

Flash Art

The Word Made Flesh

IN DEPTH

*Do they stand only by ignorance?
Is that their happy state, the proof
of their obedience?*

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*,
Book IV.

*Reason, the controller, has a perfect
understanding of the conditions, the purpose, and the materials
of its works.*

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
VI.V.

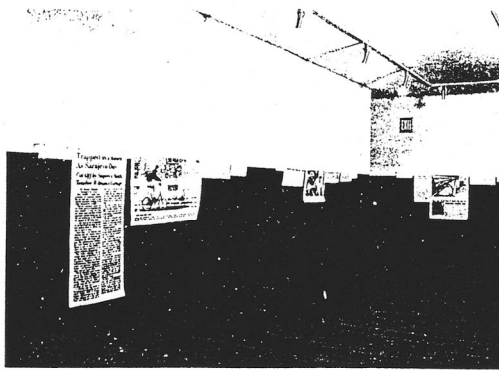
According to legend, the angel Uriel, also known as "The Scale," guards the gate of Eden. Uriel is there to keep us out because we chose knowledge, the only thing forbidden to us and therefore the only thing worth having. Only by becoming pure — that is, ignorant — can we be returned to our idyllic state. This symbolic rift between religion and science, between authority and observation, has haunted Western culture. The notion that knowledge is a prophylactic against transcendence, understanding being "only" meaning, transcendence being "beyond" meaning, has become a way of arguing an ongoing critique of the cult of the "sublime" art object as institutionally compromised by "an artistic apparatus according to which art, rather than being equated with information, depends almost exclusively on an aesthetic and economic appreciation of mere objects" (Jean-François Lyotard, *Art After Philosophy and After*).

Knowledge is seen as the key, and the self-mandated answer to this issue, the "self-reflexive artwork" (frequently spotted since 1917), aims for an awareness of "pure mind." Instead of "objects" as artworks, we have the manifestation of "differences." Most conceptual work therefore comes with, or as, a body of text; prime cud for the ruminations of those so disposed, it defines its difference from ordinary art objects, should you be mistakenly seduced by any of its formal qualities. The central weakness of this kind of "conceptualism" was that its methodology was its agenda.

Reliant on the substitution of text for object, the auratic context of the gallery space and the rhetoric of its extra-mural activities, conceptualism became one style among many, driven by internal contradictions.

But three recent New York shows demonstrated that the relationship among thought, text, and art may have moved on to a new phase in which the struggle with the nature of knowledge is being reconsidered. This time around, the

Matthew Ritchie



JOSEPH KOSUTH, THE THING-IN-ITSELF IS FOUND IN ITS TRUTH THROUGH THE LOSS OF ITS IMMEDIACY, 1993. INSTALLATION VIEW. COURTESY LEO CASTELLI GALLERY, NEW YORK

struggle resembles more closely the Valentinian gnostics' tale of "Wisdom's fall through her profane search for knowledge of the 'Source.'" Striking similarities in presentation and equally striking differences in both meaning and understanding of the work characterized these shows.

Of course, the weapon of choice was the word.

Two veterans, William Anastasi at Sandra Gering and Joseph Kosuth at Leo Castelli, bracketed a young contender, Sean Landers, at Andrea Rosen. Each artist embellished the work with his signature accessories: Kosuth came in black and white, Anastasi chose racing colors of red and blue, while Landers appeared on legal yellow. The core of all three installations consisted of a huge body of text. Anastasi presented a research project, over two years in the making, and available in a limited edition. Landers presented his familiar confessional musings and provided them for mass consumption as a limited edition "novel"; while Kosuth, reversing the "handmade-to-mass-produced dynamic," exhibited a variety of previously published non-art material as a sequential installation. As the dialogue swung back and forth between modes of presentation and models of consumption, the viewer was left with some abiding questions.

In "artifact culture," whether or not we think we are self-aware, all channels to our mind from what Aurelius would call the "world-na-

ture" are aware. Biologically speaking: "higher-order consciousness and hence meaning arises from the interaction... of memory with the combined action of conceptual areas and speech areas" (G.M. Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*).

