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By

Sean M. Kirchhoff

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

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Abstract

AVATAR

by Sean M. Kirchhoff

Chairperson of the Thesis Committee:

Professor Elaine O'Neil
S.P.A.S.

A thesis presented on the body of work "avatar" exhibited in the SPAS Gallery in Spring 2002. It touches on personal experience and background of the exhibit, the work of previous quarters, influential artists, and the philosophy behind the artist's use of appropriation.

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This is dedicated to my unborn child, Truth.

In memoriam

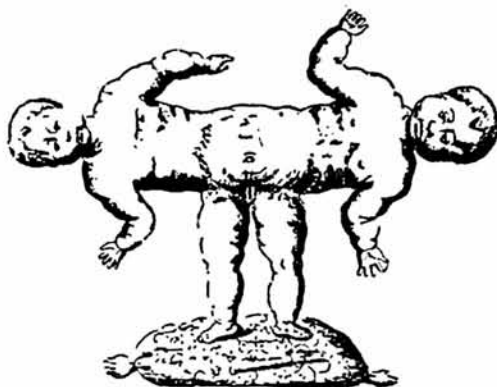
*I am glad for those who have found enrichment amongst the chaos...*¹

Memory. It has almost been two years since I have walked through the space of my “avatar.” I must call on an innate ability in order to recreate it. How can I trust what I have remembered? What is to stop me from reshaping the past? What if I have created a fiction so convincing that it has become part of my nonfiction? The answer lies in documentation. I wrote while working on my images for “avatar.” The following is an excerpt from my journal and the beginning of this thesis. It will provide a solid preface for us to begin looking at the work again.

“I was raised a Catholic. I attended private school from Pre-K to the 12th grade. Where do I remember learning to fear God? I slept with the light on. I would watch movies that scared the shit out of me. Monsters of all forms and fashions lived on the back of my eyelids. I knew what they looked like. So did my parents, and they tried their best to protect me. They told me that they did not exist. Someone made them up to scare me. They are not real. Couldn’t that line of reasoning be applied to God or religion? I knew what monsters looked like. What did God look like? I couldn’t answer that question. Nobody could answer it. That was what I came to fear. How was I supposed to be afraid of someone or something I couldn’t find? Why would I ever want to find something that I should be afraid of? That is the wonder of Catholic guilt; it provides answers without giving any.

¹ R.A. Salvatore, *Siege of Darkness*, p.70

THE
TRUE PICTURE
OF A
FEMALE MONSTER
BORN NEAR
SALISBURY.



ON Wednesday the 26. day of *October*, 1664. The Wife of *John Waterman*, a Husbandman, in the Parish of *Fisherton-Anger*, near *New Sarum*, or *Salisbury*, brought forth a wonderful Creature, which cannot be otherwise accounted then a Monster: It having two Heads, four Arms, and two Legs.

The Heads standing contrary each to other, one Head standing where the Feet should be.

There were two perfect Bodies downwards to the Navel, as if there had been two Children, and there they were both joyned together.

The Loyns, Hips and Legs issued out of the sides of the Bodies, just in the middle, where both Bodies were joyned together.

It was dissected, and there were found two Hearts, two Livers, and all the inward parts complete, as the outward to the Navel, except only that it had but two Kidneys.

There was but One Sex to both these Bodies, which was the Female.

This Monster lived two days, and during that time took Sustenance. It would not Suck, but did Eat with both Mouthes; when the one cried, the other did so too, each imitating the other in several actions, and was seen alive by many hundreds of the neighbouring places, which flocked to see so strange a Creature.

The Mother had one Child more at the same time, which was born first, and which also is a Female, and a very comely Child in all proportions, and is yet living.

This Monster is intended speedily to be brought to London.

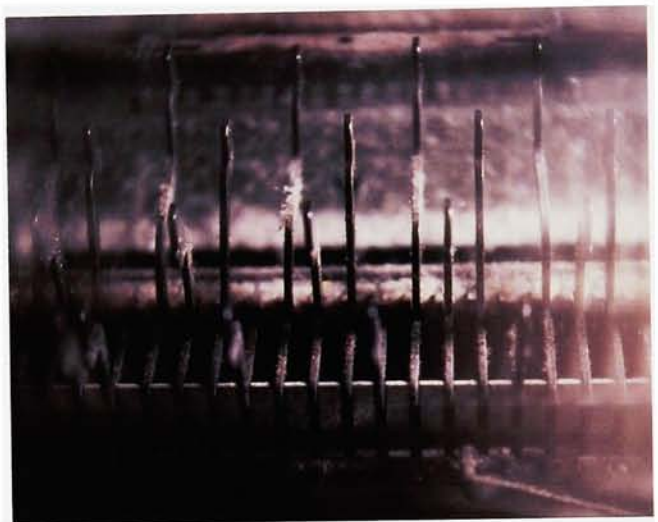
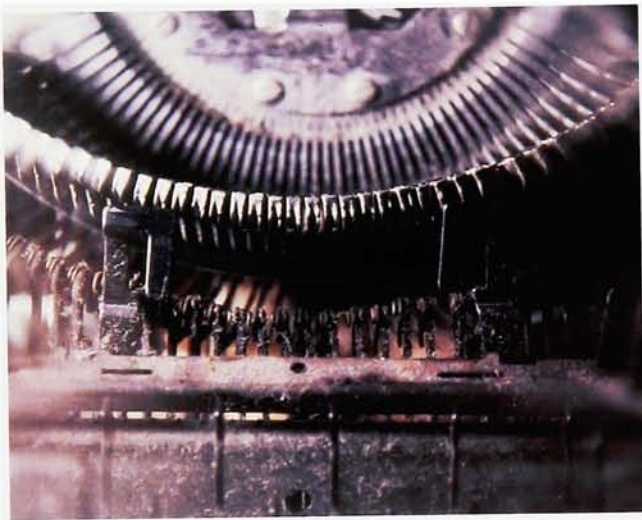
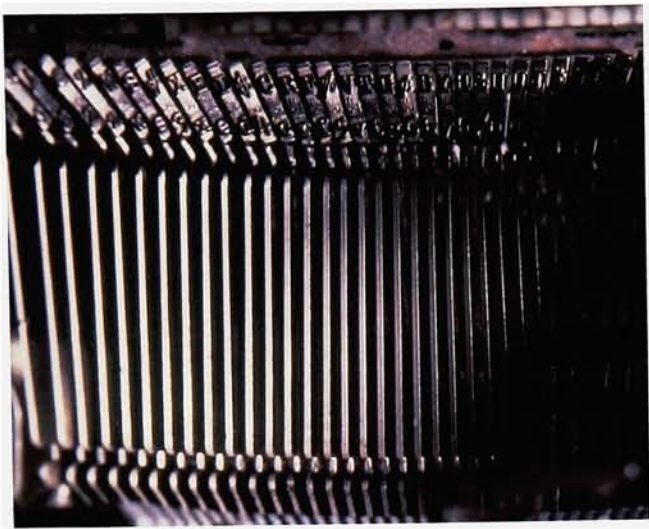
With Allowance, *Roger L'Estrange*, *Novemb. 5. 1664.*

LONDON,

Printed for *R. P.* at the Sign of the Bible in
Chancery-lane, 1664.

I watched television to try and find answers. There wasn't a V-chip. My parents made me watch with a blanket in my lap. My parents would tell me to cover my face whenever there was something that they felt was inappropriate. My dad tried to hide his magazine collection. They tried to hide me rather than sit and explain to me such things of the world. It was probably the easiest thing to do. My parents knew that I found the magazines. They never knew that I cut holes in my blanket.

So it went, trying to find answers through a hole in the wall. I received answers that only generated more questions. My fears of God and monsters were the basis for a myth that I set forth to create in a world of gratuitous information and entertainment. I was told that one of my fears did not exist. Now I find that one is dependent on the other. My parents tried to protect me. I felt they were only keeping me from the truth. So I covered my eyes with a blanket of holes and watched the dance of gods and monsters.”



Orwell's Typewriter, Sean Kirchhoff, 1999

Reconciliation

Faith is not granted by tangible proof. It comes from the heart and from the soul. If a person needs proof of a god's existence, then the very notion of spirituality is diminished into sensuality and we have reduced what is holy to what is logical.²

The road to “avatar” was not a straight path. The beginning of the road seems so far away from where I type this. It has been 4 years since I first came to R.I.T. I left behind New York City. It was my muse for my first two years of photography. I was coming home to a warm reunion with Rochester. That soon changed once classes started.

I was in over my head. It's difficult when you ask yourself every day, “How the hell did I get here?” I was having difficulty getting started. I found myself five weeks into my first quarter of graduate school with nothing to show. Then I found a typewriter. The typewriter didn't work and it reminded me of the old electronic word processor my grandfather gave me. I carried it around with me that entire day. The outer shell was the first to go; the letter keys were last. I plucked those letters off like a stricken lover to petals on wilted flowers. I did not know why I was doing any of this.

With my grandfather's camera I proceeded to shoot the subject of my first walkthrough. It contained 5 pieces; 4 8” x 10” photographs and 1 30” x 40”. I attempted to incorporate something conceptual to my photographs. I named the series “Orwell's Typewriter.” I was trying to draw a visual line between the rotted, skeletal technology and the rise of newer technologies that don't require human hands. I forgot that they were just photographs of a broken typewriter. There was something else about them that I found success with. It was the

² Ibid. p.70



Your Mother Has Your Eyes (part 1), Sean Kirchhoff,
series of digitally manipulated 4 x 6's, 2000

atmosphere. I presented the images in one of the black studios with minimal light. The smaller images were too small to have any dramatic effect. The larger photograph soon took on an ominous presence within the space. In the quarters to follow, this aspect became one that was dark, ominous, and uncomfortable; this was my art school experience.

