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Subversive consciousness and the photographic image

BY

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CONTENTS

List Of Plates 1

Introduction 3

Chapter One (Response to changing times) 5

Chapter Two (From subvertion to survival) 25

Chapter Three (The "myopia" of man) 40

Conclusion 58

Bibliography 59

List Of Plates

Fig. 1 Duchamp, *Bottle Rack*, 1914

Fig. 2 Hugo Ball, *The Cabaret Voltaire*, 1916

Fig. 3 George Grosz, *Untitled*, 1920

Fig. 4 A-I-Z, *Cover Illustration*, 1932

Fig. 5 John Heartfield, *Adolf the Superman Swallows Gold and Spits Junk*, 1932

Fig. 6 Jacques Hérold, André Breton, Yves Tanquy and Victor Brauner, *Exquisite Corpse*, 1934

Fig. 7 Max Ernst, *Conjugal Diamofds*, 1926 (Frottage)

Fig. 8 Man Ray, *Rayogram*, 1927

Fig. 9 Man Ray, *La Prière*, 1930

Fig. 10 Salvador Dali, *Still from l'Age d'Or*

Fig. 11 Salvador Dali, *The Great Masturbator*, 1929

Fig. 12 Susan Trangmar, *Amidst*, 1994

Fig. 13 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1984

Fig. 14 Steichen, *Wheelbarrow and Flowerpots*, 1920

Fig. 15 Robert Doisneau, *Les Gosses de la Place Hérbert*, 1957

Fig. 16 Bruce Nauman, *Window or Wall Sign*, 1967

Fig.17/18 Sandy Skoglund, *Ferns*, 1980 / Boyd Webb, *Thaw*, 1989

Fig. 19 Sandy Skoglund, *Hangers*, 1979

Fig. 20 Boyd Webb, *Nemesis*, 1983

Fig. 21 Boyd Webb, *Autostrafe*, 1983

Fig. 22 Boyd Webb, *Eels*, 1970

Fig. 23 Boyd Webb, *Herbert Groves*

Fig. 24 Boyd Webb, *Cornflakes*

Fig. 25 Boyd Webb, *Worms*, 1977

Fig. 26 Boyd Webb, *Mrs. Barnes*

Fig. 27 Boyd Webb, *Trophy*, 1985

Fig. 28 Boyd Webb, *Chattels*, 1989

Fig. 29 Boyd Webb, *Entomb*, 1993

Fig. 30 Boyd Webb, *Parole*, 1993

INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to discuss the work of a number of artists who, through their art dealing with issues, both social and political, have attempted to unleash the idea that art for them is a process of reassessing man's values through images which subvert our assumed vision of the world.

The first chapter is historical; it highlights the political and social changes at the beginning of the twentieth century, which resulted in artists reacting in particular ways. The chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive history of twentieth century art, instead it is intended to shed some light on the avant-garde and specific artists within this framework.

I have drawn a line down the centre of this century and divided it between modernism and post modernism, and I have discussed the inception of the avant-garde within modernism and its continuation in the latter half of the century within post modernism.

In Chapter one I discuss the aims of the avant-garde, specifically the Dada and Surrealist groups, along with the mediums used by these artists. Both groups used many mediums from painting to photography and with these tools they managed to break new boundaries of creativity. Almost every object / means used by Dada and Surrealist artists served a purpose towards the subversion of what was accepted as conforming to culture.

Chapter two observes the emergence of artists in the latter half of this century who concern themselves with issues and who adapt mediums once investigated by the original avant-garde. For example, artists such as Susan Trangmar and Sandy Skoglund, like the Dadaists, use photography as a means to express their concerns but within post modernist society.

The third and final chapter begins as a description of the work of one particular artist Boyd Webb, whose images encompass all of the ideals associated with contemporary civilisation, through his use of large-scale "tableaux". He begins as a neo-avant-garde artist in the true sense of the word but his later work seems to have reverted to a modernist thinking which the original avant-garde had been embroiled in.

CHAPTER ONE

(RESPONSE TO CHANGING TIMES)

Reacting to overwhelming social, political and technological changes in the western world, early modernist artists reformed their roles not only as artists but as agents of a new culture that would be dominated by the ideology of modernity and the concept of progress. At the beginning of the twentieth century cultural groupings formed rapidly, if partially becoming competitively self promoting. The manifesto became the badge of self conscious self advertising schools. Futurists, Imagists, Cubists, Formalists, Constructivists, Dadaists and Surrealists all variously announced their arrival with a passionate and scornful vision of the new. Some wanted to prevent innovations becoming fixed as orthodoxies and some were in favour of the new and sought to abolish old values. The avant-garde was inspired therefore, "By a model of deliberate progress in art."

During the first half of the twentieth century, first the Dada and then the Surrealist artists sought emancipation from the accepted reality with which they were familiar. Dali states:

> **Convinced of the fundamental instability of reality itself, the surrealist artists sought to demonstrate that the unexpected details captured in a straightforward photograph could trigger a kind of psychic shock in the viewer that would ultimately lead to the discovery of new relations between imagination and reality. (Phillips, p. 34)**

Picture a photograph of a tree taken in Autumn, this is not how a tree always looks, it is the recording of an unprecedented reality. Louis Aragon in 1936 conceived the concept that photography, rather than being an enemy would eventually, along with the new realism, become an auxiliary to painting.

> **The photograph teaches us to see - it sees what the eye fails to discern. In the future it will not be the model for the painter in**

> **the old sense of academic models, but his documentary aid in the same sense as newspaper files being indispensable to a novelist, and would anyone say that newspapers and reporting are in competition with the novel? (Phillips, p. 63)**

It is this which artists like Man Ray and John Heartfield in the original avant-garde sensed vaguely when they tried, in various ways, to incorporate the photograph into their work.

With the presence of a culture discredited by the Great War, "Dada" was initiated in Zurich in 1916, but the impact of this group was later felt in New York, Paris, Cologne, Hanover and Berlin.

The starting point for Dada was the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, a centre for artistic entertainment organised by Hugo Ball, a part-time radical journalist. Ball stated, "Dada tried to bring about a synthesis of the romantic dandyistic and demonistic theories of the 19th century, Futurism providing the Dandyism," (Hughes, p. 63) Ball was of course being depreciative of Marinetti, the creator of Futurism who had earlier wanted to burn all libraries for the sake of the future. With Ball it was for the sake of the past: "We should burn all libraries and allow to remain only that which everyone knows by heart, a beautiful age of the legend would then begin." (Hughes, p. 63)

Dada was an anti-art movement, whose aim was to create the anti-aesthetic which would remain useless and valueless. Marcel Duchamp believed taste to be a mere habit, the recognition of something accepted. He presented "Ready-made Objects" for exhibition with the intention that they should be approached with no aesthetic emotion. (See Fig. 1)

The cabaret Voltaire was host for performances by Tristan Tzara and many others. Readings of phonetic or simultaneous poetry were performed in horrific costumes and masks. There was also a review of the cabaret and Dada activities in which Tzara announced: (See Fig. 2)

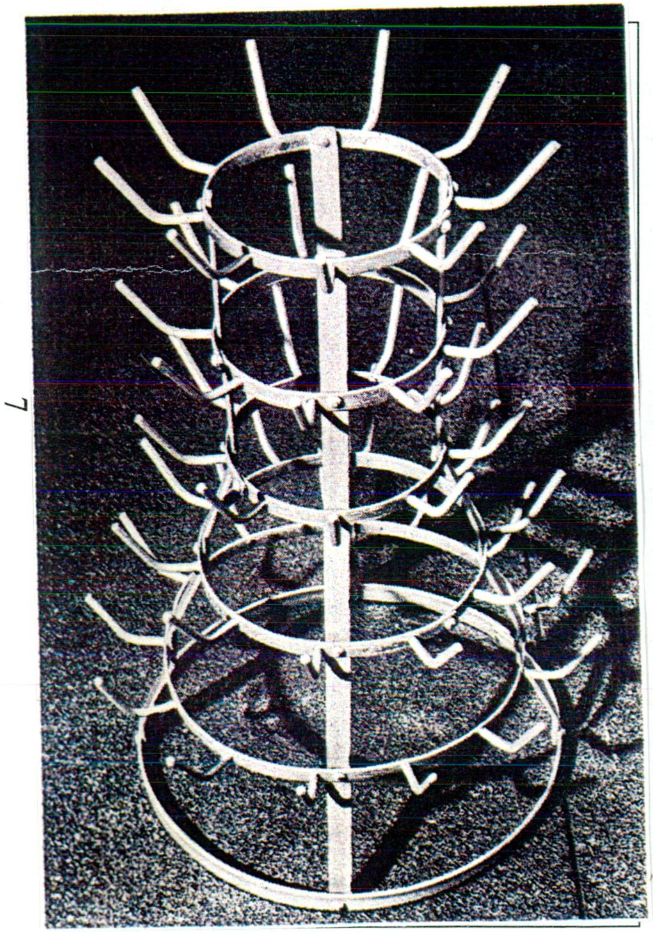

Fig. 1 Duchamp, *Bottle Rack* , 1914

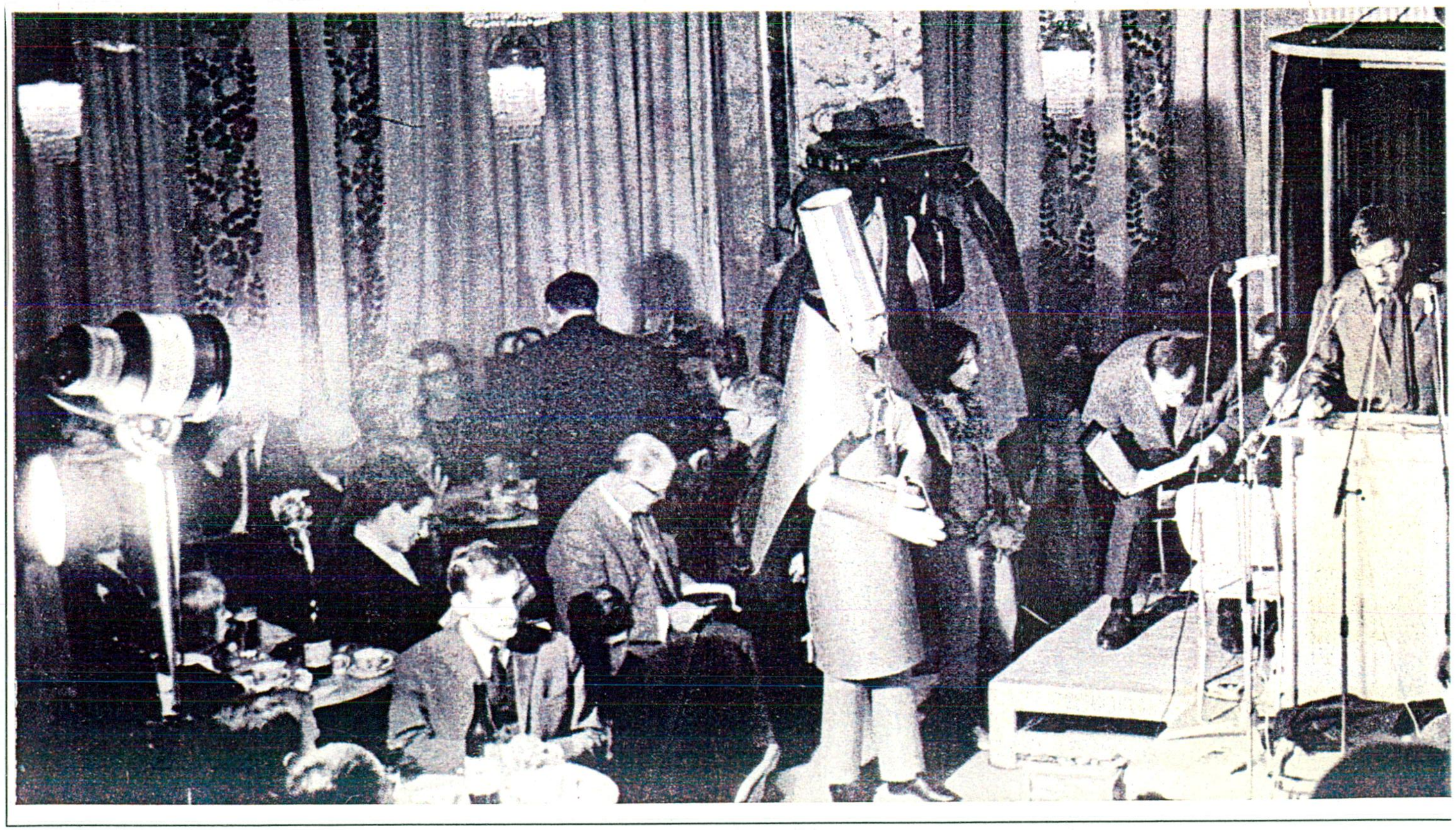

Fig. 2 Hugo Ball, *The* Cabaret Voltaire, 1916

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> **Dada had no programme, wanted nothing, thought nothing and created only with the intention of proving that creation was nothing. Intelligent man has become an absolutely normal type. The thing that we are short of, the thing that is interesting now, the thing that is rare because it possesses the anomalies of a precious being, the freshness and the freedom of the great anti-man, that thing is the idiotic. (Alexandrian, p. 30)`**

Other Dadaists, through painting, photography and montage could combine the grip of a dream with a certain documentary truth. Artists like John Heartfield and Hannah Höch created photomontages with the intent and purpose of propaganda. Photomontage (the mixing of photographic images on the same surface in a collage like manner) became a major tool in the execution of Dada beliefs, for example John Heartfield took photographic images from magazines along with his own photographs and, by placing images of prominent leaders alongside ridiculing captions, he created an immediate uproar from those offended by the images. Along with the use of Photomontages the Dadaists developed mass production techniques in reproducing images and posters for distribution in order to bring issues of art and politics to a broader audience.

George Grosz's images of the 1920's make explicit his attitude that the world is owned by four breeds of pig, the capitalist, the officer, the priest and the hooker whose other form is the socialite wife. This was perceived through illustrative cartoons of "Automaton" figures which represent the human but take the form of mechanical devices in unfamiliar box-like surroundings. (See Fig . 3)

The cartoon-like figures which followed, depicting scenes from the Salon were anxious for mass reproduction. With the intent of reproduction in mind, Grosz also used montage, and similar to Heartfield, had his images published in periodicals such as the Magazine *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (Workers Illustrated Paper) or A-I-Z. A-I-Z was founded in Berlin in 1925 and was moved to Prague when Hitler took power in Germany in 1933. It changed its name in 1936

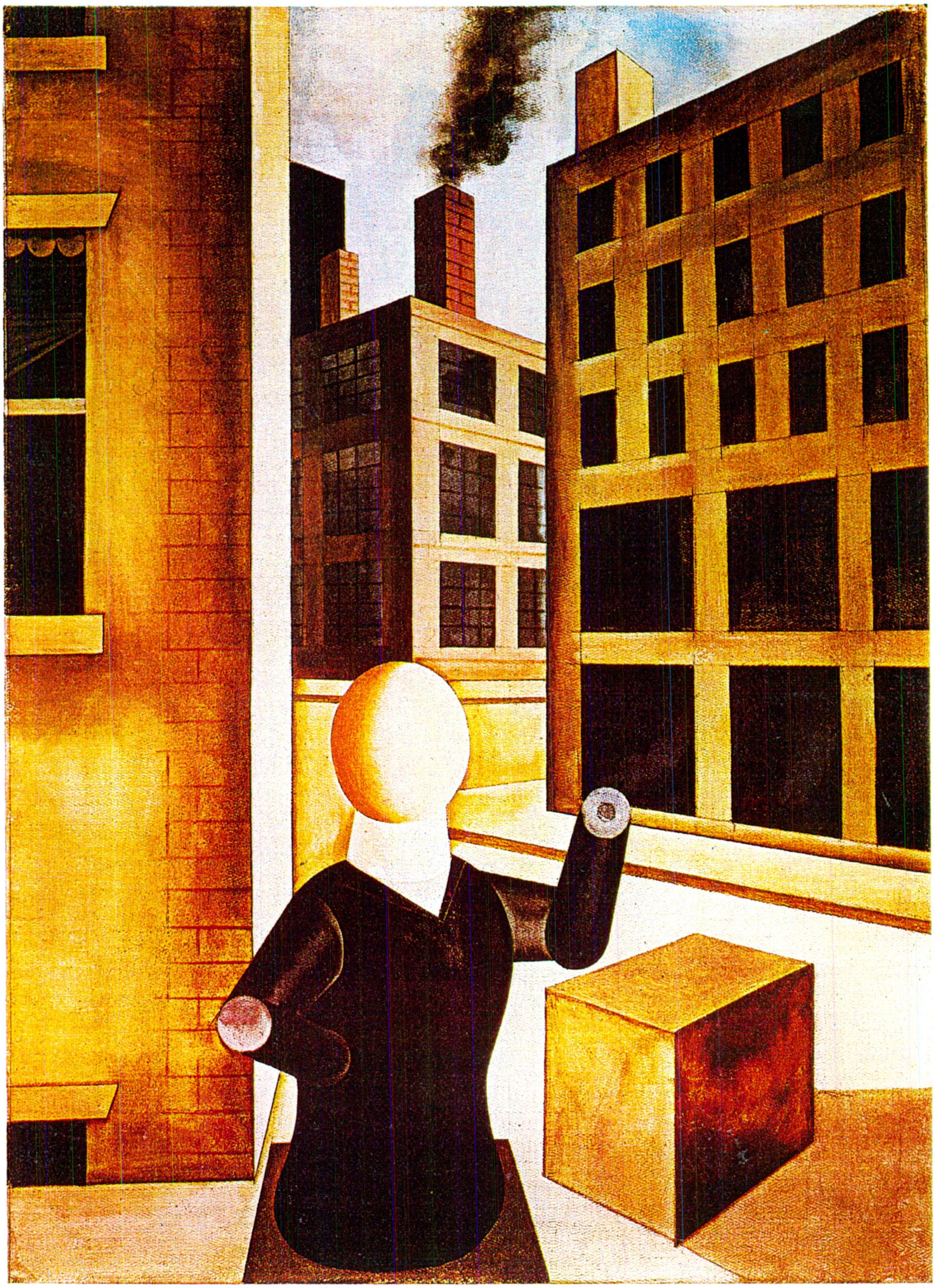
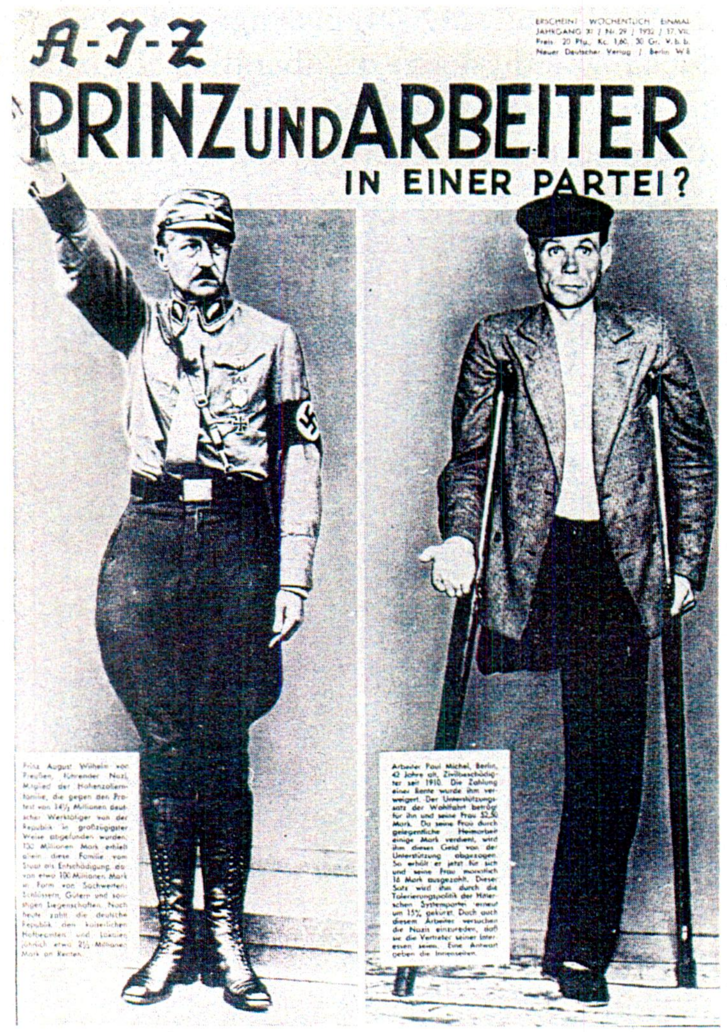


