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STERLING RUBY

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STERLING RUBY'S POST-HUMANIST ART

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HUMANISM: AN IDEOLOGY

Art historian Erwin Panofsky introduced his mid-twentieth-century essay "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" with an anecdote about the deference with which the old and ailing Immanuel Kant received his physician.¹ Only nine days before he died, Kant was resolute about being helped from his chair in order to greet his guest with proper dignity and respect. Exerting great effort to remain standing until his kind doctor was seated, Kant explained simply, "The sense of humanity [*Humanität*] has not yet left me." His explanation, which, Panofsky adds, almost brought tears to the two men's eyes, sympathetically introduces the theme of an enduring, classics-based humanism that had survived the frequently banal, *de rigueur* geniality of eighteenth-century German society. Panofsky explains that "humanity" in this situation connotes much more than bourgeois politesse:

It had, for Kant, a much deeper significance, which the circumstances of the moment served to emphasize: man's proud and tragic consciousness of self-approved and self-imposed principles, contrasting with his utter subjection to illness, decay and all that is implied in the word "mortality."

Panofsky then defines the word *humanitas* in terms of an ideal and objective position of stability between the polarities of bestiality and divinity, before outlining the word's significance for the Greco-Roman world, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. His brief discussion enables him to deduce:

It is from this ambivalent conception of *humanitas* that humanism was born. It is not so much a movement as an attitude which can be defined as the conviction of the dignity of man, based on both the insistence on human values (rationality and freedom) and the acceptance of human limitations (fallibility and frailty); from this two postulates result—responsibility and tolerance.²

In consideration of Panofsky's conclusion, it would appear that humanist ideals over time have served as much more than a historical mind-set, since they have been conceived as *homo sapiens*' highest aspirations and laudable quest to remain throughout life rational, self-determining, consistent, and deeply empathic. Panofsky, in fact, reaches this conclusion when he notes, "the humanities endeavor to transform the chaotic variety of human records into what may be called a cosmos of culture."³

Couched in terms of universals intended to reveal an essentially unyielding foundation for humankind, which has been only subtly inflected by changing historical circumstances but not profoundly challenged or modified by them, humanism has served since the Renaissance as a pervasive ideology and set of principled norms for Western culture. It is predicated on viewing individuality as an indispensable human characteristic that testifies to each person's unique appeal, and it has been coupled with the ideal state of being able to remain fully and continuously self-possessed as part of humanity's natural state. This ideology readily gained supporters because of its ostensible ability to empower individuals to transcend all social obstacles through adherence to inborn core values that affiliate them with humanity at large, even though it also advocated a static rather than a dynamic view of human beings. Humanism viewed culture as its pinnacle as well as its legitimate heritage, and its followers regarded the arts as constituting unmediated revelations of humankind's vital strengths.

1 Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" in Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Art* (New York: Double Day Anchor Books, 1955), p. 1.

2 Ibid., p. 2.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

Thus, humanists were able to extend their authorization of each person's sovereignty to individual works of art, which served as its surrogates and legacy. Consequently, they also considered works of art to be so well integrated that their form and content—like the long-heralded troika of human mind, body, and spirit—were ideally integrated, closely connected, and directly accessible.

Because humanism has constituted such a pervasive and effective ideology, with its constructed views seamlessly naturalized and ratified over many centuries, it helps to begin dismantling its tenacious hold and static views by first looking at those areas of twentieth-century thought where it appears to have been jettisoned. Then we will be equipped to consider the development of Jacques Lacan's split subject in the second half of the twentieth century in order to appreciate how the humanist and Copernican view of humanity was being whittled down to a more reasonable and realistic scale. Lacan's innovation regarding the formation of subjects under language's auspices in turn sets the stage for the post-Lacanian revolution incited by Félix Guattari's transversality, referring to the fecundity of partial and continually changing subjects that is also central to the post-humanist art of Los Angeles-based artist Sterling Ruby.⁴

Early in the twentieth century, inroads into the uplifting yet overbearing, and the heroic yet stultifying humanist ideology were made in a number of fields. In the area of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure demonstrated that the meanings of words and phrases have no transcendent source; they have simply become attached to signs through usage, thus paving the way to rethink human culture's dependence on language as constructed and conventional rather than an inherent birthright. In psychology Sigmund Freud demonstrated that people are subject to competing drives, each with a different mode of signifying, so that residual illusions of monolithic self-reliant selves could be jettisoned. In anthropology Claude Lévi-Strauss applied de Saussure's findings to his analysis of tribal cultures, and discovered mythic and kinship structures cohered by sets of implicit rules that worked together to undermine individual agency while at the same time they solidified group ethos.