In the second quarter, I found myself feeling inadequate and unprepared. Following the success of my first quarter, I started filling the back of my car with trash. The baby blue station wagon was home to sheets of rusted metal, broken controller boards from computers, egg crate Styrofoam, and even old baking trays. I spent my nights photographing these things. Critique was not productive. Though I was told to use a medium format camera, I had never used one. Logic told me to take this chance and learn something; Pride did not agree. Always one to make orange juice out of apples, I challenged myself to make work without picking up a camera.

Fate delivered the baby album within a matter of weeks. I found it while helping my parents clean out a hall closet. I did not realize how much my father documented me as a child. Ninety percent of which I could not remember, yet I was there when the picture was taken. I started to realize that I could not recognize my *self* in these pictures. I had lost all subjectivity. I had become a baby in baby pictures. My father couldn't have known that he was making fodder for his son's art school days.

I believe that if you stick a mirror in front of a baby, s/he will recognize the presence of a life form, yet they will not be able to identify with the doppelganger. Here I was, almost twenty, having a similar experience with a photograph. It was unsettling. I believe that instinct drives an infant to verify their existence through interaction between the environment and the child's senses. This ultimately manifests through communication. The small percent of



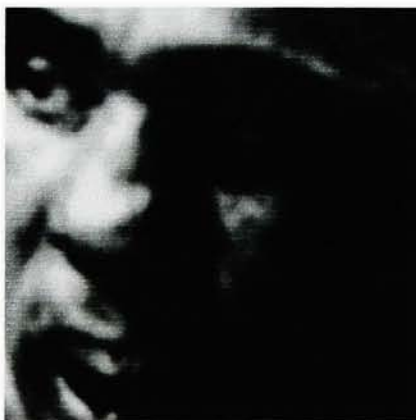
Your Mother Has Your Eyes (part 2), Sean Kirchhoff,
series of digitally manipulated 4 x 6's, 2000

the pictures I could identify with are at a point in time after my sister was born. I realized that sexual identity through gender roles develops into a subjective sense of self. These are the ideas I kept in mind while working on the images.

I received bare bones Photoshop training when I was at New York University. This would be the first project that I would use this program as a creative tool. After scanning my father's original prints, I began to "deface" them. I removed the eyes, nose, ears, and mouth of some of the earliest images of my infancy. I allowed the features to surface as the images progressed chronologically. The subjects were brutalized. The images were far from subtle. I made over forty to edit through for my second quarter walkthrough.

The presentation became an important part of this critique. The images were snapshot size, 4" x 6". I exhibited 30 of them in the walkthrough. My mother would keep snapshots on the mantle above the fireplace. Some of the pictures were not in a frame and just rested against the wall. I knew that I would be unable to construct a mantle in the studio. I improvised by creating small bits of wood about seven inches long and two inches thick. They had a groove running down the middle for the pictures to rest in. These were mounted in a line along the three white walls of the studio. The prints were flush-mounted on clear Plexiglas. I wanted the snapshot characteristic of being able to see the watermark on the back. The photographs rested in the groove of the wood with no adhesion. The viewer was welcome to take the pictures off the "mantle" and take a closer look.

I was successful in recreating the "ominous" though the work was completely different from my first quarter. I accomplished this with the number of images I had and the way they surrounded the viewer. It is hard to be "dark" in a white studio, so I used minimal lighting and let the subject matter do the rest. I was told that the images were disturbing, and that was all I could hope for. Also, I



Jerkin' Hoff, Sean Kirchhoff, 2000

had answered my challenge to make work without a camera and/or film. It just turned out to be someone else's camera.

Continuing my study of identity and the face, I came across the source images for my third quarter project "Jerkin' Hoff." The book was called *The Fights*. It contained the boxing photographs of 1930s, '40s, and '50s sports photographer Charles Hoff. His photographs accompanied essays on the sport of boxing during the timeframe of his photography. The book has become one of my favorite collections. While working on my baby pictures, I destroyed any sense of identity at my own will. With Hoff, I was viewing photographs of two men destroying their own identities at each other's will. Hoff had a knack of capturing the effects of a left hook to a man's jaw with incomparable detail. The results of that instant on a person's face could only be captured in a photograph (it was impossible to be seen by the naked eye, except for the resulting bruise). These images compelled me to use them for my own. I removed them from the context of a thrown punch. I left it for the viewer to filter through the beautifully abstract violence. What is the true nature of the event and what was illusion? Can beauty exist where there is violence? These were questions I asked myself while making this work. The pictures were 30" x 30". They were shown in a black studio. They covered three walls and had almost no lighting. The decapitated heads and faces seemed to float as the viewer stood in their midst. This walkthrough earned me the right to advance and work on my thesis. This is where the road to "avatar" starts.

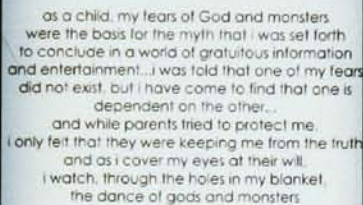
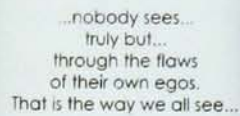
The first major change regarding my thesis was to address the source. Rather than pick images from simply one person's body of work, I turned to the massive media resource of the Internet. I started collecting trash again. I was drawing from sports, singing, and movies. There was something lacking from the resources I found. The resulting images I made did nothing but frustrate me.



early source images and
the beginning of the look and feel of "avatar"

Hunting became a shallow experience. I found it monotonous and too formulaic.

What I was looking for came in the form of pornography. I used to get punished for sneaking a peek at my father's magazine collection; now I get to download it onto their computer for the sake of art. The first downloads were ones involving men at the point of orgasm. I was still focusing on facial studies and expression. That changed once I picked up one book, *Francis Bacon*. I used Bacon's studies and portraits of the face for a foundation when editing and working with the new photographs. I started to pay attention to his triptychs and his paintings dealing with the human body. I examined these and then reexamined what I had downloaded. Certain pictures began to visually separate themselves from the others. A side comment from a peer (about a "monster with two backs") provided the caption for the work that I was making. I found myself blurring and erasing the lines that divided the two participants in the scene. The look and feel of "avatar" had begun.



Man's miserable fall

11 And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?



Resurrection

No, I'll not argue openly against one who has claimed to have seen an avatar, because that person will not understand that the mere presence of such a being undermines the very purpose of, and value of, faith. Because if the true gods were so tangible and so accessible, then we would no longer be independent creatures set on a journey to find the truth, but merely a herd of sheep...unthinking...³

³ Ibid. p.70-71



69

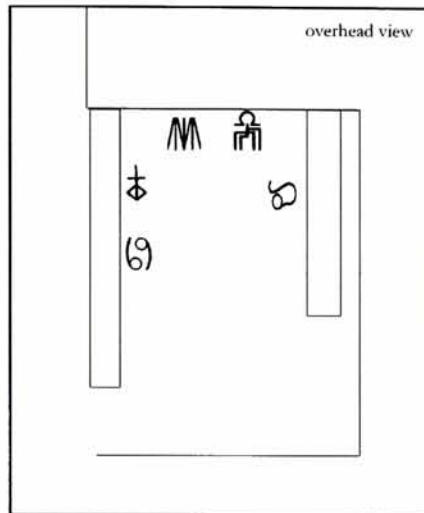












The Exhibit

It has been 18 months since the exhibition. I can still remember seeing “avatar” for the first time. The space was set in a square in the far corner of the gallery. It was secluded and private. It forced you to leave the way you come in. It was exactly how I wanted it. In order to see any of the pieces of the show, you needed to be within its walls. In order to avoid them, you had to leave. The pieces covered three walls and were displayed as shown in the figure above (*overhead view*). The lighting was low and dramatic. The pictures were inkjet prints on a canvas fabric. They were all 20” x 20”, matted in black, and framed; 30” x 30” in total size.

Magritte once said, “I think the best title for a picture is a poetic title...which is compatible with more or less lively emotions such as we feel when looking at a picture...The poetic title needn’t tell us anything, but should surprise and delight us.”⁴ The names of my pieces are based off of this idea. They are appropriated symbols that I have remanufactured. The titles do not inflect any further meaning to the piece; they parallel the process of the image-making. The names for four of the images are derived from astrological symbols. They are: Cancer, Sagittarius, Libra, and Leo. The other is a compilation of two alphabetic

⁴ Meuris, *magritte*, p.95



Above: *Matsyavatara*, Vishnu's fish avatar, Trichinopoly painting, 19th century A.D. (*New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, p.365)

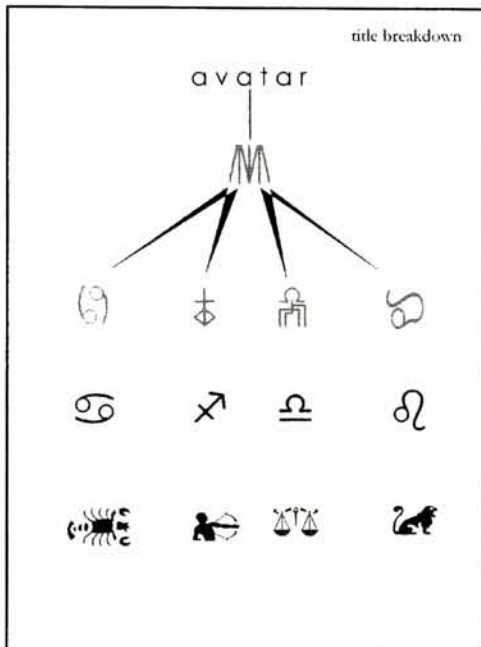


Above: Drawing of monstrous birth from Ambroise Pare's *Des monstres et prodiges* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1971; orig. 1573), p.14