Fig. 3 George Grosz, *Untitled*, 1920



A-I-Z

ERSCHEINT WOCHENTLICH EINMAL
JAHRGANG XI / Nr. 29 / 1932 / 17. VII.
Preis 20 Pfg., Kc. 1,60, 30 Gr., V. b. b.
Neuer Deutscher Verlag / Berlin W 8

PRINZ UND ARBEITER
IN EINER PARTEI?

Prinz August Wilhelm von Preußen, führender Nazi, Mitglied der Hohenzollernfamilie, die gegen den Protest von 14½ Millionen deutscher Werktätiger von der Republik in großzügigster Weise abgefunden wurden; 130 Millionen Mark erhielt allein diese Familie vom Staat als Entschädigung, davon etwa 100 Millionen Mark in Form von Sachwerten: Schlössern, Gütern und sonstigen Liegenschaften. Noch heute zahlt die deutsche Republik den kaiserlichen Hofbeamten und Lakaien jährlich etwa 2½ Millionen Mark an Renten.

Arbeiter Paul Michel, Berlin, 42 Jahre alt, Zivilbeschädigter seit 1910. Die Zahlung einer Rente wurde ihm verweigert. Der Unterstützungssatz der Wohlfahrt beträgt für ihn und seine Frau 52,50 Mark. Da seine Frau durch gelegentliche Heimarbeit einige Mark verdient, wird ihm dieses Geld von der Unterstützung abgezogen. So erhält er jetzt für sich und seine Frau monatlich 18 Mark ausgezahlt. Dieser Satz wird ihm durch die Tolerierungspolitik der Hitlerschen Systemparteien erneut um 15% gekürzt. Doch auch diesem Arbeiter versuchen die Nazis einzureden, daß sie die Vertreter seiner Interessen seien. Eine Antwort geben die Innenseiten.

A-I-Z cover

1932

Fig. 4 A-I-Z, *Cover Illustration*, 1932

to *The People's Illustrated* and it collapsed in 1938 shortly before the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. (See Fig. 4)

An illustration of the aggression of the Berlin wing of Dada was during the occurrence of a violent attempt by the Radical right to overthrow the Weimer Republic in 1920. Clashes occurred between the army and workers in Dresden. A bullet went through the window of the Zwinger Gallery and damaged a Rubens painting. Upset by the incident, Oscar Kokoschka a painter (then art professor at the Dresden academy) financed an appeal which appeared in local newspapers and as wallposters, urging the two sides to settle their scores away from cultural treasures. This attempt to elevate art above political struggle and the lives and homes of individuals outraged Grosz and Heartfield and they immediately replied with a furious polemic "Der kunstlump" (the artist as scab), ridiculing the idea that art could be considered more important than the lives of workers. The visual equivalent of their political and cultural beliefs was photomontage.

To interpret, comment on and shape the fabric of the time instead of just decorating it, is what makes the images that Dadaists of Weimer Germany produced so much more interesting than those of Paris in the twenties. Heartfield said during the Great War in 1917, “The greatest significance of Dadaism was that it immunised us against relapsing into expressionism, which had lost its original importance as a result of the new political situation.” (Evans and Gohl, p.23) The original use of photomontage was an attempt among Berlin Dada artists to demolish easel painting.

To prevent speculation of Dada issues remaining within Dada circles, Heartfield experimented with various forms of mass reproduction and distribution. He managed to make the book jacket into a political instrument, he designed posters, magazines, newspapers, calendars, pamphlets and along with the writer Kurt Tucholsky he produced "Deutschland, Deutschland Über Allés” (1929), a new kind of satirical photo-text book. Heartfield, among other artists

of the twenties managed to break down distinctions between the fine and applied arts. Heartfield wanted to encourage "seeing", but through proletarian eyes. In his attempt to heighten class consciousness through the experimental use of photomontage he relied on and manipulated two categories of popular knowledge. Firstly knowledge of the reality depicted in photographs and secondly, knowledge of the medium of photography.

Tristan Tzara brought Dada to Paris in 1920, at this point two years since its original manifestation in Germany when he had stated, “Dada is useless like everything else in life, Dada has no pretensions just like life should not.” (Alexandrian, p.46)

Dada, or at least the ideals of Dada, still remained true with Heartfield and Grosz, even with the development of surrealism. For example, in the year 1934 the Czechoslovakian government responded to pressure from the German ambassador in Prague, and eventually were forced to remove seven montages from an exhibition of international caricature in the Mánes art association in Prague. One of the images which had most offended the Nazis was a portrait of Hitler with a spinal column of gold coins and the title *Adolph the superman swallows gold and spits junk*. As a result of local press coverage of this censorship, attendance at the exhibition increased and many people gathered to Heartfield's defence. Heartfield in his own defence produced postcards of some of the banned pieces of art and sent them to prominent Nazis. He also published a commemorative photomontage subtitled: "The more pictures they remove the more visible the reality will be!" (See Fig. 5)

André Breton began promoting the unconscious with the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. Surrealist artists felt man suffered from a corruption of reason inbred with a bourgeois upbringing. Breton felt that to interpret mans condition was to build a post-revolutionary world, every mistake in the universe becomes an obstacle in mans development. He asserted that the Surrealists were in the vanguard of the struggle for the total liberation of mankind because they

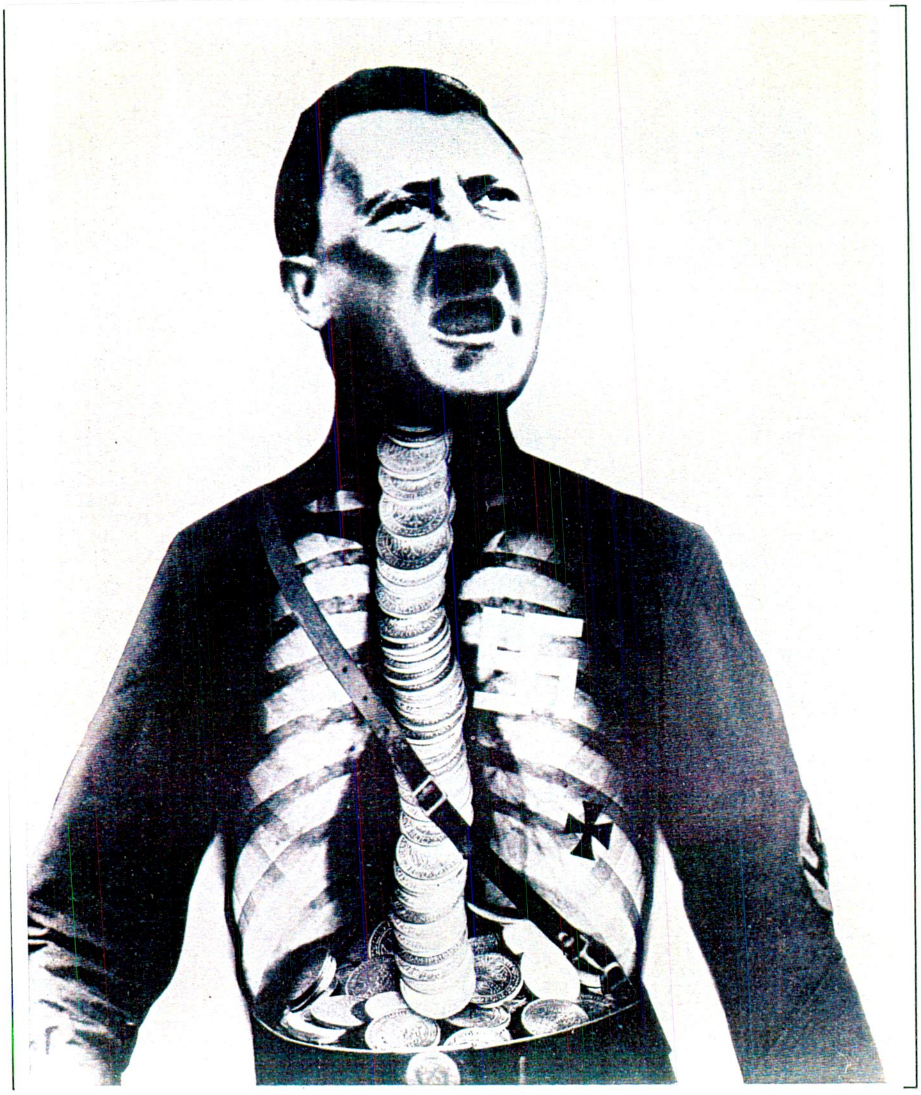


Fig. 5 John Heartfield, ***Adolf the Superman Swallows Gold and Spits Junk*****,**

1932

believed that to bring about the absolute revision necessary in real values, the artist must concern himself solely with a psychological model.

Basically with the Surrealists belief that man was corrupted with reason, they needed a means to stand back and view his situation. Their naive view that this could be achieved through accessing the subconscious mind was an effort on their part to revise man's true values. Their first attempts at this was through automatic writing originally, and then through drawing. The first manifestations of this were *Exquisite Corpse Drawings*, a game invented by the first three painters to join the movement, (Max Ernst, Georges Malkine and André Mason), in which a sentence or a drawing was made up by several people working in turn, none being allowed to see any of the previous contributions. Many results of this "poetry of chance" were published in *La Revolution Surrealiste* a periodical published from 1924 - 1929, where writing, painting, photography and sculpture became aspects of one main activity - that of calling reality into question. The Surrealists maintained the attitude of total revolt against tradition and orthodoxy that stemmed from their Dadaist antecedents. (See Fig. 6)

Following the inception of "automatic" writing and drawing, experiments were undertaken with shows, spectacles, photography (Man Ray and his "Rayograms") and cinema. The first group exhibition of Surrealism was in 1925 at the Gallerie Pierre in Paris. The exhibitors were Chirico, Klee, Arp, Ernst, Man Ray, Miro, Picasso and Pierre Roy. The exhibition was not successful, for although the movement knew what its aim in poetry and writing were, the manifestation of this through painting was unstable.

It was around the time when André Breton published, *Le Surrealisme et la Peinture* in 1928 that he sought to broaden the debate of Surrealism into the field of mental adventure. He believed that for man to address issues of conformity, painters should no longer draw their inspiration from reality as this

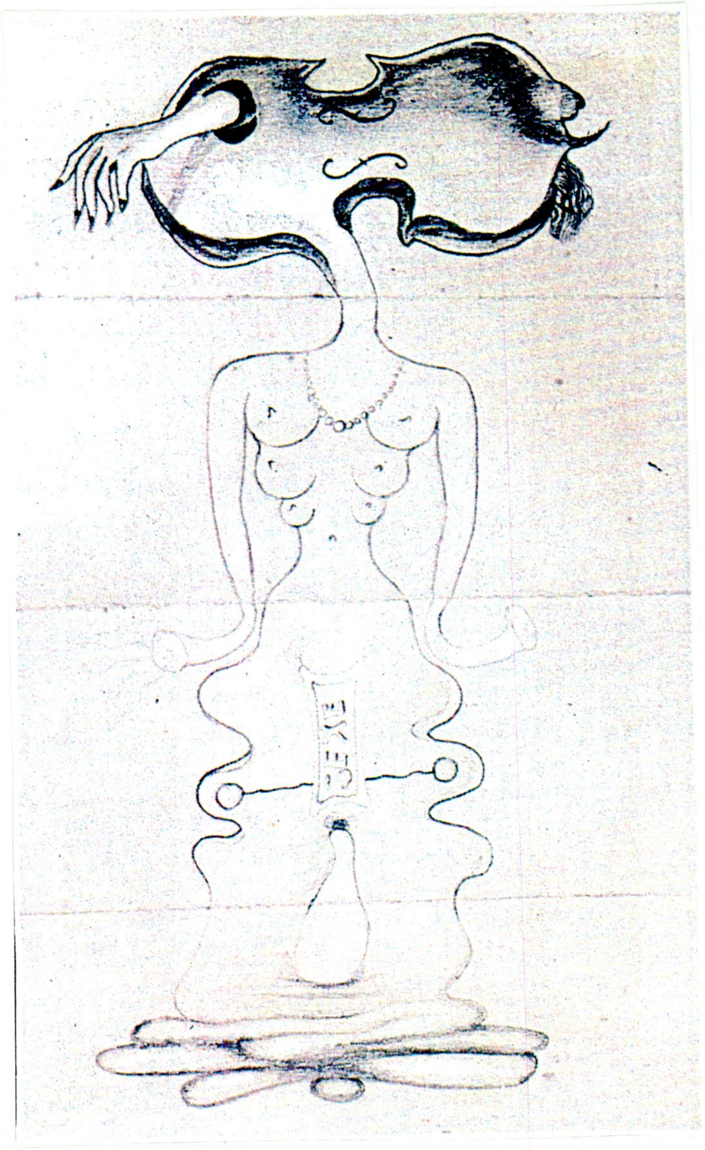


Fig. 6 Jacques Hérold, André Breton, Yves Tanquy and Victor Brauner,

***Exquisite Corpse*, 1934**

would just produce a more or less felicitous image of the object which concerns them

Max Ernst was one of the first Surrealist painters to show qualities of inspired imagination. Many of his images came from the moment between the half-sleeping and half-waking state. He also would see an image in the pattern of a mahogany panel in his bedroom which he drew as *a huge birds head with thick black hair*. This then led to his discovery of frottage in a seaside inn in August 1925. He began taking black lead rubbings from the grooves and graining of the floorboards. From these tracings an image would arise and become clear to him. Frottages suggested to him forests, hordes of animals and heads. He brought these together in his collection *Histoire Naturelle* published in Paris in 1926. For Ernst, frottage was the equivalent to automatic writing. (See Fig. 7)

The Gallerie Surrealiste was inaugurated on 26th March 1926. The first exhibition was paintings by Man Ray although he is more well known for his photography. Man Ray transformed photography from a means of documenting the world to that of investigating it. As a painter Man Ray began to practice photography as a means of earning a living. In 1921 he invented "Rayograms". The technique is described thus: various objects are placed in the dark onto a sheet of light sensitive paper; they are then illuminated by a ray of light, and the areas underneath the object will remain white, due to being masked from the light. Then the light sensitive paper exposed to the light turns black, and the areas of the paper where shadows were cast by the objects are protected also to a certain degree. When the paper is then developed, the result is white silhouettes and graduating toned areas of shadow. (See Fig. 8)

Man Ray showed a certain scorn for technical skill and elaborate cameras; he believed in photographing ideas rather than things, and dreams rather than ideas. Apart from his experiments he took fashion pictures for Paul Porret, did portrait photographs and made reproductions of avant-garde works. He once