However, considered from different perspectives, these inroads did not get rid of humanism; they only repositioned it by removing it slightly off center stage. For example, de Saussure's view that the relationship between signifiers and their signifieds is straightforward and dependable provided a secure basis for a conservative and ultimately humanistic view of language as integrated and stable. Despite Freud's differentiation between unconscious and conscious minds as well as the id, ego, and superego that split up humanity's assumed integrity, the overall objective of his psychoanalytic approach was to strengthen the ego's role, thereby reinforcing an ultimately traditional humanist view of a magisterial, rationally guided self. Even though Lévi-Strauss's structuralism robbed individuals of their agency, he partially restored it in a surprisingly humanistic fashion when he attributed mythology's sources to exceptionally resourceful and imaginative "*bricoleurs*"—*artistes extraordinaires* whom he credited with originating the remarkable mythic structures and matrilineal patterns that joined tribal cultures into intelligible units.

In the area of twentieth-century visual arts, a similarly beleaguered yet still connected humanism served as a foundation for a number of disparate styles. Despite breaking up the objects they painted and subjecting them to radically different perspectives, the Cubists depended on highly romanticized views of artists as ideal articulators of the ongoing dynamics of the world they inhabited. Even as they worked under the aegis of the absurd, Dadaists attempted to fight the devastating irrationality of World War I trench warfare and its demoralizing aftermath by subscribing quite rationally to the homeopathic law of similars whereby they injected in their potent artworks—

4 Sterling Ruby, interviews with author, August 21 and 22, 2008, Los Angeles. Material from these intensive daylong interviews with the artist will be cited throughout this study. Only longer statements will be footnoted.

and in society at large—discrete amounts of illogicality and chance. Although the Surrealists were intrigued with the id's powerful libidinous and unreasonable drives that they believed constituted the source of their dreams as well as art's strange juxtapositions, they attempted to colonize aspects of it under the very humanistic metaphor of the artist's proverbial muse, which they relocated within themselves, specifically in their unconscious, to provide a humanistic means for translating irrational dreams into visually lucid works of art. Despite some Abstract Expressionists' assertions that their works were only about the act of painting and therefore were often abandoned as unfinished rather than completed, most of them were convinced that C.G. Jung's theory regarding humanity's predilections to certain types of imagery called "archetypes" formed a firm and entirely rational foundation for understanding humankind as well as for creating and interpreting their work. Even though Frank Stella's statement (cited as an epigraph) would indicate that he had successfully managed to dispense with humanism in his work, he and his fellow Minimalist artists aimed to excise it from their work even as they also retained it in the role of the artist and the viewer. According to this attitude, artists acting as enlightened critics were supposed to cut through inessentials in order to set up situations in which epistemological inquiries into art's essential structure can be undertaken, while viewers were assumed to be ideally constituted as objective readers of the resultant art. As critic Barbara Rose, who was at the time married to Stella, observed in her landmark essay on Minimalism entitled "ABC Art," "Such a downgrading of talent, facility, virtuosity, and technique [as occurs with Minimalist art], with its concomitant elevation of conceptual power, coincides precisely with the attitude of the artists I am discussing."⁵ Although Sterling Ruby is commendably self-aware, he leaves his work much more open to viewers' interpretations than Stella does, and also relies, as we will see, on the constituting role of his many different media, so that they interrupt connections between the artist and the work in addition to those ensuing between the artist and the viewer. In addition, Ruby pays much more attention to the role that one's social, political, and historical position plays in the creation and interpreting of art, thus demoting humanism to the vagaries and/or fortuities of position and perspective.

LACAN'S SPLIT SUBJECT

The twentieth-century residual signs of an age-old humanist ideology were given a *coup de grâce* by the noted Parisian psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, whose theories of the first half of the twentieth century reframed human beings as alienated subjects. According to Lacan, infants, whose every need is provided by their parents, are cosseted in the preverbal state he calls the "Real." Once they start to move about and begin recognizing themselves as separate beings, they initiate the condition Lacan terms the "Imaginary," which enables them to attach themselves to wholistic images outside themselves. This attachment, known as the "Mirror Stage," represents a decisive early stage of alienation in which toddlers from around six to eighteen months old begin to assume, in paranoid fashion, the role of this other being that has seized hold of their imagination. At the same time that the Imaginary image is becoming the toddler's identifiable norm, the child crosses the threshold into a far more profound and complete estrangement known as the "Symbolic"—the crucial and transformative realm of language's dominance according to Lacan—and consequently the infant becomes effectively alienated from its Real self as it becomes in turn subject to the dictatorial protocols of the Symbolic language it embraces. For Lacan, entry into a

