

Joel-Peter Witkin

The Sacred and the Profane

By

Elisabet Lagerström

Fine Art Sculpture 1995



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National College of Art and Design

Fine Art Sculpture

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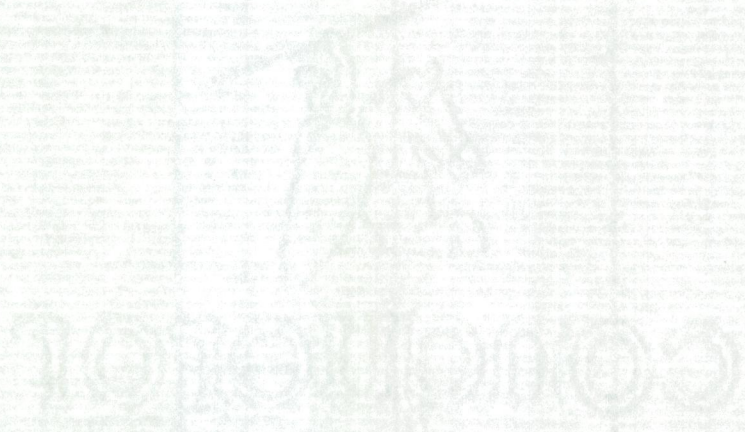
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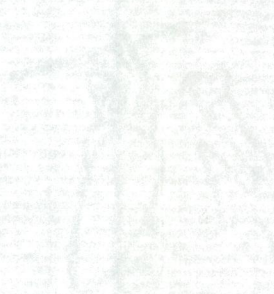
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COMPTON



## INTRODUCTION

Joel-Peter Witkin (1939 - ) is an American photographer whose main goal in life is to see God and to find his true self.

It sounds harmless enough, but it has turned him into one of the most controversial photographers of contemporary art. Whenever he exhibits he stirs up a turmoil of emotions.

The negative opinions about him are many and the words are fierce. He has been called cynical and calculating - using humans and animals to provoke horror, shock and fascination. His work has been called appalling and revolting. He has even been branded as a Satanist! Hal Fisher (1983) tells us about a New York art critic, who not only refused to review one of Witkins exhibitions, but threatened his editor to resign if he allowed any coverage of the exhibition. Another art critic, Susan Kandell (1989) accused him of exploitation of the cheapest kind; exploitation not merely of his subjects - hermaphrodites, paedophiles, deformed individuals, fetuses, cadavers and animals - but of his voyeuristic audience primed by the media to crave gratuitous sex and violence and only too thrilled to find it in the lofty setting of the art gallery.

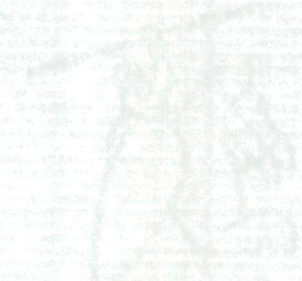
Joel-Peter Witkin is not a pleasant and accessible artist. His photographs are dark and frightening. His models do not fit within the prevalent standards of beauty, or, for that matter, what we would consider "normal" behaviour. The objects he chooses for his still lives are macabre and shocking. The subjects he is dealing with are the most taboo ones, those of sexuality and death.

Witkin walks on a tightrope between the sacred and the profane, it is a delicate balance. He is addressing the biological differentness of people born physically abnormal, the psychological differentness of people of non standard sexual persuasions, and the transformation of the flesh wrought by mortality.

Simply put, Witkin is dealing with a world of deviance most of us refuse to acknowledge. It is a world filled with violence, sexuality, death and torments, a world of outsiders rejected from our "normal" society.

As an introduction to Witkin's world, taking a look at his ongoing request for models will give us an idea of what to expect. He needs physical marvels -





TOTAL



*"a person, thing or act so extraordinary as to inspire wonder; someone with wings, horns, tails, fins, claws, reversed feet, head, hands. Anyone with additional arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips, head. Anyone without a face. Pinheads, dwarfs, giants, satyrs. A woman with one breast (centre), a woman with breasts so large as to require Daliesque supports; women whose faces are covered with hair or large skin lesions and willing to pose in evening gowns. Active and refined sideshow performers, contortionists (erotic), anyone with a parasitic twin, people who live as comic-book heroes. Boot, corset and bondage fetishes, a beautiful woman with functional appendages in place of arms, anorexics (preferably bald), the romantic and criminally insane (nude only). All manner of extreme visual perversions. A young blond girl with two faces. Hermaphrodites, beings from other planets. Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ. Anyone claiming to be God. God."*

(Blaisdell 1989)

There are questions to be raised about Witkin's work. Is he merely a calculating cynic, out to shock us as some of his critics claims or is there in his photographs an honest and sincere respect for life and death, as he himself claims?

And, what I personally find more important, is the question of just how far one can go when dealing with the taboo subjects of death and sexuality before it crosses the line over to becoming exploiting and pornographic? What is most shocking - Witkin's images or the fact that he is challenging our moral standards?

These are questions I intend to discuss in this Thesis, based on Witkin's work, his own statements and those of others. The following is a brief description of the different chapters:

- **Background**

This chapter deals with Witkin's upbringing, education etc. It will also point out different influences and real life incidents that are important in his work.

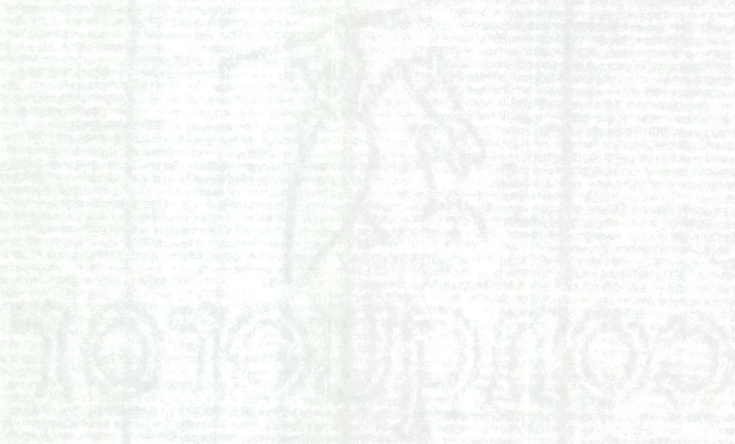
- **The Search**

This chapter deals with Witkin's spirituality and its relevance to his work.

- **Technique**

Here I will discuss the technical aspect of his work and its importance on the final result.

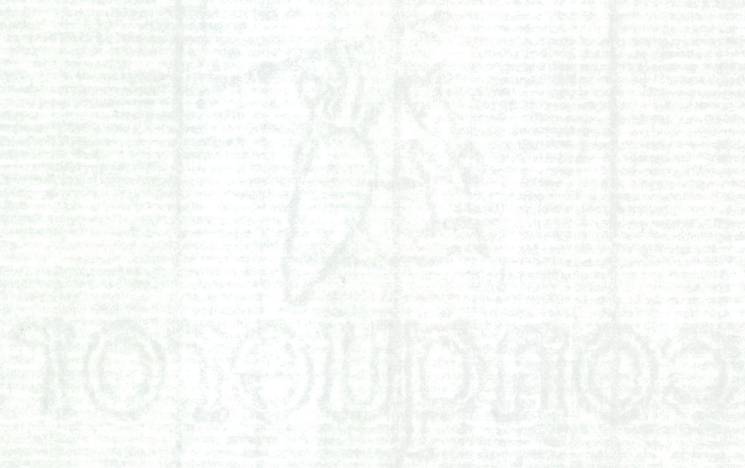




- **Pain and Pleasure**

In these two chapters I intend to discuss his work and how it relates to pain and pleasure, physically, spiritually and sexually.







## BACKGROUND

When you are looking at Joel-Peter Witkin's photographs you inevitably start asking yourself questions. Questions such as - Who is this person, and where does it all come from? I wouldn't say that it is necessary to know all about Witkin's background to be intrigued and fascinated by his work. There is a darkness inside all of us and to which Witkin, through his work, reaches out and touches. They are our fears, nightmares, our fascination of all sorts of deviance, especially sexual ones. But where as we keep them hidden and buried, Witkin brings them out in the open. He is creating the images we only look at. He is physically dealing with the world he presents, with the body parts, fetuses and dead animals.

Even if it isn't essential to know his life story, there are certain events and influences that when you know of them, brings his work to a different level and maybe makes it a bit more understandable. Looking into Witkin's background one quite soon realises that what we have here is not just any ordinary every day American, there are events and circumstances that clearly go outside the normal.

So where did it begin? Witkin was born in 1939 and raised in Brooklyn, New York. He and his twin brother were the sons of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, who divorced due to religious difficulties. Witkin and his brother stayed with their mother but kept in touch with their father.

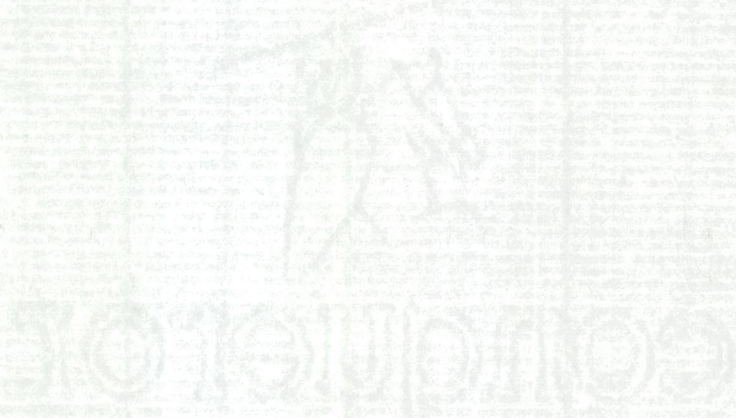
In 1945, when Witkin was six years old, an incident happened that according to himself, was the beginning of his work.

*"It happened on a Sunday, my mother was escorting my brother and myself down the stairs of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church. Walking through the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screams and cries for help. The accident involved three cars, all with families in them. Somehow in the confusion, I was no longer holding my mother's hand. I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I reached down to touch the face, to ask it - but before I did someone carried me away."*

(Witkin 1985)

This incident is definitely the main key to understanding Witkin's work. It was his first conscious visual experience and it left its mark. We can see the traces of it in his work all







the time; lacerated people, severed heads and loose body parts. Witkin claims that it was this experience that influenced him to become a photographer whose main subjects would concern violence, pain and death.

Naturally this experience was a severe shock to his young psyche but according to himself it didn't defeat him and leave him insensitive. Instead he chose to accept the injury and go on, he continued to live as a child, but a silent child who sought not the toys and games of children. He had little interest in things of this world, mostly he was obsessed with seeing.

