not aware of this. The magnesium in her installations acts as a type of prime matter which, when lit and the gross material destroyed, remains as a transcendental presence within the eyes. In the same way, the alchemical alkahest is the spiritual remains of charred prime matter. Biswas located the magnesium bird within an enclosed Victorian kitchen garden which resonated with the homely sense of nurture. This location also has its

equivalent in the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden depicted in alchemical engravings which represents the space of the laboratory and also the site of the chemical wedding of the male and female principles. Birds in alchemy allude to the spiritual essence of the prime material and its volatile nature, as well as the process of distillation.

The film cannot be reduced to a series of alchemical emblems, in fact, since there remains a residue that eludes any transposition into words or into definite visual symbols. It is this poetic residue which is the actual subject of the film, in the poignant recalling of the passage of time, transition and measure, the steady tread of life. The poetic space engaged in the work of both Sutapa Biswas and Helen Chadwick is an issue which will be reconsidered later in the present context.

In the mean time, in the next chapter it is worth giving due recognition to another type of politicized alchemical art which emerged in the 1980s in Australia. It did so in a negative response to the American and European investment art markets and their media product in art magazines, monographs and the blockbuster international art exhibitions and fairs such as the Venice Biennale and *Dokumenta*. The intention of many (perhaps most) Australian artists in the twentieth century has been to challenge the cultural hegemony of the northern hemisphere and to assert the value of their own product. In addition, an even more pressing concern has been that of identifying a national identity for themselves.

Notes

1. Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pp. 168–218.
2. Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1st edn, Paris: Flammarion, 1974; London: Penguin Classics, 2005), pp. 90ff.
3. Chadwick, *Women Artists*, pp. 194–5.
4. Ibid.
5. Susan L. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (New York: Lund Humphries, 2004), pp. 59–60.
6. The full range of Varo's paintings may be seen in the only monograph currently available in English on her work, Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville, 1988).
7. Chadwick, *Women Artists*, pp. 191–7, 201–5.
8. Andrea Schlieker (ed.), *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures 1940–90* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991). A more recent analysis is available in the special issue on Leonora Carrington of the journal *Cauda Pavonis*, 19/2 (2000), edited by Robert Lima with essays by Gloria F. Orenstein, Robert Lima and Urszula Szulakowska.
9. Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*, p. 13.
10. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, pp. 11–35.
11. Ibid., pp. 57–64.

12. Ibid., pp. 64–7.
13. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 350–51.
14. Chadwick, *Women Artists*, pp. 75–9; These ideas are discussed in Georgiana M. Colvile, 'Beauty and/Is the Beast: Animal Symbology in the Work of Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini', in Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 162–7.
15. Chadwick, *Women Artists*, p. 79.
16 15 Jung , 'The Psychological Aspects of the Kore' (1951), in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 182–203.
17. Ibid., p. 188.
18. Leonora Carrington, 'The Stone Door', in *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 137.
19. Warner in Schlieker, *Leonora Carrington*, p. 10.
20. Warner in ibid., pp. 17–18.
21. Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below*, intro. by Marina Warner (London: Virago Press, 1988), p. 195.
22. Ibid.
23. Rebecca Horn, *Rebecca Horn: Bodylandscapes – Drawings, Sculptures, Installations, 1964–2004*, with essays by Armin Zweite, Katharina Schmidt and Doris von Drathen, including a dialogue between Rebecca Horn and Joachim Sartorius, and poems by Rebecca Horn. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers; London: Hayward Gallery, 2005).
24. Rebecca Horn, *Rebecca Horn*, exh. cat., New York: Guggenheim Museum; London: Tate Gallery (1993): essays by Germano Celant et al., interviews by Germano Celant, Stuart Morgan, and texts by Rebecca Horn (New York: Guggenheim Museum and Rizzoli, 1993).
25. Martin Mosebach, Daniel Soutif and Rebecca Horn, *Rebecca Horn* (Paris: Galerie de France, 1988).
26. Rebecca Horn, *La Ferdinanda, Sonata voor een Medici villa* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1981).
27. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing, intro. by Sandra M. Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 5–13, quote on pp. 84–5.
28. Mark Sladen (ed.), *Helen Chadwick*, exh. cat. (London: Barbican Galleries and Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004).
29. [Sutapa Biswas], *Sutapa Biswas: An Anthology of Essays on the Work of the Artist*, essays by Griseld Pollock, Laura Mulvey et al. (London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Portland, OR: Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College).

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9

Australian art and the esoteric tradition

Since the 1980s surprising numbers of Australian artists have become interested in the alchemical tradition in the context of their investigations into the nature of Australian identity. Others have referenced Hermetic imagery in a discussion of sexual and gender politics. These artists have included Brett Whiteley, Robert Owen, Rose Farrell, George Parkin, Janet Laurence, Luke Roberts, David Moses and Tom Arthur. In addition, the work of Milan Mrkusich in New Zealand, with its alchemical and mystical themes, has gained an important cultural significance for that country's post-colonial history.

At an earlier period in the late nineteenth century the influence of the esoteric tradition had been dispersed in Australian culture through the activities of the Theosophical Society and its various splinter groups. Their effects on art were first recorded by contemporary Australian artist Tom Gibbons.[1] More recently, Jill Roe has produced a detailed study of the role of Theosophy in Australian art,[2] recording the work of several distinguished female artists and writers who were committed to that movement, such as Daisy Mary Rossi (1879–1974) and the influential feminist Bessie Rischbieth (1874–1967).[3]

No less a person than Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934) had emigrated to Sydney, where he had joined forces with another esoteric cult, that of the Liberal Catholic Church established during the First World War by James Ingall Wedgwood (1883–1951). Leadbeater became a bishop of this eccentric religious organization.[4] From the mid-twentieth century onwards other teachers of Hindu spiritual systems arrived in Australia, such as M. Sudowski (Mouni Sadhu), who was Polish in origins and a follower of the Indian saint Śrī Ramana Maharshi. During the 1950s in Sydney, Mouni Sadhu taught the philosophy and spiritual disciplines of Vedantic non-dualism.[5] By the 1980s all types of Asian spiritual systems and yogic practices were established in the country, such as Transcendental Meditation, Ananda Marga, Siddha Yoga, groups associated with the Hindu teachers Krishnamurti or Rajneesh, as well as different types of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

The alchemical tradition itself has an idiosyncratic placement within Australian intellectual history. An interest in alchemy on the part of small groups of university academics in the 1980s was due to Frater Albertus Spagyricus (Dr Albert Richard Riedel, 1911–1984). Born in Dresden, he had emigrated to the United States in the 1960s, where he established a private college of alchemical studies in Salt Lake City known as the Paracelsus Research Society (later Paracelsus College). Riedel paid annual visits to Australia in order to teach alchemy as a practical laboratory craft to anyone who wished to enrol. His practical work was based on the three principles of Paracelsian alchemy: sulphur, salt and mercury. By the late 1980s he had gained quite a large following in Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane and its hinterland in Mount Tambourine. Riedel's craft was in fact no Hermetic secret since he published a number of books on the subject purporting transparency in their account of the alchemical process.[6] There were three procedures which the apprentice had to master: first the treatment of vegetable materials, then the minerals, and finally animal matter. Success was dependent on the isolation of a volatile spirit called the alkahest, a fiery liquid with corrosive qualities (probably a form of nitric acid). Three different philosophical stones would be produced, vegetable, mineral and animal, which were to be used in healing disease. Among the minerals Riedel placed great importance on antimony, a semi-metal popular with alchemists since the fifteenth century. On Riedel's death, his college was transplanted to Australia and renamed the Spagyric College. It continues to be very active with a prominent website.[7]

The alchemical influences on Australian art, however, did not devolve from the influence of the Spagyric College, which had a following in academic and literary circles rather than among artists. Instead, visual artists gathered their information from a broad range of popular sources such as publications on Surrealist art and Jungian psychology, as well as from the influential Thames and Hudson series *Art and Imagination*. A major influence in the 1970s and 1980s was that of the Adyar bookshop chain in the dispersal of esoteric knowledge throughout the state capitals. These bookshops belong to the Theosophical Society.

Prior to examining the esoteric tradition in its effect on Australian art, it is necessary to provide a history of the visual arts on that continent. Australian art made by artists of European origins remains almost unknown internationally due to its lack of promotion by the national institutions and the business community.

Central to Australian art history has been the quest for national identity and the struggle of Europeans to establish a positive relationship with the difficult terrain of the continent and its demanding climatic conditions, in particular drought. European visual images of the land were first made by artists engaged in scientific studies on board Captain James Cook's ship, HMS *Endeavour*. They had been commissioned to record Cook's voyage, whose purpose was

to circumnavigate the mythical *Terra Australis* (1770). The landscape tradition was subsequently developed by convict artists imprisoned in the first British settlement at Botany Bay in Sydney, who produced lively graphic accounts of the young colony. In the later nineteenth century professional landscape artists such as the British landscapist John Glover (1767–1849) and the Viennese painter Eugene von Guerard (1811–1901) depicted the alien Australian land in terms of the European Romantic movement. Subsequently, artists appeared, such as Tom Roberts (1856–1931), who helped to create the national myth of the white Australian settlement with its imagery of bush-wackers, drovers and sheep-shearers, working against a background of native bush.[8] Other locally born artists such as Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917) sought to devise a specifically Australian iconography of the land,[9] although it was the German painter Hans Heysen (1877–1968) who produced the ultimate Romantic portrait of the Australian bush in his shimmering landscapes of intense colours modelled on the techniques of the French Impressionists.[10]

In the 1960s and 1970s Australian academics and intellectuals led an embittered attack on simplistic models of national identity, symbolized by the tradition of landscape painting, which was now perceived to be pernicious. These attacks were the result of a negative popular reaction to the participation of Australia in the Vietnam War. In the major state capitals of Sydney and Melbourne leftist artists, critics and art historians reacted against American modernist art and the capitalistic art market. In the 1970s at Sydney University and Sydney College of Art, Charles Merewether and Anne Stephen edited a set of polemical texts, *Beyond the Great Divide* (1977), arguing against the cultural domination of New York.[11] However, in this demand for a culture reflecting local conditions there lay the danger of Australian art being labelled 'provincial' by the artistic centres of the northern hemisphere. This issue still concerns Australian artists. During the 1960s the concept evolved of Australia as an eccentric, upside-down world at the bottom of a rabbit-hole, as in the *Alice* books by Lewis Carroll. The country was also conceptualized as the 'Land of Oz' (also the name of the counter-cultural paper *Oz* founded in London by Australian self-exiles).

In the past forty years the dominating issue for Australian artists has become more specifically the moral issues concerning land ownership and the dispossession of the aboriginal inhabitants from their heritage, both economic and cultural. Indigenous artists located in urban centres such as Richard Bell (b. 1953)[12] and Gordon Bennett (b. 1955)[13] in Brisbane have analysed the negative effects on aboriginal culture of European political and cultural domination. Yet many white Australian artists express an almost religious reverence for the earth of the Australian continent, the result of contact with aboriginal myth and culture (such as may be accessible to non-initiates). A European artist of this type is Anneke Silver in Townsville, whose work, though not alchemical in content, is deeply engrossed in the concept of sacred earth and ritual.[14]

The political struggles of the 1960s produced city-based aboriginal artists who had become fiercely politicized by the 1980s and 1990s, such as Trevor Nickolls (b. 1949) of Adelaide, the central figure of that generation, and women artists such as Fiona Foley (b. 1964), Judy Watson (b. 1959), Sally Morgan (b. 1951) and Julie Dowling (1969). Both white and aboriginal artists and writers collaborated in the international exhibition *Eureka!* (1982), which featured the work of both white and aboriginal Australian artists and promoted the legal claims of the indigenous peoples and their traditional artforms.[15]

A related political issue for all artists, as well as an inescapable practical problem, is that of Australia's location in the Asian-Pacific region and its consequent cultural marginalization in relation to the northern hemisphere. Aiming to go some way towards redressing the situation, the Sydney Biennale was organized in 1973, an international exhibition held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The exhibitions have invariably explored the vexed historical interaction between Australian and World art, as in *European Dialogue* (1979), curated by Nick Waterlow, which took the form of a dialogue with the artistic centres of the north, as did William Wright's *Vision in Disbelief* (1982) and Nick Waterlow's *Origins, Originality + Beyond* (1986). Subsequent exhibitions have asserted that the Australian art world is a world centre in its own right with its own home-brewed critical responses, such as *From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art ca. 1940–1988* (1988) and *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in Twentieth Century Art* (1990).

In the mid-1970s post-structuralist theory hit the Australian art world, hot off the press from Paris in the original French, as well as from New York by means of journals and travel contacts. The protagonists of these ideas were young lecturers at Sydney University and Sydney College of the Arts. Their major effect was felt in the 1980s due to the influence of the critical journal *Art and Text*, established at Sydney College of the Arts in 1982. Visits were paid by the French critical theorists Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak and Jean Baudrillard, whose appraisal of digital media had a revolutionary effect on Australian artists. They were to become world leaders in the pioneering of digital technology in the 1980s. The influence of French post-structuralism, based on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, encouraged a revival of Surrealist models of art practice and literary criticism.

Surrealism had an impressive history in Australian art of the 1940s and 1950s in the work of artists such as James Gleeson (1915–2008), Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) and the Boyd family. The full importance of Surrealist art to national culture, however, was only recognized in the exhibition *Surrealism: Revolution by Night* (1993) at the National Gallery of Australia. Surrealist art in the 1980s did not emerge directly out of this historical lineage, but was rather a re-invention informed by contemporary radical theory and reflecting current political and cultural issues. In this renewal of irrational modes of esoteric practice, ideas were often invoked from world magic and religion.

Among the earliest Australian artists to develop an interest in alchemy was the painter Brett Whiteley (1939–1992), an artist of international stature whose work had strongly Surrealist aspects. From 1960 he travelled in Europe and America, and he even managed to sell a painting to the Tate Gallery, the youngest artist ever to do so. Whiteley's early influences were those of Roger Hilton (1911–1975) and William Scott (1913–1989), but he soon abandoned abstraction in favour of a figurative style. In 1967 he left for New York on a Harkness Fellowship and settled in the Chelsea Hotel. Greatly influenced by the peace movement of the late 1960s, he participated in the street protests and strangely came to believe that the American forces would leave Vietnam if he could produce one enormous painting advocating peace. He created the work *The American Dream* (1968) on 18 wooden panels, fabricated out of paint, collage, photographs and flashing lights.

Whiteley's mixed-media collage *Alchemy* (1972–73) is an expression of his belief that art has a political function, as well as an innate power to transform society in a positive manner. It was used for the cover of the Dire Straits album *Alchemy* (1984). It was painted and collaged on 18 wooden panels which were overlaid with gold leaf, collage, rock, Perspex panels, conducting electrical wires, pencil-marks, PVA, varnish, the remains of animal brain, earth, twigs, a stuffed bird, a nest, an egg, feathers, a cicada's exoskeleton, a bone, dentures, rubber and metal sink plugs, pins, shells and a glass eye. Whiteley's central idea is inscribed in black ink on the first panel, that painting 'is the bastard of alchemy'. It is no more than a game, and although the 'poet' (meaning artist) is a 'holy thing', he is not able to invent anything until he has been inspired and has lost his senses entirely.[16] Here Whiteley appears to be alluding to his own heavy heroin addiction, stating that otherwise, 'he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles Plato 1'. He quotes directly from traditional alchemical texts that 'The way that can be spoken of Is [*sic*] not the constant way.' Alchemy, he writes in the inscription on the painting, is 'the Grand work' which brings together 'all the previous TRANSMUTATION or God?' The experience cannot be reduced to 'one single absolute image, for one image cannot hold it'.

The 18 panels should be read from right to left. They are meant to be a type of self-portrait taking cosmological form. Whiteley includes imagery of land and sky, as well as his customary erotic references to flesh, genitalia and sexual intercourse. The sequence concludes on the left with alchemical emblems of a white sun and serpent tentacles on a gold background. The last two panels were originally part of a destroyed portrait of Yukio Mishima, the Japanese writer who had committed ritual suicide in 1970. At the moment of death, Mishima had a vision of an exploding sun. The centre of the work contains the word 'IT'.

In utter contrast to this hash of sensibility is the work of Robert Owen, who owes his ideas to the international constructivist movement and its scientific principles. In fact, his work generates an entirely different sensibility from

that of Whiteley since he belongs to a different generation from that of the emotive Surrealist predecessors. Owen's generation of Australian artists aligned themselves with the international minimalist and conceptual trends of the 1960s and 1970s. This reductionist aesthetic (one might call it an ethic) has been the foundation of Owen's practice throughout his career.

Born in Sydney, Owen studied sculpture at the National Art School in Sydney, graduating in 1962. In the mid-1960s he lived in Greece, then in London until 1975, when he returned to Sydney.

Although Robert Owen has taken recourse to the esoteric tradition on occasion, he has avoided over-dramatic narratives. More recently, he has favoured the theme of ideal Platonic form and mystical geometry. His practice is informed by alchemy, kabbalism, Renaissance Hermeticism, Buddhism, Tantrism, the mysticism of light and colour and the philosophy of the Armenian guru Gurdjieff. Some of these ideas are evident in his sculpture *Vessel*, commissioned in 1988 for the architect Fumihiko Maki's New Exhibition Centre in Chiba, Tokyo. The work consists of a painted steel cube tilted on one of its edges. As the viewer approaches, it appears to change its form from a cube to a rhomboid. Owen had been inspired by Albrecht Dürer's etching *Melancholia* (1514), which displays such a large rhomboid. Dürer's engraving is an allegory of the arts ruled by the planet Saturn, such as alchemy, astrology, mystical Pythagorean geometry and mathematics.

Owen's commission, *Axiom*, for the atrium of Commonwealth Law Courts in Melbourne (1998) is another discourse on Pythagorean geometry. It is built in the form of seven structures, each containing 20 nodes and 30 edges, their shapes changing as they ascend. The top structure is located in a circle of fibre-optic light that changes its colour imperceptibly as it moves through the colour spectrum. His brief required him to produce a work that all cultures would find relevant, and he turned to the language of geometry as the most universally comprehensible. *Axiom* refers to self-evident truth, established principle, maxim, rule and law. Owen aimed to emphasize clarity and purity of form in providing a transparent, yet complex, visual metaphor for the process of transformation and change.[17]

In the late 1980s Robert Owen began to reference alchemy in his installations, specifically in a series of vertical structures called *Persephone's Towers*. Named after the Greek goddess of the Underworld, these were metal towers, like hypodermic needles, about 1.8 metres high. Each tower, like Asian minarets, took a different architectural form. Some of them recalled the alchemical alembics depicted in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (*c.* 1510).[18] In 1987 the same forms were adapted to a gigantic scale for a sculpture tower produced to stand in the World Exposition of 1988 in Brisbane (*Night Companion*) (fig. 9.1). Alchemy also figured as the theme of his Brisbane installation *A Waring Peace, A Sweet Wound, A Mild Evil* (1988). Owen created an image of the Moon on the floor of the gallery, formed out of shatterproof windscreen glass.

Sounds of night creatures from the Far East were projected into the space. At the other end of the gallery, a rock on the floor was surrounded by a pool of ultramarine pigment. It referred to the geography and geomancy of the ancient Australian continent and its Asian setting. On this were set two pots upright, lip to lip, and sealed at their touching ends with vermillion pigment. A Tibetan singing bowl was placed in the centre of the crystal Moon. A line of guttering ran along the back wall, whose interior was painted with matt ultramarine paint, recalling the International Klein Blue of Yves Klein's Rosicrucian alchemy. On this was scattered gold leaf. All of these were elements taken from alchemy and modernist alchemical references. Among the themes of the installation were those of wounds and sutures, as well as fertility leading to the creation of the Philosopher's Stone in the form of gold and red cinnabar (a sulphur and mercury complex).

The work of Robert Owen does not express any particular political position, although his intention has always been to interact with the public in his monumental public commissions. His themes have necessarily reflected common interest and importance, such as systems of law, or communications.

9.1 Robert Owen, *Night Companion*, sculpture tower on the former 1988 World Exposition site in Brisbane (photograph by the author)

A more politicized, specifically ecological, discourse has appeared in the recent work of sculptor Janet Laurence (b. 1947), who has employed alchemical ideas.[19] Laurence first studied at the University of Sydney and then at the Academia Belle Arte, Perugia and the New York Studio School. Her studies engaged her with architecture in the context of the Australian environment. From the early 1980s she used natural substances to create installations, such as *Notes from the Shore* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1981). In 1981 she was also commissioned by the federal government to create a public monument, the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, in Canberra in collaboration with the firm of architects Tonkin Zulaikha.

Her latest projects have concerned the history and culture of Australian aboriginals. In 1994 Laurence created a sculptural installation, *Edge of the Trees*,

for the Museum of Sydney, located on the site of the original Government House. She co-operated with the aboriginal artist Fiona Foley, in consultation with the architects Denton Corker Marshall. The work consisted of 29 wood, sandstone and rusting steel columns. The columns represented the aboriginal clans who had originally inhabited the area, their burial poles and rock carvings. They also referred to the effects of European culture. The issue was that of the memory of each culture and their inter-relationship. Samples of seeds and resins recalled the original flora and fauna, while bone, shell, hair and other elements recalled both white and aboriginal inhabitants of the site. In addition, tribal Koori voices were recorded and they recited the original names for the areas around Sydney.[20]

Laurence has worked on a variety of other environmental projects which have involved her in practical chemistry. She has examined, for instance, the remediation programme taking place in the Olympic Project at Boundary Creek in Homebush Bay. The results of the experiments at the site were used in the work itself, *In the Shadow*. Set in the water of the creek were large glass columns representing the chemical flasks used in the water studies, and they were inscribed with texts concerning the remediation process. Falling and spurting water, mists and fog simulated the cleaning process that the water had gone through. In another project commissioned by the Department of Environment, *Picture of the Dark Face of the River* (1999), for the John Gorton Building, Canberra obliged Laurence to undertake scientific research in meteorology, oceanography, Antarctic studies, satellite imaging and plant life.

Her scientific and alchemical interests have led her to the exploration of glass as a medium in works such as *Unfold* (1997) for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in which photographs of animals were overlaid on glass panels to represent the trapping of once-free creatures. In collaboration with Jusik Han, Laurence was also commissioned to make the windows for the Central Synagogue in Sydney (1997/98). She created an installation of four windows entitled *49 Veils*, in which 49 layers of coloured glass panels related in abstract form themes from the kabbalah. She was fascinated by the particular properties of glass – its translucency, transparency and reflectivity. These qualities enabled it to represent water in both its solid and its liquid forms. Its ubiquitous presence in modern architecture was an additional factor that stimulated Laurence's appreciation of its possibilities as a sculptural and pictorial material – 'a material that would reflect you the viewer into it and the environment'.[21]

Witnessing the transformative processes of nature has led Janet Laurence to her interest in alchemy as a holistic science, a metaphor for Australian ecology. She envisions her own art practice with its roots in the changing Australian environment, both urban and natural, as a type of alchemical procedure.

One of the most original and innovative Australian artists of the 1990s and 2000s has been Tom Arthur, born in Boston in 1946, but resident in Sydney

since 1973. Arthur was originally educated at the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Tuft's University. From 1976 he became an influential teacher at Sydney College of the Arts, influencing with lasting effect the practice of several generations of Australian artists.

Tom Arthur produces mixed-media installations which are densely layered and resist easy interpretation, since his symbolic forms take the character less of metaphor than of metonym. That is, his visual signing-system retains its material connection with the reality that it signifies. Primarily, he is undertaking a phenomenological investigation into the 'quiddity' of objects and the manner in which they are socially, politically and culturally validated. Life is a flux in which appearance is fleeting. In Arthur's assemblages the signifiers alter and vanish, while the same signs re-appear in different contexts. In the same manner, human life and its recorded history are unstable. It is impossible to nail down once and for all the 'true' facts about any event since the interpretation of the given data and their material substance alters, or is simply lost.[22] Tom Arthur undertakes an existentialist enquiry, often ironic, into the absence of meaning, the uncertainty of memory and history. Indeed, his major theme is that of history as fiction.