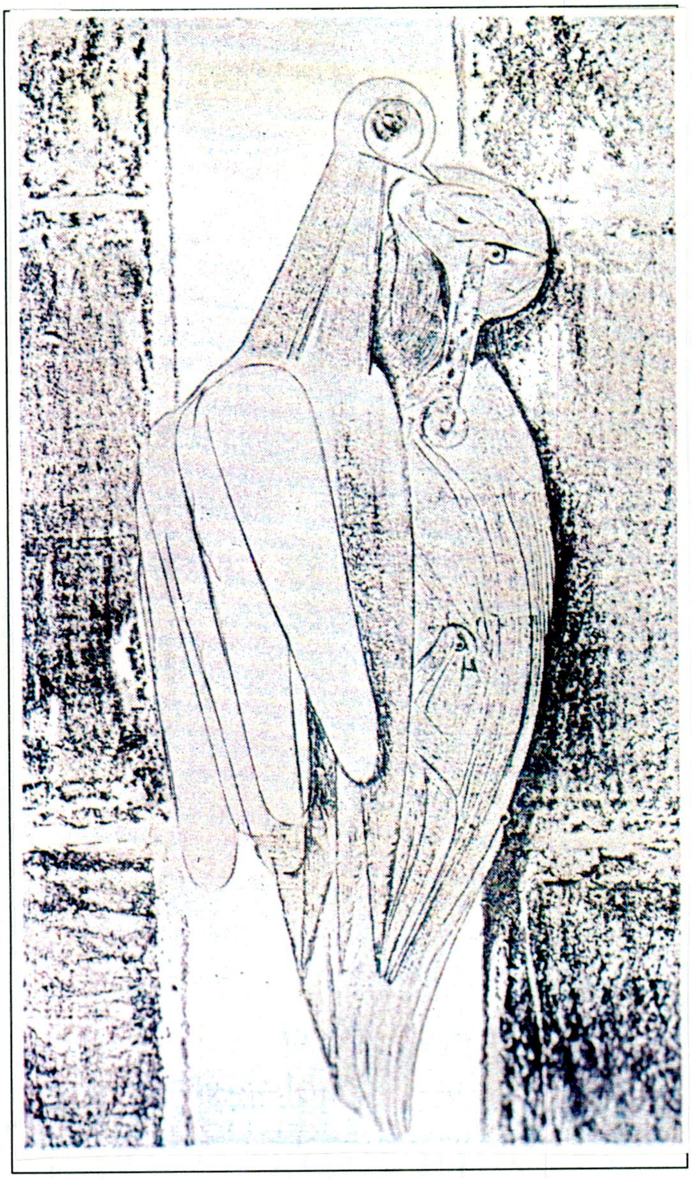


Fig. 7 Max Ernst, *Conjugal Diamofs*, 1926 (Frottage)

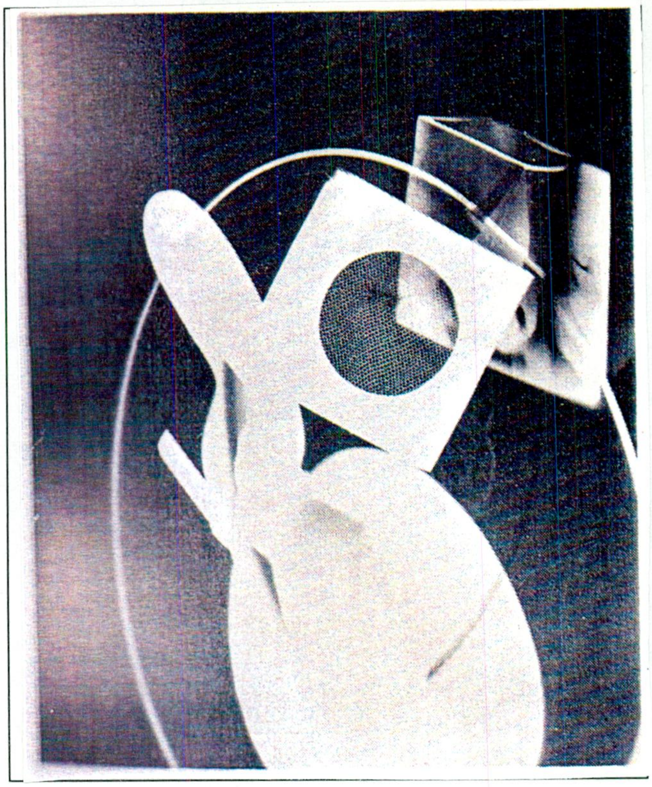


Fig. 8 Man Ray, *Rayogram*, 1927

made a portrait of the Marquise Casati, showing her with two pairs of eyes: she declared that the artist had taken a portrait of her soul.

He began taking photographs of nudes in 1925. He treated the female body in the same way that Duchamp made a ready-made; he would use some kind of personal detail to make each one different from the other. (See Fig. 9)

Ray used many photographic processes, for example "Solarization", which allows the values of cast shadows to be inverted, giving flesh a misty, dream-like outline. His manipulation of the photograph was his way of expressing his Surrealist beliefs. So, by changing how we perceive an image to be, he has immediately subverted our assumptions of what to expect from photography and on a broader scale of what to expect from reality. This being similar to how Heartfield intended to change one's 'knowledge' of depictions within photographs and medium manipulation.

It was around the mid twenties that painting lost its potency among Surrealist artists. They had always had some kind of difficulty expressing their views through this medium. Collage became the next step for these artists to take. It also seems an obvious step considering the impact of montage throughout the previous years of Dada.

In collage, Aragon saw the possibility of an assault on reality by a form of the marvellous using elements taken from reality with the purpose of these being used against it. Because of a lack of immediate pressure on Surrealists to invoke public upheaval at the time, room was left for humour and experimentation in their images, while still addressing serious issues of modern life.

From the 1930's onwards, Surrealist art became even more impatient to influence social life. They initiated and contributed to periodicals such as *La Revolution Surrealiste*, published irregularly from 1924 - 1929. *La Revolution Surrealiste* was never intended to be an art journal although among its most

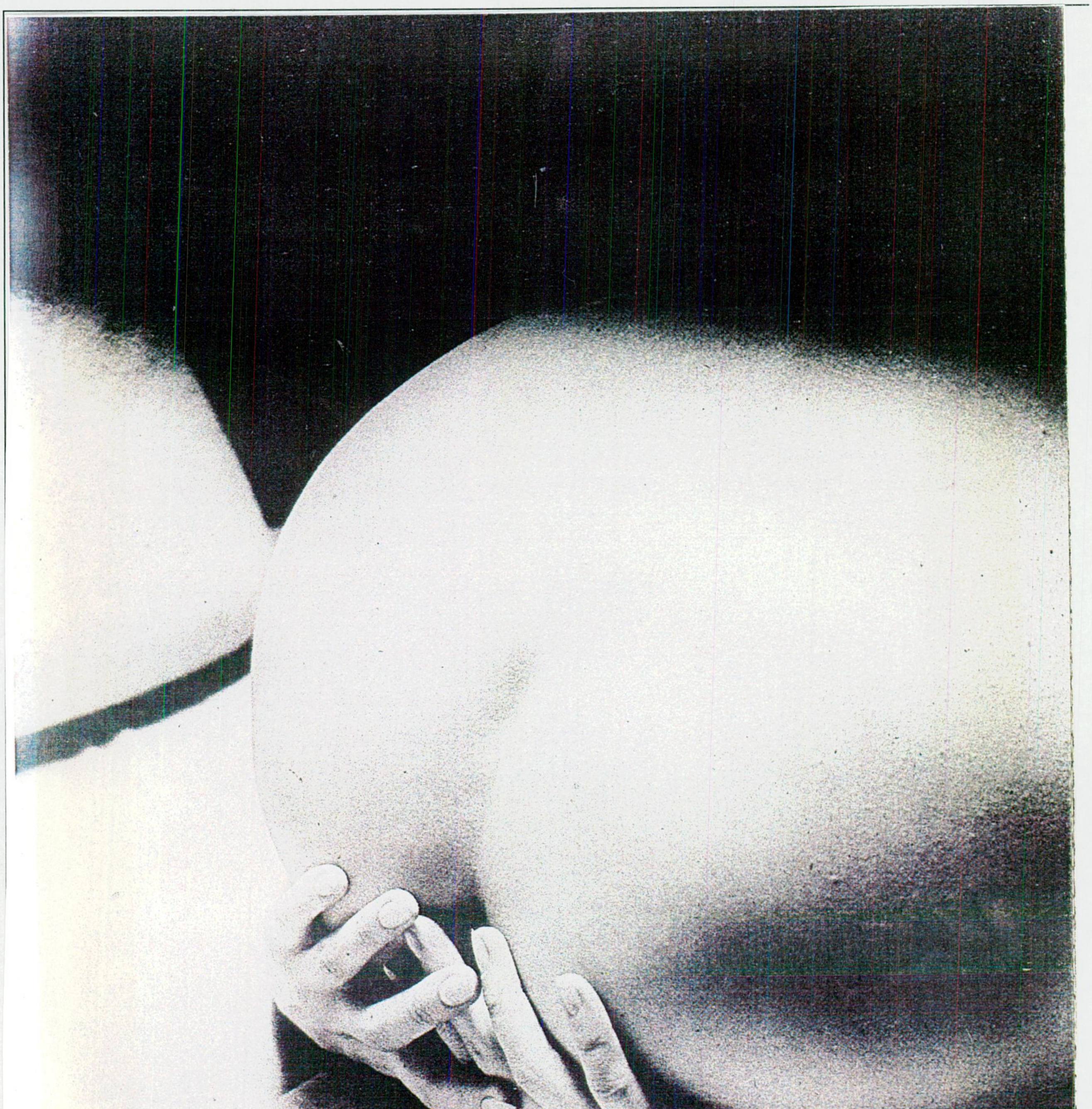


Fig. 9 Man Ray, *La Prière*, 1930

significant texts were artists accounts of their dreams in both visual and written form.The two Surrealist journals (*La Revolution Surrealiste* and *La Surrealism au Service de la Revolution* (1930 - 1933) demonstrate a progression of thought from an almost total disregard for politics to an interest in Marxism, as shown by the leading Surrealists joining the French communist party.

The Surrealists were determined to destroy traditional culture by ridicule if not by violence. In one instance they sent a letter to the heads of insane asylums demanding freedom for mental patients, and an ultimatum to the French government calling for them to "Disband the army and open the gates of prisons". At this point the Surrealists had established a hate for war, nationalism, and the church and they had contempt for all traditional values.

They adopted this direction with *La Surrealism au Service de la Revolution* (1930 - 1933) and published more left-wing articles and manifestos along with poems, accounts of dreams and automatic texts. They also published stills from *L'age d'Or* (The Golden Age) , a film produced by Salvadore Dali and Luis Bunuel, in the first issue of the magazine. (See Fig. 10) The film was violently anticlerical, erotic and irrational in nature. The Surrealists felt that clashes between fascist gangs and the destruction of some of their paintings following the publication of that particular issue was enough to establish their revolutionary credentials.

On many occasions the Surrealists, mainly Breton, were put in a position of being called before the French communist party and asked to explain the reasons for their behaviour. The main problem the party had with the Surrealist group was Salvador Dali, who developed the idea of the "paranoiac - critical method" in the early 1930's having become a member of the group in 1927. His "paranoiac - critical method" showed that artists could obtain spectacular results by the controlled simulation of psychological states.

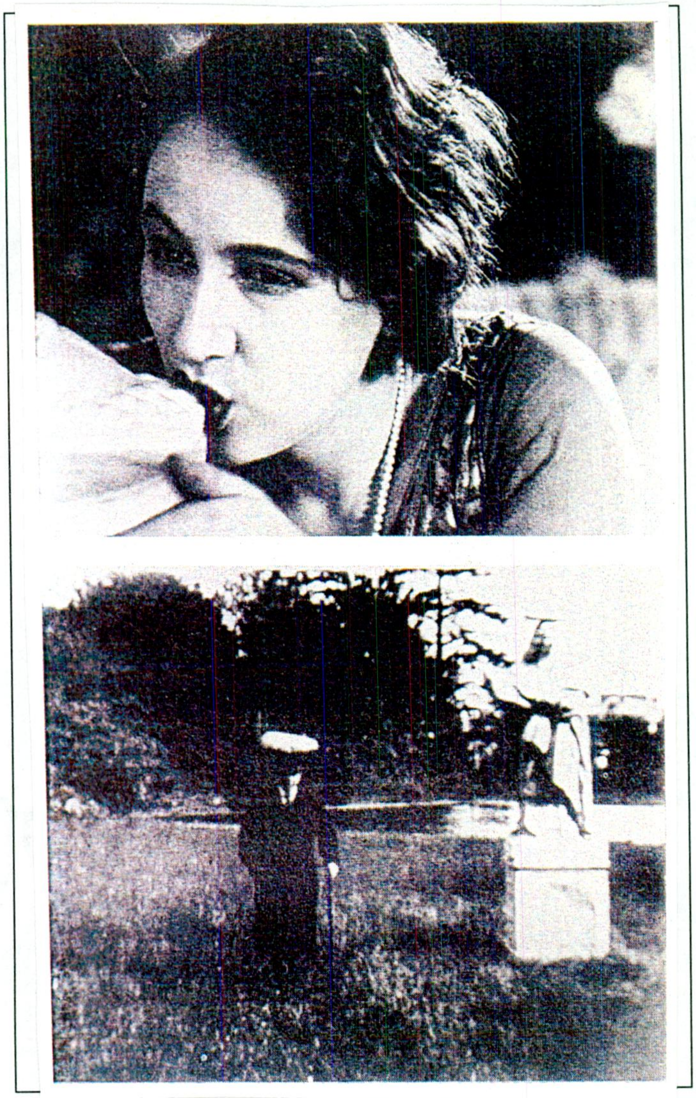


Fig. 10 Salvador Dali, ***Still from l'Age d'Or***

“Paranoia is an interpretative disorder with a rational basis, which if skillfully mastered by the painter, will allow him to reveal the double significance of things.” (Alexandrian, p. 100)

Having acquired this state of mind, Dali believed it possible for the "painter to act and think as if under the influence of a psychic disorder, while remaining fully aware of what is going on." From this method Dali described his painting thus: “Photography (by hand and in colour) of concrete irrationality and of the imaginary world in general.” (Alexandrian, p. 102) Following his many paintings based on the Paranoiac - Critical - Method approach, he began writing, creating sculptures and film making. (See Fig. 11)

The communist party demanded that the Surrealists repudiate Dali after the December issue of *La Surrealism au Service de la Revolution* (1931). In the November issue, his painting, *Le Grand Mastibateur* had caused great consternation, but in the following issue he published the explicit essay *Rêverie* (Dream), which described the sexual fantasies he had while masturbating in front of a little girl. Breton refused to get rid of Dali, but a few years later he was forced out of the Surrealist group for crass commercialism.

The death of André Breton in 1966 marked the end of Surrealism as an organised movement. The modernist view of the avant-garde was a process of engineered change motivated by a drive for aesthetic originality, wilful independence and formal experimentation.

The struggle for a new individual with a new ideological and spiritual experience of the world was contained within the avant-garde and its programme of change. This struggle, through political and social means, was the motivation behind the Dada and Surrealist groups.

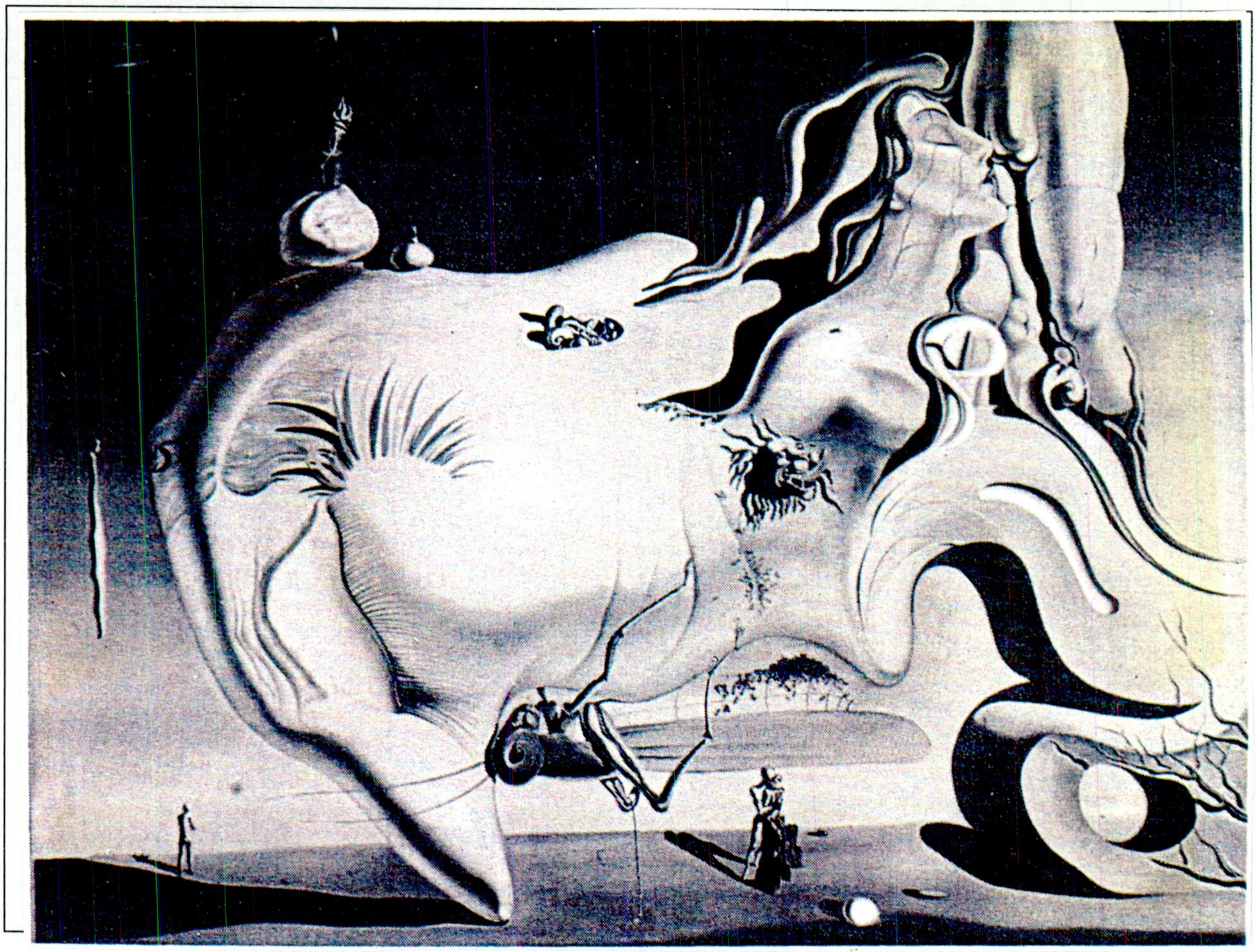


Fig. 11 Salvador Dali, *The Great Masturbator*, 1929

CHAPTER TWO

(FROM SUBVERTION TO SURVIVAL)

A new definition of what it means to be avant-garde in a post-modern age is the pushing of the boundaries of imagery in art. The political mission of the avant-garde and the relationship of artists to society also, and remaining as a part of this is the modernist inquiry into the nature and limits of art itself.