5 Barbara Rose, "ABC Art" in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), p. 278.

culture's Symbolic economy is achieved at enormous cost so that the child hereafter is a split subject in which language supplants the infant's connections with its initial reality (its Real), including particularly its drives, which are then displaced and thereafter rendered inaccessible, becoming the basis for the unconscious.

In the second half of the twentieth century the works of two leading American artists in particular—Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman—dramatize in material terms and in somewhat different ways from each other Lacan's essentially linguistically based split subject and its move beyond humanism's wholistic and thoroughly integrated models. This split subject appears full blown in Warhol's tabloid *Interview* where it takes the form of highly orchestrated photographs of professionally made-up, coiffed, and attired celebrities and socialites. Captions for these *Interview* photographs emphasize the elaborate production techniques formative to these images: they read like movie credits when they reference make-up artists, hair stylists, fashion consultants, and photographers. The net effect of enumerating the names and specialties of these professionals and their contributions to the elaborately staged images produced for this tabloid can be understood by considering these portraits and their captions in terms of the subject's entry into a particularly glamorous and material-based Symbolic.

Working in essentially the same manner but using herself as the model, Cindy Sherman continues Lacan's critique of humanism when she has projected on her person various stereotypical images representing distinctly different semiotics. Instead of looking for clues to the real Cindy Sherman behind the many personae she has produced since the late 1970s, one is well advised to consider the poignancy of her art that repeatedly plays on the Lacanian process of *aphanisis*, in which carefully orchestrated masks (societal signifiers) subject persons to their visual eloquence, thereby effecting radical estrangements with their original selves, which are kept offstage and rendered invisible. Because Sherman's images are powerful and persuasive despite being redolent with post-humanist irony, they constitute gripping images of reified or stereotypical selves that testify to the Symbolic's persuasive efficacy. Put differently, the language of signification detaches the Real's unary signifier—represented by the idea of Cindy Sherman, the artist, without a mask—from its pre-stereotypical haven and incarcerates it in distinct Symbolics. Assimilated in terms of increasingly diversified sign systems that are the Symbolic's prerogatives, Cindy Sherman's many masks function as metaphors, dramatizing the ways that social and cultural codes together with their protocols cannibalize her "essential" self, making it their subject. In this way her female stereotypes mark her absence at the same time that they demarcate their presence. Whatever emotions this subject then feels are those belonging to the regnant culture that has co-opted her pre-linguistic drives and redirected them to its own distinct ends.

Although both Warhol and Sherman handle their split subjects with irony, dry wit, and, sometimes, outright humor, the power of their art is in large part predicated on the forceful void of an evacuated humanism. Rather than offering a viable alternative to this humanism, Warhol's *Interview* staff ceremoniously papered over its disappearance in his portraits with an ostentatiously campy fashionableness and a celebratory mannequin-like blankness, which contradictorily summons this void it appears to be masking. Instead of seeking to rectify the loss of a fully conscious and integral self at the basis of all her work, Sherman revels in the Symbolic's inventiveness and semiotic playfulness in terms of the proliferation of types she artfully mines in her work. But in the process of assuming her many roles, Sherman often leaves a slightly discernable yet telling gap between her staged presence and herself, creating a situation that the French theorist Roland Barthes calls an "obtuse meaning" and compares to:

an actor disguised twice over (once as actor in the anecdote, once as an actor in the drama-turgy) without one disguise destroying the other; a multi-layering of meanings which always lets the previous meaning continue, as in a geological formation, saying the opposite without giving up the contrary.⁶

The slippage between Sherman's staged roles and prosaic self thus creates a fissure whereby somewhat ambiguous signs, referring to aspects of Lacan's split subject, overlap and intervene one with the other.

