NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
FINE ART, PAINTING

DISCUSSING THE PRESENT CONDITIONS FOR
FIGURATIVE PAINTING IN RELATION
TO LUCIEN FREUD, DAVID SALLE
AND SIGMAR POLKE

BY

PATRICK HORAN

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY
OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

BA, FINE ART
1998

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES

DISCUSSING THE PRESENT CONDITIONS FOR FIGURATIVE PAINTING IN RELATION TO LUCIEN FREUD, DAVID SALLE AND SIGMAR POLKE

INTRODUCTION

The nineteen eighties marked a period when the commercial emphasis of the art market was focused on contemporary figurative painting. Labelled Neo-Expressionism, the use of figuration and traditional expressionist devices served as a basis for a painting practice through the work of artists such as Eric Fischl, David Salle, Philip Guston and Larry Rivers in America, Sandro Chia and Clemente in Italy, Anslem Kiefer, George Baesilitz and Sigmar Polke in Germany and David Hockney, Ron Kitaj and Lucien Freud in Britain. The critical discussions of this trend came from a range of positions in relation to questions as to the critical value of painting. They explicitly and implicitly refer to the critical implications of painting such as its relation to modernism and the contended formal values it implies, the critical repercussions of its commodity status and its relation to the alternative range of art practices and mediums. In Chapter One an elaboration of the positions maintained by a selection of writers will serve to establish a point of reference that will inform a subsequent examination of the painters Lucien Freud, Sigmar Polke and David Salle in Chapter Two. This will expose the critical connotations of the identified trend in figuration. It will also construct the framework for an overall interpretation of the range of painters and the critical conditions they worked within, in the nineteen eighties. Subsequently this model can operate as a point of reference for a period when the identity of painting was so ill-defined and confused by its inherent connotations that its value as a critical medium was consistently in question. Consequently indepth investigations and defensive mechanisms can be seen as related productive responses that stabilized the identity of a trend of painting. Maintaining a figurative practice raised such problematic issues that resolution could only be achieved through the critical writing and practice that defined a framework to continue or appropriate figuration without reworking its problematic associations. It is the argument of this thesis that such a framework exists across a range of critics and artists work in the eighties which is the source of the exemplary positions discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two.

CHAPTER 1
AN ELABORATION OF CRITICAL POSITIONS IN RELATION TO FIGURATIVE PAINTING IN THE 1980'S

A range of critical discussions has been produced in relation to painting in the nineteen eighties. The following critics maintain exemplary positions in relation to figurative painting. Norman Rosenthal maintains a traditional position based on modernist values of painting. Yve Alain Bois and Thomas Lawson base their criticism on their understanding that the traditional conditions of modernism were not applicable in the nineteen eighties and expand on their reasoning. Also Craig Owens and Donald Kuspit adopt a psychoanalytic critique of aspects of figurative painting in the nineteen eighties. Establishing and cross referencing these positions will inform a critical framework to interpret figurative painting and facilitate a comprehensive understanding.

Norman Rosenthal discusses the chronological development of modernist figurative expressionism up to and including the Neo-Expressionists, in the essay *"Questions to a broken mirror"*. He maintains that all of the different styles of representing reality are attempts to empathise with the spectator on various levels and sees the agenda of the early modernist artist as one that "was meant to destabilise held assumptions about both art and living" (Rosenthal 1997, p.50). This suggests that there is a constant or pure value within the paintings for the spectator to empathise with, which is a problematic assertion. It seems that he dismisses or passes over the context and theory behind given styles which might otherwise explain their technical qualities. Style or distortion, which he sees as the vehicle for modernist art is understood in a limited and unnecessarily definitive way. Presented as equivalents of reality to suit the mood of the spectator or as attempts to destabalise held assumptions, modernist art appears to have a value of commentary whose mode of progress is to compete with itself. Rather it could be seen as a field of study that investigates and attempts to engage with reality, within the limitations of the medium, whilst maintaining a self referential discourse. It is the former evaluation however that Rosenthal is suggesting and it follows that this view would inform his attitude to contemporary painting.

Also he identifies a model of the progression of art practice as marked at various historical phases by a masterpiece. This represents a problem in itself as the idea of a masterpiece can not be uncritically and simply accepted as it represents an extreme value judgement made with problematic or ill defined criteria. This is further complicated by the consequent construction of hierarchies of relative merit.

With the masterpiece imposing itself at key moments and using its shock (distortion) value to demonstrate the defining mentality of the period, he then begins to take into account the various social changes that occurred to divide modernism from contemporary circumstances. He questions the validity of the masterpiece not on its own terms but in this context of mass communication. He asks if the masterpiece can be an adequate metaphor for catastrophe when the mass media can portray it much more accurately. Consequently Rosenthal's position favours the early twentieth century use of painting since he places the activity in the historical context of representing our cultural memory. The alienated images, represented as various distortions, are primary sources of information that cannot be communicated the same way by any other medium. Here is where Rosenthal places value in painting.

In relation to Rosenthal, Yve Alain Bois' position differs in that he attempts to define an end to modernism in *"Painting the task of mourning"*. This necessitates that the conditions of modernist painting have to be re-evaluated. Discussing contemporary painting, Bois suggests firstly that the consequent revivals of modernist strategy are "elaborate mechanisms of defence" (Bois 1986, p.329) against an end to modernism and are getting in the way of a new game. This would include a wide range of painting from Neo-Expressionism to the use of abstraction made without acknowledging its disrupted conditions. It follows therefore that a responsible contemporary painting must deal with the implications of its relationship with modernism to make it clear that the principles of modernism are not merely extended and manipulated to fit into contemporary circumstances. Bois thus identifies a problem when looking at contemporary painting; if the modernist agenda is being extended and wrongly applied or if the history is being treated in such a way as to be relevant within a contemporary discourse.

In contrast to both Norman Rosenthal's and Yve Alain Bois' independent perceptions of painting after modernism, Thomas Lawson in *"Last Exit Painting"* places emphasis on the relevance of social circumstances in relation to the interpretation of painting. Seeing modernist art practice's primary value as taking a stance against dominant culture, he traces its progress and efficiency giving rise to its downfall. Where it reacted more and more to the present and "the presence of the artist" (Lawson 1981, p.81) and distanced itself from its history. In formal terms painting became repetitious and unaware of its social position to the point that it isolated itself from the other art practices of the time. Although this is a narrow account of the degeneration of modernist painting it clearly highlights the importance of the art practice's relationship both with its history and social position.

6

Presenting the example of the Neo-Expressionists, Lawson describes their processes as mannerisms of modernist painting which express a nostalgia for the past as opposed to a position in relation to the past. He describes how appropriation is not used as a disruptive agent but as a resource for "unlimited growth"(Lawson 1981 p.85). Their ambivalence towards their choice of appropriated subjects and how they are represented produces contradictions which Lawson perceives as a strategy to avoid criticism. By not adapting a contemplated relationship with the resources of modernist art and compensating for the contemporary responsibilities of painting, like its institutional status, the validity of the Neo-Expressionists' output is significantly degenerated despite its formal value.

In *"Toward another Laocoon or the Snake Pit"*. Lawson makes a comparison between the practice of the avant garde and the Neo-Expressionists. He refers to the history of the avant-garde, describing it as little more than "passive resistance" (Lawson, 1985 p.99) against the dominant capitalist culture. He identifies a pattern where the avant-garde questions the commodity status of the art object by introducing elements from alien cultures and traces the avant-garde as far as the Abstract Expressionists where the dominant art practice of painting was turned against itself by the literal implications of the medium. It is here, Lawson proposes, that the breakdown of modernism began, where "a new order became imperative; one in which all previous avant-garde values were reversed". He proposes that Pop represented the avant-garde trying to reinvent itself as a subculture but was as much based on the commodity value of the art object as the modernist art before it. He also suggests that minimalism and conceptualism represented modernist art attempting to reinvent themselves, with the observation that they were highly dependant on the art institution.