> **The art of the contemporary avant-garde is an art of expansion, of inclusion, of synthesis, through which contemporary artists have undertaken the ethical mission to search for the significance of human existence and express the beliefs by which mankind lives. (Fox, p. 97)**

In the photographs of Susan Trangmar a mysterious figure appears in various typically British settings - in front of a church say, or outside a factory. Within this series of *Untitled Landscapes*, in each case, the figure is only an observer, not involved in the scene in other ways, she has become a tourist within her own culture. Since these photographs, which were made during the 1980's, she has moved from straight photographic processes to slide projection installations. Her latest piece of work entitled *Amidst* differs from her other work in that it is "site specific" in the fullest sense of the term. Not only is *Amidst* visually integrated into its architectural surroundings but it is also conceptually linked to the location for which it was designed. The piece was commissioned by London's Dash Gallery and was installed in 1994. The Dash Gallery is unusual in two respects; firstly, it consists of an almost perfectly circular space with four thick pillars which cause a minimal distraction to the symmetry. The building is also located on the Isle of Dogs on the edge of the West India Docks development - a mass of unwanted office blocks and empty yuppie cages in the middle of some of east London's most deprived communities. This area is also the home of "Canary Wharf" standing as a monument to the self-destructive nature of 1980's capitalism.

The installation was cornered off by a black curtain. On passing through this blockade the viewer is surrounded by a 360 degree panorama of an evergreen forest. This is of course a facsimile, an illusion created by eight whirring slide projectors placed equidistantly along the circumference of the room. The joints between the individual images are almost indistinguishable, with no spill-over onto the floor or the ceiling. The pillars create little intrusion and their lines almost echo the near-prefect verticals of the pine trees. (See Fig. 12)

The viewer's participation was an important element in the piece and similar to the artist's earlier *Untitled Landscapes*, the play of the viewer's silhouettes or shadows across the panorama gave the viewer a sense of standing back, and witnessing his / her surroundings from a distance. This was one of the visual delights regarding this particular piece, but the work also exists on an intellectual level.

The forest, or rather "Trangmar's Forest", is introduced in an urban environment, (the worst nightmare of the inception of the post-modern dream). What better park for this fictitious, non-functional city than Trangmar's humming illusionary forest. Not only that, but this forest, a real forest photographed by the artist, in real life is as unnecessary and unproductive as the twentieth century planning disaster where it is located. These regimented pine trees are as artificially construed and as much an offence to the landscape as any office block. They are ecologically unsound. In other words they are the vegetable equivalent of Canary Wharf.

Douglas Davis once called post-modernism the fast-food chain of art, a phenomenon of late capitalism-accessibility, informality, self-service and self depreciating banality. But fast-food also contains all the form and technology of modernist art. This is where the overlaps occur. The line is drawn when it is realised that somewhere within post-modernism, the mood is no longer optimistic, logic or even anti-logic are no longer sufficient. Technology has undesirable side-effects and in a world threatened by defoliated land, polluted air

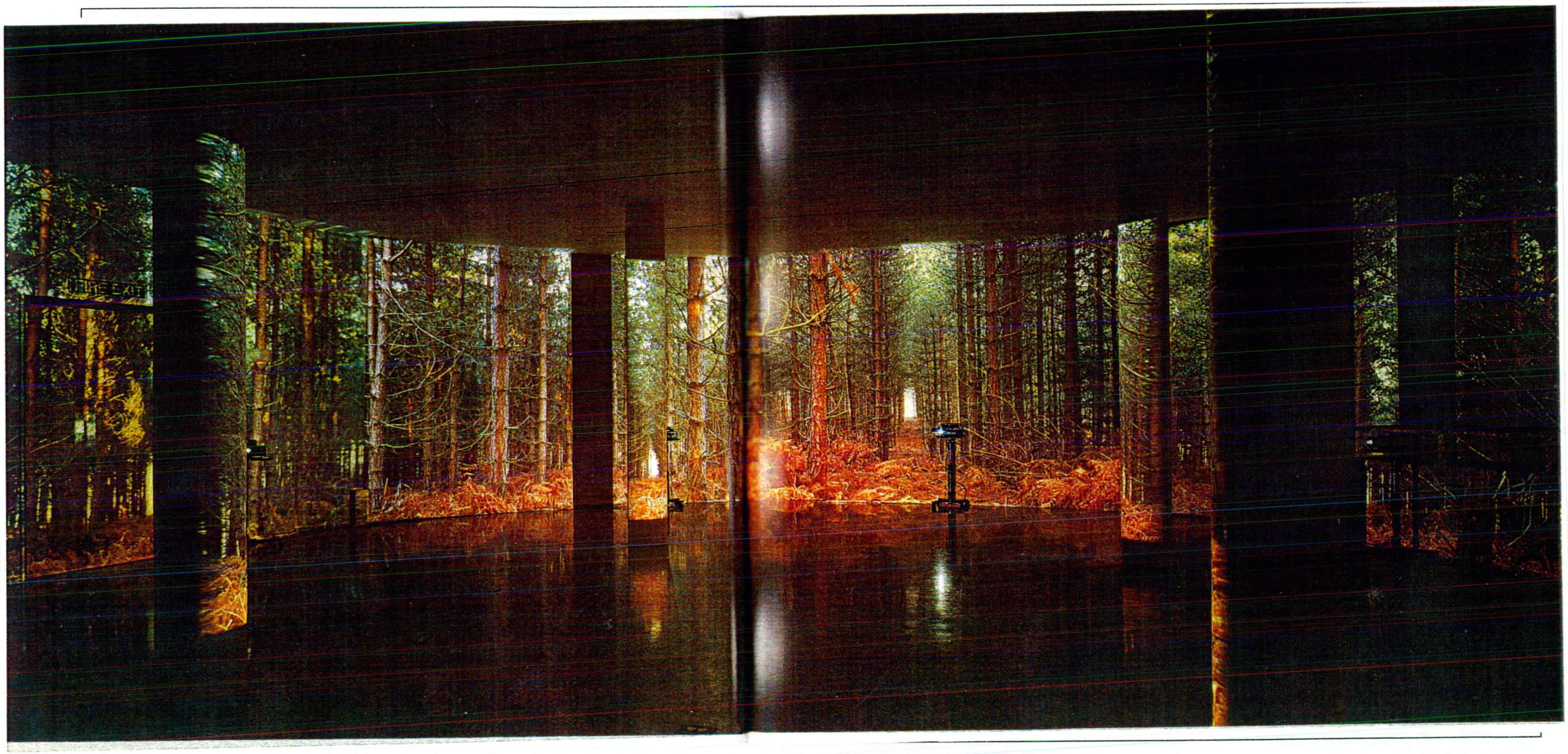


Fig. 12 Susan Trangmar, *Amidst*, 1994

and water, depleted resources, chemical additives, radioactive wastes and space debris, progress is no longer the issue. The future has become a question of survival.

The original avant-garde opposed the authoritarian influence of established culture. One of the key attributes of post-modern thought is a reconsideration of the artist's relationship to society and the culture at large, and an attempt to reunify the aspirations of progressive art with the culture in which the artist and audience exist.

Dada stood, not against art but against the institutionalisation of art, and its prescribed forms for a conventionally minded audience. Avant-gardism is a way of perceiving culture, in particular the culture of the present and how it relates to that of the past and future. The avant-garde brings to bear the wider cultural significance of the perception of human intervention on earth. The contemporary avant-garde has both maintained and broadened that search for purpose.

Artists like Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince re-photograph and rearrange existing pictures to give them a new context, and so a new meaning. (See Fig. 13) By deconstructing images, they intend to deprogramme us from simply accepting pictures as documents of reality, and to examine the way images shape us. The photography at the beginning of the 1980's was reaching towards a critique not just of the art market but of the entire social system. It is important to say that with photographs from this time, even some images which seem to be documentary are not necessarily so. Post-modernist artists distinguish themselves from modernism, and photographers distinguish themselves from artists who use photography. But can fiction be differentiated from documentary work? As John Szarkowski, once head of the New York Museum of Modern Art's photography department, has said, “Photography is a creative

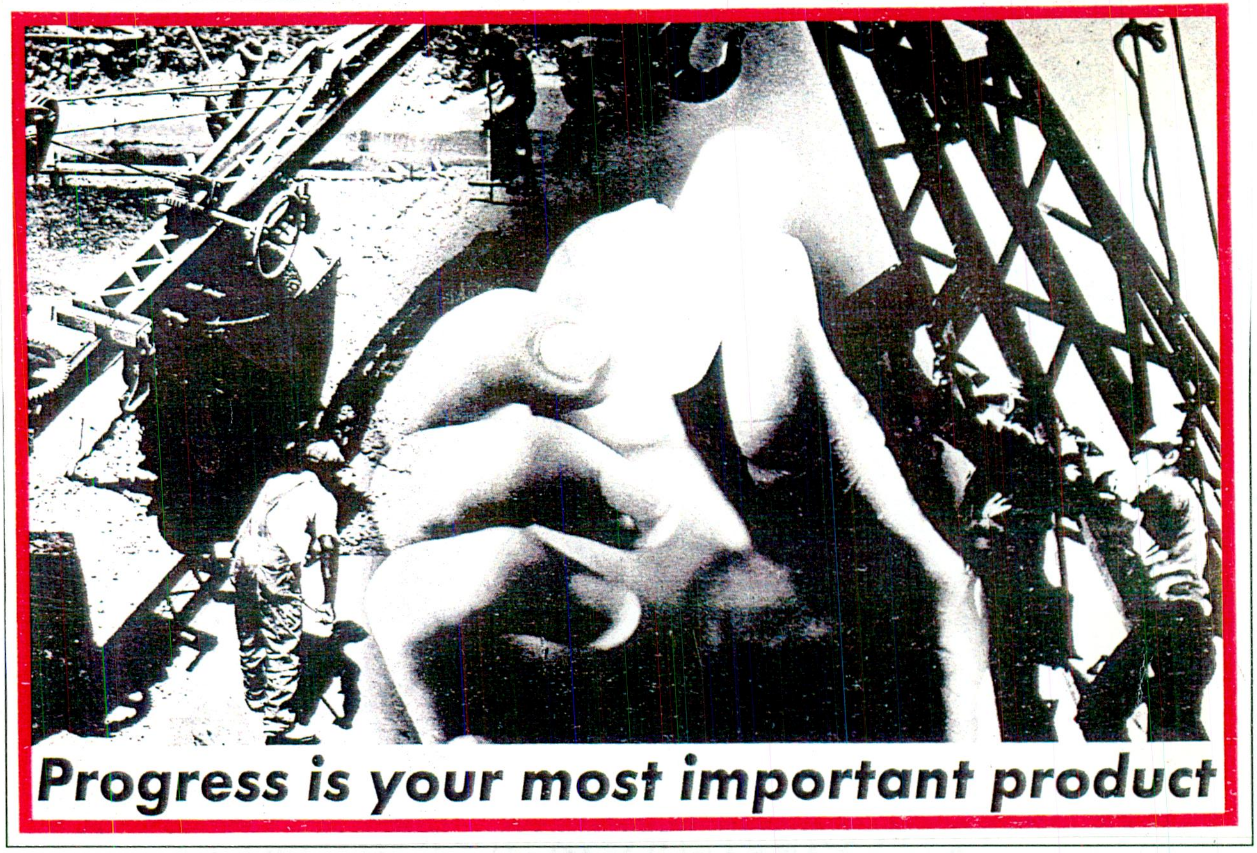

Progress is your most important product

Fig. 13 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1984

medium and even the most apparently documentary picture is a construct." (Bolton, p. 114)

It is possible to separate photographers from artists and among photographers high art from low. The 1970's marked the sway by a younger generation of artists that subvert conventional notions of photography. Photographic images are being sold and commissioned by artists, some of whom may never have held a camera. Post-modernist photography is like advertising or fashion; it is directed in the studio.

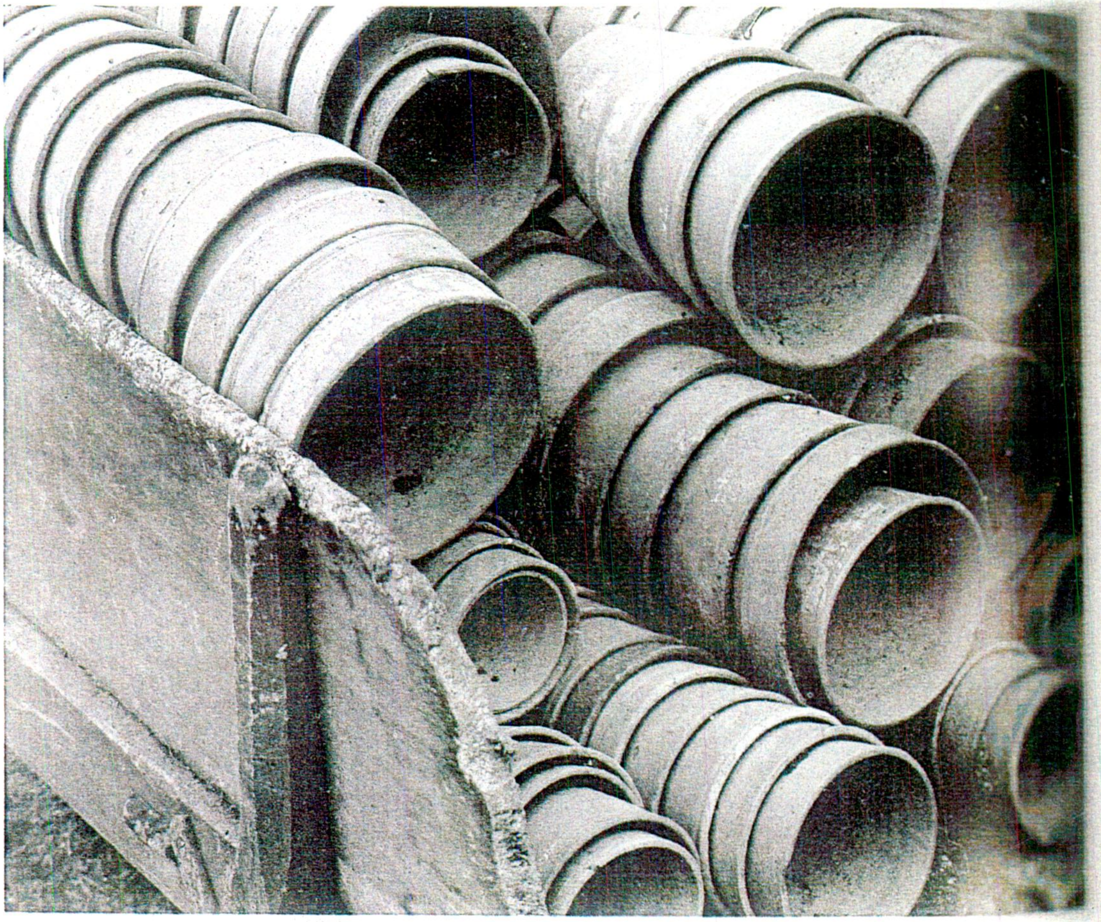
Since, in the eyes of the pictorialist, the aim of the photograph is art, many artists believe that any means which are required to achieve that end are permissible. Thus, as early as 1861, C. Jabez Hughes observed that the photographer, like an artist, is at liberty to employ what means he or she thinks necessary to carry out his / her ideas. If a picture cannot be produced by one negative then he/she would use two or ten, but let it be clearly understood that these are only means to the end, and that the picture, when finished, must stand or fall entirely by the effects produced and not by the means employed.

Some feel that photographs that are essentially vehicles for ideas in the end do not have the same power to move us as those that spring more directly from life, that capture memory by immobilising thin slices of time and space, while the former can reshape our understanding of our culture.

The two main ideals of photography users this century, those being the Pictorialist and the Purist (The difference between making a picture and taking a picture) are seen through the endeavours of two people who served time as the head of the New York Museum of Modern Art's photography department between the 1940's until the 1980's. I have chosen these two men, not because they have excelled in the medium of photography but because of their positions held as the head of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art they have influenced younger artists who have followed since.

