

Richard Misrach, *Playboy #38 (Warhol)*, 1989–91.

In my reading of critical models in art and theory since 1960 I have stressed the minimalist genealogy of the neo-avant-garde. For the most part, artists and critics in this genealogy remained skeptical of realism and illusionism. In this way they continued the war of abstraction against representation by other means. As noted in chapter 2, minimalists like Donald Judd saw traces of realism in abstraction too, in the optical illusionism of its pictorial spaces, and expunged these last vestiges of the old order of idealist composition—an enthusiasm that led them to abandon painting altogether.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, this anti-illusionist posture was retained by many artists and critics involved in conceptual, institution-critical, body, performance, site-specific, feminist, and appropriation art. Even if realism and illusionism meant additional things in the 1970s and 1980s—the problematic pleasures of Hollywood cinema, for example, or the ideological blandishments of mass culture—they remained *bad* things.

Yet another trajectory of art since 1960 was committed to realism and/or illusionism: some pop art, most superrealism (also known as photorealism), some appropriation art. Often displaced by the minimalist genealogy in the critical literature (if not in the marketplace), this pop genealogy takes on new interest today, for it complicates the reductive notions of realism and illusionism

advanced by the minimalist genealogy—and in a way that illuminates contemporary reworkings of these categories as well. Our two basic models of representation miss the point of this pop genealogy almost entirely: that images are attached to referents, to iconographic themes or real things in the world, or, alternatively, that all images can do is represent other images, that all forms of representation (including realism) are auto-referential codes. Most accounts of postwar art based in photography divide somewhere along this line: the image as referential or as simulacral. This reductive either/or constrains such readings of this art, especially in the case of pop—a thesis that I will test initially against the “Death in America” images of Andy Warhol from the early 1960s, images that inaugurate the pop genealogy.<sup>2</sup>

It is no surprise that the *simulacral* reading of Warholian pop is advanced by critics associated with poststructuralism, for whom Warhol is pop and, more importantly, for whom the notion of the simulacral, crucial to the poststructuralist critique of representation, sometimes seems to depend on the example of Warhol as pop. “What pop art wants,” Roland Barthes writes in “That Old Thing, Art” (1980), “is to desymbolize the object,” to release the image from any deep meaning into simulacral surface.<sup>3</sup> In this process the author is also released: “The pop artist does not stand *behind* his work,” Barthes continues, “and he himself has no depth: he is merely the surface of his pictures, no signified, no intention, anywhere.”<sup>4</sup> With variations this simulacral reading of Warhol is performed by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard, for whom referential depth and subjective interiority are also victims of the sheer superficiality of pop. In “Pop—An Art of Consumption?” (1970), Baudrillard agrees that the object in pop “loses its symbolic meaning, its age-old anthropomorphic status”; but where Barthes and the others see an avant-gardist disruption of representation, Baudrillard sees an “end of subversion,” a “total integration” of the art work into the political economy of the commodity-sign.<sup>5</sup>

The *referential* view of Warholian pop is advanced by critics and historians who tie the work to different themes: the worlds of fashion, celebrity, gay culture, the Warhol Factory, and so on. Its most intelligent version is presented by Thomas Crow, who, in “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early War-



Andy Warhol, *National Velvet*, 1963.

hol" (1987), disputes the simulacral account of Warhol that the images are indiscriminate and the artist impassive. Underneath the glamorous surface of commodity fetishes and media stars Crow finds "the reality of suffering and death"; the tragedies of Marilyn, Liz, and Jackie in particular are said to prompt "straightforward expressions of feeling."<sup>6</sup> Here Crow finds not only a referential object *for* Warhol but an empathetic subject *in* Warhol, and here he locates the criticality of Warhol—not in an attack on "that old thing art" (as Barthes would have it) through an embrace of the simulacral commodity-sign (as Baudrillard would have it), but rather in an exposé of "complacent consumption" through "the brutal fact" of accident and mortality.<sup>7</sup> In this way Crow pushes Warhol beyond humanist sentiment to political engagement. "He was attracted to the open sores in American political life," Crow writes in a reading of the electric-chair images as agitprop against the death penalty and of the race-riot images as a testimonial for civil rights. "Far from a pure play of the signifier liberated from reference," Warhol belongs to the popular American tradition of "truth telling."<sup>8</sup>

This reading of Warhol as empathetic, even engagé, is a projection, but no more than the superficial, impassive Warhol, even though this projection was his own: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." Both camps make the Warhol they need, or get the Warhol they deserve; no doubt we all do. And neither projection is wrong. I find them equally persuasive. But they cannot both be right . . . or can they? Can we read the "Death in America" images as referential *and* simulacral, connected *and* disconnected, affective *and* affectless, critical *and* complacent? I think we must, and we can if we read them in a third way, in terms of *traumatic realism*.<sup>10</sup>

#### TRAUMATIC REALISM

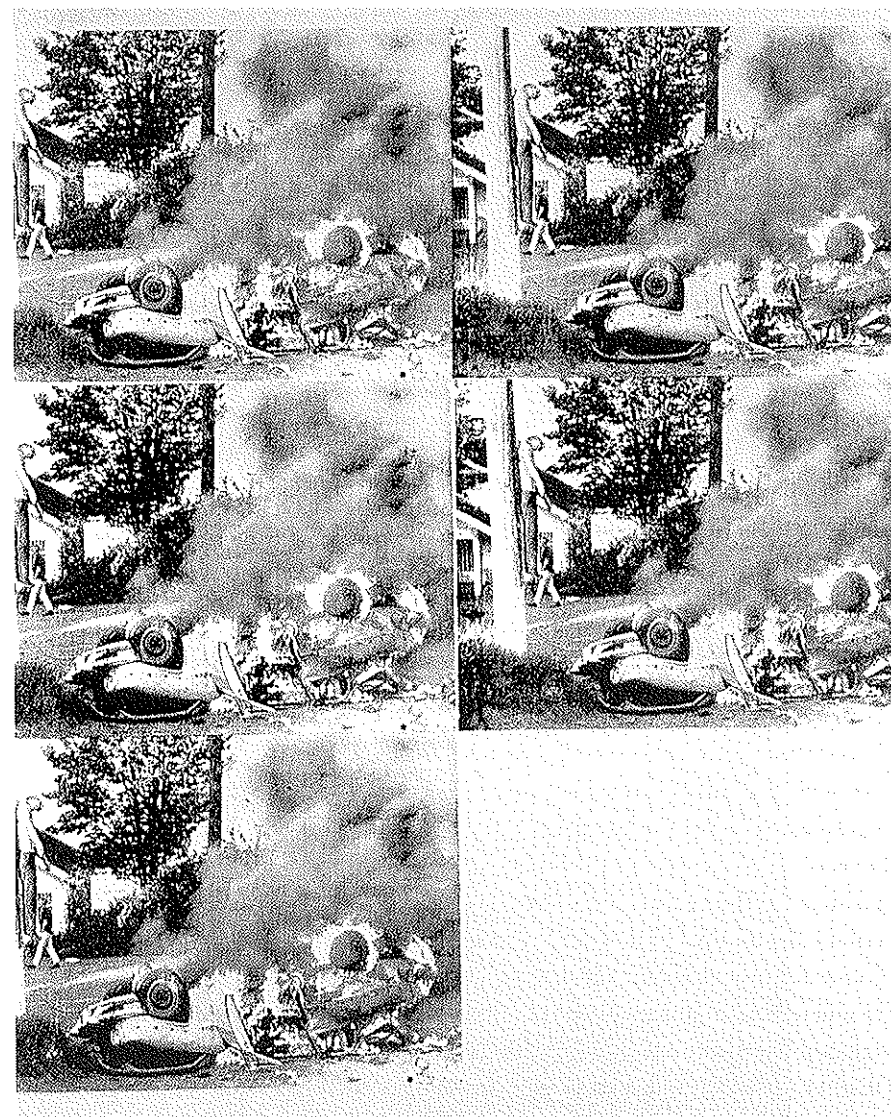
One way to develop this notion is through the famous motto of the Warholian persona: "I want to be a machine."<sup>11</sup> Usually this statement is taken to confirm the blankness of artist and art alike, but it may point less to a blank subject than

to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defense against this shock: I am a machine too, I make (or consume) serial product-images too, I give as good (or as bad) as I get.<sup>12</sup> "Someone said my life has dominated me," Warhol told the critic Gene Swenson in a celebrated interview of 1963. "I liked that idea."<sup>13</sup> Here Warhol has just confessed to the same lunch every day for the past twenty years (what else but Campbell's soup?). In context, then, the two statements read as a preemptive embrace of the compulsion to repeat put into play by a society of serial production and consumption. If you can't beat it, Warhol suggests, join it. More, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; that is, you might reveal its automatism, even its autism, through your own excessive example. Used strategically in dada, this capitalist nihilism was performed ambiguously by Warhol, and, as we saw in chapter 4, many artists have played it out since.<sup>14</sup> (Of course this is a performance: there is a subject "behind" this figure of nonsubjectivity that presents it *as* a figure; otherwise the shocked subject is an oxymoron, for there is no subject self-present in shock, let alone in trauma. Yet the fascination of Warhol is that one is never certain about this subject behind: is anybody home, inside the automaton?)