It can be seen that there is a certain amount of ambiguity surrounding the question of whether an art practice is reusing modernist principles or extending them. Lawson suggests that the contemporary artist must account for their position in the contemporary capitalist society, though he is unable to suggest how the artist can do this, he does point out where it has not been achieved. An example is implied to be that of the Neo-Expressionists which he sees as successful in drawing attention to the contradiction of art in the twentieth century. He identifies their formal value as a packaged presentation of appropriated styles whose contradictory arrangement negates their original values, and sees this as a conscious lack of responsibility for the implications of the elements used. Explicitly depending on the institution for support he sees the Neo-Expressionists directly responding to the capitalist society as it did in the mid-nineteenth century i.e. as a culture that exists within the apparatus

7

of commercial entertainment and tourism. It is painting such as this that would invalidate the status of the medium as useful in its own right in the context of contemporary art.

A common thread running through the perspectives of Rosenthal, Bois and Lawson is that none of them maintain that the critical value of painting had run its course. Lawson and Bois establish a necessity for the re-evaluation of the critical conditions for painting that implies a framework that can be either ignored or engaged with. Rosenthal's perspective retains problematic traditional values such as the production of master pieces and a pure emphatic value for expressionism. This represents a significant critical divide. To elaborate; Lawson suggests that the contradiction implied by the use of figuration and on the same plane as abstraction is made to avoid criticism. The complexity of interaction between these devices are seen by Lawson as degenerating into arbitrary appropriation and presentation. Alternatively Craig Owens position *"Honour, Power and the Love of Women"'*, concerns the identification of underlying characteristics of figurative painting such as male power and domination. What he terms "anti-modernism" is described as the "loss of the capacity for negation" (Owens 1983, p.62) resulting from an inappropriate extension of the perceived modernist attributes of the masculine desire to be a hero. Also what makes European painting parodic or critically active for Donald Kuspit is the use of modernist styles in relation to its orientation towards memory, thus operating as a retrospective critique. However this notion coincides with Rosenthal's interpretation of modernist styles as emphatically presenting the cultural consciousness of the period. One could say that adapting the means of appropriating styles to signal "the helplessness of the individual" (Kuspit 1995, p.51) is a presentation of the artists perception of cultural consciousness.

These points suggest a possible framework of interpretation of neo-expressionism. Each of them questions identified values associated with a range of painters, and when these questions are applied to specific examples from the range of practices a response can be constructed that can determine the critical conditions for painting. However, this is a thoroughly contested arena that does not give rise to any stable concensous. Each of the writers represent exemplary positions that refer to problematic implications of the Neo-Expressionist practice but can be regarded cumulatively as an indication of the critical conditions for painting, to be re-evaluated. By examining comparisons between each position a framework can be constructed that can underpin a figurative painting practice. A key factor that all of the critical positions refer to is the combined use of figurative and abstract devices; the historical values they represent and the consequent values of their combined presentation.

8

This device is perceived as parodic by Taylor i.e. knowingly using or presenting modernist devices in a critical framework. Craig Owens understands the use of these devices as invalid and contradictory to the point of being anti-modern; and Kuspit sees them as a political gesture. Each of these points can be noted in the juxtaposition of styles as attempts to incorporate figuration and abstraction on the same plane in the work of Lucien Freud, David Salle and Sigmar Polke.

With reference to Donald Kuspit's "European Sensibility Today", one can identify a "situation-bound emotional approach that makes for a certain unconscious communality among European artists", (Kuspit 1990, p.117) for example the Germans and Italians who place emotional significance on the surface of the painting. Since the conceptually derived tradition of American artists like Salle, Fischl and Rivers or the romantically derived tradition of British artists like Kitaj, Hockney or Freud place no such emotional significance on the surface, the values they do associate with the surface must have meaning of equal significance. In an attempt to evaluate this significance an examination of the three practices of Freud, Salle and Polke will be made. Chosen as exemplary variations of the Neo-Expressionist theme, a comparison and contrast of their practices will help to clarify the key critical issues that they engage with whilst compensating for the difference in national and historical contexts that each artist represents. Lucien Freud is taken to represent a British figurative tradition derived from Romanticism. He makes studious naturalistic paintings of naked figures with a formal repertoire of expressionist devices that he uses to refer to an essential theme of mortality. Sigmar Polke is chosen to represent a European tradition especially derived from German expressionism that places value in the arena of memory and historical identity. Within this context, examples of expressionism and representation make subjective quotations from history or make reference to history in relation to Polke's perspective. David Salle is an American artist whose practice derives from conceptualism. He explicitly appropriates images from a variety of cultural media and conceptually presents them in co- relation through his figurative representations in the medium of paint. Each of these artists make figuration a central aspect of their practice, they also incorporate devices of modernist expressionism within these paintings and engage the problematic associations in relation to their individual stances. A comparison and contrast across this range of practices will help to excavate the meaning associated with this common use of figuration and expressionism that will, in turn, clarify the conditions of figurative painting during the nineteen eighties.

9

CHAPTER 2
LUCIEN FREUD, DAVID SALLE AND
SIGMAR POLKE:
A REVIEW OF PRACTICES IN RESPECT OF
FIGURATIVE PAINTING IN THE 1980'S

Lucien Freud consistently paints the human figure within a limited typlogy of space. The significance of this space, suggesting an artists' studio, with basic elements such as chairs and beds, or sometimes without, and only bare floorboards or white sheets; is that the naked figure is presented within one of the few plausible environments that nudity and contrived posture can be represented without being explicitly allegorical. This refined framework for the construction of space is comparable to an equally refined representation of time, with the consistency of paint representing a solidity and presence (within a given and lapsed time period) and the time consuming detail of tonal values and form representing real time for the artist and model. This maintenance of time is played upon through the choice of pose, which may be strenuous or relaxed for the model. The strenuous extreme creates a tension between the model and artist (which is subsequently evident in the painting), where as the relaxed extreme represents a distance between the artist and model in which the artist is permitted to observe the figure though the model may be asleep or significantly distracted from any interaction with the artist. In between each of these extremes of tension and distance there is a variability of tolerance. The consequences of this refined set up is that the viewer of the painting is observing a representation of the model within a conditioned framework of time and space.

This provides Freud with a framework for a conceptual use of paint. His working method is to begin painting the figure against a flat background. Though sometimes these backgrounds have a similarily heavy consistency of paint applied as that of the figure they are significantly subordinated due to the lack of attention to colour, tone and form as compared to the figure. Since the elements represented in the compositions of Freud's body of work are few and constant (the model and environment) he can allocate a particular painting technique to signify each of them. (Plate 1, pg. 11) On the figure he combines a treatment of paint between the extremes of a raw application that connotes the animalistic sense of the figure and a finished application of the paint suggesting an alternative disciplined, domesticated or self conscious sense of the figure. Each of these operate within the overall dynamic of the painting of the figure and signify an engagement with an implicit polarity between binary traits such as primitive and evolved, masculine and feminine or wild