Edward Steichen's ambitions in the 1920's carried him far beyond the confines of art photography. His portraits and fashion photography for magazines brought him celebrity status and fortune and, during his service in the US Navy, he realised the power of documentary reportage. In 1942 he came to the museum of modern art, he collected many photographs during the war and organised an exhibition entitled *Road to Victory*. Here was something new in photography not just placed there for its aesthetic value. They were photographs used as force, people who usually never visited museums flocked to see them. He presented large scale prints and manipulated his images to create the impact he required. Steichen reigned as the Museum of Modern Art's Head of Photography until 1962 when Szarkowski took over. Steichen's approach was mass media, multi-viewing, illustration and the image rather than the image maker become famous. (See Fig. 14)

Szarkowski has followed three main lines of thought since Steichen. The introduction of a formalist vocabulary theoretically capable of comprehending the visual structure of any existing photograph. The isolation of a modernist visual "poetics" supposedly inherent to the photographic image, and the routing of photography's "main tradition" away from the Stiegliz / Weston line of high modernism and toward sources formerly seen as peripheral to photography. Szarkowski has managed to separate photographers from artists who use photography. In setting out formal rules and creating a compositional icon out of the photograph, he has lost post-modernism somewhere along the line. The Dada artists believed one of the good things that came out of their endeavours was that it had left expressionism behind which had lost its importance with the new political situation. Similarly, are Szarkowski's theories on photography as an art form relevant, in an age where impact and immediateness are the main social concerns? Is Szarkowski reverting back to modernism, where art became elitist? The modernist vision may have had democratic aims, but in practice it was elitist, and had begun to seem brutal and dogmatic; it was competitive, it insisted on being an object in a world of objects. (See Fig. 15)



EDWARD STEICHEN. *Wheelbarrow with Flower Pots.* 1920. Gelatin-silver print. The Museum of Modern Art

Fig. 14 Steichen, *Wheelbarrow and Flowerpots*, 1920

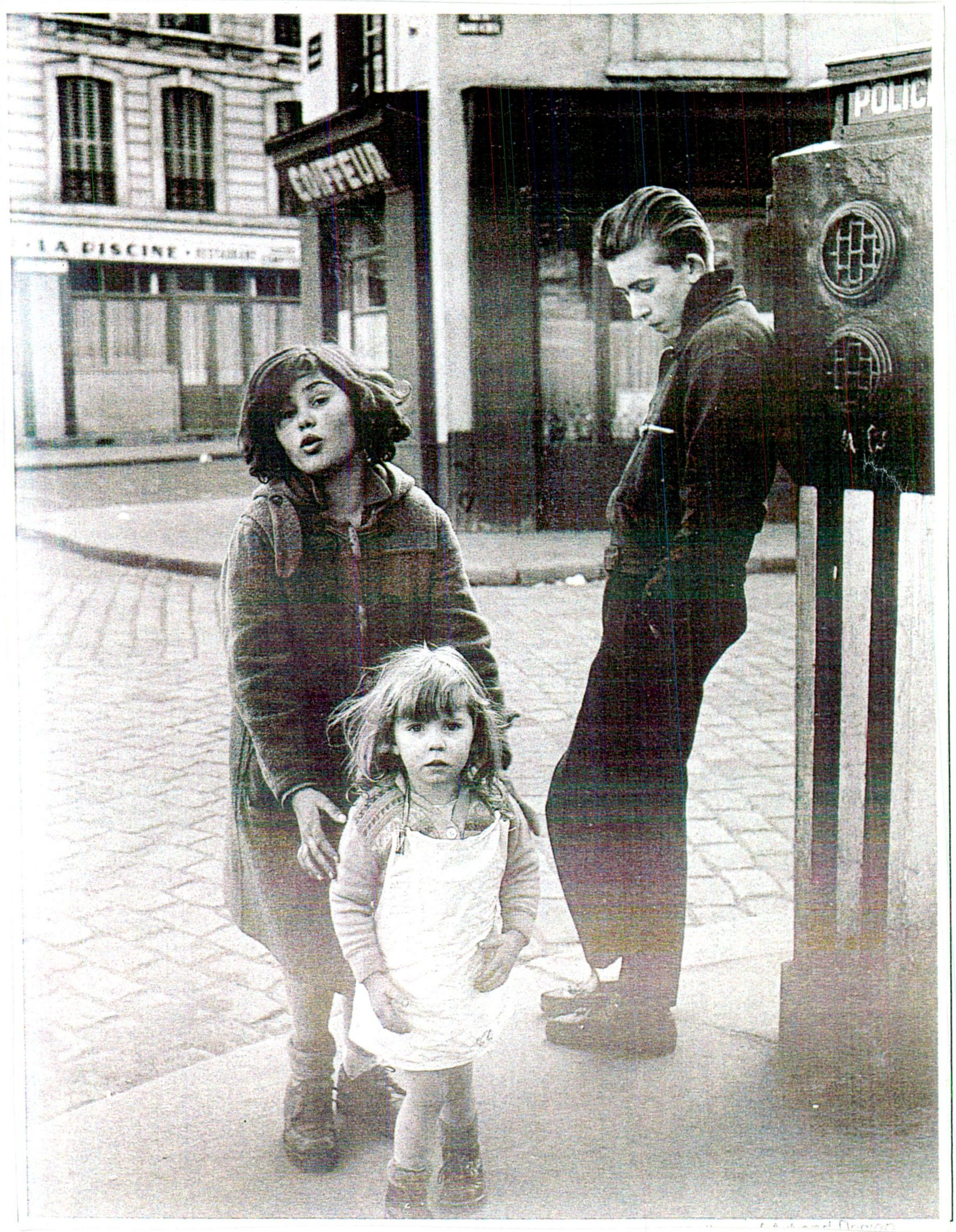

LA PISCINE
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Fig. 15 Robert Doisneau, *Les Gosses de la Place Hérbert*, 1957

Artists like Trangmar, have the same subjective view of the world around them as did Dada and Surrealist artists, but possibly through the faults of the original avant-garde the new approach has slightly altered. To photograph life at its most intense is to offer an empty shell, but to photograph the wrapping or the tinsel is to evoke flames.

There is little evidence to support a notion that any avant-garde movement other than constructivism had a significant impact socially or politically.

Many of today's arguments that the avant-garde has perished, turn on the notion of a changed relationship between artist and audience. But because that relationship was never quite as the avant-garde imagined it to be, it would be more accurate to say that the perceived role of the artist has changed. The original avant-garde artists fought a battle against, among other things, the artist as elitist. Modernist art developed during the mid-twentieth century again into a series of objects displayed and noted for their aesthetic importance. Artists began to comment on art alone, and the breach between avant-garde art and the socio-political sphere was at its most evident in the US during the late 60's. This period at the height of the Vietnam war coincided with the ascension of radically experimental minimalist and process art. Many of the artists who professed revolutionary sympathies or radically disagreed with United States foreign policy could not express their moral condemnation or their feelings against political activities through their art which was their lifework. Instead they were reduced to signing petitions. One artist, Robert Morris, shut down an exhibition of his sculpture at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in protest over the American bombing of Cambodia. The fact that an artists chief protest against the political powers of his society was not in showing his art but in not showing it, underscores how ineffectual avant-garde art may be in influencing politics.

The new practice among many contemporary artists is of engaging the interests and addressing the experiences of the audiences. While it is true that there are

artists intending to provoke their audiences with overtly political or socially critical art, (Bruce Nauman and Barbara Kruger), (See Fig. 16) by and large the subject of much of the most contemporary art that deals with communal or cultural interests is less the angry protest of the outcast than that of the concerned participant.

The depiction of a world where man can see the results of his doing is embodied in the photographs of Sandy Skoglund, an American artist born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1946. She deals with themes of overpopulation, mass production, natural versus the manmade and post world disaster. Her colour cibachrome prints have a semblance to those of Boyd Webb (See Fig. 17 / 18) although her use of repetition through the artists "making" of sculptural figurines are a need on the part of the artist to combat a mass media audience over exposed and over accepting of American culture. Her work also illustrates the need felt by many artists to make physical objects, even if those objects themselves are not the final product.

Skoglund controls every detail in her photographs and goes one step beyond the tradition of studio photography. The lack of rationality, the improbable or unnatural aspects, lend a surrealistic tone to her work. They suggest a dreamlike or sometimes nightmarish state of mind. But this is Surrealism in the service of strong narrative ends, even in the unpeopled tableaux. She places surrealism also in the service of social and political commentary, as she expresses concerns about the workplace, as in *a breeze at work* overpopulation in *Maybe Babies*, ageing and nuclear war as in her two pieces *Ferns* and *Radioactive Cats.* Her concerns are expressed through analogy and hyperbole. Skoglund presents two sides of the picture; her images have become American icons in two media works which, when seen in concert encourage us to reflect on the meaning of photographic truth and when viewed independently, retain their integrity and power as commentaries on our culture.

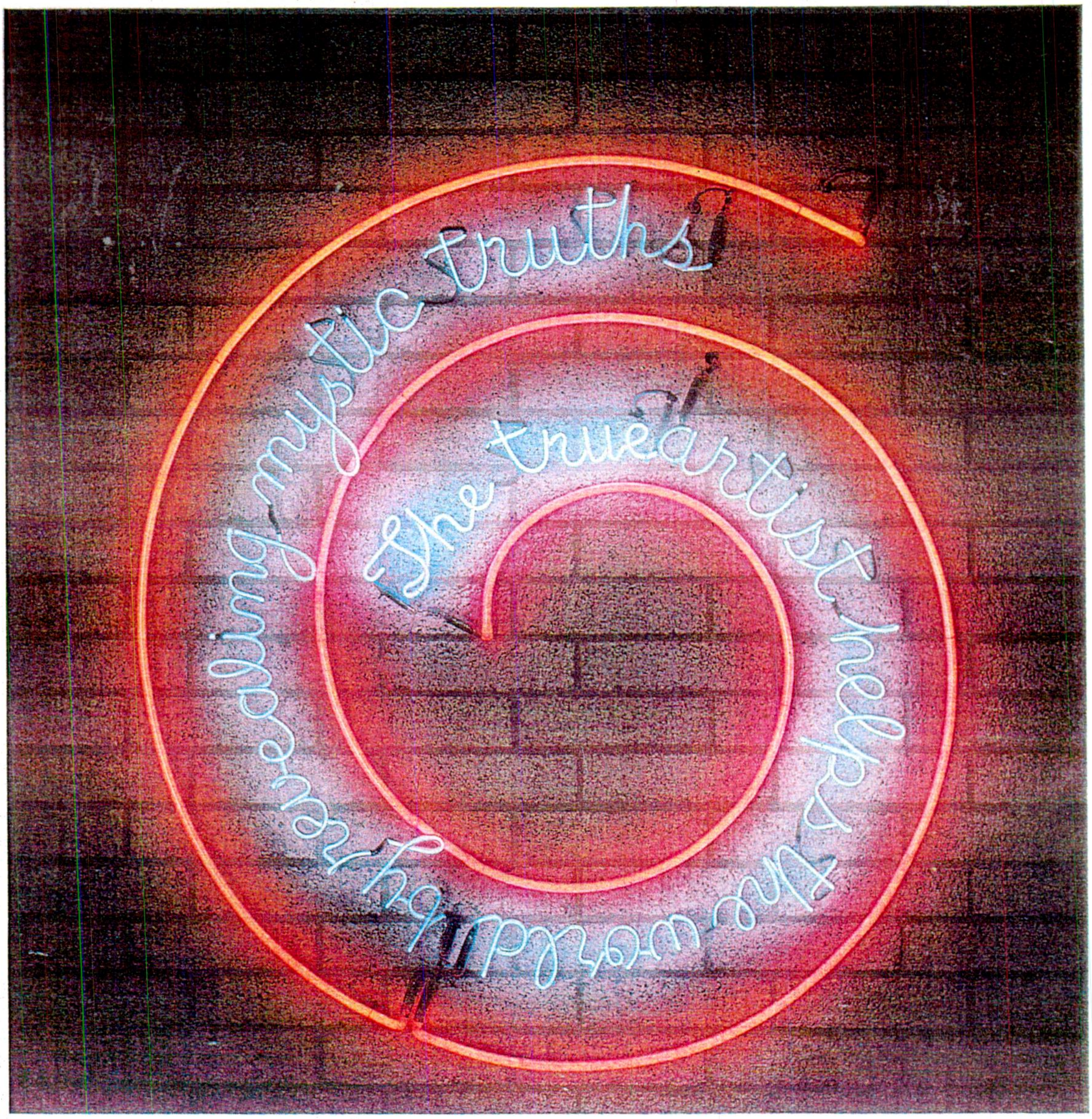

The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths

Fig. 16 Bruce Nauman, *Window or Wall Sign*, 1967

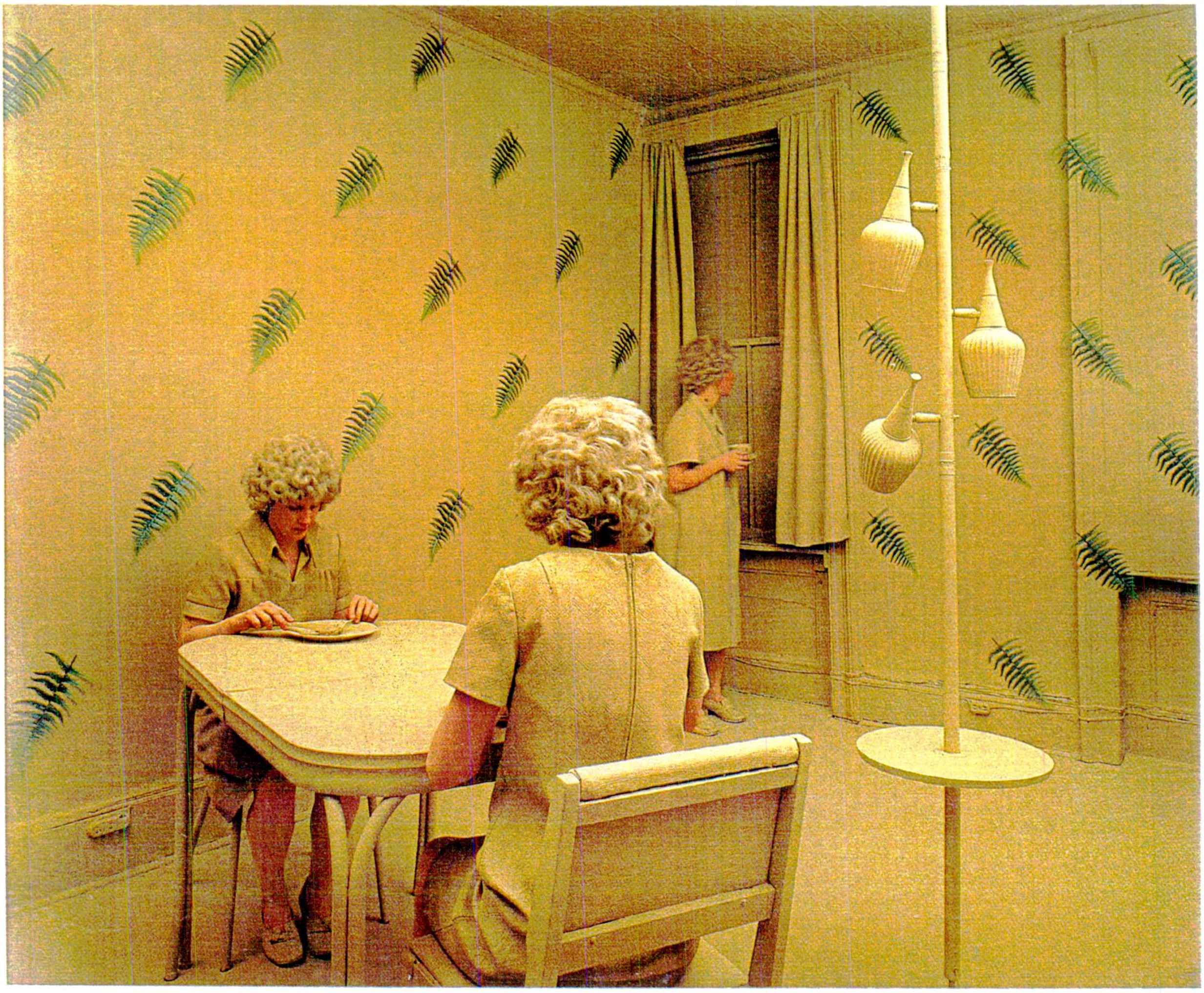
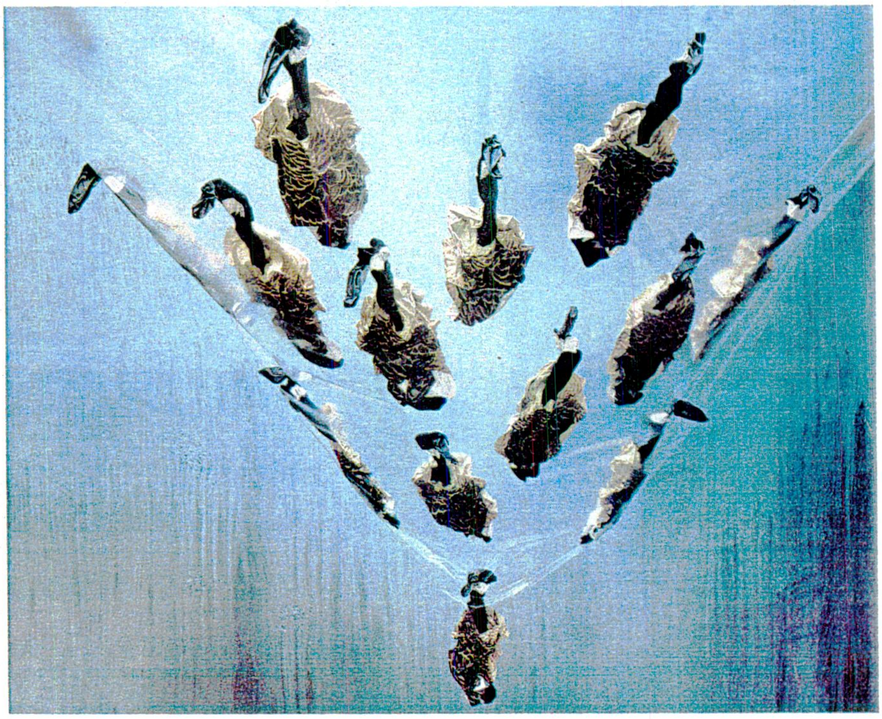
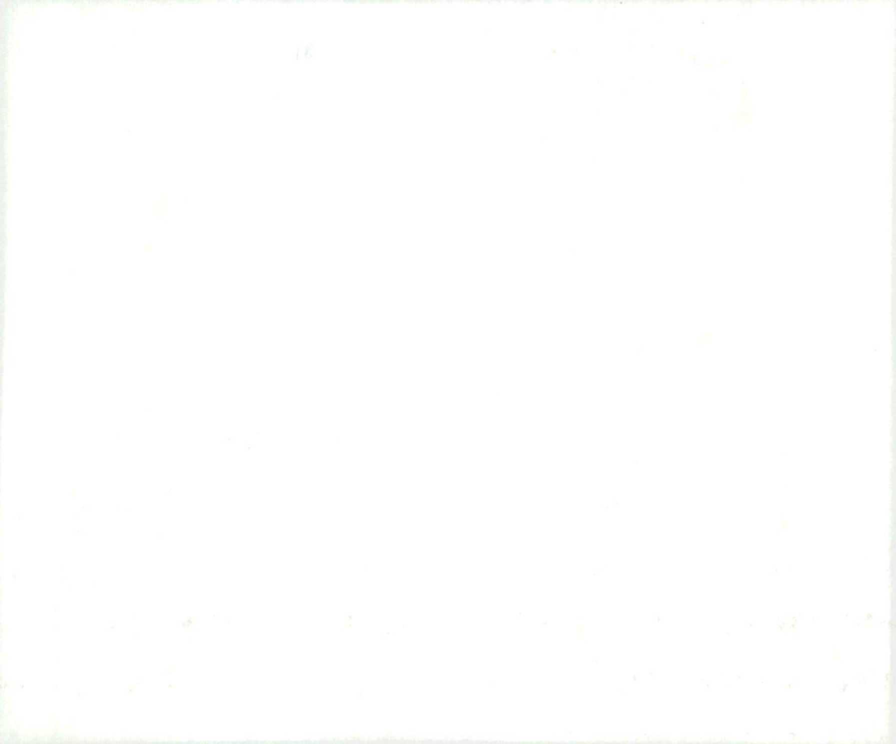


Fig.17/18 Sandy Skoglund, *Ferns*, 1980 / Boyd Webb, *Thaw*, 1989





Hangers is a piece made by the artist in 1980. The picture consists of a room in which are hung on the walls and spread on the floor blue hangers. There are two chairs, rubber duck, a pair of rubber gloves hanging out of a plastic bucket, fake flowers in a vase, four pot scrubbers and three small toy animals sitting on one of the chairs, and a lemon. (See Fig. 19) Skoglund asked herself what would Martians do if they came upon a brightly coloured thing shaped like a triangle with a hook? She then thought of a lot more objects from within man's surroundings which if discovered for the first time by an unsuspecting alien would seem very questionable and defunct. The figure in this particular photograph represents a person waking to a very different reality.