Above: *Aizen-Myoo*, wooden sculpture of the Kamakura period, 14th century A.D. (*New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, p.415)

characters, “T” and “M.” The symbols also behave like the constellations they represent. You can transpose the respective names over the images themselves. I discovered this idea for the titles when I was checking my horoscope. I was



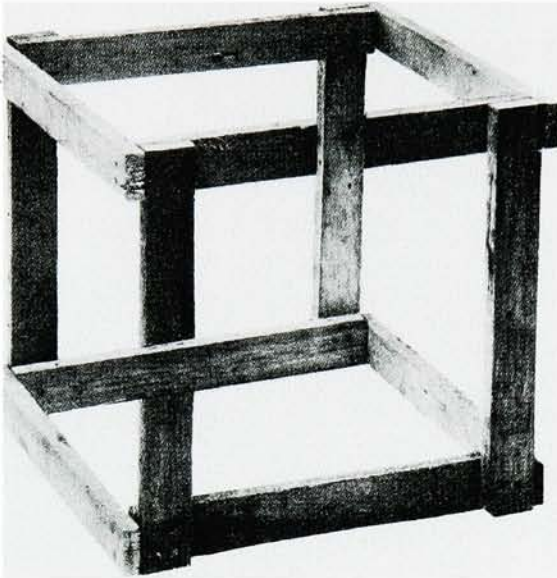
surprised to find that the symbol for Cancer was a sideways “69.” This seemed fitting with my subject matter. I found that I was able to do this with others; they are all derivatives of the original astrological symbol as shown on the left (*title breakdown*). The piece, whose title is composed of the “T” and the “M,” is the central figure. It represents the picture that bears its name, as well as the four pictures that flank it as they merge into one. It is a symbol for the actual structure of

the exhibit.

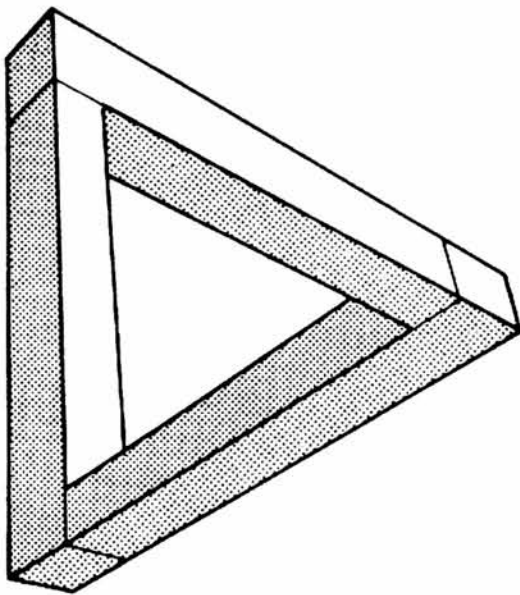
The Conflict

From the beginning of this work, I was faced with an interesting dilemma. It consisted of the views of human sensuality versus my background in Catholic spirituality. Sexual freedom and pornography are viewed as monstrosities to the eyes of the faithful. Over the years, my Catholic faith has been a constant internal conflict. I have slowly lost faith in the institution that I was taught would help me find the truth. At this point in my life, I am left to find it myself. My art is my map; yet I am not always sure where it leads.

“My internal struggle of sensuality versus spirituality is the primary philosophical brick that I built this work on; where is the truth? Is it in what we can see, feel, taste, and experience? I addressed this earlier with the analogy of gods and monsters. I have found that I would need to represent this conflict using two



“Crazy Crate,”
photographed by Dr. Cochran, Chicago
(*The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher*, p.87)



Tribar
R. Penrose
(*The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher*, p.87)



sets of visual cues: the religiously aesthetic and scientifically real. I have provided examples of both. These are the opposing visual forces that I used as inspiration for my work. I tried to dissolve the line between them and see what would result. This was an experiment, a mutation. Did I create the religiously real image or the scientifically aesthetic? What if I have made the actual manifestation of a god? Then again, we are just talking about a mutated form of pornography.”⁵

The Images

*And even more so if we are to believe the suggestion of avatars, because truth is singular and cannot, by definition, support so many varied, even opposing manifestations.*⁶

I started editing the images with a specific form established through the conflicting imagery of religious aesthetic (*Matsyavatara*) and the scientific realism of documented “monstrous” births. I combined this with an aspect of mutated, violent form modeled after Francis Bacon. For each image, I sought an entity consisting of remnants from the source images that leaned towards the godly (*Aizen-Myu*) or the monstrous. In Bacon’s paintings of the human form (*Triptych*), I have found that the violent abstraction of the body, though static, is suggesting action and movement. Facial features and identity suffer as they get incorporated into the overall destruction of the established norm for the human body. Where some of my pictures appear to be static, others display an inferred chaos within their black expanse. The forms are either at a point of extraction from or consumption of itself.

One aspect that I was excited about incorporating into my images was a reference to optical art or optical illusions. As a young student, I studied them and tried to develop my own. I have now created a place for them. I was able to construct my characters’ forms to defy physical norms. It generates a result that seems

⁵ excerpt from personal journal

⁶ R.A. Salvatore, *Siege of Darkness*, p.71



Left: *Cycladic Idol*,
3000 B.C.
(*New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, p.86)

Below: *The Dream* (detail),
Salvador Dali ,1931
(*Essential Dali*, p.73)



visually capable yet logically false. While doing this, I kept in mind a favorite quote from Magritte, “Do you always have the same shoulder?”⁷ I tried to accomplish this in the subtlest way possible. This allows for the observer to become uncomfortable beyond the initial viewing of the work. The viewer will come to realize that something is awry, even after accepting that nothing is at it should be.

This was a body of work where I pulled from my second quarter’s images. This time based on the model of a 5000-year-old *Cycladic Idol*. One form of editing I did not expect to do was the removal of all sexual identifiers, including body hair. I wanted to be provocative. If I could utilize the perversion present in my audience that notices there are no sexual parts available, it may compel them to wonder why. They may even fill in their own blanks.

⁷ Bruno Ernst, *The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher*, p.64



Self Portrait (Move Over Bacon), Sean Kirchhoff, 2001

A Museum at Purgatory

*It is my responsibility to act as their souls' guardian, as well as preserver of their accumulated treasures. These objectives I adhere to, though I can't at all honestly say I'm utterly devoid of prejudice, nor do I think I'm the right person to call a soul's guardian. Nevertheless, I **am** the Curator, and I carry out my obligations to the best of my ability.⁸*

What I am about to present to you is a catalogue of some of the work I have collected throughout my life. They are visual analogies to the progression of my own work. Like life, this oeuvre can be confusing. The structure, direction, and contents are in constant disorder, yet it always exists, as it should, in the present. I have chosen Purgatory as my current space because it offers me an environment favorable to the arrival of enlightenment. At which point, I will no longer be required to carry these artifacts. So, until then, view at your pleasure:

...for pleasure seeketh objects beautiful, melodious, fragrant, savoury, soft; but curiosity, for trial's sake, the contrary as well, not for the sake of suffering annoyance, but out of the lust of making trial and knowing them. For what pleasure hath it, to see in a mangled carcase what will make you shudder? And yet if it be lying near, they flock thither, to be made sad, and to turn pale. Even in sleep they are afraid to see it. As if when awake, any one forced them to see it, or any report of its beauty drew them thither...From this disease of curiosity are all those strange sights exhibited in the theatre.⁹

⁸ Bantock, *The Museum at Purgatory*, p.VII

⁹ St Augustine, *The Confessions*, p.232



Left: *Assassinat de Botelin Valentine*, 14.9.04,
Unknown, 1904;
Archives Historiques et Musée
de la Préfecture de police, Paris
(*Police Pictures: The Photograph as Evidence*, p.89)

We see St. Augustine's "lust of the eyes"
everyday, from rubbernecking a car accident
to watching an open heart surgery on televi-
sion. I never realized there were photography
books that embraced this notion to such an
extent. After I was in a serious car accident in
2001, I started collecting such volumes.
From Kilpatrick's *car crashes...* to *Weegee's World*.