10
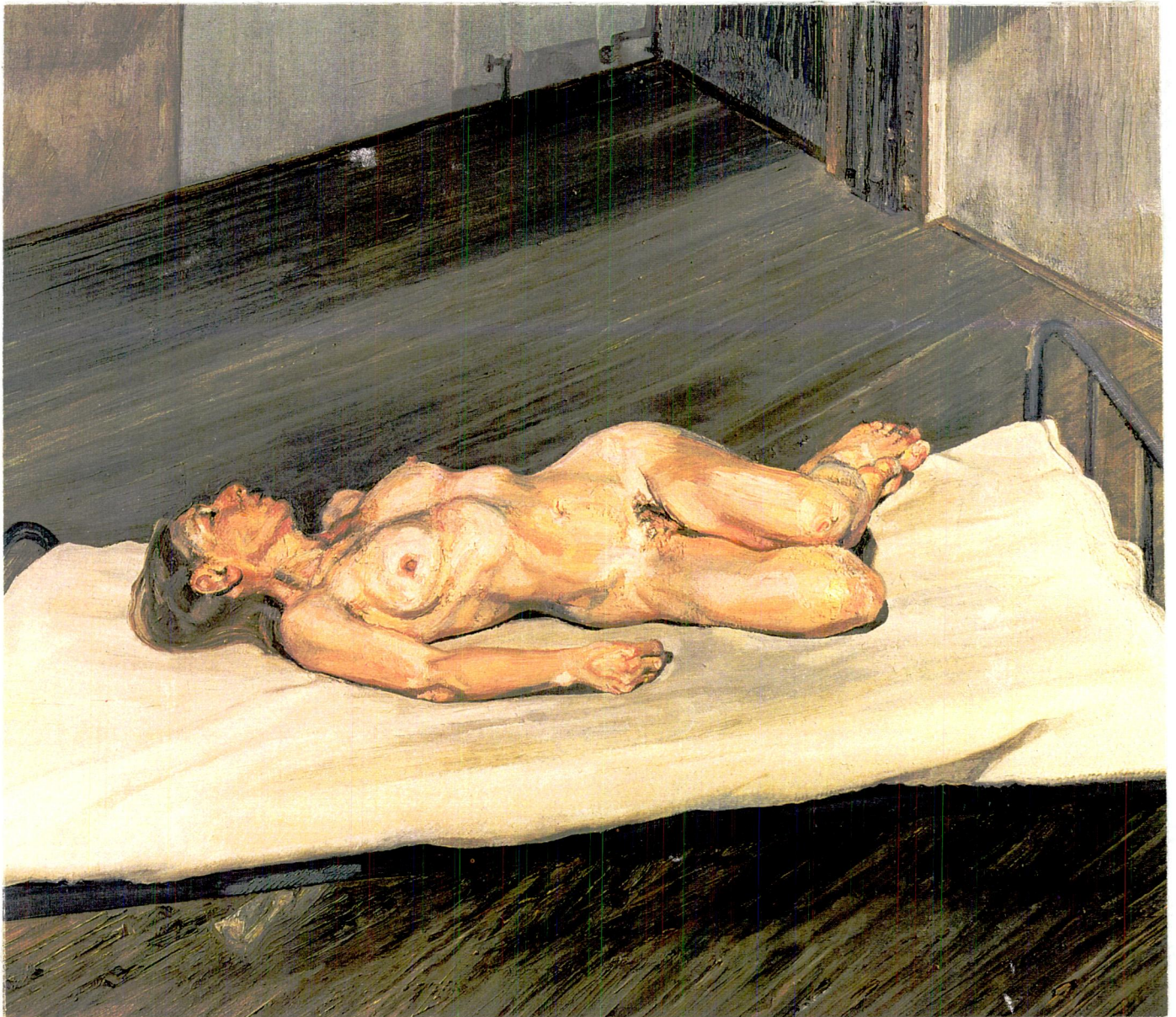
Plate 1. Naked Woman, Lucien Freud, 1988
Oil On Canvas

This painting demonstrates a typically refined
composition of elements that facilitates
a framework for observation and depiction.
Also it depicts the distinction in the application
of the paint on the background in relation
to the woman.

and domesticated. It could therefore be suggested that Freud uses the inherent implications of these particular applications of paint as conceptual models. These implications however are only inherent within the semantic system that defines them ie modernist painting. So although the applications are conceptual models the meaning produced by them is allegorical. The allegory referred to is historically bound to perceived values of painting, since these values are being investigated or revised by Freud, it is not ill- conceived of him to use them in a contemporary context. Part of the reason why these modernist values were disregarded is because it was demonstrated through the decline of abstract expressionism that paint in itself has no pure value and any values that are perceived are the result of meanings by external association. Freud is not an apologist for modernism nor does he offer a critical rejection of modernism, he maintains a traditional line of investigation and compensates for the discontinuity of modernism by constructing a conditioned framework to contextualise the figure ie given (constant) environment and props under the working conditions of a semi-mechanical interaction between artist and model within a given time period. He subsequently achieves a rationalised conceptual framework based on the processes that define his method of painting. This facilitates a style of expressionism that is not contradictory (in the sense of imposing modernist logic) because the conceptual application of the technique is made to refer to its allegorical properties in a suitably contrived painted environment.

The example represented by Freud is not as Rosenthal maintains an interpretation of cultural consciousness but rather it is an informed presentation of represented elements that constitutes a specific line of investigation. If this example of Freud is made equivilant to Kuspits model, it can be seen that European painting similarily represents modernist elements to critically engage with a culture perceived to be oriented towards memory, this European stance would be an equally plausible alternative to Rosenthal's assertion. However It would then be required of European painters to actively maintain a suitable framework for representation such as that constructed by Freud to facilitate their modernist expressionism.

Kuspit suggests that European painting represents a culmination of the products of its own past and the more recent American art. Its use of these appropriated historically bound techniques is noted to be directed towards, not a specific project such as Lucien Freuds but as an identification of the inconsistencies and relativity of a historically infrormed identity - " a political gesture in the face of social forces beyond their control". (Kuspit 1995 p.51) It can be seen as a repercussion of the end of modernism with its utopian trends that a re- affirmation of the past (as a rejection of utopianism) represents a reflexive definitively postmodern response. Kuspit

12

legitimises expressionist painting with the assumption that this European postmodernism corresponds with the American and British equivalents. However Brandon Taylor alternatively suggests that the result of the interaction of European, American and British sensibilities constitutes "national stereotyping within a framework of tradition". (Taylor 1995, p.50) This can in turn be related to Lawson's proposition that they are applying the logic of the avant-garde which is to incorporate elements of debased marginalised or alien cultures(in this case modernism) into modern art, to disrupt its commodity status by adapting "cycles of appropriation and reappropriation". (Lawson., 1985, p.99) In relation to this a figurative style emerged in artists such as Sigmar Polke, and David Salle whose use of mass-media imagery serves to engage the viewer with explicitly contemporary issues, though a problem arises in how integral these contemporary issues are in relation to the production and presentation of their paintings. Both Salle and Polke each use imagery derived from the mass media and high or low culture, but due to the differences between their intentions and application of this imagery a distinct contrast can be made. In an attempt to use this contrast to determine the critical conditions of figurative painting in the period of the early nineteen eighties; it is necessary to identify the common ground they occupy and their subsequent differences.

The most prominant common characteristic of Polke and Salle's work is the use of multiple meanings and unrelated genres. Taylor points to the subversion of modernism as a strategy facilitated by these devices. Salle's ambivalent appropriation of art images combined with mass produced, commercial imagery and pornographic representations of women, propose loaded implications to the status or value of painting. Treated in such a technically informal and formulaic manner, however, Taylor questions the critical value of his individual paintings. Polke exhibits this same tendency of subverting modernism though he relies more on the identity of the images he appropriates and sometimes works them into a loose narrative which makes it more accessibly ironic or parodic. Also, unlike Salle, he appropriates and presents images using a variety of definitive methods of production that indicates either a value imposed on the surface of the painting or a value maintained by the implications of the surface of the painting.

Both Salle and Polke can be identified as subverting or parodying modernism and the practice of painting. However the relevance of such a practice is limited to a context where the question of the mortality of painting was becoming a jaded subject. Without engaging in sufficient depth with specific issues relating to the subject being parodied the practice of irony becomes an empty sign representing a break with historically perceived values of art, but, describing no critical argument or alternative to support

13

it. As such its existence is reflexively modernist as opposed to postmodern. It is not certain if this is the case in Salle or Polke's work though the plausibility remains. When this technique of subverting modernism begins to seem ambivalent or unnecessarily obscure in either artists work it can be perceived to operate as a strategic crutch to support either Salle's mysogynistic meditations or Polkes Germanic post-War angst.

Discussing irony in relation to Sigmar Polke, Kevin Power proposes that it is the reverse of synthesis. Where synthesis is the cognitive processing of information to produce meaning (new information), it corresponds to the methods of art production that culminates with late modernist abstraction. Irony in relation to this responds to the frameworks of art production that imply meaning and questions their authority and validity. The use of such a strategy reflexivly deconstructs meaning and as such is a very insular and limited debate. Power maintains that Polke (though the same could apply to Salle) makes an accomplished use of this strategy. Where the modernists aspired to present a sense of dislocation that was investigated through representational devices they synthesised interpretations of a general perception, that by the logic of their production were singular points of view. Such specificity inevitably compromised any given sense of dislocation. Polke's use of irony, however, is proposed to facilitate an authentic sense of dislocation without being limited by the logic of production, where previous meanings produced by synthesis may be regarded as signs with a defined language, without their methods of synthesis asserting any authority. On the other hand Power points to the fact that although irony can facilitate an objective critique, it is limited in its own sense, in that irony retains its identity as a characteristic response. This restricts irony to the exposure of fallacies in painting such as the authority of the artist or the language, but resists potential engagement with the subject. With regards to Polke it is argued that his use of irony is a superficial (as opposed to in-depth) parody of high modernism and American Pop that points indirectly to the German viewpoint of post war Western culture, with which Polke's work is primarily involved with. Unlike Polke, Salle does not have such a personal agenda and his range of appropriated subjects is much broader, to such an extent that their relationship is so obscure that they appear incomprehensible. Salle's ironic stance is all the more superficial due to his use of flat representation that is deliberately or otherwise, "bad."