Her use of figures within her images is similar to Webb. Is this conveying a certain hope that mankind will live on, or is it reminding us of the destructive force that exists?

This and other questions are also raised on viewing the work of Boyd Webb. The final chapter is dedicated solely to this artist as he represents the contemporary artist living in a post-modern age acclaimed across the globe for his "observational" rather than radical tableaux images. Webb is the new avant-garde artist engaged in the experiences of his audience. His vernacular raises moral questions never with the intention of decodifying or resolving contemporary issues, but engaging peoples awareness of their existence.

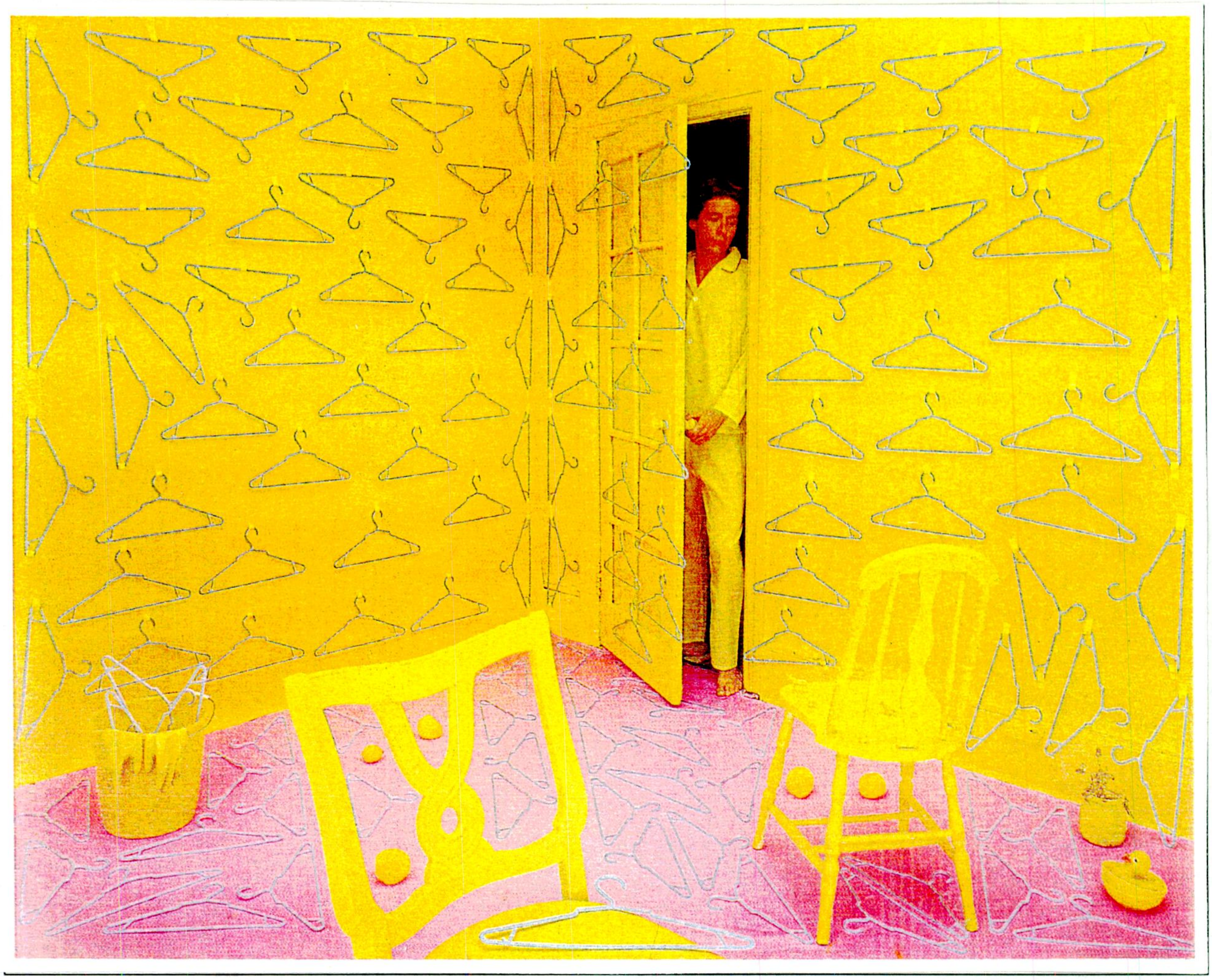


Fig. 19 **Sandy Skoglund, *Hangers*, 1979**

CHAPTER THREE

(THE "MYOPIA" OF MAN)

Against a blue sky swoops a dreary landscape disproportionate to everything on it. Scattered along the cliff edge are a few dwellings and some signs of plant life. We see beneath the ground level a naked figure on all fours "alive", with a tube held to his mouth. Looking above ground again, we see one of the houses is coming apart at the seams due to a balloon device swelling within the walls. The tube which the figure is blowing into is attached to the balloon which is about to burst. The man, unaware of the outcome above ground looks intent and calm in what he is doing. (See Fig. 20)

This is a description of a photograph entitled *Nemesis* by Boyd Webb, a cibachrome print constructed by the artist in 1983. This image described as a "Tableaux" by the artist, (a group of persons and accessories grouped together producing picturesque effects) was composed within his studio in London. The blue sky, a sheet backdrop hanging behind the carpet landscape draped between two studio walls. The dwelling is cardboard and the "plant life" a few parsnips (or carrots painted white) slotted into holes in the carpet, creating the effect of an other world unknown, yet familiar to man.

Immediately we realise that the fate of this house and the land around it lies in the figure beneath. If only he could see what is happening above his own head. This thrill of discovery can be experienced on viewing many of the works of Boyd Webb, the feeling that you alone are the first to realise what is going on. What other damage has he done \ is he going to do, and can we prevent it?

The items used by the artist to construct his settings are found, recycled, contrived (as in the use of an exotic fruit to describe the nipple of a whale in *"Nourish"* 1984) and almost always manmade. He takes these tools and uses them to paint images dealing with mortality, evolution, extinction and in particular "man's myopia". Similar to the way an artist mixes paint and applies his brush to canvas considering colour, scale, composition etc.

Having worked out the cleverness of his images, one can't help looking again just to be sure the artist has not missed a minor detail. But every inch within the frame has been accounted for, along with his reuse of backdrops and objects from image to image, his clarity and ability to relay a notion remain pristine. In both *Harvest* 1983 and *Autostrafe* 1983 the composition of blue sky, sloping carpet landscape and figure underground are almost identical to *Nemesis*, but each image stresses a different facade of man's inability to see his failings. (See Fig. 21)

His is an invented world, tacked together for the final photographic image, yet the truthfulness of all "reality" is brought into question. His images are not from dreams as in surrealism, they are the simulated reality which represents the consciousness of today's artists. His first works were set up on location, outside betting shops, in fields etc., but now his images rely on completely fabricated environments, that mimic everyday life.

The logic may be irrational, but it is not absurd, merely perverse like so much of mans behaviour. He began by using narrative along with three or four images - he chose to use photography instead of film for simple economical purposes. (Also, photography gives an image, any image, immediate credibility.) Photography has recorded science and history, also colour brings it even closer to the "real" truth, so by employing the medium of truth, Webb is ensured to draw our attention. His use of titles and narrative lead us no further to a set meaning in his work. His photographs are deliberately angled in order to be approached and rationalised by all, until the viewer realises that rationality is not a part of the world he portrays, yet he must have been inspired somehow for such a world to come about?

Think of Dorothy and the Scarecrow in *"The Wizard of Oz"*. When they meet at a cross-roads in their journey, someone decides which way to go, therefore leaving two other directions they could have travelled. At the point where theymeet the first case of trouble along their chosen path, Webb probably would have said "they should have gone the other way!"

He starts with a half-formed idea for a work, other times he will have a title initially and then produce the image. Webb has said "I think an artist produces his best work indirectly, without truly realising what he is making. It is like juggling a lot of cats in the air at the same time - and at the right moment they form a rug." (Catalogue 1989, p. 3)

His work is not concerned with history or style - nor is it exactly painting. Perhaps primarily Webb's work constitutes a sort of apologia for the genre picture. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, at the end of the 1960's the challenge to art in its original manifestations had never been greater. Elitism and commodity - fetishism, the trapping of late capitalist society, had diverted art from its true aims. Earth art, body art, performance and other developments arose from a need to multiply the means by which the object of art could be re-assessed. Possibilities proliferated in an attempt to restore the revolutionary potential of art as early modernists had understood it. This was an international attempt, as much as the art movements in the first thirty years of the twentieth century had been. At this time during the late 60's, photography came into question again. The media's dependence on context as a major regulator of meaning pushed photography to the forefront of discussion in this turn of the decade investigation . New Genres emerged like the "photo-text sequence" or "story art" in which verbal and visual components existed in a state of mutual critique. New artists like Boyd Webb also emerged.

Webb studied sculpture in Christchurch in New Zealand. His first art school projects set out to contradict the expectations of the staff. His major Christchurch work was his degree show in 1969. A notice on a locked door showed

the hours when he would be available. Examiners returned between the stated hours only to find a small office with a secretary who told them politely that Mr. Webb was busy and that they needed to make an appointment. When they were finally admitted to the inner office they found evidence of his work in alphabetical order in a filing cabinet. Everyday life assumed a theatrical air that day for Webb and his examiners, as if held up like a specimen on tweezers. It was now up to Webb to transfer this defamiliarisation into art.

In 1970 he made a photograph entitled *Eels*. (See Fig. 22) The scene looked like something out of a family album. An angelic child stands in the garden of a bungalow. The sun is shining, flowers are blooming and all is right with the world. There is one tiny detail in the image which on noticing calls the context of the photograph into question. A closer look reveals that surrounding a circular flowerbed behind the child is a low fence made of loops which look like metal stuck into the ground, the fence in fact is made of frozen eels bent into semi-circles, thawing quickly in the heat. This photograph has been offered as a kind of forgery, and its principle aim, similar to projects pursued by the artist during his college years in New Zealand is to defamiliarise and subvert himself and the viewer from fixed orthodoxies set out in the past and accepted by many artists.

The photograph captures the external expression of objects foreign to its mechanism. In other words, the camera captures that sense of exteriority which seems to emanate from an object. This objectivity (as mentioned earlier in Chapter One relating the tree as an unprecedented reality) which a camera can observe the world through, can be used as a teaching aid for onlookers. The photograph used in these lessons is a kind of secondary object emanating from the original.

His mind bending images are thwarting along with his early narratives. You know what it is all about and then it is lost to some triviality. But is that not the problem he is addressing?

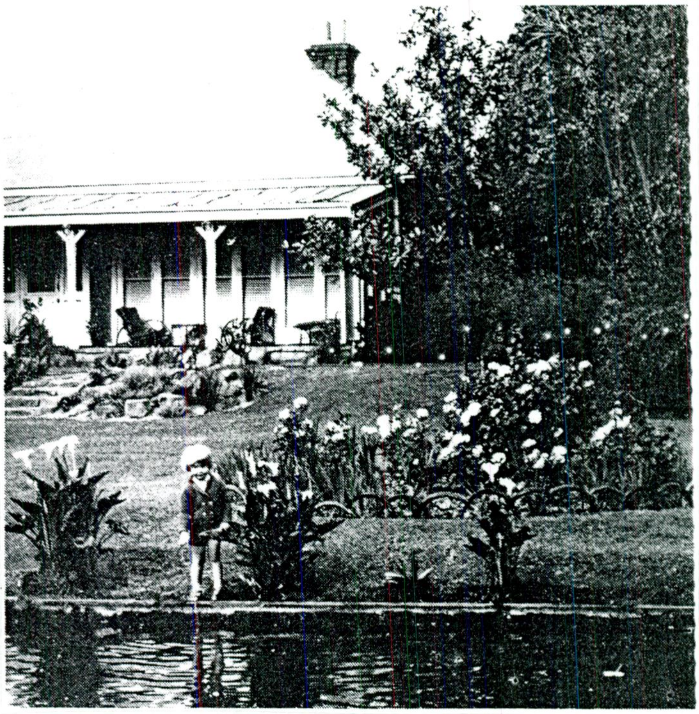


Fig. 22 Boyd Webb, *Eels*, 1970

Glencormac

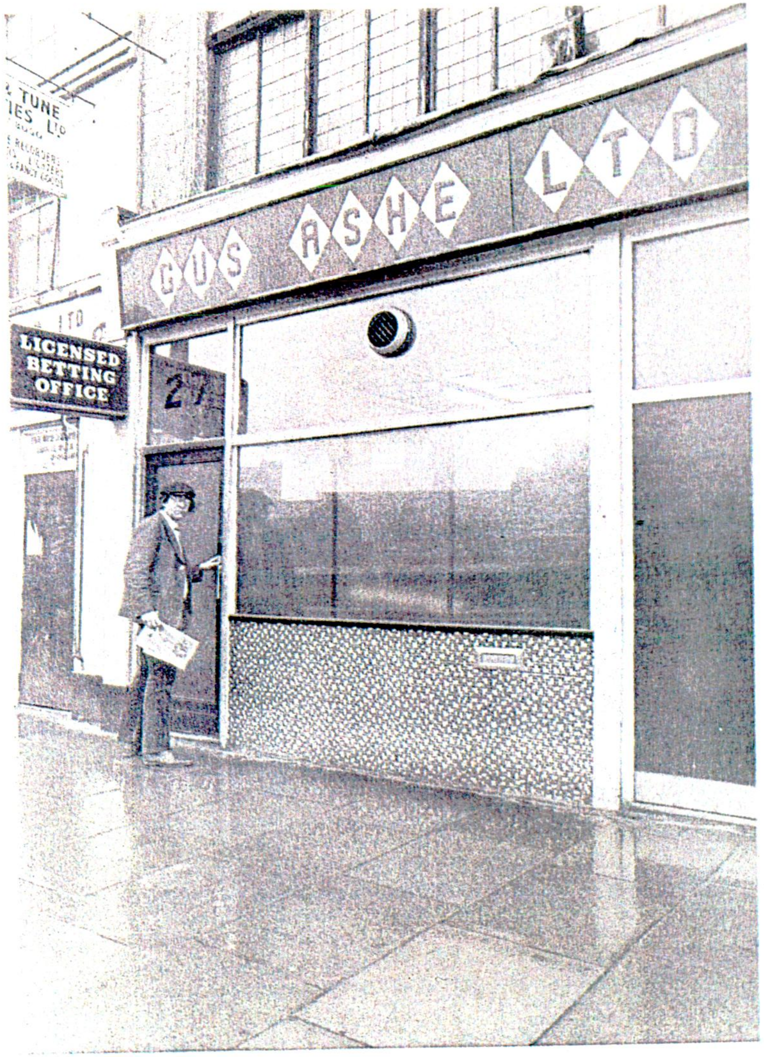
During the 1970's Webb engaged himself in the "Photo text sequence". In each work from this period the structure differs and the plots vary in length. At this time Webb was now living in London and studying at the Royal College of Art. Bewildered by the size and variety of London he spent most of his time cycling about noting locations for what became a series of portraits of British characters and customs. In *Herbert Groves* (See Fig. 23), two colour photographs taken by the artist in 1973, one an informal and non-specific image of a betting shop, the other image deploys a man with a mouthful of moss held open in a mock medical manner with what looks more like skewers than surgical implements. Lichen which Groves cultivates in his mouth, consists of fungus and algae living off one another. Groves must frequent betting shops in order to be able to malinger, and for the lichen therefore to thrive.

Is the story of Herbert Groves an excuse to link two unrelated elements together, or is the artist dislocating himself from activities familiar to urban living?

