

The Retrospective Eighties

In its most effective forms, modernist art from Manet to Pollock took the form of a revelation, contributing to the world by showing the way to a more encompassing truth than previously known. It is this messianic quality of modernist art that made its struggles so dramatic and its solutions so forceful. As the world witnessed the Holocaust, the war in Vietnam, and the surge of civil unrest in the late sixties, the search for a singular truth by the lone artist seemed presumptuous at best and authoritarian at worst. With the development of a myriad of new art approaches during the late sixties and seventies—including Conceptual art, Performance art, Land art, and Process art—and the powerful social and political critiques of feminists and civil rights activists, it became increasingly obvious that traditional histories and interpretations of “modernism” were simply inadequate.

In the eighties, a number of artists, and many more critics and theorists, declared a break with the modern era, identifying themselves as “Postmodernists.” Postmodernism implied a dissatisfaction with the narrow confines of modernism, which apparently promoted the accomplishments of white, male artists of European descent at the expense of engaging political and social concerns, and nonmajority and female artists. Postmodernism, by contrast, encouraged overtly polemical practices and an ironic distance from conventions of the past. The development of Postmodernism was facilitated by the tools of Poststructuralism and deconstruction—theoretical propositions that had gained increasing prominence since the late sixties among artists, critics, and art historians. The term “Poststructuralism” indicates that this movement came after the development of Structuralism, a school of thought based on the premise that underlying structures in language and society could be identified and studied as vital aspects of culture. Poststructuralism refers to the work of a group of predominantly French philosophers including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes, who posited that the structures of language and political institutions were simply conventions rather than natural

facts. Understood as constructions rather than essential principles, structures of language and of institutions could then be analyzed and “deconstructed.” The practice of deconstruction involves the minute examination of the assumptions underlying particular texts, which may be literary, but may also refer to the larger discourses and social and political networks in which we live our lives. The insights of Poststructuralism, combined with the technique of deconstruction, provided the theoretical tools to analyze the underlying assumptions of modernism, enabling artists and thinkers to articulate a critical break with modernism.

Somewhat ironically, at the same time that Postmodern critiques of art were being formulated, the audience and the market for new art were greater than ever. In this atmosphere, many younger artists were catalyzed to reframe the history of art in a way that resonated with a Postmodern consciousness. The artists of the eighties looked back to any number of historical styles, sometimes including several styles within one work, in order to recontextualize the achievements of modernism to give them significance in a Postmodern environment. Reclaiming the value of art that had been premised on an authoritative position that was no longer valid was a difficult and contentious project. While some artists restated through appropriation the voices of the past in the company of the present, others created contemporary variations on styles of Expressionism, abstraction, installation, and assemblage. The sections that follow examine the aesthetic and political consequences of attempts in the eighties to enlist traditions of historical modernism to speak to the present.

Codes of Context: Appropriation

Appropriation, the tactical borrowing of visual culture from one context to another, was one of the first identifying characteristics of an art that would be called Postmodern. Appropriation was most clearly evident in the work of a number of artists who, regardless of their

training, relied on photography for their source material. Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman, among others, presented photographs of photographs; photographs of television; photographs that looked like films; paintings of paintings; and paintings of photographs. These works all failed to assert any of the transformative effects expected of art. Like the citations made by Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol (see figs. 621.38, 21.43), Appropriation appeared to lack signs of creativity. As discussed in chapter 25, the appropriative strategy of pastiche was apparent in the work of the contemporary architects Robert Venturi, Michael Graves, and Philip Johnson, who seemed to be collaging historical styles to generate contemporary buildings. Forms seemed to be stolen and pasted together with little regard for the original context and, some worried, little regard for the immediate context either. This cut-and-paste procedure turned out to have great potential for visual practice.

Despite its simple definition as something akin to graphic theft, Appropriation can be stretched to include work that copied and manipulated both images and ways of communicating. In its initial incarnation, circa 1977, Appropriation art functioned by emptying the borrowed image of its initial signification and creating new meaning by repositioning it in a new context. The result antagonized viewers whose initial aesthetic or emotional responses to a picture were contradicted by the fact that the artist did not actually create it. To startled viewers of the late seventies, Appropriation appeared to be a mean-spirited plagiarism that undermined the intuitive experience of looking at art.

Appropriative artists, such as Kruger, Levine, Prince, and Sherman, did not intend to undermine the viewer, but they believed it was critical that viewers did not confuse the creativity of the artists' sources with the intention of the new work. They adopted devices for keeping the viewer aware of the mechanics of Appropriation and distanced from the traditionally expressive aspects of art, such as quoting easily recognizable sources such as Mondrian or the Marlboro Man; adopting stylistically disruptive features such as collage or dramatic cropping; and creating titles that explained the appropriation. Like Duchamp or Fluxus (see figs. 13.16, 24.10), Appropriation artists insisted that the borrowed item was meaningful because of its position, and their creative act lay in framing it.

Appropriation turned out to be an effective strategy for dealing with the power of the mass media and even stealing its thunder. By extracting images from their familiar original contexts and mixing them with other images from different sources, Appropriation strips iconography of its original import. At the same time, by putting borrowed images into a new context—that is, by “recontextualizing” them—it also endows those images with a new and often unsettling impact that encourages viewers to see the original sources in a new light. This startling effect—making us see familiar images afresh, as if for the first time—is the

source of Appropriation's power as a critique. In the critical language of the day, this effect made Appropriation art “deconstructive”—setting in motion an analytical process that takes apart and exposes the image-maker's designs on us. Art of this kind gives us a more sophisticated awareness of how easily we can be manipulated by visual images.

Kruger, Levine, Prince, and Sherman

A notable example of the deconstruction process at work is found in the art of **Barbara Kruger** (b. 1945). Her picture-and-text combinations (fig. 26.1) reveal the most manipulative aspects of modern media culture. Kruger, who in the mid-sixties had worked as a graphic designer at *Mademoiselle*, appropriates the look of a glossy magazine layout. Fashion magazines are an especially clear example of contrived visual meaning, since they freely crop and group their pictures and impose captions on them, in order to force the images into the particular “story” that the photo editor wants to tell. By borrowing these techniques, and by bringing them to the surface where we cannot miss them, Kruger makes it obvious that our response, not only to this picture—taken from a fifties photo annual—but to any media image, is largely dictated by the editorializing of its presenter. Our understanding of what we see is not a



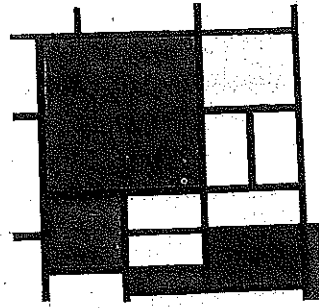
26.1 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1981. Photograph, 60 × 40" (152.4 × 101.6 cm). Collection Vijak Mahdavi and Bernardo Nadal-Ginard.

simple, direct response to the optical facts; rather, it is something that has been “constructed” for us.

Work like Kruger’s suggests that artists can also turn the tables. If the media can manipulate images in order to convey new meanings, so can artists—by taking such images back and giving them yet another new spin. In so doing, artists can open the viewer’s eyes to the complex, ambiguous process by which the meanings of virtually all pictures are constructed. In fact, one can uncover a good deal about how a culture works and what it believes by “deconstructing” the way it uses visual images. This process of deconstruction reveals how certain images function to enforce social myths rather than any underlying truth. The force of continual observation, for instance, that women experience as subjects of the mythic standards of beauty, is captured in Kruger’s image with the metaphor of a slap. By confronting the role of images and identity, the technique of appropriation brought art into the media-governed, image-saturated eighties—and, simultaneously, brought the eighties into art.

The quintessential Postmodernist among American artists may be **Sherrie Levine** (b. 1947), for her work most clearly re-presents familiar images from the canon of Western art history. Levine first startled the art world in 1981 with an exhibition of her own unmanipulated photographs of well-known, textbook examples of images taken by such master photographers as Edward Weston, Walker Evans, and Andreas Feininger. Levine’s replication of these iconic images pointedly undermined the ideals of modernism—originality, authenticity, and the unmediated link between the image and meaning. The presentation of familiar images—an interior of a poor Southern home by Evans for instance—authored by Levine forced the viewer to contemplate not the sublime geometry of the home and the corresponding moral rectitude of its inhabitant, as Evans intended, but the network of political, cultural, and commercial forces that sent Evans to the South and his work to the museum. Levine’s copy confronts us with impurity, ambiguity, and politics in place of Evans’s impeccable clarity.

After completing this series of photographs, Levine realized that her subversion of these traditional standards of artistic value could be accomplished not only through photographic reproduction, but also through the insertion of her own touch. As a woman artist, deconstructing masterpieces of male artists by redoing them in watercolor carried its own feminist statement. Levine began hand-painting watercolors and gouaches “after” art-book reproductions of paintings by Léger, Mondrian, Lissitzky, and Stuart Davis—complete with printing flaws. Her *Untitled (After Piet Mondrian)* (fig. 26.2) substitutes the measured tension and coloristic balance of Mondrian’s painting with the slightly green imperfections of the textbook reproduction that is Levine’s original. Like Polke’s *Bunnies*, (see fig. 26.15) Levine’s copy of a mass-produced reproduction draws attention to the transformation of everything from



26.2 Sherrie Levine, *After Piet Mondrian*, 1983. Watercolor, 14 × 11" [35.6 × 27.8 cm]. Private collection.

sex to art into commodities traded in the cultural or political economy.

Levine pursued similar goals in a subsequent series consisting of what were less pure appropriations than “generic paintings,” as the artist calls them. One series consists of small casein and wax panels offering two-color variations on a single theme of one narrow and three wide stripes. Here the model was a composite of all the great modernist stripe painters, again a pantheon of male artists, including Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Brice Marden, Frank Stella, and Daniel Buren. While the new works present the overall look of Minimal painting, they copy no one masterpiece or specific style. Instead, the artist takes on the male-dominated aesthetic of high modernism in a “generic” fashion. Despite Levine’s evident iconoclasm, she is not without models, perhaps most significantly Marcel Duchamp, with whose readymades (see figs. 13.16, 13.17) the artist has acknowledged an affinity.

Like Duchamp’s readymades or Pop icons such as Warhol’s soup cans or Lichtenstein’s comics, Appropriation was criticized because it failed to visibly transform its motif from reality into art. Artists countered this response in several ways. First, they insisted, like Duchamp, that art is not limited to those objects that render the appearance of reality in alternative forms or materials. Secondly, it was argued that transformation was in the mind of the artist, not the eye of the beholder. Kruger and Levine’s work alone amply showed the efficacy of Appropriation as a transformative tool, as each radically recast our understanding of familiar

objects. Finally, Appropriation was shown to be generative in rather old-fashioned terms as a form of drawing.

Richard Prince (b. 1949) developed a body of work that draws attention to the artifice underlying myths of American individuality and to Appropriation as a tool to deconstruct them. In a series of works including *Untitled (Cowboys)* (fig. 26.3) Prince re-presented the protagonist of televised cigarette ads. Avoiding the posture of “original” taken on by Levine’s work, these photographs of television screens are self-conscious about their artificiality. They advertise the act of theft that is at the root of Appropriation and, unlike the myth of American manhood and tobacco consumption that they present, are clear about their misleading qualities.

Prince is unique for the clarity with which he conceived Appropriation as a formal tool. Early in his career, he enumerated different methods of appropriating that, like Sol LeWitt’s instructions (see fig. 22.53) or Jasper Johns’s repertoire of marks (see fig. 21.18), determine the appearance of the final works of art. With a list of eight different variations including the original copy, the rephotographed copy, the angled copy, and the out-of-focus copy, Prince showed Appropriation to be a form of mark-making related to art of the previous decades.

Beginning in 1978, **Cindy Sherman** (b. 1954) allied the arts of Performance and photography; she cast herself

as the star of an inexhaustibly inventive series of still photographs called *Untitled Film Stills* sometimes characterized as “one-frame movie-making” (fig. 26.4). Complete with props, lighting, makeup, wigs, costume, and script, most of the pictures exploit, with the eventual goal of subverting, stereotypical roles played by women in films, television shows, and commercials of the fifties and sixties. Her characters ranged from a bored suburban housewife to a Playboy centerfold.

In 1980–82 Sherman began working in color and in near-lifesize dimensions. As the pictures grew larger, the situations became more concentrated, focusing on specific emotional moments rather than implying the fuller scenarios seen earlier. Setting, background (supplied by a projector system), clothes, wig, makeup, and lighting combined with the performance itself to create a unified mood: anxiety, ennui, flirtatiousness, or confidence. Sherman displays exquisite control over the tableaux, from the unified color schemes to disturbing details such as the black scuffs where a door has been kicked in (see fig. 26.4) or a piece of torn newspaper clutched by a plaid-skirted teenager sprawled on a linoleum kitchen floor. Like a Hitchcock heroine, the subject seems vulnerable to something outside the photographic frame.

Sherman’s project, like Kruger’s, is based on examining the notion that “woman” does not exist apart from socially



26.3 Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 1991–92. Ektacolor photograph 48 × 72".

introduce an artist in possession of the gaze even while she is the object of it.

Holzer, the Guerrilla Girls, McCollum, and Tansey

While most Appropriation artists copied existing images, a second group appropriated the means by which society transmits knowledge and exercises control. In an updated *trompe l'oeil*, artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Allan McCollum, and political activist group the Guerrilla Girls, reproduced the modes of communication seen in the streets, museums, or on television, and then infiltrated the expected content of the message. Images that looked like advertising or literature conveyed content regarding the politics of race, gender, healthcare, and sexuality, as well, of course, as issues of art making and collecting. Like the radical thinking of the previous two decades, Appropriation in the eighties appeared to dismantle the myths of originality, genius, and power that had been threatening to collapse since the sixties. Moreover, its consequences lay within the worlds of practice as well as theory. Here was an art form with a high proportion of women practitioners.

In *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (see fig. 26.1), Kruger, as well as using a found image, copied the graphic clarity of magazine layout, thus using a means of communication created by the mass media to expose the aggression of representation. With an even tighter focus on means of public address, Jenny Holzer (b. 1950) creates “language” works that appropriate the anonymous, often aggressive, manner in which messages of warning or instruction are transmitted from institutions such as police forces, the military, schools, or churches. Related to the Conceptual art of the seventies, Holzer’s interventions are based on the pithy, often political, and sometimes cryptic sayings that she composes. She called these sayings “Truisms”; a typical example is the one-liner, “Abuse of power comes as no surprise.” Some of the sayings sound like replies to the homespun wisdom of Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. And although they can be as banal as fortune cookies, many have the punch of advertising slogans. At first, Holzer printed her aphorisms on posters that were pasted to the walls of public places, such as phone booths and bus shelters, but later she ran them on electric signboards in more prominent locations. In 1982 she obtained the use of the Spectacolor Board in New York’s Times Square (fig. 26.5), and flashed pointed remarks like “Private property created crime” and “Protect me from what I want” to throngs of surprised pedestrians. Her subsequent installation pieces in museums and galleries have generally been more meditative and subjective, notably *Laments* for the 1990 Venice Biennale, but at times they have been spectacular. At the Guggenheim Museum in 1989, a ribbon of her color signboards ran along the edges of Frank Lloyd Wright’s great spiral ramp. The lights spinning around the helical curve of the architecture surrounded the visitor with such urgent phrases as “You are a victim of the rules you live by.”



26.4 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*, 1979. Photograph, 10 × 8" (25.4 × 20.3 cm).

constructed images of femininity and exploring the self-conscious assumption of that role by the woman herself. However near or distant the quoted source, Sherman and her fellow “image-scavengers” cause us to question our reliance on images and our relationship to the authority they wield. Integral to the role of images in the formation of feminine identity is the role of what has been theorized as the “gaze”: the act of observation as it is implicated in power relations between those who observe and those who are observed. Traditionally, in both society and art history, women are most often objectified by the gaze; they are placed in the position of something to be possessed, enjoyed, and understood through vision. The centrality of female sex symbols in Western culture testifies to the conventional understanding that looking is different for men than for women, and it is no coincidence that those who do more of the looking have more power than those who are looked at. Sherman’s imagery undermines the expected dynamic of the woman/model/subject being revealed through representation by the man/artist/observer. Not only is Sherman the artist and the model—the watcher and the watched—but, as a subject, her identity is never secure. The question of “who is Cindy Sherman?” is made as unanswerable as it is inevitable. The *Untitled Film Stills*



26.5 Jenny Holzer, Selection from *Truisms*, 1982. Spectacolor Board, 20 × 40' (6.1 × 12.2 m). Installation, Times Square, New York. Sponsored by Public Art Fund, Inc., New York.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

- Working without the pressure of success.**
- Not having to be in shows with men.**
- Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.**
- Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.**
- Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine.**
- Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.**
- Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.**
- Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.**
- Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.**
- Having more time to work when your mate dumps you for someone younger.**
- Being included in revised versions of art history.**
- Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.**
- Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.**

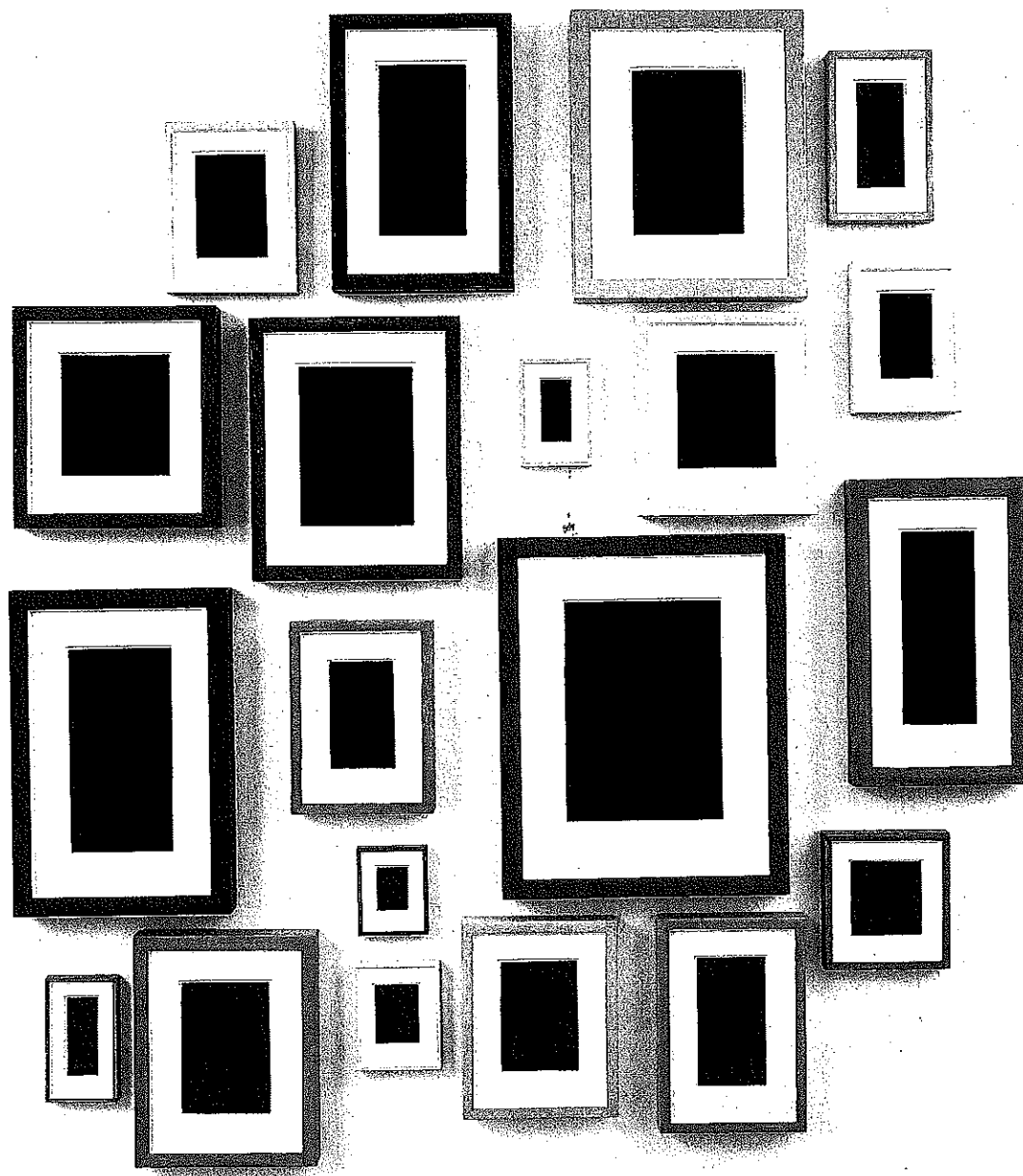
A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD
 532 LAGUARDIA PLACE, #237 • NY, NY 10012
www.guerrillagirls.com

26.6 Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, 1988.

Holzer's strategy has proved particularly effective for political action groups who wish to use the techniques of advertising, but have more radical messages to convey than corporate advertisers. In 1985 a group of anonymous feminists who made public appearances disguised in ape costumes began plastering streets and buses with advertisements that looked like public service announcements. The group, calling themselves the **Guerrilla Girls**, took on the mantle of the "conscience of the art world" and had grown frustrated at the small number of women represented in galleries, museums, and positions of power in the art world. Though feminist activism in the seventies had opened the door to such institutions, too few women had been allowed in. One early poster (fig. 26.6) ironically listed the advantages to being a woman artist beginning with "Working without the pressure of success." Another

noted that the \$17.7 million spent on a Jasper Johns work could have purchased one work each by sixty-seven major women artists, including Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Artemesia Gentileschi. The Guerrilla Girls have co-opted a variety of forms of public address, including pasting posters around cities, renting space on billboards and buses, giving public lectures (in full ape attire), publishing an art history book, and operating a website (www.guerrillagirls.com).