In addition to Lacan's split subject, the overall economy of Sherman's art is heavily invested in the moment when her actual or real self becomes affiliated with specific Symbolics, which she always views in terms of stereotypical and often ridiculous modes of representation. Providing emendations to the theory of the subject's entry into the Symbolic that his friend Lacan developed, the Parisian linguist Émile Benveniste focused on this strategically and crucially important moment in his essay "Subjectivity in Language" in which he demonstrated the need to connect language with specific contexts and take into consideration a given speaker's position (semantic view) when doing so—a situation he termed *énonciation* as opposed to the actual statement itself (the *énoncé*).⁷

At the same time that Benveniste was rethinking Lacan's sutured Symbolic self in terms of linguistics, the French Marxist Louis Althusser, also a close friend of Lacan, was also re-thinking this point of the subject's inscription in the world in terms of Lacan's Mirror Stage by ascribing agency to the mirror or language and reconceiving the two as instruments of ideology that hails or interpellates individuals as concrete subjects so that they exhibit the material effects of a particular ideology.⁸ Even though Althusser's approach has proven extraordinarily useful to Marxists since it explains how ideologies are embraced by actual subjects and realized in daily life, it regards this process as an enduring reification that cuts off other possibilities for becoming interpellated in different and often contradictory ways, a dilemma,⁹ as we will see that the French theorist Félix Guattari, who later worked both separately and in tandem with the Paris-based philosopher Gilles Deleuze, was already finding ways to solve when, in the 1960s, he innovated groundbreaking experiments with institutionalized psychotics.

Plumbing the fecund ideas of Guattari, among other theorists, rather than those of Lacan, Sterling Ruby has created since 2004 highly ambitious work that differs substantially from both Warhol's and Sherman's art. Veering away from the affecting void of a no longer creditable humanist tradition that is a basis for their art, Ruby's work has been shaped by positive and forward-looking post-Lacanian theories pertaining to a no longer essentialized self and an open-ended subjectivity. These theories move even further in splitting and breaking up the humanist tradition than Lacan's tragically split self.

At the same time that Ruby's art projects positive views of proliferating subjectivities, it also responds to the restraints of certain aesthetic and social practices stemming from Minimalism's continued hegemony in the twenty-first century, fully 40 years after its inception, as well as from reactionary and repressive late twentieth-century changes in the American penal system that together have had the effect of incarcerating and/or reifying the self in monolithic terms. Responding to these ideas and attitudes as sets of contravening forces whereby the self is opened up and contradictorily shut off, Ruby's work explores issues of multiple and continuously flourishing subjectivities and deconstructions of polarized gender relations, at the same time that his art responds to the problems that ensue when human beings are incarcerated in static identities.¹⁰

6 Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning" (1970), trans. Stephen Heath in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, rpt. 1983), p. 323.

7 Cf. Émile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language" in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Miami Linguistics Series No. 8 (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 223–230.

8 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: NLB, 1977), p. 121–173. Monthly Review Press, 1971.

9 The refinement of Althusser's basic approach to ideology, which does not reflect aspects of the real world but instead produces subjects involved in imaginary relations with others and thus is one step removed from the world, has been undertaken by his former student Michel Pêcheux who has reworked the concept of interpellation so that it takes into consideration different subjectivities situated across the lines of race, gender, class, and other sociopolitically constructed identities. Cf. Martin Montgomery and Stuart Allan, "Ideology, Discourse, and Cultural Studies: The Contribution of Michel Pêcheux," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 17, No. 2 (1992), <http://www.cjc-onlin.ca/index.php/journal/rt/printerFriendly/661/567> (accessed September 22, 2008)

10 Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" (1966) in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977), p. 203–204.

ART AND IDEOLOGY: THE INTERVENTION OF THE MEDIUM

Rather than simply manifesting in his work social practices and becoming subject to their ideologies, Ruby's art is about them. Both descriptive and separate from these dynamics, his art, as we will see, is able to provide a vantage point on certain ideologies and practices rather than being co-opted by them. This is a crucially important yet little understood artistic prerogative that the French nineteenth-century symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé comprehended in his "Preface" to his typographically arranged poem *A Throw of Dice... [Un coup de dés...]*. In this introduction, he emphasizes how "the reading process is spaced out" and enables "the [consequent] 'blanks' in effect, [to] assume importance," thereby underscoring the way that the paper on which the poem is printed "intervenes" in the process of reading it.¹¹ The white paper's intervention in Mallarmé's poem and in other material works of art saves them from being co-opted by contemporaneous ideologies, including humanism, thereby providing them with a means for wresting themselves (as well as their readers or viewers) free from ideologies' usual interpellating power.