These notions of shocked subjectivity and compulsive repetition reposition the role of *repetition* in the Warholian persona and images. "I like boring things" is another famous motto of this quasi-autistic persona. "I like things to be exactly the same over and over again."<sup>15</sup> In *POPism* (1980) Warhol glosses this embrace of boredom, repetition, domination: "I don't want it to be essentially the same—I want it to be *exactly* the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel."<sup>16</sup> Here repetition is both a draining of significance and a defending against affect, and this strategy guided Warhol as early as the 1963 interview: "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect."<sup>17</sup> Clearly this is one function of repetition, at least as understood by Freud: to repeat a traumatic event (in actions, in dreams, in images) in order to integrate it into a psychic economy, a symbolic order. But the Warhol repetitions are not restorative in this way; they are not about a

mastery of trauma. More than a patient release from the object in mourning, they suggest an obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy. Think of all the *Marilyns* alone, of the cropping, coloring, crimping of these images: as Warhol works over this image of love, a melancholic “wish-psychosis” seems in play.<sup>18</sup> But this analysis is not quite right either. For one thing the Warhol repetitions not only reproduce traumatic effects; they also produce them. Somehow in these repetitions, then, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance and an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect and a producing of it.

Here I should make explicit the theoretical model I have implicated so far. In the early 1960s Jacques Lacan was concerned to define the real in terms of trauma. Titled “The Unconscious and Repetition,” this seminar was roughly contemporaneous with the “Death in America” images (it ran in early 1964).<sup>19</sup> But unlike the theory of simulacra in Baudrillard and company, the theory of trauma in Lacan is not influenced by pop. It is, however, informed by surrealism, which here has its deferred effect on Lacan, an early associate of the surrealists, and below I will intimate that pop is related to surrealism as a traumatic realism (certainly my reading of Warhol is a surrealist one). In this seminar Lacan defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated. “*Wiederholen*,” Lacan writes in etymological reference to Freud on repetition, “is not *Reproduzieren*” (50); repetition is not reproduction. This can stand as an epitome of my argument too: repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also points to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject—between the perception and the consciousness of a subject touched by an image. In an allusion to Aristotle on accidental causality, Lacan calls this traumatic point the *tuché*; in *Camera Lucida* (1980) Barthes calls it the *punctum*.<sup>20</sup> “It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me,” Barthes writes. “It is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless



Andy Warhol, *White Burning Car III*, 1963.

already there.” “It is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash.”<sup>21</sup> This confusion about the location of the rupture, *tuché*, or *punctum* is a confusion of subject and world, inside and outside. It is an aspect of trauma; indeed, it may be this confusion that *is* traumatic. (“Where is Your Rupture?,” Warhol asks in a 1960 painting based on a newspaper advertisement, with several arrows aimed at the crotch of a female torso.)

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes is concerned with straight photographs, so he locates the *punctum* in details of content. This is rarely the case in Warhol. Yet there is a *punctum* for me (Barthes stipulates that it is a personal effect) in the indifference of the passerby in *White Burning Car III* (1963). This indifference to the crash victim impaled on the telephone pole is bad enough, but its repetition is *galling*, and this points to the general operation of the *punctum* in Warhol. It works less through content than through technique, especially through the “floating flashes” of the silkscreen process, the slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking, repeating and coloring of the images. To take another instance, a *punctum* arises for me not from the slumped woman in the top image in *Ambulance Disaster* (1963) but from the obscene tear that effaces her head in the bottom image. In both instances, just as the *punctum* in Gerhard Richter lies less in details than in the pervasive blurring of the image, so the *punctum* in Warhol lies less in details than in this repetitive “popping” of the image.<sup>22</sup>

These pops, such as a slipping of register or a washing in color, serve as visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real. “What is repeated,” Lacan writes, “is always something that occurs . . . as if by chance” (54). So it is with these pops: they seem accidental, but they also appear repetitive, automatic, even technological (the relation between accident and technology, crucial to the discourse of shock, is a great Warhol subject).<sup>23</sup> In this way he elaborates on our optical unconscious, a term introduced by Walter Benjamin to describe the subliminal effects of modern image technologies. Benjamin developed this notion in the early 1930s, in response to photography and film; Warhol updates it thirty years later, in response to the postwar society of the spectacle, of mass media and commodity-signs.<sup>24</sup> In these early images we see what it looks like to dream in the age of television, *Life*, and *Time*—or rather



Gerhard Richter, *Unde Rudi*, 1965.

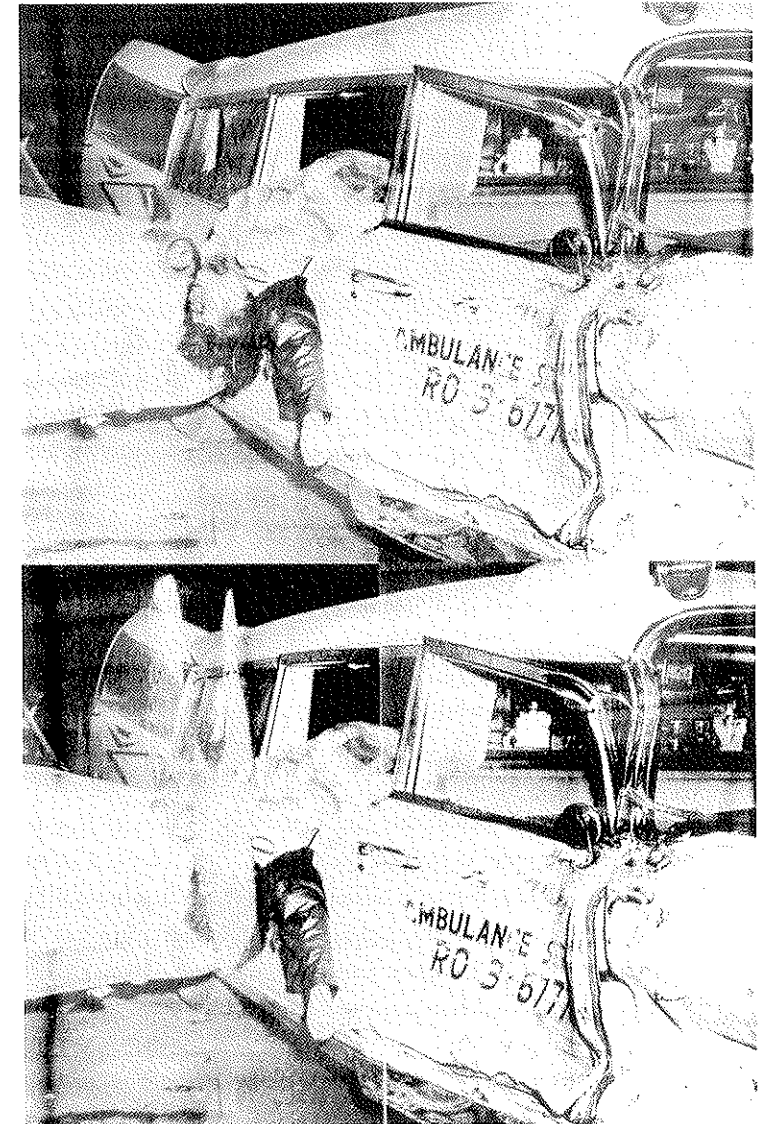
what it looks like to nightmare as shock victims who prepare for disasters that have already come, for Warhol selects moments when this spectacle cracks (the JFK assassination, the Monroe suicide, racist attacks, car wrecks), but cracks only to expand.