His assemblages are constructed from a wide variety of organic and metallic component parts, as different as fragments of real bone, bronze casts and digital electronic systems. Arthur's manner of composition is constructivist, the fabric and manufacture of the different elements being clearly exposed. The projects mostly adopt architectural form, especially the recently re-exhibited wooden mock-up of an aeroplane entitled *The Fertilization of Drako Vulen's Cheese Pizza* (1975) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (2008). The title is a pun on the name *Draco volans*, a flying lizard which can sail through the air like a glider by means of a cape of skin around its shoulders. The wooden flying machine, with its skeleton wings and tail, is suspended from the ceiling and lit with blue neon lights. The main bulk of its body is filled with sand.

Tom Arthur's artistic concepts have been shaped by his studies of history, archaeology, alchemy and freemasonry. These influences have led him to develop two particular installation formats. One is that of an almost life-size stage set, the other that of a traditional glass and wood museum case in which small artefacts are gathered together to form fictional displays of some aspect of human culture.[23] The system of classification of these objects is totally subjective, and is governed by Arthur's personal preferences and life experience. The cases invoke both the objective science of archaeology as well as the intuitive methods of the alchemical laboratory. The *massa confusa* of memory is reconstituted within these cases alchemically, bringing into play individual psychological forces. The same concept of a fabricated history has interested other international artists, such as Mario and Marissa Merz at the *Art and Time* exhibition (Barbican, London, 1988), where they displayed fake archaeological artefacts. Tom Arthur, however, has developed his own ideas independently.

9.2 Tom Arthur, *Goodbye Carpet, Goodbye Small Door* (1983) (mixed-media installation). With the permission of Tom Arthur

In other installations he has explored the tragic connection between male sexual desire and violence and death. These works are filled with a distressing sense of absence, loss and nostalgia. One of the most complex of these stagings has been *The Entire Contents of a Gentleman's Room* (1987), exhibited at the Sydney Biennale in 1988,[24] a life-sized staging 'incised, cut through', open to the viewer.[25] It was a further development of an earlier work on the same theme, *Goodbye Carpet, Goodbye Small Door* (1983)[26] (fig. 9.2). In this work there were two connected rooms which were in a chaotic state, having been violently disrupted in some physical struggle. The one on the left lay in darkness, illuminated only by gas flames rising from the floor:

> The walls of the left room were peppered with burnt through holes, the room being somewhat colander-like with the floor as exposed raw earth. The room was illuminated by flickering gas flames pixillating the objects and shadows through a kind of dancing, antique, cinematic, flicker.[27]

A metal object created an arabesque against the back wall. It was a 'salvaged, barnacle-encrusted, length of perforated steel from a wrecked ship. Its form was reminiscent of a segment of cinema film stock.'[28] A white ladder had also been introduced, slightly under-size and submerged under some water which was contained in a steel trough. This was incorporated under the flooring of the installation connecting the two rooms.[29]

The right-hand room, in contrast, was brightly lit by a single 500 watt incandescent light globe. Its highly finished walls, ceiling and floor were pierced

9.3 Tom Arthur, detail, *Goodbye Carpet, Goodbye Small Door* (1983) (mixed-media installation). With the permission of Tom Arthur

with dozens of long, delicate arrows with red flights 'seemingly shot from the central void of the room itself'.[30] They pierced a human skeleton lying in the middle of the room which was enfolded in the arabesques of a wooden line (fig. 9.3). The emblem of the arrow held a particular resonance for Tom Arthur. It had originated in Max Ernst's painting *Oedipus Rex* (1922), in which a walnut is shown pierced by an arrow, an overt phallic image. More distantly, it recalls the image in the Ashburnham manuscript in Florence, in which the form of the dead Adam, as alchemical prime matter, is pierced by an arrow.[31]

Marcel Duchamp has been a mentor for Arthur's artistic development, especially in his suggestion that an artwork is not a finished object, but rather an extension of the artist's thought process, and hence an ongoing discourse.[32] Arthur has said the same concerning his series of room installations:

> these works I've been making, these open narratives with various entry points …. I wanted to keep the work alive … as chapters of an ongoing story … it's almost impossible to do that anymore. It's not within the framework of society for these things to happen … extending the works over a lifetime …. And then I wondered what the hell do you call this book? … maybe 'The Sixth Sense of Loss' … people die, and things that are lost, that we are losing ….[33]

Death is a constant theme in Tom Arthur's work, and the figure of the human skeleton has recurred throughout his installations, as in one apocalyptic

assemblage, *Circadian Dust Music*, in which an elongated skeleton arises vertically through the centre of a hoop suspended around it. The image recalls the resurrection of the dead on Judgement Day, the hoop representing the mouth of the grave.[34] Hence, it is not surprising to find that Arthur has collaborated on a project in which artists created various works in response to the historic burial ground at Rookwood Necropolis in Sydney (1996).[35] He had encountered this exceptional site early in the 1970s when he had first moved to Sydney. Set high on the very edge of the cliffs overlooking Sydney Harbour, about eleven miles out of the city, the cemetery was established in 1867 and is the largest Victorian cemetery in the world. In the Rookwood collaboration his work referenced a text by Yukio Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel* (1971), in which the speaker anticipated his future vacuous, wasted life, marked by betrayal and culminating in death.[36]

The structure of *Goodbye Carpet, Goodbye Small Door* emerged out of other installations that had incorporated both genuine and fabricated archaeological materials, bones and stones. An early work of this type was a floor-piece constructed as a small open room, *Sameness amid Flux, Private amidst Public* (1978–79). Specific prototypes for *Goodbye Carpet, Goodbye Small Door* included assemblages such as *Portrait of Noh Yugen* (1975), set in a glass case, and *It Remains Straight because it's Only the Jar that Changes* (1981), another three-walled room whose floor is covered by precisely arranged objects.[37] Tom Arthur also made jewellery. His aesthetic sensibility for the world in miniature serves to account, in part, for the intensity of his work, in which uncontrollable emotions have been so exquisitely distilled.

Arthur's interest in archaeological materials reflects a concern with the fact of transience, more specifically the transmutation of form as an evolutionary process. The identity and meaning of a particular phenomenon remain forever undefined and uncertain, since the fact of change is the only constant in both nature and culture. Bones are the only extant remains of a once-living entity, the only link with the past. The remains of the previous form are lost to memory through obsolescence. They become the template for a new entity: an object whose original signification has changed out of all recognition. The writings of Henri Bergson have been a significant influence on Arthur. Bergson argues that intuition is a more effective faculty than reason for the discovery of absolute reality. Reason is enforced to deal in abstract symbols, approximations of, or equivalents to, reality, whereas intuition can seize on the essential nature of phenomena.[38]

In his investigation of the forces of history, natural and human, Arthur has paraphrased and parodied the investigative methods of empirical science and replaced them with the intuitive processes of alchemy. His output has included the writing of stories which contain an element of autobiography. Arthur's family background is Albanian, an oral culture in which stories figure as a constructive and analytical tool for organizing lived experience and memory:[39]

> memory is so crucial – something which you pass onto people, and something which keeps me alive- it's not the things themselves, it's what they mean. And I know only too well that things can't mean the same for X years, but only what they mean then …. Everything out there, in this society we live in is designed to erase memory and turn you into a malleable piece of 'stuff'.[40]

Tom Arthur is very much an artist's artist, and his influence on succeeding generations in Australia has been profound. His work had a particular resonance for the practice of a Queensland artist David Moses (1957–2005), so much so that Moses' oeuvre can be defined as a dialogue with Arthur's practice and his phenomenological enquiry. One direct response to *The Entire Contents of a Gentleman's Room* was a series of computer-generated images made by Moses in the 1990s, displaying interiors with skulls, alchemical flasks, crucifixes and scattered debris. This particular series, *Revelation – the content of the mind Wunderkammer I*, Moses described as 'projections of collections … representing the attic of a gentleman's mind'.[41]

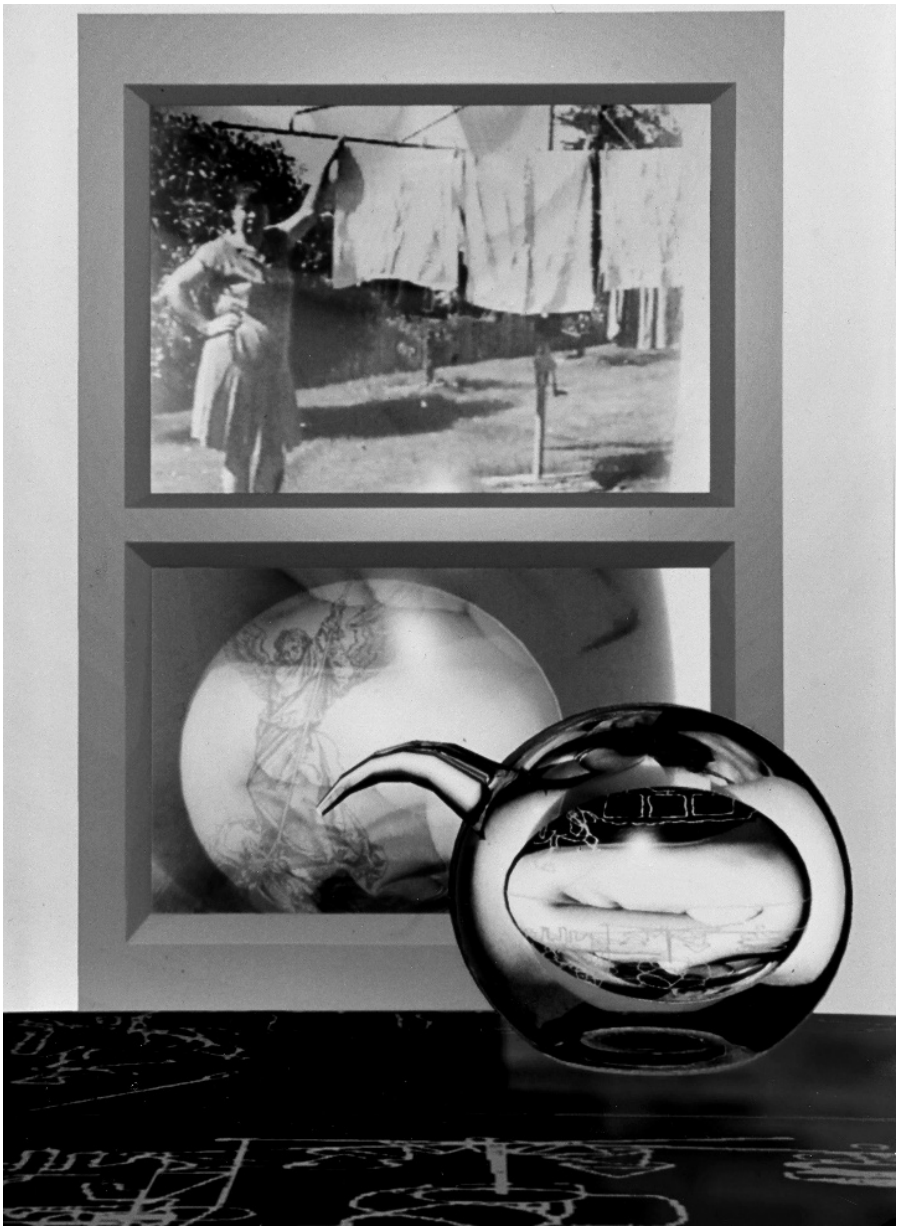
Unlike Arthur, Moses located himself firmly within an ongoing Surrealist tradition, but of equal importance to him was the direct influence of seventeenth-century alchemical imagery. Moses' art practice expressed a belief in spiritual transcendence and the possibility of resolving political and social conflict. He engaged in a critical dialogue with the modernist masters, most especially Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. Unlike Arthur, Moses did not regard Duchamp as a personal mentor. Instead, he followed Joseph Beuys in directing an attack against the stereotype of Duchamp as the philosopher of the avant-garde, although he lacked political commitment.

David Moses was born in Ipswich, Queensland, and he trained professionally both in Brisbane and in Hobart, Tasmania, where he eventually settled. In the 1980s he was one of the artists organizing the Chameleon Contemporary Arts Organization in Hobart, an influential experimental art space. Moses was among the first to engage with the new digital technologies. From 1988 he was exhibiting his computerized imagery internationally in venues such as the Sao Paolo Biennale and at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds.

He had a special interest in the interface of traditional sculpture with computer-generated representations: '[In] the notion of immersion and insertion where the act of visualisation meets that of externalization – the studio/interface becomes the canvas/gallery …'.[42]

Moses was aiming to evolve a technology that could 'break through the "looking glass" and bring computer-generated forms out of the machine'. Among his interests were: 'alchemical concepts of transformation as expressed in direct sculptural casting and the transformative nature of computational processing'.[43]

Moses conceptualized hyper-space as his own alchemical laboratory in which he constantly reworked his photographs and Xeroxed imagery. He produced work in series, continually transmuting the same emblems.



9.4 David Moses, *Untitled (Hill's Hoist)* from *The Bride series* (mid-1990s) (computer-generated image). With the permission of the Estate of David Moses

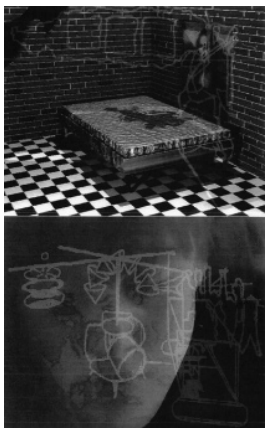
In this aspect Moses was paralleling the working practice of Tom Arthur and reflecting the mood of the 1980s, in which the experimental avant-garde was rejecting the static 'finished' museum object.

Among the themes that Moses explored was that of Australian nationalism, and he adapted his critical tools from the alchemical emblems used by the early modernists. Moses appropriated the alchemical arrow, which he also used as a signifier of male desire, on the model of Max Ernst and Tom Arthur, as well as the original alchemical image in Ashburnham manuscript BL 1166. This has also appeared in a three-dimensional sculpture in which a golden egg pierced by an arrow is suspended with red thread within the golden framework of a human-skull.[44] In his investigations into the psychology of male sexual desire Moses produced a vehement critique of Duchamp's misogynistic sexual imagery. In a series of computer-generated imagery (*The Bride series – the metaphysics of meeting and union*, *c.* 1995) he entered into dialogue with Duchamp's *Large Glass* and *Etants Données*.

In one digital image from *The Bride series* he replaced Duchamp's alchemical Bride with that of his own pregnant wife hanging up three nappies on a 'Hill's Hoist', a circular free-standing washing line (itself an icon of white Australian suburban culture) (fig. 9.4). These nappies replaced the three diagonal objects in the upper storey of Duchamp's *Large Glass* in which the Bride is ensconced. The human world of washing day is the alchemical laboratory of the Australian household, in which faeces, disease and decay are transmuted into health and growth by the rays of the Australian sun, the Philosopher's Stone of the southern continent. Moses' parody of Duchamp's icon was extremely effective, an appropriate critique of art and society at several levels, both attacking Duchamp's concept of women and simultaneously criticizing the menial position of women in Australian culture, as well as questioning the inter-relation of contemporary Australian art with the modernist European academy.

In a later work, *X Borders* (1995) (fig. 9.5), the visual field was divided into two horizontal levels. In the top space Moses superimposed the outline of Duchamp's Bride across a scene of a desolate bedroom, while below there was a melancholy female face, overlaid by the outline of the chocolate-grinding machine from *The Large Glass*.[45] The work spoke of the abandoned desolation of a rejected lover and the failure of the alchemical conjunction. In the top space stands a double bed, unmade and with a large pool of blood on its surface. It stands next to a harsh red-brick wall on which there hangs Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. The reality of sexual violence and psychological trauma is juxtaposed with the imaginary fantasy of Duchamp's insect-like Bride and her inept suitors.

Moses also made a very subtle Australian adjustment to another of Duchamp's masterworks, his *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14). This mixed-media assemblage had been produced from three pieces of string with which Duchamp had measured the distances between different subway stations on



9.5 David Moses, *X-Borders* (1995) from *The Bride series*, (computer-generated image). With the permission of the Estate of David Moses

the Paris underground rail network. He had then dropped these strings onto paper and re-copied them onto pieces of discarded wood. Finally, the three strings were glued onto strips of black paper and, along with the wooden pieces, they were stuck onto a discarded oil-canvas. The final work exemplified Duchamp's rejection of aesthetic concerns and symbolism, as well as his disregard for the controlling forces of the artist's mind and hand, substituting for them the laws of chance. With the aid of red paint Moses coolly transformed Duchamp's avant-garde anti-art into a horizontal Australian landscape depicting the red-desert region of the Outback. He placed a copy of the vertical strips on their side so that their bumps and indentations became a distant vista of low eroded hills. Thereby, he was protesting both against the cult of Duchamp's mastery and against the cultural domination of European art. He invalidated Duchamp's empty formalism as being irrelevant to contemporary Australian culture.

Moses sourced Duchamp's optical diagrams, as in *Tu m'* (1918), interweaving them with alchemical imagery taken from seventeenth-century Renaissance engravings, especially Robert Fludd's engraving of the Cosmic Man, whose body is depicted spreadeagled across the heavenly spheres. Moses also appropriated de Chirico's emblematic imagery of mannequins, set in distorted perspective views of empty, echoing city-squares with chequered pavements. Alchemical flasks, reflecting landscapes of sea and sky, morphed into the form of de Chirico's mannequins. Matter and organism became a single substance in a dynamic universe impregnated with *anima*, spirit.[46] Moses modulated the emotional and erotic intensity of his images with bathos, parody and irony, and also with puns derived from his semiotic and linguistic interests. He had made a particular study of alchemical word-play, specifically the colours of the laboratory work. Alchemy is occasionally metaphorized as 'child's play', *ludus puerorum*, as pictured in the *Splendor Solis* of the early sixteenth century.

Mystical geometry and mathematics produce the central emblems in Moses' series *Golden Mean* (1984; 1997), whose subject is European claims for racial supremacy and the notion of racial purity. A golden pavilion, similar to those found in medieval tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, is superimposed with the outlines of cupids, Leonardo's famous drawing of the Cosmic Man and theatrical masks:

> Initially constructed as a multi-media installation in 1984 this work linked ideas of 'perfection' with the notion of supremacy, especially that of racial dominance and purity, which was current in the early part of the twentieth century.[47]

Moses was an innovatory artist, as well as a genuine Hermeticist who expanded the scope of the alchemical discourse. He had a deep political commitment to the autonomous development of Australian culture and to its international recognition by art historians, critics and market forces.

There exist still other types of photographic practice in Australia which engage similar esoteric themes. Most notably, since the 1980s Melbourne-based artists Rose Farrell (b. 1949) and George Parkin (b. 1949) have developed a unique type of photographic practice, closely related to theatrical production. Their concern has been to retrieve forgotten systems of knowledge, among them the esoteric tradition. For their work Farrell and Parkin have won international acclaim.

They produce over-life-size C-type colour prints depicting people dressed in historical costume who are inserted physically into a theatre set constructed out of plaster. The scenes are based on various historical paintings, engravings or illustrations. Rejecting digital technology, Farrell and Parkin construct everything themselves by hand, painting in details such as the original cross-hatchings of historical engravings. They photograph the scenes onto traditional C-type negatives, using a standard single-lens reflex camera on a tripod. The conventions of theatrical staging are both their mode of operation as well as the subject of their art. They convert history into contemporary theatre by intruding themselves into the historical European text of the originals.

Their performance-photography has included imagery from the grand tradition of Baroque painting, such the *Repentance* sequence of reconstructed seventeenth-century oil paintings (1988). Another series, *Miserable Pleasures and Glorious Mysteries* (1989), has included an image of the Virgin Mary of the Pieta which originated in Quito Ecuador. They had also earlier produced imaginary film stills from Soviet cinema, *Linesmen of the Volga*, Red series (1982–83) and *Red Squares* (1986–87).

The theme of alchemy and the Hermetic tradition emerged in a set of C-type prints, *Worthy Habits and Mantles* (1990). They re-staged the engravings found in a seventeenth-century Hermetic (probably Rosicrucian) emblem book on the theme of divine love, with accompanying text. Some of the original imagery carried alchemical connotations, such as one depicting Christ-Mercury crucified on the Tree of Life. In one particular engraving, *Whole Desire*, a supplicant kneels before God who is symbolized by the emblems of his eyes and ears. From the heart of the devotee arises an arrow directed towards God (fig. 9.6). The image belongs to an iconographic tradition of the alchemist at prayer in his laboratory, as in Hans Vredeman de Vries' depiction for Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (fig. 9.7; see below). Nothing in alchemy, nor in any esoteric practice, will attain its just ends without the direct intervention of the grace of God, hence the necessity for prayer and submission.

9.6 Rose Farrell and George Parkin, *Whole Desire* from *Worthy Habits and Mantles* (1990) (colour C-type photograph). With the permission of Rose Farrell and George Parkin

The detail of the arrow is also worth mentioning since it occurs frequently in a Hermetic context. It is encountered, as has been remarked, in an alchemical manuscript of the fifteenth century located in the Medicean Library in Florence (MS Ashburnham 1166, *Miscellanea d'Alchimia*). This was probably written and illustrated in Padua *c.* 1470. The picture shows Adam prone on his back, an arrow embedded in the right side of his chest, while a tree arises from his genitals.[48] He represents the dying prime matter (the name Adam meaning 'red earth' in Hebrew) out of which there will be created the

regenerative Philosopher's Stone. The arrow is itself a phallic signifier, as in Max Ernst's painting *Oedipus Rex* (1922), where it is depicted piercing a walnut, a metaphor for the alchemical egg. In a more general way, the arrow can represent the forces of desire, as in Farrell and Parkin's photograph from *Worthy Habits and Mantles*, in which the supplicant is directing all his willpower towards God, purifying his base desires into a spiritual quest for the divine and into a longing that the divine manifest its presence in materiality as the Philosopher's Stone.

As far as Farrell and Parkin are concerned, their own relationship with this alchemical series of texts and pictorial emblems is completely detached. This is also the case in their other appropriations from different religious, spiritual and intellectual traditions. They recover these, often defunct, ideas for the purpose of information, rather than having any wish to subscribe to the beliefs underlying the iconography. The political objective of Farrell and Parkin's work is to criticize the reduction of Australian culture to the footnotes of history, as a late appendage to European art and culture. To this end they perform a sort of 'cargo cult' in their manner of assembling the stage sets, costumes and personas. They act, perhaps even subconsciously, as if they were the 'primitives' of Western culture, looking-in at the windows of the hegemonic institutions.

Farrell and Parkin do not criticize the actual works that have been enshrined within the walls of history. In fact, they admire them, though not as participants in their histories. Instead, they regard these iconic works as outsiders to the iconic tradition of High Art, finding much that inspires aesthetic and intellectual appreciation, but still more that appears bizarre and utterly incomprehensible. As in the cargo cultism of the South Sea islands, the mysterious artefacts of the northern hemisphere are repositioned in a new geographical location, though for a quite different purpose, sometimes as objects of worship. Farrell and Parkin adopt this literalist mode of interpretation, refusing to interpret or comment critically on their original sources. In their manner of recreating the artefacts they devise something quite new that cannot be placed into any aesthetic category, though the artwork remains tied umbilically to its origins.

This is an understated political position that criticizes European cultural imperialism which has not ended with the eviction of British rule from Australia. At the same time, however, Farrell and Parkin positively delight in their European sources, which are painstakingly retrieved from obscure archives and lovingly re-presented to public view.