This capacity of art to be about ideology rather than becoming one of its subjects is actually discussed by Althusser in his far too infrequently referenced "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" (1966). Responding to Daspre's question about whether or not art should be considered an ideology, Althusser unequivocally states that he does "not rank real art among the ideologies." He then elucidates his position:

I believe that the peculiarity of art is to "make us see" (*nous donner à voir*), "make us perceive," "make us feel" something which *alludes* to reality ... What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of "*seeing*," "*perceiving*," and "*feeling*," (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes* ... Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a "view" of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a *retreat*, an *internal distantiation* from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us "perceive" (but not know) in some sense from the *inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held.¹²

Since Althusser considers knowledge (as opposed to art) to be inherently structural and involved in the articulation of systems and the implicit rules "*of arrangement and combination* that gives them their meaning," he attributes this type of analysis to science, whereas art "is 'detached' from ... ideology and in some way makes us 'see' it from the *outside*, makes us 'perceive' it by a distantiation inside that ideology."¹³ Following up on this observation, it is my contention that in art the wonderfully absurd opacity of its media and form preclude it from interpellating ideological subjects because these formal means obstruct the more direct persuasiveness necessary for this type of enlistment.¹⁴ As we will see, Sterling Ruby's art revels in the power of intervening media and consequently moves easily from sculpture to video, collage, ceramics, and painting.

Art's ability to permit its viewers opportunities to observe critically ongoing ideological constructs rather than to be interpellated by them, as Althusser suggests, and thus avoid becoming subject to their protocols and caught up in their limits, as happens with Lacan's Symbolic, is one of its crucially important, but still unfortunately rarely cited advantages. This capacity to open art up to the topic of subjectivity without locking its viewers into a particular identity is an especially valuable

11 Henry Weinfield, ed. and trans., *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 121.

12 Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art..."

13 Ibid.

14 This explication of Althusser's letter that removes the taint of interpellation from art so that it is not just seen as ideology's effects but instead is viewed as a means for comprehending and understanding ideology, was first developed in Robert Hobbs, "Looking B(1)ack: Reflections of White Racism" in Robert Hobbs, Glenn Ligon, et al, *30 Americans* (Miami: Rubell Family Collection, 2008).

critical tool for Ruby's post-Lacanian and post-humanistic work because, as we will see, it is able to introduce his audiences to new possibilities without encumbering them with any one in particular. The reason for this capability is the extraordinary role that the artistic medium is able to play. Functioning in much the same way as the white paper on which Mallarmé's poems are printed, the medium is both inside the art as the means for manifesting its content and also outside the work since it "intervenes" and interacts with this meaning, as we have seen in the above reference to Mallarmé's "Preface" to *A Throw of Dice*.

This crossing of boundaries functions in an analogous manner to the way images operate in the minds of schizophrenics, who are unable to become completely wedded to a given Symbolic because of a number of not clearly understood reasons that are both chemical and behavioral. To understand the profound role that artistic media assumes in the minds of artists and viewers, it helps to look at one of the particularly revealing observations made by the schizophrenic called N.N., which the Freudian psychoanalyst and anthropologist Géza Róheim collected during the years 1938–39 when he was working at the Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts. Included among the many insightful observations that Róheim recorded in his little-known study *Magic and Schizophrenia* is N.N.'s poignant description of his first illness, which focuses on the ways his words lack their customary abstractness and become, in his mind, fully encumbered by the objects they articulate:

I was thinking of how that trouble began. On a Sunday when I could not eat and could not make myself understood, it felt as if I were being lifted right out of the house. As I have told you—when I went home I would upset everything, or everything looked upset, or I was upset. My shoes were always knocked off, and then there was trouble in my brain—and it would be difficult to say things. So one of the doctors gave me the advice to take off the shoe and put it in my brain. Then the shoe would help me talk. When I say the word "shoe," a shoe would form itself in my mouth. Or I would feel the chair, or the street I was living on. This would happen when somebody who knew me—maybe my aunt or mother—would touch me through the air. When I said "street," the whole street would be in my mouth, and it would be difficult for me to pronounce it. Or when I ate soup, the whole can of soup would be in my mouth. Or a house... The words were angered in my head—they would not come out.