Thus the *punctum* in Warhol is not strictly private or public.<sup>25</sup> Nor is the content trivial: a white woman slumped from a wrecked ambulance, or a black man attacked by a police dog, is a shock. But, again, this first order of shock is screened by the repetition of the image, even though this repetition may also produce a second order of trauma, here at the level of technique, where the *punctum* breaks through the screen and allows the real to poke through.<sup>26</sup> The real, Lacan puns, is *traumatic*, and I noted that the tear in *Ambulance Disaster* is such a hole (*trou*) for me, though what loss is figured there I cannot say. Through these pokes or pops we seem almost to touch the real, which the repetition of the images at once distances and rushes toward us. (Sometimes the coloring of the images has this strange double effect as well.)<sup>27</sup>

In this way different kinds of repetition are in play in Warhol: repetitions that fix on the traumatic real, that screen it, that produce it. And this multiplicity makes for the paradox not only of images that are both affective and affectless, but also of viewers that are neither integrated (which is the ideal of most modern aesthetics: the subject composed in contemplation) nor dissolved (which is the effect of much popular culture: the subject given over to the schizo intensities of the commodity-sign). "I never fall apart," Warhol remarked in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975), "because I never fall together."<sup>28</sup> Such is the subject-effect of his work as well, and it resonates in art that elaborates on pop: again, in some surrealism, some appropriation art, and some contemporary work involved in illusionism—a category, like realism, that it invites us to rethink.

#### TRAUMATIC ILLUSIONISM

In his 1964 seminar on the real Lacan distinguishes between *Wiederholung* and *Wiederkehr*. The first is the repetition of the repressed as symptom or signifier,



Andy Warhol, *Ambulance Disaster*, 1963.



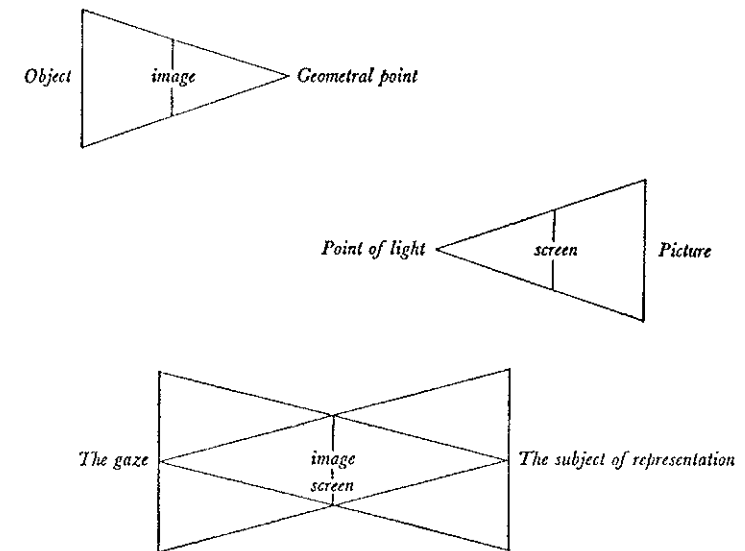
which Lacan terms the *automaton*, also in allusion to Aristotle. The second is the return discussed above: the return of a traumatic encounter with the real, a thing that resists the symbolic, that is not a signifier at all, which again Lacan calls the *tuché*. The first, the repetition of the symptom, can contain or screen the second, the return of the traumatic real, which thus exists beyond the *automaton* of the symptoms, beyond “the insistence of the signs” (53–54), indeed beyond the pleasure principle.<sup>29</sup> Above I related these two kinds of recurrence to the two sorts of repetition in the Warholian image: a repeating of an image to screen a traumatic real, which is nonetheless returned, accidentally and/or obliquely, in this very screening. Here I will venture a further analogy in relation to surrealist art: sometimes its illusionism is so excessive as to appear anxious—anxious to cover up a *traumatic* real—but this anxiety cannot help but indicate this real as well.<sup>30</sup> Such analogies between psychoanalytic discourse and visual art are worth little if nothing mediates the two, but here both the theory and the art relate repetition and the real to visuality and the gaze.

Roughly contemporaneous with the spread of pop and the rise of surrealism, the Lacan seminar on the gaze follows the seminar on the real; it is much cited but little understood. There may be a male gaze, and capitalist spectacle is oriented to a masculinist subject, but such arguments are not supported by *this* seminar of Lacan, for whom the gaze is not embodied in a subject, at least not in the first instance. To an extent like Jean-Paul Sartre, Lacan distinguishes between the look (or the eye) and the gaze, and to an extent like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he locates this gaze *in the world*.<sup>31</sup> As with language in Lacan, then, so with the gaze: it *preexists* the subject, who, “looked at from all sides,” is but a “stain” in “the spectacle of the world” (72, 75). Thus positioned, the subject tends to feel the gaze as a threat, as if it queried him or her; and so it is, according to Lacan, that “the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration” (77).

More than Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, then, Lacan challenges the old privilege of the subject in sight and self-consciousness (the *I see myself seeing myself* that grounds the phenomenological subject) as well as the old mastery of the subject in representation (“this *belong to me* aspect of representations, so

reminiscent of property,” that empowers the Cartesian subject [81]). Lacan mortifies this subject in the famous anecdote of the sardine can that, afloat on the sea and aglint in the sun, seems to look at the young Lacan in the fishing boat “at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated” (95). Thus seen as (s)he sees, pictured as (s)he pictures, the Lacanian subject is fixed in a double position, and this leads Lacan to superimpose on the usual cone of vision that emanates from the subject another cone that emanates *from the object*, at the point of light, which he calls the gaze.

The first cone is familiar from Renaissance treatises on perspective: the subject is addressed as the master of the object arrayed and focused as an image for him or her positioned at a geometral point of viewing. But, Lacan adds immediately, “I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture” (96).<sup>32</sup> That is, the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze: thus the superimposition of the two cones, with the object also at the point of the light (the gaze), the subject also at the point of the picture, and the image also in line with the screen.



The meaning of this last term is obscure. I understand it to refer to the cultural reserve of which each image is one instance. Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen *mediates* the object-gaze for the subject, but it also *protects* the subject from this object-gaze. That is, it captures the gaze, "pulsatile, dazzling and spread out" (89), and *tames* it in an image.<sup>33</sup> This last formulation is crucial. For Lacan animals are caught in the gaze of the world; they are only on display there. Humans are not so reduced to this "imaginary capture" (103), for we have access to the symbolic—in this case to the screen as the site of picture making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze. "Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze," Lacan states. "The screen is here the locus of mediation" (107). In this way the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light. Otherwise it would be impossible, for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real.

Thus, even as the gaze may trap the subject, the subject may tame the gaze. This is the function of the screen: to negotiate a *laying down* of the gaze as in a laying down of a weapon. Note the atavistic tropes of preying and taming, battling and negotiating; both gaze and subject are given strange agencies, and they are positioned in paranoid ways.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Lacan imagines the gaze not only as maleficent but as violent, a force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed first.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when urgent, picture making is apotropaic: its gestures arrest this arresting of the gaze before the fact. When "Apollonian" (101), picture making is placating: its perfections pacify the gaze, "relax" the viewer from its grip (this Nietzschean term again projects the gaze as Dionysian, full of desire and death). Such is aesthetic contemplation according to Lacan: some art may attempt a *trompe-l'oeil*, a tricking of the eye, but all art aspires to a *dompte-regard*, a taming of the gaze.

Below I will suggest that some contemporary work refuses this age-old mandate to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real. *It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition.*

To this end it moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn. For the moment, however, I want to remain with the categories of *trompe-l'oeil* and *dompte-regard*, for some post-pop art develops illusionist trickings and tamings in ways that are distinct from realism not only in the old referential sense but in the traumatic sense outlined above.<sup>36</sup>

In his seminar on the gaze Lacan retells the classical tale of the *trompe-l'oeil* contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Zeuxis paints grapes in a way that lures birds, but Parrhasios paints a veil in a way that deceives Zeuxis, who asks to see what lies behind the veil and concedes the contest in embarrassment. For Lacan the story concerns the difference between the imaginary captures of lured animal and deceived human. Verisimilitude may have little to do with either capture: what looks like grapes to one species may not to another; the important thing is the appropriate sign for each. More significant here, the animal is lured in relation to the surface, whereas the human is deceived in relation to *what lies behind*. And behind the picture, for Lacan, is the gaze, the object, the real, with which "the painter as creator . . . sets up a dialogue" (112–13). Thus a perfect illusion is not possible, and, even if it were possible it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented; indeed, it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object (the little bit of the subject lost to the subject, the *objet a*). "This other thing [behind the picture and beyond the pleasure principle] is the *petit a*, around which there revolves a combat of which *trompe-l'oeil* is the soul" (112).