After their venture into alchemy and the Hermetic tradition, Farrell and Parkin produced a succession of works concerned with the history of empirical Western medicine, specifically with those aspects of medical practice that have been abandoned. Farrell and Parkin produced stage sets and photographic installations on an epic scale, such as *Black Room* (1992), *Pulleys, Dislocations and Counterweights* (1998), *Traces of the Flood* (2000), *Random Act 2 Unforeseen*

Circumstances (2001) and *Random Acts* (2005). In these photographs Farrell and Parkin explored the effects of hospitalization on individuals and their isolation from society. Out of their 1992 residency in New York at *PS1* and *The Clocktower* emerged the installation *Black Room*, consisting of eight large-scale, multi-panelled photographs. This was the culmination of six years of exploring medical practices. The imagery suggests the theme of torture, but in reality the photos depict archaic instruments of healing with human figures, as if trapped in desolate and helpless situations. For example, in the print *Untitled ~1* there appears a tranquillizing chair made by Benjamin Rush in 1810, though the viewers tend to perceive it as an electric chair. The protagonists are photographed in an old house within its detritus of mould, plumbing pipes, stained walls and mattresses.[49] Another installation, *Night-sea Crossing* (Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, 1987), consists of five triptychs in which the central panel depicts a figure being stretched and pulled. The side panels show machinery such as water wheels and other hydraulic machines copied from eighteenth-century engravings.

In their most recent artwork, *Restoration* (2008), they have drawn on two particular historical documents, one of which is a set of engravings on classical architecture by Hans Vredeman de Vries (*Perspective*, Leiden: Henricus Hondius, 1604). There is an important alchemical connection in the selection of this particular artist, for he had also illustrated Heinrich Khunrath's alchemical *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (1607) (fig. 9.7). Vredeman de Vries drew illusionistic scenery depicting buildings set in exaggerated single-point space with raked floors. These architectural depictions have a mystical connotation related to Rosicrucianism, alchemy and possibly early freemasonry. They are a Theatre of the World, a symbolic microcosm of the universe, a world within a world. In the Renaissance there was a confluence of religion, science, magic and art, and it was not uncommon to encounter in a single person, such as Vredeman de Vries, the combination of medical practitioner, anatomist, alchemist and artist.

The figurative imagery of the *Restoration* photographs is derived from a rare book that records Greek surgical practice of the first century AD (Nicetas, Chirurgia and Paris: Pierre Gaultier, 1544) written by the ancient Greeks Galen and Oribasius. The text and illustrations of this Greek original recorded a tenth-century Greek manuscript edited by the Byzantine physician Nicetas. The subject concerns the re-setting of dislocated limbs. However, in their photographic reconstructions Farrell and Parkin did not aim to produce historically accurate copies of the original pictures. Each image features an injured man or woman lying on a bed against the backdrop of De Vries' Hermetic architecture of arches and columns. Papier mâché hands and other props attached to the figures suggest arcane medical treatments.

The theatrical space of Farrell and Parkin's photographs hovers between the real and the conceptual, with living persons emulating the symbolic

9.7 Heinrich Khunrath, the alchemist in his laboratory, *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (Hanau, 1607), engraving. Photograph by courtesy of Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds

figures of the original stylized illustrations. In response to this process of dehumanization, Farrell and Parkin endow their human models with individual identities. In the original woodcuts the figures had been naked, but in the photographs they appear clothed in the dress and wigs of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. George Parkin made most of the costumes himself, sewing into the trousers of each figure an individual name tags and rosettes, 'which gave the sitters some ownership of the character and was a personal touch. Although not seen in the images it helped to set the scene.'[50] The sitters themselves selected the fictional careers of their characters (*The Goldsmith*, *The Silk Weaver* and so on), picturing the human story within each scene (fig. 9.8).

9.8 Rose Farrell and George Parkin, *The Silk Weaver* from *Restoration series* (2008) (colour C-type photograph). With the permission of Rose Farrell and George Parkin

Farrell and Parkin have altered Vredeman de Vries' pictorial mode from landscape to portrait, condensing the horizontals into verticals and disrupting the geometrical proportions. They have gently inverted his rigid classification of space into an unstable territory that has slipped out of alignment. In the same manner, the human figures have dropped out of historical biography, becoming part of the abstract order that governs the background space.

The Hermetic significance of De Vries' geometry has been erased due to this topographical upheaval, and his autocratic architectural regime has been rendered plebeian.

The Australian critic Dylan Rainforth has commented of Farrell and Parkin that their work is a theatrical machine:

> They're searching for the coherently fake, not the convincingly deceptive .... Their work is a thinking tool, an apparatus they use to puzzle things out. The term home theatre is rarely so apt, especially when it is also a home operating theatre – and one capable of operating on so many levels too: conceptual, rhetorical, retinal and spatial. So the artists spend time with their theatrical machine and its mysteries and in this way its challenges can develop into something pleasurable.[51]

Farrell and Parkin are fascinated by lost visual languages known only to a few initiates, or almost entirely extinct. Their practice, despite its international success, is located within the context of the Australian quest for national identity within the conditions of post-colonial politics and culture.

Another Australian artist who has employed photography as a site for theatrical performance is Luke Roberts (b. 1952), who also explores in a flamboyant manner the icons of European art as they are contextualized within authoritarian political systems. Roberts has employed Hermetic imagery on occasion, although the main site of his critical discourse is the Baroque theatricality of the Roman Catholic Church. Roberts as a performance artist had been substantially influenced from the outset by Surrealist art and literature, in particular Salvador Dalí and René Magritte in his work of the 1980s. From the Surrealists, Roberts has appropriated at various times the symbology of Duchamp's Bride, Rene Magritte's bowler-hatted, faceless man, Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, Dalí's moustache and his imagery of Mae West's lips.[52]

Robert's own starting point, however, has been his own political position as a gay man born into the repressive culture of Outback Central Queensland and its archaic Catholicism, a throwback to the 1930s. His imagery is derived from linguistic games based on the pun. In fact, his work should be rightly placed within the irrational traditions of the post-Symbolist French writers Jean-Pierre Brisset and Raymond Roussel. Through recourse to homophonic texts, Roberts has managed to people a fantastic universe of outrageous characters, locating their origins in outer space in the planet Metalluna. His critical method resembles those of the French writers who sought to uncover a truth deeply obscured within an intersection of texts. Whereas Roussel had sought to deconstruct a text *ad absurdum*, Brisset had sought for the intrinsic significance of the text, that which was not at all apparent in its rational means of communication.[53] This latent signification always points back at the code-breaker himself, as in Roberts' case. Roberts explains:

> 'Reality is made of language,' Terrence McKenna said. One of my guiding ideas has been the myth of the Egyptian god Ptah, who spoke the name

> of everything to bring it into reality. These ideas have figured widely in my work. The word made flesh and the flesh made word.[54]

Roberts was born in Alpha, a small town in Central Queensland near which ran the Alice River. The very name of the town and other simple facts has led to the creation of an eccentric mythical world. Roberts' self-identification with an alter ego known as 'Alice' he ascribes to his alchemical 'baptism' in the Alice River which graced him with this new persona:

> My mother … described a journey that we went on, just a few weeks after I was born, to a town about 160 km/100 miles away. It was summer and a hot day in the Outback. My parents took me down to a river en route to bathe and cool me. The river's name is Alice.[55]

Roberts' original Roman Catholicism has also inspired the characters that he plays (including Jesus Christ), but whom he regards in some way as entities autonomous of his own conscious ego. These fictional personas possess a carnivalesque character, transgressive and disruptive, but child-like:

> From as early as I can remember … I wanted to be an artist. In the 1950s and 1960s, especially here in Australia, and especially in country Queensland, that was an equivalent of saying you wanted to fly to the moon. We didn't have oil paintings in our town, or any other paintings for that matter, just prints and the best of these were holy pictures. I was very influenced by the pre-Vatican Council form of Catholicism, including the Latin Mass.[56]

Kitsch dominates Roberts' iconography. This aspect seems, in fact, to be present in the work of many white artists whose origins lie in the Australian Outback. Roberts adopted the common perception of Australia as an upside-down world, a heterotopia, an alternative autonomous world:

> The ritual and ceremony of the church has had a big influence on my performance art work. We didn't have a museum or an art gallery in the conventional sense, so the closest we had as a sculpture garden was the cemetery. The cemetery has also played a role in my view of art. At the same time I was taking on the influence of kitsch objects and the movies and other forms of cultural expression such as formal dances, rodeos and travelling shows, especially circuses. Carnivals disrupt the norm.[57]

Queensland itself gained a demonic aspect in Robert's thinking due to the extreme right-wing political conditions of the state in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the state capital Brisbane, which had been placed under martial law. Police brutality was rife and the judicial system corrupted. The government was ruled by the Liberal–Country Party coalition, with Johannes Bielke-Petersen as Premier. His excessive moral and social conservatism and his overt racism against aboriginals and non-Anglo-Saxon Australians were notorious. Homosexuals and aboriginals were banned from public bars in the mid-1980s. There seemed to be no way of deposing him since the electoral boundaries

had been changed to favour the election of right-wing governments. In the 1970s and 1980s in Brisbane art and popular culture had gone underground in the severe political conditions, and many of the youngest artists, musicians and writers spent periods of time in goal.[58] Eventually, the Fitzgerald Inquiry (1988) was organized to investigate official corruption, and Bielke-Petersen and his party were eventually ousted from power.[59]

In response to the depressive atmospheric of Brisbane, Roberts produced his first character in 1977, 'Alice Jitterbug', whom he cross-dressed according to the conventions of gay 'glam'. Her range of significations stretched from the Alice River and Australian Outback culture through to Lewis Carroll's Alice and his punning word-play. An additional allusion incorporated Native American medicine men, whose recourse to cross-dressing permitted them to act as mediums for the spirit world in healing rituals. Artists have a shamanistic role in Robert's world-picture. In 1984–87 Roberts departed for Paris, Berlin and Amsterdam. During this time he moved to the study of the French Surrealists and their commitment to political revolution. Elements of their practice were integrated into the figure of Alice, specifically Breton's naming of the Surrealist journal *Le Surréalisme à la service de la révolution* (1929). Roberts took the initials of the journal, 'L.S. à la S de la R', whose homophonic sounds read as 'Alice [L.S.] à la service de la révolution'.

The most enduring alter ego manifested herself in 1974. This was 'Pope Alice', modelled on the mythical Pope Joan and on the High Priestess of the Waite Tarot pack. Her world provided a heterotopia for Roberts to inhabit in preference to the deadening political realities of fascist Queensland. Pope Alice acquired, in addition, the symbolism of Duchamp's Bride. By the early 1990s, in a series of performances in New York and Venice, she had been given a white face mask and a papal tiara adorned with breasts/phalluses in the manner of the Hellenistic statue of Diana of the Ephesians. More recently, the face mask has come to cover her entire face, and its shape, along with that of the eyes, is the popular image of aliens from space.

Pope Alice is said to have worked many supernatural miracles, and she has even performed a Catholic-style mass including the alchemical act of transubstantiation of water into wine. In a performance at Leicester University (1998), dressed as Duchamp's Bride in wedding gown and veil, Pope Alice turned water into wine in a plastic bucket by means of crystals of potassium permanganate concealed in its base. She then distributed plastic Halloween skulls from a silver tray to the audience with a pair of silver tongs. She enacted the role of both the alchemist Pope-Priest distributing the communion to the audience as well as that of 1950s Outback housewife with her tray of baked cakes served to visitors.[60]

The logophiliac non-sense that has produced this haunted image is comparable to the inventions of Raymond Roussell, as is evident in Roberts' explanation of Pope Alice's extra-terrestrial speech:

she is the only known speaker of the antediluvian Mu language and articulator of Mulang, the noble sign language of Lemuria, as well as keeper of the complexities of the enigmatic rongo-rongo script.[61]

Roberts has a certain engagement with alchemical Hindu Tantric rites, which are said to transmute the body and psyche. Shiva is the god of Tantric Yoga and transgression, as well as of alchemy and the dance. A personal emblem for Roberts is that of Shiva-Shakti taking the form of a single male/female-gendered body. In his *Hindu Signs* performance Pope Alice inscribed signs which Roberts explains as sacred geometry, referencing also the *Emerald Table* of Hermes Trismegistus:

Sacred Geometry and a recognition that all cultures throughout the world have particular types of geometry in common often associated with the sacred, the divine and healing. The Chakra system is part of this sacred geometry.

… The Mandelbrot set also figures in the work as a means of attempting to describe Infinity, especially our own internal infinity. As above, so below and so within ....[62]

In his most recent series of performances, Roberts has returned to the Outback territory of his childhood in Alpha. In the course of this event, *Outback Tea Ceremony* (2009) (fig. 9.9), Pope Alice in her Raelian mask performed a Japanese tea ceremony, kneeling on a stool and using the authentic traditional utensils. The setting is the desert of the Outback, and in the background is an iconic Australian detail, a billy-can boiling over a campfire. This was the essential equipment in the wanderings of the cattle drovers and of the swagman, a tramp or casual labourer. The swagman and the drover are the central figures in the myths of the Australian Outback created in the late nineteenth century, the stuff of tales and folk-songs. His billy-can is just any old tin can. 'Billy tea', however, has become a legendary delicacy in Australian cuisine, and special tea leaves for its preparation can be bought in local supermarkets.

Roberts has brought together the two completely different tea ceremonies. Both involve the alchemical element of fire, and the ritual of the tea-making is a transmutational spiritual process. Tea is an integral part of Zen philosophy and Japanese national identity, and at the same time it is a culinary focus in the historical development of Australian identity. The brewing of billy tea is a ritual part of 'mateship' between working-males in the desert Outback. In the middle of this confluence of texts there kneels a cross-dressed gay man, acting the part of a female Pope and also of Duchamp's alchemical bride in her wedding dress. More elementally, Roberts is identifying with the Elohim-spacemen, the humans who acted as creator-gods in the extraterrestrial theology of Rael (an idea first popularized in the 1960s by Erich von Däniken).

The constant themes underlying all of Roberts' work are those of Lewis Carroll's Alice and of the Alice River in Central Queensland. Hence, a third tea ceremony is recalled in this particular performance, that of the tea party

9.9 Luke Roberts, *Pope Alice: Outback Tea Ceremony* (2009) (photograph of Pope Alice in performance), Alpha, Queensland. With the kind permission of Luke Roberts

in *Alice in Wonderland* with its lunatic characters and their cryptic, but sage, reflections on the vicissitudes of life.

The essential issue located among these densely layered meanings is what constitutes Australian identity in a post-colonial context. Roberts references Australia's Asian location and its economic and increasingly cultural dependence on countries such as Japan. He examines (with affection) the white Australian myth of the romantic Outback and its macho inhabitants. However, he also introduces a range of syncretic religious ideas derived from the Catholic mass, concepts of alchemical transmutation and from Raelianism.

Another alchemical theme has been evident in Roberts' installations in his *Wunderkammer* ('Cabinet of Curiosities') series. In large glass vitrines he has displayed his own assemblages, alongside his collection of antique artefacts, pop and bush kitsch, which he has accumulated over the years.[63] This domestic and cultural excess has been transmuted into artistic gold by Roberts through the application of his own eccentric taxonomies to the classification of the various artefacts.[64]

At this time Pope Alice continues to work alchemical transmutations and miracles. She continues seeking to identify the essential elements of both her own Australian identity and of the complex discourse of gender in her society.

There is one more artist who needs to be mentioned in the context of Antipodean art and its esoteric influences, and that is Milan Mrkusich (b. 1925), a New Zealander born in Dargaville and educated in Auckland. His family were Dalmatian in origin. Mrkusich has gained a reputation as one of New Zealand's leading modernist painters, and his concerns are pictorial rather than political, poetic rather than rhetorical. His painting takes the form of a geometric expressionist style.

In his early years from 1949, Mrkusich had worked for an architectural firm, Brenner Associates, as a colour consultant. Subsequently, from 1958 he was employed on commissions in creating stained-glass windows and mosaics. His main intellectual and spiritual influences at that time came from Jung's psychology, as explained in the popular text *Man and His Symbols* (London: Aldus; W.H. Allen, 1964). It was in this context that Mrkusich encountered alchemy and the spiritual significance of geometrical form. In particular, he began to work with Jung's central symbol of the mandala, which represents the efforts of the human psyche to attain wholeness and integrity. In the 1960s Mrkusich produced the series of paintings known as *Emblems* (1963) and then his *Elements* and *Four Elements* (1965–66), which reflected his esoteric interests. From 1968 he explored another still more minimalist style in a set of monochromes and other works such as the *Meta Greys* (1969–76) and the *Dark Paintings* (1970s–2000s), in which forms and elements were eliminated.

Mrkusich continued with his series of monochromes through into the 1980s, when he turned to the Constructivist tradition for his *Segmented Arcs* (1982–83). At this time he had gained international recognition, and he was invited to participate in the 48th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh in the United States. Further new directions ensued from the 1980s, including the *Journey* series, based around the exploration of colour. In his painting *Ambient Gold* (2009) he returns to strong alchemical allusions in the arrangement of the colours of red and gold. Gold is overlaid above several levels of colour, although one red corner is left visible and a short black vertical line is included to add tension to the surface. The analogy of alchemical transmutation is one which has often been applied to the colour experimentation of Mrkusich.[65]

Mrkusich seems to have been the only Antipodean artist to have used alchemical references in a purely formal and poetic context without reference to the socio-political and cultural history of his country. This is probably a reflection of his early artistic training in the years preceding the heated political debates of the late 1960s in which art was regarded as being implicit in the debasement of Western culture. The succeeding generation which began its practice in the 1980s has felt itself obliged to tackle in their artwork the problems of the colonized lands of Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, Mrkusich's type of practice is important and has validity as a radical type of experimentation which is also socially significant, as will be discussed in due course.

However, Mrkusich has not altogether remained free of national politics since he has gained a status as a national icon, one of the founding fathers of a specifically New Zealander tradition of art practice. He has been feted as a major cultural commodity in several major retrospectives since the 1970s, most recently in 2009, and justly so, since his work is of such intellectual import and artistic consequence as to merit this reputation.[66]

In the country which colonized the Antipodes, Britain, probably the most widely explored artistic theme from the eighteenth century to the present day has been that of the landscape. Although the issue of national identity which haunts Australian art has not been an issue for British landscape artists, they too have explored the theme of dispossession from the land and other social issues arising from the industrialization of the countryside. The esoteric tradition has influenced British landscape art, initially prehistory and Celtic myth, as in the work of Paul Nash and Henry Moore, and after 1945, magic and alchemy, as well as Indian Hindu and South American mystical traditions.

Notes

1. Tom H. Gibbons, *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel: Studies in English Literary Criticism and Ideas 1880–1920* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia, 1973).
2. Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879–1939* (Kensington, New South Wales: New South Wales University Press, 1986).
3. Jill Roe, 'A Shadowy Figure? Bessie Rischbieth, Theosophic Feminist', *Australian Cultural History*, 23 (2004), 79–95.
4. Gregory Tillett, *The Elder Brother: A Biography of Charles Webster Leadbeater* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
5. Mouni Sadhu, *In Days of Great Peace* (Bangalore: Ramnarayan Press, 1952 and later reprints).
6. The main publications by Riedel are Frater Albertus, *The Alchemist's Handbook: A Manual for Practical Laboratory Alchemy* (New York: Samuel Weiser, [1960] 1974), and Frater Albertus, *The Alchemist of the Rocky Mountains* (Salt Lake City, UT: Paracelsus Research Society, 1976), which is very rare.
7. For Paracelsus College, see http://homepages.ihug.com.au/~panopus/.
8. Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1796–1960* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1962).
9. Ron Radford, *Our Country: Australian Federation Landscapes, 1900–1914* (Adelaide, South Australia: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2001).
10. Jane Hylton and John Neylon, *Hans Heysen: Into the Light* (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield, 2004).
11. Charles Merewether and Anne Stephen (eds), *The Great Divide* (Melbourne: Fitzroy, 1977).
12. Richard Bell, *Scratch an Aussie*, exh. cat. (Brisbane: Milani Gallery, 2008).
13. Ian McLean and Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett* (Roseville East, New South Wales: Craftsman House, 1996).
14. Ross Searle, *Artists in the Tropics* (Townsville, Queensland: Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, 1991); Anneke Silver website: www.annekesilver.com/cv.shtml; Jane Magon, *Anneke Silver: Images of the Goddess and Nature Mysticism* (Sydney, Western Australia: Fine Art Publishing, 1995).
15. Micky Allan et al., *Eureka! Artists from Australia*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Gallery and Institute of Contemporary Art, 1982).

16. Barry Dickins, *Black and Whiteley: Barry Dickens in Search of Brett* (South Yarra, Victoria: Hardie Grant Books, 2002).

17. The author would like to thank Robert Owen for his assistance with research materials. He is currently represented by Arc One Gallery in Melbourne: http://arcone.com.au.

18. Caroline Barnes, 'Robert Owen: A different kind of modern', *Artlink*, 26/3 (2006), 40–45; Alex Selenitsch, *Dark Night*, cat. essay (Melbourne: Sherman Galleries, 2005); Alex Selenitsch, *Jumping Dimensions*, cat. essay (Melbourne: ARC One Gallery, 2004).

19. Interview with Janet Laurence, www.galeriedusseldorf.com.au/GDArtists/LaurenceJanet/JLawrence.html#interview.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. This section is partly based on conversations with Tom Arthur in Sydney in the late 1980s. The author would like to thank Tom Arthur for his invaluable assistance.

23. Robert Lindsay, *Tom Arthur – Survey 10*, exh. cat. (Melbourne, Victoria: National Gallery of Victoria, 1979).

24. Tom Arthur, *The Entire Contents of a Gentleman's Room*, curated by Frances Lindsay; includes essay by Urszula Szulakowska and interview by Tony Maniaty with Tom Arthur (Melbourne, Victoria: Melbourne University Gallery, 1987).

25. Approximate dimensions: length 72 m × height 3 m × width 3.6 m; information supplied by Tom Arthur in email to the author, 26 June 2009.

26. Tom Arthur and Tony Maniaty, *Goodbye Carpet, Goodbye Small Door*, exh. cat. (Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, 1983).

27. Information supplied by Tom Arthur in email to the author, 26 June 2009.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana MS 1166. d. e, *Miscellanea d'Alchimia*, *c.* 1470s. This image may be viewed in Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge, 1993), fig. 131, and also in Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), fig. 39.

32. Arthur, *The Entire Contents of a Gentleman's Room*, n.p.; Tom Arthur, *A Propos (3) Objet A*, exh. cat. (Melbourne, Victoria: Robert Lindsay Gallery, 1994), n.p.

33. Arthur, *The Entire Contents of a Gentleman's Room*, n.p.

34. Eileen Chanin (ed.), 'Death Insights on Life', in Philip Kent, *The Magnificent Seven Deadlies: Death-insights on Life*, exh. cat. (Sydney, Western Australia: Rookwood Necropolis, 1996), p. 11.

35. Ibid., pp. 11–12, 14.

36. Ibid., p. 14.

37. Approximate dimensions: length 9 m × height 3 m × width 3 m; information supplied by Tom Arthur in email to the author, 26 June 2009.

38. Tom Arthur, *Tom Arthur Survey*, exh. cat. (Melbourne, Victoria: National Gallery of Victoria, 1979), n.p.

39. Arthur, *Entire Contents of a Gentleman's Room*, n.p.

40. Ibid.

41. David Moses, 'David Moses Artwork 1984–1998', unpub. cat. (Hobart, Tasmania, *c.* 1999), n.p. This section is based on interviews and correspondence with the artist during 1988–*c.* 2005.

42. Moses, 'Artwork 1984–1998', n.p.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. David Moses, *Unrealisable Sculpture*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, collections of materials from *Mail Art Project*, exh., 1995.

46. Moses, *Unrealisable Sculpture.*

47. Moses, 'Artwork 1984–1998'.

48. This image may be viewed in Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, fig. 131, and also in Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy*, fig. 39.

49. The following section is based in extensive conversations with the artists during 1988–2008. The author wishes to thank Rose Farrell and George Parkin for their assistance with research materials. See Rose Farrell and George Parkin, *Pulleys, Dislocations and Counterweights*, exh. cat. with essays by Paul Mellor and Catherine Grout (New York: PSI, 1997/98).

50. Rose Farrell and George Parkin, e-mail to author, 10 April 2008.

51. Dylan Rainforth, 'Rose Farrell and George Parkin: Home Operating Theatre', *Artlink*, 28/3 (2008), 20–25, quote from p. 22.