Pronouncing the word "street" and at the same time feeling the street in your head—that is insanity.¹⁵

N.N.'s description of this sickness, which is a recognized symptom of schizophrenia, is similar to the interference that artistic media create when they operate on the same plane as a work's subject. Although the French Marxist theorist Jacques Rancière in *The Future of the Image* envisages a boundary clearly separating form and content in terms of the alternatives of *punctum* (art's arresting formal power) and its *studium* (its various specified and possible semiotic references),¹⁶ Mallarmé's preface to his *A Throw of Dice* and N.N.'s first realization of his psychotic condition indicates an entirely different and more cohesive situation. Their approach reveals that art's physical matter, its way of characterizing itself, and the content manifested by it are far more closely aligned than Rancière indicates. Instead of Rancière's oscillating perspective, there is an ongoing confrontation of art's form and content that frees viewers from any interpellative encumbrances at the same time that it permits them to see how its Symbolic or ideological registers function. What this means for our analysis of Ruby's

15 Géza Róheim, *Magic and Schizophrenia* (New York: International Universities Press, 1955), p. 160–161. N.N.'s observations, as recorded in Róheim's book, were of great importance to sculptor Alice Aycock and are discussed in my monograph on her work. Cf. Robert Hobbs, *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 2005).

16 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

art is that his work can both invoke and indicate various subjectivities while maintaining enough distance so that his viewers can look at them as part of the art's subject rather than being concerned that these subjectivities will hook them into ideology's enticing and pernicious effects.

STERLING RUBY'S TOPICS

The positive and dynamic theories important for Ruby's work include the post-structuralist approach of transversally forged subject positions developed by the post-Lacanian psychoanalyst Félix Guattari while working with psychotics like N.N. It is also predicated on the deconstruction of male/female relations that another post-Lacanian, the self-styled feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, has hypothesized. Ruby's work gathers energy as well from the radical differences separating the austere intellectual rigor of circa 1960s East-Coast Minimalism from the cool lushness of its "*Finish Fetish*" L.A. counterpart. And it depends on the historical interplays between the engendered positions assumed by such macho-oriented Minimalists as Donald Judd and the contemporaneous and entirely different approach taken by the anti-form artist Eva Hesse, whose works have been considered feminist. Ruby's art is also haunted by the concomitant sea change that took place in the art world in the late 1960s when modernist concerns were first being replaced by postmodern ones, and it draws strength from several generations of L.A. artists, including Edward Kienholz whose work anticipates by several decades Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and such later artists as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley whose work gives aesthetic form to her ideas.

Sterling Ruby's art is also responsive to the very recent and urgent social problems that have ensued in the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attacks because of the Bush administration's blatant disregard for the rights of *habeas corpus*. This government's indifference to the law continues an extraordinarily cruel practice in the penal system, initiated in the late 1980s, whereby inmates, without due legal process, have been placed in special solitary confinement facilities. Either deemed intractable prisoners because of their inability to follow the rules of regular penitentiaries or considered likely sources for information on the whereabouts and nefarious activities of their fellow gang members on the outside, provided their resistance can be broken down, these inmates have been consigned to super-maximum security prisons or control units (called "Supermax," a term Ruby has employed as the title for a number of his solo shows). These units are actually prisons within the United States's state and federal prison system that places inmates in isolated cells for as long as 23 hours a day for months, years, and even decades. According to the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) the official definition of supermax prisons is as follows:

Free standing facilities, or a distinct unit within a facility, that provides for the management and secure control of inmates who have been officially designated as exhibiting violent or seriously disruptive behavior while incarcerated. Such inmates have been determined to be a threat to safety and security in traditional high security facilities, and their behavior can be controlled only by separation, restricted movement and limited direct access to staff and other inmates.¹⁷

17 Jesenia Pizarro and Vanja M.K. Stenius, "Supermax Prisons: Their Rise, Current Practices, and Effect on Inmates," *Prison Journal* 48, No. 2 (June 2004), p. 249.

Notable supermax facilities include the earliest one in Pelican Bay, which is located along California's northern border—and is the subject of a number of Ruby's works—as well as the most recent and infamous one at the United States Naval Base on the shore of Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, which

became notorious during the Bush years. Because of its unreasonable and illegal policies, this prison, even though it is not referenced in Ruby's art, resonates with all of his works dealing with this type of incarceration. Guantánamo can be understood as in part formative to them¹⁸ even though Ruby first became acquainted with supermax facilities by watching the MSNBC television series *Lock-up*. This series consists of ten documentaries, each one hour in length; it premiered in the summer of 2000 and has proven so popular that it has been frequently rerun.