Peter Plagens identifies a style of painting that demonstrates an understanding of what can make "effective" art. Including Salle in the *"academy of the bad"* he

14

describes the method of using formally awkward or naive painting and drawing as a strategy to give the work the appearance of art. He argues that using this method as a strategy asserts the supposed genius and authority of the artist and of the language employed by presenting the illusion of a decisively made artwork. A large proportion of David Salle's subject matter is paintings of the naked female figure often in awkward and sexual positions, impaled by objects or dismembered by the frame of the canvas. These images are derived from appropriated pornographic photographs from which his paintings retain a voyeuristic perspective emphasised by the distancing of monochrome. Within this context he also questions the authority or relevance of images from popular and high culture. For example in plate 2(pg.16) a repeated painting of a pornographic phtograph of a female figure is overlaid with the images of the torso of a dancer, an eye, the Eiffel Tower a vase and a figure from a Lucien Freud painting. It can be seen that he depicts each of these themes in variations of his flat representational style where no topic appears more significant than any other. Having no definitive line of enquiry a critical evaluation can only be made on the basis of either a specific engagement with the representation of appropriated cultural images referring to the identity of painting, and the structure of the language that defines it, or the construction of a framework of cultural signs with subjective and variable relationships that Salle refers to in a strategic stylisation of effective painterly devices. Although a critical assessment would likely yield an overlap between each of these poles, as parameters of investigation they are severely limited.

Regarding Silgmar Polke (though again this could relate to Salle), David Thistlewood argues that a subversion of modernism exists not as a self-referential parody or commentary but as a process of negating aspects of modernist logic that are no longer appropriate and potentially limiting. Such aspects include the uniqueness and indispensability of the art object and its status within a perceived hierarchy of cultural expression. Disregarding for the moment how appropriate such a gesture is whilst remaining in a highly commercial art market, it is indicative of an attempt to renovate modernism to accommodate otherwise contradictory elements such as abstract and figurative representation; for example plate 3(pg.16). If this is so, it can be seen to operate as a critically constructive procedure, though it would require subsequent application to a more focused concern ie Polke's examination of the post war German cultural identity or Salle's presentation of erotically contextualised cultural images making provocative ethical considerations.

It is therefore noted that three possibilities exist for the interpretation of an active subversion of modernist, traditional and popular cultural images in relation to conditions for making paintings. Firstly as a superficial response to the postmodern critical
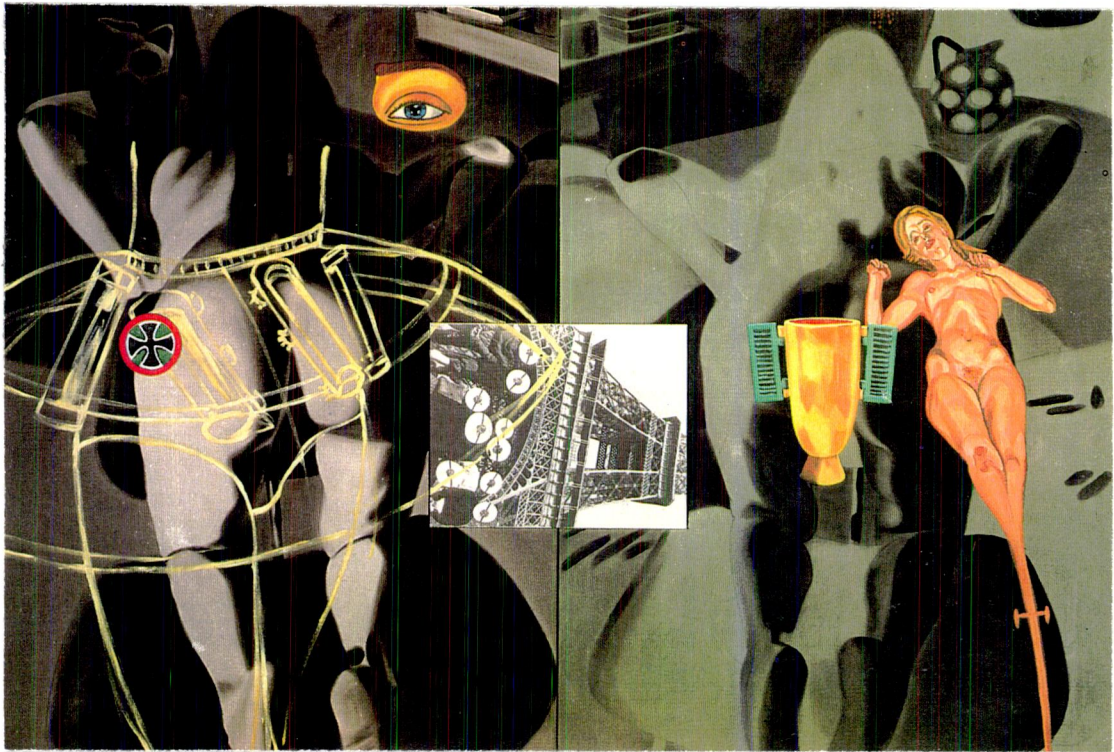
Plate 2. Pewter Light, David Salle, 1986
Acrylic, Oil & Photosensitized Linen on Canvas