The presentation of thought and language is much more about the discovery of internal content than a frustrated contextual awareness of external mediating forms. Language and symbolic memory are the tools that allow us to be "conscious of being conscious," and hence circumscribe our understanding of art; but knowing the fact of a socially constructed selfhood does not provide understanding of the direct experience of the self. Similarly, external linguistic structures like texts, like memory itself, are more than the sum of their parts. Each text becomes a model of the conscious mind that depends on its unique history and embodiment. Language is the primordial word become material flesh, the flexible skin of the mind, flayed, tanned, and draped onto the armature of syntax. The text is the mark and measure of its creator. Here we had three such texts: Kosuth on knowledge of the world; Landers on knowledge of the self; and Anastasi on knowledge of knowledge itself.

By positing political consciousness as content... he [Hans Haacke] helped reinforce formalistic presumptions about art and

left for the public perception the political enunch of a conceptual art style...

Joseph Kosuth, *Teaching To Learn*.

For years, Kosuth has scrupulously avoided tangling with the mass media for exactly the reasons he here excoriates Haacke. Clearly then, it is not Kosuth's intention to be political in the conventional sense when he shows us some of the scenes of absolute tragedy and indifference so common in the mass media he quotes.

His installation bisected the gallery horizontally, the upper area white, the lower black. On a steel clothesline arrangement at the horizon line, in a style deriving from his own working method, Kosuth hung groups of printed material, newspaper clippings, cartoons, and the familiar quotations. Kosuth has long argued that we should view the work through lenses ground from a glass that will allow our unprincipled eyes to see the relations between things, not the things themselves. This in turn has allowed him to fashion a cunning alloy from a diamond hard stylistic eye and a flâneur's emotional distance. But "relations" between things are as apt to be institutionalized and subjective as anything else. Here, the more open presentation and the inclusion of a more specific relation between tragedy and comic relief lent a commendable engagement to the piece, but this opened up still other questions. Events in the real world like the ones shown here outrank in emotional priority any questions of their recontextualization. This piece had an unconscious will to relevance. The impression was one of art trying to woo the world to its will, invoking the media as a familiar demon, and finding instead the rhythms of the mind overpowered by real-time events, scrambling to collate, to create retrospective order — "recta ratio" in retreat. In this it bears some resemblance to the gigantic *Currents* (1979) by Robert Rauschenberg, another attempt to sum up the media as an environment. A work in progress then, as the cracks in the facade of Kosuth's work slowly open.

Say for instance that I thought my life was worth describing every ugly detail of and that I was de-

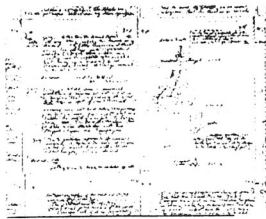
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GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY



cluded enough to think that my jerking off in my studio was something higher than what it is. That every moment I spend in self-loathing or self-pity was somehow something for your consumption.
— Sean Landers, “[sic].”

So begins Landers’s novel, presented in handwritten form as the centerpiece of his installation at Andrea Rosen. The show also consisted of other text pieces, various inebriated and deformed ceramic leprachauns, and a video performance of the artist adopting sculptural and masturbatory poses. Landers has taken literally the conceptualist injunction that the mean-



WILLIAM ANASTASI, DU JARRY (DETAIL), 1990-93. INSTALLATION. COURTESY SANDRA GERING, NEW YORK.

ing must be located outside the art world. The tautological nature of the art-object is not only taken as a given but as a guarantee that the project can occupy unquestioned status. When conceptualism traded intention for style, its rhetoric became no more plausible than so-called professional wrestling, which feigns combat, prefaced by the indignant posturing that is the Ur-text of American media production. Instead of interrogating the “object” as an answer to this, Landers presents an extreme artistic persona, like a silent comedian hoping to present pratfalls with such formal dexterity that the perfection of his error becomes admirable in itself. In demonstrating the innate insecurity of the artist he unravels the Aurelian myth of “Reason, the controller.” The narrative’s “Sean Landers” is the love-child of the 70s’ lofty ambitions, 80s’ greed, and the 90s’ self-help books. This perfectly captures the essentially narcissistic nature of phenomenological conceptualism. If all meaning is to be provided by the context, why not indulge your fantasies to the fullest? “If I don’t become an art genius I’m going to

kill myself and I mean it,” Landers writes, and we almost believe it. In its way, this is an honest extension of the project, an exploration of conceptualism’s “inner child,” the abandonment of the quest for perfect knowledge in favour of the raging Id.