Admittedly, the references to supermax prison units in Ruby's art are so powerful and controversial that they come close to overwhelming his work with their appeals to public outrage regarding the lack of judicial and legislative oversight in putting individuals in interminable and often permanent solitary confinement. However, Ruby's work manages to subsume his explicit and implicit references to this incendiary subject matter in his art under the overarching aegis of confrontational views between a generic Minimalism and an L.A.-based Latino-styled gang-originated graffiti. In his works, austere and formidable Formica monoliths that appear resolutely institutional reveal the indexical telltale marks of human rebellion, transgression, and weathering, as incised graffiti tags, smudges, fingerprints, spray paint, and rough edges that metaphorically connote frustrated attempts to break out of reified definitions of the self, including even Lacan's Symbolic, which continues to keep human beings sequestered under society's lock and key.

The past actions of these indexical tracks in Ruby's work refer back to the putative actions of individuals—ghostly personages representing supermax prisoners and/or the artist—who are referenced but who cannot be adequately recalled by the signs they have left deposited on the surface of the monoliths. On first acquaintance, Ruby's indexical references would appear to have a basis in the well-known and often referenced two-part essay "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America" by the eminent art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss. In her article Krauss connects American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of the index with photography as a chief *modus operandi* for 1970s art. In doing so she conflates the index and the icon—another Peircean sign based on resemblance to an external referent—before asserting the ability of the work of art to recall or reaffirm photographically the appearance of the object physically giving rise to it.¹⁹ If one looks at indexical relations, however, without the reassurance of photography's iconicity, as Ruby's work does, then the elusiveness of the indexical source, whose effects the work of art witnesses and registers, is extraordinarily moving in terms of the alienation it connotes. Such off-stage indices, which can only be partially reclaimed or understood, are a crucial operative for Ruby's art and a basis for its stirring pathos where they appear as signs of now absent humans in the monoliths, gouged impressions of the fingers that molded the clay in the ceramics, missing initiators of the gravitational flows of urethane comprising the stalagmites, and now absent hands that once held cans of spray paint when making the paintings. While works of art, to a certain extent, always refer to the missing indexical component of the artist's hand, rarely has the absence of the forces giving rise to it been characterized with the poignancy this type of sign achieves in Ruby's post-humanistic work.

Inflected by both post-Lacanian and post-humanist views of the world, Sterling Ruby's art occupies a strategically important position in twenty-first century culture in terms of its inauguration of dramatically new situations for rethinking subjectivity. The prescient *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith recognized the importance of his work when she referred to him as "one of the most interesting artists to emerge in this century." She then elaborated:

18 Cf. Jennifer Daskal and Stacy Sullivan, *Locked Up Alone: Detention Conditions and Mental Health at Guantanamo*, ed. Joanne Mariner, Dinah PoKempner, and Joseph Saunders (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), p. 1-2. In this book-length study the facilities at Guantanamo are referred to as "supermax":

"Approximately 270 prisoners remain at Guantanamo, most of whom have been in US custody for more than six years without ever being charged with a crime. Some 185 of them—including many of the several dozen individuals already cleared for release or transfer—are now being housed in prison facilities akin to and in some respects more restrictive than many "supermax" prisons in the United States.

Such detainees at Guantanamo spend 22 hours a day alone in small cells with little or no natural light or fresh air. They are allowed out only two hours a day (often at night) to exercise in small outdoor pens. Except for the occasional visit by an attorney or representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), they have little human interaction with anyone other than interrogators and prison staff ...

None of the prisoners currently held at Guantanamo has ever been allowed a visit from a family member, and most of them have never been allowed even to make a single phone call home during the six-plus years they have been detained. Detainees receive virtually no educational or rehabilitative programming to help them pass the time ...

They spend most of their days alone in totally enclosed cells with no educational and vocational outlets, and little more than the Koran and a single book to occupy their minds—something that is of little use to those that are illiterate ... the conditions at Guantanamo have reportedly caused the mental health of many prisoners to deteriorate ..."

19 Cf. especially Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2," *October* 4 (Autumn, 1977), p. 58-67.

He makes obstreperous, richly glazed ceramic vessels that suggest charred remains, totemic sculptures webbed with mucously, macramélike drips of resin; large, dark collages dotted with constellations of tiny images of artifacts, and drawings, photographs and short videos.²⁰

20 Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Sterling Ruby, New York Times (March 21, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/21/arts/design/21gall.html?ex=1363752000&en=d05b6d57253043f3&ei=5124&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink> (accessed October 10, 2008). Smith's review focuses on two overlapping exhibitions of Ruby's work in New York City: *Chron* at The Drawing Center's Drawing Room and *Kiln Works* at Metro Pictures.