Below: 1 mile north of Corona Del Mar,
Mell Kilpatrick
(*car crashes & other sad stories*, p.105)



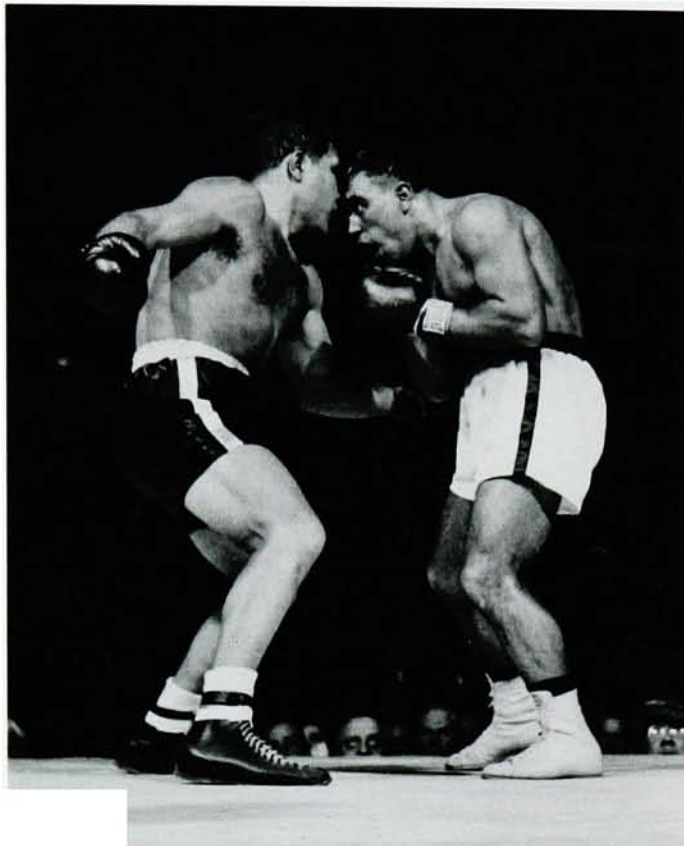


Above:
Victim of Auto Accident,
 October 29, 1939,
 Weegee (*Weegee's World*, p.109)

I find "Their First Murder"
 Weegee's most provocative photo.
 From the myriad of expressions
 across the ages; what is absolute
 amazement for the young, is the
 horror for the elder. Weegee, in a
 lot of his work, seemed to have a
 profound understanding that some-
 times the reactions of the viewer
 can be more interesting than what is
 being viewed.

Right:
 "Their First Murder," October 9, 1941
 Weegee (*Weegee's World*, p.64)

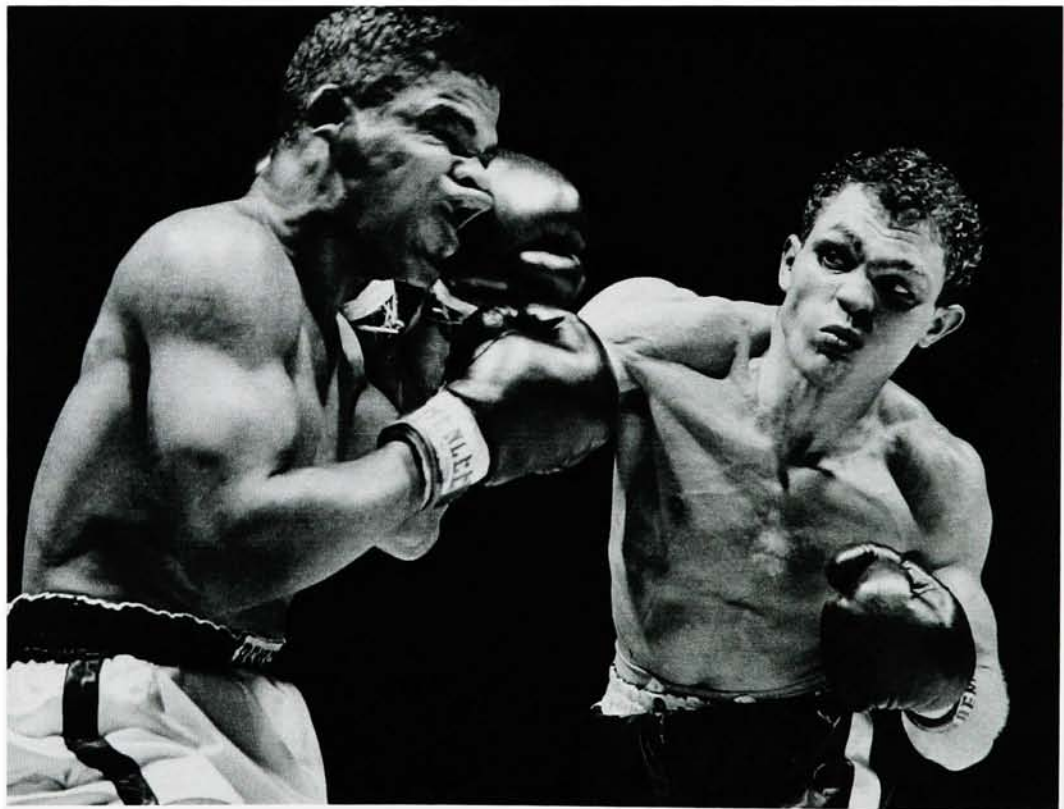




Left: *Unidentified Boxer vs. Bo Bo Olson*,
Charles Hoff
(*The Fights*, p.50)

Hoff was not a sports photographer to me. The way he framed his shot, as well as his lighting, made the ring his studio, or even better, his canvas. Though the work could get put into the same category as the crime scene photographs, there is just something so romantic about these images that keeps me from ever making the comparison.

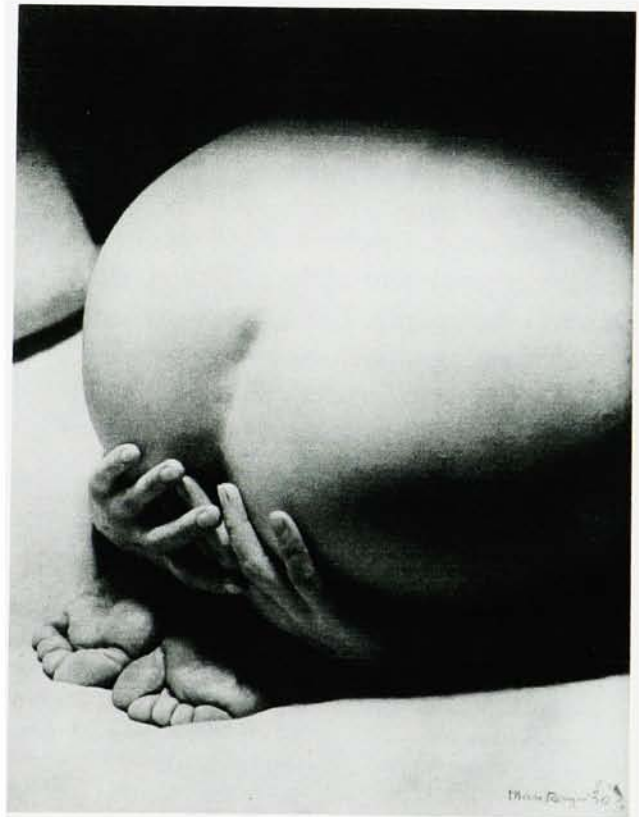
Below: *Len Matthews vs. Carlos Ortiz*,
April 13, 1959
Charles Hoff
(*The Fights*, p. 32)





Left: *Interim portrait #271*,
Bill Jacobson, 1992
(*NEW art*, 72)

Right: *La Priere*,
Man Ray, 1930 negative, printed later
(*In Focus: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty
Museum / Man Ray*, p.60)

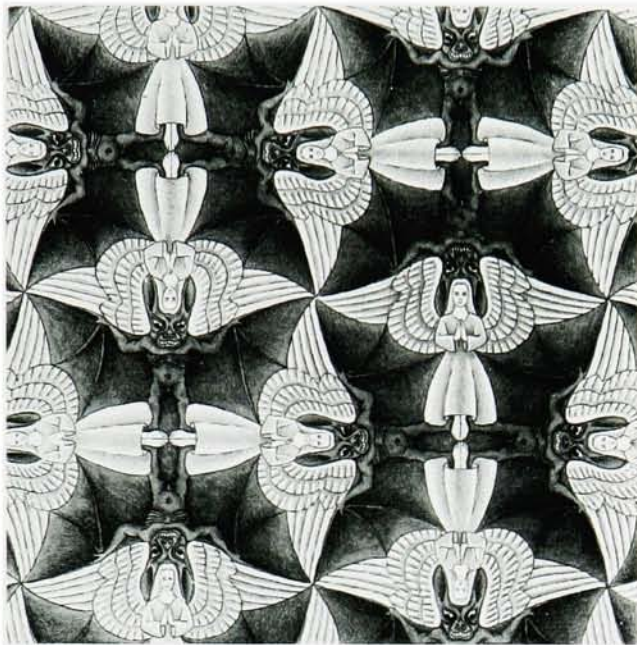




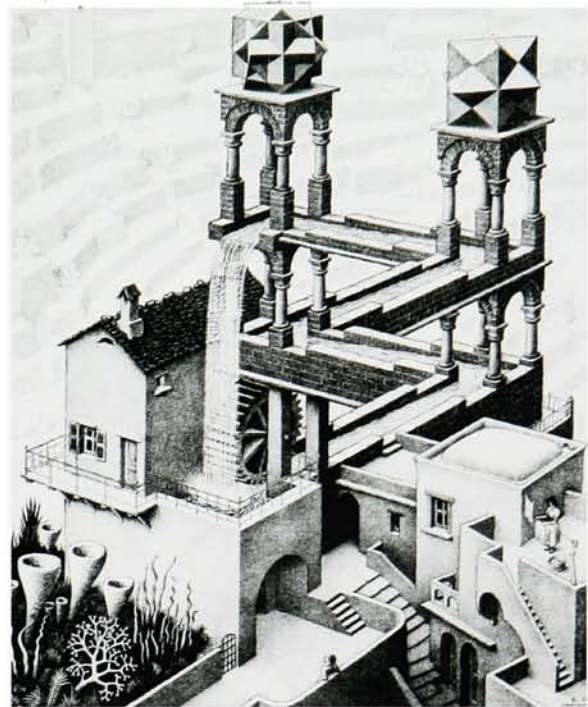
Three selections from
Une Semaine de Bonte,
a surrealistic novel in collage
by Max Ernst.