The work of **Allan McCollum** (b. 1944) interrogates contemporary attitudes toward art from within the galleries rather than in the streets and the media. McCollum's oeuvre consists of objects that function as signs of art. As one critic described them, they are like the shop signs of eyeglasses that an optician might hang in front of his shop. Called *Surrogates* (fig. 26.7), McCollum's objects

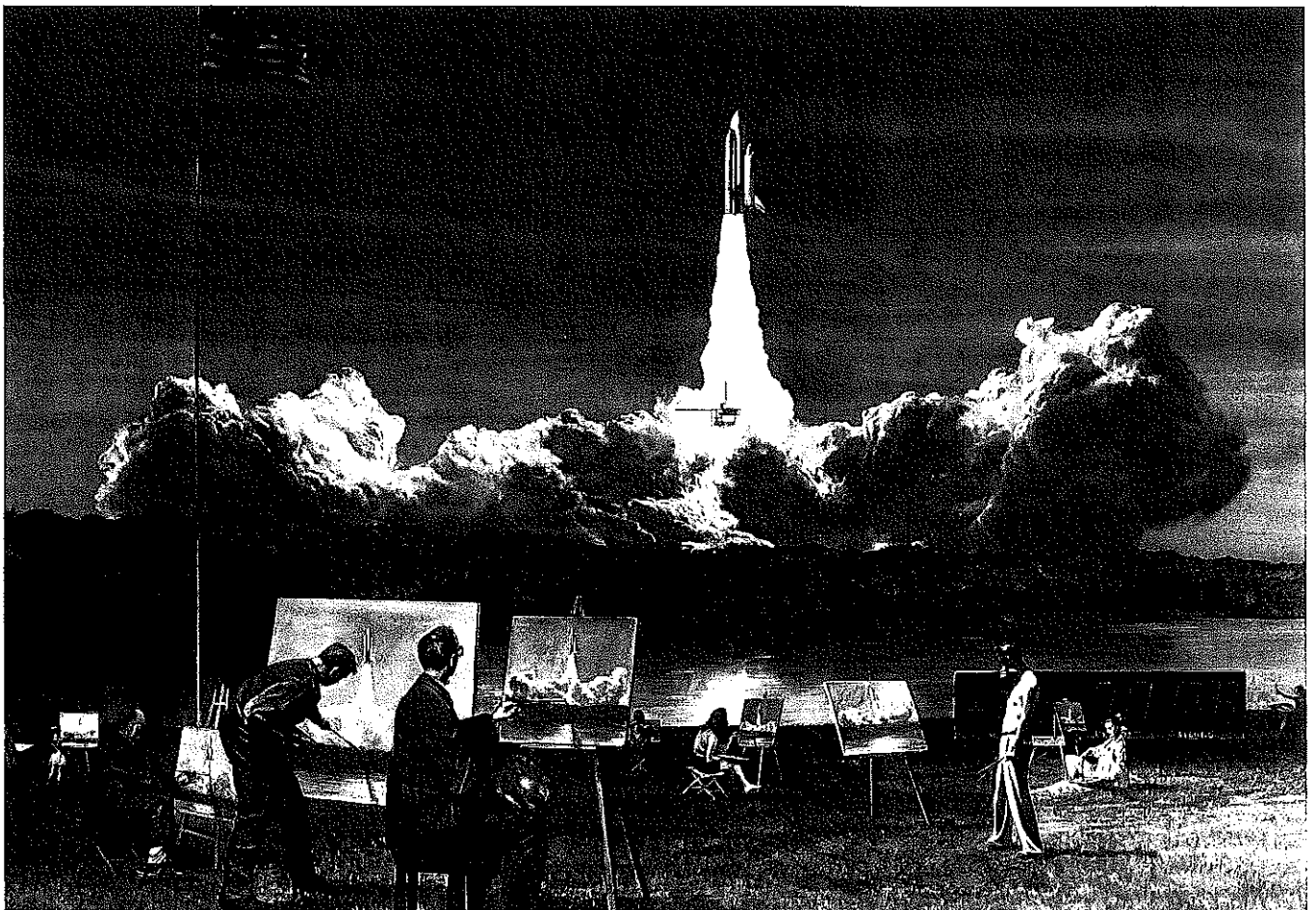


26.7 Allan McCollum, *20 Plaster Surrogates*, 1982–85. Enamel on hydrostone, twenty parts, various dimensions.

are plaster casts of framed pictures that he has painted black for the frames, white for the mat, and black for the picture. The thousands of *Surrogates* have slight inconsistencies of size and surface so that, while they lack any of the details that one expects from a work of art, each one serves as a place holder for the idea of a different work of art. In a politically and philosophically challenging question for those who study art, McCollum asks how anyone besides the wealthy can enjoy “souvenirs of that class of people who manipulate history to your exclusion.” The issue of class and art continued to be a pressing one in the late twentieth century, when collectors with big bank accounts were buying out gallery shows, sponsoring exhibitions, promoting artists, and establishing “good taste.” The *Surrogates* force one to consider whether it is the social status afforded by art or its content that matter most. McCollum’s mass-produced objects, infiltrating museum and gallery exhibitions by speaking the language of art, answer in favor of the former. In a last caustic gesture reiterating the complicity of art and power, McCollum created *Perpetual Photos* (1982–89), reproductions of art as it appeared on the office walls of the fictional, but influential, Ewing Oil, the commercial enterprise dramatized on the television series *Dallas*.

The importance of theory to artists of the early eighties was immeasurable. It was as if the art-about-art impulse

that defined formalism was taken far beyond the confines of the picture plane. The work of **Mark Tansey** (b. 1949), on the face of it traditional figurative realism, serves as evidence of the prevalence of theory and criticism. Painted in grisaille, Tansey’s images resemble preparatory sketches for old master canvases, but illustrate, with great liberty, the recent history of art. In the monumental *Triumph of the New York School* (1984), Tansey transforms the military metaphor of “avant-garde” into an ironic variation on history painting based loosely on Velázquez’s *Surrender at Breda*. The painting depicts French artists, dressed in European military uniforms (save Picasso in a fur coat, Matisse in a cape and Duchamp in a robe) passing the baton of modernism to the Americans, who are dressed as GIs. In *Action Painting II* (fig. 26.8), space flight provides the metaphor, as the space shuttle launch becomes the premise for a joke about the distance between the public and the modern (the Sunday painter and the action painter) and a more serious commentary on the transformation of Abstract Expressionism into a style. In the late fifties it was of great concern whether Abstract Expressionism had calcified into an academic style. What might it mean to have turned the existential challenge and the expressive gestures of Pollock or De Kooning into a style? Posed another way, were artists, like those in Tansey’s picture, not acting themselves but merely and ridiculously painting pictures of



26.8 Mark Tansey, *Action Painting II*, 1984. Oil on canvas, 76 × 110" (193 × 279.4 cm).

actions? By the mid-eighties and nineties, artists turned to just such an ironic strategy to vitalize nonfigural abstract art.

Primal Passions: Neo-Expressionism

With the beginning of the eighties, the reaction against Minimalism assumed a new intensity, kindled in the United States by young painters with a love of bold gesture, heroic scale, mythic content, and rebellious figuration. Critics dubbed this movement Neo-Expressionism. European artists had been practicing a Neo-Expressionism since the sixties, when German artists in particular sought means to negotiate the cultural presence of the United States and the USSR in post-World War II Europe. On both sides of the Atlantic, Neo-Expressionists revived agitated, feeling-laden brushwork. Almost all of them generated content by exploiting imagery so taboo, primal, or vulgar that descriptive realism seemed to pass into the dislocated, surrealist realm of dream, reverie, or nightmare. Yet even though the accessibility promised by identifiable subject matter was not quite as immediate as some might have hoped, collectors, museums, the media, and some critics rejoiced that here, at long last, were large, vigorously worked, color-filled, and clearly meaningful canvases. In an art world hungry as much for excitement as for imagery, this was an event. It was made all the more newsworthy because it had been spearheaded in Europe, where German and Italian artists were working with a self-confident strength and independence not seen since the original Expressionists (in the case of the Germans) or the Futurists and Metaphysical artists (in the case of the Italians). For the first time in the postwar era, Continental artists could reclaim a full share of international attention and world leadership in new art, hand in hand with younger American painters.

The so-called Neo-Expressionists evinced a daring embrace of metaphor, allegory, narrative, surfaces energized by and packed with photographic processes, broken crockery, or even oil paint that made the New Image art of the seventies (see chapter 24) seem yoked to modernist dogmas of emotional and formal reserve. Paradoxically, however, while previous avant-garde movements had tended to renounce the past, the Neo-Expressionists sought to liberate themselves from modernist restrictions by rediscovering those very elements within tradition most condemned by progressive, mainstream trends. For example, the Americans tended to look to the later, expressionist Picasso—the Picasso certain modernists had thought unimportant—instead of the cerebral, discriminating artist of the heroic Analytic Cubist era (see chapter 9). They flocked to the 1983 Guggenheim Museum exhibition devoted to the Spanish master's final decade (1963–73), drinking in not only the liberated drawing and color, but also the unrestrained, autobiographical sexuality expressed by a still-vital octogenarian (fig. 26.9). Not coincidentally, sexuality loomed large—often blatantly—in Neo-Expressionist art as well.



26.9 Pablo Picasso, *Man, Guitar, and Bird-Woman*, 1970. Oil on canvas, 63 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (161.9 × 129.9 cm). Estate of the artist.

Beyond these broad, and highly provisional, generalizations, the Neo-Expressionists—a title almost none of them found appropriate—have little in common. Instead of forming a cohesive movement, they emerged, more or less independently, from their respective cultural and stylistic outposts. In the United States, those artists who came to the forefront of the movement did so with significant gallery support in the late seventies and early eighties. The market that propelled the Americans inspired a retrospective interest in the many artists whose work had long shown characteristics of Neo-Expressionism. The celebration of paint did not come without criticisms, the strongest of which asserted that to reclaim modernist styles was to ignore postwar critiques of modernism. After conceptual art, feminism, and Appropriation, the step back to painting seemed to many to be a step too far.

German Neo-Expressionism

Among the German Neo-Expressionist painters, the senior artist is Georg Baselitz (b. 1938). His paintings are also perhaps the most distinctive, with the topsy-turvy orientation of their imagery—usually upside down—and their full, ripe color and powerful, liberated brushwork. In a gesture that was both nostalgic and nationalistic, Baselitz (born Georg Kern) renamed himself for the village where he was born, Deutschbaselitz in Saxony, after he moved out of what was then Russian-occupied East Germany and into West Berlin. Postwar West Germany, Baselitz

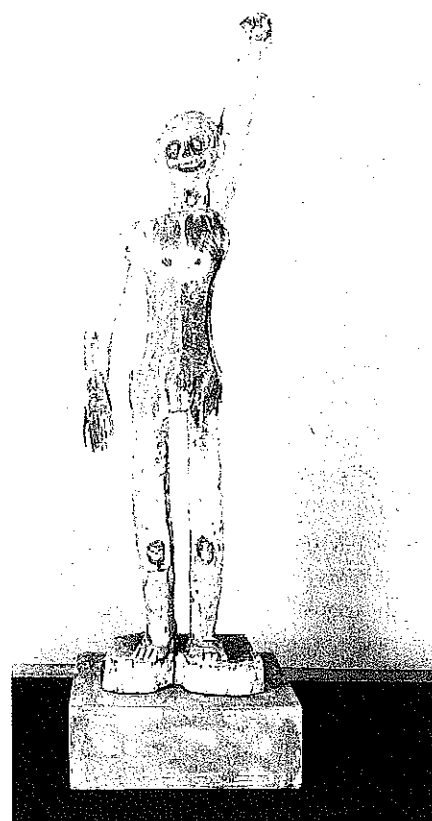
discovered, was dominated by the cultural presence of the United States as East Germany had been by the Soviet Union. In 1958, the year after Baselitz emigrated, West Berlin hosted New American Painting, a show originating at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, which promoted artists including Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline. The propagandistic nature of the exhibition typified the policy for rebuilding Germany, which entailed an influx of economic and cultural goods from the United States. Artists wishing to assert creative and national independence could resist the impulse for abstraction but were wary of figurative painting because of its connections with Soviet Socialist Realism (see chapter 11). Baselitz's solution was to revive the kind of narrative and symbolic, emotive and rhapsodic, art in which Germans had previously achieved greatness (see fig. 1.7). During 1964–66, when international art was dominated by American Color Field painting (see chapter 19) and Pop (see chapter 21), Baselitz developed an iconography of heroic men—huge figures towering over devastated landscapes. The monumental human forms were personifications of the German psyche, homeless after the moral and physical devastation of the war. Baselitz eventually turned from the wandering heroes to figures left more or less intact but abstracted from reality by an upside-down posture and the disintegrating effects of brilliant color and aggressive painterliness (fig. 26.10). Baselitz's treatment of his subjects, often friends in the midst of mundane activities such as talking, eating, or drinking, dramatized them by magnifying their size and manipulating their bodies through evocative distortions of anatomy.

Baselitz also made sculpture, hacking forms out of wood to register the medium's inherent qualities (fig. 26.11). While this may be a tribute to the late works of Michelangelo, it also calls to mind the German Expressionists, who excelled in woodcut.

26.10 Georg Baselitz, *The Brücke Choir* (*Der Brückenchor*), 1983. Oil on canvas, 9'2½" × 14'11" (2.8 × 4.5 m). Private collection.



In his rebellion against all authoritarian “norms,” most particularly those inherent in the monolithic consistency and coolness of sixties American abstraction, Markus Lüpertz (b. 1941) made intensity the driving force behind his search for artistic independence, variability the character of his style, imaginative reference to earlier artists his process, and politics the content of his art. Lüpertz saw



26.11 Georg Baselitz, *Untitled*, 1982–84. Limewood and oil, 8'3" × 2'4" × 1'6" (2.5 × 0.71 × 0.46 m). Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.

Picabia as a precursor of his own stylistic restlessness (see figs. 10.49, 13.22) and Picasso as a model of the obsessive quoter of established art. No less important, however, was Pollock, who for Lüpertz seemed a “Dionysiac” painter attuned to discovering the mysteries of his own personality within the unifying process of his art. Lüpertz uses abstracting means to invent objects that, while simulating the look of real things, remain totally fictitious, or what might be called “pseudo-objects.” In the early seventies, the artist executed a “motif” series in which he introduced such recognizable but taboo emblems as German military helmets, uniforms, and insignia, and combined them with palettes and other attributes of the painting profession. These works signified the need to confront

history and the imperative that art be grounded in concrete reality (fig. 26.12).

Having crossed from East to West Germany, **A. R. Penck** (b. 1939) struggled in his art not only with the cleft in German society but also with the need to come to terms with himself as an exile. The form that this self-taught artist found most effective for his purposes was a stick figure—Everyman reduced to a cipher—set in multiples or singly in a tapestry or batiklike pattern against a field of solid color, with figures and ground so counterbalanced as to lock together in a dynamic positive-negative relationship (fig. 26.13). Mixing stick figures with a whole vocabulary of hieroglyphs, cybernetic symbols, graffiti signs, and anthropological or folkloric images, Penck expresses



26.12 Markus Lüpertz, *Schwarz-Rot-Gold I*, 1974. Distemper on canvas, 102¼ × 78¾" (260 × 200 cm).



26.13 A. R. Penck, *The Red Airplane*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 3'1.1" × 6'10½" (1.19 × 2.1 m). Private collection.



26.14 Jörg Immendorff, *Café Deutschland I*, 1977–78. Acrylic on canvas, 9'2" × 10'10" (2.8 × 3.3 m). Ludwig-Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany.

such personal and public concerns as the urgent need for individual self-assertion in a collective society. As a “crossover” himself, Penck often painted poignant versions of the lone stick man walking a tightrope or a burning footbridge suspended above an abyss separating two islands of barrenness.

Almost in counterpoint to Penck’s radically depersonalized imagery, Jörg Immendorff (b. 1945) paints in a detailed, if highly conceptualized, realist style. Like Penck, he anguished over the theme of the individual entrapped by the contradictions of modern German life. In the *Café Deutschland* series, the central image is the artist himself, often seated between a pair of allegorical columns symbolizing the two halves of a polarized world (fig. 26.14). While Baselitz, and to a great degree Lupertz and Penck, adopted styles that recalled the Expressionist painting of Die Brücke (see chapter 8), Immendorff looked to different sources. Taking from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity; see chapter 13) examples of Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, and Max Beckmann, Immendorff evokes the moral poverty and political disgust that concerned these post-World War I painters in a style that, like theirs, bears more fidelity to realism than that of the prewar Expressionists. During and after his student days in Dusseldorf, where he studied with Joseph Beuys, Immendorff joined activist groups supporting tenants’ rights and opposing the war in Vietnam and capitalist imperialism. His *Café Deutschland* paintings typify his political and aesthetic agenda. The relatively public, accessible style, the autobiographical subject, and the lurid disco scene, complete with heavy, forward-pitching perspective, express, as Donald Kuspit has written, the ambivalence of “an egalitarian Maoist oriented toward the lost cause of a democratic China, and a successful bourgeois artist appropriated by the market.”

Sigmar Polke (b. 1941), along with Gerhard Richter, created an alternative to the nationalistic catharsis of their Neo-Expressionist peers. In the early sixties, the international art community provided in Pop Art its own alternative to American Abstract Expressionism and European abstraction of *Art informel* and *Tâchisme* (see chapters 19 and 20). Polke, Richter, and fellow student Konrad Leug created Capitalist Realism, an indigenous form of Pop Art that responded to American aesthetic hegemony. This new Pop Art distorted what appeared to be an American infatuation with capitalism into an art sensitive to the unique complexities of contemporary German life. In the sixties, Polke adopted the Benday process of mechanical reproduction not long after it had been integrated into painting by Roy Lichtenstein (see figs. 21.38, 21.39). But whereas the American artist aestheticized the dot system, not only by treating it as a kind of developed Pointillism (see chapter 3) but also by using it to depict established icons of high art, the German simply hand-copied—“naively”—a blown-up media image, complete with off-register imperfections and cheap tabloid subject matter (fig. 26.15). The “imperfect” results draw attention to the means of reproduction,



26.15 Sigmar Polke, *Bunnies*, 1966. Acrylic on linen, 59 × 39½" (150 × 100 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

interfering with the seamless perfection that makes both classical Pop Art and advertising so effective. In the context of postwar Germany, Polke’s works constituted a critical commentary on the infiltration of American media imagery into German culture. Polke often worked on an allover grid or otherwise mechanically patterned ground. Rauschenberg, of course, had incorporated ordinary textiles and photographs into his combine paintings, as a device for generating the shock effect once possible in the unorthodox juxtaposition of materials (see fig. 21.10). Polke, however, developed the painterly “naturally” out of the mechanical, thus demonstrating a disturbing synchronicity between subjective creativity and mass production. By the eighties, Polke was no longer creating Pop variations on advertising. In a further assimilation using photography, the artist developed his imagery by layering photographic imagery onto underlying patterns of regularly repeating abstract motifs, often taken from textile designs (fig. 26.16). Delineated like contour drawings and layered in a manner inspired by Picabia’s *Transparencies* (see chapter 13), the images seem paradoxically to dematerialize at



26.16 Sigmar Polke, *Hochstand*, 1984. Acrylic, lacquer, and cotton, 10'8" × 7'4" (3.3 × 2.2 m). Private collection, New York.

the same time that they emerge from the support upon which the artist has painted them, creating an illusionistically deep pictorial space even as it seems independent of all perspective systems. Moreover, the figuration phases in and out of focus, as if it were the product of photographic or darkroom manipulations, or perhaps even of an accident with one of the substances Polke is known to have used in creating his curiously synthetic and characteristic colors. The impact of these visually stunning canvases is complicated when the premise for aesthetic indulgence is as morally and historically ambivalent as the guard tower that appears in *Hochstand* (see fig. 26.16)

Like his compatriot Penck, Dresden-born and -educated **Gerhard Richter** (b. 1932) found himself so in conflict with the social and aesthetic conditions of East Germany that he crossed over into the West in 1961. In 1962–63, Richter was in Düsseldorf and, with Polke, learning from Beuys, Fluxus, and exhibitions of American Pop artists. After his collaboration with Polke, Richter's work took a decisively more conceptual turn. Catalyzed by the iconoclasm of Fluxus, Richter declared, "I had had enough of bloody painting, and painting from a photograph seemed to me the most moronic and inartistic thing that anyone could do." This was an antiart gesture that led to a chal-

lenging artistic career. Since 1962, the artist created scores of "photopaintings," all of them more distinctly "photographic" than Rauschenberg's transfers, and yet far more like real paintings than Warhol's appropriations of media imagery. In his later photopaintings, Richter felt freer to depart from the original, often a snapshot made by the artist himself, as long as he preserved something of a genuine photographic look, complete with such flaws as out-of-focus blurring, graininess, or exaggerated contrasts, all of which seem to be points of mediation between painting and photography. The calm, bucolic scenes of Richter's later work (fig. 26.17) show Central European landscape immersed in a soft, romantic atmosphere, a kind of filter that reveals as much about how painting and photography alike distort our vision of reality as it does about the world depicted.

In the late sixties, Richter ran counter to the photopaintings with a return to pure abstraction, first in a series of heavily impastoed monochrome works called *Gray Pictures* (*Grave Bilder*). By the beginning of the eighties, after investigating many different styles, he came to concentrate on full-color, vigorously worked Expressionist abstractions (fig. 26.18), painted as a series and complementary to the cooler, more objective "classicism" of the photo landscapes. Though apparently as free and gestural as their Abstract Expressionist antecedents, Richter's abstractions are based on photographs of details of his own work. Chromatically and gesturally similar to abstractions painted by De Kooning in the fifties, Richter's nonrepresentational works issue from a different critical process. They present a planar space layered in strata of relatively distinct elements, a structural conception already seen as characteristic of much Postmodern art. In executing these works, Richter drew upon a vast repertoire of painterly techniques—troweling, scraping, flinging, scumbling, and brushing—that recall the artistic procedures of Hans Hofmann (see



26.17 Gerhard Richter, *Scheune/Barn No. 549/1*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 27½ × 39½" (69.9 × 100.3 cm). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



26.18 Gerhard Richter, *Vase*, 1984. Oil on canvas, 7'4½" × 6'6¾" (2.2 × 2 m).
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

fig. 11.1). In later work, Richter painted his abstractions directly, without the intervention of photography.

In the apocalyptic paintings of **Anselm Kiefer** (b. 1945), German and Jewish history are frequently evoked symbolically through the motif and appearance of scorched earth. Kiefer's interest in exploring the consequences of German history began in a series of conceptual photographs that have little to do with the physical presence of his Neo-Expressionist canvases. In 1969, in a collection of photographs called *The Occupations*, Kiefer documented himself standing in Nazi uniform before monuments like the Colosseum in Rome giving the Nazi salute. The scandal of enacting Hitler's imperialist desires in a confusing and often belittling way created a scandal that still colors the reception of Kiefer's work. The question of how to reckon with German history on personal, national, and international stages remains central to considerations of Kiefer's art.

In pursuing such themes, Kiefer exercises the freedom to exploit and mix images of Germany from the mythic realm of Valhalla (the mythological dwelling place of gods and heroes) to the horror of Auschwitz and Nuremberg, as

well as biblical and historical themes. His media are equally diverse—straw and sand, overprocessed photographs, lacquer, and fire—and might serve the expressive purpose of simulating ancient fields charred and furrowed from centuries of battle and seeming to stretch into infinity. Kiefer's elegiac themes are seen in *Departure from Egypt* (fig. 26.19), one of his most grandiose landscapes, rolling away majestically, yet held to the plane by the hook of Aaron's rod. Even though appearing as if it had been swept by a firestorm, or mulched in blood and dung, tar and salt, the field rewards close inspection with a rich sense of tactility and texture.

Kiefer has also worked in sculpture. He has made immense "books" out of lead and gathered them on shelves; the resulting assemblages can weigh several tons (fig. 26.20). Like Kiefer's paintings, his books contain the past, but as much through their material presence as through imagery or language. Indeed, these huge volumes have a massive solidity as physical objects that conveys a palpable sense of the weight of history upon us. The artist's use of lead is also resonant with the centuries-long human

26.19 Anselm Kiefer, *Departure from Egypt*, 1984. Straw, lacquer, and oil on canvas, lead rod attached, 12'5" × 18'5" (3.8 × 5.6 m). Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



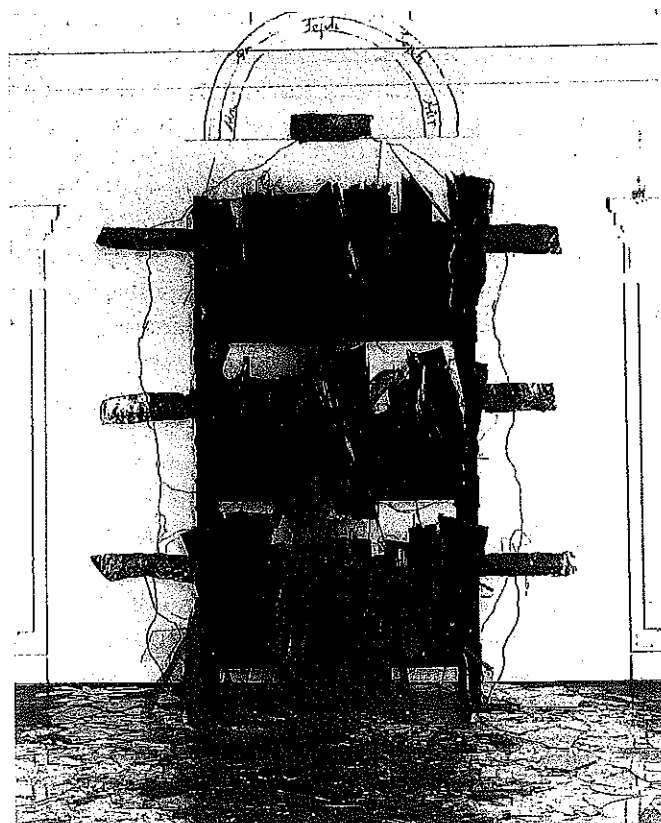
desire to turn nature into wealth and power: lead is the material that alchemists sought to convert into gold in the Middle Ages. It is now used for shielding against the radioactivity of atomic devices—a modern transmutation of matter that in some sense has fulfilled the alchemist's dream, even as it has made great devastation possible. After the unification of East and West Germany in 1991, Kiefer

moved to southern France and stopped painting for a while. In the mid-nineties, however, he revealed new canvases that take the romantic terrain of his new home as the source for a series of brilliant, light-filled landscapes that seem to bring a layer of coloristic beauty to his typically dark and painful palette.