In the mid 1950's, when Witkin was sixteen years old he obtained his first camera. He learned how to use it by reading books on photography and his first serious photographic task came when his brother needed some help with a project he was working on. His brother was studying painting and needed some studies of the subjects he was working on. The subjects were the freaks at Coney Island. Witkin took photographs of a three legged man, a dwarf called the "Chicken Lady" and a hermaphrodite. The freak show fascinated him and he discovered in himself a strong emotional response to these unusual people. This emotional response is reflected in his work. There are very rarely any "normal" people in his photographs, most of his models would be considered "freaks", one way or another, physically or mentally.

Witkin's interest in these people is not something unusual in itself. Others have always been fascinated by the ugly and sometimes horrible outcomes of Mother Nature. The freak show has always been a popular element in fairs and circuses. That is, up until recent years, now we are much more civilised and educated and do not approve of such things as freak shows. Also the advances within medicine and plastic surgery has made it possible to "correct" deformities giving these people a chance to live and function normally in our society.

However, when it comes to Witkin's interest in those people I would say that his fascination goes far beyond the ordinary. But then again, Witkin isn't part of the ordinary. His first sexual experience was with the hermaphrodite he was photographing for his brother. This is important because I believe it is another key to his work. Along with death and pain, sexuality is a main concern in his photographs, and very often it is the deviances of sexuality, that which most people would consider perversions. Mainly his models are of ambiguous gender, hermaphrodites and pre-op transsexuals.

The freak show became like a home to Witkin, a real environment filled with his living fantasies. Unfortunately, in the late 1950's the freak show moved south and, Witkin, because the show was not in the need of a photographer, was unable to travel with them. Not having his original subjects available to work with he now started to fabricate his own environments in which he directed strange events to take place and then photographed them.





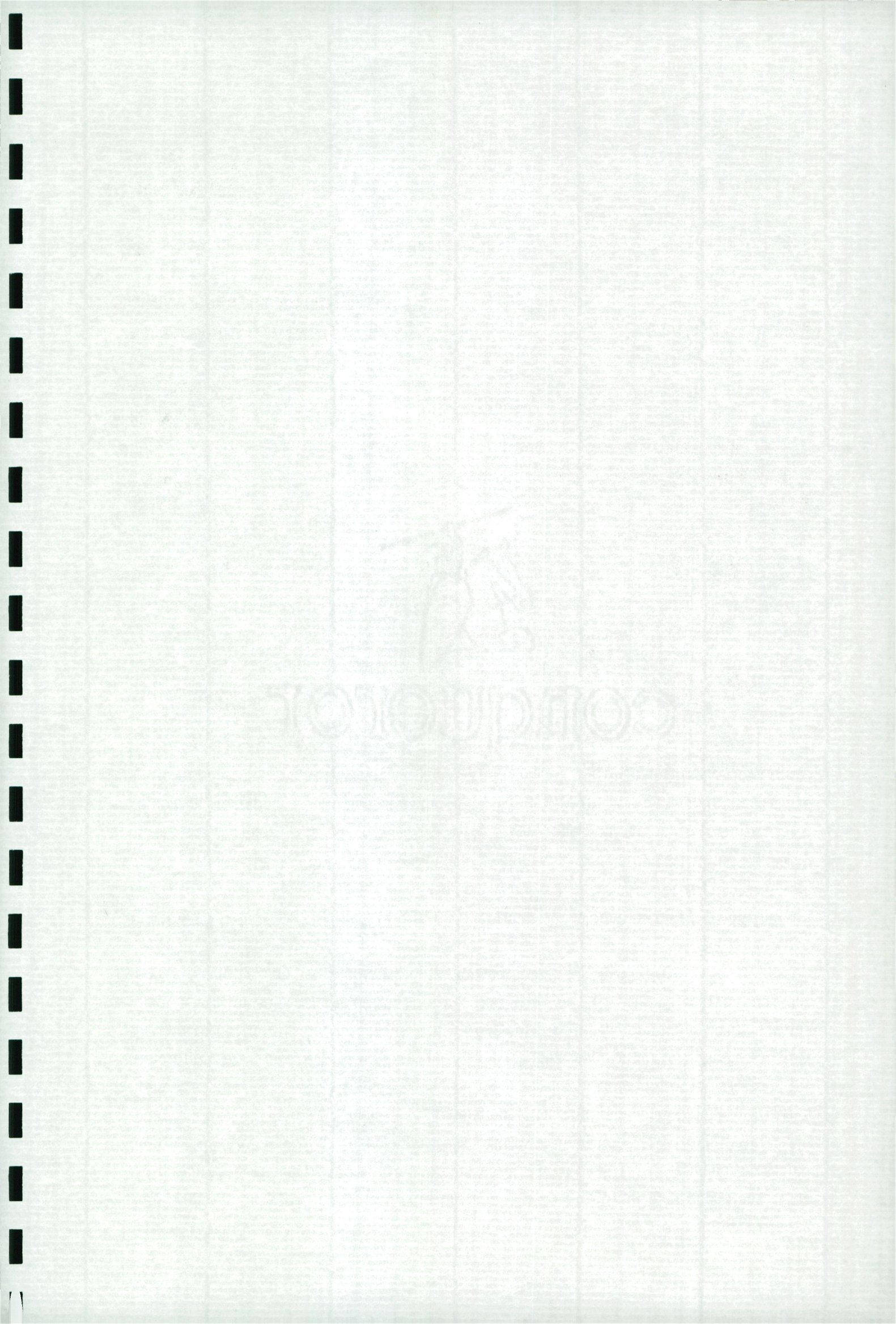


The most important visual influences at this time were reproductions of paintings dealing with religious and esoteric themes. Cimabue and Giotto, because of their depictions of the frozen emotions of the sacred and Rembrandt because Witkin felt that he made the sacred human. The Symbolists, like Felicien Rops, Gustav Klimt and Alfred Kubin, were also important because their work dealt with dreams, perversity and satanism, which, in Witkin's opinion, challenged the sacred and yet seemed to be an unavoidable part of the sacred at the same time. Two others were Balthus and Max Bechman, the former because he satisfied the appetite of his vision, the erotic and the voyeuristic, the latter, while dealing in the melding of pain, lostness and death, hoped to find what was "real" by objectifying it. This is very much the same as Witkin is hoping to find though his own work.

In 1961 Witkin began working full-time as a printer of colour photographs, but he still managed to attend evening classes at New York's Cooper Union School of Art as a sculpture major. Because he was not a full-time student, Witkin was eventually drafted into the Army during the Vietnam War. In order to be able to continue photography, he enlisted as a combat photographer. Unlike most of the other participants of the war, Witkin managed to spend most of the time in Europe and America, documenting and cataloguing various forms of deaths. Deaths by suicide, accidents, blasts and shrapnel.

In 1975 Witkin began graduate studies in photography at the University of New Mexico. He left New York after almost eight years of work, for the open space, clean air and sunshine of Albuquerque. With him he brought two suitcases. One containing his cameras, the other one containing his collection of masks and leather belts. It was here he began a more formal study of the history of art and photography, and became acquainted with other serious photographers, all of which expanded his outlook.







## THE SEARCH

*The human being, as homo religious, is a creature that worries. His worrying is both his burden and his distinction. In the dark ages of his mutation to homo sapiens, at the turning point between animality and humanity, his intuition of the presence of the numinous around him tipped the balance toward humanness.*

*Man discovered Universe and, concomitantly, the existential problem of his place in cosmos, assigned to him by some power for some particular reason, toward some goal. He thus invented an entire mythical universe in answer to the questions evoked by his fundamental anxiety.*

*Reflecting on the origins of his human condition, man came inevitably and universally to the conclusion that this present life is not what it was meant to be by the God(s) in illo tempore. In short, from being anxious, man became unhappy, stricken with guilt feelings about an initial accident that is repeated endlessly throughout human existence and can be called "sin".*

André La Coque 1987

The core of Witkin's work is, in my opinion, his search for God, the Creator, the True Self. His fascination with seeing and observing is based on, according to himself, the uncertainty of being alive. He wants proof of existence itself. He is searching for the answers to the questions that have tormented him since he was a teenager, to find an explanation of what Life and Death really are. Witkin like most thoughtful teenagers was seeking for the answers to life's riddle. The fact that his father was a Jew and his mother a Catholic probably made him even more confused. Neither within Judaism or Catholicism did he find any answers to his questions or anybody that could explain them to him. The conclusion he came up with was that only the creator of all things - God, the maker Life and Death, would know, and Witkin wanted to find out from him.

He thought the opportunity had come to him when he was seventeen. He was to meet and photograph a rabbi who had seen and talked to God! Finally he would be given the possibility to find the answers from a man who had not only met, but actually talked to God. Of course it didn't turn out that way, what he found was a sleepy little old man in a large dusty study, there was no presence of God, neither within the rabbi nor within the room. Despite the disappointment Witkin felt, he still believed that reality meant only one thing - the presence of God before him. Until that happened, he would have no identity, no





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purpose.

After he left the army, Witkin's ambition was to make photographs that would help him to better understand himself in relation to God. In order to see God, he took upon himself the great task of creating the image of God. He says:

*"I could no longer wait to see God - therefore I would create the image of God! In order to know if I were truly alive, I'd make the invisible visible. Photography would be the means to bring God down to earth - to exist for me in the photographic images, I would create. I chose to create Christ as God, because I believe he is God and because he still represents the living belief of this culture. He is the symbol, regardless of historical existence representing REDEMPTION and the end of suffering and confusion.*

(Witkin 1985 p.39)

This conception resulted in a series of photographs called "Contemporary Images of Christ". The first image of Christ he made was set in the slum of Philadelphia and it represented the coming of Christ into the world. As a model, he used his brother's five year old son, who was stripped of his clothes and put on an abandoned street. His face was powdered white and he was given a dead bird to play with.

Witkin later moved the stages for his "events" up to the rooftops. This because they provided more seclusion for the people he photographed. This was important because many of them were physically unusual and would attract a crowd. For instance, one of his many subjects was a 200 pound extra in porno films. A typical image from this series would be "Christ Homosexual" which shows a young boy, nude except for a pair of Japanese World War II Kamikaze flier's goggles and womens spiked high heel shoes.