This “surrealistic novel in collage” may be the most inaccessible part of my collection, yet also serves as the favorite. Ernst, “in his earliest collage books...generally made up completely new scenes out of many separate pieces, but for most of *Une semaine de bonte* he used existing illustrations as base-pictures...usually the relatively crude and usually lurid wood-engraved illustrations of French popular fiction that were plentiful in the books and periodicals of the late 19th century. The subject matter of such literature was torrid love, torture...” (publisher’s note, Ernst, p.vi)





Above: *Angels and Devils*,
M.C. Escher, 1941
(*The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher*, p.40)

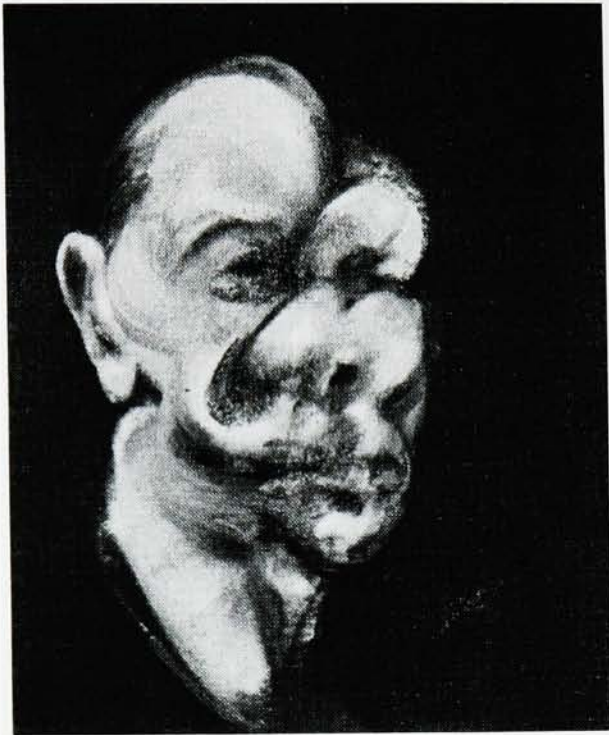


Top right:
Waterfall,
M.C. Escher, 1961
(*The Magic Mirror of*
M.C. Escher, p.89)

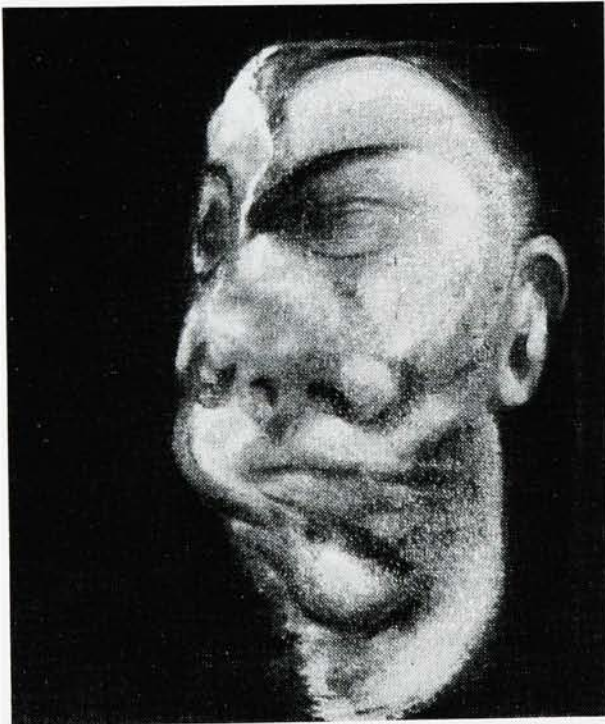


Left: *Print Gallery*,
M.C. Escher, 1956
(*The Magic Mirror of*
M.C. Escher, p.32)

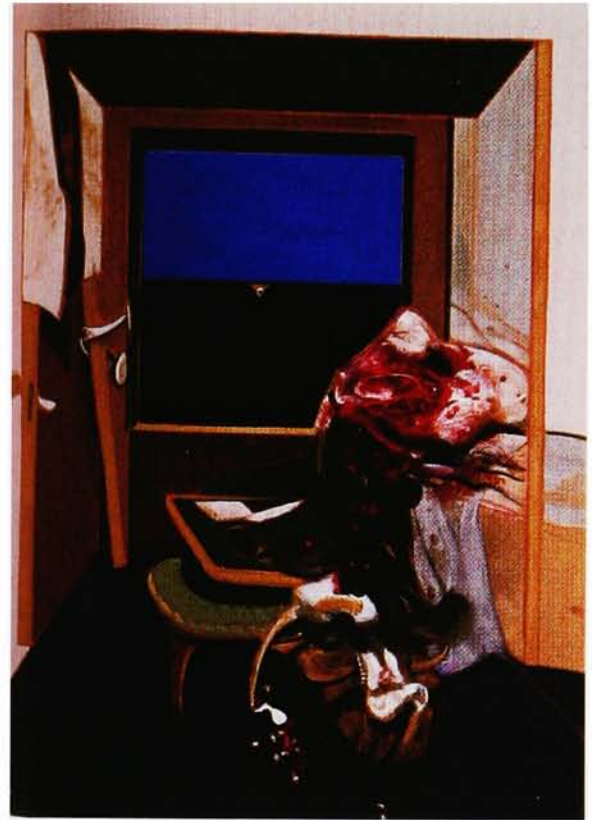
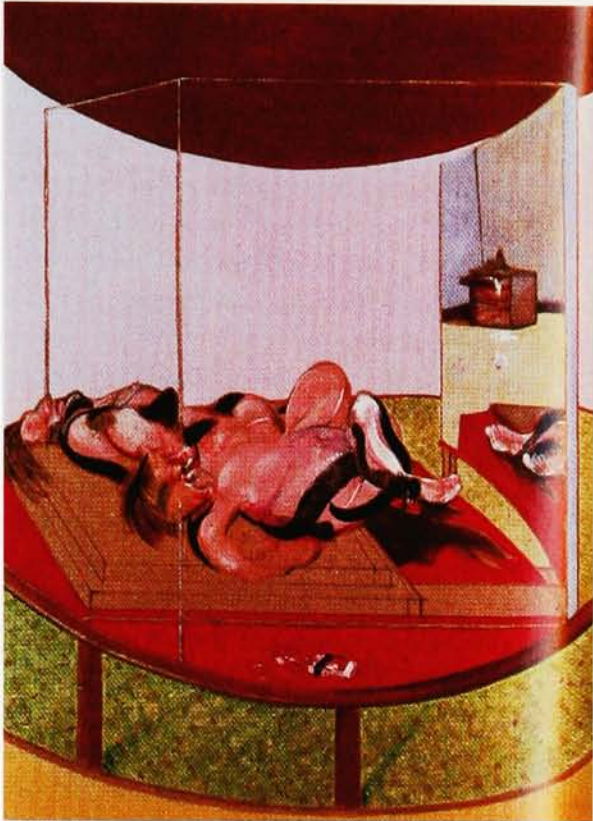
M.C. Escher was the first artist whose
work I collected.



Study for Three Heads,
Francis Bacon, 1962
(*Francis Bacon*, p.66)