52. I am grateful to Luke Roberts for his assistance with research materials. The following section is based on interviews in 1988–2009.

53. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking* Glass (La Salle, IL: Open Court, (1985), pp. 17–27.

54. John LeKay, interview with Luke Roberts, *Heyoka Magazine*, 11 (2008), http://heyokamagazine.com/heyoka.19.lukeroberts.interview.htm.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Michele Helmrich, 'Divine Curiosities: The World according to Pope Alice', in Luke Roberts (ed.), *Vanitas: Pope Alice Presents Luke Roberts* (Brisbane, Queensland: Institute of Modern Art, 1999), pp. 16–33.

59. Phil Dickie, *The Road to Fitzgerald* (Brisbane, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1988).

60. Michael Snelling, 'Prelude', in Roberts, *Vanitas*, pp. 6ff.

61. Roberts, interview, *Heyoka Magazine*.

62. Ibid.

63. These works were shown in his solo exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery (1994–95), as well as in *Perspecta* (1996); similar artefacts appeared in exhibitions at the Sala Diaz Experimental Art Space, San Antonio, Texas (1997), and at the PSI 21st annual exhibition, New York (1996–67).

64. Helmrich, 'Divine Curiosities', pp. 26–8; interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg in Roberts, *Vanitas*, pp. 60ff.

65. Alan Wright and Edward Hanfling, *Transform: The Abstract Art of Milan Mrkusich* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009).

66. See ibid.

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10

Earth magic

It was their enduring commitment to the Romantic landscape that distinguished the British Surrealists of the 1930s from their French counterparts. Artists such as Paul Nash, John Nash and Graham Sutherland combined the dream imagery of the French with their own visions of the land from the perspective of native Celtic myth.

Paul Nash (1889–1946) explored the Dorset landscape of Neolithic stone circles and their associated prehistoric cults of sun and moon.[1] In 1933, after a serious illness, he was drawn to the ritual landscape around Avebury stone circle and the nearby prehistoric burial chambers, as well as the monumental earthwork of Silbury Hill.[2] Nash's paintings have a theatrical construction like stage scenery, partly in reference to Giorgio de Chirico's haunted townscapes and partly because Nash actually designed stage sets. In his paintings he distorted the perspective and set isolated objects in the midst of spatial voids, evoking an uncanny atmosphere, as in *Northern Adventure* (1919) and *Landscape from a Dream* (1936–38).

His brother, John Nash (1893–1977), and leading British modernists such as Henry Moore (1898–1986) and Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) similarly moderated their engagement with Continental artistic developments by recourse to the national traditions of art.[3] Moore's stone sculptures are constructed in such a manner that they form an integral unity with the landscape around them. Their semi-abstract forms echo the curves and hollows of the land. Similarly, it was on the model of the earth that Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) devised her sculptural language. Paul Nash exerted a strong influence on the landscape painting of Graham Sutherland (1903–1980), who, like Nash, had at first emulated the work of Samuel Palmer (1805–1881). Sutherland was subsequently drawn into the practice of Surrealist automatism and related concepts of the creative subconscious mind in the production of dream and fantasy.

Andrew Causey has commented on the manner in which British Surrealists explored the inner animation of landscape, using popular myth as an entry into the secrets of nature. Nash explored the themes of the sea, the courses of

the heavenly bodies in the heavens, as well as the mysticism of the symbol of the sun-wheel and its earthly equivalent, the sun-flower. Causey concludes that the art of the British Surrealists was essentially Romantic in mood, concept and intention.[4]

The ideas of the French Surrealists were promoted in Britain by critic and art theorist Herbert Read (1893–1968) by means of *The International Surrealist Exhibition* (11 June–4 July 1936), which was held at the New Burlington Galleries in London. Read was a member of the organizing committee, among other important artists, critics and writers. There was a counterpart organizing committee in Paris which consisted of, among others, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Georges Hugnet and Man Ray. The *London Bulletin* encouraged the reception of Surrealism by producing 15 issues on the subject from April 1938 to June 1940.[5] Public lectures took place in London with invited speakers such as Breton and Eluard. An intentional furore resulted from Salvador Dalí's performance at the gallery, *Fantomes paranoiaques authentiques*, in which he appeared dressed in deep-sea diver's gear and nearly suffocated.

Herbert Read was the most important advocate of modernist art and Continental psychology in Britain, promoting the work of both Freud and Jung. Read himself was a poet, critic and philosophical anarchist, as well as a pacifist (he lacked any rapport with Breton, however, partly due to Breton's communistic loyalties). Read was instrumental in founding two British associations of artists, the Unit 1 and Circle groups, which reflected his own convictions concerning modern art's socio-political function. He was convinced that art could have a redemptive effect on the social and political order, urging that children should be taught through art-making and referring to Jung's ideas on the positive creative forces of the Unconscious.[6] Later on, Read became a member of the editorial committee which was to produce the definitive edition of Jung's collected writings published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in the 1950s. Additional influences on Read came from Hegel, Schiller, and for a time, Karl Marx.

Strangely enough, despite their interest in myth and theories of the subconscious mind and despite their close contacts with Paris, none of the early British Surrealists make any mention of alchemy. The sole exception is a novel produced by Read in 1935, his luminous and beautifully crafted work, *The Green Child*. Although he never spoke directly about alchemy itself, Read would have encountered its discourse at the heart of Jung's psychological system. Read draws on Jung's concept of universal archetypal images as pre-existent in the psyche of all humans.

Jung himself recorded his own responses to *The Green Child* in a letter written on 17 October 1948 in which he commented on how he read the book in one day and was so struck by its remarkable qualities that he stayed awake most of the following night. Jung interpreted the work as referring to the alchemical *arcanum*, that of the Philosopher's Stone. He was intrigued by

Read's metaphors of stone as representative of alchemical pneuma, equating stone with spirit. Jung concluded that these were by no means intellectual inventions, but authentic products of the unconscious mind, and there was nothing arbitrary about the characters and settings in Read's story.[7]

The central character in this work is a recently returned British émigré who is journeying home to a location that strongly resembles Read's own native land of Kirbymoorside in North Yorkshire. In the novel the landscape is integral to the development of the story, and it has a psychological significance. The central character speaks always in the first person and does not reveal his name, which suggests that he is the embodiment of the Jungian archetype of the hero. The man has had a successful career as an agriculturist and politician in his adopted country in South America. Returning to England, he attempts to reach his home by following a river that runs upstream. This is a self-conscious motif referring to the widdershins orientation of the unconscious mind in Jungian psychology, a realm of topsy-turvy, since the Unconscious is an inverted reflection of the rational faculty.

In the course of his journey upstream, the man comes across an isolated farmhouse where he sees another man attempting to force a green-skinned girl to drink the blood of a slaughtered lamb. It is a negative allusion to the Roman Catholic Eucharist, in which the sacrificial blood of the Lamb of God (Christ) is fed to the faithful. Since Read is critical of all institutionalized religion, he uses this Roman Catholic motif as a metaphor of the rigid conscious mind. Read is accusing Christianity of perverting natural humanity, with its innate spark of the divine. The Green Child is unable to eat flesh and blood since she is not of this world – that is, the rational mind of the common herd is alien to her refined sensibilities. Her green colour refers to pre-Christian cults of the god of vegetation. In essence, she is nature herself in her Jungian form as the Anima, the unconscious mind of the hero himself. The Jungian Unconscious is gendered female in the male mind (a woman's Unconscious being gendered male).

The Green Child is released by the hero, and this loosening of the bonds which chained the Unconscious to the restricted conscious mind (the farmer) instigates the successive events. The girl leads the hero to a lake, into which she plunges and he does the same. He follows her to her green homeland, hidden below the water from the people living on the surface of the earth in a state of humdrum consciousness. According to Jung, the Unconscious reveals its presence in dreams, appearing in symbols of wild places such as rivers, lakes, the sea, underground caverns and deep forests. The pairing of the older male hero with the young girl recalls another Jungian alchemical archetype, that of the old man Saturn, god of the Age of Gold, but also of decay and death, identified with lead – the prime matter.

In the story, the man is forced to regress to a space and time parallel to that of rational society. Read uses the vivid narrative of this beautifully written

but emotionally cold work to explain his political ideas as a committed anarchist, as well as his view of the male artist and critic as an initiate into a higher spiritual order. In his description of the philosophers whom the hero encounters in the green underwater world, Read introduces allusions to contemporary abstract sculpture. The philosophers create crystal forms in their search for the essence of pure form. The man is separated from the Green Child, who is abandoned to a vague realm of old women where she does nothing at all, while the men live together in a numinous sphere of intellectual advancement and grow in spiritual wisdom. They are reunited with their female counterpart only in death. The sole companions of the men in their highly evolved metaphysical state are insects, cold and utterly alien. At this point Read abandons Jungian psychology in order to promote his own ideas concerning the moral superiority of aesthetic insight, which for him is the most desirable aspect of the human condition.

Eventually in *The Green Child* the hero slowly dies, fossilizes and transmutes into stone. Read seems to be referring to the Philosopher's Stone, but his actual model for the stone transmutation may have been the chemical transformations that occur naturally at Mother Shipton's Cave at Knaresborough, North Yorkshire. The limestone-saturated water dripping down the entrance to the cave fossilizes objects hanging from the roof, such as hats, umbrellas and teddy bears, turning them into limestone stalactites. Read outrageously rejects the Christian view of spirit as supplanting the material world in death. Instead, he asserts the opposite, that matter supplants spirit, though in a Jungian sense. The material stone in Read's novel represents the Unconscious in a variant on the more usual Jungian symbols of seas and forests. In this sense, the fossilization of his hero does not signify the death of the spirit, but rather the unification of the conscious mind (the hero) with the Unconscious (represented by stone). The stone material is also the Philosopher's Stone.

At the same time, Read is expressing his disgust at the banality of popular culture, proclaiming instead the supremacy of an initiated intellectual and artistic elite.

After the Second World War, British artists were to encounter other types of esoteric spirituality during the counter-culture of the late 1960s, when the religions of the Indian sub-continent became familiar to the general public. Gurus such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi introduced yoga and meditation to the West, being followed by a superfluity of other charismatic figures such as Bhagavan Rajneesh and his Tantric sexual yoga. There was, moreover, a revival (or rather a complete reinvention) of European esoteric traditions involving magic, astrology, herbalism and witchcraft. In the early 1970s Thames and Hudson publishers began to issue their *Art and Imagination* series, which provided an introduction to all kinds of esoteric systems, including alchemy and freemasonry, mostly from a Jungian perspective.

Among the British artists closely associated with the counter-culture of the 1960s is Alan Davie (b. 1920), who has maintained a long-standing interest in alchemy. In the context of a recent exhibition *The Alchemical Journey* (12 May–12 June 2004) he commented on the Surrealist character of his own work and on his empathy with Jung's concept of archetypal imagery in his *Psychology and Alchemy*, a text which has exerted a powerful influence on his practice. Davie regards his practice as a type of magical mark-making, the production of mysterious languages accessible only to initiates into the magical mysteries. He acknowledges the ancestry of his work in the practice of the ancient alchemists.[8]

Davie is of Scottish origins, born in Grangemouth. As well as being a painter, he is also a jazz musician. He works with abstract forms that are largely improvised and are influenced by Jungian dream interpretation, music and mystical traditions. Davie thinks of himself as both alchemist and shaman.[9] His other sources include Zen Buddhism, African and Indian cosmology, as well as myths from pre-Columbian America, Polynesia and Australia, Celtic art and child art. In 1941 he won an Andrew Grant scholarship that enabled him to travel throughout Europe, and in Venice his work drew the attention of Peggy Guggenheim, who purchased a painting. At this time, he fell under the influence of Paul Klee's paintings and theories. His first New York exhibition took place in 1956, where he encountered the American abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko.[10] Yet, although his work displays their substantial influence, his inclusion of semi-abstract imagery and emblems creates a style that is uniquely his own. The references to magical kingdoms and Hermetic mysteries in the titles of his works do not serve to illuminate the paintings, but rather increase their mystery in their demand on the viewer to correlate form and title. The quality of Davie's imagery is jewel-like. The works are radiant and luminous. He considers his use of colour to be like an alchemical ritual transforming his canvas into a microcosmic reflection of the heavens, or into a cluster of jewels. In his work he perceives colour and space uniting in a transmutation and play of changing human emotions.[11]

Out of the prolific range of his work, one could draw attention to works such as *Village Myths No. 39* (July 1983) (fig. 10.1), which has been produced by means of an automatist process of playful doodling. The forms are impacted and pressed densely against each other. The offhand graffiti quality is light-hearted and humorous. Davie avoids both romanticism and morbid scenarios. For all their mystical intent, his painterly settings are more like those of circus and playground than of temple and arcane sacred site. Since the 1940s and 1950s, Davie's imagery has become more constructed and less arabesque, revealing the influence of textile art from South America and of Mogul illuminated manuscripts from India. The cultural influences metamorphose into a seamless web.[12]

10.1 Alan Davie, *Village Myths No. 39* (July 1983) (oil on canvas, 214 × 173 cm) London, Tate Gallery Collection. With the permission of Alan Davie

Like Davie, though with quite different results, Jo Tilson (b. 1928) has rejected European art, turning instead to the myths and culture of Native Americans and Australians. He was also drawn to the European Hermetic tradition, specifically to alchemy. Tilson originally belonged to the circle of British Pop artists who emerged in London during the early 1960s. He studied first at St Martin's School of Art with Leon Kossoff (b. 1926) and Frank Auerbach (b. 1931), and then at the Royal College of Art with Peter Blake

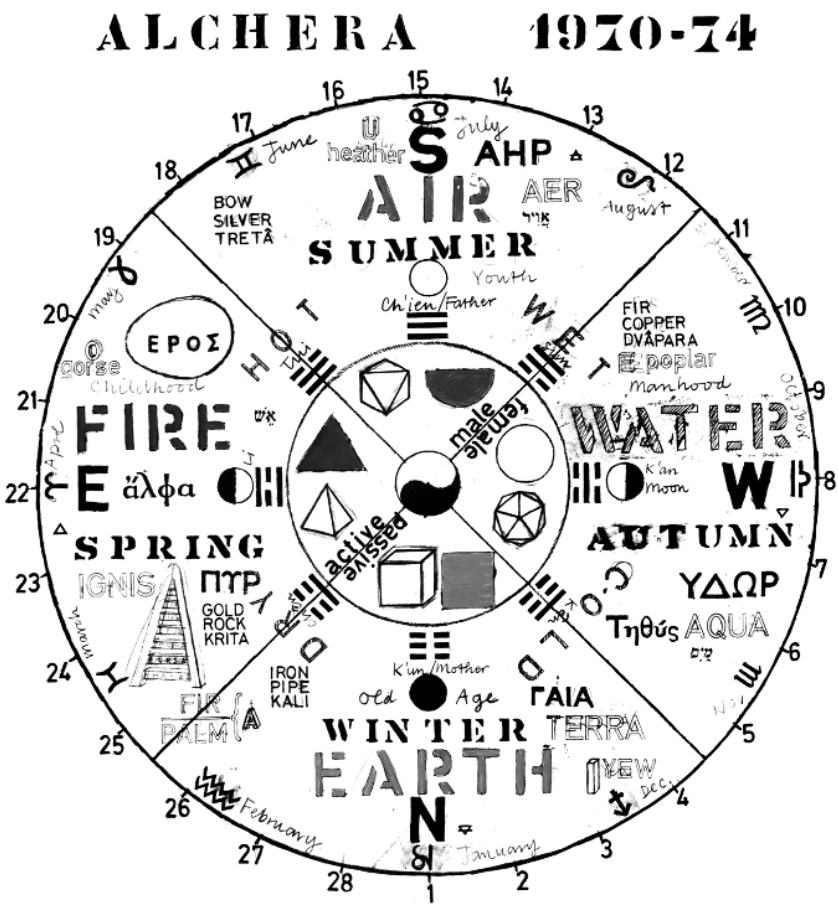
(b. 1932) and Richard Smith (b. 1931). Tilson exhibited internationally in 1964 at the 32nd Venice Biennale. He eventually abandoned Popism in 1972, when he moved out of the city back to a rural lifestyle in a vehement rejection of consumer society. Tilson had always valued the craft skills associated with wood-working, and he returned to these on his removal away from urban areas, producing meticulous examples of hand-printed imagery in traditional formats.

As an artist, Joe Tilson has been seriously undervalued in the history of British art, despite the prolific extent of his output. The range of his experimentation with materials and compositional formats in his graphic and photographic works is possibly unmatched among artists of his generation. Particularly ignored has been his political commitment to radical ideas. These were expressed in the late 1960s in a series of prints on paper known as his *A–Z Box* (1969–70). Among the issues explored, for example, were several works concerning the hunt by right-wing enemies for the communist guerrilla and cult hero Che Guevara (*Is This Che Guevara?*, 1969). Another topic was the murder of the Czech student Jan Palach by the forces of the communist regime during the Velvet Revolution in Prague. Several other prints were dedicated to the democratic revolts in Czechoslovakia (*Prague Postcard*, 1969–70). He also made references to the Vietnam War (*Vietnam Courier*, 1969–70) and to the communist leader Ho Chi Minh.

In the construction of his prints, rather than weaving a symbolic text in Davie's manner, Tilson engages in a semiotic exercise. He has invented, for example, a series of systems, visual structures based on the letters of the alphabet and days of the week. He has also developed other forms derived from circular mnemonic devices using a quadruple numerology referring to the four elements, the four directions and the four seasons, an alchemical numerology as in his graphic series *Alchera* (1970–74) (fig. 10.2). Tilson has also made allusions to the lunar months, labyrinths, ladders and words.[13]

In the late 1960s, many artists such as Alan Davie and Jo Tilson sought to escape the influence of American art and international modernism in favour of an engagement with world art, religion and myth. Their aim was to devise a different type of art practice which could speak of a metaphysical dimension of experience, using more universal resources in a more humane spirit. Unusually in a British context, they did not work with the native modes of landscape painting, but were directed instead by the broader international currents of Popism. These were modulated with political and spiritual texts in their subject matter, employing rich surfaces and textures in prints and paintings. There was also a commitment on the part of both Alan Davie and Jo Tilson to traditional forms of craftsmanship in the use of materials, colours and tools.

In the succeeding generation, some artists returned to the native landscape, to which they appended alchemical and other mystical metaphors, for example the work of the painter and printmaker Thérèse Oulton (b. 1953), whose semi-abstract surfaces and colourism recall the forms of the land.



10.2 Joe Tilson, *Alchera* (1970–74) (screenprint on paper) © Joe Tilson. All rights reserved, DACS 2009. © Tate, London 2010

In the late 1970s to early 1980s she attended St Martin's and the Royal College. Oulton has been shortlisted for the Turner Prize and has been described as one of the leading abstract artists of her generation. She commenced her practice in landscape before moving onto abstraction. Oulton has used the concept of alchemical transmutation metaphorically to describe her aesthetic process, in which she creates a densely worked surface of rhythmic patterns and texture, of voids and spaces. Her paintings in the exhibition *Slow Motion* (2000) emulated the phenomenological aspects of filmic imagery. Oulton develops a tension between motion and inertia, light and shadow. The dualism of form and inform, mass and void develop into an alchemized discourse concerning the reconciliation of opposites. Oulton's work does not involve any political agenda, and she prioritizes the poetic mode of expression.[14]

If the title of 'alchemical artist' were to be awarded to anyone, then it should be given to the prolific Scottish artist Glen Onwin (b. 1947), whose work engages him in practical chemical work, reflecting the natural processes of generation and decay.[15] Onwin was born in Edinburgh and studied painting at Edinburgh College of Art (1966–71), where he became interested in the chemical properties of industrial substances such as coal and salt. In 1973 he discovered a large saltmarsh near Dunbar which led to his first chemical experiments in site-specific installations, such as *The Recovery of Dissolved Substances* (1980s), where he was concerned with the human history of salt-recovery from the sea. In this installation, as well as exhibiting scientific documentation concerning this ancient industrial process, Onwin also constructed an underground saline chamber lined with salt behind glass walls. The trapped salt underwent subtle chemical changes at a microcosmic scale which Onwin related to an esoteric alchemical process.

In his gallery work Onwin has adopted natural materials that implicate the processes of fire and decay, such as sulphur, ash, earth and material debris. In addition to his installation work, between 1974 and 1998 he produced a large number of artists' books on the theme of alchemy. In fact, his involvement with the topic has drawn him into a scholarly investigation of the original medieval and Renaissance alchemical texts and imagery. It could be claimed that among artists with similar interests, Glen Onwin has an unparalleled knowledge of alchemy, and his employment of its chemical processes has been more profound than that of any other contemporary artist.[16]

As a specifically artistic process, Onwin's practice recalls those of Eric Orr and Sigmar Polke, who similarly produced chemical changes in the materials of their works. However, in distinction from these artists, Onwin's main concern is to sustain the evolution of the landscape and its minerals, and this has led to a commitment to the ecological movement and to land conservation. He is interested in the inter-relation of alchemy with the earth and life sciences, as well as with the arts. At present, he is working with the ideas of 'synthetic biology' '(a concept first explored by Stephane Leduc

in 1911) in collaboration with Michael Russell at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre.[17]

From the outset Onwin has been interested in the chemical structure and environmental effects of common salt, as in his earliest works such as *Saltmarsh* (1975), in which he examined the physical and biological cycles of a natural tidal saltmarsh. He has been intrigued by the crystalline reactions in natural salt pans which maintain a high level of salinity. He has studied these chemical reactions in relation to the neighbouring organic plant growth. In alchemical symbology, salt with its harsh astringent qualities is associated with the stage of putrefaction and death.[18]

One of Onwin's most effective alchemical experiments was a site-specific installation made for the Square Chapel in Halifax, Yorkshire (figs 10.3 and 10.4). Taking its title from the *Emerald Table* of Hermes Trismegistus, the installation *As Above So Below* (1991) was a dramatic exploration of chemical change. The Square Chapel is a former nonconformist place of worship whose interior is set on three levels. These have been stripped out, leaving only bare brick walls and wooden floors.

On each of these levels Onwin introduced large square troughs of chemicals, also placing alchemical glasses in illuminated niches. The troughs were filled with salt water and wax, which over the course of a number of weeks produced different types of residues in various colours that floated in thick layers on the surfaces.[19] They changed and increased in quantity.[20] The installation was entered from the top floor, and the rooms were encountered down a dark staircase and along corridors which contained glass tubes filled with various substances. Crystalline forms were produced by the salt water on the surface of the troughs according to the effects of the climate. The black liquid also acted as a mirror, and reflected the room and the roof around the troughs – 'as above, so below'. The lighting was kept low and was greenish in colouration, which was also reflected in the briny tanks.

Onwin named the different levels and their contents according to some of the different stages of the alchemical process. The rendered brick trough on the topmost level was named 'Nigredo' (the blackening, or death), and it held black-dyed brine, wax and salt crystals. The glass tubes in the corridor were named 'Pharmacy', and they contained red and green dyed water with a vegetal tincture and the installation was lit with red and green lights. The installation on the next level down was entitled after a line in the *Emerald Table*, 'Its Nurse is the Earth'. The floor was covered in bitumen with a copper sulphate solution. There were also glass vials containing a vegetal extract and aluminium on a wooden support, lit by a green light. On the walls were located 110 plates made of various metals, 105 of which were engraved with the symbols of the elements. This room was succeeded by another installation named 'The One to The One', in which rendered brick tanks were filled with black and white dyed brine, gypsum and coal, also lit with a green light.