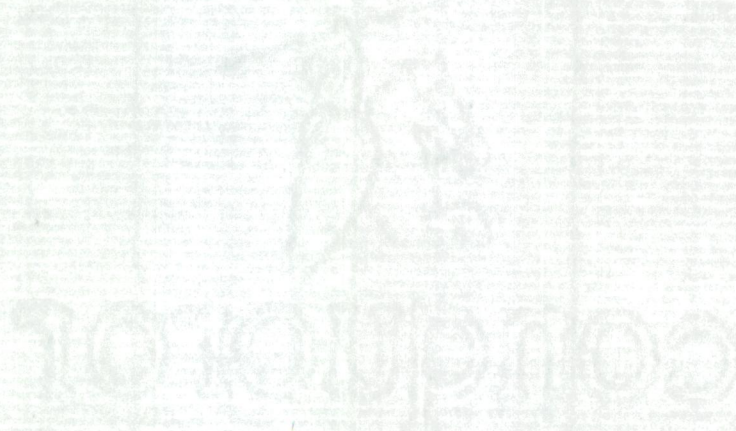
Witkin calls himself a portraitureur, not of people but of conditions of being. He says

*"I'm making a record of events which will show how one person, one phantom, engaged the world. I believe this work represents a visual biography of what one man did to create a dialogue with the infinite".*

(Witkin 1985 p2)

When we go through the door that leads into Witkin's world we leave reality as we have come to know it behind. What we enter is a world of myths, masks and symbols. It is a theatre, but a theatre of the grotesque, of the bizarre and sometimes morbid aspects of life. It has a strong aura of danger, and it's a world that one would not want to be left behind in. It is a world where mythology is being visualized and brought to life, but not quite in the way it is normally presented to us. What we get is an intriguing mixture of myth and reality,







all based on Witkin's fantasies and his need to visualise what he has been told about.

Mythology is the main source from which Witkin's work derives. It ranges from the contemporary images of comic strip heroes to the ancient Greek mythology, not to exclude the greatest source of them all - the bible.

Witkin has said that he could never accept any symbol for its intended use in any form. That applied to scripture, myth and even to the simple stories of the comics. And comic strips has played an important role in shaping his imagery. About the same time as the "Christ-series" he made a series of photographs based on the same theme, but using the contemporary myth heroes found in the comics. Superman was to him the Hero of Goodness, the Secular of Christ; Batman was the Lord of the Bird World and Darkness, the Anti-Christ; Wonder Woman the Amazon of Impotence, was the Virgin Mother. One of these images photographed on a roof top, shows Christ at the world's end, exhausted and defeated by Batman, the Anti-Christ. An image that definitely does not leave us with much hope for the future of mankind.

In his attempt to bring God down to earth Witkin's use of myths is a way of making the divine a little more understandable, to make the sacred more human. A way for him and us to be able to identify with the deity and the divine plan. Witkin is constantly challenging everything that we consider to be sacred. In his attempt to make the sacred human, the line that crosses to profanity is very fine. His visual re-creations of the stories from the Bible are far from the ones we grew up with, the ones shown to us in Sunday School. Witkin's Christ and Mary figures have all been removed from their traditional setting of purity and goodness are plunged down into what could be seen as a contemporary purgatory. It's Eden after the fall, although it is very dubious if there ever was a "before the fall".

Witkin challenges the church and its self-righteous views of what is right or wrong, sacred and profane, divine and human. In a way, it is as if he is challenging God himself, daring him to come down to earth and prove his existence and to give us the answers. For it couldn't be that the whole concept of God is just another myth invented by man as an answer and explanation to our existential problems, as in André La Cocque's theory, could it?

It has been said that:

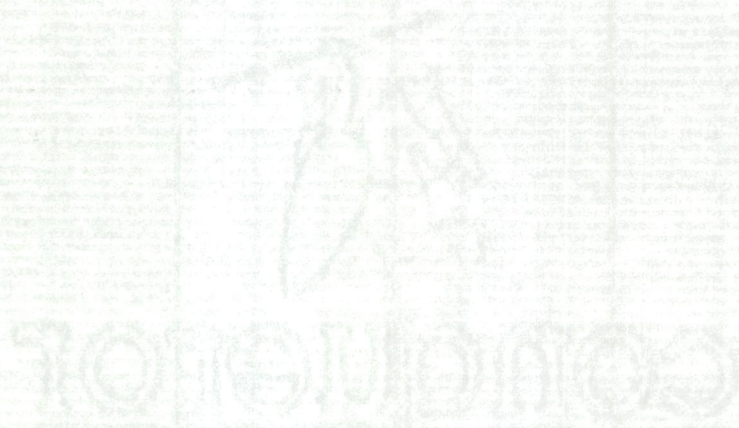
*"To understand or sense what Joel Peter Witkin is doing, it is best to put on a mask, as one might do during the carnival season"*

(Coke, 1985)

*Masks plays a major role in Witkin's work. He has said that "I am a person that could relate to human beings as a human being, but visually I continued to relate to people mainly through symbols"*

(Coke, 1985)







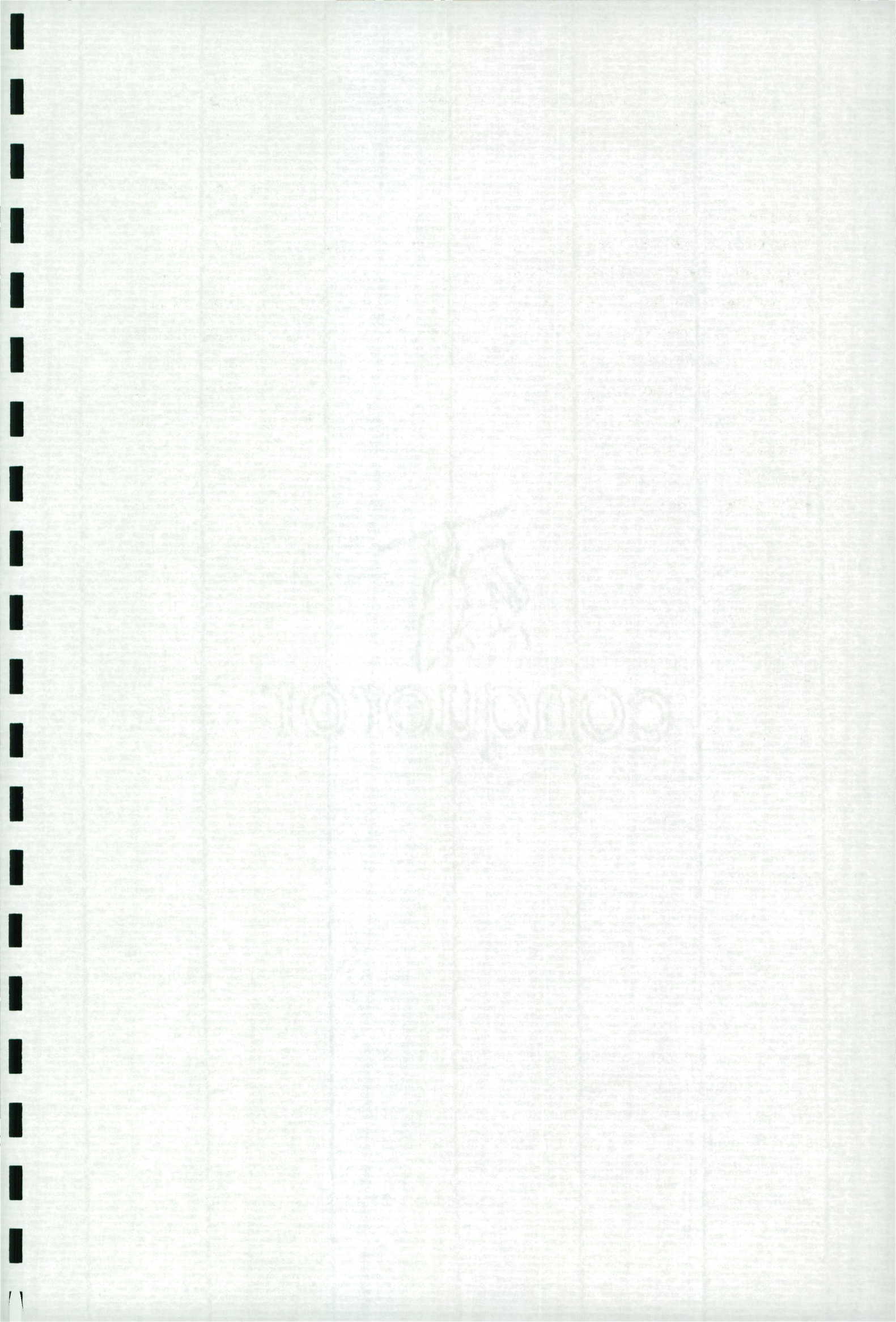
I mentioned earlier Witkin considers himself a "portraitist of conditions of being". To place a mask on the model prevents the personality of the subject to interfere with the meaning of the image. His interest would not be to reveal what the individual subject chose to hide, but instead to make the qualities of the hidden more meaningful. I very much doubt that his images have the same impact upon the viewers if he did not use the masks. They are important because they make the models anonymous and without personal features. They are no longer individuals, they are beings - human beings and the important thing is what they represent, not who they are as persons.

Witkin believes that Christ was a man who transcended his bodily form and became God or, put in his own words "God placed on the man called Jesus the mask of Christ". By placing masks on his models, Witkin is seeking to reveal the true self, the true spirit that he believes hides within his models, within himself and everyone of us, and hopefully that would make God appear. This is done in the hope of his own personal revelation, the end of all his doubts, confusion and pain.

According to La Coque (p.320) Christ is the manifestation thus making God visible, and to see God in Christ is the way for man to achieve divinity. God came down to man, and man climbs back to God.

Witkin's intention is to bring God back down to earth again. In order to do so, he is making the sacred more human. After all, man was created in the "image of God". However, since we are only humans, the actions we take to advise that "likeness of God" can never be anything else but human. Looking at it this way, what Witkin seems to be doing is not only to make the sacred more human, but to make what is human into something sacred.







## TECHNIQUE

When one is discussing Joel-Peter Witkin's work, the technical part of the work has to be mentioned. It is as much part of the finished image as the carefully created and staged environments.

Witkin has a special relation to the darkroom and the equipment in it. He begins the process by communicating with them and thanking them in advance. He also refers to the darkroom as:

*"A kind of holy house, a refuge for phenomena"*

(Witkin 1985)

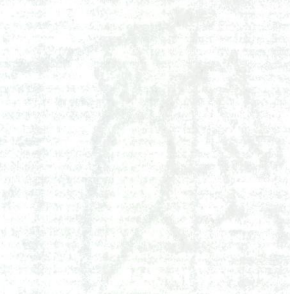
His treatment of the negatives and the photography paper is just as crude and violent as the images that appears on them.

The rich patina of stains, scratches, and other marks, has a dual function. It defines the space of the image, confining the subject tightly within its bounds. And it refers to a primary source of Witkin's iconography, other photographs, the photographs he has viewed in the University of New Mexico Art Museum and elsewhere. This inspiration ranges from the scuffed, scratched, burnished, metal surface of the Daguerrotype to the fuzzy, grainy news image of death and disaster; from the peeling emulsion and excised features of a Bellocq prostitute to the favourite snapshot, in a back pocket or old drawer.