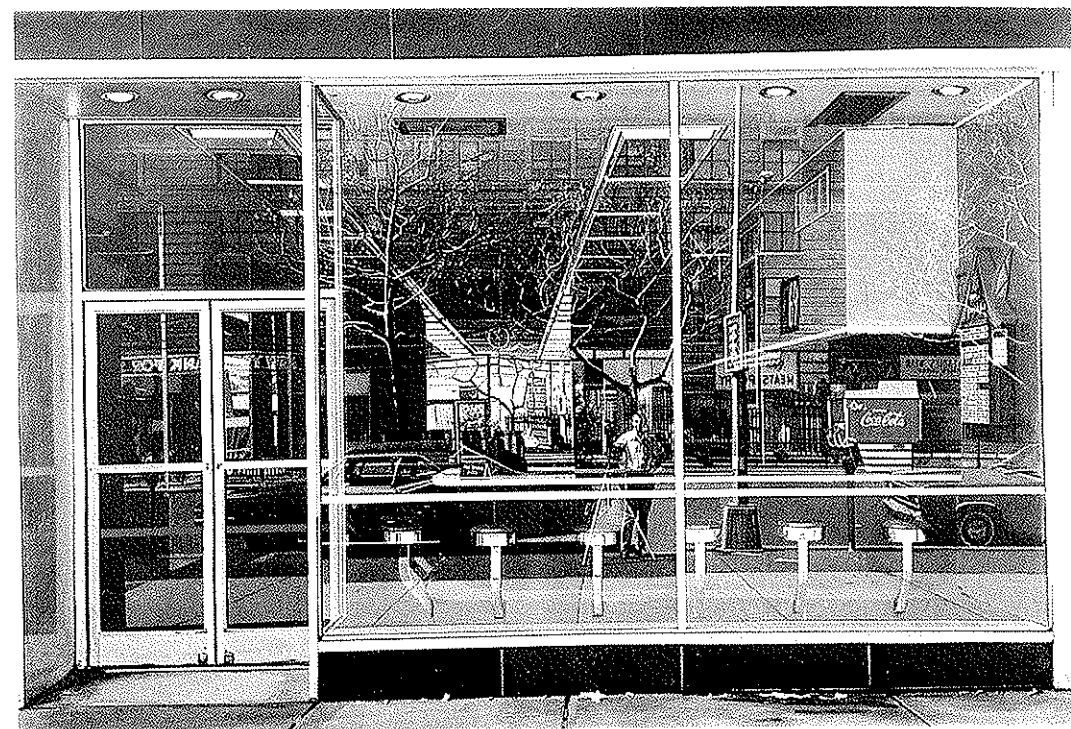
As an art of the *trompe-l'oeil*, superrealism is also involved in this combat, but superrealism is more than a tricking of the eye. It is a subterfuge *against* the real, an art pledged not only to pacify the real but to seal it behind surfaces, to embalm it in appearances. (Of course this is not its self-understanding: superrealism seeks to deliver the reality of appearance. But to do so, I want to suggest, is to delay the real—or, again, to seal it.) Superrealism attempts this sealing in three ways at least. The first is to represent apparent reality as a coded *sign*. Often manifestly based on a photograph or a postcard, this superrealism shows the real as already absorbed into the symbolic (as in the early work of Malcolm



Morley). The second is to reproduce apparent reality as a fluid *surface*. More illusionist than the first, this superrealism *dereals* the real with simulacral effects (related to the pop paintings of James Rosenquist, this category includes Audrey Flack and Don Eddy among others). The third is to represent apparent reality as a visual *conundrum* with reflections and refractions of many sorts. In this superrealism, which partakes of the first two, the structuring of the visual is strained to the point of implosion, of collapse onto the viewer. In front of these paintings one may feel under the gaze, looked at from many sides: thus the impossible double perspective that Richard Estes contrives in *Union Square* (1985), which converges on us more than extends from us, or his equally impossible *Double Self-Portrait* (1976), in which we look at a diner window in complete perplexity as to what is inside and what is outside, what is in front of us and what is behind. If *Union Square* pressures a Renaissance paradigm of linear perspective like *The Ideal City*, *Double Self-Portrait* pressures a baroque paradigm of pictorial reflexivity like *Las Meninas* (it is no surprise that, in the move to use lines and surfaces to tie up and smother the real, superrealists would turn to the baroque intricacies of such artists as Velazquez).

In these paintings Estes transports his historical models to a commercial strip and a storefront in New York; and indeed, as with pop, it is difficult to imagine superrealism apart from the tangled lines and lurid surfaces of capitalist spectacle: the narcissistic seduction of shop windows, the luscious sheen of sports cars—in short, the sex appeal of the commodity-sign, with the commodity feminized and the feminine commodified in a way that, even more than pop, superrealism celebrates rather than questions. As reproduced in this art, these lines and surfaces often distend, fold back, and so flatten pictorial depth. But do they have the same effect on *psychic* depth? In a comparison of pop and superrealism with surrealism Fredric Jameson has claimed as much:

We need only juxtapose the mannequin, as a [surrealist] symbol, with the photographic objects of pop art, the Campbell's soup can, the pictures of Marilyn Monroe, or with the visual curiosities of op art; we need only exchange, for that environment of small work-



Richard Estes, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1976.

shops and store counters, for the *marché aux puces* and the stalls in the streets, the gasoline stations along American superhighways, the glossy photographs in the magazines, or the cellophane paradise of an American drugstore, in order to realize that the objects of surrealism are gone without a trace. Henceforth, in what we may now call postindustrial capitalism, the products with which we are furnished are utterly without depth: their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy.<sup>37</sup>

Here Jameson marks a shift in production and consumption that affects art and subjectivity as well, but is it a "historical *break* of an unexpectedly absolute kind"?<sup>38</sup> These old objects may be displaced (already for the surrealists they were attractively outmoded), but they are not gone without a trace. Certainly the *subjects* related to these objects have not disappeared; the epochs of the subject, let alone of the unconscious, are not so punctual.<sup>39</sup> In short, superrealism retains a subterranean connection to surrealism in the subjective register, and not only because both play on sexual and commodity fetishisms.

Georges Bataille once remarked that his kind of surrealism involved the *sub* more than the *sur*, the materialist low more than the idealist high (which he associated with André Breton).<sup>40</sup> My kind of surrealism involves the *sub* more than the *sur* too, but in the sense of the real that lies below, which this surrealism seeks to tap, to let erupt, as if by chance (which again is the mode of appearance of repetition).<sup>41</sup> Superrealism is also involved with this real that lies below, but as a *superrealism* it is concerned to stay on top of it, to keep it down. Unlike surrealism, then, it wants to conceal more than to reveal this real; thus it lays down its layers of signs and surfaces drawn from the commodity world not only against representational depth but also against the traumatic real. Yet this anxious move to smooth over this real points to it nonetheless; superrealism remains an art of "the eye as made desperate by the gaze" (116), and the desperation shows. As a result its illusion fails not only as a tricking of the eye but as a taming of the gaze, a protecting against the traumatic real. That is, it fails *not* to remind us of the real, and in this way it is traumatic too: a *traumatic illusionism*.

## THE RETURN OF THE REAL

If the real is repressed in superrealism, it also returns there, and this return disrupts the superrealist surface of signs. Yet as this disruption is inadvertent, so is the little disturbance of capitalist spectacle that it may effect. This disturbance is not so inadvertent in appropriation art, which, especially in the simulacral version associated with Richard Prince, can resemble superrealism with its surfeit of signs, fluidity of surfaces, and enveloping of the viewer. Yet the differences between the two are more important than the similarities. Both arts use photography, but superrealism exploits some photographic values (like illusionism) in the interests of painting and excludes others (like reproducibility) *not* in these interests, indeed that threaten such painterly values as the unique image. Appropriation art, on the other hand, uses photographic reproducibility in a questioning of painterly uniqueness, as in the early copies of modernist masters by Sherrie Levine. At the same time, it either pushes photographic illusionism to an implosive point, as in the early rephotographs of Prince, or turns round on this illusionism to question the documentary truth of the photograph, the referential value of representation, as in the early photo-texts of Barbara Kruger. Thus the vaunted critique of representation in this postmodernist art: a critique of artistic categories and documentary genres, of media myths and sexual stereotypes.