Plate 3. This Is How You Sit Correctly (After Goya), Sigmar Polke 1982
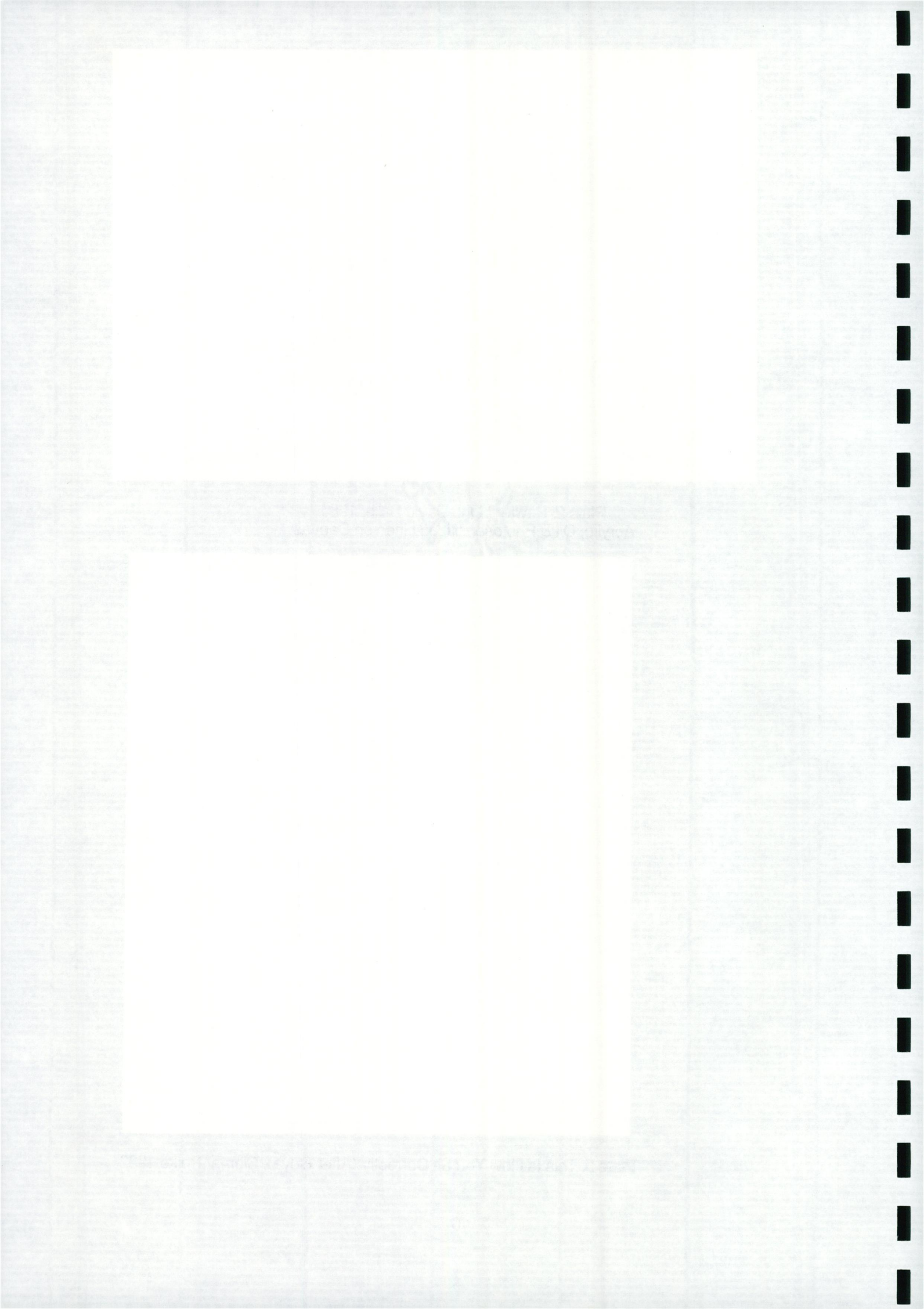
evaluation of painting that questions issues regarding intention, authority and frameworks of meaning. A subversion of painting in this sense would indicate an understanding of its problematic associations without necessitating a rigorous critical engagement.It would facilitate a framework to adapt particular styles and motifs of what can unquestionably be called art (in that it is historically bound), to indulge in and rework into a commercially acceptable art practice with the illusion of being theoretically based. Secondly it could be proposed that a subversion of modernism implies a critique in painting of previous painterly devices in an attempt to formally go beyond these devises but continue the theoretical implications. In this respect it would adapt a definitively modernist property of self referential critique through process and style, corresponding to Rosenthal's interpretation of painting as an effective or emphatic metaphor of a perceived cultural consciousness. However, David Thistlewood proposes that to say Polke's appropriation of styles operates as an adverse critique of them is to construe the presence of a modernist "single minded commitment" (Thistlewood 1996, p.2) to the investigation of a given intention or procedure. He maintains that Polke exhibits no such single minded commitment implying that this in itself is defiant of modernism. This point subsequently refers to the third possibility of maintaining the theoretical and formal stability of modernism but suitably adapting its 'problematic' theoretical implications as hypothetical equivalents to either Salle's *problematic* depiction of women or Polke's depiction of a *problematic* German cultural consciousness. Although such an approach constructs a suitable framework for engaging with paint, its effectiveness is heavily dependant on the strength of the area of investigation it is applied to. These three points represent credible critical parameters of debate concerning the implications of the subversion of modernism through painting; facilitated by the use of multiple meanings and the mixture of unrelated genres.

A second line of enquiry facilitated by these techniques is the deconstruction and investigation of the frameworks of meaning that constitute a visual language. According to Kristin Olive a deconstruction of the visual language is made by Salle in his use of the technique of presenting allegorical images that cannot be resolved by means of allegory. The same technique is employed by Polke and the suggestion is that it reflexively exposes the traditional device of narrative as being limited in terms of its linear or singular perspective. An attempt was made by modernist painters to indicate the instability and subjectivity of language constructs by adapting either expressionist or schematic styles of representation, for example the Cubist representation of space, however the processes and intention of their production remained stable and objective, ie.the Cubist style. Salle and Polke overcome this contradiction by appropriating images from allegorical constructions and integrating

them into an apparently incoherent composition of multiple images using unrelated genres. The subjectivity achieved by multiple meanings displaces a necessity for intention and subsequently objectivity. The use of unrelated genres is indicative of communicating meaning but implies that the process of production is delibrately a variable value operating within this language.

The formal application of this technique, in relation to Salle is perceived by Plagens as strategically bad. Salle's technique of painting maintains flatly represented images, usually differentiating genre with the use of colour and tone. It could be proposed that this consciously denies the paint any illusory depiction and indicates a conceptual value imposed on the appropriated images. This technique implies a critical stance against painting as an expressive or authoritarian cultural response, thus specifically engaging in the deconstruction of meanings associated with painting. However, any attempt for Salle to go beyond this self referential critique is limited to the subject matter of the images he appropriates. On the other hand Power interprets Salle's ambivalent treatment of the surface of the painting, not singularly as an indication of the conceptual value of the image, but as a " construction of a space where individual images establish their significance" (Power,1996 p.109) without having to relate to each other in formal terms of size, perspective or form. He defines a surface that he filters all of the images through to negate significance so that aesthetically, the image only retains its form. In this respect one could say that he defines parameters to project the dislocating effect from unstable frameworks of meaning onto a specific relationship with women depicted through pornography. In terms of deconstruction however, this strategy is not rigorously critical, rather it is a complex method of instilling conceptual effectiveness as opposed to expressionist effectiveness into his painting and subsequently corresponds with Rosenthal's critically limited interpretation of painting as operating as a formal metaphor. Where Salle works ambivilantly with the surface, in such a way as to filter it through a unifying medium of graphic representation, and Freud constructs a framework to critically retain the expressionists values of the surface, Power maintains that Polke works psychologically with the surface. He suggests that he exhibits an understanding of the frameworks of meaning implied by the surface in that he includes the adaptation of a variation of techniques of representation into his process. In contrast to Salle, and like Freud, he maintains the authentic element of modernist painting, its assertion of authority through the explicit use of paint, however Polke incorporates it into a system that presents authenticity as an impossibility. In this sense he reinforces the significance of the surface which consequently increases the dislocation effected by his deconstruction of the medium.

David Thistlewood points to Polke's use of contiguity as a method of deconstructing a

visual language, where he appropriates images as signs of aspects of the language and presents combinations of these images in a seemingly random fashion. In doing so he presents incompatible images whilst alluding to their authenticity, by the adaptation of the surface created by the image, he thus exposes the extent of stability imposed on the visual language by making the authentic surface meaningless. Such an attempted depiction of continguity provides a method for extracting a potentially subjective meaning where the intention of the artist is suitably distanced from this process to prevent any imposition of meaning. Though this strategy demonstrates an understanding of the limitations of the traditional language it also plausibly maintains a model equivalent of Polke's perception of a dislocated German cultural consciousness. However both Power and Lawson alternatively perceive it as a possible strategy to "define a critical space with what is essentially an act of complicity", (Power, 1996, p.105) indicated internally by the adaptation of traditional devices and externally by a dependence on artistic institutions. The process of deconstruction in the work of Polke and Salle indicates an understanding of language constructs but its limited frame of references prevents it from being expanded further, except as a complex device effecting an imposed subject. However given the historical circumstances of the production of their paintings, when painting was by some conceived as having run its course of making meaning. Salle and Polkes art practice define a position where this is critically accepted and where an attempted resolution is made. As such any sense of complicity can be understood to be bound by a particular historical necessity to cognitively come to terms with the range of possibilities and limits of the practice of painting.

A third issue implied by the use of multiple meanings and unrelated genres, noted by Andrew Benjamin is to examine the meanings imposed on the medium of paint in terms of polar opposites such as immediacy mediacy and expression imitation. Immediacy, he proposes, is "undone in the inscription of that act into a process", (Benjamin, 1996, p.138) and becomes mediate because a process is contrived and therefore mediate. Expression is the depiction of immediacy and a reproduction of this expression would thus become an imitation. Both Polke and Salle employ these terms when they imitate acts of immediacy by quoting from various sources of media; from high culture to popular culture. They present compositions of these images in seemingly random sets that negate the individual narratives of the images and present the traditional meaning associated with painting as fallacious. However, Polke is more specific in his engagement with this issue than Salle by his inclusion of the meaning imposed on the processes of making a painting, by the imitation of style. Although Polke appears more complicit of traditional values by the adaptation of its painting devices, it could alternatively be stated that he reinforces the impossibility of

19

immediacy. Lawson says of Salle that the use of multiple meanings and unrelated genres is potentially effective by destabalising held assumptions but when the critical impact of his subject matter is not sustained and unnecessarily ambivalent; they become decorative. It could alternatively be suggested that he negates all signs of immediacy from the surface to realise traditionally unmeaningful representational forms, possibly to reflexively define a disturbing potency of an image. In relation to this issue Freud avoids the implications of the expressions of immediacy by maintaining the conditions of time within his stable practice, thus incorporating a mechanical approximation of immediacy into his practice.