10.3 Glen Onwin, *Emerald Table*, *As Above So Below* (mixed-media installation on three floors and in corridors), Square Chapel, Halifax (1991). Courtesy of the Henry Moore Institute. Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones. By courtesy of the artist

10.4 Glen Onwin, *Emerald Table, As Above So Below*, installation, Square Chapel, Halifax (1991). Courtesy of the Henry Moore Institute. Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones. By courtesy of the artist

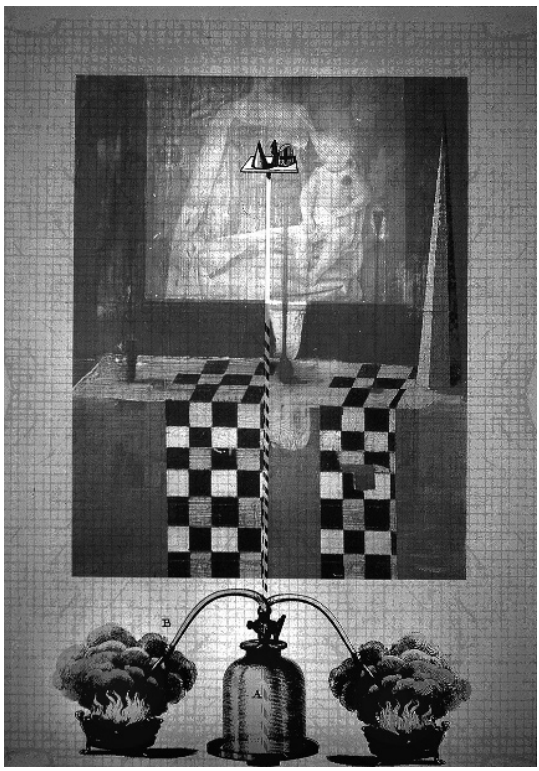
The last installation was named 'Uroboros' after the alchemical serpent that paradoxically represents both the prime matter and the perfected Philosopher's Stone. This consisted of an aluminium tank, brine, a plastic tube and green dye lit with green light.

Onwin's recourse to large tanks of chemicals which are exposed to the effects of weather and light recalls the chemistry recorded in seventeenth-century alchemical treatises, most especially the processing of nitrate and other salts as described by Michael Sendivogius (1566–1636) in his *Novum Lumen Chymicum* (1604).[21] A later commentary was written on this treatise by Andreas Orthelius, which was published in Zetzner's *Theatrum Chemicum* (Strassburg, 1656). The text was accompanied by a set of engravings, one of which showed an open alchemical flask positioned in front of a window and exposed to the air, while another depicted a tub of chemicals standing in the open air. Paracelsus, in his text the *Grossen Wunderarznei*, explained that even thunder and lightning were caused by a 'Saltniter-Sulphur', while the stars were composed of crystalline salts of sulphur, or nitre.[22]

In his observations through an electron microscope of minute chemical processes such as the growth of salt crystals, Glen Onwin is working with the concept of the 'microcosm', the major idea fundamental to Paracelsian alchemy. In fact, he has described his work as a microcosm that mirrors natural events. Paracelsus, in his *Liber Azoth*, had referred to an astral virtue, or aerial nitre, or saltpetre, which was transmitted by the rain to the earth out of the spirit of the sun. This aerial nitre was the spirit of matter which gave life to all creatures. Later, in the eighteenth century, this essential spirit would be identified as oxygen. In fact, Glen Onwin is a Paracelsian alchemist, searching to discover the refined aetherial spirit present in all material substances that gives life and transmutes form in an endless progression.

Another innovative artist currently working in Scotland on alchemical and esoteric ideas is Ian Howard (b. 1952), who is currently the Principal of Edinburgh College of Art. In his art practice he is in dialogue with the Western Hermetic tradition, producing paintings and prints that often refer directly to the original engravings of the Renaissance alchemists. Howard's purpose in invoking the esoteric tradition is to support and validate his resolute opposition to conventional systems of rational knowledge contrived on the basis of economic privilege and political authority. Howard's own ideological stance could almost be described as being anarchistic (at least in his art-work) in his elevation of magic above reason and his assertion of the rule of chance in place of pre-determined systems of order.

One of Howard's major works is the suite of 20 screenprints known as the *Heretical Diagrams* (1996).[23] These images depict symbolic allusions to hermetic geometrical structures, with appropriated imagery from art history, as well as references to alchemical diagrams and laboratory equipment (figs 10.5, 10.6).



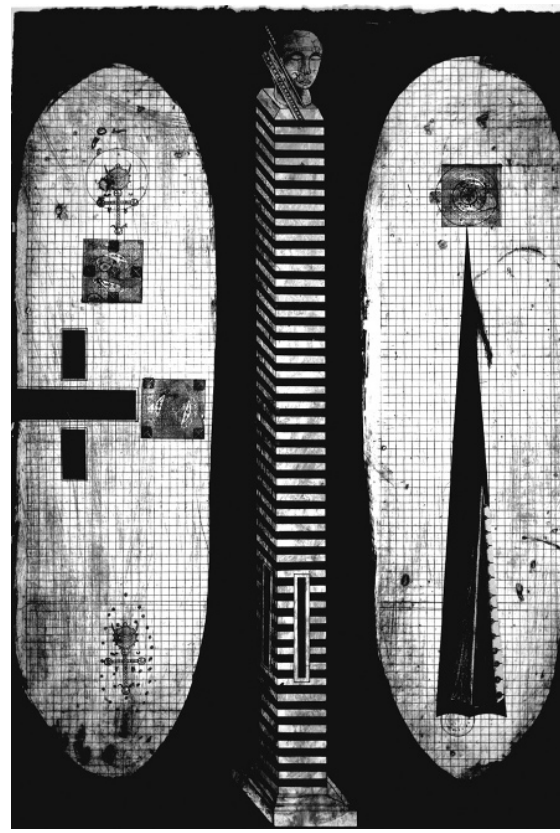
10.5 Ian Howard, *Alchemia* (screenprint, 107 × 76 cm) from series *The Heretical Diagrams* (published by Peacock Printmakers, Aberdeen, 1996). By courtesy of the artist

The scenes are located in a shallow space that takes the shape of an altar set into a recess. In one print from this series, *Alchemia* (fig. 10.5), Howard has borrowed the image of the *Melun Madonna* originally painted by Jean Fouquet, a Renaissance artist at the court of Charles VI of France. He has faded the image back and cropped the top of the painting so that the Madonna's head is not fully visible. On the altar below the painting stands a tall hexagonal cone, and the altar-cloth has a chequer-board pattern. Below the scene of the niche appears some alchemical equipment appropriated from an eighteenth-century source involving practical chemistry. The alembic is stoppered with glass, and two tubes lead off into two smoking fires set in portable grates. From the top of the vessel there arises a pole painted in the red and white stripes of the traditional barber's sign (a reference to the process of healing). On top of this there have been placed some objects, among them a cone and a bishop's mitre adorned with a cross. The whole image has been printed on squared graph paper.

Other alchemical references appear, for example, in another print, *Ritratto* (etching with lithograph and rubber stamps, 107 × 76 cm) (fig. 10.6). Here, two shapes appear which take the form of ovoid enclosures, two-dimensional maps effectively. Within them is shown variants of Malevich's black cross on the left, as well as the emblem of John Dee's Monad at the top of the enclosure. This consists of the sign for Mercury with additional occult symbols appended to the end of its cross-arms. There is another allusion to the esoteric significance of the cross-form beneath the Monad. A geometrical figure set in a square enclosure shows Malevich's cross in the process of deconstruction. These references recall John Dee's magical geometry in his treatise the *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564). In this work Dee took apart the form of the Monad and carried out various geometrical exercises with elements taken from its original structure. These carried deep esoteric significance. In Howard's print it is the black cross of Malevich, signifying

the realm of the sublime, which is deconstructed in a similar manner as a type of geometrical alchemy, a magical ritual.

The second ovoid contains an acute-angled, long triangular form, pleated and buttoned like a piece of material. Above this is shown the mystical circle squared, an impossible geometrical feat signifying the union of earthly and divine substance – the Philosopher's Stone itself. These two oval forms are also a type of *temenos*, a numinous space of sacred ritual. In between the two enclosures there has been placed a three-dimensional pillar composed of layers of black and white stone. It contains windows at the lower level. At its apex is situated the bust of a head. In its esoteric reference, this object recalls the brazen head made by the medieval natural philosopher Roger Bacon, which in legend was reputed to speak and answer questions. It also carries connotations of similar magical heads in the Celtic literary and artistic inheritance of the British Isles.



10.6 Ian Howard, *Ritratto* (etching with lithograph and rubber stamps, 107 × 76 cm), from series *The Heretical Diagrams* (published by Peacock Printmakers, Aberdeen, 1996). By courtesy of the artist

In this series of prints the chequer-board floor, or its equivalent as graph paper, is an abstract motif which is a significant magical device. The black and white patterning refers to atavistic memories of archaic religious rituals from the dawn of time, as well as the interplay of good and evil (white and black) in human existence. The subsequent transposition of such chequered patterns into the context of board games has not eliminated the trace of their role in the performance of sacred rites, specifically those involving ritual sacrifice.

More specifically, Ian Howard has drawn on the esoteric ideas of the renegade Renaissance scholar Giordano Bruno, as well as on those of the major English alchemists of that period, Robert Fludd and John Dee.[24] In particular, he is exploring the strange geometrical figures that appear in their original

seventeenth-century treatises alongside. All of these Hermeticists had been involved with dissident ideas which threatened their political authorities. The writings of Giordano Bruno, for example, had so provoked the Catholic Church that it felt compelled to execute him in the most brutal manner. Bruno, in fact, was advocating the abandonment of Christianity in favour of a return to pagan beliefs, specifically those of the ancient Egyptians. In his esoteric books he made use of geometrical figures whose meaning remains obscure at the present time. Howard also engages with the painting of Paolo Uccello (1397–1475), whose fascination with perspective space and complicated geometrical structures led to the production of a series of enigmatic paintings that concealed some deeper meaning.

Howard's prints have the same richly detailed visual surfaces as those of seventeenth-century alchemical engravings, although he does not copy any imagery directly. Like these sources, his prints are made to be scrutinized privately at close quarters, held in the hand, rather than viewed at a distance mounted on a wall. The prints have qualities in common with the intimate genre of the 'artist's book'. The surfaces of the *Heretical Diagrams* incorporate metallic colours, so that they glow and reflect. Their format recalls that of medieval manuscripts, or of painted altarpieces and icons laden with gold leaf, ultramarine and precious stones.

In the *Heretical Diagrams* Ian Howard has produced an authentic alchemical treatise with its own original realm of signifying forms. Although the images carry a subtle political agenda concerning the liberating forces of artistic creativity, the complex and personalized visual linguistics also convey a poetic text that evades transcription into a logical argument. The significance of such poetic modes of visual expression in relation to overt political texts will be discussed further in due course.

Further south, in the county of Yorkshire, there are contemporary artists whose sympathies are similarly inclined towards the esoteric spiritual tradition. This region is of great historical importance in the history of innovative Western art practice, for it has produced many artists of considerable international stature, such as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Damien Hirst.

Among those who continue to work within the landscape tradition, a major figure is David Walker-Barker (b. 1947), who produces work on the theme of the vanishing working landscape of north-east England. His paintings, assemblages and installations capture both the spiritual atmosphere of the region's prehistoric past and its geological marvels, as well as the hard facts of working lives that have toiled in its industrial lead mines and stone quarries:

> When I look at the landscape it is not the hills, rivers and woodlands that I see … but layers of time stretching back to the beginning of the universe.[25]

The present author has commented:

> This short statement summarises the range and diversity of David Walker Barker's visual works. Simultaneously it identifies a fascination for land surface and environments, for a sense of place and for what he terms 'deep nature' – the subatomic and microcosmic and for time itself. His work is governed by a compelling insight that reality is structured on the principle of synchronicity; everything is everywhere present at all times …
>
> … Thus his visual works are no longer images of landscapes, are not topographical or scenographic, but re-enactments of events and forces, of the underlying dynamic processes that fulfil every level of existence. They allude to the continuous retelling of the story of life from the most archaic of origins, human and non-human, conscious and material, historical and natural, life before life ever was, the whole burgeoning livingness of matter.[26]

David Walker-Barker is a self-trained geologist and archaeologist who has amassed an important professional collection of geological and glass artefacts. Some of these he has located in his studio, which he conceptualizes as both an artist's workshop and a museum. It is organized like a laboratory since he regards his practice as an alchemical procedure in which he gains knowledge concerning the chemistry, physics and biology of his rich range of materials.

Walker-Barker trained at Goldsmiths College and at the Royal College of Art. From the outset he focused on the Jurassic coastline of North Yorkshire and the Pennine landscapes of Yorkshire, County Durham, Cumbria and Northumberland. He has walked and camped in this scenery, exploring disused lead and fluorspar mines. Out of these deeply felt engagements with the land and its working-people, Walker-Barker has produced multi-media artefacts that he describes as 'equivalents' to the landscape, rather than a portrayal of it. These works express his intellectual, aesthetic and political responses to the scenes, specifically to the human history of labour and social life associated with them.

Typical of his production in the past ten years is the complex assemblage *We are on a route uncharted* (2001), consisting of a shallow wooden box, in the centre of which there is a cross overlaid with a photograph of a child (fig. 10.7). Its head is denuded of hair, as it is a victim of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion. The materials used include lead, which is covered with gold leaf. Lead protects against nuclear fallout, while the gold leaf is used to indicate the presence of the sacred, as in religious icons.

Walker-Barker often inserts found and fabricated objects into small alcoves within the wooden fabric of his works. These objects are meant as protective talismans, memories, remnants of traumatic history, fetishes. Some are made of precious materials or contain religious references. Others are no more than debris and decaying dross. He has always collected fossils and minerals, which he stores in his studio in the manner of a *Wunderkammer*. In the work *Simultaneous Histories* (2001) (height 125 cm, width 14 cm) he exhibited a skeleton of a bird encased in lead. Walker-Barker employs symbolic colours and materials that refer to alchemy, such as red paint made out of cinnabar ore,

10.7 David Walker-Barker, *We are on a route uncharted* (2001) (assemblage, height 111 cm, width 70 cm). By courtesy of the artist

blues from pure lapis lazuli, and ochres collected from the moors and mines. He has placed glass vials of solid residues containing chemicals and semi-precious powdered minerals into his works. A constructed artefact that directly references chemical process is his assemblage *Distillations and Concentrates* (2004) (height 107 cm, width 145 cm) (cover image).

His collaborator Iain Biggs has conceptualized Walker-Barker's studio-space as being an archival site in which a process of resurrection is taking-place, materials being raised to a conceptual and emotional status:

> Rows of fragments stored in drawers, jars and small vials archive the residue of intersecting histories. Specimens and artefacts recovered from selected sites provide a range of materials and signifiers. Some become pigments and are used conventionally whilst others inhabit Relic Flasks retaining their mystery as the residue of an undisclosed event. They are the basis for something akin to a redemption – honouring the past and raising questions of what is remembered and why – and are used to fabricate objects that act as emblematic touchstones to places and the obscure meanings embedded there ….[27]

His collection includes shards of pottery and fragments of glass from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fossils, minerals, crystals and all types of mysterious objects: jars with dried-up residues, tightly bound mummified remnants, medicinal herbs, baby teeth, animal bones. They are arranged in a classification-system particular to the artist, listing the locations in which they were collected. The thread connecting all the items is memory and personal resonance. The studio space is numinous with texts and threads of allusions, narratives half-formed with suspended meanings, open to being re-worked and brought to life. Biggs compares him to:

> a somewhat reticent scientist working at his laboratory bench, testing and pondering carefully constructed 'models' of reality in their different configurations, reflecting on the work of others – both in his own field and elsewhere.[28]

Walker-Barker tends to use the form of religious triptychs and altars for his works. One such example is his *Genius Loci: St. Martyn's Church, Cymyoy, The Black Mountains, Monmouthshire* (2001) – (height 96 cm, width 146 cm). In this assemblage, lapis and gold leaf have been laid onto a traditional gesso ground.[29] Another work, *Time's Arrow. A Reliquary* (2004), consists of a cross painted in lapis lazuli and scumbled in gold; a bottle and a metal object have been inserted into the surface. Among the objects he has included in the assemblage *Kettleness Layers. Jurassic Alum Shales* (2004) (fig. 10.8). In this work Walker-Barker displays rows of bottles with chemicals such as alum, which is essential to the dyeing industry and is manufactured along the Yorkshire Coast. The side panels are painted, and there are inserts of metal tools.

The subject of *The Remains of a Hidden Landscape* (2005) is the accessibility and inaccessibility of two specific geographical locations, and it is intended as a geological and social record:[30]

10.8 David Walker-Barker, *Kettleness Layers. Jurassic Alum Shales* (2004) (assemblage, bottles with chemicals such as alum, painted side panels, inserts of metal tools, 115 × 77 cm). By courtesy of the artist

most of the material world [has become] visible and … clearly defined in this strange restructuring. In the newly forming landscape we see a growing three-dimensional lattice work that spreads in three major directions, the NE–SW veins, the NW–SE cross-veins and the WNW–ESE quarter-point veins.

Enormous curtains of minerals hang in space reaching downwards for over a thousand feet to a distant contact with a mass of granite far below. These curtains of rock stretch for miles. To the south and southwest where once had been the great Cross Fell range you would see the huge curtain of the Great Sulphur vein and its eroded edges, to the north the vast vertical deposits that bisect the now invisible northern fells of Cumbria and the border land of Northumberland. Eastwards other static curtains penetrate the now invisible rocks of County Durham, bisecting where Weardale and savagely bleak Rookhope Vale once were.[31]

In a recent ambitious project *Killhope* (2006), Walker-Barker collaborated with the North of England Lead Mining Museum at Killhope in County Durham in the Northern Pennines. The resulting installations included original photographs and other archival material recording the history of lead mining and its workers in that area. The art-works stood both on the surface in the pit rooms and underground within the mine itself. Walker-Barker is profoundly interested in the sense of place in relation to the long time spans of geological history, both microcosmic and macrocosmic forms. His works are re-enactments of these histories, the re-telling of the ancient stories:

Phenomena subtly interrelated in a manner beyond the grasp of ordinary logic, causality at a deeply intuitive level, consonance between ourselves, other realms and other entities in a process beyond conscious awareness, 'events in and through deep time'.[32]

In a substantial collaboration with the artist Chris Rawson-Tetley,[33] he has also explored the forgotten history of the quarrying industry of the north-east of England (2008):

The human intersection with the geological is mapped by an ever-changing pattern drawn through time across the invisible surface of the landscape and at depth following the pattern of the minerals, a drawing that has been continually erased and re-drawn.[34]

The West Yorkshire landscape has also been imaged in the sculptures and drawings of Robert Ward (b. 1949), although in a more minimalist mode and in a special relation to his own personal life history, rather than in the context of the industrial history of the region. Ward graduated from Kings College University in Newcastle in the 1960s, where he had followed the Bauhaus-inspired Basic Design Course. This initial training in creating abstract systems has determined Ward's life-long working method. He has also studied at the Academia di Bella Arti, Rome (1975–76), exhibiting subsequently in Australia, Canada, Greece, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan and the United States:

> Ward belongs to a generation of British artists, brought up in the years immediately after World War Two … sculpture that was being made in this country in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s onwards. A group show, for example, with Ward's work at its heart would be interesting indeed. We would likely find the work of Michael Kenny, Geoffrey Smedley, Martin Naylor, Carl Plackman, Tim Head, David Nash, Keith Milow, Paul Neagu, Brian Catling and Nick Pope. Like many of these artists he used both the walls and floors of the studio and gallery, often within the same work. We would also see the work of 'New British Sculptors', such as Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Bill Woodrow, Edward Allington and Anish Kapoor.[35]

In an exhibition that Ward produced for the Chiesa di St Agostino in Bergamo, his work was accompanied by an artist's book, *Six Memos* (2001), which was conceptualized as a dialogue with the writer Italo Calvino in his text *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Harvard University Press, 1988). This was a series of reflections on the ethics of art practice. Throughout his text Calvino refers to alchemy and its aim to unite conflicting elements. Under the title 'Quickness', Calvino writes:

> Any object is magic. Each object is endowed with powers which determine relationships …. The function of art is the achieve communication between things which are different sharpening the differences.[36]

Calvino's text triggered the experience of an epiphany for Ward's practice. He was struck by the manner in which the title of each of the memos described precisely the qualities that he was seeking in his own work, namely Lightness, quickness, multiplicity, exactitude and visibility:

> Ward turned his attention to literature in relation to the sculptures and drawings he was showing. 'For me the drawings are poems; the sculpture is novelistic,' he stated. It is an interesting idea and a further indication of how Ward's sculptural imagination has a subtle literary strand to it.[37]

He has produced a whole series of artists' books, such as *Conventions, Objects and Fields* (1995), *Crimsworth* (1998), *Songs* (1998), *Six Memos* (2001) and *Patterns* (2005).

Ward's drawing practice owes not a little both to the art of the alchemist and the sleight of hand of the magician. He somehow manages to produce abstract paintings in colours ranging from deep purple-black through crimson to gold, employing only one type of red paint (his own chemical formulation) painted onto large sheets of A1 ceramic-coated paper. The colours are produced solely by light interacting with the layers of paint, changing their hue and colour according to the manner in which the strokes of paint have been laid and the direction of their application. The surfaces are minimal without any imagery, and are confined to one colour field.

Resident in one of the old Yorkshire mill towns, Hebden Bridge, Ward's unspoken solidarity with that history also permeates some of his installations.

Inevitably, he too has referenced the English landscape. A series of works, *Crimsworth* (1998), related to a scenic view of great beauty located around the corner from the mill towns of the West Riding.

One of Ward's chief mentors is Constantin Brancusi, whose meticulous working practice he mirrors in his own studio. Brancusi's nature mysticism, his ritualistic use of materials, as well as his allusions to ancient myth inspired Ward's early paintings and sculptures. Throughout many of his installations, like Brancusi, Ward recycles his own found objects, such as fans and dumbbells. His appointment as professor in the University of Newcastle, New South Wales (1977–82) may have encouraged Ward to adopt an Australian type of theatrical installation in which a type of stage set is created, with strong narrative scenarios that absorb the viewer into the space. He similarly regards his own studio space as an action-theatre, both workshop and stage (he has a fascination with Georges Braque's painting of his own studio).

Ward comes very close to Brancusi's working procedure, in which every artefact in the studio, no matter how practical, has a placement that is precisely mapped. Similarly, following Brancusi, Ward is attracted to the polished surfaces of his sculptures and the reflections caught within them. He regards the sculpture as being a microcosm that reflects its environment, and thereby incorporates it: 'Ward also thinks of sculptures, like Brancusi, in terms of families of forms (once linking his titles to members of his family).'[38]

In his bronze sculptures Ward has evoked the Arthurian myth of the Grail, casting forms that take the shape of chalices. He locates these sculptures in the Yorkshire landscape, in locations rich with the natural wildlife of water and field. Ward's drawings are closely integrated into these bronze pieces, as in *The Miller's Song* (1998) (fig. 10.9), where an acrylic drawing in deep yellow on ceramic paper is suspended from the wall so that it touches the ground. In front of it stand two bronze chalices on pillars. In their middle section they incorporate the form of a circle. The two pillars are set into cup-like forms at their bases. The vessels recall both the Grail and alchemical equipment such as the basins used in the process of calcination, in which base matter is purified by fire. The drawings in the sculptural series of works that Ward entitles *Songs* (1998) may indicate successively the colour stages of alchemy – black, white, yellow, citrine and red.[39]

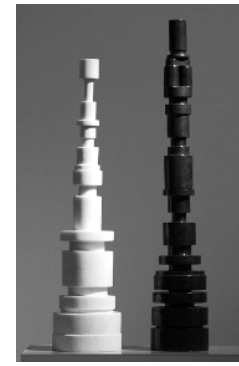
The concern with the inter-relation of painted surface and three-dimensional object is an enduring one for Ward, and he continues to engage with this problematic at the present time. He conceptualizes the issue as one that involves the fourth dimension of space-time in the transposition and interaction of two-dimensional and three-dimensional form from one dimension to another. In this interest, Ward is continuing the experiments of the early twentieth-century modernists, especially Georges Braque, who is an intellectual mentor for Ward's practice.