So, too, the two arts position the viewer differently: in its elaboration of illusion superrealism invites the viewer to revel almost schizophrenically in its surfaces, whereas in its exposure of illusion appropriation art asks the viewer to look through its surfaces critically. Yet sometimes the two cross here, as when appropriation art envelops the viewer in a superrealist way.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, the two approach one another in this respect: in superrealism reality is presented as overwhelmed by appearance, while in appropriation art it is presented as constructed in representation. (Thus, for instance, the Marlboro images of Prince picture the reality of North American nature through the myth of the cowboy West.) This constructionist vision of reality is the basic position of postmodernist art, at least in its poststructuralist guise, and it is paralleled by the

basic position of feminist art, at least in its psychoanalytic guise: that the subject is dictated by the symbolic order. Taken together, these two positions have led many artists to focus on the image-screen (I refer again to the Lacanian diagram of visuality), often to the neglect of the real on the one side and sometimes to the neglect of the subject on the other. Thus, in the early copies of Levine for example, the image-screen is almost all there is; it is not much troubled by the real nor much altered by the subject (artist and viewer are given little agency in this work).

Yet the relation of appropriation art to the image-screen is not so simple: it can be critical of the screen, even hostile to it, and fascinated by it, almost enamored of it. And sometimes this ambivalence suggests the real; that is, as appropriation art works to expose the illusions of representation, it can poke through the image-screen. Consider the sunset images of Prince, which are rephotographs of vacation advertisements from magazines, familiar pictures of young lovers and cute kids on the beach, with the sun and the sea offered as so many commodities. Prince manipulates the superrealist look of these ads to the point that they are *derealized* in the sense of appearance but *realized* in the sense of desire. In several images a man thrusts a woman out of the water, but the flesh of each appears burned—as if in an erotic passion that is also a fatal irradiation. Here the *imaginary* pleasure of the vacation scenes goes bad, becomes obscene, displaced by a *real* ecstasy of desire shot through with death, a *jouissance* that lurks behind the pleasure principle of the ad image, indeed of the image-screen in general.<sup>43</sup>

*This shift in conception—from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma—may be definitive in contemporary art, let alone in contemporary theory, fiction, and film.* For with this shift in conception has come a shift in practice, which I want to graph here, again in relation to the Lacanian diagram of visuality, as a shift in focus from the image-screen to the object-gaze. This shift can be traced in the work of Cindy Sherman, who has done as much any artist to prepare it. Indeed, if we divide her work into three rough groups, it seems to move across the three main positions of the Lacanian diagram.



Richard Prince, *Untitled (sunset)*, 1981.

Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, 1989.

In the early work of 1975–82, from the film stills through the rear projections to the centerfolds and the color tests, Sherman evokes the subject under the gaze, the subject-as-picture, which is also the principal site of other feminist work in early appropriation art. Her subjects see, of course, but they are much more *seen*, captured by the gaze. Often, in the film stills and the centerfolds, this gaze seems to come from another subject, with whom the viewer may be implicated; sometimes, in the rear projections, it seems to come from the spectacle of the world. Yet often, too, this gaze seems to come from within. Here Sherman shows her female subjects as self-surveyed, not in phenomenological immanence (*I see myself seeing myself*) but in psychological estrangement (*I am not what I imagined myself to be*). Thus in the distance between the made-up young woman and her mirrored face in *Untitled Film Still #2* (1977), Sherman captures the gap between imagined and actual body images that yawns in each of us, the gap of (mis)recognition where fashion and entertainment industries operate every day and night.

In the middle work of 1987–90, from the fashion photographs through the fairy-tale illustrations and the art-history portraits to the disaster pictures, Sherman moves to the image-screen, to its repertoire of representations. (I speak of focus only: she addresses the image-screen in the early work too, and the subject-as-picture hardly disappears in this middle work.) The fashion and art-history series take up two files from the image-screen that have affected self-fashionings, present and past, profoundly. Here Sherman parodies vanguard design with a long runway of fashion victims, and pillories art history with a long gallery of butt-ugly aristocrats (in ersatz Renaissance, baroque, rococo, and neoclassical types, with allusions to Raphael, Caravaggio, Fragonard, and Ingres). The play turns perverse when, in some fashion photographs, the gap between imagined and actual body images becomes psychotic (one or two sitters seem to have no ego awareness at all) and when, in some art-history photographs, deidealization is pushed to the point of desublimation: with scarred sacks for breasts and funky carbuncles for noses, these bodies break down the upright lines of proper representation, indeed of proper subjecthood.<sup>44</sup>

This turn to the grotesque is marked in the fairy-tale and disaster images,

some of which show horrific accidents of birth and freaks of nature (a young woman with a pig snout, a doll with the head of a dirty old man). Here, as often in horror movies and bedtime stories alike, horror means, first and foremost, horror of maternity, of the maternal body made strange, even repulsive, in repression. This body is the primary site of the *abject* as well, a category of (non)being defined by Julia Kristeva as neither subject nor object, but before one is the former (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the latter (as a corpse given over to objecthood).<sup>45</sup> These extreme conditions are suggested by some disaster scenes, suffused as they are with signifiers of menstrual blood and sexual discharge, vomit and shit, decay and death. Such images evoke the body turned inside out, the subject literally abjected, thrown out. But they also evoke the outside turned in, the subject-as-picture invaded by the object-gaze (e.g., *Untitled #153*). At this point some images pass beyond the abject, which is often tied to substances and meanings, not only toward the *informe*, a condition described by Bataille where significant form dissolves because the fundamental distinction between figure and ground, self and other, is lost, but also toward the *obscene*, where the object-gaze is presented as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen.<sup>46</sup>

This is the domain of the work after 1991 as well, the civil war and sex pictures, which are punctuated by close-ups of simulated damaged and/or dead body parts and sexual and/or excretory body parts respectively. Sometimes the screen seems so torn that the object-gaze not only invades the subject-as-picture but overwhelms it. And in a few disaster and civil war images we sense what it is to occupy the impossible third position in the Lacanian diagram, to behold the pulsatile gaze, even to touch the obscene object, without a screen for protection. In one image (*Untitled #190*) Sherman gives this evil eye a horrific visage of its own.

In this scheme of things the impulse to erode the subject and to tear at the screen has driven Sherman from the early work, where the subject is caught in the gaze, through the middle work, where it is invaded by the gaze, to the recent work, where it is obliterated by the gaze, only to return as disjunct doll parts. But this double attack on subject and screen is not hers alone; it occurs



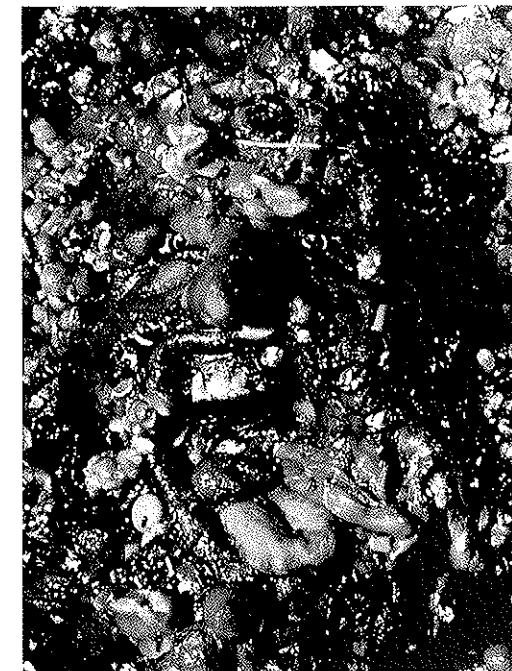
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #2*, 1977.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #153*, 1985.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #183*, 1988.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #190*, 1989.



on several fronts in contemporary art, where it is waged, almost openly, in the service of the real.

This work evokes the real in different ways; I will begin with two approaches that bear on illusionism. The first involves an illusionism practiced less in pictures than with objects (if it looks back to surrealism, then, it is to the figures of Duane Hanson and John de Andrea). This art does intentionally what some surrealist and appropriation art did inadvertently, which is to push illusionism to the point of the real. Here illusionism is employed not to cover up the real with simulacral surfaces but to uncover it in uncanny things, which are often put into performances as well. To this end some artists estrange everyday objects related to the body (as with the sealed urinals and stretched sinks by Robert Gober, the table of still-life objects that refuse to be still by Charles Ray, and the quasi-athletic apparatuses developed as performance props by Matthew Barney). Other artists estrange childhood objects that return from the past, often distorted in scale or proportion, with a touch of the eerie (as in the little trucks or massive rats of Katarina Fritsch) or the pathetic (as in the Salvation Army stuffed animals of Mike Kelley), of the melancholic (as in the dead sparrows with knitted coats by Annette Messager) or the monstrous (as in the crib become a psychotic cage by Gober). Yet, however provocative, this illusionist approach to the real can lapse into a coded surrealism.