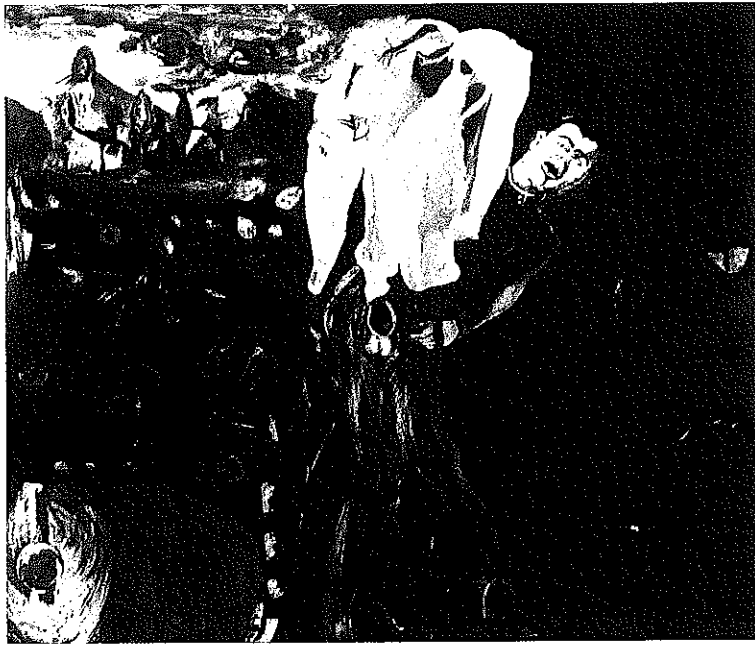
Italian Neo-Expressionism

The second nation to foster a substantial Neo-Expressionist movement was Italy. Called the "*transavanguardia*," Italian artists of the seventies found in painting and Italian classicism, two traditions disregarded since World War II, the ingredients for a contemporary movement. Among the "three Cs" of Italy's *transavanguardia*—a group completed by Sandro Chia and Enzo Cucchi—who first came to international notice at the 1980 Venice Biennale, the Neapolitan-born **Francesco Clemente** (b. 1952) was the most prolific. Clemente maintained studio-residences in Rome, Madras, and New York, and each year spent time working in each country. While he absorbed and used the imagery, ideas, and techniques native to the environment of each city, the artist also allowed his disparate influences to overlap and cross-fertilize. This became especially apparent in works like the twenty-four miniatures of *Francesco Clemente Pinxit*, executed in India in the classical Hindu manner, using natural pigments on paper.

Clemente taught himself oil painting in New York. There, like Barnett Newman (see fig. 19.30), Clemente created a series of works entitled *The Fourteen Stations*, interpreting the theme not with the traditional iconography of Christ's journey to the Cross, but rather through a dreamlike intermingling of personal psychology, cultural history, and religious symbolism. The artist's own naked body is ubiquitous throughout the paintings in the series. In *Station No. IV*, the figure resembles a Roman-collared



26.20 Anselm Kiefer, *Breaking of the Vessels*, 1990. Lead, iron, glass, copper wire, charcoal, and aquatec, 16' × 6' × 4' ½" (4.9 × 1.8 × 1.23 m), weight 7½ tons. The Saint. Louis Art Museum, Missouri.



26.21 Francesco Clemente, *The Fourteen Stations, No. IV*, 1981–82. Oil and encaustic on canvas, 6'6" × 7'4½" (2 × 2.2 m). Private collection.

priest, screaming like Bacon's bishops (see fig. 20.47) and lifting his white surplice to reveal a dark, egg-shaped void just above an intact scrotum (fig. 26.21). Behind the figure stands a bull, painted with all the distorted energy of Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret* (see fig. 19.9). The animal recalls Nandi, Siva's bull, and provides a link between the Christian series and Clemente's Indian works.

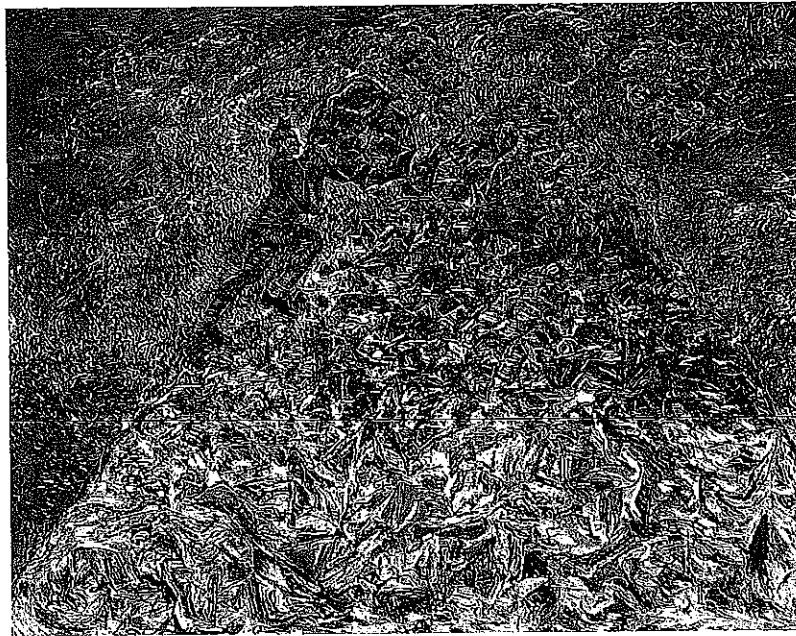
Clemente's innumerable self-portraits present an image of selfhood and masculinity that is porous and flexible. Conventional expectations about male identity are undermined as are the boundaries of the body. Clemente presents the human form doubling up on itself, as it mutates from a self-contained entity to a being mingled with others, in scenes that are sometimes ecstatic and sometimes painful. An elegant vision of the loss of self in a generative moment of creation is the 1983 *Semen* (fig. 26.22). Suspended, with eyes closed, is a being loosely defined by a broken outline and incomplete shading. It resembles a kind of highly developed fetus, floating in amniotic fluid. The title, however, suggests a connection with swimming

sperm. Together these clues create an ambiguous double sense of potential life awaiting fruition.

In his reaction to modernist conventions, **Sandro Chia** (b. 1946), a Florentine who subsequently relocated to New York, relied on Italian exuberance and a personal knowledge of the ersatz Neoclassicism practiced during the Fascist twenties and thirties by artists such as Giorgio de Chirico (see fig. 13.5) and Ottone Rosai, who were themselves reacting against Futurism, Italy's first modernist style. Adopting the older painters' conventions—their absurdly muscle-bound nudes and self-consciously mythic situations—but inflating the figures to balloon proportions while reducing the overblown narratives to the scale of fairytales, Chia parodies his sources while thumbing his nose at the authentic Neoclassical rigor that survived in Minimalism. Just as appealing as the comic amplitude of these harmless giants is the Mediterranean warmth of Chia's color and the nervous energy of his painterly surfaces—qualities of scale, palette, and touch that the artist also managed to translate into his heroic bronzes. Just how



26.22 Francesco Clemente, *Semen*, 1983. Oil on linen, 7'9" × 13' (2.4 × 4 m). Private collection.



26.23 Sandro Chia, *The Idleness of Sisyphus*, 1981. Oil on canvas, in two parts: top 6'9" × 12'8¼" (2.1 × 3.9 m), bottom 3'5" × 12'1¼" (1.05 × 3.9 m), overall 10'2" × 12'8¼" (3.1 × 3.9 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

to take Chia's injection of contemporary citizens into classical themes, particularly the case of the bureaucrat in *The Idleness of Sisyphus* (fig. 26.23) was central to debates over Neo-Expressionism in the eighties. The reclamation of grand narrative painting even with the self-deprecating ineptitude of Chia's Sisyphus suggested to some that the deconstruction begun in the sixties had been in vain.

Unlike the world travelers Clemente and Chia, **Enzo Cucchi** (b. 1950) remained solidly rooted in the soil of his native region near Ancona, a seaport on Italy's Adriatic coast. There, for generations, the Cucchi family has worked the land, a land whose circular compounds of farm buildings and catastrophic landslides often figured in the artist's paintings. Because of his doomsday vision and his love of richly textured surfaces, built up with what often seems a waxy mixture of rusted graphite and coal dust, Cucchi has sometimes been compared with Germany's Anselm Kiefer (see figs. 26.19, 26.20). What sets him unmistakably

apart, however, is the Italian heritage that he brings to his dramas; he grew up amid paintings of saints and martyrs. In his *Entry into Port of a Ship with a Red Rose* (fig. 26.24), austere yet emotively rendered crosses glide across the large fresco in graceful clusters, as purposefully as a fleet of sailboats. Such powerful compositional effects, achieved with the sparsest of means, have led some critics to compare Cucchi's work with the early Renaissance frescoes of Giotto.

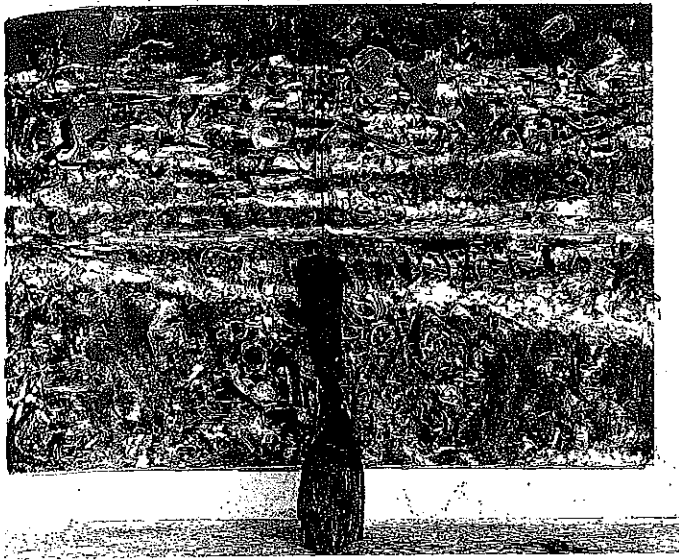
American Neo-Expressionism

The artist most often credited with catapulting the eighties art scene in New York was the Brooklyn-born, Texas-educated **Julian Schnabel** (b. 1951). For viewers starved by the lean visual diet of Minimalism and Conceptualism, Schnabel's grand-scale, thematic pictures—reviving the whole panoply of religious and cultural archetypes once the glory of traditional high art—had an electrifying effect.

In a move both innovative and violently expressive, Schnabel incorporated three dimensions into a flat surface in works such as *The Sea* by embedding broken crockery in a reinforced wood support (fig. 26.25). The idea for this process came to him during a visit to Barcelona, where he saw Antoni Gaudí's tiled mosaic benches in Güell Park (see fig. 5.10). However, rather than smooth and inlaid, Schnabel's shards project from the surface in an irregular, disjunctive arrangement that visually functions, edge to edge, as a field of enlarged Pointillist dots. At the same time that the china pieces serve to define shapes and even model form, they also break up the image and absorb it into the overall surface flicker like a primitive, encrusted version of the Art Nouveau figure-in-pattern effects of Gustav Klimt (see fig. 5.6), Gaudí's Austrian contemporary. By painting over, around, or even under the protruding ceramic, Schnabel created every kind of pictorial drama, from evocations of folkloric wit and charm to suggestions of mythic



26.24 Enzo Cucchi, *Entry into Port of a Ship with a Red Rose*, 1985–86. Fresco, 9'2" × 13'1" (2.8 × 4 m). Philadelphia Museum of Art.



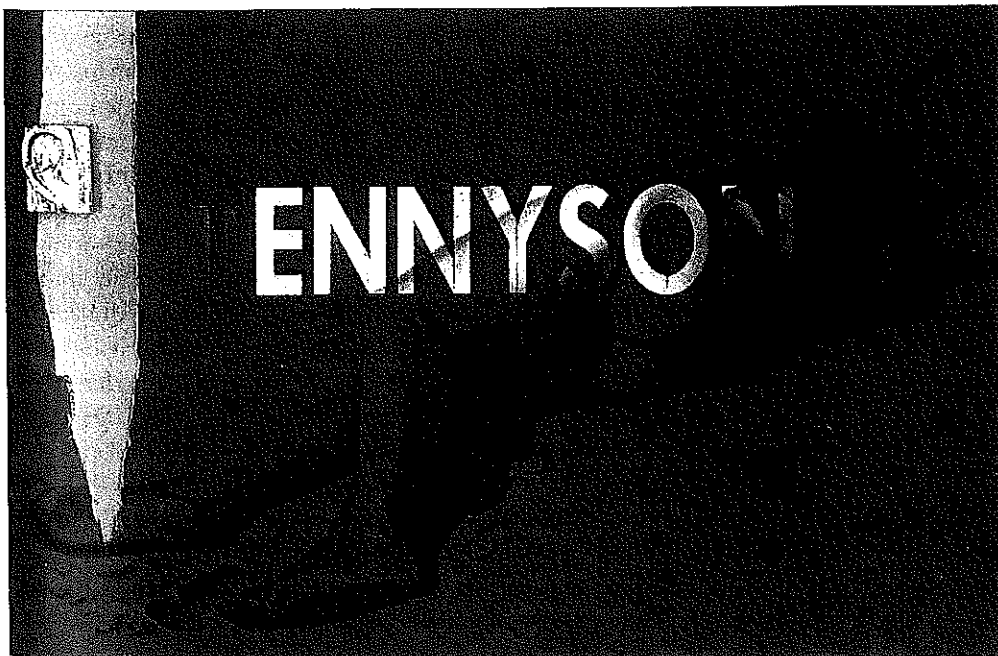
26.25 Julian Schnabel, *The Sea*, 1981. Oil on wood, with Mexican pots and plaster, 9 × 13' (2.7 × 4 m). Saatchi Collection, London.

ritual. The emotive effect of Schnabel's work arises less from the image, which is not immediately decipherable, than from an audacious stylistic performance, or process, that simultaneously structures and shatters both figure and surface. In the nineties, Schnabel took his flair for drama and his control over multiple formal and narrative layers to Hollywood, making two well-received films.

Among the American Neo-Expressionists, one of the most controversial artists was **David Salle** (b. 1952). Salle forged an unpromising mix of secondhand, disassociated elements into a new, original conception. In the painting *Tennyson* (fig. 26.26), the artist professed a Conceptual background by lettering out the title in capitals, across a field dominated on the left by a found wooden relief of an

ear, and on the right by a nude woman with her back to the viewer. The name of a Victorian poet, a piece of erotica, and a severed ear—at first, the different images may seem to cancel one another out and erase all meaning, until one recalls that in 1958 Jasper Johns reproduced Tennyson's name across the bottom of an abstract canvas painted in sober gray on gray, as if in tribute to the artistic integrity and lyrical, high-minded spirit of England's "good gray poet." The connection to Johns is reasserted by the disembodied ear, which could also evoke the poet's "ear for words," or Van Gogh's self-imposed mutilation, but also, and more tellingly, Jasper Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts* (see fig. 21.15). Johns originally affixed a three-dimensional ear, among other anatomical parts, above the painting of a target. In Johns's work the uncomfortable relationship between the destination of an arrow or bullet and the exposed fragments of a naked body generated a range of personal and political content. Such correspondences were less clear in Salle's works, though supporters thought that paintings like *Tennyson* should be read as a commentary on the naked woman, the sexism such imagery represents, and the role of the nude in the history of art.

Salle's selection of poses typical of soft-core pornography (though copied from Salle's own photography rather than published sources), art historical "masterpieces," found objects, and pop culture references encouraged the interpretation of his paintings as dustbins of American culture. To supporters, Salle was a deft practitioner of pastiche, the critical assemblage of existing cultural elements to elicit an analytical response from the viewer. If, by the eighties, painting, with its grand tradition and canonical history, was understood to be a politically suspect medium, then Salle's casual combinations forced it to come down from its pedestal and sully itself with the mundane objects of everyday life. To critics in the eighties, it was too early to



26.26 David Salle, *Tennyson*, 1983. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 6'6" × 9'9" (2 × 3 m). Private collection, New York.

presume that it was common knowledge that painting had been compromised by its relationship to the elite of history. The image of themselves that many Neo-Expressionist painters put forward did nothing to assuage their critics. Complete with beautiful models, troops of assistants, and the ubiquitous cigar, they appeared to be more like clichés of the modernist genius than critics of modernism. Without such a critique, Salle's imagery, like most Neo-Expressionist painting, appeared to many as naïve and sexist pining for the glory days of the great male painters.

Few of the Neo-Expressionist painters address their art totally to the figure, in all its naked physical and psychological complexity. Foremost among such painters is **Eric Fischl** (b. 1948), whose immense fleshscapes have an unusually high-voltage effect on viewers (fig. 26.27). Created in tandem with a large body of photographs and fascinating preparatory sketches made of overlaid drawings on tracing paper, Fischl's presentation of nudity takes on a self-consciousness in form as well as content. Deliberately composed to occupy the spaces of alienation and Americana familiar to the work of American painters such as Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper (see figs. 2.48, 18.37), Fischl's subjects move beyond a fascination with either flesh or paint to become implicated in suggestions of alcoholism, voyeurism, onanism, homosexuality, and incest. This can be seen in paintings set in the gardens, on the beaches, in the well-appointed rooms, and on the yachts of affluent America, all populated by men, women, and children scattered about or clustered in scenes of boredom and isolation. Like the cathartic abstractions of his Neo-Expressionist peers, but in a style that referenced the

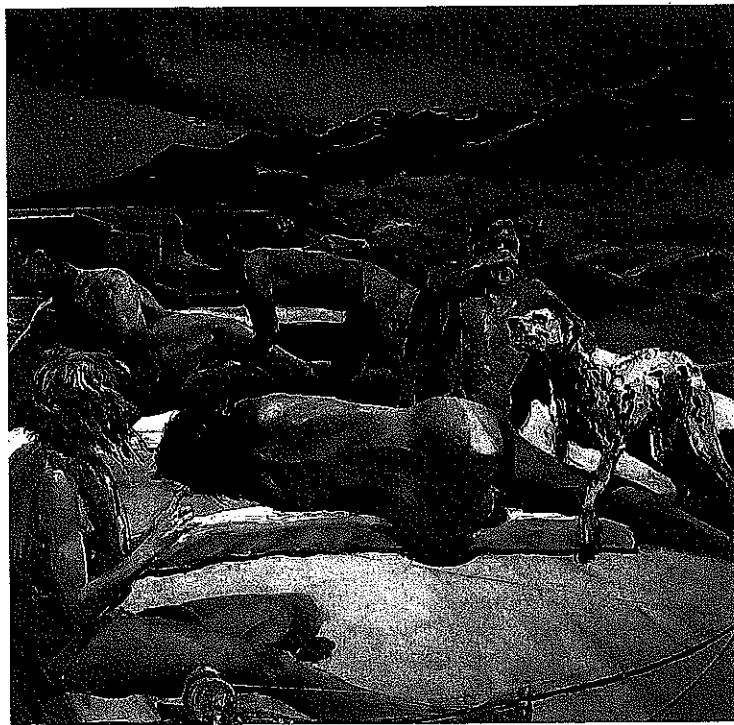
traditions of American Realism, Fischl painted upper-middle-class angst. Awkward and half-embarrassed, self-absorbed and yet furtively, even intently, aware of one another's exposure, these figures communicate the individual's psychic as well as physical nakedness.

The paintings in Fischl's *India* series, a series of images based on scenes observed on a trip to northern India in 1988, have been described as the work of a "post-modern tourist." The series, like Clemente's work in the miniature tradition, implies a critique of the "Orientalism" and "exoticism" often featured in European images of Asia and Africa from the nineteenth century, just as Fischl's nudes are in part a critique of female nudes by Manet and others. Separating Fischl from his colonialist predecessors, however, is the fact that he works in an era in which Western imperialism most often takes the form of tourism and economic expansion rather than outright military conquest. Even if the beggars and the group of monkeys in *On the Stairs of the Temple* suggest little beyond a tourist's snapshot, the treatment of a woman at the center prompts a more complicated response. Clothed in pink and bathed in splendid light, she might at first seem to evidence at least some attempt by the artist to fathom another culture, with its different understanding of spiritual and physical beauty. Yet the draped figure communicates real ambivalence. The viewer's expectation that she be freely available as an object of visual delectation is at least partially confirmed by the subject's incarnation of the stereotype of veiled "Other of the East."

The Challenge of Photography in 1980s Art

Neo-Expressionism was heralded by many as a return to painting and curators celebrated that young artists "had returned to the painter's pots." But many also took cameras into the studio. Eric Fischl's paintings were often the result of studying not just the model, but photographs of family, friends, and strangers. Salle generated many of his motifs by duplicating the compositions and the appearance of photographs. In the critical debates of the day, Neo-Expressionism figured as the return of the painterly, while Appropriation tapped into the potential of mass media, particularly photography. The issue was always complex and a number of artists juxtaposed the aesthetic bravado of the former with the sociocultural analysis of the latter.

The art of **Robert Longo** (b. 1953), which has been described as "apocalyptic Pop," features over-lifesize imagery taken from or inspired by film, television, comic books, and advertisements; a secondhand world of kitsch and high culture mixed and matched to provoke voyeuristic responses to such basic themes as love, death, and violence. No less dramatic is the serendipitous variety of media that Longo and his collaborators (usually named) have combined: sculpture (wood carving, stone intaglio, and bronze casting), painting (acrylic, spray paint, and gold



26.27 Eric Fischl, *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 7 × 7' (2.1 × 2.1 m). Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lehrman, Washington, D.C.



26.28 Robert Longo, *Untitled* (Men in the Cities series), 1981. Charcoal and graphite on paper, 8 × 5' (2.4 × 1.52 m).

leaf), drawing, silkscreen, and photography. Longo's practice put him in the company of Appropriation artists while his aggressive content, which has included black American flags, guns, and huge ocean waves, links his work to the Neo-Expressionist impulse.

Longo gained early recognition with a number of large black-and-white charcoal drawings, such as the 1979–82 series *Men in the Cities*. For these impressive works, the artist photographed single figures clad in sober business clothes and seized in the contorted throes of what could be either agony or ecstasy, dying or dancing (fig. 26.28). But while any such condition should create a sense of heat, the figures are frozen—and perhaps all the more haunting for the tension that this ambiguity produces. Perhaps better than any of his peers, Longo captured the sense of corporate-induced frenzy that animated the artworld in the early eighties. His contorted and violent figures, all dressed in business attire, express the uneasy combination of urgency and disregard that treating art as investments could produce. At a moment of escalating prices and famous art stars, the influence of money on artistic success felt as if it had never been greater, causing great ambivalence in the art community. *Men in the Cities* was created by transferring photographs that Longo took of his friends leaping, dancing, and fighting on his roof. The images were projected and duplicated by means of emphatic and stylized charcoal and graphite drawings, which Longo executed with the help of assistants.

The identical twins **Mike and Doug Starn** (b. 1961) produced work in collaboration. Although they have also painted, their principal medium is an elaborate variety of photocolage. In their work, they appropriate a photographic image and subject it to all manner of technical alterations. They might enlarge an image enormously, or make a toned print of it in the nineteenth-century manner. But they will also deliberately scratch the negative, or otherwise distress the image, crease or tear the print, stain



26.29 Mike and Doug Starn, *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait*, 1985–88. Toned silver print and Orho film, Scotch tape, and wood, 8'9" × 13'3½" (2.7 × 4.1 m). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

it with glue, or cut it up. They will then complete the work by mounting and framing the separate pieces, or tape them directly to the wall. Often the resulting large-scale photocollages are as imposing as murals.