The technique he uses, which has become a trademark of his just as much as the shocking objects, dates back to his years at the University of New Mexico. During this period he tried out different ways of creating his images. He left the studio and began photographing outdoors. He didn't use a tripod because he wanted the camera to be an extension of his body and his mind. The scratching of the negatives started when in one of his negatives, a woman who Witkin had not been aware of while taking the photograph appeared. He was taking pictures of a small toy, a small rubber alligator onto which he had attached a dolls head so that the alligator was wearing the head of a woman. Witkin made hundreds of images, using this object, none of them including any people. However in one of them "Los Angeles Death" (1976) a bypassing woman appeared. Witkin liked the physical form of her, but found the presence very disturbing. She was part of an "incident" he had created, but was also a witness to it.

*"She had, observed me symbolically inflicting pain onto the object I had made by trying to strangle it. This object then became a symbol, not only of the*





# COMPUTER



*image, but of my sadism. I had been caught in the process of inflicting pain. In all my previous work, the viewer could never know that I had either caused or renewed the pain and suffering which I presented as photographic prints. This image proved it!"*

To remove all evidence that would incriminate him he scratched out the woman's face with a needle on the emulsion side of the negative. By doing this he began to realise that he could change the image for his own emotional and aesthetic purpose.

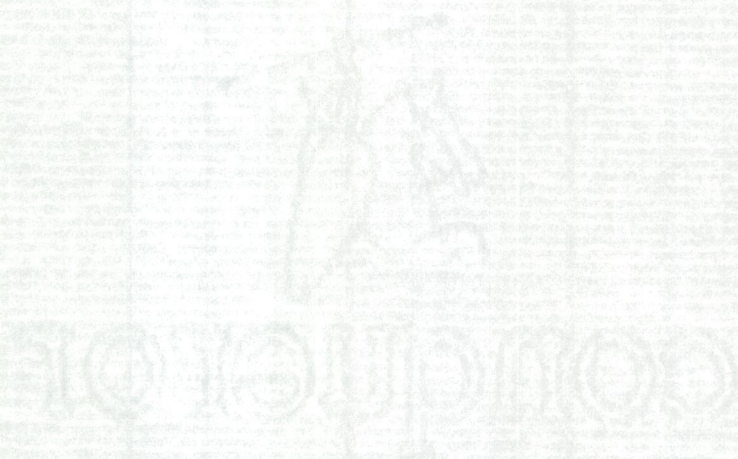
Witkin disfigures and mutilates the images and the models by scratching the photographic paper the negatives. He places thin tissue paper on the surface of the paper in order to increase light refractions and soften the image, or he punches holes in the tissue to create areas of sharpness. He sprays the tissue with water to make it more translucent. He works mainly in black and white, printing on a warm toned paper and they are then hand-toned, usually with yellow and brown. This is what gives the prints the impression of a patina brought on by old age or the look of parchment.

Although the main body of his work is black and white, there are a rare number of images that have undergone Witkin's encaustic process. "Burned" onto Aluminium, the image is subtly, pointillistically coloured. A layer of wax is applied and buffed with the palm of the hand for up to fifteen hours. After "resting" through three months of temperature changes, the waxing-buffing is repeated, and again three months later. Witkin rarely undertakes this arduous process, and then makes only a single encaustic rendering of an image which becomes a unique work; straight photographic prints of the same image make up his signed and numbered editions.

This old-masterish look of Witkin gives even the most outrageous image a sense of history, as if the photographs had been put away in a musty cabinet for years and only recently been re-discovered. It makes it easier for us to approach his bizarre subjects than would be the case if he used a straight forward printing technique. It works as a shock absorber, tempering the impact of the horrible and shocking subjects. To look at Witkin's images is like looking into a soft mirror. What one sees is a reflection of one's face, of reality, but slightly distorted, slightly disfigured.

We rely on mirrors to show us a true reflection of ourselves, but how do we know that even the most perfect mirror isn't slightly distorted? The same way we put our faith in mirrors we believe in cameras. We trust them to record and represent reality, to witness the truth. Witkin relies on that trust. It is always an issue in his work. By showing us morbid and bizarre images, the veracity of which is hard to believe, he exposes our faith in the camera. Because underneath that faith is the hope that truth can be objectified - recorded by the camera as it happens. That would relieve us of the responsibility of deciding for ourselves

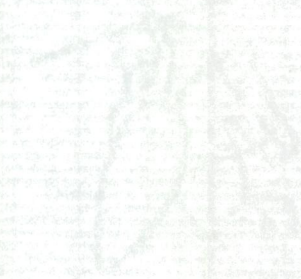






as to what to regard as real. Witkin constantly frustrates that trust. An example of this is the image "Woman Once a Bird, Los Angeles" (1990). A naked woman, her head shaved and dotted with feathers, sits with her back to the camera. A deep channel of scar tissue marks each of her shoulder blades, as if she was an angel, violently shorn of her wings. The background of this image comes from a story Witkin had heard years before. A man told him that his sister, who worked in a hospital had a patient who had little wings that actually moved. Whether it was true or not Witkin never got the opportunity to find out since he was unable to get into the hospital. However, the point here is not whether the story is true or not, but whether we believe in Witkin's image or not. Being familiar with his work and having seen the human oddities he works with, I for one have no problems believing this image. If anyone could find a person with wings it would be Joel-Peter Witkin. In this case, the woman's scar tissue was the work of a make up artist but when it comes to the question of truth and reality in Witkin's work, one can never be quite sure.





COLLEGE



## PAIN

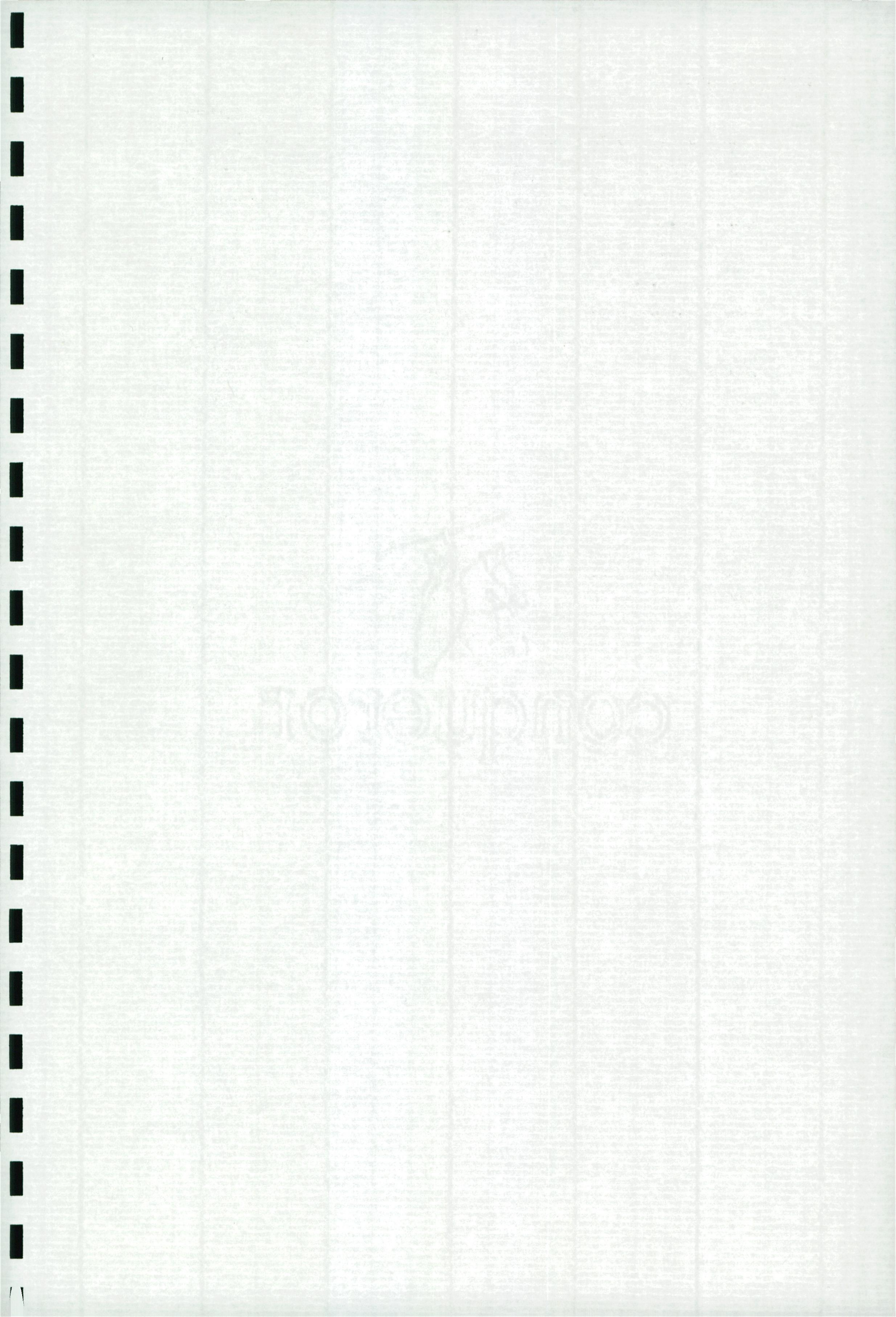
*"Only saints and artists can expose the pain and beauty cloaked by the masks of propriety that are worn by people unable or unwilling either to show their true faces or to wear their pummelled, still-beating hearts on tattered sleeves".*

Joel Peter Witkin 1991

Pain is a word that for me is inevitably linked to Joel Peter Witkin's work. Physically, emotionally and spiritually. Some of his images I find so disturbing that they become physically painful to look at. The deformity of some of his models is such that it is very obvious that they must live in constant agony both physically and emotionally. Witkin seeks such people, what he refers to as "damaged" people. He advertises in local newspapers to find them, and in his catalogues and exhibitions there is always a request for people to contact him. His hope is that their pain will be revealed to him in the photographs he makes. His aim is to record real feelings in a real time rather than the fantasies of his models. In order to achieve that he has gone to extremes. At the time he was a student at the University of New Mexico he, for example, belted, hooded and nailed a claustrophobic man to a wall, to whom he bound a woman who the previous week had been released from a local mental institution. In another case he placed in a cage a man born with no legs - leaving him there, masked and helpless, while he himself sought to find "truth" in the viewfinder of his camera. On another occasion the model wears dental surgical retractors for the purpose of forcing her mouth open. However, Witkin found that the retractors could not supply enough stress to hold the mouth open to the extent he desired so he placed the models sister, wearing black gloves, in the background, in order to force the mouth open to its extreme. Although the emotions evoked in the subjects gave the images a visceral quality that was much stronger than anything acted out from a script, and that the seeking of authentic responses to stressful situations was exciting, Witkin began to realise that what he was doing could damage his subjects as well as his own psyche.