10.9 Rob Ward, *The Miller's Song* (1998) (acrylic drawing in deep yellow on ceramic paper with two bronze chalices on pillars, 234 × 183 × 24 cm). With the permission of Robert Ward

Ward himself explains:

> My practice continues to take the form of chapters in a developing process, each set of work or exhibition being a meditation and integration into the mechanisms and poetry of the visible. … I regard my drawings as profiles of space where time is allowed to occur and imagination is willed to expansion.[40]

Accordingly, Ward has often reworked the same theme over a wide number of years. For example, the theme of the alchemical duality of the King and



10.10 Rob Ward, *King and Queen* (2005–2006) (black and white marble). With the permission of Robert Ward

Queen has been explored in two versions in totally different materials and with totally different formal references. The earlier version was made as far back as 1987 (*David's Chair – King and Queen*) out of bronze, copper and wood. The two forms are roughly hewn out of wood with a rough resemblance to the human form, and balanced on their upper edges are the familiar iconographic symbols that recur through-out Ward's assemblages – steel cups, turned wooden balls stacked up into a tower, gym dumbbells cast in lead and other found objects of an industrial nature.[41] There also exists a second version in bronze taking the title of *Adam and Eve* (2004) but engaging the same turned, chess-like forms.[42] A more recent version has been carved out of black and white marble, *King and Queen* (2005–2006) (fig. 10.10). It takes the form of finely turned towers, similar to the totemic structures explored by Brancusi. Ward's image strongly recalls chess pieces, and in this format the sculpture is directly in dialogue with Duchamp's preoccupation with fate and games of chance in his painting *Portrait of Chess Players (Portrait de joueurs d'échecs)* (1911) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as well as in his more overtly alchemical *The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes* (1912), which examines the conflicting dynamic of the opposition of male and female. In contrast, Ward's *King Queen* are filled with the still gravitas of a Chinese emperor and empress as portrayed in ancient jade carvings, a reflection of Ward's frequent artist residencies in the Shanghai Sculpture Park from the late 1990s, as well as of his life-long devotion to traditional Chinese silk-painting and calligraphy with its minimalist aesthetic and cultural ethos.

In contrast to the visionary work of David Walker-Barker and Robert Ward, since the 1990s there has emerged a younger generation of artists who belong to a much darker Yorkshire than that of the heroic miners of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with their close-knit communities. Among these later artists whose outlook is considerably more austere politically and socially there are, nevertheless, some who have turned to the visual imagery of magic and alchemy in early modernism, such as painter and sculptor Norman Pearce, who employs the old magical codes in order to devise a sharp political critique.

This later generation grew up in the 1970s, experiencing the devastating effects of a world economic depression, perceiving a bleaker and tenser northern landscape. Coming to maturity in the 1970s, they were confronted with the breakdown of the ethical order that had accompanied a stable, if archaic, industrialized culture of regular work hours and factory discipline. The now-defunct regulatory system had shaped the spiritual order, social norms and structure of the extended family system and its mores. Yet at the same time as this collapse of the local culture was occurring in the towns of

the West Riding, in the late 1980s there was developing a new scene which was producing experimental and popular music, as well as writing, visual art and drama. In the punk and post-punk era there were a number of independent recording studios in northern England with their own labels, as well as a dynamic and original music scene that was commercially viable.

None the less, the general atmosphere of northern England was very dark in the years when the Tory government was led by Margaret Thatcher and cutbacks were being applied to social welfare, despite widespread unemployment. There was genuine economic hardship, as well as a sense that some infinitely precious spirit of humanity had been destroyed. Some young writers felt compelled to record the degenerated condition of the West Riding from the 1970s. One well-known example is David Peace (b. 1967) in his *Red Riding* quartet of books (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001–2003), who has portrayed a searing, bloody and apocalyptic nightmare in his account of the total socio-political breakdown of the northern industrial areas. In his novels the world of the West Riding is bereft of hope in its geography of irreversible economic decline. The county is shown to be a corrupted police state in which the innocent are martyred. David Peace was born in the small town of Ossett in West Yorkshire. The main influence on his writing was that of the American crime writer James Ellroy. As he was growing up, Peace experienced at close hand the police hunt for the serial killer known as the Yorkshire Ripper, and he also witnessed on the media the miscarriage of justice on innocent and vulnerable people.

Emerging from the same creative circles of the 1990s is writer, journalist and musician Adrian Wilson, who has produced a more detached and humorous view of contemporary society, centred specifically on Wakefield, a small city in West Yorkshire. Unrelentingly, Wilson has mirrored in his novels the absurd events of this tiny patch of land, hilarious and tragic and peopled by odd individuals whose lives briefly illuminated the dilapidated city momentarily and then were re-engulfed by obscurity. In his book *Very Acme* (2000) he has projected a collage, both affectionate and critical, of myriad individual biographies. Wilson pictures the degradation of the city of Wakefield in 1995, its traditional culture and historical buildings smothered by ring roads, supermarkets, fast food outlets and warehouses. The emptiness of soul triggers feelings of nostalgia for the past, 'a barnacle-encrusted ruin of the memory'.[43]

Working in close contact with these writers and musicians is Norman Pearce (b. 1958), himself a writer and musician. Latterly, he has turned to the esoteric tradition in response to the alchemical imagery of Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dalí. Initially, Pearce had commenced his career in the 1980s as a musician in the cult band *638938*, which experimented with electronic modes. He produced some iconic recordings with HMV that retain an international cult following.[44] Pearce transferred to the visual arts in the 1990s, taking a

degree in Fine Art at the University of Leeds. His work is sympathetic to the history of the Situationist International of the 1970s, and he is primarily engaged with the critical discourse of the institution and the art-market. To this end, he uses modes of appropriation, selecting iconic imagery such as pictures from the European modernist tradition, or contemporary paintings such as those of the graffiti artist Banksy which have been sensationalized by the popular media.

Pearce is adamantly opposed to consumerism and its associated iconographies, and in his work he references Foucault's critique of the regulatory systems governing civic society. He has evolved a neo-Popist style which he uses to attack art-institutions and the commodified cultural artefacts of the art market such as the paintings of the modernist abstractionists, American Pop artists and the Brit-artists of the 1990s. Lichtenstein is a particular *bête noire*, as are Mondrian and Damian Hirst.

Other works of his, in contrast, have engaged a metaphysical dimension which he evokes through the use of pure colour as a structural element rather than a decorative quality. Pearce has developed a symbolic language based on the coded colour schemes of alchemy and its message of spiritual and material redemption. Unusually for his social milieu, he continues to believe in the possibility of social and political renewal and his work speaks of this potential. In his endeavour of supporting cultural transformation, his work has assumed an alchemical quality. In the late 1990s Pearce was taking everyday objects, removing their functional parts and leaving their residue as solid colour in a type of alchemical transmutation. The character of the ensuing sculptural reliefs hovered somewhere between Popism and pure abstraction, a type of work that was impossible to categorize but which retained humour as an important component.

In the painting *Trans-dimensional Lounge* (2008) Pearce describes a fourth dimension of pure colour in which the Philosopher's Stone appears in its traditional alchemical colour, taking the form of a red basketball. In its precise linear geometry the painting describes a futuristic vision of psychic and physical energies. One of the sources of this image is Giorgio de Chirico's painting of *The Disquieting Muses* (1916), which he had described as an image of the 'perfect metaphysical city'. Pearce, however, has modified his intention. For example, de Chirico had originally included an image of the Castello Estense in the background, but Pearce has replaced this with the tower of Wakefield cathedral. Likewise, De Chirico's dummies have been exchanged for a pylon that radiates lines of energy into a box composed of space and stars. The transmuting pylon is a type of alchemical alembic:

> The main object … a control tower … (*totem harlequinade*) both receiver and sender, a metaphysical sculpture that signifies any and all magical possibilities. It receives signals from the 'box of outer space' …. A time-slip terminal for trans-dimensional travel ….[45]

10.11 Norman Pearce, *Untitled (The Transformation Scene)* (2009), after wall graffiti by Banksy (acrylic on canvas, 132 × 99 cm). Courtesy of Norman Pearce, 2009

The painting undermines the status of the interactive technologies by transposing them into the traditional materials of high art, eliminating their practical economic function by re-presenting high technology in the form of a fetishistic totem.

In another painting, *Untitled (The Transformation Scene)* (2009) (fig. 10.11), Pearce retains the situationist framework of his earlier work in a critical

engagement with the media circus surrounding the British artists promoted by art dealer Charles Saatchi. Pearce has selected a celebrated graffiti image originally painted by the artist Banksy onto a brick-wall. The latter had appropriated a 1930s cartoon of a maid sweeping a room. However, in Pearce's appropriation, in turn, of Banksy's action he has turned the situation around so that this same image becomes a critical examination of the career of Damien Hirst and the aesthetic status of his 'spot paintings'. Hirst has produced dozens of these paintings, which he regards as his most intellectual works. Pearce has questioned the innovatory nature of these paintings and Hirst's public persona as a revolutionary artist following a radical trajectory and overturning modernist conventions.

Pearce problematizes this rhetoric by appropriating a cartoon image of a 1920s housemaid sweeping floor-dust under a curtain. This cleansing is an alchemical act of purification (*purificatio*), and it recalls the alchemical emblem of 'women's work' in a picture ('Emblem III') of a woman washing sheets which is found in Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1618). The setting in Pearce's work is that of a theatrical 'transformation scene', the last part of the traditional British pantomime in which a fairy-tale ending is disclosed. The curtain in the picture is a theatrical drop-curtain, painted in the manner of a Hirst spot painting. However, as the maid lifts its folds, she displays beneath a Mondrian-like geometric grid painted on the wall behind. In this work Pearce is arguing that Hirst is the latest in a lucrative lineage of abstract painters in which the absence of imagery, and thus of voice, is a negative political act colluding with the investment market. Mondrian made great claims for the metaphysical qualities of his painting, but nearly a hundred years down the line, what is most evident is the monetary value of his canvas. Similarly, it could be argued that Hirst makes attractive and harmless decorations for executive offices and domestic spaces with a vast investment potential. The theatrical references in Pearce's work refer to the stageyness of the whole London art scene, a media circus or magical show for public entertainment.

In the 1990s–2000s the historical northern landscape and the dejected industrial city have been the themes explored by significant British artists based in the north who have used the language of alchemy. In comparison, alchemical and other occult references are less encountered in the work of London-based British artists, a similar situation to that of the New York art-world, as discussed earlier. Indeed, it has been more usually the culture of the industrial north which has enabled a productive link to be established in art between a committed political stance and the ancient spiritual traditions.

An important exception, however, is the work of Bill Woodrow (b. 1948), an internationally distinguished British sculptor, who has made politically effective use of alchemical concepts. Woodrow trained at Winchester School of Arts in the late 1960s and at St Martin's School of Art. In 1986 he was a finalist in the Turner Prize at the Tate Gallery. He belongs to a high-profile

generation of British sculptors who first appeared on the London art scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their approach was anti-modernist and often critical of the link between art history, the art museum and the investment art market. The concept of the iconic sculptural artefact was explored in their work with a dry sense of humour, and this instigated the use of found objects in preference to the 'high art' materials of bronze and marble.

Woodrow produces assemblages made of domestic and urban artefacts, such as washing machines, whose original identity remains evident in the finished work, producing a structure that is difficult to read since it invokes many layers of conflicting meanings. The viewer is both entertained and amused by these works, and also challenged intellectually in the frustrated attempt to condense the different signifiers into some monolinear text. Woodrow's assemblages defy reduction into any singular narrative. Their obstinate physicality transmutes them alchemically into defiant autonomous entities, standing free of the viewer's expectations. What the viewer has to deal with is a three-dimensional object containing a variety of intersecting narratives, but whose total effect is poetic, forcing the viewer into a silent contemplation on the 'thingness' of things. The ontological status of these objects is more than the sum of the texts inscribed within their form and material components.

Woodrow has also produced raw and acerbic political imagery in *The Periodic Table* (1994), in which he launches a vigorous attack on global capitalism through the use of alchemical metaphor. There is an undercurrent even in his more mute assemblages which implies a criticism of consumerist industrial dross, and on another level, of the stifling tradition of British modernism.

Woodrow's anti-modernist intention is certainly a type of political resistance to the sculptural legacy of tradition of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth which has been enshrined by art historians and the art institutions. His work rejects the magistry of Moore's late monumental objects carved out of marble or cast in bronze. Instead, the material preferred by Woodrow has included such debris of industry and consumerism as car doors and hoods, industrial units and textiles. They are absent of any aura of glamour and are no more than utterly abject traces of human history, depersonalized and empty of all meaning. For example, *Life on Earth* (1984) consists of a group of vinyl chairs and consumer durables, forming a *mise-en-scène* as in the action of a movie and implicating the audience into the scene.[46]

The idea of turning junk into art in Woodrow's case reveals the influence of Dada and its resistance to mainstream aesthetic expectations and the accompanying cultural languages. The structural mode of his work is an intentional surrender to the play of chance, permitting the materials to speak their texts as they come into conjunction with each other within the assemblage. Woodrow is also re-entering and re-evaluating the Surrealist object, but producing effects that are anti-romantic, rough and boisterous in presence in comparison with the polished dream-like assemblages of the

1930s. In fact, Dada has probably left a stronger impression on Woodrow's abrasive installations and graphic works.

Woodrow's practice is innately alchemical, in that he instigates a process in which, as in a laboratory process, the conjunction of forms and materials dictate the outcome, rather than the artist himself. He has also made use of alchemical metaphors, both in his assemblages and installations, as well as in works on paper. Some of the themes in the *Beekeeper* series are chemical. In the assemblage *Hive* (2005), for example, the beehive has been transformed into a distillation apparatus (fig. 10.12). Emerging from its walls are many robust bronze tubes oozing luscious amber drops made of gold-coloured glass.[47] There exist authentic alchemical references to the production of honey as a metaphor of gold-making in the works of Robert Fludd of the seventeenth century.

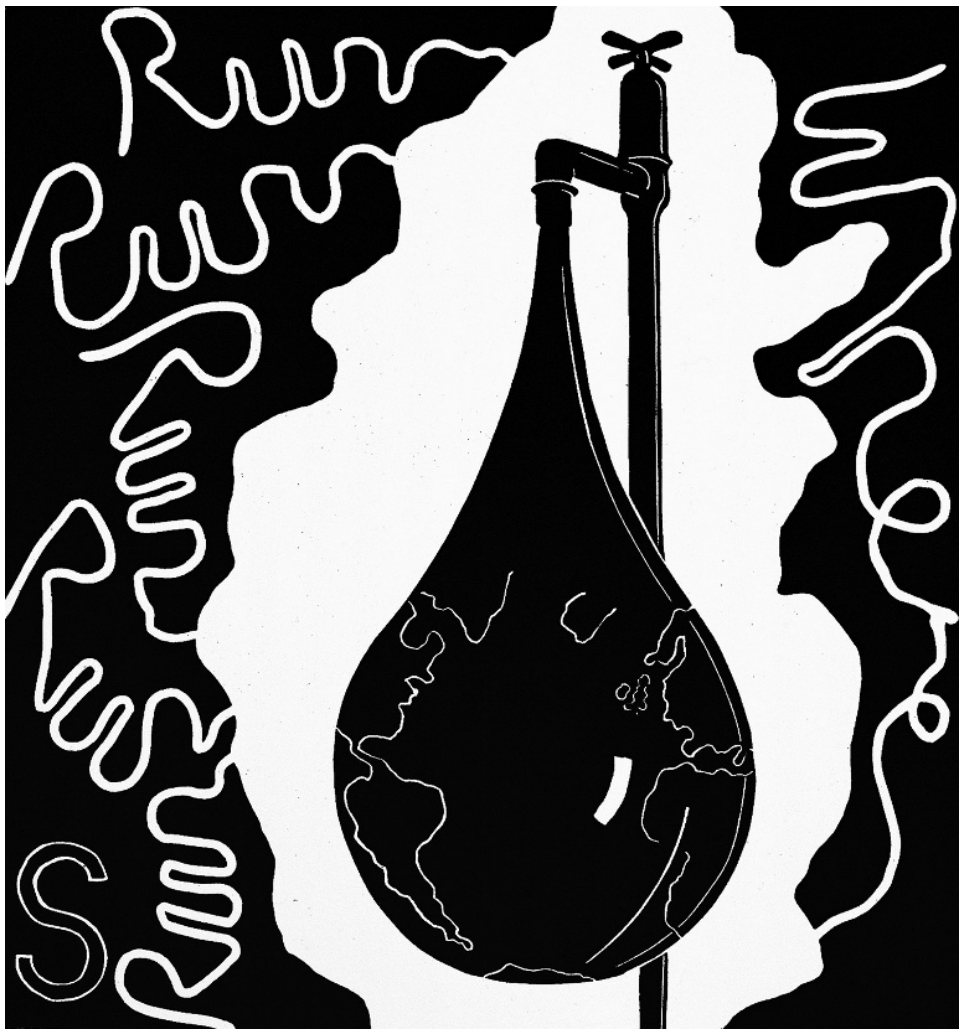
In addition, Woodrow has produced a series of 21 linocuts on paper on the theme of the Periodic Table of the Elements (1994).[48] In these he has pictured both the ancient alchemical elements such as gold, sulphur, tin, arsenic and phosphorous, as well as the more recently discovered ones – titanium, chrome, uranium and nitrogen. This work is a critical enquiry into the manner in which the Third World, particularly Africa, is exploited by global corporations exporting its raw minerals and leaving indigenous populations destitute. Woodrow's print of *Mercury* depicts the winding alchemical Ouroboros serpent, but the markings on the snake's scales produce the form of a Nazi swastika. The image of *Sulphur* shows a dripping tap, with the word 'Run' inscribed around it (fig. 10.13). The huge drop of water has taken the form of an alchemical flask, inside which there is a map of the continents of North and South America placed in opposition to the continent of Africa, with a vast expanse of ocean between them. It is the same issue of the manner in which the economic resources of Africa are endlessly drained-away by global capital based in the financial centres of the northern hemisphere.

Bill Woodrow has found that alchemical symbols have enabled him to picture in sharp focus the negative effects of global economic and political structures. He has taken the theme of gold-making as a metaphor for the economic exploitation by the multinationals of poorer countries.

Another British sculptor of a younger generation who employs a type of alchemical procedure in his work is Paul Etienne Lincoln (1959), British-born but currently resident in New York. He has taken the anti-modernist absurdist mode pioneered by Woodrow's generation to an extreme of humorous neo-Surrealist narrative. Many of his assemblages, installations and films carry complex esoteric meanings. Lincoln devises his own classification system in defiance of rational categorization, as in his set of ordinary ceramic plates and saucers placed into a museum glass display case, *Evolutionary Links* (2008), or his accordion which has been refitted with found objects and texts, *Lincordian* (2006–2008). The *Ginsmaid* is a banal gin-and-tonic dispensing

10.12 Bill Woodrow, *The Hive* (2005) (bronze, glass, paint, 124 × 140 × 141 cm; edition of eight plus four artist's casts). Courtesy the artist

machine, pompously presented in an elaborate vitrine and accompanied by accessories such as a pink feather duster, a photograph of the 'forces' sweetheart' of wartime Britain, Vera Lynn, and finally, a bottle of Gordon's gin is also included. There is another reference to alchemical transmutation in a set of pseudo-alchemical laboratory equipment which has been rendered unusable, *Distillate Still for Fagus Sylvatica var Pendula* (2002), while yet other assemblages have been used by the artist in performances in which Lincoln has acted the part of an alchemist, wearing a full-length



10.13 Bill Woodrow, *Sulphur*, BW94/21 from *The Periodic Table* (1994) (21 black and white linocuts on 270 gsm BFK Rives paper; Book 30, portfolio 30; printed by Simon King, Cumbria; published by Paragon Press, London). Courtesy the artist

beech-leaf cape and performing a peculiar ritual in which creosote is distilled from beech wood.[49]

Lincoln has also created an unusual type of artist's book in which he has conceptualized a microcosmic world, *The World and Its Inhabitants* (London: Bookworks, 1997). It takes the form of a flip-top cardboard case containing 24 cards showing an inhabitant of a miniature ideal world. The inhabitants of this world are not only modern denizens, but they also represent ideas,

and can be historical figures. Their biography is printed on the back of each card.

Lincoln's absurdist sense of humour is Dadaistic in its anarchism. His assemblages deconstruct the everyday realities of urban life, although he does not project any more specific political critique in his work.

Alchemy is encountered in British art and art writing as a metaphorical term for the transformative powers of art-making. Especially artists based within the northern regions, or in Scotland, like Glen Onwin and Ian Howard, have taken extensive recourse to alchemy. By such means they have created hard-hitting political critiques involving issues such as racism, gender, ecological disaster, the history of labour and class and regional versus national identity.

It is illuminating to consider the manner in which local artistic traditions have often pre-determined the specific way that alchemical ideas have been deployed. Whether it is the Paracelsian alchemy which continues to inspire German artists such as Sigmar Polke and Rebecca Horn, or the national school of landscape-painting which is continually revisited by contemporary British artists, or the Hermetic legacy of Central and Eastern Europe, inherited from the strange court of Emperor Rudolf II in Prague, its history is referenced in the work of, even stranger, contemporary Viennese Surrealists, as well as in the political texts of Czech artists and film-makers, the next subject for consideration.

Notes

1. Roger Cardinal, *The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), pp. 20–23, 59–62, 104–17.
2. Ibid., pp. 59–62; David Boyd Haycock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate, 2002), pp. 48–63.
3. Susan Compton (ed.), *British Art in the Twentieth Century: The Modern Movement*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1987), p. 10.
4. Causey in ibid., p. 260.
5. Compton, *British Art*, p. 117.
6. David Thistlewood, *Herbert Read: Formlessness and Form – an Introduction to His Aesthetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); David Goodway, *Herbert Read Reassessed* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998); Benedict Read and David Thistlewood (eds), *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, exh. cat. (Leeds and London: Leeds City Art Gallery, 1993).
7. Herbert Read, *The Green Child* (London: Robin Clark, 1989), pp. 509–10.
8. Alan Davie, letter to James Hyman in James Hyman, *Alan Davie: Recent Paintings and Gouaches*, exh. cat. (London: James Hyman Fine Art, 2003).
9. Douglas Hall and Michael Tucker, *Alan Davie* (London: Lund Humphries, 1992), p. 50.
10. Ibid., pp. 28–32.
11. Davie to Hyman, edited correspondence, exh. cat. (London: Gimpel Fils and Hyman Fine Art, 2003).
12. Davie to Hyman in ibid.

13. Joe Tilson, *Joe Tilson: Recent Works 1961–1991*, exh. cat. (London: Waddington Galleries, 1992); see also Joe Tilson, *Alchera 1970–1976* (London: Marlborough Fine Art, 1976).

14. Thérèse Oulton, *Thérèse Oulton: Recent Paintings*, exh. cat. (London: Marlborough Fine Art, 1990).

15. Glen Onwin website, www.onwin.co.uk/site/Home.html.

16. Glen Onwin, *Saltmarsh* (Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council, 1974); Glen Onwin, *The Recovery of Dissolved Substances* (Bristol: Arnofini, 1978); Glen Onwin, *Solve et Coagula* (St Andrews: St Andrews University Press, 1981); Glen Onwin, *Earth Icons/The Chymical Garden* (Bristol: Artsite, 1988); Glen Onwin, *Revenges of Nature* (Edinburgh and Glasgow: Third Eye, 1988); Glen Onwin, *As Above So Below* (Leeds: Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, 1991); Glen Onwin, *Flammable Solid/Flammable Liquid* (Glasgow: Tramway, 1996).

17. Onwin website.

18. Onwin, *As Above So Below*, pp. 9–11.

19. Ibid., pp. 52–58, 78.

20. His work is also discussed in Martin Kemp, *Visualizations: The Nature Book of Art and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 154–5.

21. Andreas Orthelius, 'Commentator In Novum Lumen Chymicum Sendivogii', *Theatrum Chemicum*, vol. 6 (Strasbourg: Zetzner, 1656); see the illustrations on pp. 413 and 415.

22. Zbigniew Szydło, *Water Which Does Not Wet Hands: The Alchemy of Michael Sendivogius* (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1994), pp. 67–92.