The second approach runs opposite to the first but to the same end: it rejects illusionism, indeed any sublimation of the object-gaze, in an attempt to evoke the real as such. This is the primary realm of abject art, which is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body. Often, as in the aggressive-depressive sculpture of Kiki Smith, this body is maternal, and it serves as the medium of an ambivalent child subject who damages and restores it in turn: in *Trough* (1990), for example, this body lies sectioned, an empty vessel, while in *Womb* (1986) it seems a solid object, almost autonomous, even autogenetic.<sup>47</sup> Often, too, the body appears as a direct double of the violated subject, whose parts are displayed as residues of violence and/or traces of trauma: the booted legs by Gober that extend, up or down, as if cut at the wall, sometimes with

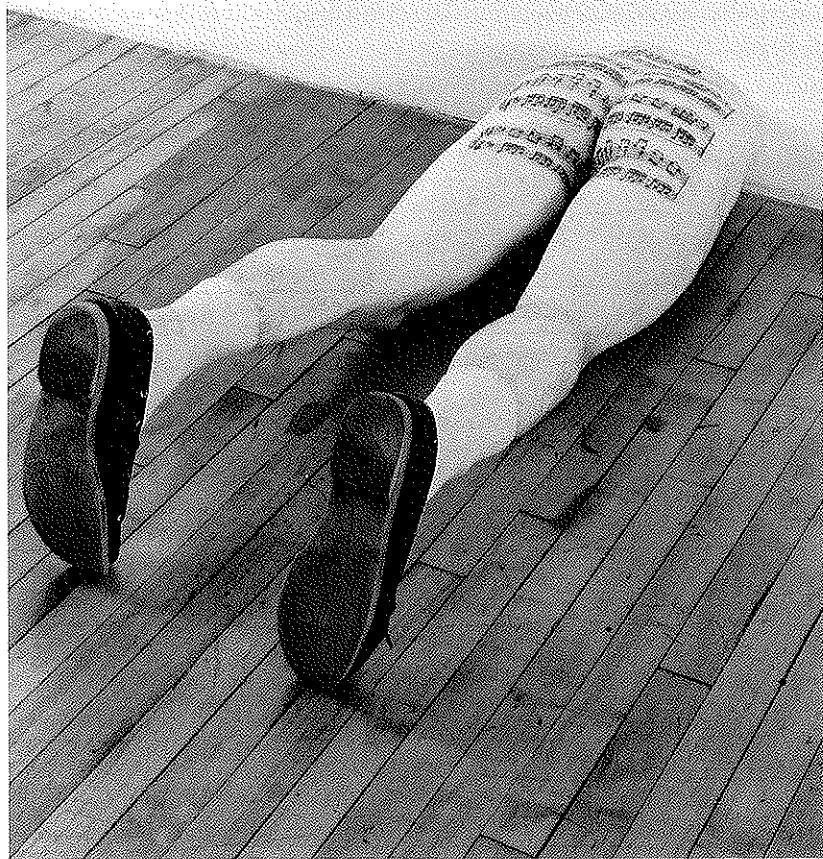
the thighs planted with candles or the butt tattooed with music, are thus humiliated (often in a hilarious way). The strange ambition of this second approach is to tease out the trauma of the subject, with the apparent calculation that, if its lost *objet a* cannot be reclaimed, at least the wound that it left behind can be probed (in the Greek *trauma* means "wound").<sup>48</sup> However, this approach has its dangers too, for the probing of the wound can lapse into a coded expressionism (as in the expressive desublimation of the diaristic art of Sue Williams and others) or a coded realism (as in the bohemian romance of the photography *verité* of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson, and others). And yet this very problem can be provocative, for it raises the question, crucial to abject art, of the possibility of an obscene representation—that is, of a representation without a scene that stages the object for the viewer. Might this be one difference between the obscene, where the object, without a scene, comes too close to the viewer, and the pornographic, where the object is staged for the viewer who is thus distanced enough to be its voyeur?<sup>49</sup>

#### THE ARTIFICE OF ABJECTION

According to the canonical definition of Kristeva, the abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I (but what is this primordial I that expels in the first place?). It is a fantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it—too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body (again the privileged realm of the abject) and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, "where meaning collapses"; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society alike.<sup>50</sup>

This only skims the surface of the abject, crucial as it is to the construction of subjectivity, racist, homophobic, and otherwise.<sup>51</sup> Here I will note only the ambiguities of the notion, for the cultural-political valence of abject art depends

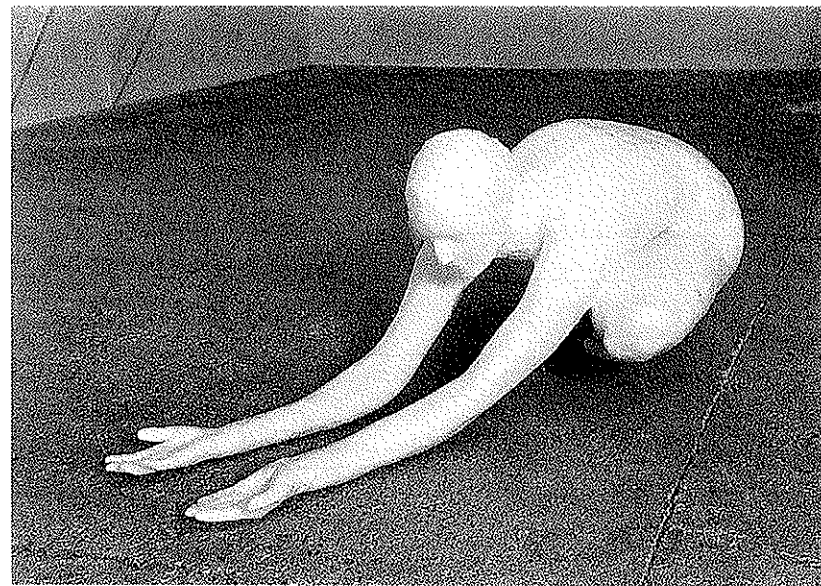




Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1990.



Robert Gober, *Slanted Playpen*, 1987.



Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1992.

on these ambiguities, on how they are decided (or not). Some are familiar by now. Can the abject be represented at all? If it is opposed to culture, can it be exposed in culture? If it is unconscious, can it be made conscious and remain abject? In other words, can there be a conscientious abjection, or is this all there can be? Can abject art ever escape an instrumental, indeed moralistic, use of the abject? (In a sense this is the other part of the question: can there be an evocation of the obscene that is not pornographic?)

The crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is her slippage between the operation to abject and the condition to be abject. Again, to abject is to expel, to separate; to be abject, on the other hand, is to be repulsive, stuck, subject enough only to feel this subjecthood at risk.<sup>52</sup> For Kristeva the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subject and society alike, while the condition to be abject is corrosive of both formations. Is the abject, then, disruptive of subjective and social orders or somehow foundational of them, a crisis in these orders or somehow a confirmation of them? If a subject or a society abjects the alien within, is abjection not a regulatory operation? (In other words, might abjection be to regulation what transgression is to taboo? "Transgression does not deny the taboo," runs the famous formulation of Bataille, "but transcends and completes it.")<sup>53</sup> Or can the condition of abjection be mimed in a way that calls out, in order to disturb, the operation of abjection?

In modernist writing, Kristeva views abjection as conservative, even defensive. "Edged with the sublime," the abject tests the limits of sublimation, but even writers like Louis-Ferdinand Céline sublimate the abject, purify it. Whether or not one agrees with this account, Kristeva does intimate a cultural shift toward the present. "In a world in which the Other has collapsed," she states enigmatically, the task of the artist is no longer to sublimate the abject, to elevate it, but to plumb the abject, to fathom "the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression."<sup>54</sup> In a world in which the Other has collapsed: Kristeva implies a crisis in the paternal law that underwrites the social order.<sup>55</sup> In terms of the visuality outlined here, this implies a crisis in the image-screen as well, and some artists do attack it, whereas others, under the assumption that it is torn, probe behind it for the obscene object-gaze of the real. Meanwhile,

in terms of the abject, still other artists explore the repressing of the maternal body said to underlie the symbolic order; that is, they exploit the disruptive effects of its material and/or metaphorical rem(a)inders.