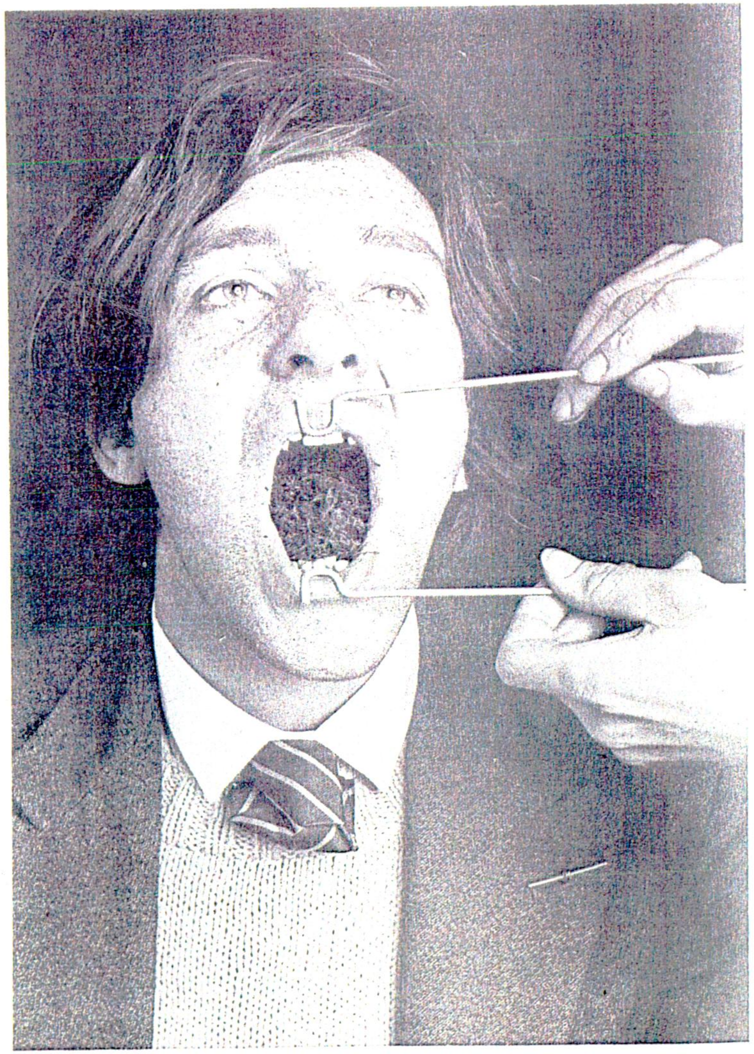
It is through these methods of linking words and images in ways which matched verbal and visual devices that the familiar Boyd Webb format took so long to perfect. From his short photo-texts grew the prevalence of arguments as plots and a concern with impossible situations such as marriages etc. One such piece involved a woman determined to revenge herself symbolically on her domineering husband by persuading him to arm wrestle her over the breakfast table, then cheating and forcing his clean shirt cuff down into a cereal bowl full of mud. This piece demanded a lengthy text, a picture of the actual competition, and a flashback photograph of her wading in the river to gather mud. (See Fig. 24)

Worms, a colour photograph made in 1977 could be called the prototype for the Boyd Webb style we are familiar with today. *Worms* carried a one word title and showed two men holding a tug of war in a closed room. (See Fig. 25) Above the centred knot in the rope, there is an inset image of two worms

Fig. 23 Boyd Webb, ***Herbert Groves***



Herbert Groves, an amateur lichenologist, has successfully developed and introduced a lichen (Sponsio Grovesiaceae) to the moist lining of his throat in order to become eligible for disability compensation. A keen punter he now studies form in earnest, investing sometimes to advantage, sometimes not.



Through skilful husbandry the lichen Sponsio Grovesiaceae has adapted successfully to the inclement environment of the human throat. Nutrients essential for this lichen's survival are filtered from the humid fug of despair, jubilation and nervous human effluvium peculiar to betting shops.

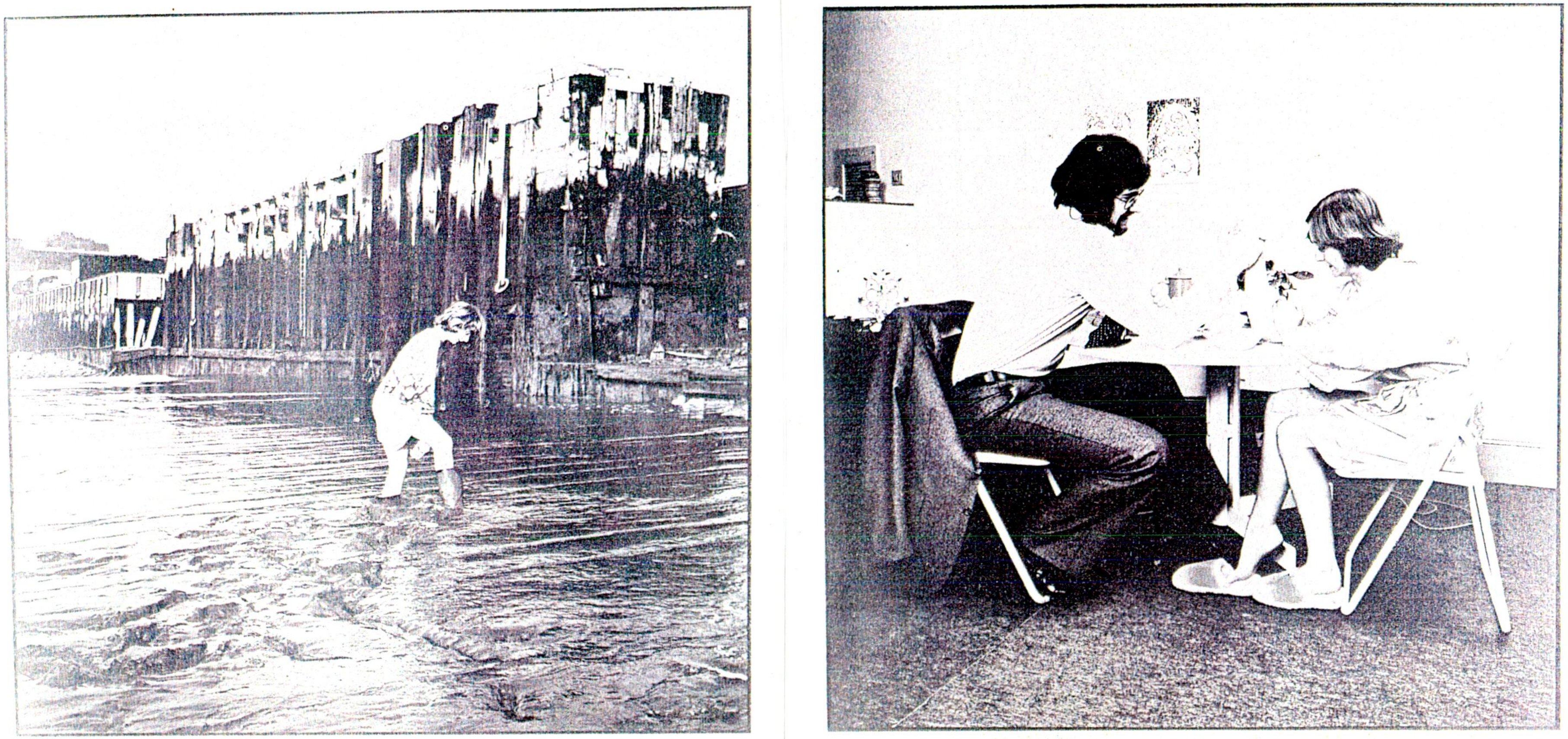


Fig. 24 Boyd Webb, *Cornflakes*

For all his success John still behaves like a brute towards me. He lets no opportunity of baiting me pass – at times I have been close to leaving him. However, recently I took matters into my own hands. With a certain amount of difficulty I obtained a quantity of mud. I put this into my cereal bowl – disguising it with a layer of cornflakes. At breakfast I behaved in such a way as to bring out the very worst in him, this culminated as I planned, in a trial of strength. When I could see the glint of victory in his eye I removed my slipper and gently prodded him in the groin. At this little surprise he relaxed his grip and it was not difficult for me to force his hand, and that immaculate cuff, over and down into my bowl of cornflakes.

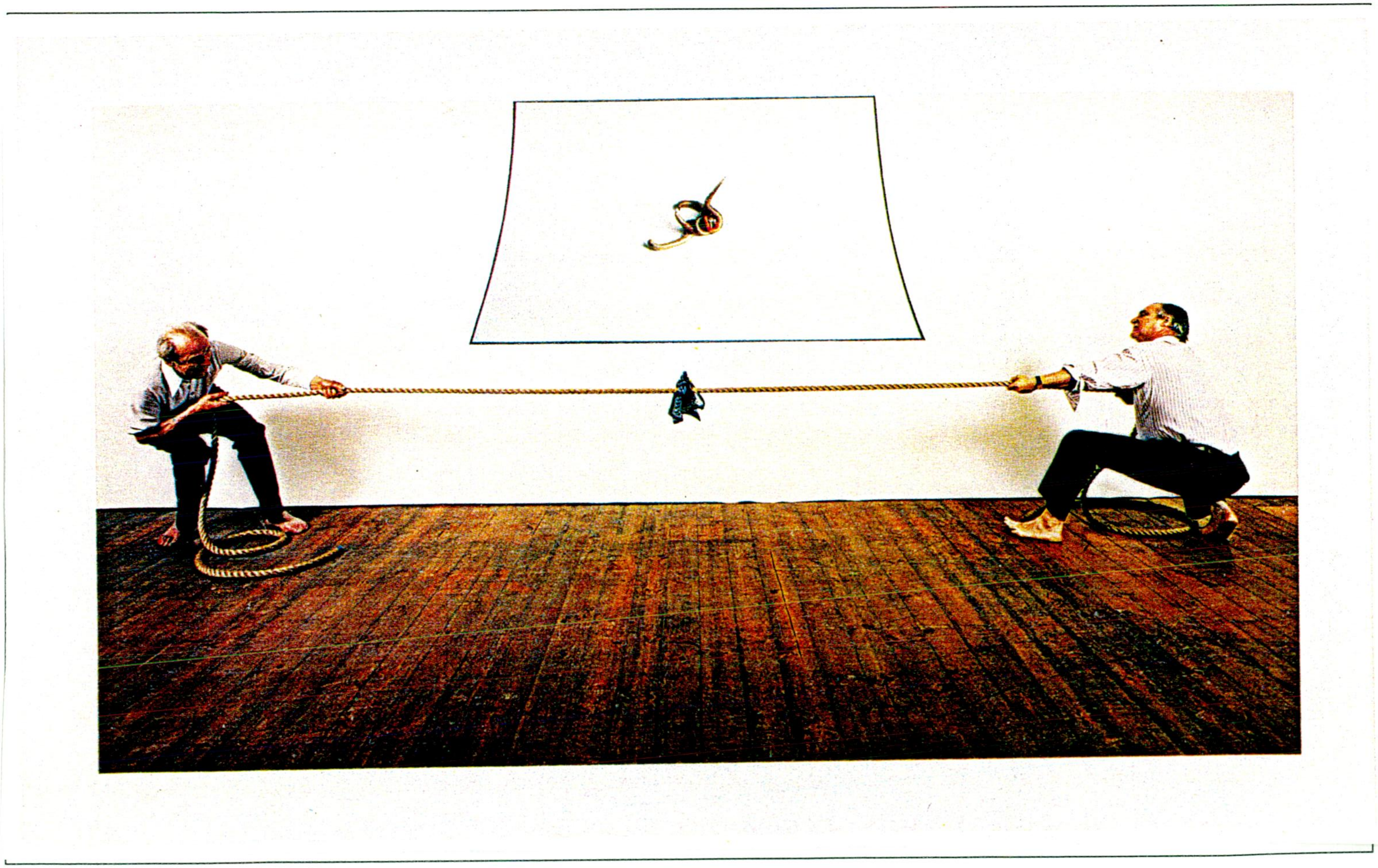


Fig. 25 Boyd Webb, ***Worms*****, 1977**

knotted together like a pair of bent nails. Everything in the image seems simultaneously locked in combat transcending immediate issues. There is no shortage of logic in Webb's work but rather a surplus, applied in ways contorted to correct our vision of the world.

Webb is a manipulator of gravity, he enters another space just like Alice in Lewis Carroll's book went into a space which had nothing to do with universal gravity and geometry. In another narrative from the 1970's Webb freezes or holds time to a standstill with his image of a woman and a pram at a railway track.

Mrs. Barnes has a problem. (See Fig. 26) She wants to be everywhere at the one time yet cannot calculate the means to get there, or rather, the simplest means. To get to the other side of the track she will attempt to push her baby in the pram as if she were still pushing it along a pathway. The pram functions along a pathway yet does not across a railway track. Does Mrs. Barnes invent a new pram to cross the railway tracks or does she conform to not crossing to the other side like everyone else? Or is this what Webb is trying to convey at all in this short narrative?

Most individuals could relate to the scenario of Mrs. Barnes to some extent in real life. As Webb has witnessed during his first experiences of London. Alongside settled domestic types vagrants gamble in empty lots, a woman drops her baby while concerned with her own problems. What are man's priorities? Is a world at war not as curious as Mrs. Barnes pushing her way across obstacles which physically will not let her pass?

One classic case of human helplessness and long endured suffering was in a video directed by Philip Haas and designed by Webb himself in 1984. In one scene a man wearing only an orange shirt tucked into his white underpants needs to light a cigarette but finds this impossible because he is standing on a revolving dais. In desperation he tries bending forward to reach two lighted

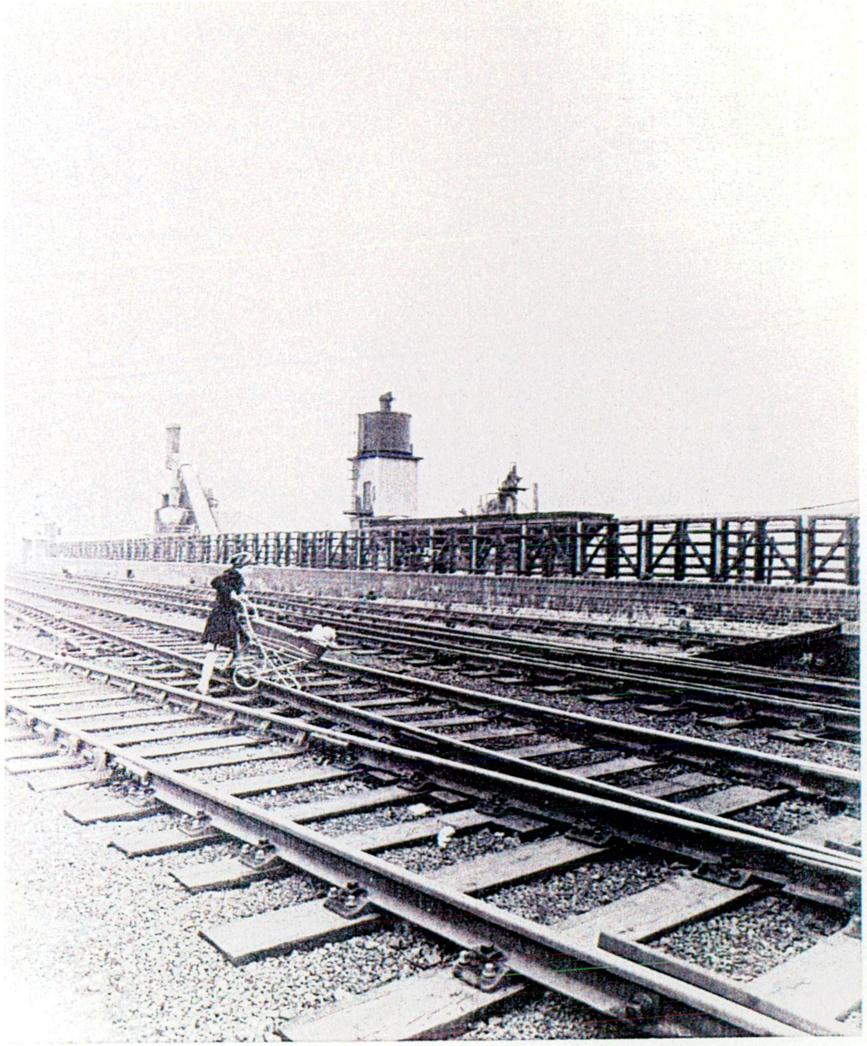
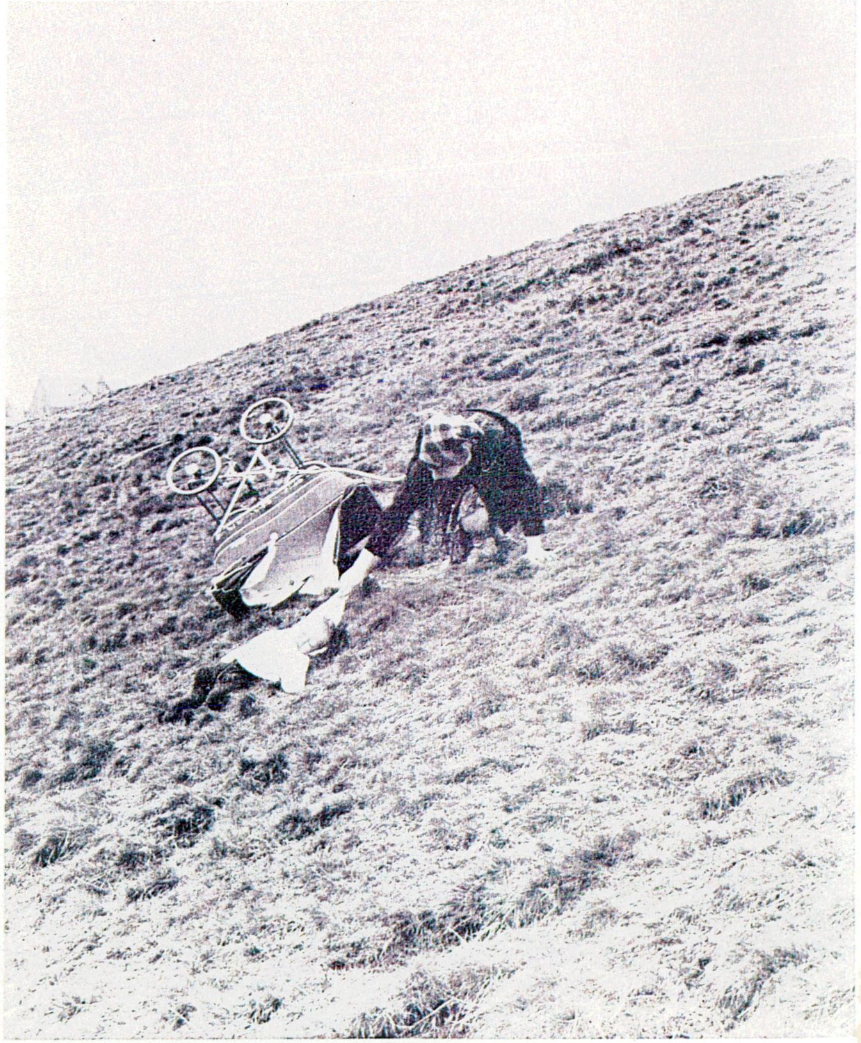


Fig. 26 Boyd Webb, *Mrs. Barnes*



Mrs Barnes' instinctive re-orientation is unequal to her desire for self-advancement.

tapers, but these are mounted on two remote control tanks which run around in circles between and around his legs. The flames from the candles pass so closely to his white underpants that they leave a black trail of smoke. The man continues to undergo an eternity of punishment, torn between two choices - lighting a cigarette and burning his private parts. His only option is to carry on.