23. Ian Howard, *Heretical Diagrams* (Aberdeen: Peacock Printmakers, 1996). There are 20 prints in the series, each 107 × 76 cm, in an edition of ten.

24. Ibid.

25. The author would like to thank David Walker-Barker for his assistance with this section. It is based on interviews during 1991–2009; Urszula Szulakowska, *Migrations through Time: The Paintings and Constructions of David Walker-Barker*, exh. cat. (London: Hart Gallery, 1999), n.p.

26. Ibid.

27. Ian Biggs in David Walker-Barker, *Contained Histories*, exh. cat. with essay by Ian Biggs (London: Hart Gallery, 2005), n.p.

28. Ibid.

29. David Walker-Barker, *Chronologies*, exh. cat. with essay by David Hill (London: Hart Gallery, 2001), n.p.

30. Walker-Barker, *Contained Histories*, n.p.

31. David Walker-Barker, *Land2* website, www.land2.uwe.ac.uk.

32. David Walker-Barker, *In Search of a Hidden Landscape: Artworks at Killhope, the North of England Lead Mining Museum*, exh. cat. with essays by Chris Rawson-Tetley, Peter Davidson, Jimmy Craggs, Joe Forster and David Walker-Barker (London: Hart Gallery, 2006).

33. Chris Rawson-Tetley and David Walker-Barker, *The Naked Quarry: Yorkshire Quarry Arts* (Leeds: Mercury Print, 2008): Chris Rawson-Tetley website, www.chrisrt.co.uk.

34. Biggs in Walker-Barker, *Contained Histories*, n.p.

35. The author would like to thank Rob Ward for his assistance with this section. It is based on interviews during 1991–2009; see Jonathan Wood, essay in Rob Ward, *Reflections* (Whippingham: MakingSpace Publishers, 2009), p. 5.

36. Rob Ward, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, exh. cat. with essay by Urszula Szulakowska (Whippingham: MakingSpace Publishers, 2001), n.p.

37. Wood in Ward, *Reflections*, p. 5.

38. Ibid., p. 4.

39. Rob Ward, *Songs*, exh. cat. with essay by Urszula Szulakowska (Bristol: Making Space, 1998), n.p.

40. Rob Ward website, www.robwardsculpture.co.uk.

41. Ward, *Reflections*, p. 77.

42. Ibid., p. 154.

43. Adrian Wilson, *Very Acme* (Glasshoughton, West Yorkshire: route, 2000), p. 186; see also the entry for Adrian Wilson at www.route-online.com/authors/adrian-wilson.html.

44. The cover-sleeve of the album *Atavistic Vision of Youth Attaining Monetary Equilibrium Whilst Drifting to Oblivion* (HMV) displays his neo-Popist graphic style; author's interview with Norman Pearce, Wakefield, 30 June 2009.

45. Norman Pearce, statement to exhibition for *Artwalk*, Wakefield, January 2009; Norman Pearce, *New Works*, Harrison Trust, Wakefield, 2009.

46. Lynne Cooke, *Bill Woodrow: Sculpture 1980–86*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 1986). M.J. Jacob, 'Bill Woodrow: Objects Reincarnated', in T.A. Neff (ed.), *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture since 1965* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp. 156–75.

47. See Bill Woodrow website, www.billwoodrow.com. See also J. Roberts, *Bill Woodrow: Fools' Gold*, exh. cat. (London: Tate and Darmstadt: Inst. Mathildenhöhe, 1996–97).

48. Bill Woodrow, *The Periodic Table* (1994), 21 black and white linocuts on 270 gsm BFK Rives paper, printed by Simon King, Cumbria (London: Paragon Press, 1994).

49. See Paul Etienne Lincoln, *artnet* website, www.artnet.com/artist/424356839/paul-etienne-lincoln.html.

11

Alchemy and art in the Czech state and Poland

In Central Europe the work of film-maker Jan Švankmajer and artist Jiří Havlíček has been a late manifestation of a lived Hermetic tradition dating back to the time of the legendary Emperor Rudolf II in sixteenth-century Prague.[1] In Poland, on the other hand, recourse to alchemy has been infrequent in the twentieth century since the intelligentsia has tended to regard the Hermetic tradition as an integral part of Germanic culture, and thus antipathetic to native interests.

Historically, during the Renaissance, Kraków, the capital of Poland, had produced some notable alchemists, particularly Michael Sendivogius, who had performed a successful transmutation for Rudolf II. Moreover, at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, alchemy was a flourishing practice among both students and lecturers. Krakówian alchemists resided in the streets around the church of St Mary.[2] Even the English magus John Dee had visited Kraków with his dubious collaborator Edward Kelly while travelling under the protection of the Polish nobleman Jan Łaski. During their residence in the city they practised alchemy. Due to the fracturing of historical continuity in Polish culture, this alchemical legacy was not transmitted to later generations, for in the late eighteenth century Poland was partitioned between three imperialistic powers, Russia, Prussia and Austria, and disappeared completely from the map of Europe.

Alchemy is not encountered as an interest among the early Polish modernists of the nineteenth century, although many did engage with Theosophy and with the Spiritualist currents emanating from France and Germany.[3] It is thus most unusual to encounter Hermetic interests in the 1960s, such as those of the theatre director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), and in the 1980s those of the painter Krzysztof Gliszczyński (b. 1962), as well as, most recently, the alchemical interests of the performance artist Tomek Kozak (b. 1971).

In the Czech state there was a large degree of historical continuity, although it had been absorbed into the Austrian empire in the sixteenth century. The nation was given a fair degree of autonomy by the imperial authority,

since there existed a large population of Germans within the historic borders of the old Bohemia. In the late nineteenth century both the German and the Slavonic Czech elite were exposed to Viennese *fin-de-siècle* culture, and these influences promoted the development of a flamboyant style of twentieth-century Czech art which has often contained esoteric references.

In Vienna, at the end of the Second World War, there appeared a distinct grouping of artists who worked in a hyper-Surrealist style, drawing for their subjects on universal esoteric traditions. Their imaginative capacities were often fuelled by hallucinogenic drugs.[4] Their imagery referenced Renaissance art, particularly Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (*c.* 1510). One of the best-known of these artists is Wolfgang Hutter (b. 1928), who frequently alludes to Pieter Brueghel's work, most especially in his *Tower of Babel* (1563). Ernst Fuchs (b. 1930), another celebrated name, appropriates the sexual symbols of the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum*, as well as eschatological imagery from the biblical Book of Ezekiel. The Serbian artist Ljuba (Popovic Alekse Ljubomir, b. 1969) depicts erotic figurative images, dense in colour and texture. In the 1960s Friedensreich Hundertwasser (1928–2000) was removed by critics from the Viennese context and redefined as an international 'Pop artist', with considerable commercial success. His style has always been more related to the international mainstream than to the Viennese Symbolist tradition.

The product of such contemporary Viennese Surrealists has been defined as 'visionary art', which is characterized by morbid eroticism, violence and narcotically induced visions. Most of these artists produce finely detailed and highly coloured drawings and paintings, notable for their bizarre hyper-realism and over-emotional expression. The French critic Michel Random has located the origins of such art in the counter-culture of the 1960s.[5] Artists were influenced by ideas drawn from Tantric Yoga, Tibetan Buddhism and drugs such as LSD which encouraged a study of esoteric texts, such as the terrifying *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Drugs seemed to permit access to the visions of the Bardo Thodol, the post-death state of consciousness described by the Tibetans. The drug guru of the 1960s, Timothy Leary (1920–1996), through his writings encouraged his followers to experiment with LSD. Another cult text was Aldous Huxley's (1894–1963) *The Doors of Perception* (1954), in which he provided an account of mescaline-induced mental states. In addition, the writings of Carl Jung on dream imagery were widely read.

From the 1940s visionary artists, similar to those of the Viennese school, were also to be found working in Paris, figures such as Erik Desmazières (b. 1948), Yves Doare (b. 1943), Jacques Houplain (b. 1920), Jacques le Maréchal (1928), Francis Mockel (b. 1940, American in origins), Mordecai Moreh (b. 1937 in Iraq), Georges Rubel (b. 1945) and Jean-Pierre Velly (1943–1990), among others.[6] Many had experimented with hallucinogenics in order to stimulate their imagination on the model of the writer Henri Michaux, who had produced his book *Miserable Miracle* (1956) under the effects of mescaline

(similarly with his other works, *l''Infini turbulent*, 1957; *Paix dans les Brisements*, 1959, and *Conaissance par les gourffres*, 1961). Such French artists could also look back to the earlier drug-induced creations of René Daumal (1908–1944) and Jacques Sénnelier, who had collaborated with Antonin Artaud.

Michel Random has defined Viennese art as being 'alchemical', since the artists regard their studio as a laboratory for the transmutation of their own states of mind. The artwork is merely a sign that this spiritual transmutation has taken place. Both French and Viennese visionary artists have considered the making of gold to be a process that takes place within the human psyche. Yet, although these artists speak of their desire to unite with 'God', their actual paintings belie this spiritual intention as they are violent and laden with a Freudian-style imagery of sexual desire, pursuit by devouring monsters, and an eroticized desire for death.[7] The imagery is fetishistic, intended to be understood only by initiates.[8] Other symbols and compositional types used in this art are those of dizzying cosmic architecture, gothic cathedrals, Gaudi's buildings and those of the Secessionists, as well as the haunted cityscapes of Giorgio de Chirico.[9] Symbols are adopted from freemasonry, the Rosicrucians and kabbalism. Apocalyptic references are rife.

The effects of these psychologically and visually overloaded productions of the French and Viennese percolated through into the Czech state in the 1950s and 1960s, and it is possible to establish a kinship, though one that is cooler and more refined, in the Surrealistic production of both Jan Švankmajer (b. 1934) and Jiří Havlíček (b. 1946). From the 1960s to the 1980s both artists were proactive in promoting secret networks of artists and theatrical people, film-makers and political activists. Their work was encoded with a savage text directed against the Soviet-occupied Czech state, protesting specifically against the bloody repression of the 1968 democratic government led by Alexander Dubček (1921–1992). Jiří Havlíček links his *Graphica Alchymica* to the alchemistic and Hermetic themes in art. He combines the complicated images, amalgamating Fludd's Rosicrucianism with Jung's archetypes, or Erasmus's wise foolishness with the thoughts of original Czech philosopher Ladislav Klíma. In his films, Švankmajer describes the effect of the communist censorship of free speech, which reduced the citizenry to an infantile condition. The national psyche was forced to regress to a neonate state in which the sole instinct was to engulf and devour. In Švankmajer's puppet theatre the world consists of one universal substance – food – and the only response that his protagonists can make to each other is to ingest and be ingested, processed by the internal alchemy of the stomach into faeces. This is the nightmare condition of the newborn infant who knows only the will to survive.

Švankmajer was born in Prague in 1934. He studied puppetry and theatre arts at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts, and became both a theatre director and a visual artist.[10] In 1964 he made his first short film, *The Last Trick*. His practice is to mix together stop-motion animation with live action in order to create eccentric

dreamlike narratives. The central metaphor is that of the uncanny human body. In the short animated film *Punch and Judy* (1966), for example, two hand puppets destroy each other, resurrect and escape together from their coffin, being eventually revealed as two hands belonging to a single puppeteer. The metaphors refer to the self-destructive nature of the communist state, in which self-hatred is the citizen's response to political repression.

Švankmajer's subsequent short films draw on the historical legacy of the Italian painter Archimboldo, court painter to Rudolf II in the late sixteenth century. He had devised a series of ingenious portraits depicting the emperor in an allegorical manner as composed of seasonal vegetables and fruits. These had alluded to the cosmic and divine nature of imperial authority instituted by God himself and invested in a single chosen individual, in this instance Rudolf.[11] In atavistic myths of kingship the fertility of the land was dependent on the ruler's own fecundity. In his portraits Rudolf is shown as ripe and fruity, his face composed of magnificent, tumescent phallic vegetables and fruits. In reference to this native genre, Švankmajer created his own version in the animations *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982) and *Manly Games* (1988). In these films there appear two human profiles. One is made from tableware and china, and the other from fruits and vegetables. The profiles savage each other, and finally merge. The cutlery man escapes from the amalgam and devours the vegetable one. The cutlery man is eaten in turn, only to re-emerge in yet another form composed of stationary. This process of alchemical union and death and transmutation into another form continues until both figures destroy one another. The political inferences once again express the despair at the impossibility of evolving any degree of positive human inter-action in a despotic state.[12]

By 1987 Švankmajer had opened-up a new area of discursive practice in his production of films based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. He made two films involving stop-motion puppets, as well as human beings. The better-known version, with far more lavish *mise-en-scène*, is the full-length *Alice* of 1987, sinister and nightmarish, surreal in its logic (the other *Alice* was released in 1994). As always there are two opponents, in this case a human Alice and a boggle-eyed puppet as the White Rabbit. Alice enters the Underworld, following the White Rabbit through a chest of drawers. Menaced and attacked to the point of lunacy by the abject and cruel denizens of the Underworld, Alice loses control. The final scene ends in the symbolic castration of the stuffed White Rabbit by Alice as she takes off his head with a huge pair of scissors.

Prior to the return of democratic conditions in the Czech state, Švankmajer was in such a state of political desperation that the endings to his films could only ever be dark and ambiguous. This is the land of lost souls. Alice is a metaphor of the individual in the infantile collective of the communist state. The rabbit is 'Big Daddy'. In Švankmajer's interpretation of Alice the action is totally futile and there can be no epiphanies, except in the final act of

decapitation, when only this desperate act of brutality can liberate Alice from her tormentor. As for self-understanding, she gains none. The irrational levels of the Unconscious remain incomprehensible, a confused and violent babble. Alice is forever on the run in fear of her life, in fear of total dissolution into the primaeval swamp that precedes the symbolic order. In her Wonderland, nothing holds form for long. All is becoming in a perpetual black alchemical transmutation. It is the alchemical procedure without any thought of obtaining the Philosopher's Stone. Instead, Švankmajer's alchemy is cannibalistic. The objects are a sexual, phallic menace. At one point slabs of real butcher's meat pursue Alice. Wreathing around her, the animated things seek to cannibalize her. She is alien to them, not of their world, a transient. Hence they cannot enter into dialogue with her and there is no polemical encounter. In their totalitarian order she can only become nothing at all, reduced into the swathe and swab of matter in flux.

The second Czech artist under consideration is Jiří Havlíček, who has always drawn on alchemy for the symbolic content of his anti-Soviet polemic, as well as on Jung's psychology. His thinking was additionally shaped by various historical and contemporary philosophers such as the Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) in his book, *In Praise of Folly* (1511). The philosopher Ladislav Klíma (1878–1928) also affected his ideas. Havlíček further draws on the work of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. Most recently, Havlíček has explored the digital technologies, as well as science fiction, horror movies and books, cybernetics and Alfred Jarry's system of pataphysics. His sources are many and varied (alchemy, kabbalism, medieval visionary drawings, Islamic calligraphy, Baroque ceiling painting, science fiction, graffiti, the French Surrealists, Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel).[13]

Havlíček has produced black and white graphic drawings and prints, recently experimenting with colour. He combines the traditional techniques of etching, lithography and painting with those of manuscript illumination, such as gilding and enamelling. His drawing style is expressionistic, and he has deliberately adopted an untrained *art brut* style. Havlíček has a dry, black sense of humour, typically East European like that of Švankmajer. From the outset he had defined himself as a Surrealist, exhibiting with the Czech Surrealist group in Belgium in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as with the international Surrealist group Surfanta in the 1970s.

During the Soviet period he was not officially recognized by the government as an artist since he had not graduated from the one and only official Academy of Art in Prague (communist states centred artistic training in one national establishment, with the exception of Poland). Havlíček gained a degree instead from the Department of Art Education in the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University in Brno. Consequently, he was not permitted to join the official artist's union, and therefore was not officially entitled to work as an artist.[14]

Instead, he had to teach, though he continued to work in private, and managed to exhibit his artworks in the 1980s and 1990s in Germany. Perhaps by reason of his proscription by the state, his works have tended to be small in scale. At Masaryk University Havlíček lectured on drawing and printmaking, art theory and history in the Department of Art within the Faculty of Education.[15] His lectures incorporated references to electronic media, information science, anthropology, philosophy, psychology and the Internet.

Independent Czech artists were severely repressed by the state in the 1970s as result of the suppression of the Velvet Revolution of 1968, and the authorities tried to kill all resources from which an independent culture could develop.[16] By the 1980s there was stalemate. Artists living outside Prague, such as Havlíček and his associates in Brno, had no contact with the cultural life of the capital. They were not allowed to make art to sell – and indeed, to make any unofficial art at all was illegal, a subversive act against the state for which artists would be imprisoned. To alleviate the grim situation, Havlíček wrote commentaries on his students' artwork and helped them to organize exhibitions despite the serious risk this involved. In the 1990s he organized contacts with France, England, Germany and Italy.

In 1968 Havlíček had become interested in Jung, Paracelsus, kabbalah and alchemy, and he produced a set of works, *Graphica Alchemica*, whose surfaces were populated by hybrid creatures.[17] By the early 1970s he was examining esoteric Christianity, which inspired another cycle of works, *The Christian Mystics*, referring to the Spanish mystical tradition. Then came the series *Jesus Christ*, in which he united his Christian and alchemical interests. In the alchemical imagery of *Materia* (1973) the figures rise and fall as in the medieval Wheel of Fortune, in which a human figure is located at the top of the circle, with serpents and beasts at its sides.[18] In the early 1980s, Havlíček began to mix his media using photography, drawing and lithography, gilding enamels and Chinese ink, producing futuristic visions of space cities and spaceships.

In 1986–89 there appeared another range of imagery describing specific alchemical processes, as in *Lapis* (mixed media and gilt on paper). He employed cartoon-like forms and graffiti art for other small coloured drawings on paper, *Coniunctio Oppositorum*, *Pneuma* and *Balneum Mariae*. He produced a whole series of drawings called *The Alchemystics*, which included a picture of the theme of the Emerald Table, *Tabula Smaragdina* (1989–91). On an under-wash of radiant orange he laid two squares of golden-orange and green-blue on which he inscribed calligraphic marks similar to those in Judaic, Chinese and Islamic texts.[19] In the 1990s he appropriated Heinrich Khunrath's alchemical engraving of the Cosmic Christ in the Cosmic Rose in a work called *Sephir Jetzirah* (2006).[20] The work *Cabbalist* (2006) was a computer collage composed from etchings reusing Khunrath's Christ, as well as imagery of demons and adepts, monsters and a chalice, with 'AL', the Hebrew letters *aleph* and *lamed*.

In common with many other artists influenced by the Hermetic tradition, Havlíček views his creative activity as a redemptive feat in which he acts to sublimate the negative mentality of his society, its primitive subconscious fears. He thinks of himself as a type of craftsman with special spiritual powers. His essential action is the alchemical process known as *exaltation*, in which the base materials of the subconscious are elevated to the level of the lucid rational mind and the transcendent spirit.

Turning next to Poland, since the 1970s there have been three artists of stature, belonging to different generations, who have sought in the esoteric tradition for a language capable of expressing their experience of severe political subjugation.

In the late 1970s, after increasing civil disorder in Poland caused by the universal demands of the populace for democratic rights, the Communist First Secretary General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law on 13 December 1981. This condition existed until 22 July 1983. All civil rights were restricted, and censorship of the media and the press was tightened. Trade unions and other professional organizations were closed down. The military repressions were severe, with the presence of armed forces and tanks on the streets. This provoked widespread street protests and the mass arrest of citizens. On the very first day of martial law, five thousand citizens were arrested and located in prepared prison camps. In the first few days alone, 13 people were killed and dozens seriously injured.

Jaruzelski was responding to the shipworkers' strikes in the summer of 1980 at the Gdansk Stocznia (Shipyard) led by Solidarity, the first independent workers' union in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, led by Lech Wałesa. The Soviet Union threatened to invade Poland in retribution.

In the arts there was an immediate reaction to the political repression. In fact, historian Leszek Kolankiewicz has argued that, as a specific response to the political upheavals, director Jerzy Grotowski came to conceptualize his experimental theatre as an alchemical laboratory.[21] In October 1980, at a conference at York University in Toronto, Grotowski formulated the pragmatic of his Theatre of Sources Project. By this date he had gained a substantial reputation internationally as a theatre director and theorist whose influence extended beyond the dramatic arts into other forms of creative practice.

Grotowski had originally devised the Laboratory Theatre in 1959 in Opole in collaboration with Ludwik Flaszen (b. 1930). In 1962 they renamed it the Laboratory Theatre of Thirteen Rows. It was moved to Wrocław in 1965, and they added the phrase 'the Institute of the Actor's Method'. From 1970 the name of the institution was shortened to The Institute of the Actor – The Laboratory Theatre. The theatre was finally dissolved on 31 August 1984. Kolankiewicz has described the manner in which the different laboratories multiplied in the Laboratory Theatre: the 'Acting Therapy Laboratory',

the 'Group Theory and Analysis Laboratory', the 'Laboratory of Event Methods' and the 'Working Encounter Laboratory'.

Grotowski referred to his secret research in documents by the title 'the Program of Prospective Research'. He explained the reasons for his allusions to scientific method in an interview, *Laboratorium w teatrze* ('The Laboratory in the Theatre', April 1967), which was reprinted as a separate text, *Methodical Exploration*, later included in his internationally renowned work *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968). Grotowski admitted his fascination with the Institute of Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen, founded in 1920 by Niels Bohr. He had also benefited from the ideas of the British physicist and astronomer Sir James Jeans in his *New World of Physics*. Grotowski found parallels between such writings concerning particle physics and the sacred scriptures of India. In the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, the individual consciousness is said to create a world that is only partially real, since it is dependent on the viewer's perception rather than being an objective phenomenon in its own right. Grotowski was open to the accounts of Indian philosophy that he encountered in Paul Brunton's book *A Search in Secret India*, written in the 1930s, where Brunton had described the teachings of the Indian saint Ramana Maharshi.

Grotowski was also interested in the mystical ideas of the Jewish Hassidim and in the kabbalistic system, specifically in the manner in which the enlightened masters (*zaddiks*) trained their disciples, the teaching being inseparable from action and from events. As Kolankiewicz points out, for Grotowski, knowledge was not scientific knowledge, but was more like mystical gnosis – intuitive knowledge as lived experience.[22]

The association with alchemy suggested by Kolankiewicz was never mentioned by Grotowski himself, although he preferred to use the term 'opus' (work as in the sense of the 'alchemical work') in order to describe his ritualized practice. It is probable that he was thinking in the sense of a type of alchemical work undertaken by the director on the psyche of the actor. The necessary changes were forced onto the actor, induced by the director in the same manner as the alchemist forced nature to transmute herself into a higher form of being. In his first manifesto concerning the 'Poor Theatre', Grotowski described his method as one which was concerned with the ripening of the actor. This was achieved through a process of pushing him to the extreme, into a trance state effectively, leading to an integration of all his psychic and physical energies. This process would attain its realization in a state which Grotowski called 'translumination'.[23]

Grotowski stated that the actor's organism should eliminate any resistance to the inner process of psychic growth, which was like an alchemical purification in which the body vanished and burned.[24] Grotowski described the actor Ryszard Cieślak's acting style as one in which he liberated himself from the heaviness of his own body so that he became a source of spiritual light.[25] In order to achieve this state, the actor had to perform specific actions in a

highly choreographed manner. Grotowski alluded to his method in alchemical terms as the raising of dense matter to its subtle form and its return to the density of the body.[26]

The dramatic theories and studio exercises devised by Jerzy Grotowski have had a great influence on international artistic developments, from the 1980s extending beyond the world of staged theatre to that of street and gallery performance art, installation, video and film.