For their own ends Freud, Salle and Polke exhibit an understanding of the meaning invested in the medium of paint. Benjamin suggests that Polke uses this understanding to "draw together the twofold demand for painting" (Benjamin 1996, p.141) i.e. representation and abstraction. In doing so he brings together two key poles of opposition that painting facilitates and from this emerges the central fact of disruption in the traditions of painting following the conclusion of modernism. From this perspective the use of unrelated genres and multiple meanings constitutes a means to cognitively come to terms with the dislocation of the continuity of modernism and to work it into a sustainable practice; which Polke does through the examination of his German identity, Salle through his investigation of pornographic representation and Freud in his depiction of a stylised figural presence.

Another aspect of this attempt to engage with the contradictions implied by the redundancy of modernism, referred to by Thomas Crow, is the examination of values associated with repetition and replication.This is evident in Polke and Salle's replication of appropriated images or repetition of generic processes, and points to an active denial of originality (a primary assertion of modern) that sustains a critical engagement with the subject .In plates 4 and 5 (pg.21) Salle replicates a stylised representation of a figurative image and Polke repeats an authentic process of abstraction. However when Freud replicates his generic process through expressionist depiction, he exploits its consistency for the signification of his constructed values for the surface of the paint.He thus avoids its modernist implications without necessitating a critique of modernism or a denial of originality within his constructed framework.

Originality is understood to be that which makes an object individual in its conception, production and presentation. It is not a malleable concept that is applied to a physical object but a manifestation of conscious intervention or manipulation inherent within the presence or presentation of the object. When an image is replicated, any physical indication of originality is necessarily removed, while the conceptual or autobiographical
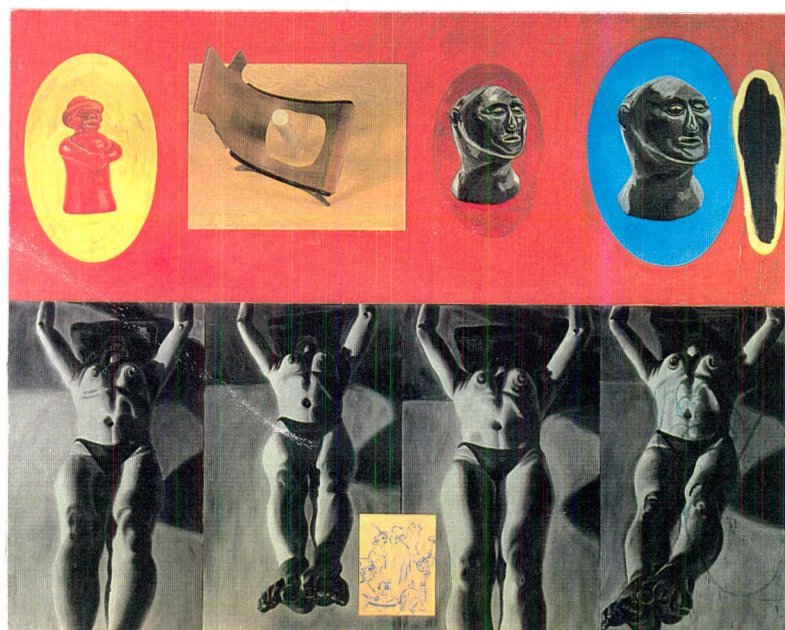
Plate 4. Marking Through Webern, 1987, David Salle 1987
Acrylic & Oil On Canvas With Wood & Chair

Plate 5. Negative Value 1: Alkor,1982   Negative Value 2: Mizar, 1982
Sigmar Polke
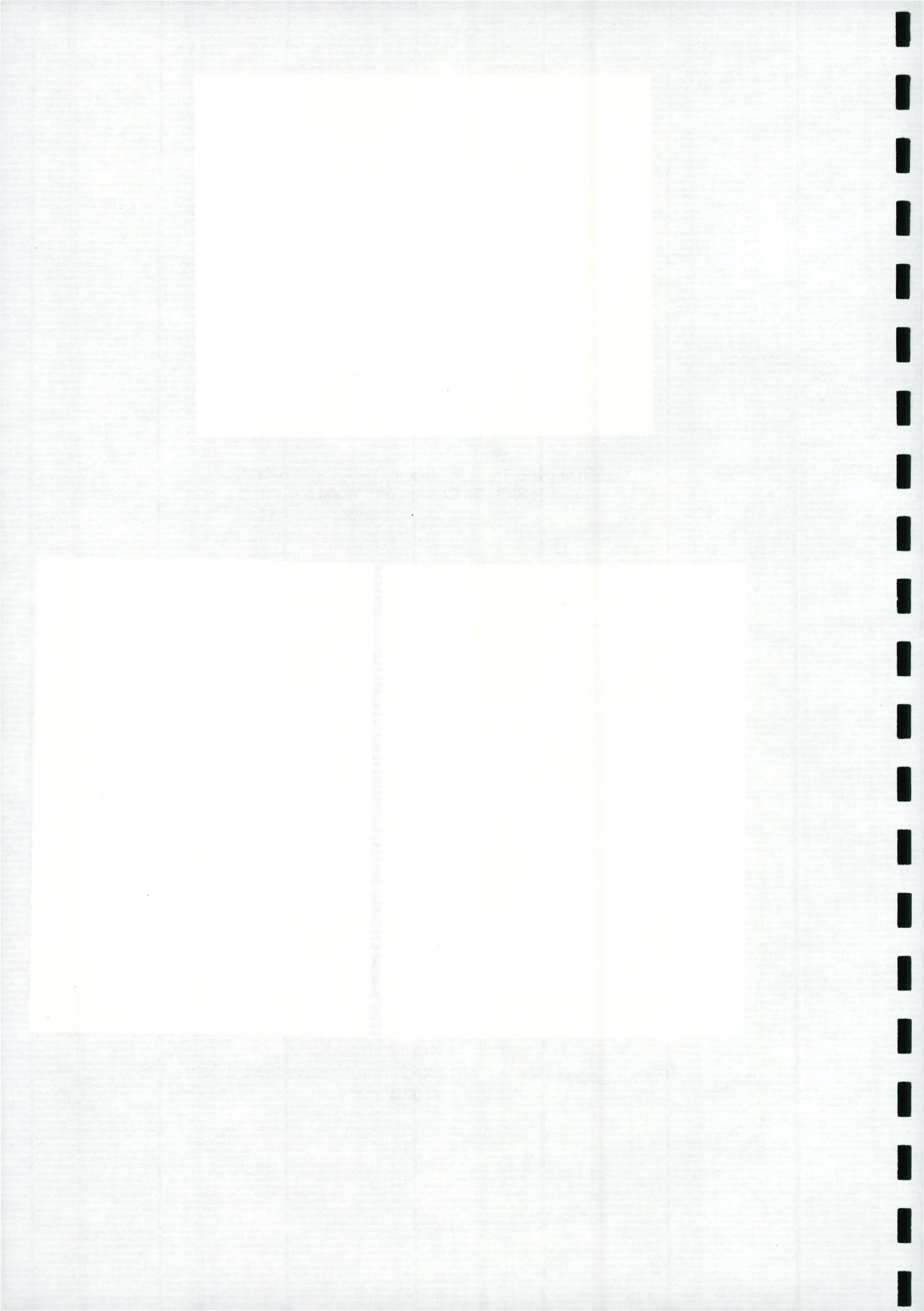
implication of originality exists, if at all, by quotation as opposed to assertion. Crow maintains that what replaces originality in a reproduction is " the material literalness and relentless visual logic of the image being replicated". (Crow 1996, p.69) Salle's engagement with originality refers to the authority it represents, where he reproduces an image with a standard informal application that affirms the removal of productive originality and questions the significance of what is reproduced as the conceptual or autobiographical value of originality in relation to images similarly appropriated from popular culture. However, Salle only exposes the relation and does not rigorously engage with the possibilities or implications it may present. In this respect his approach could correspond with Lawson's evaluation of the avant garde as a system where elements from debased or marginalised cultures are presented with, or as, high cultural art objects. Whether Salle's intent is deliberate or otherwise it implies an act of complicity left unresolved. When Polke reproduces images from high and low culture, he quotes the originality of the process of production as well as that of the concept. In doing so he explicitly uses the traditional language of originality to criticise the tradition that asserts originality. He subsequently makes a self referential critique that could plausibly operate as a model for his own critique of the German tradition that imposes guilt upon him and that can be resolved for Polke if at all, by self reference. His appropriation of images from popular culture may not be as provocatively used as Salle's, rather he may be translating these images into the language that he associates with authority in order to incorporate the present with the past in an attempt to bridge their dislocation. As such it represents a feasibly constructive engagement that offers possibilities for painting as opposed to being defensive or defeatist.