In *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait* (fig. 26.29) the Starns borrow an image often used by artists such as Duchamp and Warhol. Instead of using a photograph that documents the painting alone, however, as those artists did, the Starns took a picture of the *Mona Lisa* surrounded by its large, cumbersome vitrine at the Louvre in Paris, with the rest of the gallery and its visitors, including the two artists themselves, reflected in the glass. Even standing a few feet from Leonardo's painting, museumgoers see it twice removed, sealed behind a glaring barrier and obstructed by the reflected bodies of other visitors. The installation of the painting has the ironic effect of distancing the work from the very people who have come to experience it firsthand. In place of an original that is remote and out of reach, the photocollage substitutes its own complex aesthetic structure for that of the *Mona Lisa*. But the cut-up and painstakingly reconstituted version that the Starns create, with its patchwork grid of Scotch-taped panels, openly announces itself as a homemade, "constructed" copy—totally at odds with the mystique of the precious, irreplaceable masterpiece. The Starns create a dramatic,

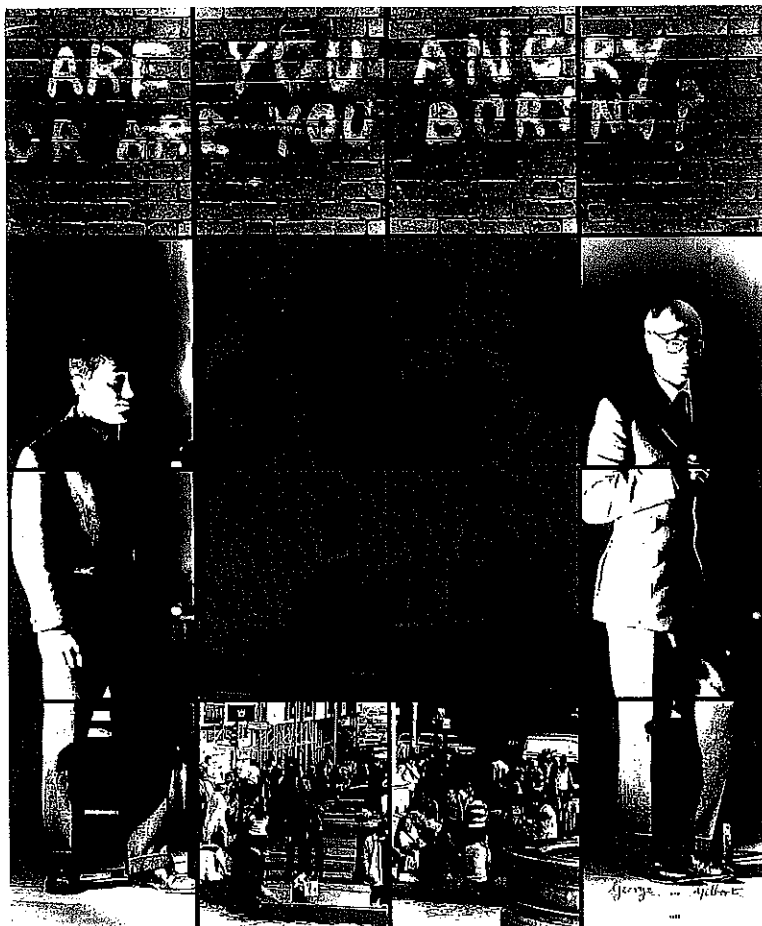
expressive comment on issues of originality and reproduction, art and meaning, devotion and power. Though clearly related to Appropriation, the Starns's aesthetic bravado placed them comfortably in the company of the international Neo-Expressionists.

The English artist team of **Gilbert and George** (b. 1943, 1942), known initially for turning their art school rebellion against modernism into comedic performances, found their monumental multipanel photographs included in group shows documenting the Expressionist movement in the eighties. The pair's later work continued to push the limits of self-portraiture, as had their *Singing Sculptures* (see fig. 24.17), but now the pair featured images of themselves in large-scale photographs, hand-dyed, mounted, and framed. The photoworks express aggressively political content, as in *Are You Angry or Are You Just Boring?* (fig. 26.30), which combines the potential energy of alienated urban youth and images relating to the AIDS epidemic with decorative intuition that recalls Matisse. Gilbert and George designate everything they make as sculpture. They favor explicitly homoerotic content, often expressed emblematically through voluptuous flower and vegetable imagery, while presenting it within a religio-aesthetic structure of stained-glass-colored panels, and iconic cruciform patterns.

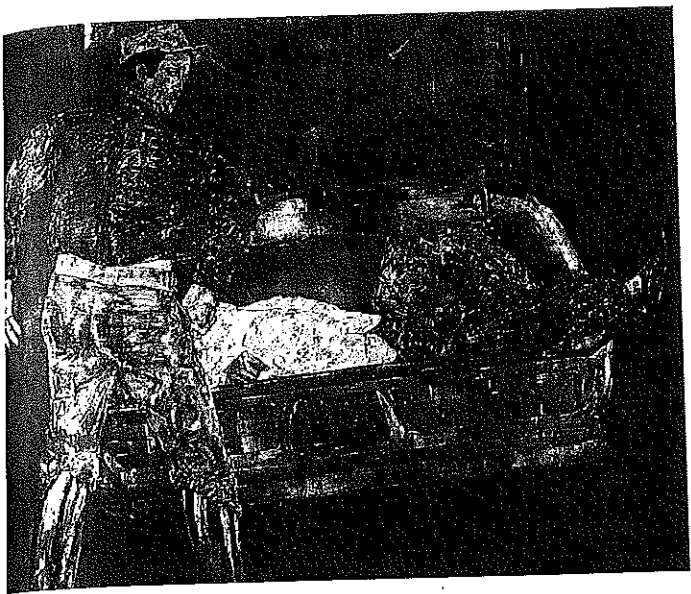
Searing Statements: Expressive (if not Expressionist) Art

In a period of young artists' early success, the Chicago-born **Leon Golub** (b. 1922) stood in stark contrast. He was a moralist in the tradition of Daumier and Beckmann (see figs. 2.14, 13.40) who for some forty years stuck by his guns, all the while "famous for being ignored," until at last, in the early eighties, the world's unhappy concerns had so evolved as to coincide with his own. These are the politics of power and the insidious, all-corrupting effects—violence and victimization—of power without accountability. The then sixty-year-old Golub had spent the long years of his exile—out of fashion and out of the country—steadily gathering his artistic and intellectual forces, so that by the time the first pictures in his *Mercenaries* series came before an astounded public in 1982, they presented, as did the later *White Squad* pictures, a hard-won but fixating, frozen unity of raw form and brutal content (fig. 26.31).

By the time of the *Mercenaries*, Golub had begun to focus on the margins of society—the jungles of South America or Africa—where the emissaries of political power tended to be not anonymous armies or aloof public figures but "mercs," individual agents for hire. To bring home the evil of torture and terrorism, Golub hit upon the idea of making his political criminals all too human, fascinating and specific in their cowboy swagger and guilty satisfaction, while reducing the intimidated victim to a dehumanized, undifferentiated state almost beneath empathy. The better to authenticate his images of unfettered police authority, Golub pieced them together from photos of political



26.30 Gilbert and George, *Are You Angry or Are You Just Boring?* 1977. Color photograph, 7'11" × 6'7" (2.4 × 2 m). Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands.



26.31 Leon Golub, *White Squad IV, El Salvador*, 1983. Acrylic on canvas, 10' × 12'6" (3 × 3.8 m). Saatchi Collection, London.

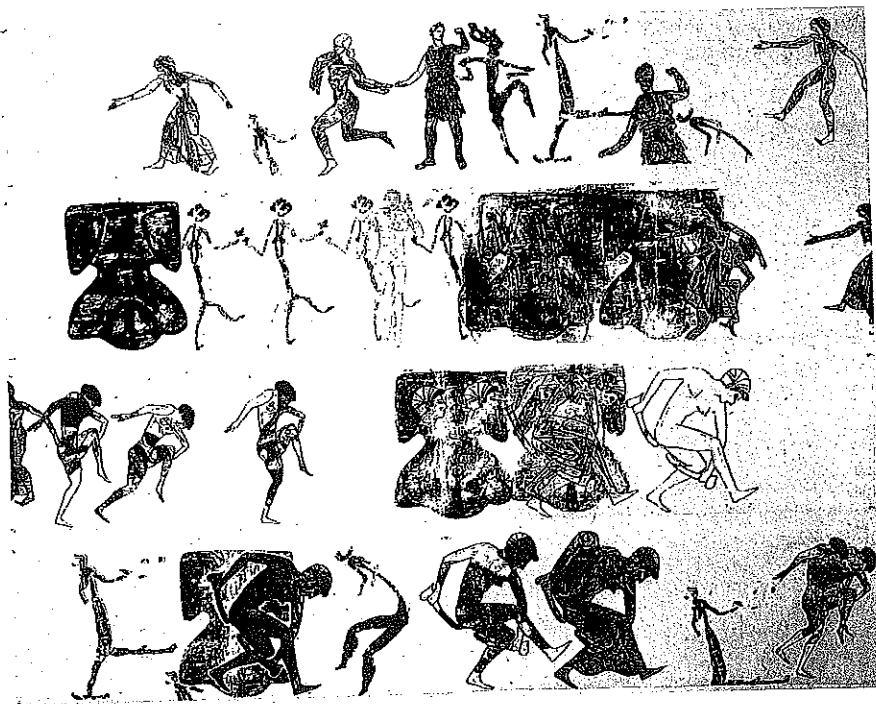
atrocities, complete with the ungainliness of men exuberantly and sensually caught up in their daily work. He made his petty tyrants ten feet (3 m) tall, pressed them forward with a ground of Pompeiian oxide-red (itself a primary emblem of imperial, political power) and cropped the anti-heroes' legs off to spill the scene forward, as if into the viewer's own space. Far too committed and subtle to preach or sloganeer, Golub simply uses his long-seasoned pictorial means—a congruence of image, form, process, and psychology—to induce feelings of complicity in a system that manipulates some individuals to destroy human life and others to ignore the fact that it is happening.

Since the beginning of her career in Chicago in the late forties, Nancy Spero (b. 1926), like her husband Golub,

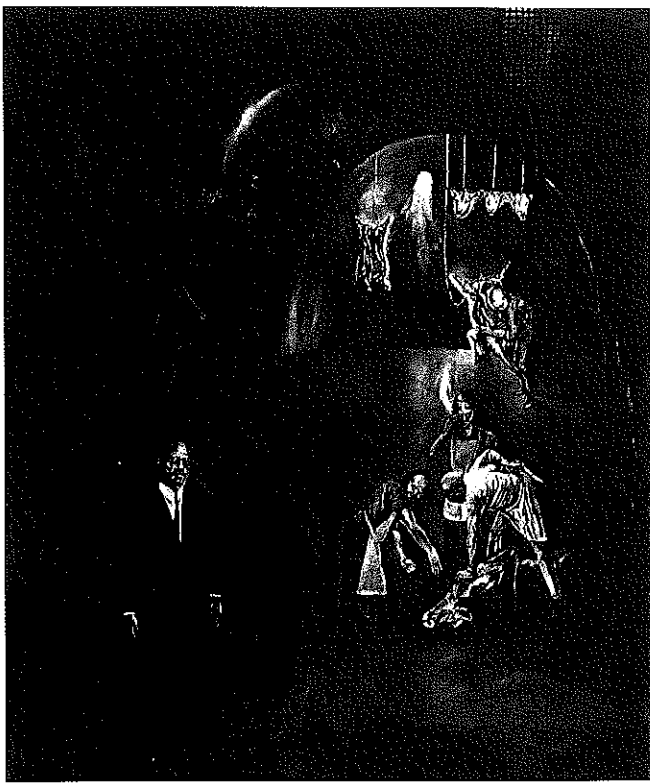
pursued political and social themes. In the sixties, her Vietnam drawings were among the most powerful statements against the war. *Search and Destroy* from 1967 shows one of the helicopters that saw much combat in Southeast Asia, but Spero imagines the aircraft in a fantastical, Goyaesque form, its nose like the lance of a huge swordfish, or perhaps a hypodermic needle, driven into the chest of a falling victim.

In subsequent work, Spero expanded her drawings into elaborate sequences. These she presented in the form of friezes or unrolled scrolls: panoramas of individual panels of print and collage, stretching up to 180 feet (55 m). These ribbons of images represent women from all eras and cultures. In *Goddess II* (fig. 26.32), ancient Greek-vase dancers and cavorting goddesses appear again and again, amid earlier and later sources. The diversity of the figures' printed textures and colors from one appearance to the next makes the frieze richly inclusive in its unfolding graphic development. Spero said that her scrolls are "almost like a map. A map of the range of human experience from birth to aging, war, and rape, to a celebratory dance of life—but depicted through images of women."

Politically and socially committed, and as uncensored in her approach as Golub or Spero, the British-born artist Sue Coe (b. 1951) moved to New York in 1972. There she began aiming her agitprop collage-paintings at such targets as the CIA, male chauvinism, nuclear brinkmanship, apartheid in South Africa, and, ultimately, the policies of President Reagan (fig. 26.33). Coe was inspired by the social and political inequities and righteous indignation expressed by artists such as Brueghel, Goya, Daumier, and Orozco. She is a true Expressionist, using art to indict an unjust world with the same passion that inspired earlier twentieth-century heroes of moral protest such as Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Max Beckmann.



26.32 Nancy Spero, *Goddess II* (detail), 1985. Handprinting and collage on paper, 7'2" × 9'2" (2.2 × 2.8 m). Collection the artist.



26.33 Sue Coe, *Malcolm X and the Slaughter House*, 1985. Oil on paper, collage, 59% × 49¼" (152.1 × 125.1 cm). Collection Don Hanson.

Coe employed a whole battery of provocative techniques—a hellishly dark palette of graphite and gore; razor-sharp drawing; jammed, irrational spaces; collaged tabloid headlines—all of which she wielded with a seemingly unshakable faith in the rightness of her perceptions. But, however extreme or fanatical these works may seem to viewers of a less political persuasion, one cannot help be moved by the poetic justice at work in a midnight world of evildoers metamorphosed into snakes and their hapless victims into angels, or in a painting overprinted with a banner like: "If animals believed in God, then the devil would look like a human

26.34 Ida Applebroog, *Noble Fields*, 1987. Oil on canvas, five panels, overall 7'2" × 11' (2.2 × 3.4 m). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



being. As one critic wrote, "Sue Coe paints horror beautifully, ugliness elegantly, and monstrosity with precise sanity."

After making small drawings, artist's books, and videos in the seventies, the New York artist **Ida Applebroog** (b. 1929) undertook a number of large, multipanel paintings in the eighties, among them *Noble Fields* (fig. 26.34). Applebroog's early work was marked by a feminist consciousness and an uncanny ability to generate expressive, intimate, and multidirectional narratives with the most schematic graphic means. A series of books from the late seventies present a single image repeated behind different headings evoking stages in tense, ambivalent stories. In her paintings, she pursued her thematic concerns with the forceful presentation of aggressive yet often highly ambiguous images. One critic, for example, saw in *Noble Fields* "a bald Medusa" who "sits for her portrait in an evening gown and arm cast, while little Oedy [Oedipus], nearby, eats a watermelon"—a description that some may find as puzzling as the painting. The mention of Oedipus is illuminating, however, since the stresses and hostilities within a troubled family are among Applebroog's notable subjects. Nonetheless, she speaks of them with a vocabulary of private symbols that the viewer cannot hope to decipher fully. Fixed against empty backgrounds that offer no clue to their meaning, her mysterious gatherings of figures are painted in thin, somewhat unearthly, colors that give them the air of characters half-remembered from a distant, traumatic past. The multitude of seemingly unrelated images makes it impossible to offer a single, unified "reading" of the painting. In some paintings, however, Applebroog is more specific in her subject matter. *The Church of St. Francis Xavier*, 1987, portrays a disconcerting image of a wheeled cross and a hooded man, referring to the church decree that forbade a Jesuit church in New York from hosting a gay organization.

Most often Applebroog delves into her substantial collection of personal and public imagery to generate what she has called "a chaos of possibilities within regimented formal

designs." In *Noble Fields*, for instance, our attention is pulled back and forth by the strip of images symmetrically disposed across the horizontal panel at the top; by the injured, supported male, the line of high-kicking dancers, and the dining female in the right panel; by the delicately painted monster with a broken arm and a frilly dress in the left panel; and by the child gorging himself on massive watermelons in the stark, lunar landscape at the center. These competing areas of interest are as difficult to reconcile with one another as are the members of a fractious family, or the layers of guilt and pain that its members bear.

Wall of Fame: Graffiti and Cartoon Artists

As Neo-Expressionism opened art to the many possibilities once banned by Minimalist purism, and Appropriation art drew on the commercial media, a number of even younger artists found themselves drawn into the energy and "authenticity" of one of the most "impure" of all graphic modes. This was graffiti, those "logos" (initials or nicknames) and scrawled "tags" (signatures) that their perpetrators called "writing" and had felt-tipped and spray-painted (or "bombed") all over New York City's subway trains since about 1960. For many passengers, this takeover of public walls by an indigenous, compulsive graphism simply constituted vandalism, but as a look back at the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Jean Dubuffet, and Cy Twombly indicates, graffiti-like marks have long been used by major artists (see figs. 19.9, 20.18). Not until the eighties, however, did the underground world of self-taught graffiti writers, mainly from the Bronx and Brooklyn, interact with the aboveground, Manhattan-based realm of artists and art-school students. In 1983, the upwardly mobile graffiti artists received a boost when Rotterdam's Boymans-van Beuningen Museum put on the first exhibition of graffiti art, and subsequently one of the world's premier dealers in modern art, Sidney Janis, put on his Post-Graffiti show. In the latter event, Janis displayed the canvases of graffiti writers in the very galleries where for years New Yorkers had viewed such blue-chip masters as Mondrian.

The graffiti artists and cartoonists who profited the most from the encounter between uptown and downtown art were those who brought the support of an art-school education to the experience. This equipped them with a basic pictorial language that was charged by the graffiti artists' urge to communicate and their powerful calligraphic thrust, and allowed them to expand their own Pop-cartoon-TV vocabulary into a new, broadly expressive language. The East Village in New York City became the home and exhibition space for many of these young artists.

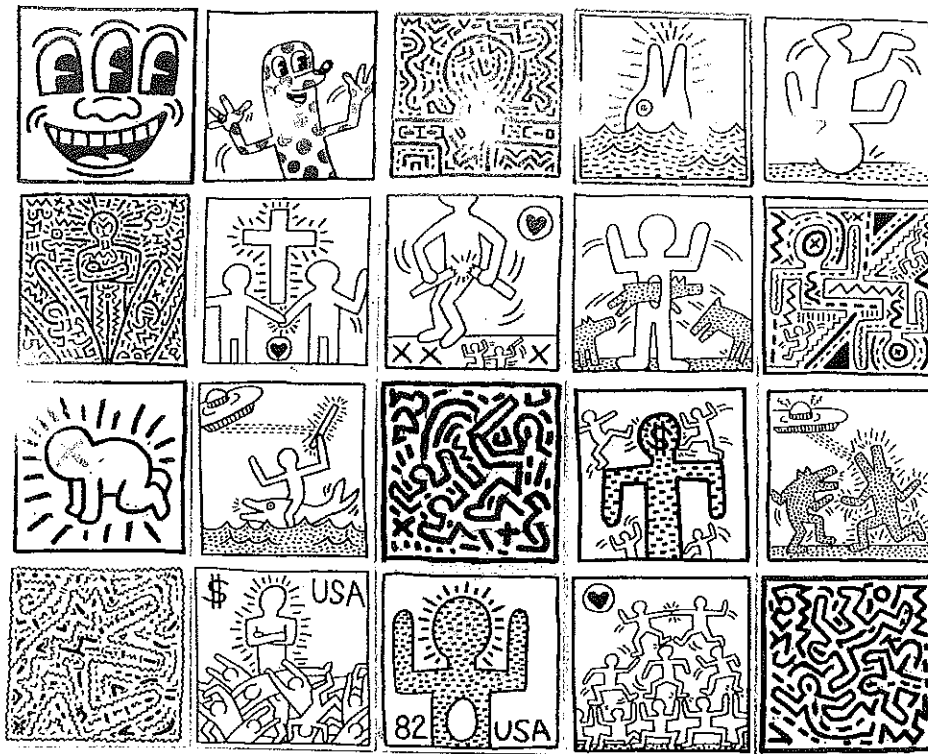
Haring, Basquiat, and Scharf

The dean of the art-school graffiti artists was **Keith Haring** (1958–90), who, with his School of Visual Arts

preparation and love of working in public spaces, served as the all-important link between the subway world of self-taught graffiti "writers" and the younger "mainstream" artists responsive to the omnipresent, abrasive form of popular expression. At the same time that he made his presence felt in all the graffiti and cartoon forums, Haring was also traveling throughout New York City's subway system and leaving his artistic calling card on virtually every train platform. The ubiquitous format for his impromptu exhibitions was the black panel from which an advertising poster had been removed, providing a surface somewhat like that of a schoolroom blackboard. After 1980, Haring made thousands of chalk drawings "in transit," always quick, simple, strong, and direct, for the activity carried with it the risk of arrest for defacement of public property. He developed a distinctive vocabulary of cartoon figures—radiant child, barking dog, flying saucer, praying man—intermingled with such universally readable signs as the cross, the halo, the pyramid, the heart, and the dollar, all rendered with such cheerfulness and generosity that their statements could be neither dismissed nor mistaken (fig. 26.35). While in his commercial work Haring seemed to prefer drawing with black sumi ink or Magic Marker on paper, oaktag, fiberglass, or vinyl tarpaulin, he remained ready to unleash his prodigious capacity for graphic invention on almost any kind of surface, including those provided by pottery vases or plaster casts of such cliché icons as Botticelli's *Venus*. On these, as well as on vast outdoor walls, he sometimes collaborated with genuine graffiti writers, most of whom otherwise preferred the moving, subterranean environment of the MTA trains.