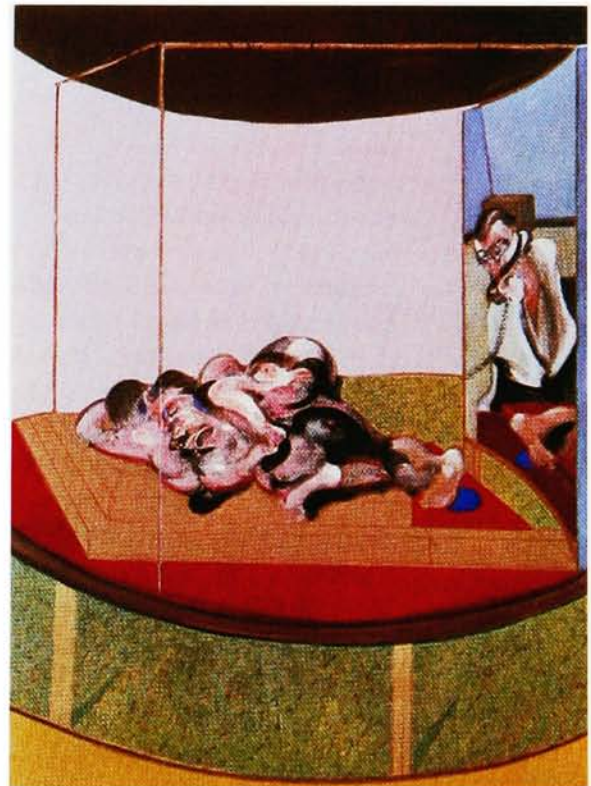


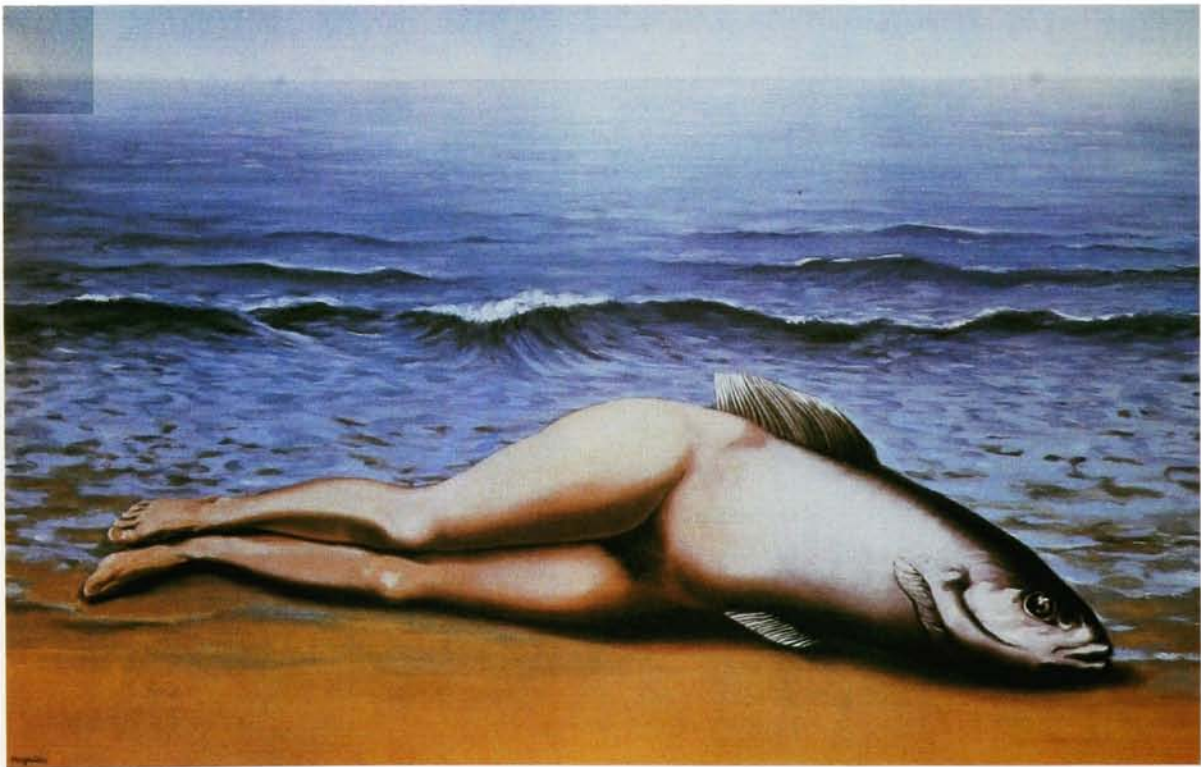
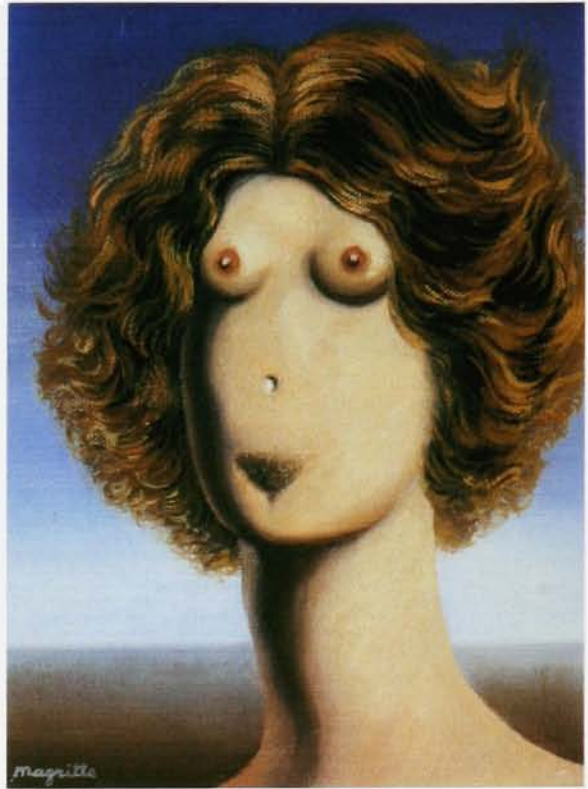
The work of Francis Bacon was first brought to my attention during the critique of my "Jerkin' Hoff" series. Little did I know how much the work would help my work evolve into "avatar". I looked at his paintings regularly. I discovered something in his portrait studies that I felt lacked in mine. They had an illusional depth developed by layers of seemingly violently fluid strokes. While struggling to find the course for my thesis, I made *Self Portrait (Move Over Bacon)*.



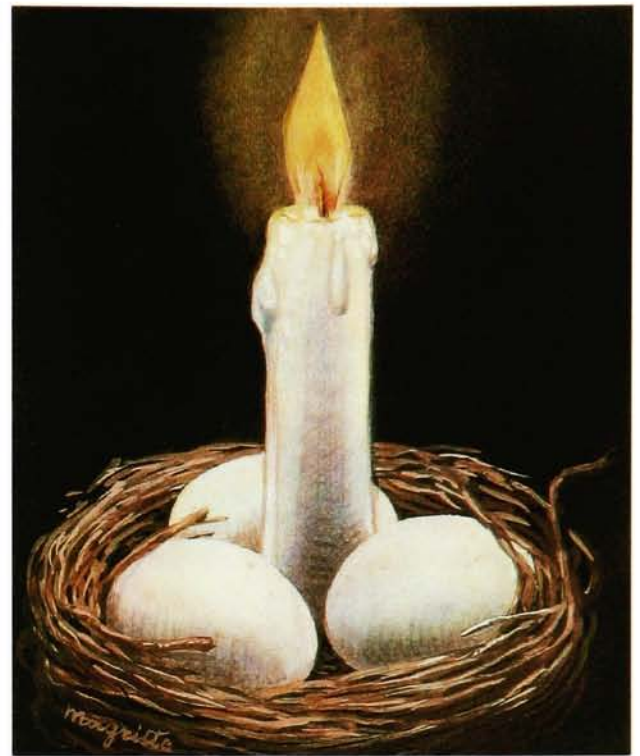
Triptych
(inspired by T.S. Eliot's poem 'Sweeney Agonistes'),
 Francis Bacon, 1967
(Francis Bacon, p.60-61)

Am I looking at a monstrosity or something beautiful? That question made me stop looking at the faces and focus more on the human form. Specifically two bodies engaged in a mutual act and the consequences that they put their own physical forms through.





“Anyone who tries to discover subtlety of meaning in all this, or...would like to know what it is all about in its deepest essence is probably looking for the very thing the painter is trying to release him from.” (B. Ernst, 64) I tried to echo some of Magritte’s visual representation in “avatar”; the loss of identity through sexual representation (*The Rape*) to the multiple limbs of *The Magician*; the animorphic form of man (*Collective Invention*) to the innuendo of *The Imagination*.



Above:
The Imagination,
Rene Magritte, 1948
(*Magritte*, p.95)

Bottom:
The Magician,
Rene Magritte, 1952
(*Magritte*, p.77)

Opposite left:
The Central Story,
Rene Magritte, 1928
(*Magritte*, p.31)

Opposite right:
The Rape,
Rene Magritte, 1934
(*Magritte*, p.39)

Opposite bottom:
Collective Invention,
Rene Magritte, 1934
(*Magritte*, p.37)



Artist's Note

As we approach the conclusion to this thesis, I would like to offer an introduction to the final Cantos. *Transcendence* is the most important piece that I wrote while completing my graduate studies. It does not make any specific reference to the work we have discussed. It does, however, provide insight to the process I employed while producing the images. I did think about what I was doing. I did try to justify what I was doing. The product is in the pages that follow.

The essay discusses the use of appropriated imagery and provides a philosophical basis for the artist's inherent use of mimicry. The 'we', of the first line, are the artists. I discuss communication and its role in the Information Age. Mass media has become an omnipresent force in my world; notice the extensive use of the word "media" throughout the introduction. At NYU, I was in a program based in media theory and criticism that was run by Neil Postman (the author of "Amusing Ourselves to Death"). He was heavily influenced by the work of Marshall McLuhan; I am also. The collages, that accompany the essay, consist of illustrations and photographs from a couple of McLuhan's books.

The essay has been through four drafts and could go through four more. Based on some the ideas in the essay, there are an infinite number of drafts I could make. The essay was first written in 2000. I have revisited and revised it every year since then. This is its current state in 2004. It is still very raw; so is the art that I make today. As I wrote earlier, I am not always sure where this leads. That is what makes it interesting.

Some may say that this is not the best place to end; but I did not come here to finish anything. I came here to get started.