Alternatively Crow suggests that Neo-Expressionism, " restores traditional authority by presenting a nostalgia for tradition" (Crow 1996 p.78) . Such an observation is explicitly evident in the work of Polke, though he carefully situates it in an unresolvable context bound to his investigation of identity. It may operate not as resistance to the changing conditions for making paintings but possibly as an attempt to accommodate a necessary transition. Salle avoids the implication of a nostalgia for traditional authority by the use of an informal technique of painting that quotes the appropriated image with no attempt to rework the original technique of making it. Although, it could be maintained that a nostalgia for the authority of painting is implicated by Polke and Salle's almost exclusive use of paint. This indicates a refusal to reject certain limiting or defining characteristics of painting that cannot operate as quotation e.g., the use of large scale rectangular canvas, derived from the example of the Abstract Expressionists, the representation of real time and skilled labour of the artist making the painting, and the two dimensional unique surface achieved by the application of paint. This may point to an understanding of a necessity for a given framework in a

22

tradition, with defining parameters for an informed party to engage with, manipulate and change, when appropriate. Lawson suggests an alternative position where the artist can afford to be ironic or critical once they remain within the traditionally, or at present institutionally accepted criteria for painting.

If this is so, there may exist a fluctuating boundary between engaging with tradition and maintaining tradition, a factor that requires the artists' acknowledgement. From a broader perspective, however, the issue of tradition as a responsibility of the artist may be academic; an implication derived from Thomas Crow's assertion that "the manipulation of signs can no longer be verified by the viewer, but by the market where the exchange of signs is its own justification". (Crow1996 p.80) In this context the acceptance of art practices such as Polke's or Salle's by the art market results in their meaning being filtered through and contextualised by the market or institution, a process that may seriously devalue the critical depth of the work. By this reasoning David Salle's explicitly uncritical or ambiguously critical stance could correspond with Crow's evaluation that "when artists accept what the modern cultural economy defines as art, it no longer has to define its identity". (Crow 1996, p.80) Alternatively, Polke's engagement with defining identity may exclude him from the implication and thus provide an opportunity to preserve his intended critical depth.

By defining the common characteristic in the paintings of Sigmar Polke and David Salle as the presentation of unrelated genres of cultural images and the multiple meanings derived from generic techniques and compositions; a subsequent understanding of the artists relations emerges from the three points described. Firstly it facilitates their parodic subversion of modernism by adapting an ironic stance. Secondly it provides a method of deconstructing the framework of the visual cultural language. Thirdly it implies an understanding of the connotations of the terms of mediate/immediate, expression/imitation, and replication/originality in relation to painting and paintings subsequently informed relations within cultural politics. In each case both Salle and Polke rely on their subject matter to apply their theoretical assertions or defensive strategies in relation to each of these points. A defined subject matter maintains a continuity in their art practices that alternatively maintains a consistency in the production of such strategies as irony, deconstruction and engagement with the terms of modernism, that are otherwise independent points that cannot sustain continuity. Therefore a critical evaluation of their subject matter is necessary to identity that it can facilitate these strategies.

Myra Schor maintains in the essay *"appropriated sexuality"* that "the explicit misogyny of Salle's images of women is matched by the implicit misogyny of its acceptance by many critics. " (Schor 1986, p.70) Her suggestion is that not only does

Salle practice a perceivably derogative depiction of women but also that the art markets, institutions and critics find sufficient distraction from it, in that he mobilises the aforementioned independent strategies. This points to a specific reception of the naked female figure in art practices both traditional and modernist. Unlike Polke, Salle continues this tradition of depicting the female figure and is subsequently more directly associated with the Neo-Expressionists, where there is a strong implication of maintaining tradition and modernism. This corresponds with the earlier proposition that he uses theoretical strategies like irony or parody to adapt a superficially critical stance that is literally imposed onto a sinister variation of the depiction of nudity practised by the Neo-Expressionists. Craig Owens in *"Honour Power and the Love of Women"* associates this theme with a specific psychological Freudian response by male artists to "situate their art not in relation to reality but in relation to desire", which in this sense refers to a "sense of powerlessness to achieve in reality what he desires in fantasy." (Owens 1983, p.58) However Lucien Freud exemplifies a practice where the depiction of the figure can operate as a critical basis for a line of enquiry. An extension of Owens psychoanalysis can be noted in Schor's interpretation of Salle's depiction of women as a metaphor for death that operates as a vehicle for responding to the complex conditions for making traditional paintings, or literally, the death of painting. Furthermore she asserts that painting with its implicit sensuality operates as a metaphor for women. Her conclusion then follows; that Salle uses painting as a vehicle to subjugate women or death. This represents a coherant critical response to Salle's use of painting and informs an evaluation of Salle's work that regards an active subversion of modernism with an informed employment of irony within his conception and technique of painting. However the implications of this ironic stance point to an attempt to pursue a questionable tradition with the illusion of a compatible critical engagement. It has also been noted that Salle uses informed methods of deconstruction that retain a certain degree of critical autonomy in relation to his subject matter. He presents incompatible allegories that represent a cross section of cultural responses and exposes a language of visual meaning as unstable and subjective. He constructs a disturbing space where no element is significant and that implicitly rejects the authority of a single medium. The dislocation effected by the contiguous presentation of images refers to an instability of meaning. These devices participate in a context prepared to facilitate what is termed by Owens as antimodernism; the extension of modernist principles to a logically inappropriate context that contradicts what defines modernist principles.However their application is skilled and thus informative. Thirdly, the implied meanings of significant terms presented in Salle's paintings, despite the subterfuge they are employed to maintain, relate to a consequential re-evaluation of conditions of modernism. His use of replicated images actively rejects conditions for immediacy thus establishing a critical distance from the conditions of traditional painting. This act is undone in its legitimation

of a traditional practice though it retains the significance of the gesture and defines an effective potency of imitated images. Finally, his exclusive use of paint defines perameters for the meaning of the imagery to ambiguously fluctuate from the poles of establishing new, if complicit, conditions for painting to ambivalent production according to the criteria of the market.

Sigmar Polkes' subject matter is the appropriation of cultural images maintaining their objective allegories and technical signs of authenticity, but whose text is an imposed autobiographical symbolic code. Such appropriated images include examples from painting, print-making and drawing, schematic drawings, decorative motifs, textile designs, abstraction, popular culture etc, and a historical range from traditional to present (Plate 3, pg.16). In reference to these images it is determined that an active model operates as a response to his sense of his German identity. Identified in Donald Kuspits' *"Mourning and Melancholia"* in German Neo-Expressionism", a psychological, historical and sociological orientation of the post- World- War- Two German identity is proposed to have emerged in the work of Baselitz and Kiefer that may also be identified in the work of Polke. Adapting the language of expressionism as definitive of their processes, they negotiate various levels of critical cognition of their identities. Kuspit maintains that such a procedure is a result of mourning and melancholy. He suggests that an equivalent response to mourning can be perceived within the autobiographic frameworks that inform Neo-Expressionist painting. Their "mourning"is an attempt to resolove socio-psychological response to the German disorder of World-War-Two; a recognition of questions of guilt and survival. This is identified in Polke's painting as a consequence of his incorporation of images that refer to a range of historical associations such as representational painting and expressive or abstract painting which retain historic authoritarian traditional values. This implied historical framework is cross-referenced with images from contemporary culture and mediums. It implicitly refers to the equivalent values that inform the present social framework that places explicit emphasis on the culture of consumption. For example Polke uses images from the decorative and graphic arts and advertising media within a context of contemporary high culture. These images from the historical present are presented with the images from the historical past and consequently imply an attempted resolution of the point of disruption that dislocated the continuity of a stable German social consciousness. This assertion overlaps with Rosenthals' evaluation of painting as a metaphor of social consciousness and although he uses devices that inform a critique of the values of modernism, this element remains complicitly modernist.