Even though Witkin may have changed his methods of trying to extort the pure and human spirit trapped within the body, being a model in his work is not exactly a dance on roses. There is always a certain amount of pain involved. But his models volunteer to pose for him, and he always explains his ideas to them beforehand and shows them previous work, so they do know what they are getting themselves into. Witkin wants his work to represent the source material of an individual's rage of confusion and the need to find "the Self". He wants his photographs to be as powerful as the last thing a person sees or remembers before death. However sometimes I find his work a bit too pretentious. His images are so crammed with symbols and shocking objects that they become overloaded and loses some of that visceral impact he is striving for. They are visually and intellectually stimulating but







lacks that emotional "gut feeling". Beautiful, yes, but empty and without spirituality. But there are a few images in which in my opinion, Witkin succeeds to bring out all that he is striving for. They are: "Penitente" (1982), "Mandan" (1981) and "Testicle Stretch with the Possibility of a Crushed Face" (1982). In these images Witkin has managed to capture the pain and extremeness a person is willing to put himself through in order to find the "True Self".

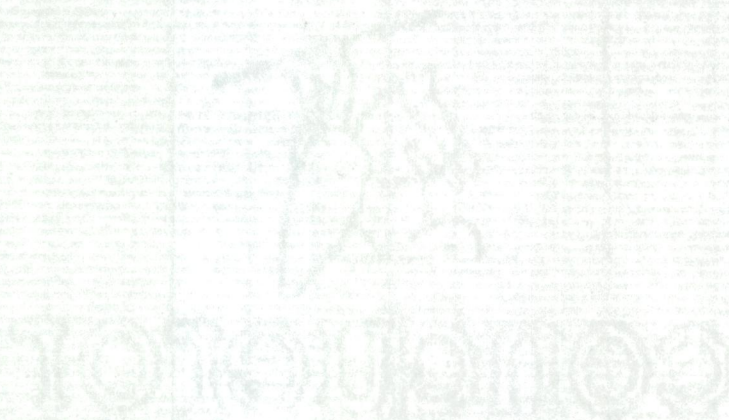
The first one, "Penitente", was the first piece of Witkin's work that I came across. Few, if any, artworks have made such a great impact on me and the fact that this image was my first encounter with Joel-Peter Witkin has probably coloured my whole outlook of his work. What I saw before me was a crucifixion scene with one very large central cross with its victim, and two smaller flanking crosses with smaller victims. The main figure is a man, nude except for a mask, not only strapped to the cross but also impaled with dozens of bundles of what appears to be sharp bristles or nails. The image mingles the crucifixion of Christ with the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. The two secondary crucifixions in the background are of monkeys. The monkeys, as well as the man, has numbers on their chests which implies some cruel laboratory experiments or some evil methods of torture in a place that we associate with concentration camps. The faces of the monkeys are frozen in ghastly shrieks. I felt then, and still do, that this image captures the entire pain and agony of the human race.

"Penitente" is based on real events. In New Mexico, where Witkin lives, there is a shadowy sect of Penitentes who push violent penance such as flagellation to the limit by, annually at Easter time, crucifying one of their male members in a bizarre and dangerous re-enactment of Christ's Passion. An act Witkin could hardly fail to be intrigued by. The image was made when Witkin had the opportunity to work with two dead Rhesus laboratory monkeys. Witkin comments about the image and the monkeys:

*The nice thing about these Rhesus monkeys is the fact that they had numbers put on their chests as codes. I really found that appealing visually. I put numbers also on my model's chest. There are also appendages coming from his body. They are seeds from a tree that was growing outside my studio. I made the cross; it took me two days to make it, because it had to be strong enough to hold up this guy who weighs almost 180lbs. Then I crucified the monkeys on the crosses. I had done this with cats that is driving nails through their "hands", and it's a very strong thing when you take a nail and put it through tissue. I'd be an evil person if I got pleasure out of doing this to a live person. However, if a person gets self-realisation from having this done, and a person said "I want you to do this", and I agreed to the idea, I wouldn't hesitate to do it".*

(Coke 1985 p.15)







In Witkin's picture the man's hands were not penetrated but held to the cross by leather straps, and his weight was held up by a footrest. Witkin explains "he was screaming and wearing a skeleton mask that I modified to carry out my plan. I want to make it clear that I think it is a waste of real energy, real feelings, to demean yourself physically, to suffer when there are different ways of generating a spiritual awareness. The picture is partly about the cruelty of crucifixion".

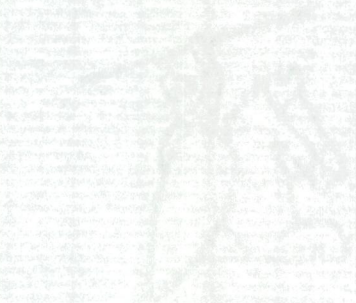
However wasteful and demeaning Witkin might think it is to put oneself through physical pain, he does not hesitate to photograph it and to integrate it into his work.

"Mandan" (1981) proves that. This photography shows a naked man bound in leather straps, half standing, half hanging from two big meathooks that have been inserted in holes in his chest muscles. The surrounding has the character of a cellar and is lit up only by a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It derives from George Catlin's painting of the 1830's of young Indian men being tested for bravery by being suspended in the air by cords hooked into their pectoral muscles. The person photographed for this picture is a man who lives in San Francisco. Witkin went to the man's house where he was shown the garage, in which the man had this elaborate rigging he used to help him carry out his performance during which he elevates himself with a rope connected with the hooks. The man began making holes in his chest muscles as a boy and progressively widened the holes with pieces of bone which were worn under his clothes.

Although "Mandan" derives from an altogether different reference than "Penitente", at the end of the day they are both about the same thing, self realisation. It is a way of trying to reach spiritual awareness, a way to get closer to the origins of life. It is a matter of making the will silence the mind, and to let the mind transcend itself out of its bodily pain. To free the spirit that is trapped inside the body. The reward for the pain is eventually, and hopefully, self realisation. The revelation of the "True Self". The Revelation of God?

To me, what these two images represent is universal pain, the original pain, the price we have to pay for our existence. Now, certain religious beliefs would claim that this pain is the price we pay for the original sin. However, other more secular philosophies do not believe in an original sin, and because of the whole concept of sin is in dispute in itself, as I think Witkin makes very clear in his work, the concept of original pain is much more appealing to me. Sin, and the different definitions of it, is something that varies from culture to culture, from religion to religion. Pain on the other hand is universal.





COLLEGE



## PLEASURE

*"The attempt to relieve by pleasurable scratching an itch becomes a painful wound"*

(Blaisdell 1989)

Phaedo in the Platonic dialogue named for him provides a telling anecdote. Socrates has been freed from his shackles.

*Socrates, sitting up on the couch, began to bend and rub his legs, saying, as he rubbed: How singular is the thing called pleasure and how curiously related to pain, which might be thought the opposite of it; for they never come to a man together, and yet he who pursues either of them is generally compelled to take the other. They are two, and yet they grow together out of one head or stem, and I cannot help thinking that if Aesop had noticed them, he would have made a fable about a God trying to reconcile their strife, and when he could not, he fastened their heads together and this is the reason why when one comes the other follows, as I find in my own case pleasure comes after the pain in my leg that was caused by the chain".*

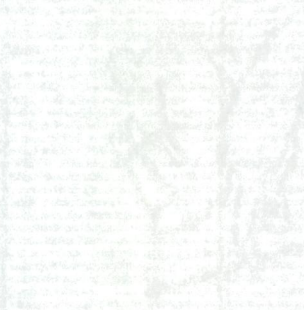
(Blaisdell 1989)

Aesop never wrote the fable, but Joel-Peter Witkin is trying to. I would even go as far as to say that Witkin is taking on the role of the God trying to reconcile the pain and the pleasure. So far I have been concentrating on the pain in his work, but just as sure as the coin has two sides, there is another side of his work and that is the one of pleasure. Because Witkin is Witkin, the pleasure he is dealing with is not to be mistaken for happiness or joy. It is a very physical pleasure, often brutal and crude; it is sexual with overtones of Sado-Masochism. It is about fetishism, bestiality, homo and transsexuality.

They are taboo subjects that tend to shake up puritanism. Many people like to believe that these deviations and perversions only exist in the underground world of a few sin ridden cities. But however absurd and repulsive Witkins images might seem, they do express human needs that exists all around the globe. They derive from the realm we now associate with the Freudian subconscious where there is a constant hunger for sexual gratification often coupled with rawness and even brutality. What Witkin is recording in his images are fantasies. But we have to remember that they are only partly figments of his own imagination - they are also the substance of real people. Witkin's pictures are not parodies nor the result of feverish hallucinations, which one might be tempted to believe but a



could/more





haunting reflection of a world existing all around us. They are expressions of inner feelings, true needs, just as much as in his more spiritual images. Witkin challenges our long held views and gives us a chance to open up the door into our own dark subconscious.