There are very few other Polish artists who since the 1980s have referred directly to alchemy. An outstanding exception is the work of Krzysztof Gliszczyński (b. 1962). His paintings and installations deal with themes of change, decay, death, rebirth – the reconstitution of self-hood and the relation of ego to universal consciousness. As a young student in the early 1980s he had been active in the political disorders on the streets of Gdansk in support of the Solidarity union strikes in the shipyards. Gliszczyński was arrested and imprisoned, a traumatic experience that resulted in an enduring fear of further reprisals. His memory of the psychic pressures of martial law are symbolized in his work by the manner in which he destroys his painted surfaces, impressing an alien text onto them by the pressure of his thumb.

On his release from prison, Gliszczyński found himself led to alchemy, in which he discovered a text facilitating his own enquiry into the nature of citizenship under Soviet autocracy. Since then, in the favourable conditions of liberated Poland in the 1990s and 2000s, Gliszczyński has further developed his subtle investigation into the issues of national and personal identity. Specifically, he is deliberating how individual subjectivity is generated through the interaction between personal memory and collective political history. The materials of chemical transmutation have provided him with an appropriate allegorical structure for this purpose. In his art practice he has devised a ritualistic manner of pictorial construction in which he attempts to reverse the natural progression of time. In this, he has been inspired by Jung's concept of synergy, in which unrelated events occur simultaneously in parallel to one other, though to the human mind they appear to interact, often with very strange results, since the natural laws of cause and effect are violated.

There is some inheritance in Gliszczyński's thinking from the Symbolist artists of the late nineteenth century, specifically Edvard Munch, for whom life was fractured and convulsed by desire, sickness and death. Gliszczyński's early encounter with Munch was fundamental to his own formative process as an artist. Munch's paintings substantiated his own experience of the finality of death, the shock encounter with the void – loss and grief. This led Gliszczyński into an existential enquiry into his own finite nature, such as is reflected in his recent series of self-portraits (2007). These works express a tentative possibility that in art and history, as in dreams, loss may be conquered in a metaphysical-space beyond gross materiality. The dead can

live again. His working-process is emblematic. He processes and re-processes the physical materials of his constructions, recycling and re-composing, but never entirely destroying them. The residues, paint scrapings and marks on the wall increase in mass and spatial area as he proceeds. Alongside the form that he is producing, another one is simultaneously being created from the dregs of the earlier works – *in memoriam* for those that came before.

Trauma is a fundamental theme in Gliszczyński's work. The self-portrait paintings are a meditation on the traumatized memories of an entire society and their effect on the contemporary Polish character. Prior to 1939, Polish identity had been constructed on the basis of cultures that had evolved historically two hundred miles further east of the present border. This culture was destroyed by the invasions of the Germans in 1939 and of the Soviet Union in 1940, when two million Poles were deported to the Siberian gulags. After 1945, Eastern Poland was illegally absorbed into the Soviet Union and most of the remaining Poles were resettled in the new Polish territories in the west that had been seized from Germany. The former eastern Polish lands now form part of the countries of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, and retain substantial Polish minorities.

So who are the Poles nowadays? In Pomorze, for example, over the past sixty years a new identity has arisen out of a patchwork of traditional local cultures and those of dispossessed peoples from the lost and forgotten *Kresy*. History has demonstrated, in fact, that it is possible to be 'Polish' in many different ways, whether within the country itself or in the diaspora outside.

To address these problems of national and individual identity, Gliszczyński has adopted the model suggested by Hannah Arendt concerning the potential retrieval of fragments of history lost in the fracturing of historical continuity by fascist and Stalinist regimes. These regimes had led to the disintegration of humane moral codes in the body politic, since the individual citizen was eliminated from involvement in the public sphere. However, the retrieval of selected fragments could provide a foundation for a more affirmative political order.[27] Following this model, Gliszczyński enacts a ritual emblematic of such a retrieval of lost history. In his practice of reusing fragments of his previous works, lost in the original process, he alludes to the recovery of historical facts suppressed and eliminated from cultural memory by the communist regime:

> I think that my painting is a reflection on some painterly energy, the condition which refers to a loss, to something irrevocably gone …. Because this interrelation is inseparable, whenever I work on a painting I leave a trace which contains a meta-painterly image… this loss … needs to be stored.
>
> Since 1996 my painterly considerations concentrate around the issue of reinterpretation, 'the end of painting' … the series (*The Mythology of Red* [*Mitologia czerwieni*, paintings and objects]) … is an attempt to outline the time parable reaching as deep back as the ancient times.

> … I prepare samples of red on canvas, fold canvas in rolls and submerge [them] in wax. Thus, the recognition of them is not completely possible, only a small trace, a mark being possible to see. This is the same as in case of truth which was hidden and its reading requires special attention from us.
>
> The condition of contemporary painting requires the reinterpretation of the past, the new look at and reading of old truths.[28]

In these works Gliszczyński is also alluding to the concept of the 'Eternal Return', an idea originating in ancient Egypt which is encountered both in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, as well as in the religious anthropology of Mircéa Eliade. They proposed the idea that time moves in a cyclical manner and is of infinite duration. In contrast, the material universe is endowed with a finite amount of matter that changes all the time into a limited number of forms. This process never ends, and it has no origin. Eliade developed the notion of the Eternal Return still further, arguing that all world cultures had divided reality into two discrete realms, those of sacred and those of profane space and time. Through ritual, it was possible to transcend historical time and to participate in the original events themselves. Hierophanies were manifestations of the sacred order. They provided the world with its moral code.

Another of Gliszczyński's projects has been to counteract the iconoclastic attitude towards painting of the Polish writer and dramatist Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), a major figure in European culture of the 1960s–1990s. Notoriously, Gombrowicz had expressed a serious doubt concerning the ability of painting to signify anything of importance, a denial that, since the 1970s, has cast a shadow on the work of Polish painters attempting to create socially and politically significant images. Gliszczyński attempts to address Gombrowicz's demand for an artform that is dynamic and for an image-building process that constantly evolves in time. Gliszczyński considers that this has been achieved by means of his working method, in which he regards his materials as being an alchemical first matter, retaining their volatility. He regards his current series of self-portrait paintings (2007) as being indexically related to his own physical presence. The paintings have become metonymic. Their surfaces are a network of rudimentary vertical and horizontal marks, imprinted with his thumbnail. He continues to add layer upon layer of colour in a wax base. The resulting effect is that the materials of the work, their formal composition and the subject matter have become integrated into a unity.

In his earlier paintings, he used the form of the geometrical grid in order to infer the presence of the historical dialectic as an ordering mechanism whose dictates and chronologies he is subsequently transgressing. In those works the geometry had been a purely metaphorical, intellectual system, as in *Labirynt* (Labyrinth) (2001), or in *Lewitacja* (Levitation) (2000) and the related *Trzy Przestrzenie* (Three Vistas) (2001). In these works horizontal and vertical gestural marks strike across the underlying geometrical structures,

or lines are engraved into the canvas. In some works, such as *Lewitacja* and *Trzy Przestrzenie*, these rational geometries contradict and almost eliminate from view the image of a human figure, which is an image of Gliszczyński himself. In the *Dialog* series (1985), as well as in *Materia Prima* (1995–96), his own recumbent form recalls Holbein's painting of the dead Christ:

> The encouragement to levitation is the encouragement to the shaking-off the power of gravitation, to become the metaphor of the unspoken character of time in which absence, transitoriness, repetition, loss, eternal return, intermingle into one. As for the painterly technique, I managed to achieve transparency in this series. Although the painting of the matter has an enormous power of covering, in this case it becomes scumble, matter which creates a mystical-metaphysical aura thanks to its mono-chromatism.[29]

From the mid-2000s this geometrical grid has been transformed into something quite different, a dense surface of jagged marks meticulously created from the impression of his fingernail, a visceral response to his meditations on history as collective and individual memory. In these indexical networks the cross line of the horizontal imprint cuts across the vertical one, thereby, reducing the authenticity of the original mark. However, its identity can be rebuilt:

> The works from the 'Self-Portrait' series are a kind of compression in which every fragment of a painting is placed back in the painting on the recycling basis. My self-portraits … pertain to my artistic personality shaped for years in Poland – the country of political transformations. Are we able to shape ourselves? Is an artist, working on a painting, capable of including universal values in it (common to collective consciousness).[30]

In Gliszczyński's self-portraits (2007) (fig. 11.1) the form of the head is constantly reworked so that its identity becomes uncertain. The face is no more than an empty field of dense opaque surface. As Gliszczyński paints and repaints the head onto successive canvases in a potentially infinite progression, the silhouette grows larger and larger, spreading out beyond the frame of the original canvas. Eventually, the portrait is transformed into a field-painting extending indefinitely beyond the borders of the canvas. The paint has now become the image. Put another way, the particular has been absorbed into the universal, the individual psyche dissolved into the cosmic *prima materia*. Gliszczyński regards art-making as being similar to the contemplating of a mandala – a slow, deliberated process, composed of minimal interventions, typical of the cool quality of much contemporary Polish painting. He performs the same laborious process as did the alchemists in their laboratories.

In the self-portraits, once the original iconic image has been lost in the process of over-painting, the subsequent intention is to recover some trace of that image. Through a process that he terms 'leucosis', Gliszczyński attempts to regain the original image. By covering the field of the painting with white

11.1 Krzysztof Gliszczyński, *Autoportret à Retour, No. 8* (2005) (oil, encaustic on canvas, 150 × 200 cm) (photograph by Dominik Kulasiewicz). By courtesy of the artist

paint, the original form reappears. In alchemy, *leucosis* was one of the final stages in the making of the Philosopher's Stone. After the spirit had been separated from base matter and both had been purified, they were reunited in a procedure that produced a white crystalline liquid. The base matter had been transmuted into the highest possible form, one in which spirit and matter had become one substance, the quintessence.

Gliszczyński's most alchemical series of work is an ongoing project which he has exhibited in the installation *Urny* (Urns) (1998–99) (fig. 11.2), although as a concept it had originated as early as 1992, first appearing in an installation called *Residuum*. This series constitutes a record of the artistic procedures and events as they gradually evolve in time and space. Initially, Gliszczyński gathered the residues of dried-up paint from his palettes and paint pots and pressed them into tall glass vessels that recall alchemical alembics and stills. More recently, he has eliminated the glass containers and has collected the drops of paint that fall onto the studio floor. He simply compresses the fragments of fresh paint in order to create a free-standing monolith. On occasion, where the paint has lost its elasticity, he has placed the fragments of paint and wax into a pan and boiled them down to collect the sediment.

11.2 Krzysztof Gliszczyński, *Urny* (Urns) (1998–99) (installation, oil and encaustic fragments of paint in glass containers). By courtesy of the artist

The reappearance of the dregs of the painting process, recycled into a new artwork, is a type of alchemical resurrection. Gliszczyński thereby alludes to the retrieval of history into a form of permanent commemoration. The vases are like Egyptian stele, marking the passing of the living from one world to the next:

> The urns are just another speck of the fragmentariness which surrounds me.
>
> What is elusive here, too, is the sense of its time. It becomes universal and increasingly more similar to an aftermath of some calamity.
>
> My new working procedure generated wastes. Valuable material, prepared especially for the work on a painting, suddenly appeared to be unnecessary and doomed to non-existence. From that time on (1992) I started to collect the remains of my work. They awakened my awareness how fragile everything we do is, how fragmentary and illusive. This was the image of everything we do. We cover everything with layers of unnecessary things, finally we become dust ourselves, which is just another layer.[31]

The procedure is modelled closely on that of the alchemists who aimed to reduce the primal substance to its elemental components. It was then possible

to imprint a new form onto prime matter, thereby giving it an entirely new identity. In the series *Cinisbacillus* (2000–2004) Gliszczyński has re-examined the *nigredo* (blackening) stage of the alchemical process that he had reviewed in earlier paintings. The *nigredo* is the dark night, the death of the prime matter prior to its resurrection in perfected form. The material that Gliszczyński frequently uses is ashes, as in his earlier paintings concerning the mythology of red pigmentations, *Mitologia Czerwieni* (1996), as also in his grey-toned works *Residuum* (1998–99).[32] He describes the manner in which he used to collect ashes from friends' houses, carefully recording their origins. These ashes symbolized the disposed culture of everyday life.

Gliszczyński's artworks become an instrument used to investigate the painful borders between life and death, memory and forgetting, gain and loss, history and its obscuration. The materials employed are the waste refuse of memory.

The most recent Polish artist to employ alchemy in an indictment of the new capitalist culture of post-Solidarity Poland is Tomek Kozak (b. 1971), film-maker, performance artist and installationist, philosopher and literary critic. Kozak has been investigating both Hermeticism and the more bizarre aspects of the esoteric tradition, such as Satanism, in their manifestation within modernist Polish literature, often in reprehensible political contexts. One recent study has involved a critique of the Luciferian and Indian Tantric interests of the controversial modernist poet Tadeusz Miciński (1873–1918). Miciński wrote the novels *Nietota* (*Moss*) (1910), *Mene-Mene-Thekel-Upharisim* (1931), as well as the poems *W mroku gwiazd* (*In the Darkness of the Stars*) (1902) and the plays *W mrokach zlotego palacu, czyli Bazylissa Teofanu* (*In the Shades of the Golden Palace, or Basil Theophanes*) (1909), and *Kniaz Potiomkin* (*Prince Potemkin*) (1906).[33]

Kozak's research concerning Miciński has been incorporated into a film, *The Lucifer Lesson* (2009), an audio-visual collage of found footage and texts. Kozak describes its aesthetic as one of the 'grotesque of charm'. The film constitutes a critique both of the political context of Miciński's occultism as well as of the political, historical and religious foundations of Polish culture and of culture in general. Another film, *The Yoga Lesson*, is a parallel project featuring an analysis of Nazi symbols of power such as the swastika in their relation to the Tantric and Vedic philosophies of India. Kozak equates the Polish Carpathian mountain range with the Himalayas in an image of a right-wing 'Indian Poland'. In this syncretic mixture of political structures, ancient philosophy, modernist art and counter-cultural esotericism, Kozak is trying to speak about the power of ill-digested ancient despotic ideas in their continuing negative effects on contemporary culture. Kozak refers to the 'dead languages' of ancient philosophy, which are not dead at all, but can be converted into a dissecting instrument for analysing the condition of contemporary Poland. He regards his country as morally and spiritually bankrupt.

In an earlier film-collage Kozak had employed the alchemical concept of the *nigredo* in order to address issues of racism and fascism. The title *Zmurzynienie* (2006) translates as 'blackening', and he describes this performance/film work as the 'short history of a metaphor'. Taking on the role of narrator, Kozak presents three filmic sequences which contain both historical biographical material and collaged scenes appropriated from films such as Pasolini's *Salo*, which he plundered for its orgiastic sequences. Other appropriated segments include scenes of medieval occult practices, secret books of magic, priests and so forth. Intercut with these excessive scenes are fragments of Polish films recounting the experiences of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps and their gradual brutalization.

Intercutting still further these visual texts are shots from films of the 1930s dealing with antiquity, specifically the art and culture of the Greeks, and finally images of the Germanic symbol of the eagle. These sequences are repeatedly punctuated by two more scenes that have been spliced together. One consists of mounted soldier-apes from the 1970s film *Planet of the Apes*, who are shown drawing bows and arrows and shooting at a target. The other shows German officers of the Nazi *Wehrmacht* similarly employed.

Kozak recounts the parallel histories of two historical figures from the period of the Second World War, one of them Polish and the other his German enemy. Both victim and perpetrator could be accused of racist attitudes towards the negroid races. They take recourse to stereotypical metaphors of black skin as symbols of the pre-civilized human condition. The pseudo-classical ideal of the 1930s as the acme of civilization is contrasted with the condition of the negroid jungle-dweller. The German subject Ernst Jungr was a Prussian who served in the armies of the *Wehrmacht* occupying Paris. He wrote a novel in the 1920s promoting right-wing views. The other subject is a Polish poet, Tadeusz Borowski, who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. On his release, he described his experiences in his poem *The Battle of Grunwald*, in which the degeneration of his psychic and physical condition in the camp is described as a descent into the condition of primitive negroid races. The two men, Jungr and Borowski, never met, nor did they know of each other. In Kozak's work they serve as examples of cultural prejudice which affects all sides of the political divide, whether fascistic, or democratic.

Kozak then proposes a problematic resolution to the ingrained cultural stenotype of black skin by reference to alchemical allegory. He refers specifically to Johann Valentin Andréae's alchemical novel *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, among other alchemical sources. Kozak recalls the story in which Rosenkreutz is wandering through a mysterious castle and garden when he suddenly encounters a black negroid figure who represents the alchemical process of *melanosis* (blackening). Kozak suggests that this imagery provides a discourse of salvation which is not racist. For the process of carbonization in alchemy, the burning away of impurities in

the prime matter is a process of redemption. Melanosis is the first stage in the reconstruction of prime matter into a more evolved spiritual form. Hence, the image of the negro changes from being a metaphor of primitive humanity into an image of spiritual perfection.

There are problems with Kozak's proposition in its universalization of the history of racial prejudice. The discourse is left hanging, begging for clarification of Kozak's specific meaning. *Zamurzynienie* is an unfinished text that requires much debate, as well as substantial expansion. Kozak is attempting to say something important about the moral decay of his country, but it is not clear as to what exactly this could be. The implication that Poland is a fascist country is surely not a reasonable accusation. His recourse to alchemy is also unresolved. Since Kozak is an artist enamoured of rapidly intercut collage in the richness of its visual field, it causes him to sacrifice the clarity of his communication.

Notes

1. Peter Marshall, *The Magic Circle of Rudolf II: Alchemy and Astrology in Renaissance Prague* (New York: Walker, 2006).
2. Rafał T. Prinke, 'Michael Sendivogius and Christian Rosenkreutz: The Unexpected Possibilities', *The Hermetic Journal* (1990), 72–98; Zbigniew Szydło, *Water Which Does Not Wet Hands: The Alchemy of Michael Sendivogius* (London and Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1994).
3. Jan Cavanaugh, *Out Looking In: Early Modern Polish Art, 1800–1918* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).
4. Walter Koschatzky, *Wien Nach 1945* (essay), exh. cat. (Vienna: Hassfurter, 1987).
5. Michel Random, *L'Art Visionnaire* (Paris: Editions Fernand Nathan, 1979).
6. Ibid., p. 9.
7. Ibid., p. 19.
8. Ibid., p. 24.
9. Ibid., p. 34.
10. Peter Hames, *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy* (London: Wallflower, 2008).
11. Pontus Hultén et al., *The Arcimboldo Effect* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987): Giancarlo Maiorino, *The Portrait of Eccentricity: Arcimboldo and the Mannerist Grotesque* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).
12. Hames, *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer*, pp. 24–42, 96–118.
13. Ken Hay in Jiří Havlíček, *Jiří Havlíček: Graphica Alchymica, Cosmica and Scatologica*, texts by Jiří Havlíček, Kenneth G. Hay, Jirina Hockeova, Josef Danek and H. Zemonova (Leeds: The Moorland Press, 2006), pp. 9ff.
14. Ibid., p. 10.
15. Ibid., p. 22.
16. Ibid., pp. 19ff.
17. Ibid., pp. 15ff.
18. Ibid., p. 14.
19. Ibid., p.12.

20. Ibid., p. 16.

21. Leszek Kolankiewicz, 'Why a Theatre Laboratory?', paper presented at conference *Why a Theatre Laboratory? Risks and Anomalies in Europe 1898–1999*, Aarhus, 4–10 October 2004, www.odinteatret.dk/media/50520/CTLS%20raport%202005%20pdf.pdf.

22. Ibid., p. 4.

23. Ibid., p. 6.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, [1951] 1958), *passim*; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), *passim*.

28. Krzysztof Gliszczyński, unpublished artist's statement, 2005.

29. Krzysztof Gliszczyński, artist's statement, *Cinisbacillus* (*c.* 2000–2004).

30. Gliszczyński, unpublished artist's statement, 2005.

31. Gliszczyński, artist's statement (*c.* 2000–2004); see also Krzysztof Gliszczyński, *Autoportret à retour*, exh. cat. with essay by Urszula Szulakowska (Gdansk: CSW Łaźnia, 2007).

32. For a complete account of Gliszczyński's work, see Dominika Krechowicz (ed.), *Krzysztof Gliszczyński*, exh. cat., texts by Aneta Szylak, Iwona Zietkiewicz and Krzysztof Gliszczyński (Gdansk: Galeria Koło, 2002).

33. Tomek Kozak, 'Indian Poland under the Flag of the Swastika? – The Cultural Vision and Philosophy of Tadeusz Micinski', lecture given at the Palace of Culture and Science, Warsaw, February 2009, excerpt: http://mobileacademy-berlin.com/pexperten/warsaw/excerpts/kozak.htm.

Afterthought: Politics or poetry?

In this book the concern has been to review the variety of ways in which twentieth-century and contemporary artists have used alchemy in their work as a politicized practice, but it has sometimes emerged that after the political text has been deciphered, there has remained a residue which has eluded enunciation in precise words. This visual and conceptual excess could be identified as an 'aesthetic' or 'poetic' content. There have, of course, been artists who have privileged the poetic mode over the political discourse, such as Cy Twombly, Eric Orr, Sutapa Biswas, Helen Chadwick, Ivan Mrkusich and Therese Oulton. The question then arises as to the validity of their recourse to poetic expression. Is this not an evasion of moral responsibility in their refusal to address the socio-political systems in which their art practice is enmeshed? This has been the dilemma faced by radical artists in over a century of experimental art practice.

Julia Kristeva has offered some resolution to this problem in her text *The Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974).[1] She argues that poetry is an expression of the irrational repressed elements of the Unconscious. Poetry, by its very nature, is a challenge to the established systems of authority. Hence, Kristeva suggests that even if the artwork is operating solely within the private poetic sphere due to its connection with the irrational processes of the unconscious mind, the poetic mode always retains a cultural revolutionary potential.

Kristeva's argument validates the claims of the early modernist avant-garde that all artists, by the very nature of their work, are revolutionary activists. Kristeva demonstrates that poetry (and visual artwork that expresses itself in poetic modes) is a way in which stale habits of expression are jolted and language is set free. By means of the poetic mode it is possible to elude the constraints of logic and to loose the dynamics of the entire semiotic chain, whether in verbal, or in visual language. This produces a richness of text that facilitates viewers (in the case of visual art) in weaving their own fabric of

meaning. The poetic field is infinite, and all possible signifiers are present within it.

None of this would have surprised André Breton, who was arguing the same case. Indeed, Kristeva has drawn on the same sources in the Symbolist poets (especially Mallarmé) as did the Surrealists.

Another issue thereby arises: given that alchemy is a poetic language *par excellence* in its rich hieroglyphic structures, then what, if anything, have artists added to its archive? How have they made it signify beyond its own poetic discourse to the more universal concerns of the particular body politic?

Certainly, the political texts within recent alchemical art would have been incomprehensible to Renaissance alchemists – the themes of genocide, racism, psychological trauma, the death of nature and the nuclear holocaust. In the visual arena there has been a wide range of invention, from the pure abstraction of Sigmar Polke and Milan Mrkusich through to the hyper-surreal creations of the Austrian and French visionary artists. Innovative materials have provided new types of alchemical transmutation, such as high-voltage electrical charges in the work of Eric Orr, and the heat and light-reactive and radioactive chemicals used by Sigmar Polke. New alchemical concepts and symbols have been devised by women artists such as Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Rebecca Horn and Helen Chadwick.

Artists have been deeply engrossed in alchemical allegory since the late fourteenth century, and it seems that the subject is not entirely irrelevant to the present time. Since the late 1980s the alchemical discourse has experienced a great revival in popular culture, reflecting the interests of the generation that grew up in the counter-culture of the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet even as this age group is gradually deposed from political and cultural authority, there is no sign that magic and alchemy are losing their interest for succeeding generations.

Possibly, in its role as the indispensable shadow that complements, criticizes and modulates the hegemonic culture, alchemy will continue to retain its efficacy as a signifying mode. The legacy of the medieval and Renaissance alchemists has been integral to the development of modernist and post-modernist Western art. As a historical phenomenon, the inspiration of alchemy on art practice has been profound. Even more, its politicized visual texts have played an integral role in the development of Western liberal and radical ideas.

Note

1. Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans. Margaret Waller, intro. by Leon S. Roudies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

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