However Kuspit points to a divide within this framework that defines a distinction

between mourning and melancholy. Recognising mourning as a constructive process in relation to the social context he suggests that the German Neo-Expressionists can alternatively represent a submission to a melancholic national identity that maintains a nostalgia for the myth of a pre- war heroic Germany, thus resisting the process of mourning in favour of a pathological response.This corresponds with what Craig Owens identifies as a narcissistic response the artist has to the frustration of not being able to realise their desires in reality, in this case referring to a desire to change history. Perceiving their national identities as "vulnerable to a history that cannot be changed", (Kuspit 1993, p.213) the German Neo-Expressionists are suggested to be obsessed with the recognition of "the pathological threat history is to the subject", (Kuspit 1993, p.216) thus exposing systems of meaning that inform a national identity but without critically engaging with or resolving them. As such either of these responses of mourning or melancholy are indicative of a similarly uncritical (previously termed indulgent) approach to Salle's depiction of women. Alternatively Freuds example indicates a position where a critical enquiry can be made in a contrived framework that can maximize the value of tradition without being complicit. However a quality of Polke and Salles work is that they engage with a much wider range and complexity of issues than Freud. As such they represent independent positions in relation to Freud that resist a judgement of their accomplishments based on an equivelance of their practices. Consequently the question raised in relation to Salle and Polke is whether reflexively modernist devices like irony which can be identified in their implicit subversion of modernism are used to sustain a credible critical context for a complicit reworking of tradition or as an acceptable critical framework to exploit traditional devices for responding to problematic issues of personal significance. Due to this divide there is a subdivision concerning Salle and Polke's use of deconstructive strategies that can be employed either as antimodernism or as a critically acceptable position in relation to modernism. Both artists have an informed understanding of visual systems of meaning and proceed to make new meaning by manipulating existing frameworks. The compatibility of this procedure with the subject matter is questionable in that it is made either deceptively analytical by the imposition of deconstruction or that deconstruction is a model equivalent to the decoding of the subject matter. Finally each of the artists critical responses to aspects of modernism are questionably justified in relation to the credibility of their engaged subject matter.This points to an attempt to maintain a critical distance from the fallacies of modernism or as an attempt to incorporate contemporary experiences of reality into a framework of modernist meaning.

CONCLUSION

The values in relation to the conditions of figurative painting that Freud Polke and Salle represent can only be fully understood in their historical context. As part of the progressive acceptance of figurative expressionism they signify an attempt to redeem values of meaning that defined a particulr significance for figurative painting. These were implicitly asserted to have been unnecessarily displaced by the postmodern revision of the conditions for making art. The comparison across these artists' work suggests that a similarity exists in their intentions and processes and that their differences can be recognised as relative or equivalent within a general context of figuration. Brandon Taylor has observed

> "The Germans were angst ridden and obsessed in the manner
> of earlier German Expressionism, The Americans were confident
> and pluralist, The British were northern romantics, concerned with the
> figure, The Italians had survived art povera to return to even earlier roots.
> National stereotyping within a framework of tradition". (Taylor 1995,
> p.50).

He points to a system that the Neo-Expressionists occupy which facilitates a common tendency to use traditional figurative values in a framework that compensates for individual intentions, processes, historical contexts and interpretations, and social contexts. To elaborate on the three artists discussed, Sigmar Polke is identified as a German Neo-Expressionist whose work has connotations of a European sensibility that places emphasis on memory and history. David Salle is an American Neo-Expressionist whose work maintains equivalent values that engage with pluralism and the role of painting in relation to mass culture and commodity culture. Lucien Freud, although born in Germany is associated with the British School of London. Using figuration he takes an analytical approach to explore ontological implications. Polke works within a European tradition of painting that derives its critical stance from Dada, Cobra, and Fluxus as well as Expressionism, Abstraction and Pop. Adapting a revolutionary stance these groups subjected their processes to their theoretical concerns and made provocative attempts to revise accepted meanings of modernist art. Polkes provocative irony towards modernism and commodity culture is thus highlighted and contextualised by his adaptation of modernist processes. Also his enquiry into his historical identity is sustained by such references. Salle's processes

27

are derived from a conceptual background that defines the meaning of images as significations within a variety of mediums. This perspective addresses literal historic and social implications but requires the intentions of the artist to be coherent constructive and deconstructive signs. Lucien Freud maintains a traditional or romantic representation of the figure that is also located in a history influenced by Pop and Conceptualism. As such he imposes conceptual signifying values onto a carefully constructed, romantically derived framework. The system that accommodates these practices, namely Neo-Expressionism, attempts to define a redeemable value of figuration through various aspects of the processes used to re-define modernist conditions for painting. Though it is derived from aspects of the modernist tradition the Neo-Expressionists demonstrate a potential critical relationship with postmodern art practice and as such define a unique area of critical expression for painting to operate within. As such the nineteen eighties mark a period of a democratic acceptance of painting into a practice of many mediums without having to compete for an identity. It demonstrates a stable practice with potential for subsequent engagement , progression or restructuring.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS:

CROW, Thomas, "Modern Art in the Common Culture",
Yale University Press, 1996

Selected Chapter
The Return Of Hank Herron: simulated abstraction and the service economy of art.

FRASCINA, F. & Harris (Eds.), "Art in Modern Culture"
London, Phaidon Press, 1992.

Selected Chapter
Painting the task of mourning, Yve Alain Bois

HERTZ, Richard "Theories of Contemporary Art",
Prentice Hall, 1985.

Selected Essays
The Academy of the Bad, Peter Plagens, 1981.
Last Exit Painting, Thomas Lawson, 1981.
Farewell to Modernism, Kim Levin, 1979
Appropriated Sexuality, Myra Schor, 1986
Honour, Power and the Love of Women, Craig Owens, 1983
European Sensibility Today, Donald Kuspit, 1990

JOACHIMIDES Christos M. & Rosenthal (Eds.), The Age of Modernism;
Art in The Twenthieth Century"
London, Thames and Hudson 1997.

Selected Essay
Reality-Distortion, Question To A Broken Mirror
Norman Rosenthal, 1997.

Abstraction-Spirituality, Purity and Belief: The Lure of Abstraction
Anna Moszynska, 1997.

HOME, Stewart, "The Assault on Culture"
Stirling AK Press, 1991

KUSPIT, Donald, "Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art"
Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Selected Chapter
Mourning and Melancholy in German Neo-Expressionism,

TAYLOR, Brandon, "The Art of Today"
London, Everyman Art Library, 1995

THISTLEWOOD, David (Ed.) "Sigmar Polke Back to Post Modernity"
Liverpool University Press, 1996.

Selected Essays
Polkes Postmodern Play
Kevin Power

Polke At The End Of Painting
Andrew Benjamin

Sigmar Polke and The Critical Problem of Multiple Signature Styles
David Thistlewood

Irony and Parody As Vehicles Of Criticism And Artistic Freedom
Martin Hertschel

ARTICLES:

CAMERON, Joan, "The Salle Academy"
Arts Vol. 60 No. 3 November 1985

FEINSTEIN, Roni,
Arts Vol. 60 No. 3 November 1985

FERNANDES, Joyce
New Art Examiner Vol. 14 Nov. 1986 P. 32-4

LAWSON, Thomas, "Toward Another Laocoon Or The Snake Pit"
Art in America, 1985, P. 96-106

LIEBMANN, Lisa, "Harlequinade For An Empty Room: On David Salle
Art Forum Vol. 25 Feb 1987, P. 94-9

OLIVE, Kristin "David Salles Deconstructive Strategy"
Arts Vol. 60 No. 3 November 1985

SCHJELDAHT, Peter, "The Real Salle",
Art in America, September 1984.

WITTEN, Robert Pincus, "Pure Pinter An Interview with David Salle"
Art Vol. 60 No.3 November 1985