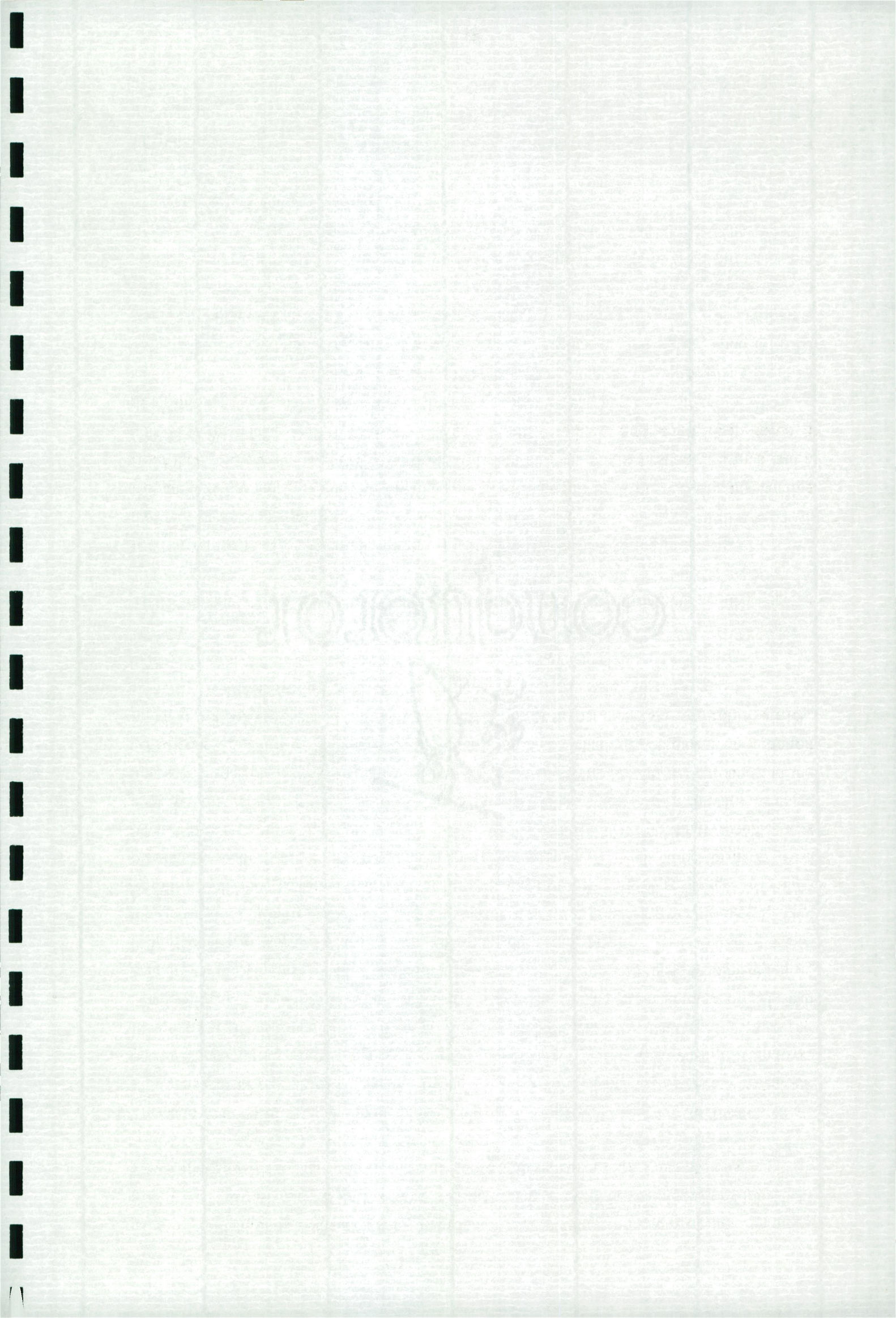
The sado-masochistic element in his photographs is no surprise. According to Susan Sontag, sado-masochism has always been the furthest reach of the sexual experience; when sex becomes most purely sexual, that is, severed from personhood, from relationship, from love. It is a form of gratification that is both violent and indirect, very mental. It is also the perfect illustration of the link between pain and pleasure. A certain amount of pain can actually be pleasurable. That is something that will not just apply to those who have a taste in masochism, it is a physical fact. In our brain, the centre of pleasure is so very close to the centre of pain that sometimes it can be very hard to differentiate between the two. One can also look upon sado masochism as a form of theatre, a staging of sexuality. Regulars of sado masochism are expert costumiers and choreographers as well as performers. And what makes the drama more exciting, is the fact that it is forbidden to ordinary people. It is a society that is normally closed to us, but Witkin is giving us access to it, making us enter that secret society of dark sexuality. It is a sensation of seeing behind the curtain, and the act of concealment is an enticement, for we all want to see what goes on during an initiation into a secret society especially if there are intimations of sexual behaviour or primitive rites. In Witkin's work, we are given the opportunity to from a "safe" distance experience and explore one of the most taboo subjects, that of sexual deviance.

The following examples should given an indication as to what I am talking about.

In "Portrait of the Constellation: Entrail Lust" (1984) a man is sitting in a heap of entrails that half covers him, masturbating. "Journey of the Mask: Phrenologist" (1983) shows a woman with her labia pierced and stretched out to extreme length by the two weights hanging from them. In "Eunuch" (1983) we are faced with an example of bestiality, a man and a dog. "Arm-Fuck" (1982) is exactly what the title implies, and don't really need a description. These images are some of the most explicit ones. There are others, much more subtle and ambiguous, where the sexuality is not the first thing thrown in our face, such as "Madame X" (1981) and "Casanova's Venus" (1982). What at first glance appears to be beautiful women turns out to be pre-op transsexuals. We admire the beauty of the female faces and upper torsos, but when we lower our eyes and find the male genitals it all of a sudden turns into something ugly and grotesque. We find ourselves both attracted and repelled. Our normal concept of beauty is thrown out the window, and the distinct line between the two genders all of a sudden no longer exists.

In Witkin's work the sacred appears increasingly linked to the erotically profane. His photographs deals directly with sexuality and spirituality. They explore the connections between the two states of consciousness that would seem diametrically opposed, both in terms







of motivation and in cultural acceptance. He postulates a direct link between the spirit and the flesh, between religion and sado-masochism. To an open mind this connection is not really as far fetched as it seems. But whereas flagellation and bodily punishment performed by those whose lives are devoted to religion is regarded as something sacred and admirable, the act of sexual intercourse, especially if it takes on a form such as sado-masochism, is seen as something profane, and therefore condemned. I would claim that the compulsions that drives the masochist are not far removed from those of an ascetic scourging his own flesh for spiritual gratification. Both religion and sex strives towards the same goal, - catharsis and the release of the ego from the body in order to find the "True Self". The methods for achieving that are through rituals and purgations. Whether one chooses religion or sado-masochism is a matter of choice based on ones beliefs and taste.

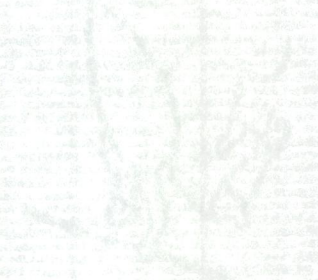
In "Testicle Stretch with the Possibility of a Crushed Face" (1982) Witkin combines spirituality with sexuality. The masochism we've seen in "Penitente" and "Mandan" has been, even though very physical, more of a spiritual kind. This time a naked man is strapped to a stretcher in what again seems to be a garage or a cellar. His testicles are strapped to a rope, suspended over a rigging in the roof, and to which the other end a number of weights are tied. The weights not only stretches the testicles, but would if they fell down, crush the man's face. This is a very unsettling image and I can imagine the effect it must have on the male audience.

By these three images, Witkin makes the link between sex and religion quite obvious. Witkin recognises it as a human need, where as the church, especially the Catholic, denies sexuality. Ascetism and flagellation is a punishment of the flesh, the body, to purge the spirit from the guilt and shame that derives from the sexual need.

But is the reward, the pleasure that comes out of that punishment, all that different from that of an sexual orgasm? What Witkin seems to imply is that only by going to the extreme, whether it is by religious flagellation or sado-masochism, can we reach that stage of catharsis in which we can achieve spiritual awareness.



# Computer





## THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE - CONCLUSION

Sex and death are taboo subjects and combined with religion, the risk of becoming profane is great. Witkin is taking that risk, and it is a delicate balance. Are we to take him seriously or should his work be dismissed as depraved, the work of a sick voyeuristic mind?

The question of pornography can not be avoided. Is what Witkin is doing simply pornography and all the talk about spirituality just empty words and phrases to cover that fact up? Some of his photographs do balance dangerously close to the verge of being pornographic, but when we examine them we find that the mystical and even darkly spiritual quality that his pictures have are quite at odds with pornography. The intention of pornography is to arouse lust immediately, not after contemplating a picture and thinking about its many implications. Pornography is a substitute for actual experience and it tends to trivialise the sexual urge. Witkin does recognise this strong universal urge, but the end result of his pictures have an aesthetic as well as an emotional power. Pornography lack the first and deals with the second in a superficial fashion. Witkin's images are, for some people erotic, but artists have created erotic imagery in all periods and in all cultures Richard Goldstein has said:

*What we want, in those moments of escape from tangibility, is excess and extremity"*

and this is exactly what we'll find in Witkin's work. He recognises that suggestions are more effective than explicitly detailed records of sexual practices.

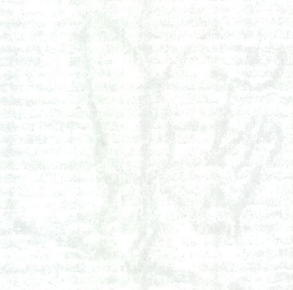
Many western societies have attempted to repress the instinctual drive to satisfy the urge or curiosity about unconventional sexual exploits. Many people live their lives ignoring, or at least not confronting, the sexual activities that goes on in all societies to satisfy libidinal impulses or to relieve the tedium of dull everyday lives. In Catholic countries before the dreary period of Lent, carnivals take place during which much that have been suppressed spills out. The content of fantasies becomes reality, but not the reality of pornography.

Witkin looks beyond surface formalism. His images are not high fashion renditions of sexual fetishes but intense meditations on the psychological impulses and ritualistic instincts which stimulates extreme forms of sexual behaviour.

Taboos are learned and taught. A toddler has only a naive curiosity about sexual organs, deformities and death. Depending on the country and culture in which the child grows up, what is taboo for one is acceptable to for another. Some cultures will not touch the dead but



# COLLEGE



STUDENT



accept death without fear. Others honour the dead body but are terrified of death. Our forbears were familiar with the process of death and dying, accepting it as a natural part of life, but few of us today share this attitude. In our sanitised and pampered society we tend to protect ourselves from the realities of death, from its pain and suffering.

Witkin is clearly concerned with the idea of death - a humbling thought we must all face - and he confronts us with the drama of the event and its ultimate in terms of pain, suffering and sexual pleasure. He manipulates and uses the trauma of death for his own purpose, freely using it to signal desperate emotions and an uncaring and unconcerned society. He justifies this by his own experiences, and yes, he has seen some of the worst things life has to offer, especially in terms of death.

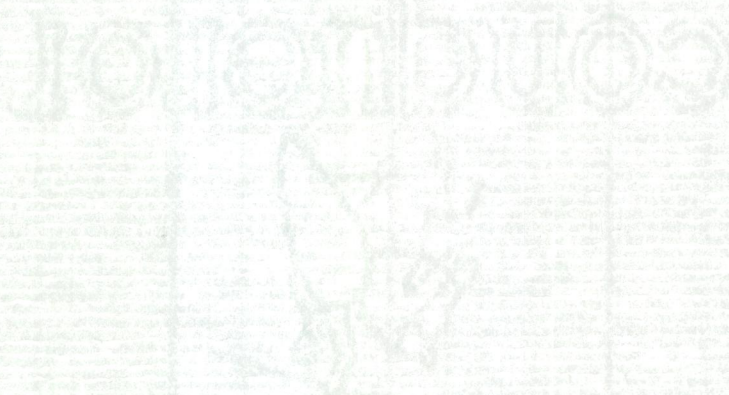
In 1991 the image "Feast of Fools" caused an uproar among the readers of the Sunday Independent where it was reproduced. The image shows a dead baby, blindfolded, some severed human hands and feet, nestling among exotic grapes, bursting ripe pomegranates, luscious raspberries and suggestive sea-food. The complaints forced the art-critic Tom Lubbock into writing a muddled apology, claiming the photography to be indefensible. If it is, why print it in the first place? If there would be something indefensible about it, it would not be the image itself, but rather the origin of it. It derives from a journey Witkin did to Mexico City in 1991. In a place called the Green Cross, Mexico's equivalent to the Red Cross, Witkin was confronted with a most horrible sight. A doctor was pulling out different drawers and pulled one open by mistake. What Witkin saw was a heap, a mound of parts of bodies and remains that because of the bureaucracy in Mexico City - no one had given the final word to clear out.