Here the condition of image-screen and symbolic order alike is all-important; locally the valence of abject art depends on it. If it is deemed intact, the attack on the image-screen might retain a transgressive value. However, if it is deemed torn, such transgression might be beside the point, and this old vocation of the avant-garde might be at an end. But there is a third option as well, and that is to reformulate this vocation, to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the order.<sup>56</sup> In this view the goal of the avant-garde is not to break with this order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled), but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of breakdown but of breakthrough, the new possibilities that such a crisis might open up.

For the most part, however, abject art has tended in two other directions. As suggested, the first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow—to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation—to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right. Yet this mimesis may also reconfirm a given abjection. Just as the old transgressive surrealist once called out for the priestly police, so an abject artist (like Andres Serrano) may call out for an evangelical senator (like Jesse Helms), who is allowed, in effect, to complete the work negatively. Moreover, as left and right may agree on the social representatives of the abject, they may shore each other up in a public exchange of disgust, and this spectacle may inadvertently support the normativity of image-screen and symbolic order alike.

These strategies in abject art are thus problematic, as they were over sixty years ago in surrealism. Surrealism was also drawn to the abject in a testing of sublimation; indeed, it claimed as its own the point where desublimatory impulses confront sublimatory imperatives.<sup>57</sup> Yet it was at this point too that surrealism broke down, split into the two principal factions headed by Breton and Bataille. According to Breton, Bataille was an "excrement-philosopher" who



Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987.

refused to rise above big toes, mere matter, sheer shit, to raise the low to the high.<sup>58</sup> For Bataille in turn, Breton was a “juvenile victim” involved in an Oedipal game, an “Icarian pose” assumed less to undo the law than to provoke its punishment: for all his confessions of desire, he was as committed to sublimation as the next aesthete.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere Bataille termed this aesthetic *le jeu des transpositions* (the game of substitutions), and in a celebrated aphorism he dismissed it as no match for the power of perversions: “I defy any amateur of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.”<sup>60</sup>

I recall this old opposition for its perspective on abject art. In a sense Breton and Bataille were both right, at least about each other. Often Breton and company did act like juvenile victims who provoked the paternal law *as if to ensure that it was still there*—at best in a neurotic plea for punishment, at worst in a paranoid demand for order. And this Icarian pose is assumed by contemporary artists and writers almost too eager to talk dirty in the museum, almost too ready to be tweaked by Hilton Kramer or spanked by Jesse Helms. On the other hand, the Bataillean ideal—to opt for the smelly shoe over the beautiful picture, to be fixed in perversion or stuck in abjection—is also adopted by contemporary artists and writers discontent not only with the refinements of sublimation but with the displacements of desire. Is this, then, the option that the artifice of abjection offers us—Oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion? To act dirty with the secret wish to be spanked, or to wallow in shit with the secret faith that the most defiled might reverse into the most sacred, the most perverse into the most potent?

In the abject testing of the symbolic order a general division of labor has developed according to gender: the artists who probe the maternal body repressed by the paternal law tend to be women (e.g., Kiki Smith, Maureen Connor, Rona Pondick, Mona Hayt), while the artists who assume an infantilist position to mock the paternal law tend to be men (e.g., Mike Kelley, John Miller, Paul McCarthy, Nayland Blake).<sup>61</sup> This mimesis of regression is pronounced in contemporary art, but it has many precedents. Infantilist personae dominated dada and neo-dada: the anarchic child in Hugo Ball and Claes Oldenburg, for example, or the autistic subject in “Dadamax” Ernst and Warhol.<sup>62</sup>

Yet related figures appeared in reactionary art as well: all the clowns, puppets, and the like in neo-figurative painting of the late 1920s and early 1930s and in neo-expressionist painting of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Thus the political valence of this mimetic regression is not stable. In the terms of Peter Sloterdijk discussed in chapter 4, it can be *kynical*, whereby individual degradation is pushed to the point of social indictment, or *cynical*, whereby the subject accepts this degradation for protection and/or profit. The principal avatar of contemporary infantilism is the obscene clown that appears in Bruce Nauman, Kelley, McCarthy, Blake, and others; a hybrid figure, it seems both kynical and cynical, part psychotic inmate, part circus performer.

As these examples suggest, infantile personae tend to perform at times of cultural-political reaction, as ciphers of alienation and reification.<sup>63</sup> Yet these figures of regression can also be figures of perversion, that is, of *père-version*, of a turning from the father that is a twisting of his law. In the early 1990s this defiance was manifested in a general flaunting of shit (or shit substitute: the real thing was rarely found). Of course Freud understood the disposition to order essential to civilization as a reaction against anal eroticism, and in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) he imagined an origin myth involving a related repression that turns on the erection of man from all fours to two feet. With this change in posture, according to Freud, came a revolution in sense: smell was degraded and sight privileged, the anal repressed and the genital pronounced. The rest is literally history: with his genitals exposed, man was returned to a sexual frequency that was continuous, not periodic, and he learned shame; and this coming together of sex and shame impelled him to seek a wife, to form a family, to found a civilization, to boldly go where no man had gone before. Heterosexist as this zany tale is, it does reveal how civilization is conceived in normative terms—not only as a general renunciation and sublimation of instincts but as a specific reaction against anal eroticism that implies a specific abjection of homosexuality.<sup>64</sup>

In this light the shit movement in contemporary art may intend a symbolic reversal of this first step into civilization, of the repression of the anal and the olfactory. As such it may also intend a symbolic reversal of the phallic visibility of the erect body as the primary model of traditional painting and sculp-

ture—the human figure as both subject and frame of representation in Western art. This double defiance of visual sublimation and vertical form is a strong subcurrent in twentieth-century art (which might be subtitled “Visuality and Its Discontents”),<sup>65</sup> and it is sometimes expressed in a flaunting of anal eroticism. “Anal eroticism finds a narcissistic application in the production of defiance,” Freud wrote in his 1917 essay on the subject—in avant-gardist defiance too, one might add, from the chocolate grinders of Duchamp through the cans of *merde* of Piero Manzoni, to the mounds of shit substitute of John Miller.<sup>66</sup> These different gestures have different valences. In contemporary art anal-erotic defiance is often self-conscious, even self-parodic: not only does it test the anally repressive authority of traditional museum culture (which is in part an Oedipal projection), but it also mocks the anally erotic narcissism of the vanguard rebel-artist. “Let’s Talk About Disobeying” reads one banner emblazoned with a cookie jar by Mike Kelley. “Pants-shitter and Proud of It” reads another that derides the self-congratulation of the institutionally incontinent. (“Jerk Off Too,” this rebel-nerd adds, as if to complete his taunting of civilization according to Freud.)<sup>67</sup>

This defiance can be pathetic, but, again, it can also be perverse, a twisting of the paternal law of difference—sexual and generational, ethnic and social. This perversion is often performed through a mimetic regression to an anal world where given differences might be transformed.<sup>68</sup> Such is the fictive space that artists like Kelley and Miller set up for critical play. In *Dick/Jane* (1991) Miller stains a blonde, blue-eyed doll brown and buries her neck-deep in shit substitute. Familiar from the old primer, Dick and Jane taught several generations of North American kids how to read—and how to read sexual difference. However, in the Miller version the Jane is turned into a Dick, and the phallic composite is plunged into an anal mound. Like the stroke in the title, the difference between male and female is transgressed, erased and underscored at once, as is the difference between white and black. In short, Miller creates an anal world that tests the terms of symbolic difference.<sup>69</sup>

Kelley also places his creatures in an anal world. “We interconnect everything, set up a field,” says the bunny to the teddy in *Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ* (1991), “so there is no longer any differentiation.”<sup>70</sup> He too



John Miller, *Dick/Jane*, 1991.



Mike Kelley, *Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood*, 1990, detail.



explores this space where symbols are not stable, where “the concepts *faces* (money, gift), *baby* and *penis* are ill-distinguished from one another and are easily interchangeable.”<sup>71</sup> And he too does so less to celebrate mere indistinction than to trouble symbolic difference. *Lumpen*, the German word for “rag” that gives us *Lumpensammler* (the ragpicker that so interested Baudelaire) and *Lumpenproletariat* (the mass too ragged to form a class of its own that so interested Marx—“the scum, the leavings, the refuse of all classes”),<sup>72</sup> is a crucial word in the Kelley lexicon, which he develops as a third term, like the obscene, between the *informe* and the abject. In a sense he does what Bataille urges: he thinks materialism through “psychological or social facts.”<sup>73</sup> The result is an art of lumpen forms (dingy toy animals stitched together in ugly masses, dirty throw rugs laid over nasty shapes), lumpen subjects (pictures of dirt and trash), and lumpen personae (dysfunctional men that build weird devices ordered from obscure catalogues in basements and backyards). Most of these things resist formal shaping, let alone cultural sublimating or social redeeming. Insofar as it has a social referent then, the *Lumpen* of Kelley (unlike the *Lumpen* of Louis Bonaparte, Hitler, or Mussolini) resists molding, much less mobilizing. But does this indifference constitute a politics?