Webb feels that by man making rules he is restricting himself in one way or another. It is frustrating to watch the cigarette scene from the video, you develop a feeling of regret and a new vision for all the mistakes ever made by man throughout his existence, if he had just gone about it another way.

Surrealism used what could be recognised as the work of children, madmen and primitives to express the complete fusion of the mind and world, usually missing in the cultivated mind. André Breton said, "These madmen are honest to a fault and their naiveté has no peer but my own." (Phillips, p. 62)

Tableaux is where Webb moved next from the narrative type images. He begins to use single images and text has shrunk to the use of solid titles. His preoccupation remains of a moral issue.

Webb calls his collection "A series of lame but colourful cartoons, combining the concerns of the Victorian genre painter and the technique of the mail order catalogue photographer." (Tableaux, p.1)

Part of the development of Webb's now mature style lay in taking the limitations imposed on him and making them into the conventions of his art. A certain kind of moral uprightness is how he has described his approach. This honesty protrudes from Webb through his images, and the viewer is therefore never mislead. His fantastic combinations of things removed from their usual frames of reference both everyday and fictional, appear to belong to an order of things logical and coherent.

> **Carpet and lino may skilfully imitate the features of landscape and ocean at the same time as they are bound clearly by the laws that determine the disposition of cloth and rubberised material. (Morgan, p. 103)**

From the late 1970's onwards (and more particularly from 1983 where they have retained a distinctive format) his sets have evolved to convey different theatrical spaces in which he is playing in. There are three distinct phases in his work each occupying roughly three years of practice: Earth, outer space and inner space.

In the first instance *Nemesis* and *Autostrafe* (See Fig. 20/21) make the reference to the fate of man's world \ Earth clear, with images of some kind of force or gods who are in total control of the fate that occurs on the surface above ground.

Around 1985 Webb moved into outer space. In *Trophy* photographed in 1985, (See Fig. 27) we see a man poised, almost hovering in outer space and throwing globes at a coconut shy on a distant planet. What is the function of this man's endeavours? Why is he throwing our precious world at a coconut, and is the prize if he hits it, the coconut itself? The reading of this piece of work is quite straightforward, Webb has not even wasted any time in constructing these globes, he has just simply gone to his local globe store and purchased them. For me this signifies the urgency of these images. It is up to us the audience to decide on the aspect or rather to specify the centre of this ripple from which all the earth's and mankind's problems have arose. Webb is not a god and doesn't trick us into believing so. In this piece and those of this time (1985) his constructions are similar to *Nemesis* except his cosmos is a black curtain splashed with white paint and the distant planet: foam.

From the late 1980's Webb's imagery has changed again. His human "actors" have all disappeared and are replaced by rubber or plastic animals. His characters are still hovering, but now rather than the lack of gravity making them float, the land of fiction has uprooted these animals and they are left floating on

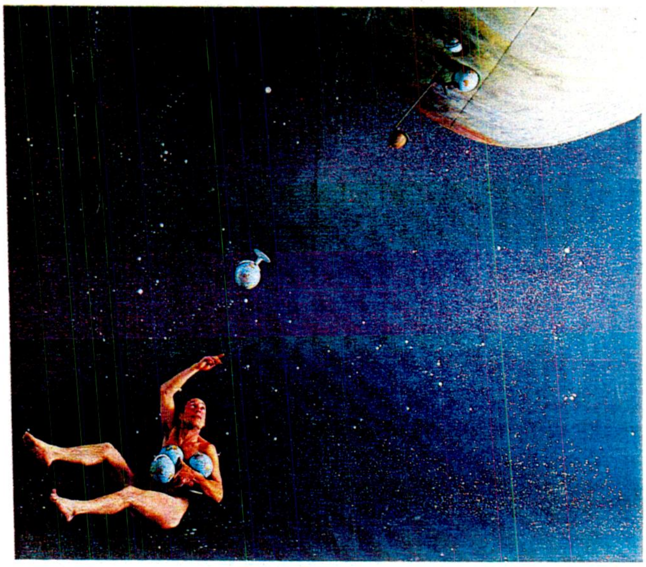


Fig. 27 Boyd Webb, *Trophy*, 1985

Glencormac

an uncertain terrain, at first seeming utopian in nature and then it is realised that this land is bland due to it being totally defoliated and sucked of its sap, so to speak. In *Chattels* 1989 (See Fig. 28) a giraffe has managed to balance a semi-deflated globe across a never ending infinity of water. Similar to before with the candle scenario in *Scenes and Songs* the frustration begins to build again as one wonders where this animal is coming from, and heading to? What is so important about this earth anyway that he is carrying? In these recent pieces we are forced to become participants in the scenario, although it does not seems to be part of us.

In his most recent work, Webb has endeavoured to present the human on a microcosmic scale. Plastecine predominates these constructs and the artist has now begun to engage himself in the physical activity of "making" the subjects or rather objects in his set-ups. Two pieces, *Entomb* and *Parole* (both 1993) (See Figs. 29/30) created a direct confrontation in the battle of the sexes. *Entomb,* where red plastecine vulvas compete with slithering spermatozoa the image suggests unsafe sex and dominance but on viewing *Parole* where the vulvas have encircled the spermatozoa “like American Indians around a wagon train” (Hilty Catalogue 1994, p. 11) the image of a dying race of spermatozoa brings thoughts of male inferiority into mind. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that similar to the Surrealists Webb has travelled too far into the inner states of consciousness and has become an effigy of those artists who minimised and perfected their technique beyond any recognition of genuine truth. His opinion is that man has reached a point where he can fiddle with his own production and almost play god. But his depiction of this is too complex, he has begun playing games and has codified his language beyond recognition.

Maybe the artist has made a decision to stick to a vernacular only to be read within his artistic circles.

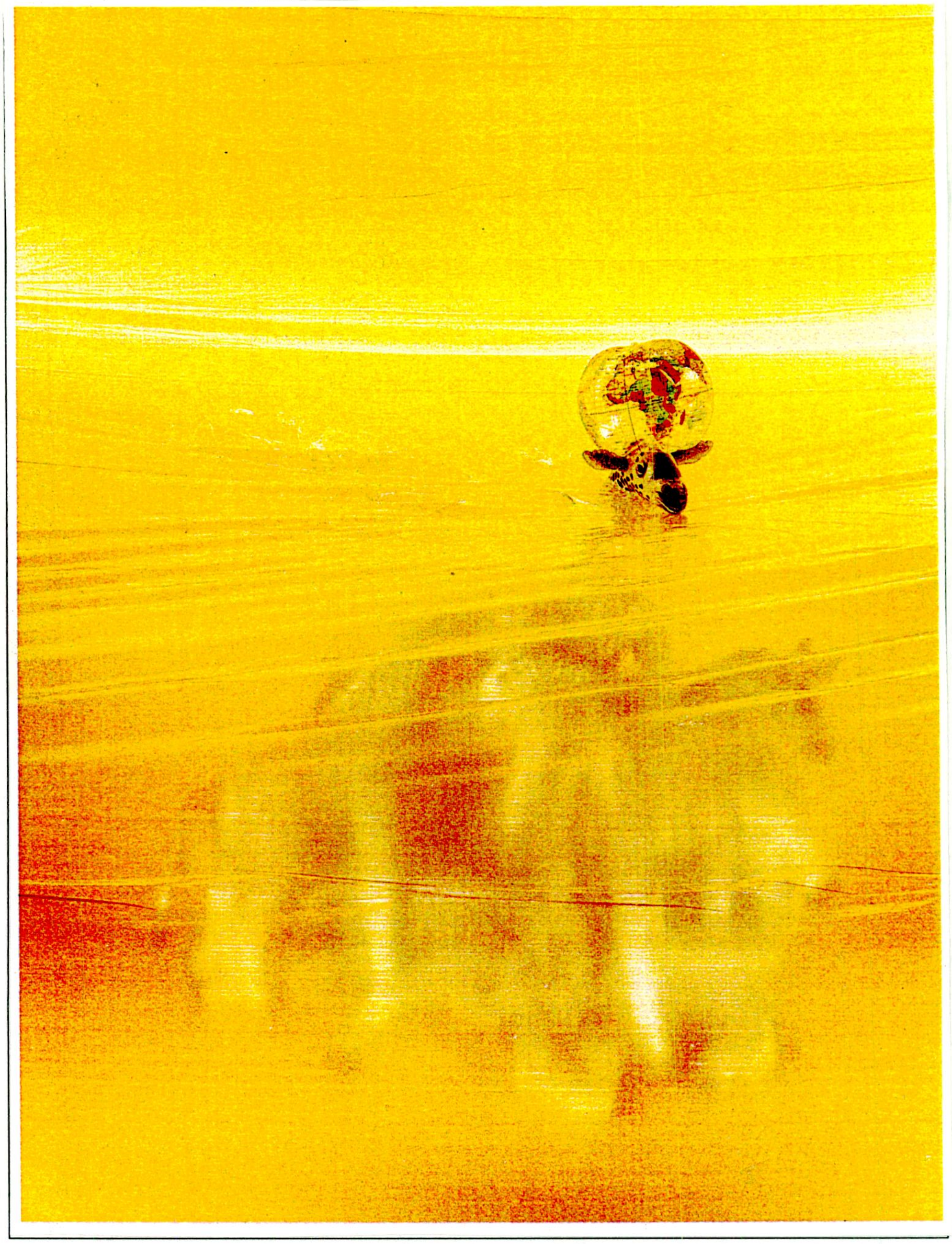


Fig. 28 Boyd Webb, *Chattels*, 1989

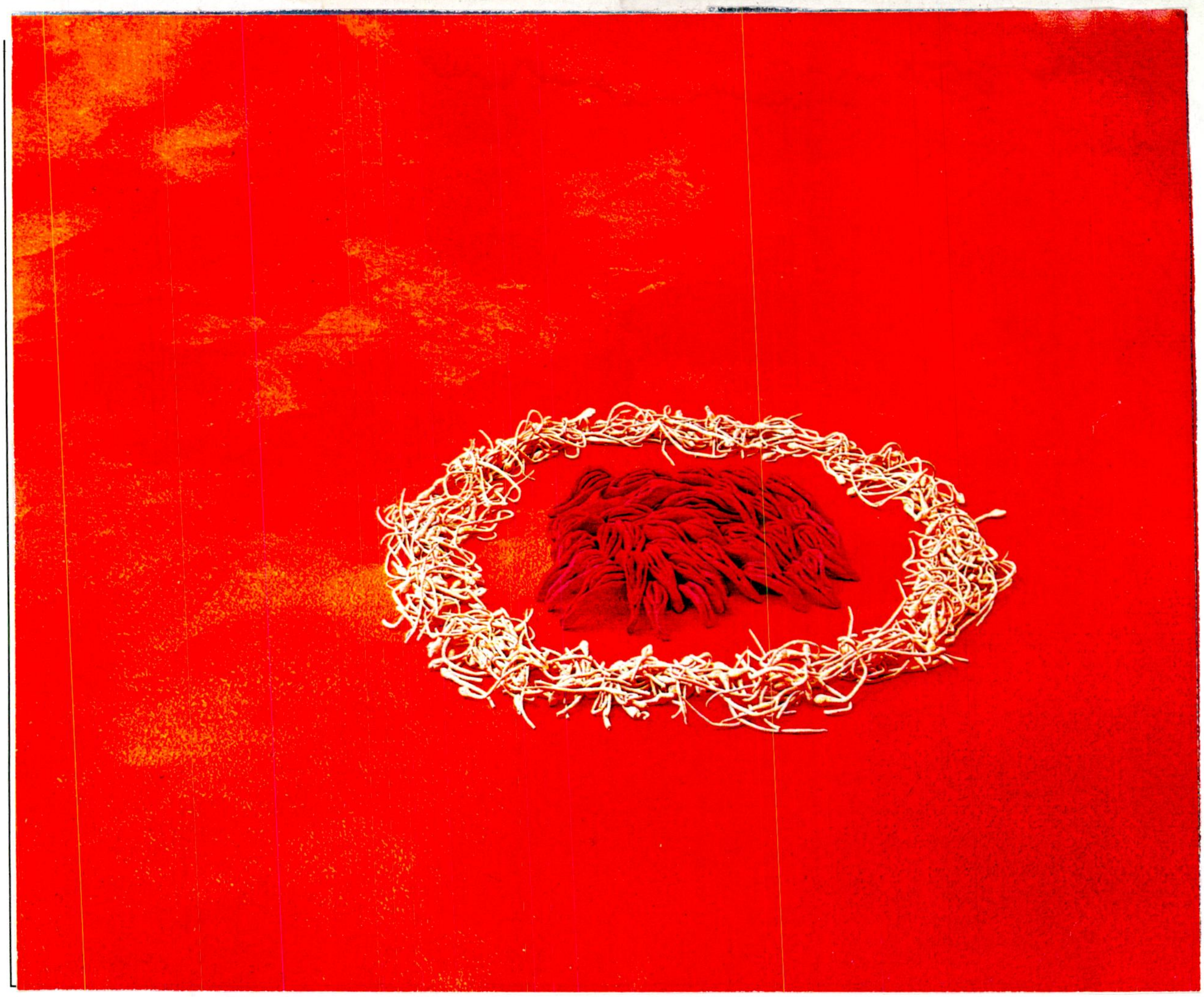
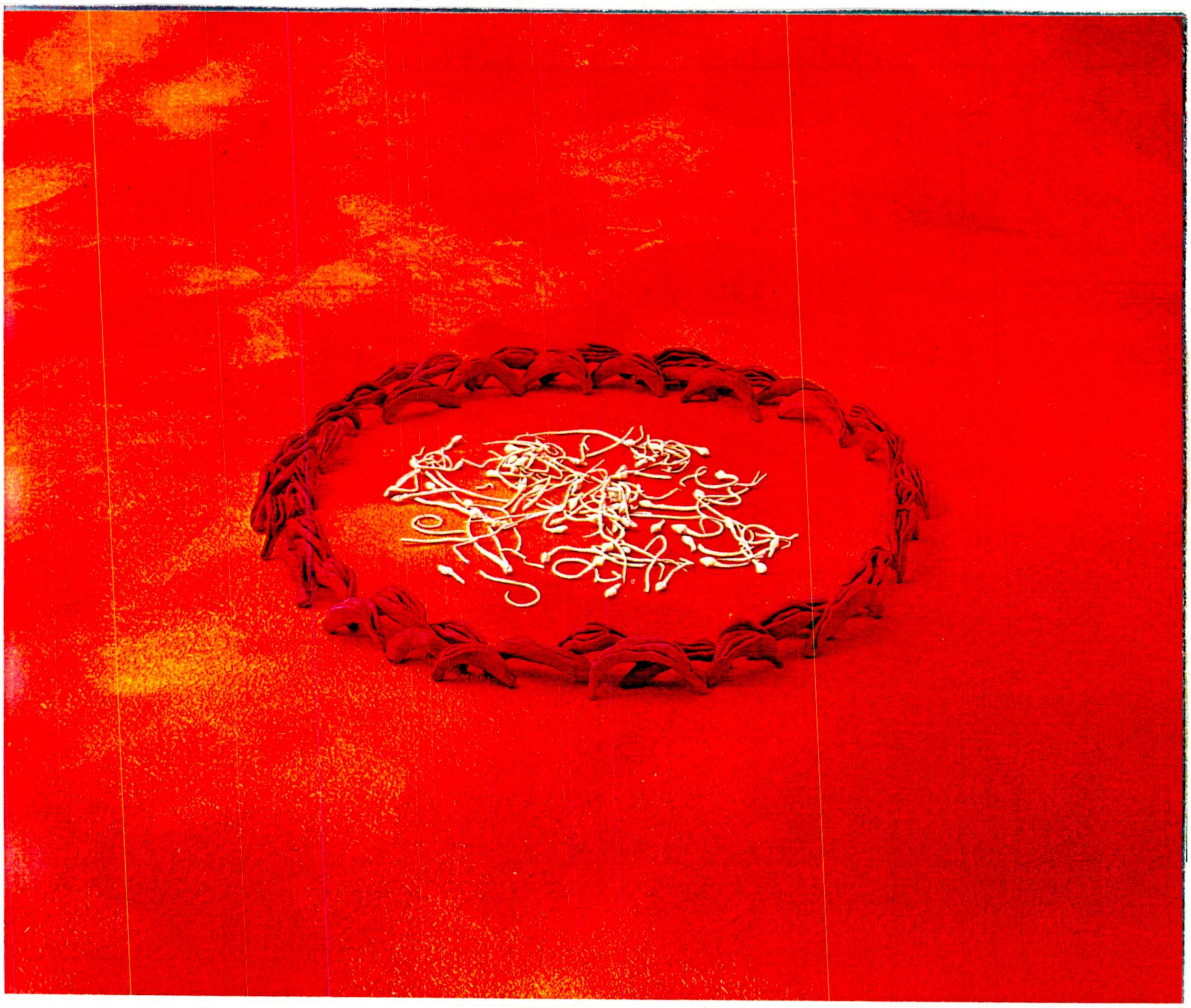


Fig. 29 Boyd Webb, *Entomb*, 1993

Fig. 30 Boyd Webb, *Parole*, 1993



CONCLUSION

To conclude; I have discussed the inception of the avant-garde at the beginning of this century, where artists reformed their roles within modernity and struggled against the fixed orthodoxies of the Art Academy, in order to interpret, comment on and shape the world within which they existed. This was persued through artistic, social and political means.

Artists since then have attempted to break distinctions between the fine and applied arts and, within fine art, to unleash photography as a valid art medium in which to work.

The artists I have discussed all share the common aim of calling all reality into question in an attempt to deprogramme artistic values.

The modernist view of the avant-garde as motivated by a drive for originality was not altogether wrong, but the fact that the avant-garde developed a programme of change within art, for whatever reason, is of more importance.

The fact is that Webb, along with Trangmar, Skoglund and the avant-garde groupings which went before them at the first half of this century, have all addressed valid issues and aimed at creating the world anew. But the strategies undertaken by these artists remain questionable. The images themselves are-loaded with meaning yet the decision on the part of these artists to exhibit in gallery spaces makes one wonder if they are addressing the right audience, or whether that audience is ready for the prescription of a lens in order to unburden them of their 'myopia'.

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