It is easy to condemn Witkin's photographs because of their contents. That way we don't have to face the reality behind them. A reality, if given constant attention, could threaten our sanity. But do we really have the right to kill the messenger just because we have problems dealing with the message?

Fact is that the more macabre aspects of the human imagination have given fuel to artists for thousands of years. We accept the torture and creative disembowelling in medieval painting and we do not think less of artists like Giotto, Bosch or Goya because in a "Massacre of the Innocents" the children are skewered violently up the anus and kebabed instead of simply being put to the sword.

Painters have dealt with purgatory, hell and damnation, with ravaged bodies, sado-masochistic sexuality and madness. We tend, conveniently, to overlook the more sadistic unsavoury imaginings of great painters. Would sophisticated viewers avert their eyes from a painting of a corpse kissing its own face? Would they question where the model had been found? Hardly. But the response to photographs of the same subject matter is very







different. The painting is experienced as "unreal", the photograph is "real". Painters seem to be above normal ethic standards, modern photographers are not.

In Britain they don't like the sight of old people embracing (a Fuji-colour advert) nor the one of a newborn baby (Benetton). In Italy they can't stomach a priest and a nun lightly kissing (Benetton again). These images were banned in 1991. In Ireland where abortions still are illegal, one might have thought that the sight of a new born baby would be the cause for a happy celebration - but no, they banned it too. On the other hand army clothes with bullet holes and blood stains (Benetton) and distressed African children suffering chronic malnutrition and who are probably dead and publicly rotting before the photographer developed his film, are perfectly acceptable as billboard images. Our attitude to photography is filled with ethical inconsistency.

Witkin's stance is an aggressive one. As he searches for answers, he forces us, the viewers, into the minds reservoirs of sensibilities, which we may not want to explore. Giving form to an imagination that has eliminated cultural structures, creates an aura not only of danger but, for some, an unbearable intimacy with Taboo subject matters.

Joel-Peter Witkin is trying to make us realise that the ideal of beauty put forth by the religious and aesthetic cultures is fascistic and tortuous, ignoring and repressing the multiplicity of being. His photographs pester the psyche to admit its hidden desire for the peripheral, the perverse and the painful.

He shows us that "normality" is strictly a concept for statisticians and sociologists and used to impose order on society. The startling and sometimes blunt confrontations of sadism, eroticism and death in his work, implies that no matter how strong our desire is to impose order and normality on society, there is a deep and rebellious opposition.

The remaining question is though, are Witkin's attempts to uncover the conventions that serves to deny and suppress the "True Self" serious, or are they merely a mask for a voyeuristic, self-indulgent brutality? I do believe they are serious. Witkin claims that he will not photograph anyone or any situation which he feels is not in some senses a condition of powerful self-revelation. It is very easy to fabricate shock without horror, perversity without passion and effect without cause. Witkin is authentic because he is not superficial. His photographs deal directly with his sexuality and his personal, agonized spirituality. He creates an image that not only shocks, or titillates, but one that puzzles, teases and, most important, questions.

They are not about horror or suffering in itself, but about the profound emotions which arises when a man is conscious of the potential of the horror and suffering that is always present in the reality of the human condition.



# contribution





## THE PILGRIMAGE

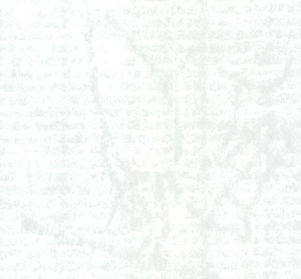
According to La Cocqué, Origen (c.185-c.254), a theologian writes in his "On First Principles" (Peri Archón) about the fall of the souls. According to this theory there are pre-existing pure spirits that strayed from their former creator and fell into human bodies. They are in pilgrimage back to God. This process of salvation is also a process of returning, of mending, of putting the world back in order. This is possible because there is between God and the world a kinship, the trace of which in man is the nous. There is here no autonomous existence of darkness. Salvation is **apokatastasis pantón** (a restitution of all things and a definitive achievement). But the eschaton, the moment of drawing near to God is endless. All has been revealed, but all is to be discovered. Christ has come, but he ceaselessly comes.

*"I have concentrated my life to changing matter into spirit with the hope of someday seeing it all. Seeing its total form, while wearing the mask, from the distance of death. And there, in the eternal destiny, to seek the face I had before the world was made."*

(Joel-Peter Witkin 1985)



# CONTRIBUTOR



The following is a list of contributors to the journal, arranged alphabetically by last name. Each entry includes the contributor's name, their affiliation, and their contact information. The list is organized into two columns, with the first column containing names starting with 'A' through 'M' and the second column containing names starting with 'N' through 'Z'. The text is presented in a standard serif font, with line breaks used to separate individual entries within each column. The overall layout is clean and professional, typical of a formal publication or directory.

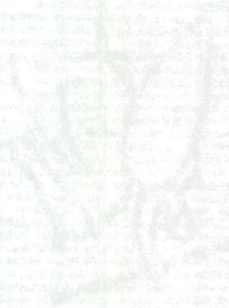


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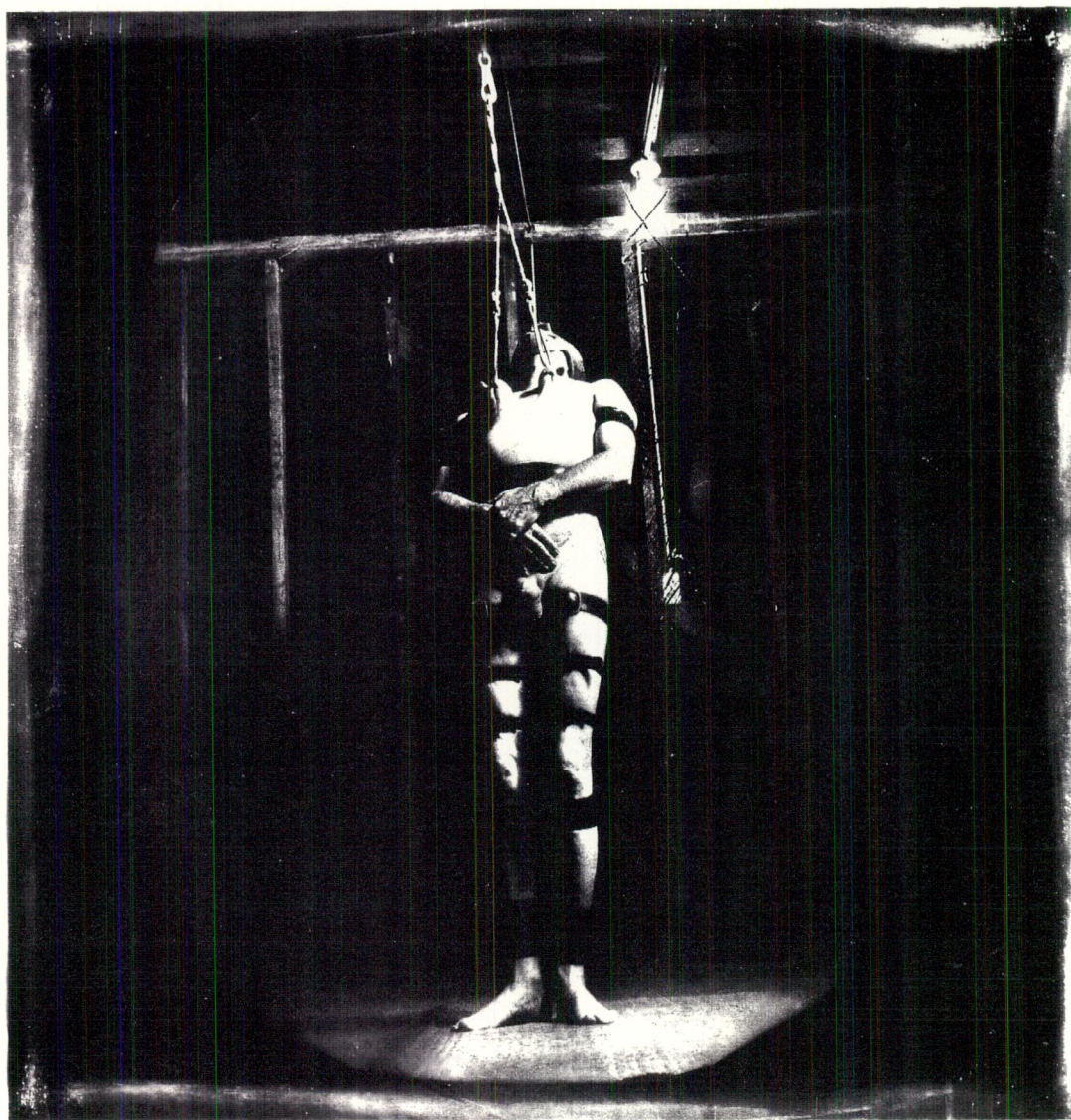