Though Haring garnered considerable respect in Europe, his contribution remained underappreciated in American museum circles during his lifetime. Though he aspired to have his work compared and exhibited with de Kooning and Matisse, his populist and political activities seemed to work against artworld recognition. Haring was politically active, creating posters and donating art for AIDS organizations in particular. In 1986 he opened the Pop Shop, which developed his project of bringing art to the masses who rarely ventured into Soho galleries. At the Pop Shop, Haring sold low-cost merchandise such as pins and t-shirts with his signature motifs. The Pop Shop is still in operation. In 1997, seven years after his death from AIDS, Haring received a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

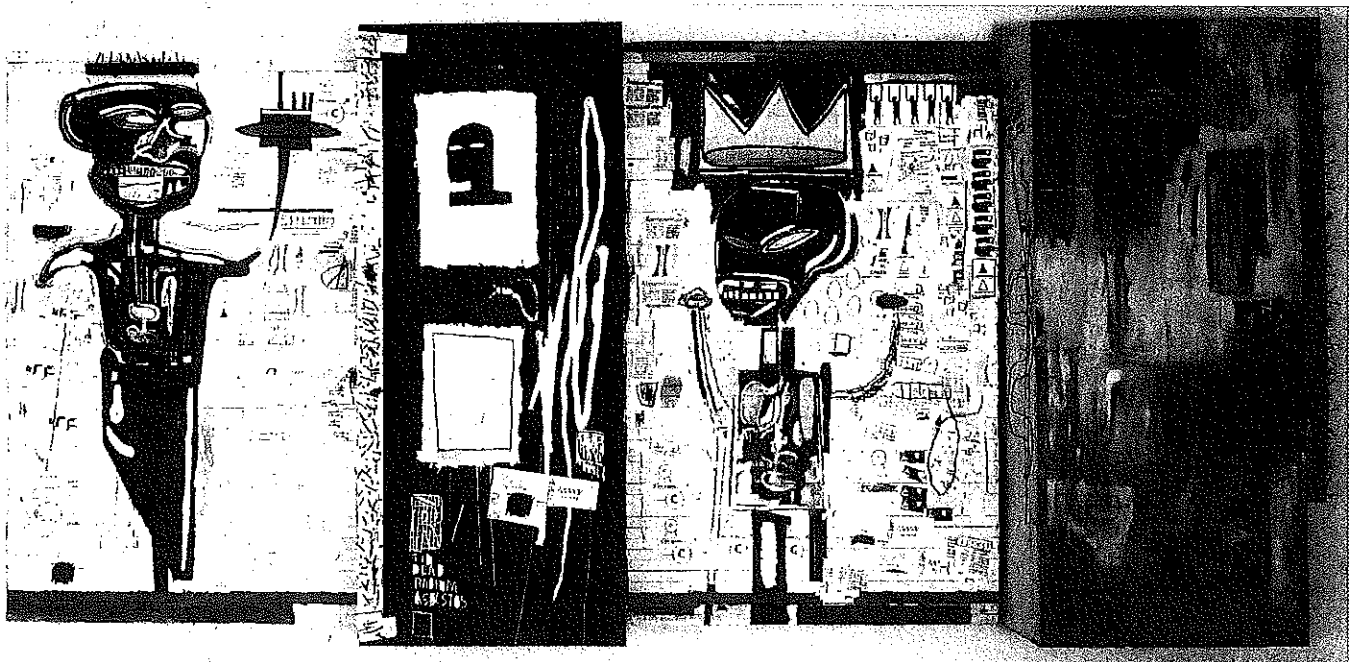
A key figure in the transformation of graffiti into painting in the eighties was the Brooklyn-born Haitian-Hispanic artist **Jean-Michel Basquiat** (1960–88). A high-school dropout at seventeen, Basquiat was probably the most meteoric star among all the talents associated with graffiti. Like the other successful graffiti-turned-painters, Basquiat never actually "bombed" trains. Rather, while more or less living on the streets in Lower Manhattan, he formed a partnership with a friend named Al Diaz and began Magic Marking poetic messages, illustrated with odd



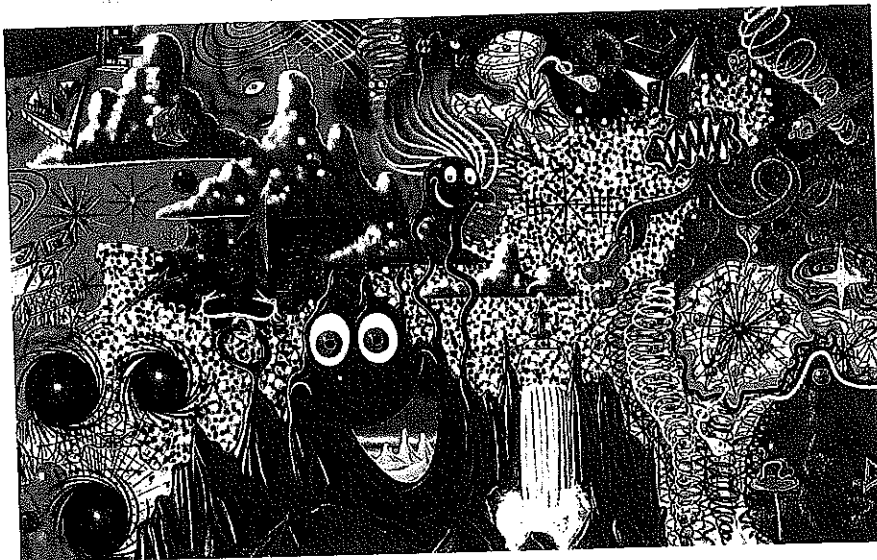
26.35 Keith Haring, *One-Man Show*, Installation view, 1982. Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

symbols, all over the city. The pair signed their work SAMO© (standing for “same old shit”). Basquiat’s tag reveals something of the frustration he felt as a black artist trying to assert his art within the context of a predominantly white gallery system. In the summer of 1980, SAMO© exhibited at the Times Square Show, a group exhibition produced by the artists’ collective CoLab that was praised for creating an environment within an abandoned building on 42nd Street that mirrored the eclectic decay found in

the city streets around it. Basquiat, together with Haring, John Ahearn (see fig. 26.40) and Kiki Smith (see fig. 27.10), contributed works that attracted favorable critical attention. Shortly thereafter, Basquiat struck out on his own, and his drawing soon revealed something more than graphic street smarts—what appeared to be a devotion to Picasso’s *Guernica* (see fig. 15.46). Basquiat’s color-infused art is characteristically peopled by schematic figures with large, flattened, African-mask faces set against fields



26.36 Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Grillo*, 1984. Oil on wood with nails, 8' × 17'6½" × 1'6" (2.4 × 5.3 × 0.46 m). Stefan T. Edlis Collection, Chicago.



26.37 Kenny Scharf, *When the Worlds Collide*, 1984. Oil, acrylic, and enamel spray paint on canvas, 10'2" × 17'5¼" (3.1 × 5.3 m). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

vigorously activated by such graffiti elements as words and phrases, arrows and grids, crowns, rockets, and skyscrapers. As in the work of Polke and Salle, the compositional force of Basquiat's work lies not in its fidelity to expected rules of composition, but rather in the poetic juxtaposition—sometimes abrasive, sometimes soothing—of a variety of images, signs, and symbols. Quite apart from his compelling sense of drawing, color, and composition, Basquiat seemed to be able to balance the contradictory demands expected of a young African-American in the artworld of the early eighties. His figural style suggested the simulated primitivism of much Neo-Expressionism, but seemed to come with the cache of Basquiat's race and biography. Politics aside, the rhythmic dirge of *Grillo* (fig. 26.36) demonstrates that the artist was adept at coordinating graphic power with textual filigree to provide elements of formal grace and often brutal content. Basquiat's life and work has provided material for a variety of writers to reconsider the expectations of the artworld and the role of expression, biography, race, money, and talent in the history and production of art. His early death left a significant artistic potential untapped.

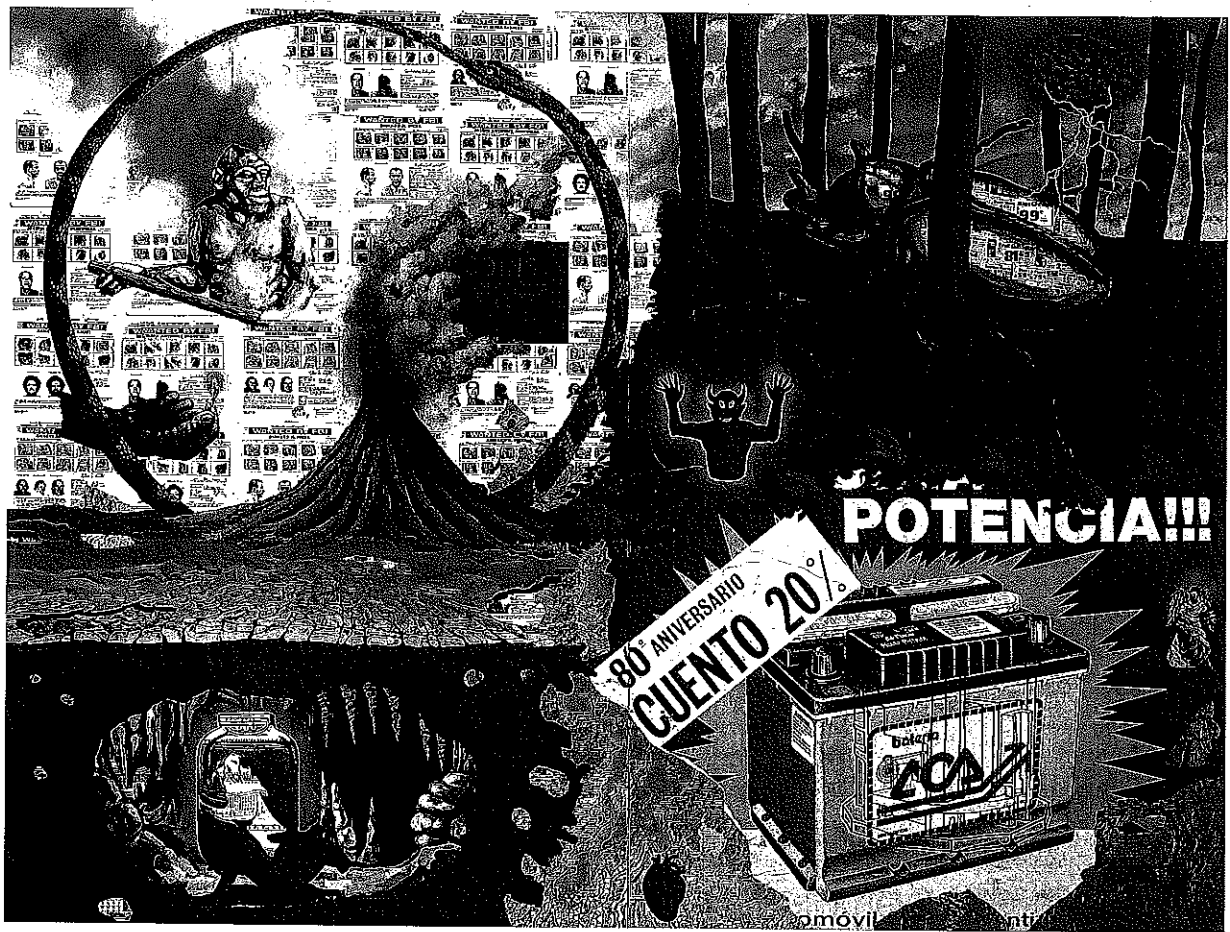
Kenny Scharf (b. 1958) also worked briefly with graffiti artists, but he took his primary inspiration from the space-age fantasy world of children's animated TV cartoons, such as *The Jetsons*, a series generated virtually next door to where Scharf grew up in Los Angeles. At first, the artist developed his signature style three-dimensionally, as he "customized" all the electronic gear in the building used for the Times Square Show, and then created a series of "Closets", complete rooms "bombed" with Scharf's characteristically whimsical spraypaint assault. To customize radios, TVs, telephones, furniture, and whole environments, Scharf applied to these objects and spaces all manner of "salvage"—kitsch items such as plastic dinosaurs, toy robots, fake furs, ropes of tinsel, old hood ornaments, a deer head—which he then spraypainted to unify the mish-mash forms and spaces.

Scharf also painted on canvas. In one vast work, entitled *When the Worlds Collide* (fig. 26.37) and measuring some

ten by seventeen feet (3 × 5 m), he fused, "in a kind of fun-house big bang," what critic Gerald Marzorati called "the Saturday-morning innocence, the phone-doodle psychedelia, the magpie delirium, the electric chromatic dazzle ..." Here, against a spaced-out background divided into maplike fields of empyrean blue, soft-focus jellybeans, star-studded black holes, and loopy stretch springs, a huge, shiny, sharp-focus red mountain metamorphoses into a jolly monster with a waterfall tumbling over one shoulder and a moonscape visible in the depths of his broad grin. All about this goofy, improbable creature float whirling cannonballs, cotton-candy clouds, disembodied eyes and mouths, wriggling amoeboids, and an orange-colored, saber-toothed, cross-eyed pixie. In *When the Worlds Collide*, Tanguy-like illusionistic Surrealism or the doomsday world of Hieronymus Bosch has been reconceived by a California cartoonist, an artist certain that "you definitely cannot have too much fun" and equipped to go about it with the compositional and *trompe l'oeil* ambitions of a Tiepolo. Scharf applies the style of hyperrealism to the subject matter of visual media in order to telescope in on the prominence of fantasy in American culture.

Wojnarowicz and Wong

Another alumnus of the East Village scene, David Wojnarowicz (1954–92) began his brief career scrawling politicized invectives and stenciled slogans in public places. An artist with a flair for drama to match the volatile life he led, Wojnarowicz developed a collage aesthetic that surrounded the viewer with the brutality of contemporary life. He was a prolific writer and photographer, as well as a painter, sculptor, video artist, musician, and performer. Wojnarowicz's installations recorded the personal pain of growing up gay in the United States and the continued cost of homophobia and AIDS. His graphic work effectively juxtaposed the romanticism of Arthur Rimbaud, one of Wojnarowicz's influences (and, in one series of photographs, his alter ego), with the landscape and mindscape of contemporary America. The results are harrowing



26.38 David Wojnarowicz, *Fire*, 1987. Acrylic and mixed media on wood, 72 × 96" (1.83 × 2.44 m).

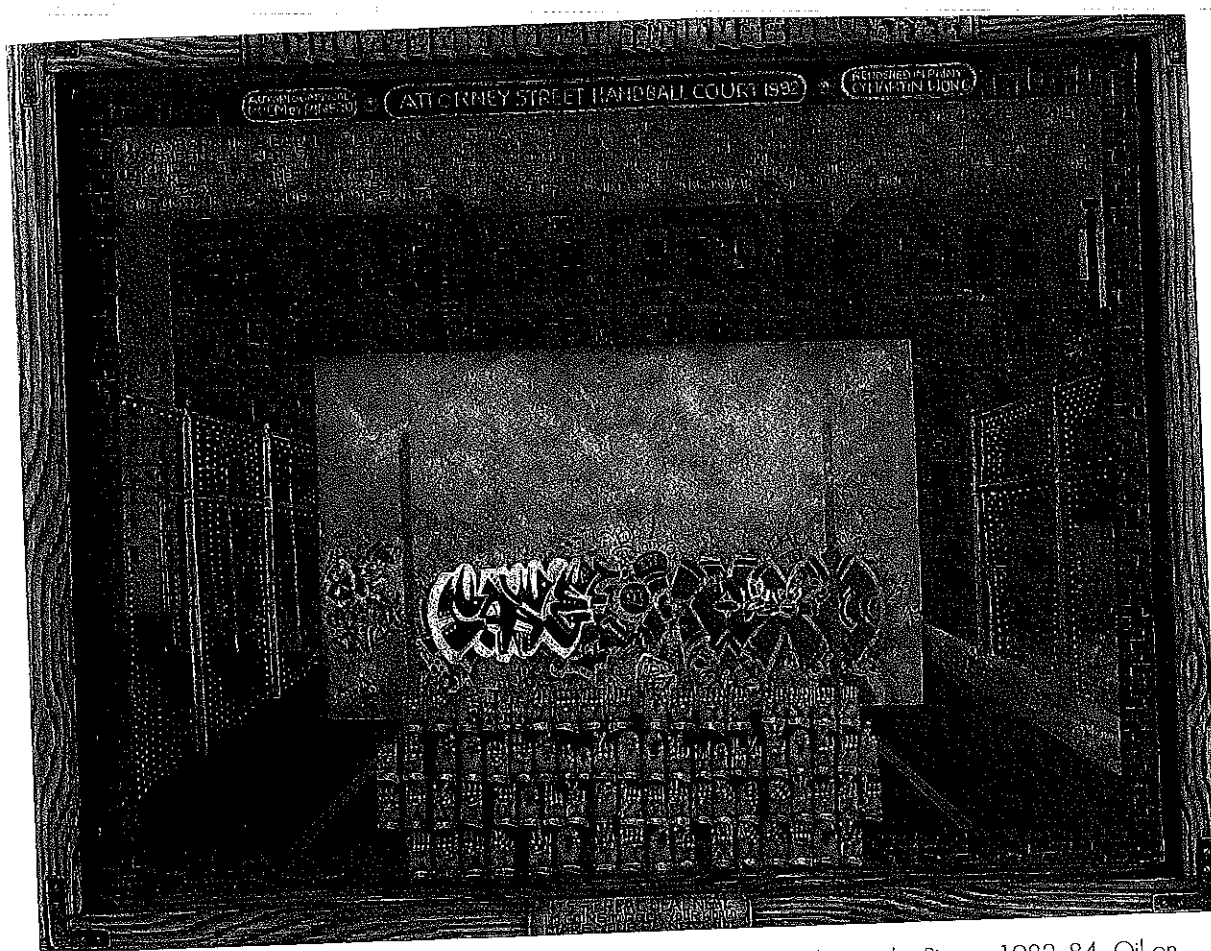
assaults on the treatment of the individual that resonate with almost apocalyptic fervor. *Fire* (fig. 26.38) was created the year the artist was diagnosed with AIDS and the year his lover, the photographer Peter Hujar, died of the disease. The image contrasts manmade power with the power of nature and crime. In a comic and biting detail, the dungbeetle is shown to possess a human brain. *Fire* and the *Four Elements Series* of which it is part, have been interpreted as an attempt to visualize a worldview that might bring sense to the loss and violence surrounding the artist.

Martin Wong (1946–99) was a painter who took public writing, including graffiti, sign language, and even charts of the constellations, as a foundation for his art. Wong began his career while working as a courtroom artist and there is a strong communicative element in his art. Though his work is figural—one of his most controversial paintings, *The Big Heat* (1988), represents two firemen wrapped in each others' arms as a building smolders behind them—Wong most often replaced the physiognomic detail required of a portraitist with a sensitivity to the expressive potential of the urban environment. *Attorney Street Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Pinero* (1982–84) (fig. 26.39) is a landscape of a lower Manhattan playground with Wong's stylized sign language notation of a poem by Miguel Pinero. Above the floating signs, graffiti adorns the urban playground, poetry fills the

sky. The title of the painting is written in gold and black on simulated and constructed frames. The author of the poem, Miguel Pinero, stood at the center of the Nuyorican Poetry movement, a group of writers committed to creating literature at the intersection of Latino and US cultures and languages. Pinero's work resonated with Wong's own commitment to an art responsive to the multiethnic, multicultural, and polyglot community in which he lived. Wong's painting, like that of Jasper Johns or Sigmar Polke, presents the viewer with a collection of different means of communication, though within the context of lower Manhattan and with a romantic eye toward its residents. In a graceful mingling of poetry, painting, and the street itself, Wong gives form to the metaphor of the city as text.

Postmodern Arenas: Installation Art

Installation works of many different kinds were created throughout the sixties and seventies, by artists who also worked in Performance, such as Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, and Rebecca Horn, and by artists with links to Conceptual art, such as Jonathan Borofsky and Christopher Burden. The special potential of environmental works, however, came to the fore in the eighties. Since we can walk around inside them, such works lend themselves to interpretation as scale models of the world at large, and



26.39 Martin Wong, *Attorney Street: Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Pinero, 1982–84*. Oil on canvas, 2'11½" × 4' (0.90 × 1.22 m).

installations made in this “retrospective” decade increasingly seemed like comments on the state of the Postmodern world. Some of these installations were specifically sites of memory, as in Christian Boltanski’s work—places to reflect on the troubled history of the twentieth century and the role played by art within it. For many artists working in this mode, such as Ilya Kabakov, the lofty aspirations of early modernist art had collapsed. Meanwhile, artists such as Bill Viola and Jenny Holzer, who turned to new electronic technologies, did so with a wary, skeptical irony, undercutting any great faith in the Brave New World of the future.

In 1980, the CoLab collective of artists created the Times Square Show in an abandoned building on 42nd street. The show set off the decade with an impulse to fill the interiors of the artworld with the detritus of the streets, alleys, subway tunnels, peep shows, movie houses, studios, parks, and vacant lots of the city. The obsession with crime and degradation that filled the Times Square Show—simulated rats crawled through the rooms, and rape and other acts of violence were depicted again and again—was relieved in a few notable works. Kenny Scharf’s delightful space age decorations were one and the sculptural oeuvre of CoLab organizer John Ahearn provided another.

John Ahearn (b. 1951) was an upstate New York artist who, with his associate Rigoberto Torres, chose to live in the South Bronx and there portray its citizens in a series of

relief sculptures. Like George Segal and Duane Hanson before him (see figs. 21.24, 24.76), Ahearn makes life casts that comment on human relationships and society at large. Ahearn’s content of indomitable subjectivity is generated through realistically rendered faces, their intense gazes conveying ferocious dignity. The artist has said: “The basic foundation for the work is art that has a popular basis, not just in appeal, but in its origin and meaning. . . . It can mean something here, and also in a museum.” Certainly the reliefs communicate a great deal in gallery settings, but by “here,” Ahearn means the exterior walls above the very streets in which his subjects live and work (fig. 26.40). Even in the neighborhood, however, Ahearn’s placement is carefully selected to suggest content. *Homage to the People of the Bronx: Double Dutch at Kelly Street I: Freida, Jevette, Towana, Stacey* (1981–82) was installed on an exterior wall several stories above the ground. Ahearn applied a surrealist manipulation of the ordinary and rather straightforward symbolism to suggest that the footing these children have as they navigate the complexities of life expressed in the two ever-circling jump-ropes is far from stable. So popular are these open-air installations that the artist’s neighbors compete to sit for twenty minutes with their heads covered by a fast-setting dental plastic. From the molds this creates, Ahearn then casts the form in fiberglass. But what brings the works to life is his immense gift for color, which allows



26.40 John Ahearn, *Homage to the People of the Bronx: Double Dutch at Kelly Street I: Freida, Jevette, Towana, Stacey*, 1981–82. Oil on fiberglass, figures lifesize. Kelly Street, South Bronx, New York.

Ahearn to evoke the ambient light and heat of skin itself. In a curious turn on dialectics akin to Robert Smithson's site/nonsite (see fig. 24.45), Ahearn creates two copies of each work, one for collectors and museums and the other

to stay rooted in the community, in the possession of the person whom it represents.

Pepon Osorio (b. 1955) has found installation to be a means to make art in, of, and for the Puerto Rican



26.41 Pepon Osorio, *La Cama (The Bed)*, 1987. Mixed media installation; bed 75 × 67 × 78" (190 × 170 × 198 cm), room dimensions 450 × 450' (137 × 137 m). Collection El Museo del Barrio.

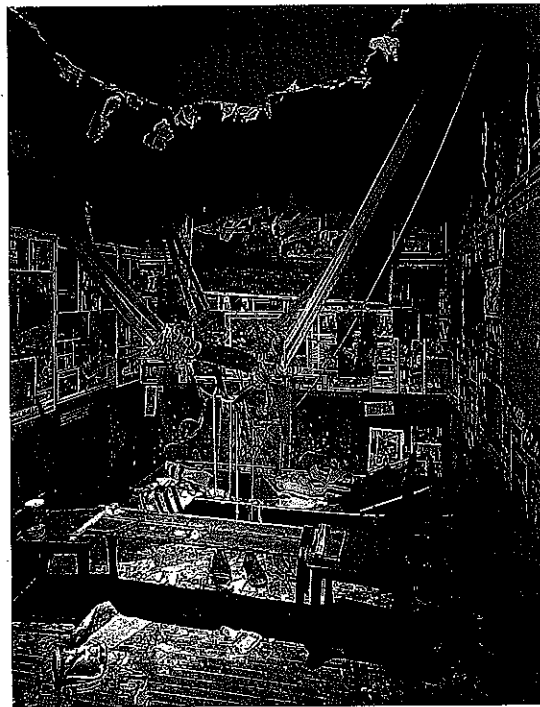
community. The enveloping nature of his format, often room-size environments bursting with all forms of decorative elements from beads and flowers to baseball cards and bicycles, mimics what Osorio understands to be a Puerto Rican aesthetic but one that embraces his viewers regardless of their background. During his early career, Osorio worked as a caseworker in the New York City department of Children's Services and he is committed to an art of social conscience. Osorio defines artistic success as the unification of the individual, nation or larger community, and universal. *The Bed* (fig. 26.41), a piece dedicated to the memory of Juana Hernandez, the woman who lived with his family and helped raise him, demonstrates the multiple references in Osorio's work. In the center of a room rests a large bed adorned with *capias*, souvenirs given in Puerto Rico at weddings, baptisms, and anniversaries. The installation presents loss through the lens of culturally specific rituals of celebration, thus inviting a nation of celebrants to comfort the artist and praise the dead. *The Bed* invites the artist's audience into a family experience in his own home: other installations focus on the choices and lives of fictionalized families. Often accompanied by performances, Osorio's art moves freely between fact and fiction, as well as personal and social realities, and always with an "aesthetics of abundance" that identifies his roots and his art.

Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933) grew up in the former Soviet Union during the harsh Stalinist era. Trained as an artist from an early age, for many years he earned his living as an illustrator of stories, most of them for children, while privately he made elaborate albums combining poetic, sometimes bizarre, tales and drawings. Kabakov began creating full-scale environmental pieces in the mid-eighties. They, too, contained elements of narrative, often revealing the difficulties and privations of Soviet daily life, but also conveying information through fantastical gatherings of objects, or what has been called Kabakov's "material poetry." After the collapse of the communist state, these works took on the character of archeological sites, where visitors could explore the cultural history of a vanished system.