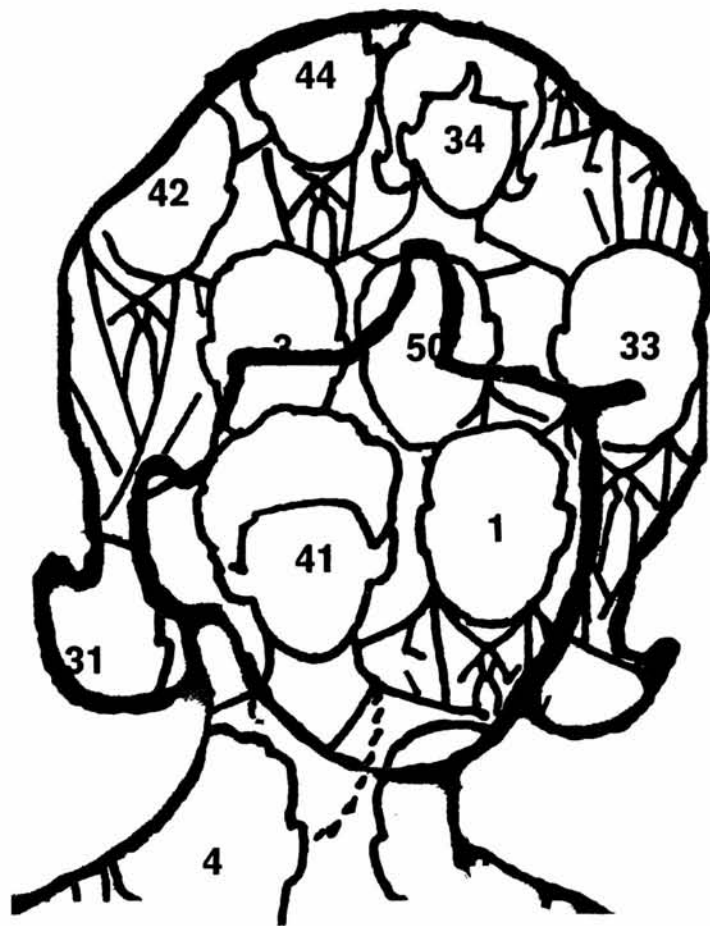
Transcendence

And it is on this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling, and to experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based.¹⁰

We bring what is interesting, emotional, and expressive—and, at the same time, determine what it is to experience anything of these—right to the doorsteps, family rooms, and desktops of the contemporary sponges of today. As the technologies of the past two centuries have mutated from the brutes of the Industrial to the intellects of the Informational, we have seen “muscle” replaced with “mind.” Lust of the flesh becomes lust of the fetish. That which is commodity, mass-produced, mediated, are the products of the global village, thus the irony of Disney’s “Small World.” The objective domains of our mind that drove us to seek subjectivity in the physical world are now populated with objects that provide us with an ever-present pseudo-subject—the Media. The media is the governing body of our village, for in itself rests the structure by which the internal structures of the village communicate. Communication provides the common link inherent in today’s technological development and the consequential global community it develops. The “chatting-fence” which divides neighbors has become the “chat-rooms” of neighboring countries. New technologies—new media—provide for the social change, which is wrought by the effects of new technologies on the order of our sensory lives.¹¹ The individual is no longer the solution absorbed by culture; it is the dry sponge thirsting for the fulfillment of fluid media. And what makes media so absorbent is not its basis in reality, but its ability for mimesis. Media is the sad, white-faced clown that is really in the box trying to convince you its not.

¹⁰ Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art? From Art and Its Significance*, p. 178

¹¹ McLuhan, Marshall. *War and Peace in the Global Village*. p. 5



CONSCIENCE

Its mimicry is based, not on fact or fiction, but on its displacement from the truth—thus the neuter medias “middle.”¹² It is the mimic, Plato warns Adeimantus, that “beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind.”¹³ Centuries later it is James Joyce who observes that the shifting of the order of our sensory lives, alters the images we make of ourselves and our world.¹⁴ But, what of the contemporary image-makers, the true Platonic mimics—the artist, what about these village aestheticians? The term ‘media’ or ‘medium’ is an application of the artistic paradigm, as well as the term for the world that encompasses the artist. It is the medium within the media. The artist is the mimic within mimesis. An application of this “media within media” manifests itself in the act of appropriation. Though it is often categorized as a product of postmodern art practice, appropriation is an inherent trait of the art that I develop as a consumer within this mediated culture.

II.

*For them, imagery is now over determined—that is, the world already has been glutted with pictures taken in the woods.*¹⁵

With “them” being postmodern appropriators, this notion of “the woods” is the visual universe that is recognized by the postmodern as finite. For them, it is believed that the visual resources provided are completely exhausted and that “it would be dishonest to pretend that [they] are still there out there in the woods.”¹⁶

¹² American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd Edition

¹³ Plato, “Republic: Book III” from *Art and Its Significance*, p. 26: in the text, the statement is asked of Adeimantus, but it can be taken that he is merely looking for affirmation of understanding.

¹⁴ McLuhan, p. 5

¹⁵ Grundberg, Andy. “The Crisis of the Real,” p. 12

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 11



CONQUEST

The subjectivity of the postmodernist politics of appropriation appears to outweigh that of the subjectivity of the object; what it means to appropriate versus the focus of the image. Though not the product of postmodernism:

*In certain quarters appropriation has gained considerable notoriety, thanks largely to works like Sherry Levine's 1979 Untitled (After Edward Weston), for which the artist simply made a copy print from a reproduction of a famous 1926 Edward Weston image (Torso of Neil) and claimed it as her own. It seems important to stress that appropriation as a tactic is not designed per se to tweak the noses of the Weston heirs, to **epater la bourgeoisie** or to test the limits of the First Amendment... And it should be said that Levine's **tabula rasa** appropriations frequently depend on (one) their captions and (two) a theoretical explanation that one must find elsewhere.¹⁷*

It should become apparent that the weaknesses of this view lay in a couple places. One, it is interesting to think that if the postmodern photographer truly believes that there is no way to create new images, how can they make more than one body of work, nonetheless any work. Secondly, this visual pinching leads to the abandonment of the viewer. The postmodernist is as affected by criticism and conceptual art post-World War II, as they are of the experience in "present-day life itself, as perceived through popular culture—TV, film, advertising, corporate logoism, PR, *People* magazine—in short, an entire industry of mass-media image making."¹⁸ But it is the masses that are ignored. The deconstruction of an image from within should see itself reintroduced as a product not only of its deconstruction, but also that of a mass-produced image. The politics of the appropriator are lost in his/her inability to solicit a response from the audience that does not experience them, and the limited artists, critics, and theorists that are able to.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.11



CONFLICT

III.

*I think...that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which others make.*¹⁹

For Plato, the artist is removed from the truth (knowledge) of that which he imitates. With the artist apart from any sense of invention and relying on imitation, it is shown that the artist is under the sway of a force that is not their own. Platonic truth is separate from the artist because of this decision to imitate. Plato's development of a hierarchy of truth is discussed in his *Republic*:

-(Plato) Well then, here are three beds: one existing in nature, which is made by God, as I think that we may say—for no one else can be the maker?

-No.

-There is another, which is the work of the carpenter?

-Yes.

-And the work of the painter the third?

*-Yes.*²⁰

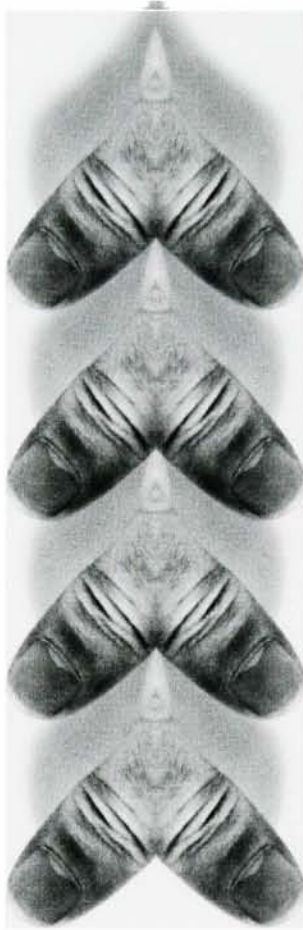
Though the framework for Plato's hierarchy of knowledge can be seen, where the artist is made separate from the Truth, it is apparent that Plato forgets to address one important factor: why the artist would want to imitate the bed? And though it seems a strange question to be asked, it gets at the core of Aristotle's origins of art.

Aristotle recognizes two causes for the creation of art, (one) the natural ability for man to be imitative and (two) experience of the world which man imitates. Not

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 14

¹⁹ Plato, p. 35

²⁰ Plato, p. 34



COMPETENT

only do these provide a foundation for art, they provide an understanding for the growth of human knowledge. Aristotle states that all primary learning is at first imitative and that it is “natural for all to delight in works of imitation.”²¹ In Aristotle’s text on the second derivation of art—experience—we find the basis for a philosophy on appropriation:

*The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things...for if one has not seen the thing before, one’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution...*²²

The key to the understanding of appropriation lies in the foundation of experience. The experience of the viewer and that of the artist are interrelated. And while joined at the hip, their synthesis is the creation of knowledge, experience, and the completion of the object. Consequently, a progression in consciousness occurs.

IV.

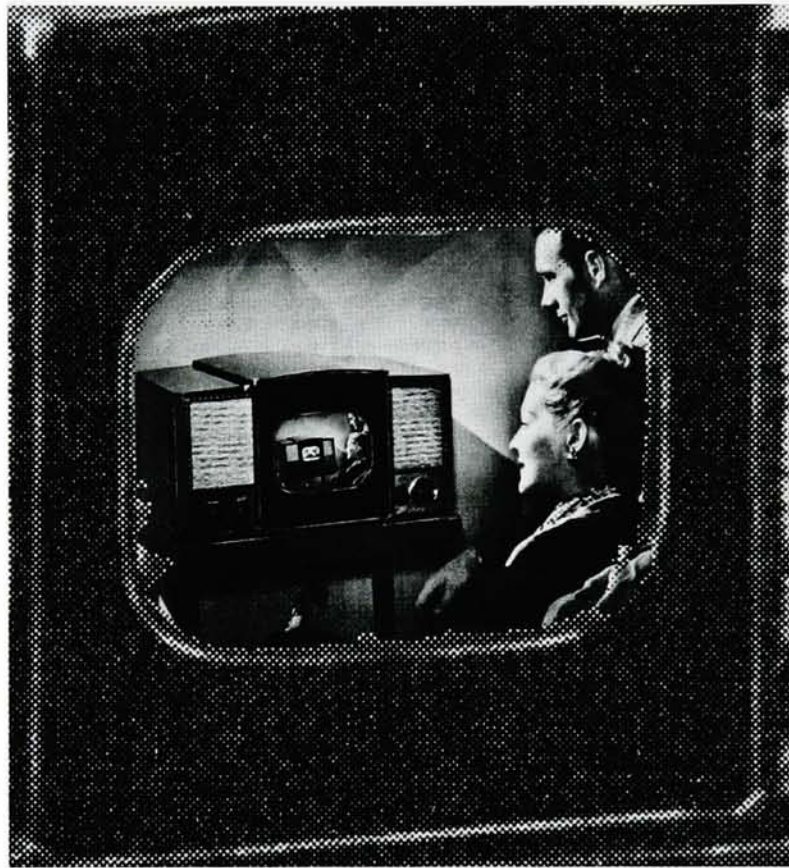
*The cook prepares food for the consumer and the measure of the value of what is prepared is found in consumption.*²³