Penitente  
1982







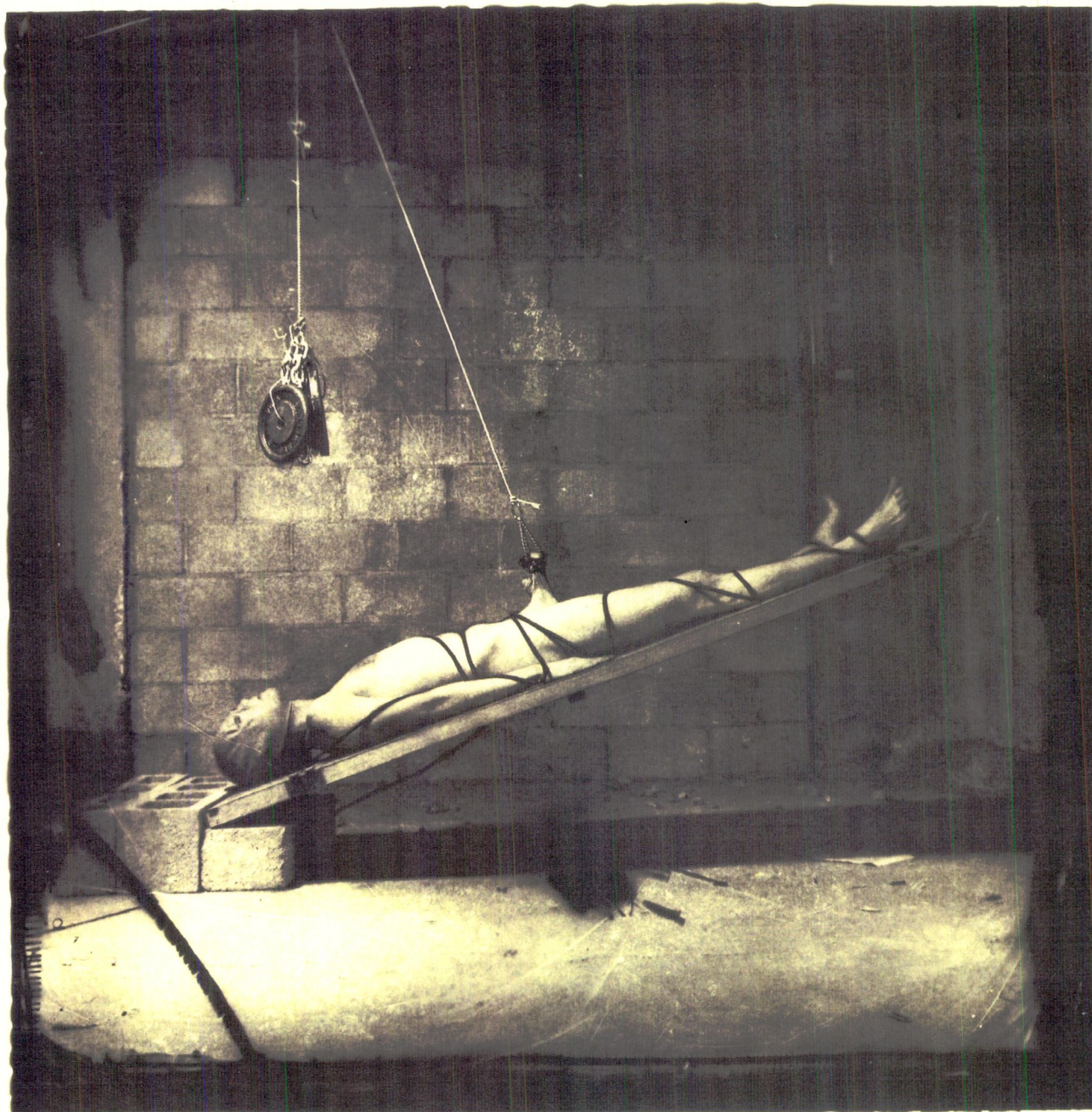


**Mandan**  
**1981**









Testicle Stretch With the Possibility of a Crushed Face  
1982



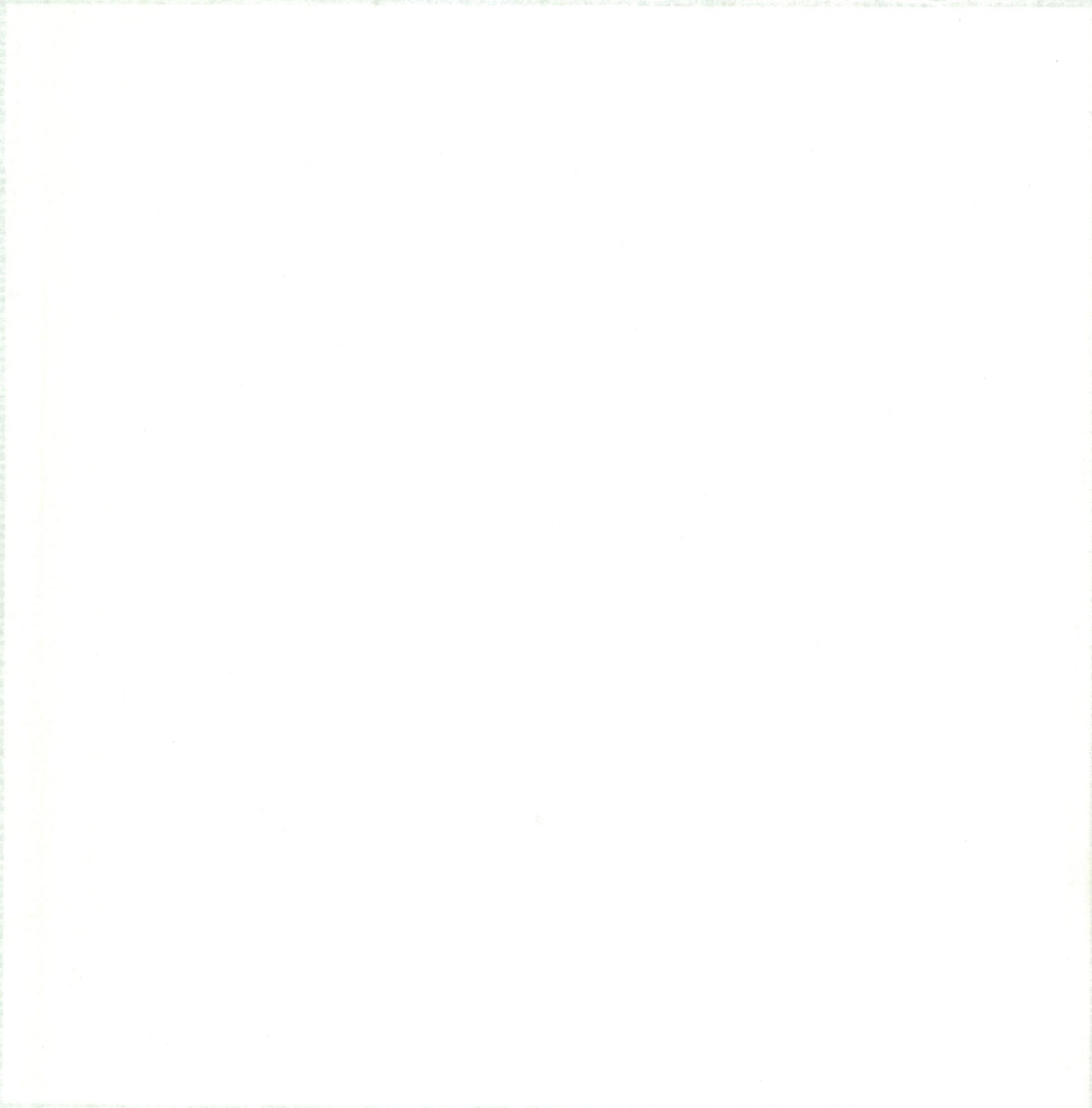






Portrait of the Constellation: Entrail Lust  
1984









Eunuch  
1983









**Arm-Fuck**  
**1982**









Casanova's Venus  
1982



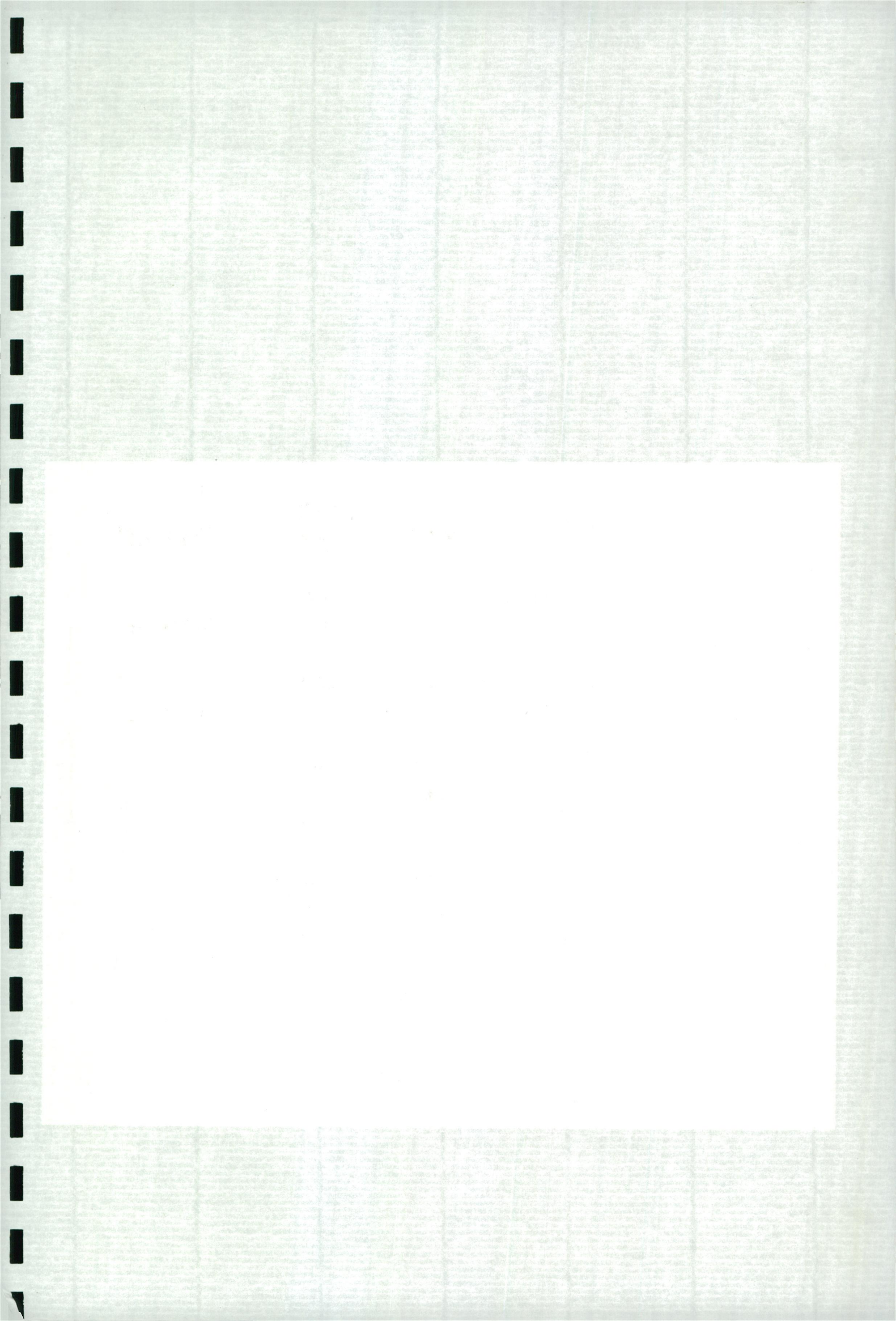






Feast of Fools  
1991





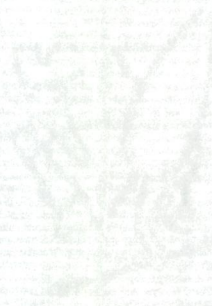


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