Often in the cult of abjection to which abject art is related (the cult of slackers and losers, grunge and Generation X), this posture of indifference expressed little more than a fatigue with the politics of difference (social, sexual, ethnic). Sometimes, however, it intimated a more fundamental fatigue: a strange drive to indistinction, a paradoxical desire to be desireless, to be done with it all, a call of regression beyond the infantile to the inorganic.<sup>74</sup> In a 1937 text crucial to the Lacanian discussion of the gaze, Roger Caillois, another associate of the Bataillean surrealists, considers this drive to indistinction in terms of visibility—specifically in terms of the assimilation of insects into space through mimicry.<sup>75</sup> Here, Caillois argues, there is no question of agency (like protective adaptation), let alone of subjecthood (these organisms are “dispossessed of [this] privilege”), a condition that he can only liken, in the human realm, to extreme schizophrenia:

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis [consumption of bacteria]. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*. And he invents spaces of which he is “the convulsive possession.”<sup>76</sup>

The breaching of the body, the gaze devouring the subject, the subject becoming the space, the state of just similarity: these conditions are evoked in recent art—in images by Sherman and others, in objects by Smith and others. It recalls the perverse ideal of the beautiful, redefined in terms of the sublime, advanced in surrealism: a convulsive possession of the subject given over to a deathly *jouissance*.

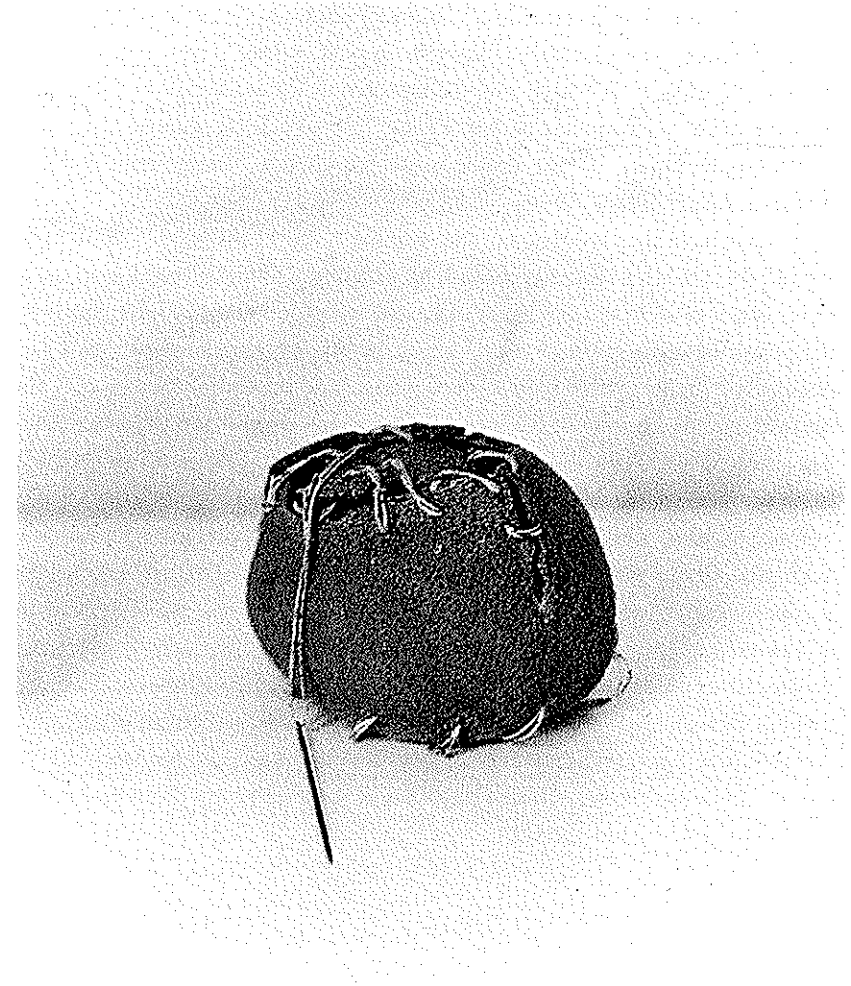
If this convulsive possession can be related to contemporary culture, it must be split into its constituent parts: on the one hand an ecstasy in the imagined breakdown of the image-screen and/or the symbolic order; on the other hand a horror at this fantasmatic event followed by a despair about it. Some early definitions of postmodernism evoked this *ecstatic* structure of feeling, sometimes in analogy with schizophrenia. Indeed, for Fredric Jameson the primary symptom of postmodernism is a schizophrenic breakdown in language and temporality that provokes a compensatory investment in the image and the instant.<sup>77</sup> And many artists did explore simulacral intensities and ahistorical pastiches in the 1980s. In recent intimations of postmodernism, however, the *melancholic* structure of feeling dominates, and sometimes, as in Kristeva, it too is associated with a symbolic order in crisis. Here artists are drawn not to the highs of the simulacral image but to the lows of the depressive object. If some high modernists sought to transcend the referential figure and some early postmodernists to delight in the sheer image, some later postmodernists want to possess the real thing.



Today this bipolar postmodernism is pushed toward a qualitative change: many artists seem driven by an ambition to inhabit a place of total affect *and* to be drained of affect altogether, to possess the obscene vitality of the wound *and* to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse. This oscillation suggests the dynamic of psychic shock parried by protective shield that Freud developed in his discussion of the death drive and Walter Benjamin elaborated in his discussion of Baudelairean modernism—but now pushed well beyond the pleasure principle. Pure affect, no affect: *It hurts, I can't feel anything.*<sup>78</sup>

Why this fascination with trauma, this envy of abjection, today? To be sure, motives exist within art and theory. As suggested, there is dissatisfaction with the textualist model of culture as well as the conventionalist view of reality—as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic. Then, too, there is disillusionment with the celebration of desire as an open passport of a mobile subject—as if the real, dismissed by a performative postmodernism, were marshaled against the imaginary world of a fantasy captured by consumerism. But there are strong forces at work elsewhere as well: despair about the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime, the destroyed welfare state, indeed the broken social contract (as the rich opt out in revolution from the top and the poor are dropped out in immiseration from the bottom). The articulation of these different forces is difficult, yet together they drive the contemporary concern with trauma and abjection.

One result is this: for many in contemporary culture truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body. To be sure, this body is the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary testimonials against power. But there are dangers with this siting of truth, such as the restriction of our political imaginary to two camps, the abjectors and the abjected, and the assumption that in order not to be counted among sexists and racists one must become the phobic object of such subjects. If there is a subject of history for the cult of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse. This is not only a politics of difference pushed to indifference; it is a politics of alterity pushed to nihility.<sup>79</sup> “Everything



Zoe Leonard, *Sewn Fruit (in memory of David W.)*, 1993.

goes dead," says the Kelley teddy. "Like us," responds the bunny.<sup>80</sup> Yet is this point of nihilism the epitome of impoverishment, where power cannot penetrate, or a place from which power emanates in a new form? Is abjection a refusal of power, its ruse, or its reinvention?<sup>81</sup> Finally, is abjection a space-time beyond redemption, or the fastest route for contemporary rogue-saints to grace?

Across artistic, theoretical, and popular cultures (in SoHo, at Yale, on *Oprah*) there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma. On the one hand, in art and theory, trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means, for again, in a psychoanalytic register, there is no subject of trauma; the position is evacuated, and in this sense the critique of the subject is most radical here. On the other hand, in popular culture, trauma is treated as an event that guarantees the subject, and in this psychologistic register the subject, however disturbed, rushes back as witness, testifier, survivor. Here is indeed a traumatic subject, and it has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not. *In trauma discourse, then, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once. And in this way trauma discourse magically resolves two contradictory imperatives in culture today: deconstructive analyses and identity politics. This strange rebirth of the author, this paradoxical condition of absentee authority, is a significant turn in contemporary art, criticism, and cultural politics. Here the return of the real converges with the return of the referential, and to this point I now turn.*<sup>82</sup>