In *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (fig. 26.42), the hardships of ordinary people are ironically juxtaposed with the grandiose projects of the state—in this case, apparently, the Soviet space program, which launched the first human being into orbit. About this fantasy work Kabakov said:

The person who lived here flew into space from his room, first having blown up the ceiling and the attic above it. He always, as far as he remembered, felt that he was not quite an inhabitant of this earth, and constantly felt the desire to leave it, to escape beyond its boundaries. And as an adult he conceived of his departure into space.

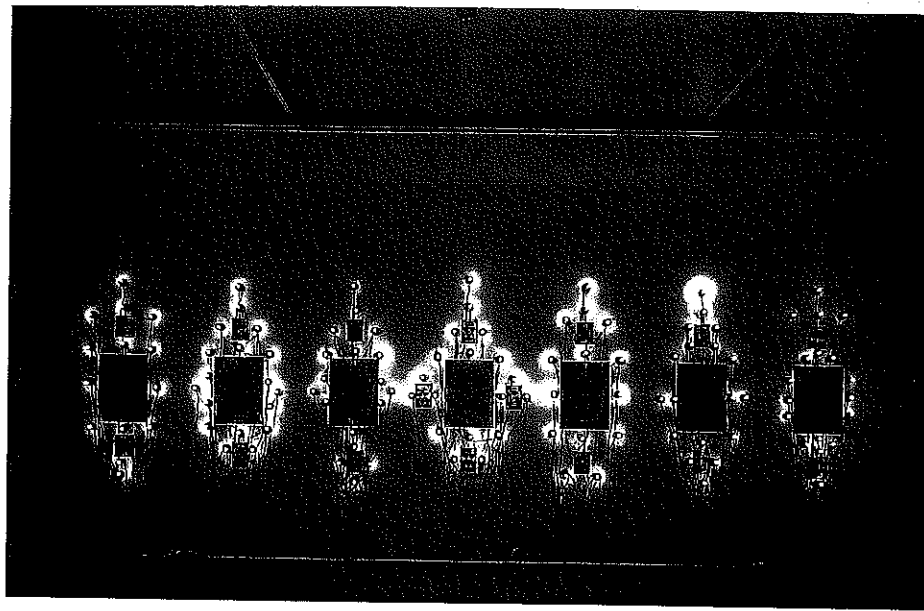
The room we see, with a gaping hole in its roof, contains the debris left behind by the astronaut's improvised take-off: broken dishes, the remains of some simple furniture,



26.42 Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1981–88. From the installation *10 Characters*. Six poster panels with collage, furniture, clothing, catapult, household objects, wooden plank, scroll-type painting, two pages of Soviet paper, diorama. Room dimensions 8' × 7'11" × 12'3" (2.4 × 2.4 × 3.7 m).

and stray items of worn clothing. Glued to the walls are various political posters as well as the traveler's blueprints, flight plans, and calculations; from the ceiling hangs the catapult that flung him away from it all, up into outer space. On a small model of a city, which has a light bulb for a sun, a strip of curved metal rising from an apartment building shows the planned trajectory of "the one who flew away."

Like many of the Neo-Expressionists, French installation artist Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) also deals with European memories of World War II. Boltanski was born in Paris on Liberation Day (September 6, 1944), as the Allied armies entered the city, and his middle name is Liberté. He often created works for prisons, hospitals, and schools—institutional sites much concerned with the consequences, and the lessons, of the past. In a series of elegies that evoke the Holocaust, Boltanski hung up slightly blurred photographs of children and surrounded them with groups of small electric bulbs that cast a glow like candlelight in a place of worship (fig. 26.43). Some of his other works evoke feelings that are considerably less overwhelming, and more mixed. *The Shadows*, for example, combines the macabre and the playful, suspending simple figurines in front of lights so that they cast large, ominous shadows on the walls. Little paper dolls hung by the neck and skeletons dangling in midair start to look like the indeterminate shapes a small child might be afraid of in the



26.43 Christian Boltanski, *Lessons of Darkness*, 1987. 23 black-and-white photographs and 117 lights, overall approx. 6'6¼" × 16'4¼" (2 × 5 m). Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland.

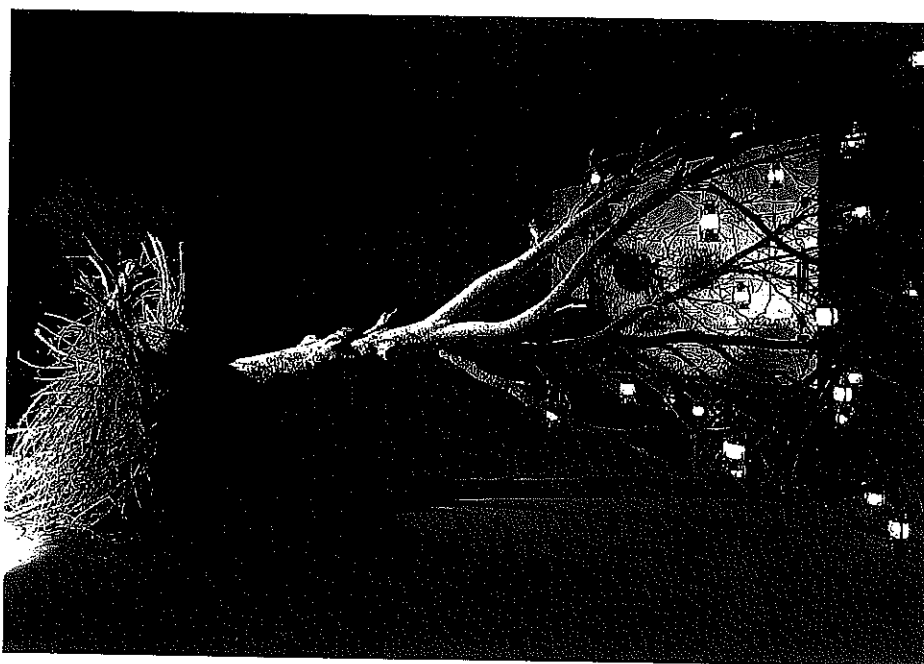
dark. At the same time, they give a knowing twist to the tradition of the Balinese puppet-shadow theater.

The American video artist **Bill Viola** (b. 1951) has also examined the theme of memory. Viola creates not just videotapes but entire installations that employ objects, video images, and recorded sound. He has long been interested in how the eye and brain process visual information, and he seeks to reveal their workings in his art. In *The Theater of Memory* (fig. 26.44), an uprooted tree lies diagonally across the floor of a darkened room. In its branches are dozens of lanterns. A video image is projected against one wall. At intervals, white noise, mostly static, erupts from the speakers, separated by long periods of silence. Of this installation Viola said:

I remember reading about the brain and the central nervous system, trying to understand what causes the trigger-

ing of nerve firings that recreate patterns of past sensations, finally evoking a memory. I came across the fact that all of the neurons in the brain are physically disconnected from each other, beginning and ending in a tiny gap of empty space. The flickering pattern evoked by the tiny sparks of thought bridging these gaps becomes the actual form and substance of our ideas.

His installation is a kind of working model of the brain's physiology, as if the viewer were standing inside the "theater" of a fantastically huge cranium. The lanterns are like the "tiny sparks of thought" that ignite along the branching "tree" of our intricate neural network; the projected video image evokes the "show" that memory replays before our mind's eye. It is a decidedly mechanistic, even clinical, view of how human consciousness operates, but a certain romantic sense of mystery is nonetheless supplied



26.44 Bill Viola, *The Theater of Memory*, 1985. Video/sound installation. Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California.

by the dramatically lit tree, the archaic lanterns, and the darkened theatrical space.

In the Empire of Signs: Varieties of Neo-Geo

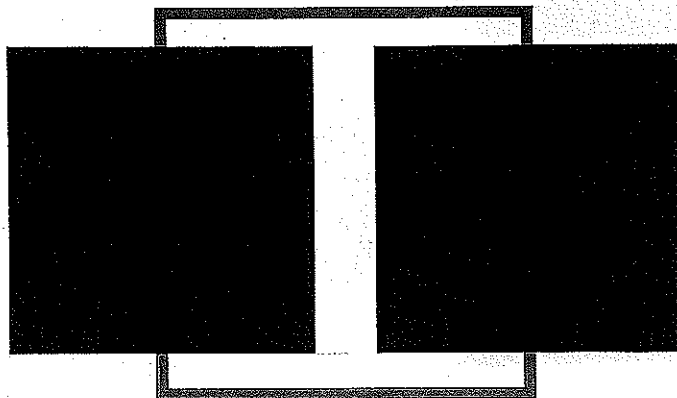
The term Neo-Geo refers to the work of artists impressed with the theoretical potential of Appropriation that used anything from Minimalist blocks to vacuum-cleaners for their identity as bearers of content, though not necessarily that most readily associated with them. Recontextualization was key, but, unlike their Appropriationist peers, Neo-Geo artists were also interested in expression. At times objects that would seem to be important for their social function filled primarily expressive and aesthetic roles. The work of the most prominent of the Neo-Geo artists, Peter Halley, consisted of squares and rectangles whose form and meaning were determined by a set of social circumstances rather than formal ones. Halley associated his forms, called circuits, with the networks of communication and power in contemporary civilization. Neo-Geo artists intentionally enlisted the history and connotations of a form when they composed rather than hoping for a resonance between the shapes on the canvas and the soul of the viewer, as modernists often had. The understanding that there is specific meaning rather than generalized expression in abstract form was clearly articulated in the mid- to late eighties, and continues to underlie presumptions about abstraction today.

Neo-Geo Abstraction

Peter Halley (b. 1953) was the undisputed leader of Neo-Geo. In a series of paintings based on Albers' *Homage to the Square* (see fig. 17.9), Halley treated the square, in his own words, "as a sign for certain kinds of regimented or confining structures in the social landscape." His emphasis on the restrictive nature of postindustrial society reflects the influence of Michel Foucault's essay on confinement, while his equation of a seemingly abstract sign with "the social landscape" derives from Jean Baudrillard's notion of

"hyperreality." Halley and others took from Foucault the insight that the regulated geometry of modern society, from the calendar to the office building, were sites where modern ideas of geometric purity and authoritarian control coincided. The compatibility between modernist geometric and the regulation of nearly every part of our lives was, it was suggested, no coincidence. The intuition that modern art was connected to modern industry had informed machine age art from between the wars on both sides of the Atlantic. In a deconstructive move, Foucault stripped the myth of progress from the relationship to reveal a more oppressive regime. Neo-Geo relied on this Postmodern insight, but resisted the impulse, so strong in modernist art, to transform a new idea into the foundation for an art of revelation.

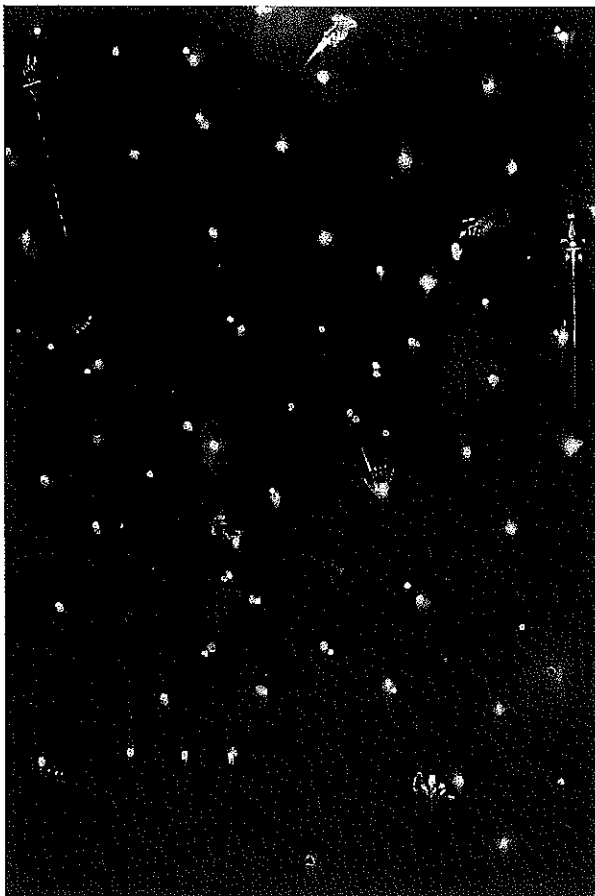
The challenge for Halley was how to express content without substituting one deconstructed truth for another; how, in other words we can tell that Halley's geometric conduits were different from the industrial abstractions of Charles Sheeler or Paul Strand (see figs. 18.27, 18.21). Halley used the writing of Baudrillard to explain that, though he relied on Foucault's insight, he, unlike the machine-age artist, did not claim to be presenting the connection between art and industry as a key to human nature. According to Baudrillard, two linked systems, international capitalism and mass media, force everyone to live in a glittering "empire of signs" where "hyperreal" images "simulate" and supplant ordinary reality. Paintings like *Two Cells with Circulating Conduit* (fig. 26.45) "simulate" this "empire" by presenting the high-tech equivalent of its "plumbing"—squares, to be understood as both battery and prison cells, connected by lines or "conduits" for the "circulation" of information and power. Halley, whose writings and interviews are often brought together with his paintings to form a single, pictorial-theoretical package, contends that his work collapses "the idea of the abstract and the representational" and gives abstraction a content. An important element in Halley's work is his use of Day-Glo paint, stucco surfaces, and, in more recent work, neon-colored wallpaper. These elements draw on an aesthetic of artifice that resists comparison to earlier modernists'



26.45 Peter Halley, *Two Cells with Circulating Conduit*, 1985. Acrylic, Day-Glo acrylic, and Roll-a-Tex on canvas, 5'4" × 8'8" (1.63 cm × 2.6 m). Collection Cooper Fund, Inc.

quests for truth. Through such devices, Halley simulates traditional artist's color and evokes the dramatic beauty of the information age. Most importantly, through color and theory, Neo-Geo forced past styles of abstraction to signify new meanings rather than, as critics would claim of Neo-Expressionism, force contemporary minds to appreciate recuperated styles.

Ross Bleckner (b. 1949) was quickly associated with Neo-Geo by Halley and others for his use of vivid stripes to make large-scale, abstract paintings. His work is closely related to that of artists such as Sherrie Levine, who made "generic" versions of past styles in order to deconstruct modernist myths (see fig. 26.2). However, Bleckner differed in his concentrated attempt to move beyond deconstruction to paint images about life and loss in contemporary America. Bleckner's often obsessively repeated patterns do not simply allude to sixties Op art; they simulated the hard-edged style in a way that reflects a Poststructuralist critique of the modernist history of twentieth-century abstraction as a progressive unfolding of styles, each built upon the other, each "heroic and original" and unrepeatable. By throwing the "correct" sequence awry with the appropriation of an "incorrect" style such as Op, Bleckner showed that the past offers a variety of possibilities and has no fixed, necessary relationship to contemporary artistic practice or meaning.



26.46 Ross Bleckner, *Seeing and Believing*, 1981. Oil and wax on canvas, 9'6" × 4'6" (2.9 × 1.37 m).

As if to reinforce the point, in 1983 Bleckner started to exhibit somber paintings, such as *Two Nights Not Nights* (fig. 26.46), in which evocations of spectral landscapes are combined with symbols—hands, torches, flowers, and urns—culled from the Baroque iconography of death and salvation. Such tenebrist paintings were among the earliest memorials to the victims of AIDS, which was first identified in 1982. Painted with wax and ground pigment rather than prepared paint, they are brilliant demonstrations of a return to old-master techniques, which Bleckner shared with another CalArts-trained artist, Eric Fischl (see fig. 26.27).

Commodity Art

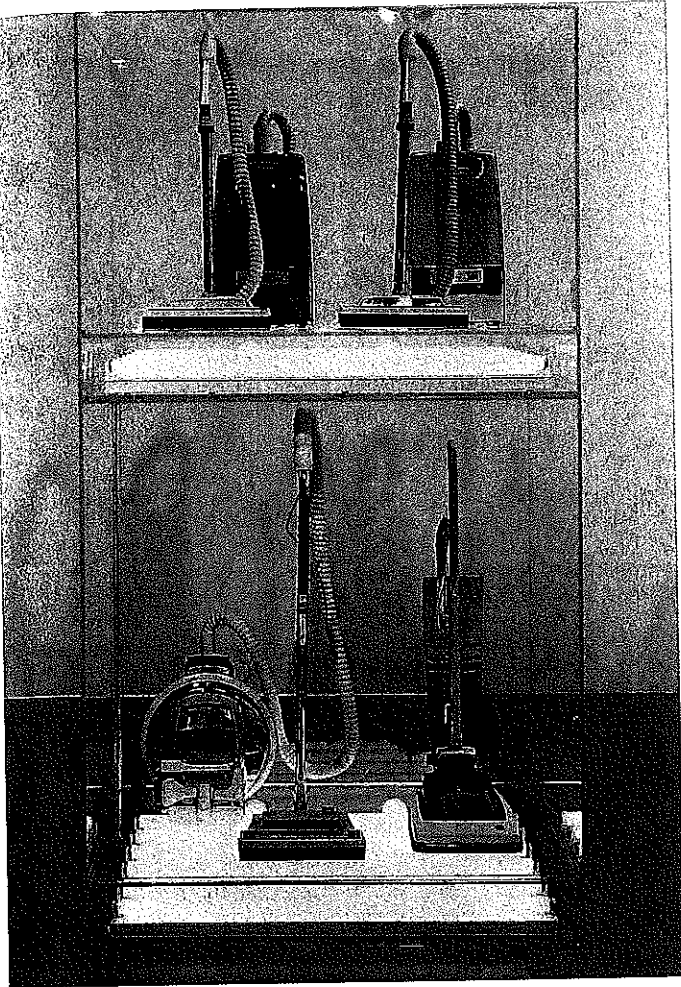
Though apparently quite different from the painting of Halley and Bleckner, Neo-Geo also encompasses sculpture by Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and Ashley Bickerton, which manipulated the commodities of capitalism as the painters had manipulated styles. This art functioned like its nonobjective counterpart, but consisted of recognizable elements from popular culture. Michael Jackson or a lava lamp might be incorporated into a work to perform an aesthetic function as well as to indicate a range of potential meanings. The completed works were no more limited to the specific significance of their contents than Halley's or Bleckner's were restricted to an art about squares and starbursts. Like Levine or Prince, Koons and company appropriated their objects from mass culture and re-presented it. Unlike Appropriation art, however, the theoretical position of the commodity artists was painfully unclear. Not only did the work seem to fetishize its materials rather than analytically re-contextualize them, but while Halley and his critics referred to Foucault, Baudrillard, or Smithson, the commodity side of Neo-Geo played at a Warholesque naïvety.

Jeff Koons (b. 1955) started showing elegant Minimalist arrangements of consumer goods in a small independent gallery with Peter Halley, Meyer Vaisman, and Ashley Bickerton in 1985. Within one year, he had graduated to a blue-chip operation in Soho. *New Hoover* (fig. 26.47) is typical of these early sculptures in its clear gridded composition and its commitment to leaving the new materials (similar to those Donald Judd had found so exciting in the early sixties—see fig. 22.47) affixed to the commercial products for which they were intended. Here is a classical Minimalism of merchandise that brought together the economic and psychological satisfaction of fine art and the commodity. It was also clear that this ex-stockbroker had a refined aesthetic sense.

Koons soon left the Minimalism frame and focussed on the ambiguous potential of commodities of much lower form than vacuum cleaners. In an exhibition entitled *The Banality Show*, Koons presented exquisitely crafted porcelain renderings of kitsch, perhaps the one category of objects from toilets to haute couture that had not yet been taken as a suitable subject for art. Koons, like the Appropriation artists, seemed content to omit any obvious

26.47 Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Quadraflex, New Hoover Convertible, New Hoover Dimension 900, New Hoover Dimension 1000*, 1981–86. Hoover vacuum cleaners, acrylic glass, and fluorescent light, 8'3" × 4'5½" × 2'4" (2.5 × 1.36 × 0.71 m). Private collection.

signs of his own creative act. Unlike Levine and others whose practice the Banality Show invoked, however, Koons did not critically reframe his selected forms. In discussing his art, Koons evinces a surprising commitment to a rather modernist belief in essences rather than a Postmodern conviction in the constructed. Claiming with disarming innocence: "I think about my work every minute of the day," he has explained that he aims to reveal the true nature of his object by putting in a place where that nature is exposed. He equates this with putting a shy person in public where you can really see their shyness. The subjects of *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (fig. 26.48), it is supposed, revealed in the delicate finish of porcelain under the heat of the gallery lights, offer up their true and rather unsettling spirit. Despite his claims for a new realism, Koons, like Halley, capitalized on artifice, presenting objects that, while they reveal something of the fixations of American culture, suggest that the desires that created Michael Jackson and Bubbles are simulated and correspond to nothing more real than television.

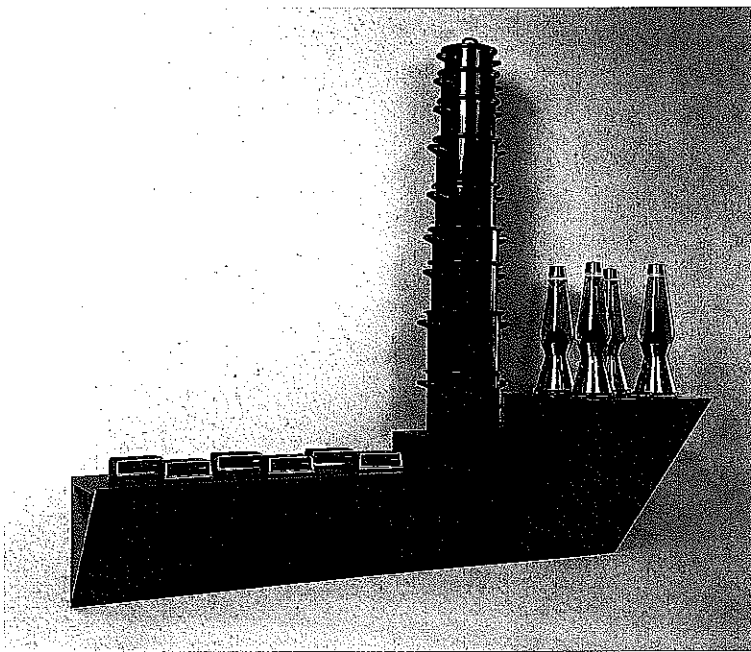


26.48 Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988. Porcelain, 3'6" × 5'10½" × 2'8½" (1.06 × 1.79 × 0.83 m).

The Banality Show was created as an ensemble, and though individual works stood alone, the effect was a composition of simulated desires in which Koons himself posed, with leather jacket and fashion-model looks, as its centerpiece.

Composing with commodities took a variety of forms. Perhaps the most elegant of these were the sparse organized collections of **Haim Steinbach** (b. 1944). On customized shelves, Steinbach arranged what looked like the results of a trip to the mall. Beside a field of six Dreammachine radio alarm clocks rises a tower of red pots looking like a Renaissance bell tower or, following the suggestion of the four lava lamps to its right, an erupting volcano. *Ultra Red #2* (fig. 26.49) encourages the viewer to think in terms of countdowns and explosions, volcanoes and Italian landscapes, in a consumer reworking of the destruction of Pompeii, but, like Steinbach's work in general, is more about color and form. In the early sixties, Frank Stella (see fig. 22.41) professed that his goal as a painter was to permit the paint on his canvases to be as beautiful as it was in the can. Paint was conceived as a found object to be arranged but not transformed in the final work. Steinbach's palette is comprised of consumer items rather than paint, but his aesthetic is strikingly similar.

If Steinbach used consumer goods to create abstractions that perhaps could be seen as landscapes, **Ashley Bickerton** (b. 1959) was most known for his portraits. Moving even farther from the realm of human experience, Bickerton chose not even the products we desire but their brand names as his material. On rather overbuilt and mechanical-looking apparatuses, Bickerton creates ironic assemblages of logos that he then gives emotionally loaded titles like *Tormented Self-Portrait Suzie at Arles* (fig. 26.50).