The ultimate criticism of an art work would be a multi-layered complex of semantic realms which would virtually contain the cultural universe in miniature.
— Thomas McEvelley, “Heads It’s Form, Tails It’s Not Content!”

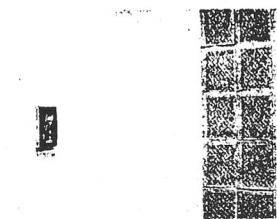
Anastasi’s wall-sized handwritten text — peppered with diagrams and rendered in colored inks — was a vertiginous experience: it explored two theses examining the relationship between works by Alfred Jarry and works by Marcel Duchamp and James Joyce. According to a Joyce scholar, it bore a striking resemblance to Joyce’s own working notes. The piece was not initially designed for exhibition, and ordinarily a scholarly manuscript would have little reason to be shown as “art.” However, through the incomprehensible maze of connections and “the beauty of the posthumous relationships as they were revealed” to the artist, his obsession with this intricate hypothesis becomes its own justification.

Anastasi has cast the Ur-figures of modernism as questions, and himself as quizmaster in a room-sized *Jeopardy*. Surfing on the information highway, Anastasi revels in his knowledge (this could not be done without rigor or purpose but these are only the skeleton of the experience for the viewer). This was the foaming joy of thinking, riding an informational water slide of pure thought. Anastasi’s notational spree worked by establishing connections in front of your eyes. It was like watching a time lapse film of coral growing, an intelligent reef of thought, with fronds of information drifting lazily in the interstices.

Taken together, these shows demonstrated that the future relationship of art and knowledge will be diverging into models of exploration that more truly resemble the conscious mind. Art was always an “object of thought”; thinking about “thinking” is not in itself real knowledge, it is a continuation of the Edenic idea of a “consciousness mystique.”

Further exploration of the definition of the self is an imperative before articulation of the mediating structures can be successful. But

even after the possession of a theory of consciousness, the very fact of the mind’s embodiment imposes inevitable limits, since the biological forms that lead to awareness are unique to each individual. Each time an imaginary construct is made, whether it is an object or a “difference,” it is hoped that it will be simultaneously a gate to and from Eden. But as tools of the conscious mind, these constructs represent its virtues and its failings. Language is the gate to Eden and the gate is closed, because language means knowledge and never innocence. The “innocent” sublime object is as compromised as the manifested linguistic “difference” is caught in the mystery of self consciousness. Art is always the made-thing, the embodiment of escape and return, the scene of the crime. The imagined idyll of Eden



SEAN LANDERS, [SIC] (DETAIL), 1993. INSTALLATION VIEW. COURTESY ANDREA ROSEN, NEW YORK.

is not for us, although perhaps some trace of our pastoral ancestors blankly grazing on the savannah makes us think it is. Nor will our conscious world ever be some Speer-like architecture of the soul measured out by the glassy staff of knowledge. Ours is the world of desire and consequence; and the word made flesh is its banner. The survival of the conceptual idiom depends, not on institutional resistance, but on what is being said. What was on offer here was a tripartite example of art as an individual engagement with the ambiguous structure of knowledge. In legend, the gnostic power of “Wisdom,” imbued with preternatural insight, found after a desperate search throughout the world that knowledge of the “Source” was impossible; at that moment she was restored to her place within the divine being.

Of these three projects, Anastasi’s captured best what might be a viable future for conceptual representation — not a struggle pitting Grace against Reason, but a delicate balancing act in which the life of the mind becomes the inner Eden.