John Dewey creates an interesting metaphor with which he relates the affiliation of the artist to the viewer. The act of cooking requires a specific level of repetition of experience within a recipe itself, often seeing the same recipe done differently for the same desired result. The recipe becomes the sum of his/her experiences: their knowledge of ingredients, formal tradition, and (most

²¹ Aristotle “Poetics,” from *Art and Its Significance*, p. 68

²² Ibid. p. 68

²³ John Dewey “Art as Experience,” from *Art and Its Significance*, p. 207



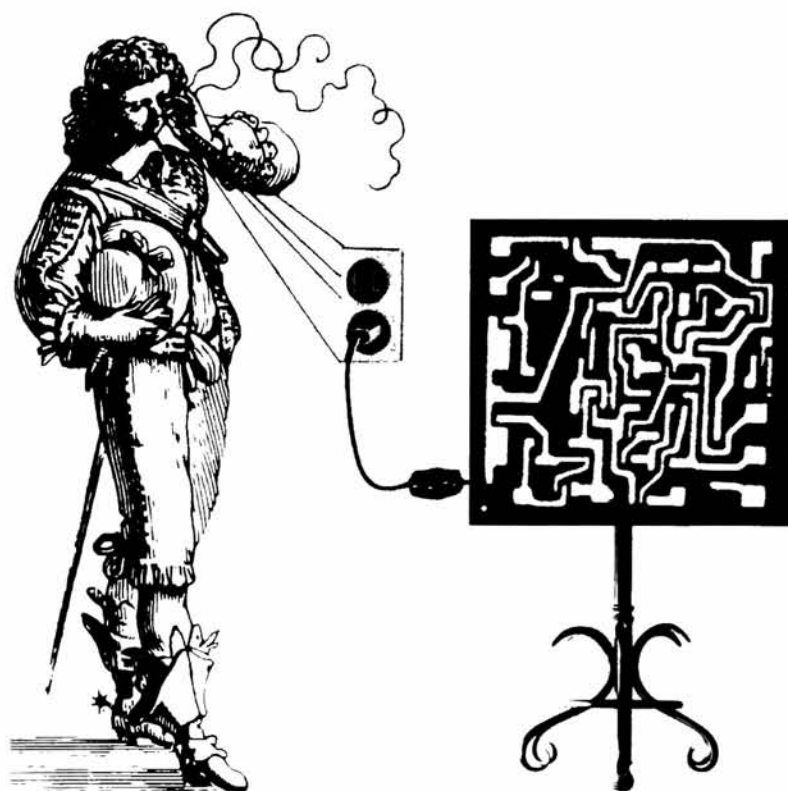
COMMUNITY

importantly) his existence as a consumer. The ability to create work as a member of a consuming populace is an important characteristic of the artist, best described as the capacity to hold a mirror in front of one person and then be able to turn it upon yourself. Since it is the fool who believes that their experience in the global village is truly unique, it is the artist who is looking to be original that gets lost. For it is the structure of a mediated global village which allows it to encompass a mass audience and make for a smaller world and a more unified experience—for, like the fallen tree in the woods, what is an experience that can not be communicated? And, if there is one, how would we ever be able to confirm this? *What is the piece of art that never gets seen?*

In mediated society, the value of experience is a measure of the masses, not the perception of the individual. Media seeks to complete itself within the pseudo-subjective domain of the conscious individual; with the understanding that the self is partaking in something separate yet equal to the collective. A thief will avoid a house with the television on because s/he assumes that s/he is not the only one watching. So the question now becomes: can the individual have a personal mediated experience? Logically, the answer is 'no.' Of course, there can be an unmediated experience in a mediated culture—that is, until it is communicated. A system of media is naturally formed upon the telling, reporting, or documenting of an experience because of media's inherent basis in communication. So back we are to the question, what is an experience that is not communicated?

The answer lies in the transcendence of an experience—interpretation. The individualized learning of what makes it an experience, separate from the continuum of Experience among the “live creatures and environing conditions...involved in the very process of living.”²⁴ Dewey wrote “we have an

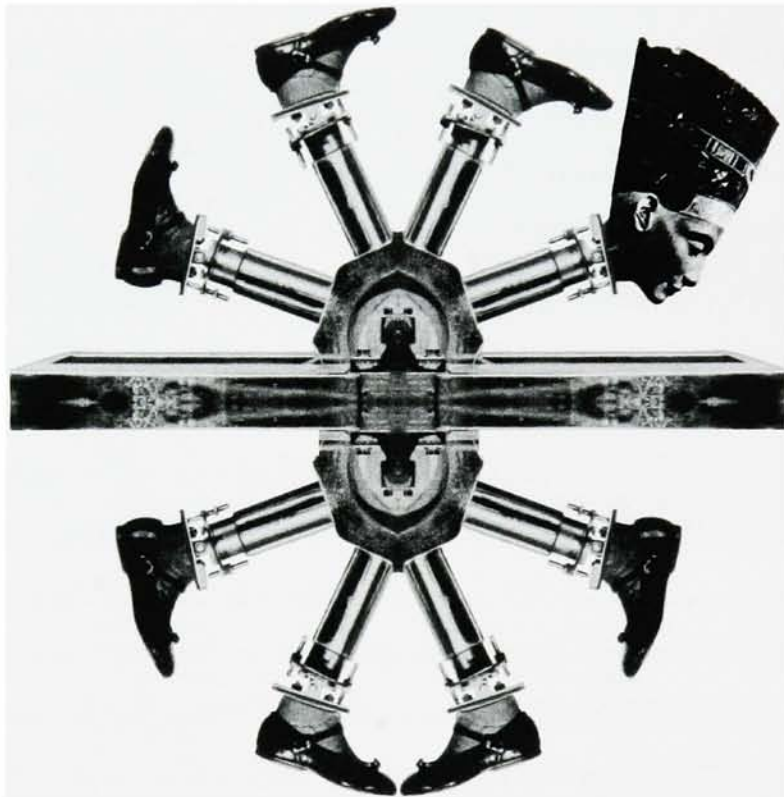
²⁴ Ibid. p. 205



COMPUTE

experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment.”²⁵ Upon its fulfillment, it takes its spot in the construction of the Experience continuum. This configuration takes the form of a fractal—structure made up of similar structure, which is made up of similar structure, and so on. Aristotle talked about how an experience—in the mind—led to knowledge and understanding. Experience produces a phenomenon that can be recalled, interpreted and reinterpreted. All this falls into a historical queue, based on the specific happenings of that time and space. Years later, a new lesson can be learned from the same experience. This lesson’s basis is the interpretation of more recent experiences being applied to the reinterpreted experience. It can be concluded, that which occurs after the temporality of an experience determines its ability to interpret the original material event. Thus the original is lost in this transcendence of the experience, which was only subject to its particular time and space. The broadcasting of a live event on television is a good example. The viewer is compelled to believe the subjectivity of the event—though the ability to interpret the original is lost through the medium that then becomes the subject of interpretation—not the ACTUAL event. The artist must now play their part as the “selector.” Presented with a continuum known as Experience, the artist must look for a transcendental experience to fill their “frame.” An artist has always had this “frame”—a device to segment their intent from the surroundings of the physical world, only to reintroduce it as something else. This also applies to mass media. With the advent of photography, this filtering of the world moved from the constant visual to the mechanical instant. It is the realism of the camera—more specifically, film—which drives the majority of media today; whether a supplement for the daily news or an illustration. While the words and the narrative inform the masses, a photograph grounds it in reality—something we recognize as existing only through experience. As a product of reality, the photograph can be considered real as well as a mediated experience from which

²⁵ Ibid. p. 205



CULTURE

one can draw interpretation in its moment historically; yet, it can be reinterpreted through shifts of experiential phenomena and the creation of new experience fractals. This allows it to transcend what it originally was—yet still is.

V.

*The Present is the moving Infiniti, the legitimate sphere of the Relative. Relativity seeks Adjustment; Adjustment is Art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings.*²⁶

The rise of appropriation in art of the twentieth can be related to the high level of appropriation that occurs with the rise of information technologies and the ensuing transformation of ritual. Keeping with McLuhan's "global village," the notion of creating experience through communal gathering has shifted to communal isolation. The mass media appropriates an event historically laden with ritual and converts it to an easily digestible form of consumption for the masses—not the individual. In a culture driven by mass media and production, it makes sense that the products of the culture are inherent to its artifice. In a society so driven by media and the pseudo-experience it provides, goods from that media should be allowed within the boundaries of the art produced under its domain. It is not only the experience of mass media that the artist gets to draw from, it is the artists' ability to reinterpret a mediated experience through their art—adjusting itself based on the newly acquired experiences that transcend original time and space.

²⁶ McLuhan, p.20: quoted from "The Book of Tea" by Okakura

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