26.49 Haim Steinbach, *Ultra Red #2*, 1986. Mixed media construction, 63 × 76 × 19" (160 × 193 × 480 cm).

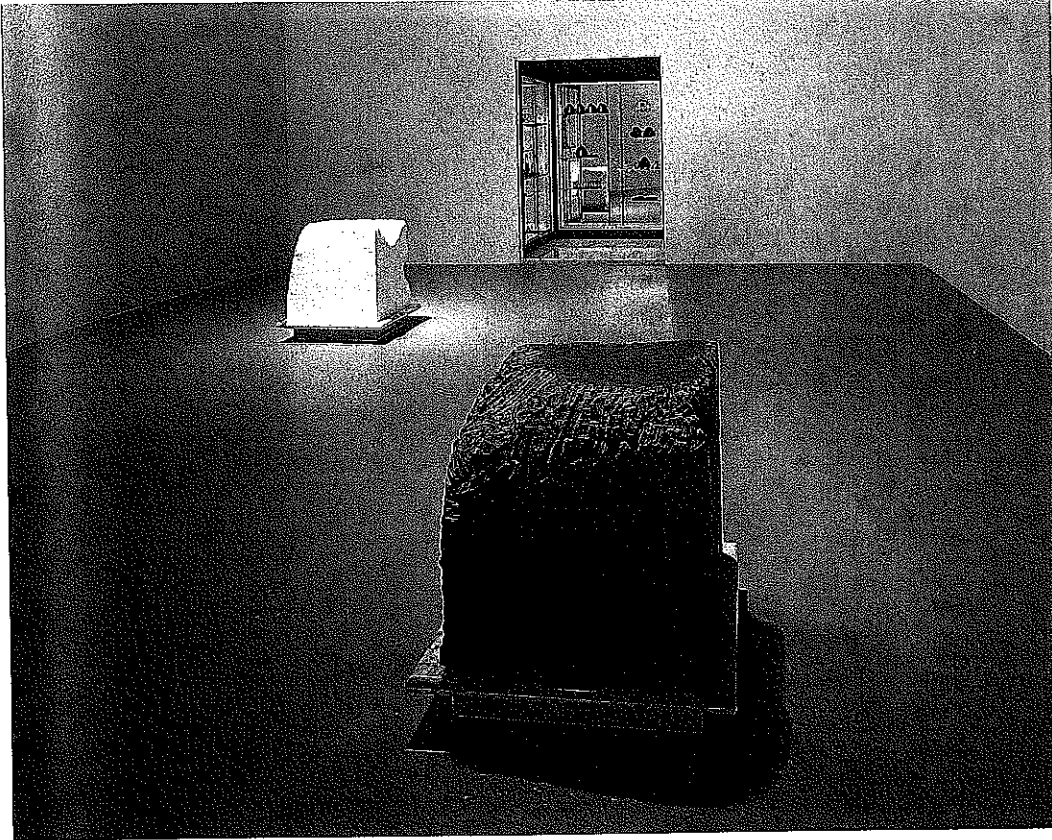


26.50 Ashley Bickerton, *Tormented Self-Portrait Suzie at Arles*, 1988. Mixed media construction with padded leather, 90 × 69 × 18" (2.29 × 1.75 × 0.46 m).

One can construct a narrative out of the indicated products, imagining, perhaps, a romantic breakup on a road trip in Southern France to rationalize the title, but the work offers little support for such an endeavor. Even the title and the artist's signature, the two human elements in the work, are emblazoned across the work's surface with all the superficiality of "TV Guide" and "MARLBORO." In Bickerton's ironic, if not cynical, world, no one subject, Suzie or cigarettes, is any more substantial than another. The portrait suggests Postmodern ideas about the importance of social context to generate meaning and the fluid and impressionable nature of identity.

Ramifications of Neo-Geo

In the early nineties, several artists produced work that seemed to reconcile the theoretical content of the abstract Neo-Geo and the evocative and commercially sensitive features of the Commodity artists. Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* of 1992 illustrates an impulse to clarify the politically critical possibilities of a combination of Halley and Koons, while Sylvie Fleury embraced the ambiguity of Commodity art from a feminist perspective. By the nineties, the



26.51 Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, 1992. 600lb cube of chocolate gnawed by the artist, 24 × 24 × 24" (61 × 61 × 61 cm). Collection of The Museum of Modern Art.

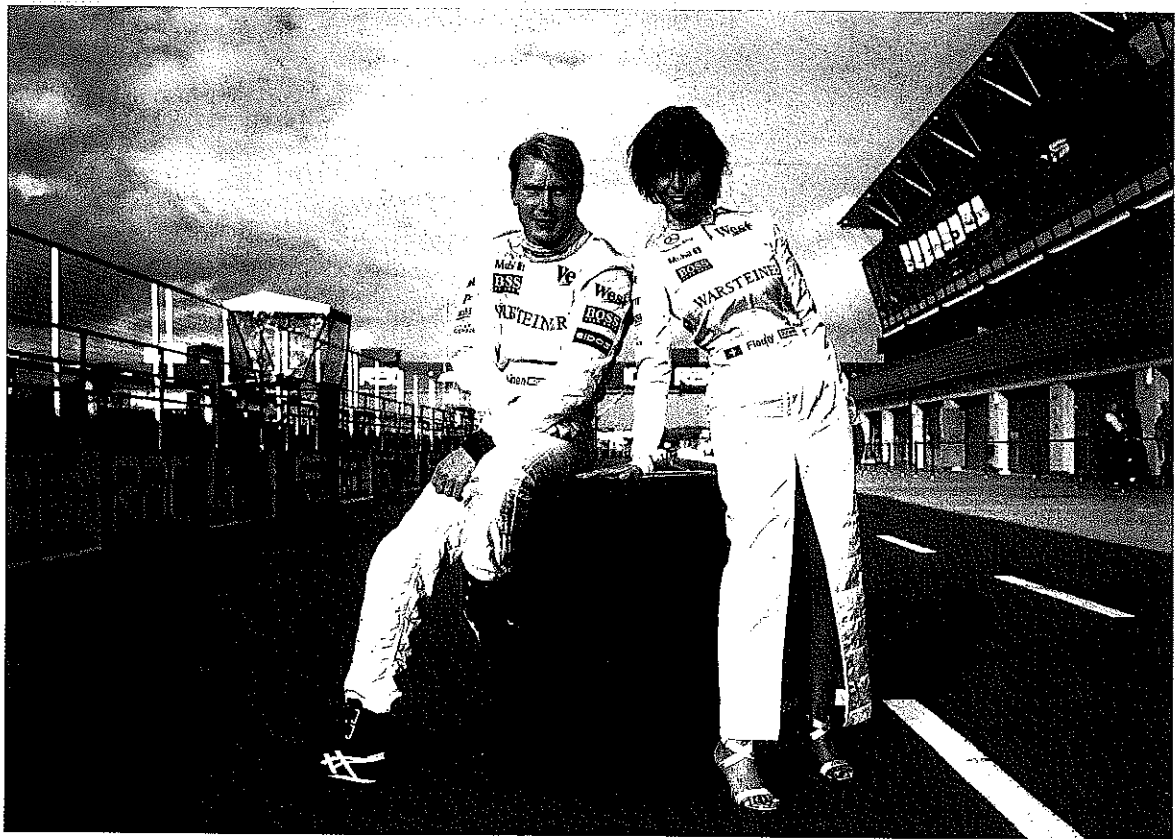
significance of form, whether abstract or commodity, was being articulated in ways that were clearly directive or pointedly ambivalent.

At first glance, *Gnaw* (fig. 26.51), by Janine Antoni (b. 1964), appears to be a pair of Minimalist cubes slightly worn at the edges and emitting an odd organic smell; in fact one is made of fat and the other of chocolate. The degradation at the edges of the works are the result of the artist gnawing at the sculptures, chewing off and spitting out mouthfuls of lard and chocolate. Living with the two cubes until she had carved away the right amount of material, Antoni then reconstituted the masticated discharge into bright red lipstick and heart-shaped candy trays to be displayed in elegant mirrored cases worthy of any fine jewelers' (fig. 26.52). Despite the complexity of the process and the installation, *Gnaw* is surprisingly succinct. Three familiar objects, lipstick, chocolates, and Minimalist cubes, are brought together through a performance that, although not seen by the viewer, is as physical and politically aware as those of performance artist Carolee Schneemann and one that generates a feminist critique of art and fashion. With objects as clean and polished as a Donald Judd cube or a *Vogue* magazine, Antoni juxtaposes abstractions of geometry, fashion, and economics in the vein of Neo-Geo, but with a clear direction not seen in the earlier work.

Sylvie Fleury (b. 1961) has brought specificity to the insights of Neo-Geo, although in her work one is confronted with the commercial presumption that underlay the work of Koons and Bickerton—that we are shaped by the things we buy—but is left uncertain how to feel about it. Fleury has displayed the residue of shopping sprees,



26.52 Janine Antoni, *Lipstick Display* [detail], 1992. Lipstick made with pigment, beeswax, and chewed lard removed from *Lard Gnaw* and heart-shaped packaging tray for chocolates made from chewed chocolate removed from *Chocolate Gnaw*. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art.



26.53 Sylvie Fleury, *Formula One Dress*, 1998.

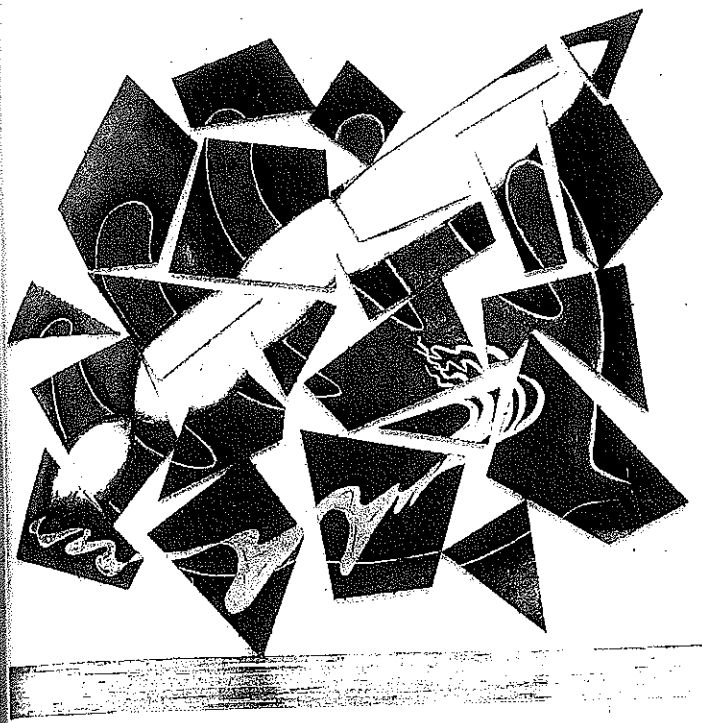
collections of designer shopping bags, shoes, and boxes. She has also created her own fashions including a series of *Formula One* dresses (fig. 26.53) that turns the woman who wears them into the female equivalent of a corporate sponsored racing team. Using the adolescent and sexist comparison of a woman and a sportscar, Fleury creates a graphic illustration of a woman defined by social prejudices and commercial products. Like the subject of Bickerton's *Tormented Self-Portrait* (see fig. 26.50), the woman who wears Fleury's dress is branded by the logos of global capitalism in a clear equation of fashion, sexism, capitalism, and sport. The irony, however, is that despite the clarity of Fleury's equation she seems to be having fun. She models the clothes with elan and continues to shop. Awareness of the forces of society does not lead to resistance as it might have even in the early eighties. Rather, the artist seems to take the inevitable appeal of sex and commerce, whether at the racetrack or the mall, as a source of pleasure and even power. In 1987, Barbara Kruger created the image/text piece *I Shop Therefore I Am*, which in the context of the moment was the personal and ironic complement to works such as Jenny Holzer's 1982 *Private Property Created Crime*. In 1999 such a statement could be taken seriously.

The Sum of Many Parts: Abstraction in the 1980s

Though overshadowed by the dramatic and sometimes shocking return of figuration in the conceptually challeng-

ing appropriation or the emotionally wrenching Neo-Expressionism, a critical point had been reached in the history of abstraction by the eighties. As is clear from the work and writing of the Neo-Geo artists, if not in the polemical critiques of Neo-Expressionism, it could no longer be presumed that there was a direct connection between abstract forms on a canvas and either emotional responses or intuitive meaning. The time had passed when Kandinsky could talk about a direct connection between a color and the soul of the viewer or Pollock could place faith in the potency of his "get acquainted period" to result in painterly expressions that reached from his experience to that of mankind. Painting, as it has been said, was compromised. It was not, however, as some prematurely announced, dead. The eighties, and nineties as well, witnessed a number of artists committed to working with the abstract tradition to articulate its boundaries and expressive as well as intellectual potential.

"All my work," the American painter Elizabeth Murray (b. 1940) asserted, "is involved with conflict—trying to make something disparate whole." In 1979–80 Murray realized a major breakthrough in her art. She began to break up not the image but rather the canvas, "shattering" it into separate shards or fragments (fig. 26.54). Further compounding the conflict was the wall, revealed through the cracks as one more participant in the battle for the viewer's eye. To make such disintegration whole again, Murray, drawing on her academic background, reintroduced figuration, and imposed upon the entire archipelago



26.54 Elizabeth Murray, *Art Part*, 1981. Twenty-two canvases, overall 9'7" × 10'4" (2.9 × 3.1 m). Private collection.

of island canvases an image simple enough—brushes, palettes, cups, the painter's own hand—to be detected as a unifying factor. In addition, Murray adopted a painting style that was as informed by cartoons as by the history of postwar abstraction. The cohesion of Murray's broken canvases could be experienced only by observers sufficiently attentive to "read" across the relief map of fractures and fields, visually and conceptually piecing the whole together like a puzzle.

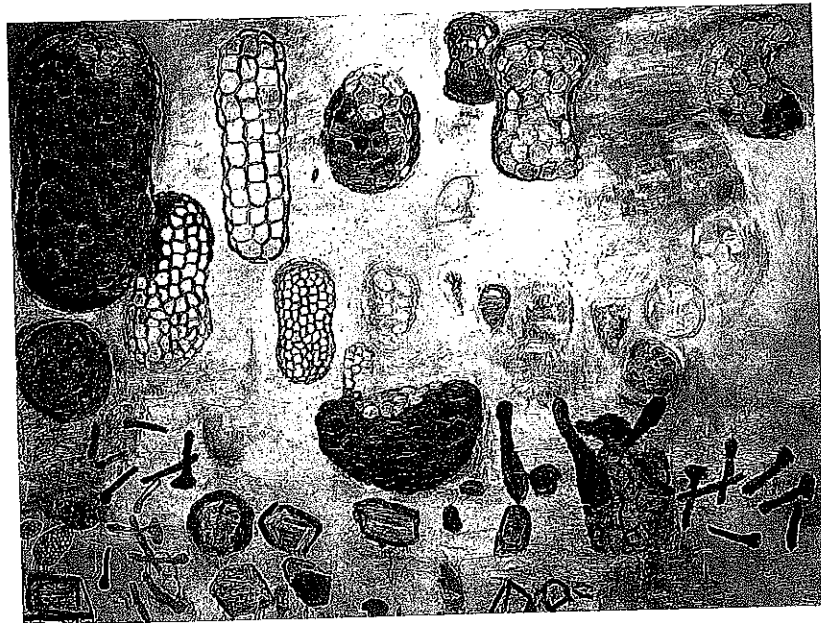
Subsequently, Murray created large relief paintings with more unified imagery, even though fissures through the

surface were still evident. These reliefs were generally based on such domestic items as old shoes with writhing shoelaces, or tables and cups, all given a certain awkwardness that made them seem vulnerable and even endearing. The objects become stand-ins for their human users, and are thus laden with psychological overtones.

It has been said that the American artist Terry Winters (b. 1949) "dreams science into art," a tendency that particularly extends to the science of biology. This is an interest not without precedents in modern art. After examining illustrations in scientific journals, Vasily Kandinsky near the end of his career portrayed microorganisms in a way that turned them into abstract shapes floating in space. Winters also painted shapes based on such organisms (along with botanical forms like buds, seeds, tubers, and spores), an interest in both artists' work that can be related to biomorphic Surrealism. But unlike the Russian, who generally focused in on one or two individual microscopic creatures, Winters suggests the dynamic interaction among the elements of a diverse community or colony as they grow, develop, and compete.

Winters spent three months working on the large painting called *Good Government* (fig. 26.55), which he started without any particular title in mind. At the beginning, he struggled to bring coherence to its anarchic array of very different forms—from expansive blastulas to hard crystals to floating fragments of chromosomes. But at last, he said, he "thought it looked like one of those maps you saw in grammar school and it said 'good government' and everything was working together." Like a system of checks and balances, these abstracted organic forms make up a complex compositional scheme, while the carefully modulated textures of this painting keep its contending shapes in "organic" relationship with one another that threatens like Malevich's black square (see chapter 11), not to be a composition at all.

Philip Taaffe (b. 1955) took abstract art as the source for his own abstract works. In a spirit akin to Appropriation,

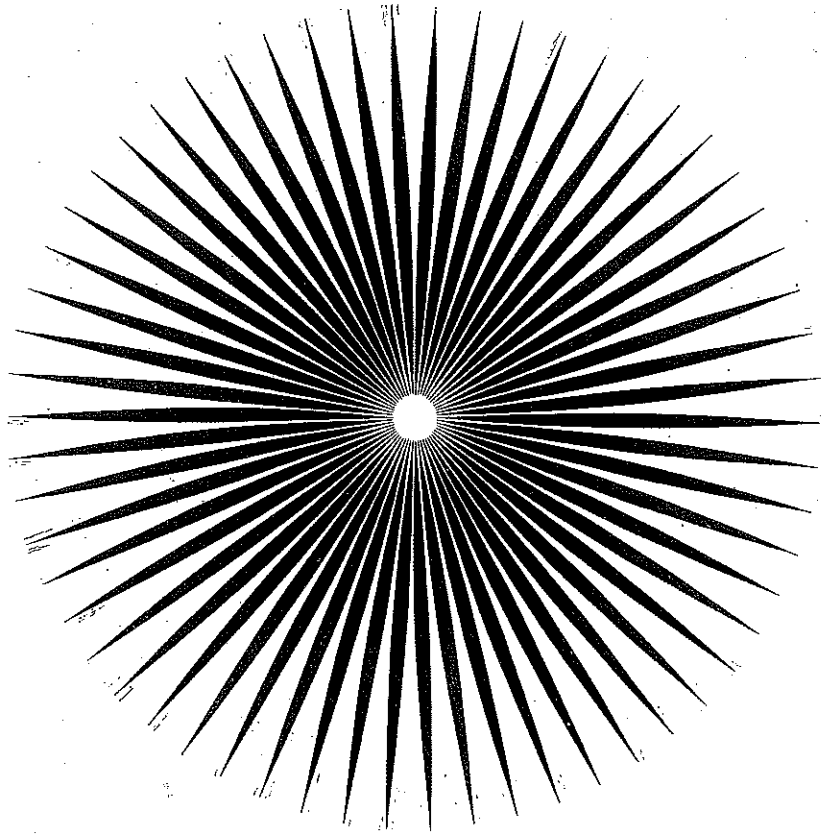


26.55 Terry Winters, *Good Government*, 1984. Oil on linen, 8'5½" × 11'5½" (2.6 × 3.5 m). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

26.56 Philip Taaffe, *Big Iris*, 1986.
Linoprint collage, acrylic on canvas,
5'3" × 5'3" (1.6 × 1.6 m).

Neo-Geo, and even Richter's abstract painting, Taaffe used drawing, painting, printing, and collage to create what he calls "representations of abstract paintings." Drawing upon a nearly encyclopedic repertoire of decorative motifs from Western and non-Western sources, Taaffe is sometimes quite direct, recreating specific paintings by Barnett Newman and Clifford Still, for instance. In other cases, genres of modernist abstraction are the general source of his inspiration. *Big Iris* (fig. 26.56) is a curious union between Georgia O'Keeffe's big flower paintings and Op art of the sixties, which joins the organic content of the former to the hypnotic visual effect of the latter. Collage, though linked to the avant-garde practice of Cubism, is also associated with craft traditions that were the aesthetic and feminist basis of Pattern and Decoration in the seventies. Calling decorative art a "culturalized representation of nature," Taaffe has found in it a means to incorporate representation into his abstractions. The cultural breadth of his sources alludes to any number of artistic traditions. Taaffe's heterodox selection of motifs conspires to position his modernist sources as just one tradition among many with which artists may create historically conscious abstract painting.

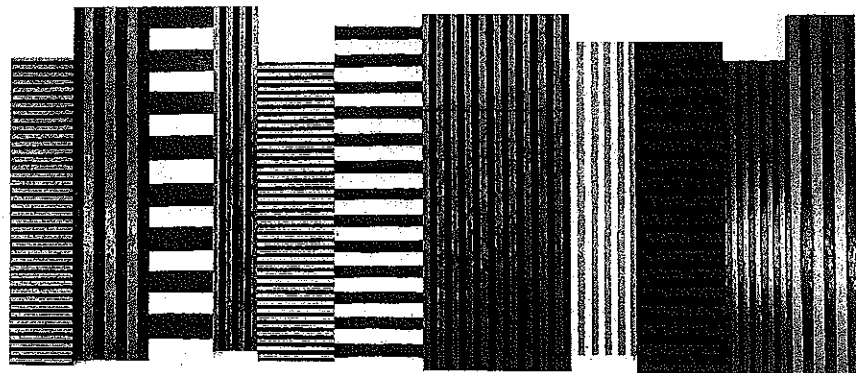
Born in Dublin and educated in London, Sean Scully (b. 1945) moved to New York in 1973. Initially, the artist used stripes in large, densely woven "super-grids," painted in a style inspired by Mondrian, the English Vorticist David



Bomberg, Agnes Martin, Brice Marden, and Sol LeWitt. Scully uses his stripes as the vehicles of an emotional or spiritual content much greater than anything obtainable from pure retinal stimulation.

Beginning with his diptychs, Scully progressively elaborated his simple vocabulary of striped panels into a language of such breadth and subtlety that each painting emerged like "a physical event, a physical personality, just like people." His colors range from brilliant, clashing primaries to tawny mustards and creamy ochers, all warmed by long, sensuous strokes freely wavering over traces of contrasting oilstick color, the latter set down freehand. Scully moved from diptychs to immense eight-by-ten-foot polyptychs (fig. 26.57), assembled from panels so various

26.57 Sean Scully,
Backs and Fronts, 1981.
Oil on canvas, 8 × 20'
(2.4 × 6.1 m). Collection
the artist.

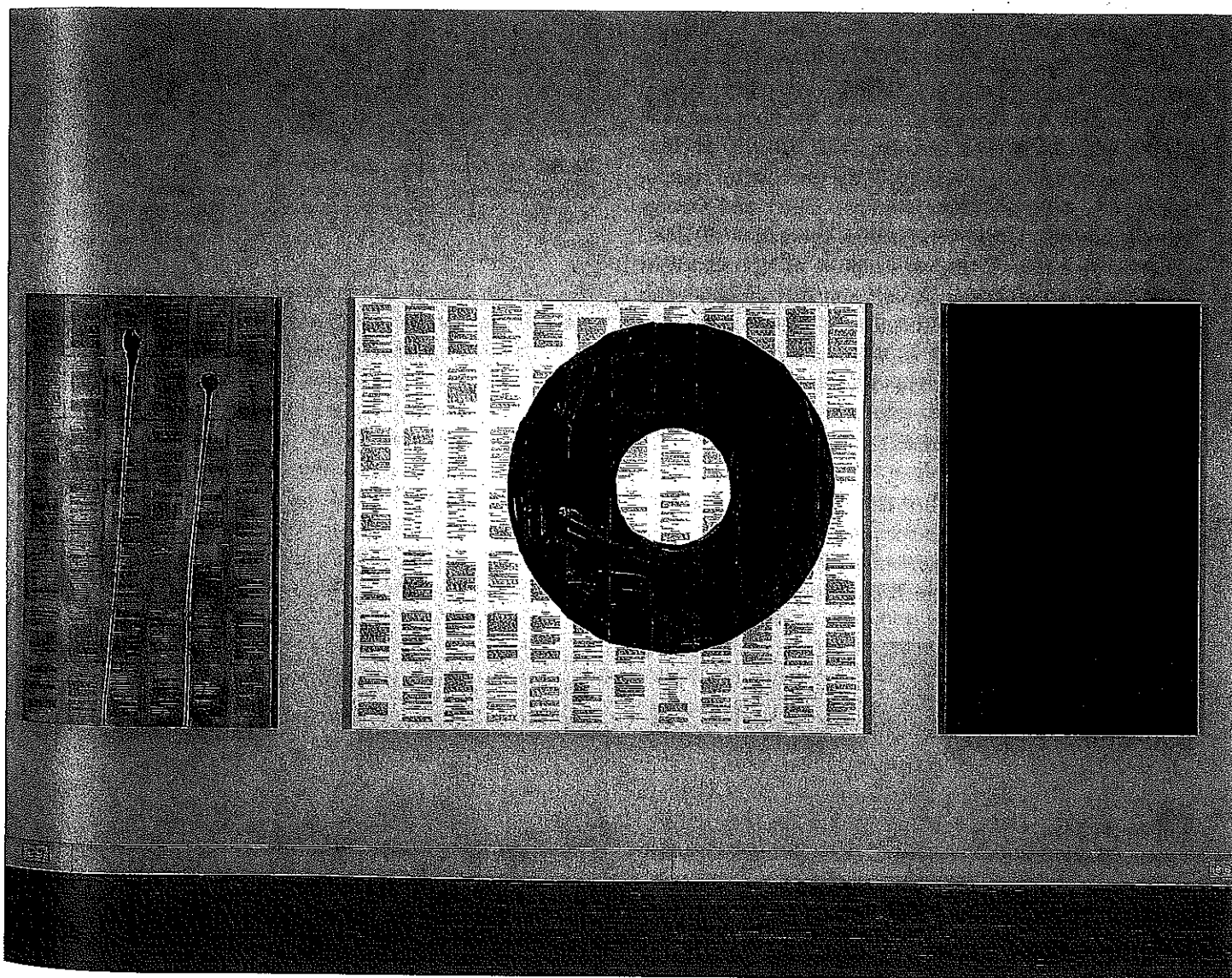


in their dimensions and depths, in their colors, widths, and directions of their banding, that they seemed like interactive social beings abstracted into iconic versions of processional figures in a classical relief or, geometric variations on Matisse's famous reliefs (see fig. 9.5). In this larger scheme, the colors and horizontal orientation assume the scale and atmosphere of landscape even as they recall monumental figural art.

In 1979, **Tim Rollins** (b. 1955) co-founded Group Material, an artists' collective that developed curatorial strategies for creating what one critic called "the conditions necessary for making communication possible." For Group Material, this included shows like *The People's Choice*, which featured treasured objects owned and displayed by their neighbors. Rollins took this social commitment into the classroom in the mid-eighties as a public school art teacher to low-income African-American and Latino teens in New York City. In 1984 he created a workshop with the students called KOS—"Kids of Survival."

The art created by Rollins and KOS took literature as its starting point and abstraction as the visual point of reference. Using texts such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Franz Kafka's *Amerika*, or Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, Rollins and the students sought to connect the themes of the books to events and concerns in their daily lives. These investigations were then used as the sources for abstract compositions that were painted onto the pages of the books. The results appropriate the text of the books as the literal and metaphoric support for an abstract art that came to be linked both to modernist concerns with the expressive potential of abstraction and Neo-Geo insights into the relationship between abstract form and cultural contexts.

The Temptation of Saint Anthony—The Trinity (fig. 26.58) is a three-canvas work that covers the pages of Flaubert's novel, itself a meditation on the temptations of physical desire—with the suggestion through color and geometry of flesh and blood. A porous red ring sits



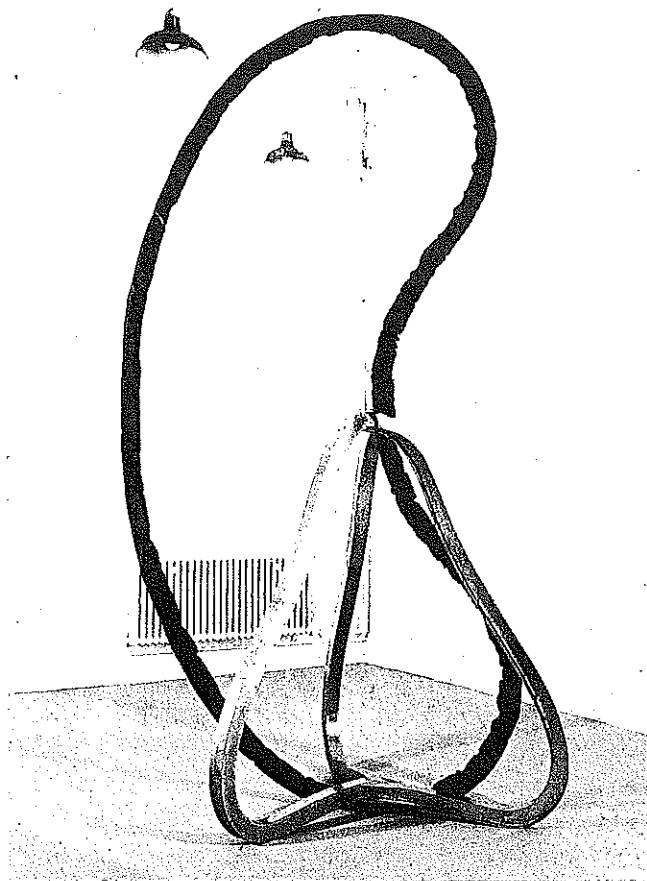
26.58 Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *The Temptation of Saint Anthony—The Trinity*, 1989–90. Blood on paper and linen, 5'8" × 16' (1.73 m × 4.9 m).

off-center in the middle panel, recalling the targets of Jasper Johns and Ken Noland (see figs. 21.15, 22.20). The red and black of the ring are made from blood. On the left panel two red wounds appear in a gold monochrome while the righthand canvas seems to fill with blood, leaving an even red surface. The connection to AIDS becomes inescapable as the blood seems to flow from a body threatened, like Saint Anthony's, by temptations of the flesh. In a gesture of cultural democracy at its best, Rollins and KOS tear Flaubert's text and the language of modernist abstraction from their nineteenth and early twentieth century contexts to carry meanings relevant to urban life in the late twentieth century.

Strangely Familiar: British and American Sculpture

As painters created Postmodern languages of abstraction, sculptors found great potential in deriving abstract objects from narrative, representational, and found sources. Among a number of contemporary English sculptors of abstract tendency, Tony Cragg (b. 1949), has modified techniques of the Minimalist and Process artists, such as grids or scatter works, to exert control over content. A striking series of Cragg's works were created by carefully placing small discards, like airy mosaics, across the floor or wall in abstract patterns of color and shape that balance the effect of the whole with the specificity of the once-useful component parts. Like his fellow Britons Gilbert and George (see fig. 26.30), Cragg represents a generation of artists tired of the purity of English sculpture as represented by Sir Anthony Caro, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth (see figs. 22.40, 17.33, 17.35). Cragg and the two sculptors most often discussed in relation to him, Richard Deacon and Bill Woodrow, found content in the Dada and Pop strategy of bringing into their abstractions all things—including at times representation—considered to be outside its purview. Scavenging and assembling bright fragments from the beaches and dustbins of England, Cragg makes newly relevant the once-useful but now broken, dysfunctional, and environmentally disfiguring products of industry. Often, as in *Britain Seen From the North*

26.59 Tony Cragg, *Britain Seen From the North*, 1981. Plastic and mixed media, "figure" to left 66 $\frac{7}{8}$ " × 23" (170 × 58.4 cm), "Britain" to right 12'1 $\frac{1}{4}$ " × 22'10 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (3.7 × 7 m). Tate Gallery, London.



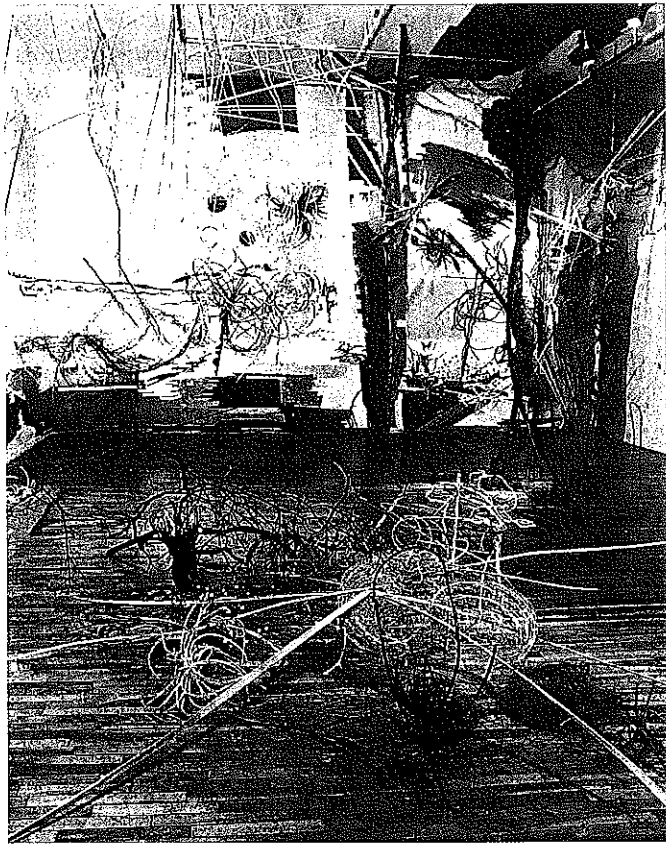
26.60 Richard Deacon, *Tall Tree in the Ear*, 1983–84. Galvanized steel, laminated wood, and blue canvas, 12'3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " × 8'2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " × 11'11" (3.7 × 2.5 × 3.6 m). Saatchi Collection, London.

(fig. 26.59) Cragg's compositions are as disorienting and politically suggestive as his process.

In 1978–79 Richard Deacon (b. 1949) read Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* and conceived a profound admiration for the manner in which "the objects that appear in Rilke's poetry, whilst taking on connotations, retain the quality of actuality." While the many implications of ears, horns, and mouths found in Deacon's sculptures derive ultimately, if obliquely, from Rilke's central metaphor of Orpheus's head, the forms remain too ambiguous to suggest clear, precise images. This dual sense of familiarity and

strangeness can be seen in *Tall Tree in the Ear* (fig. 26.60), where a large blue contour “drawing” in space seems to describe a very large dry bean, held upright by the silvery armature of what could be a pear. Together, the two- and three-dimensional forms conjure the shape and volume of the ear cited in the title, while their size evokes the immensity of the sound issuing from a tree, possibly one with branches full of noisy starlings or with leaves rustling in a strong wind. Mystery and poetry inform this art from beginning to end. Although he called himself a “fabricator,” Deacon employed simple methods, such as riveting; he used unaesthetic materials, like steel and linoleum; and he prepared no preliminary drawings or models. Instead, he permits initial idea, material, and process to interact to produce sculptures that announce their presence even as they imply absence.

Martin Puryear (b. 1941) accepted Minimalism’s simplicity and gravity but went on to invest his art with a human scale and animistic quality generated by craftsmanly process. Time spent with the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone reinforced Puryear’s desire for “independence from technology” and gave him an appreciation of the “magic”—the special meaning or content—that seems to emanate from hand-honed objects. What resulted is an art in which modernist celebration and tribal atavism, the traditions of Western high art and those of preindustrial craft, do not so



26.62 Judy Pfaff, *Deepwater*, 1980. Installation view, Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

much fuse as counterbalance one another in a dialectical standoff. The particular magic of *Old Mole* (fig. 26.61), for example, is to keep several suggestive tensions unresolved: a form that at first looks solid reveals itself as a weave of relatively weightless red cedar. And what appears to be an abstract shape quickly becomes in addition a kind of totem, a “mole”—a form that sits on the floor, looking alert and intelligent. Ultimately, the product of a craft technique is endowed with a sculptural presence, comparable to the transformation that occurs in the work of Brancusi (see chapter 9).

London-born, American-trained Judy Pfaff (b. 1946) is best known for her gallery-wide installations (fig. 26.62), works related not only to those of Jonathan Borofsky and the “scatterwork” Conceptualists (see chapter 24), but also to the abstract illusionism of Al Held, her teacher at Yale. Walking into a Pfaff installation, viewers often sense that they have entered a giant Abstract Expressionist painting—one realized, in this case, as a lush, fluid underwater environment providing total immersion among all manner of strange, tropical flora and fauna, brilliantly colored and suspended in free-floating relationships. To produce her spectacular effects, Pfaff assembled a huge collection of non-art materials—plaster, barbed wire, neon, contact papers, woods, meshes—from junkyards and discount outlets, hardware, lumber, and paint stores. Having transported these “mixed media” to the gallery, along with whatever few artifacts she may have prefabricated in her



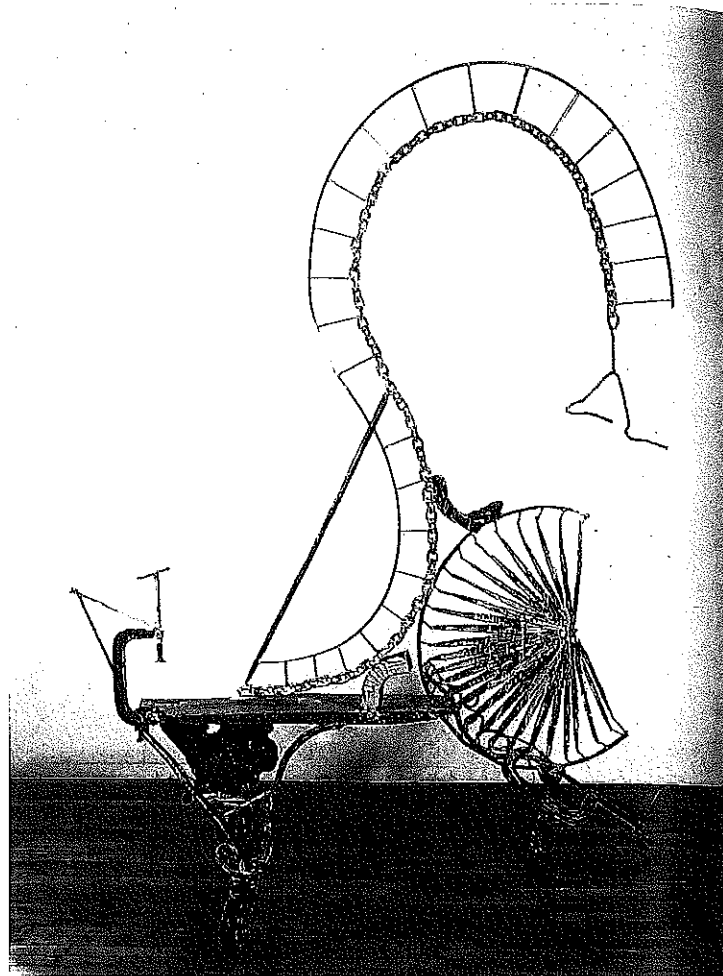
26.61 Martin Puryear, *Old Mole*, 1985. Red cedar, 61 × 61 × 32" (154.9 × 154.9 × 81.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

studio, Pfaff then worked in an improvisatory manner on site, first by setting up visual oppositions among painted and sculptural elements. With precariously counterbalanced rivalries as her guiding principle, she worked through the space, adding and adjusting, establishing and upsetting formal relationships, all in a continuous flow of inspiration, editing, and fine-tuning.

Pfaff also became an accomplished maker of portable, durable collages and constructed reliefs. These works often counter our expectations by changing the anticipated sizes of things. In *Supermercado*, which is more than eight feet (2.5 m) high, the carefully counterbalanced, brightly painted geometric solids seem to make up an enormously enlarged still life of fruits, vegetables, and bowls (hence the “supermarket” of the title), with a brick wall behind it. Here modest still-life elements aspire to the monumental. Indeed, this gathering of subtly differentiated spheres, disks, and circles might as easily suggest a model of the solar system.

After graduating from the Yale School of Art, the sculptor and painter Nancy Graves (1940–95) lived for a time in Italy. At a natural history museum in Florence, she happened upon a group of wax anatomical effigies made in the seventeenth century. In the effigies Graves saw the possibility for a new kind of sculpture. She began making small stuffed animals and assembling them with the aid of found objects. In this menagerie she discovered her now-famous breakthrough image—the Bactrian, or double-humped, camel—a unique form that, because specific, left the artist “free to investigate the boundaries of art making.” Graves made several series of full-scale camels, at first fabricating them from table legs, market baskets, polyurethane, plaster, and painted skins. Gradually, however, she progressed toward engineered, portable forms built of steel beams and covered with hide, finally producing the only camels she has allowed to be used for museum exhibition. Although uncannily naturalistic, the Bactrians were not exercises in taxidermy but original creations made without reference to models and brought to life by the artist’s own handwork and her meticulous regard for detail, texture, and proportion.

While investigating the form of the camel from the inside out, Graves discovered all manner of parts—fossils, skeletons, bones—that proved interesting in their own right as organic yet abstract forms, eminently suitable to aesthetic reordering. A commission for a bronze version of one of the resulting bone sculptures brought her together with the Tallix Foundry in Beacon, New York. Encountering a new technology launched the artist into a new phase of aesthetic experiment: open-form, polychrome, freestanding constructions combining natural and industrial shapes, often with a filigreed lightness (fig. 26.63). Graves would arrive at the foundry with shopping bags filled with fern fiddleheads, squid and crayfish, palmetto and monstera leaves, lotus pods and warty gourds, Chinese scissors, pleated lampshades, Styrofoam packing pellets, and potato chips. At Tallix she expanded the reper-



26.63 Nancy Graves, *Wheelabout*, 1985. Bronze and steel with polyurethane paint, 7'8½" × 5'10" × 2'8½" (2.3 × 1.8 m × 0.83 m). Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas.

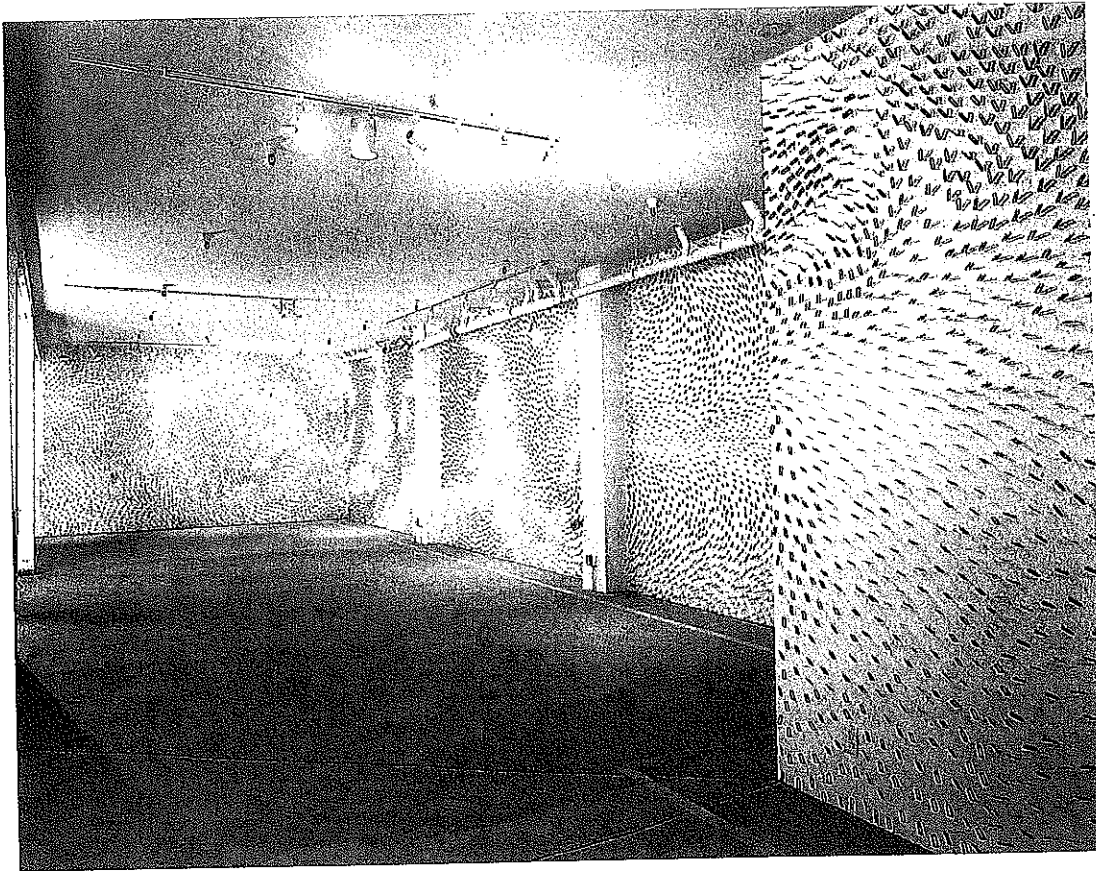
toire of forms to include pieces of broken equipment, old drainage pipes and plumbing fixtures, or even spillages of molten metal. After a construction was assembled, Graves applied pigments either by patination or by hand painting, with brushwork as freewheeling and extemporaneous as the structure it embellished.

For his sculpture, Donald Lipski (b. 1947) takes parts and makes wholes, but he imagines the whole only after finding—or scavenging—the parts and discovering a kind of surreal logic in some relationship among them. The artist’s strategy was to raid junkyards, dustbins, dumpsters, and dime stores and then combine his gleanings in assemblages that astonish and delight with the perfect union of their incompatible parts. Thanks to his ingeniously associative mind, Lipski could easily grasp how the shape and clarity of a crystal ball rendered it ideal for nesting in the cradle of an old telephone. Wrenched from their usual context and reordered in brilliantly dysfunctional ways, commonplace items became strange and wonderful objects of contemplation. While Lipski’s work may recall Marcel Duchamp and his readymades, its lack of antiart content and its lyrical obsessiveness give it a more certain kinship with the boxes of Joseph Cornell (see fig. 19.53).

Like his sculptures, Lipski's installation *The Starry Night* (fig. 26.64) also presents ordinary things in unexpected ways. Here, nearly 25,000 double-edge razor blades were stuck directly into the Sheetrock walls of a gallery. Their swarming, swirling patterns across a large area resemble the cosmic vortex of the nocturnal sky in Van Gogh's famous painting (see fig. 3.22). At the same time, however, and more disturbingly, the thousands of dangerously sharp blades protruding toward the viewer remind us of Van Gogh's self-mutilation and his tortured mental state at that time. With its complex reference combining visionary pleasure and psychological pain, Lipski's *Starry Night* communicates a surprisingly affecting sense of the dangers in an intensely romantic art. Moreover, exhibited during the AIDS epidemic in an exhibition space in San Francisco known for its experimental installations, *Starry Night* would have suggested the far more immediate dangers of romance. Abstraction was defined in *Starry Night*

by the geographical, temporal, and cultural context of its production and, like the most challenging art of the decade, was all the more powerful because of it.

Starry Night, a work of the nineties, is deeply informed by the retrospective examination of modern visual languages in the eighties, from the evocative, painterly vocabulary of Expressionism and the sublime attempts at purity in geometric abstraction to the forms of public address found in the mass media. After a decade of deconstructing visual communication, artists took on the task of rebuilding expressive and narrative forms that would respond to critiques of modernism as well as the continued desire of contemporary society to tell its stories and see its emotions, intuitions, hopes, and fears presented in art. *Starry Night*, with its appeal to art history, its implications for contemporary life, and its delicate combination of abstract form and pictorial interest, sets the tone for the problems to be addressed in the final chapter.



26.64 Donald Lipski, *The Starry Night*, Razor blades on wall. Installation at the Capp Street Project, San Francisco, 1994.