21 Given Ruby's work with the Video Data Bank, which is part of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, it should not be surprising that his first mature works would be in video. During the years from 1999–2003, when he was taking courses at the Art Institute of Chicago and living in the city, Ruby worked as an assistant at the Video Data Bank. Initiated in 1976 by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, the Video Data Bank is remarkable for its encouragement of women artists in the 1970s and 1980s, including its interviews with them. When Ruby worked with this video archive, it had in its collection over 5,000 tapes, including the entire collection of the Leo Castelli videos. Ruby learned to edit videos while on the job and would watch as many as 12 videos a day when he was at the Video Data Bank, so that he gained both technical facility with the medium as well as an in-depth knowledge about the history of modern and post-modern art that video reveals. His later interest in the ongoing dynamism of transversality no doubt has a source in his firm grounding in video.

22 Adam Eaker, "One to Watch: Sterling Ruby," *ArtKrush* 80 (19 March 2008), <http://artkrush.com/162147> <<http://artkrush.com/162147>> (accessed October 10, 2008).

23 Linda Yablonsky, "Black in the Day: Does L.A. sculptor Sterling Ruby know where he's going?" *Village Voice* (1 May 2007), <http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-05-01/art/black-in-the-day/> (accessed October 11, 2008).

24 Catherine Taft, "Introducing Sterling Ruby," *Modern Painters* (December, 2006), p. 75.

Smith's assessment was no doubt predicated on her introduction to the full range of Ruby's work that was occasioned by the extraordinary presentations of three one-person gallery exhibitions and one museum show in New York City during the 2007–08 fall–winter season—a tremendously bold move for an artist whose first well-conceived videos go back to *Agoraphobic* (2001) and whose first mature two- and three-dimensional works were made in 2004.²¹ These four exhibitions include two 2007 gallery exhibitions at Metro Pictures and Foxy Production entitled respectively *Killing the Recondite* and *SUPEROVERPASS* as well as the following presentations in 2008: *Kiln Works* (Metro Pictures) and *Chron* at the Drawing Center, which João Ribas curated. The title *Chron* for Ruby's Drawing Center show provides insight into the shift his work enacts as it moves from a humanistic orientation to a distinctly new, post-humanistic purview: in geology the word "chron" is customarily employed to refer to an event or segment of time that begins in one period and ends in another, and in physics it characterizes geomagnetic reversals caused by changes in the direction of a planet's magnetic field.

The scope of Ruby's artistic mission is evidenced by the many different artistic forms and media he has embraced; these include: etched Formica monoliths; expansive graffiti-based spray paintings; multi-media drawings; purposefully wonky ceramics coated with a surfeit of liquid glazes; halting nail polish abstractions on Plexiglas; hauntingly dark, even macabre installations; attenuated Goth-like poured and molded monumental urethane sculptures; robust bleach drawings; a range of videos; and discomfiting photographic collages and digital prints. Appreciating this full spectrum of artistic activity, critic Adam Eaker perspicaciously observed, "Sterling Ruby's work vacillates between the fluid and the static, the minimalist and the expressionistic, the pristine and the de-faced ... the multimedia artist explores the formal qualities of repression and containment."²² Even though these polarities are helpful in categorizing the impressive array of Ruby's work, which can seem chaotic and overwhelming to newcomers, such opposing attitudes could also be construed as the basis for traditional dialectical syntheses of polarities that would lead Ruby—and viewers enacting such resolutions—back to a traditional golden median similar to the middle-course Panofsky referred to as "humanist." Moving both within and beyond polarities to an open-ended and remarkable situation bordering on chaos, Ruby's overall project inaugurates new directions that can be enormously disconcerting because of their rich diversity and anxious intensity. New York critic Linda Yablonsky, for example, found Ruby's density and range confounding and acknowledged her frustration in her review of *Killing the Recondite*. "I don't get him," Yablonsky admitted, "but I want to" because "his art is too weird, and too fierce, to dismiss."²³ Two years earlier L.A. critic Catherine Taft provided an important clue to Ruby's approach, when she devised the term "illicit unions" to refer to his ability to devise "complex objects and images in which unexpected or discordant elements come together; [thus enabling] their rendezvous [to] result in frissons of transgression and transformation."²⁴

FÉLIX GUATTARI'S TRANSVERSALITY

Taft's phrase "illicit unions" is a particularly felicitous characterization of the new artistic tactic called "transversality" that Félix Guattari formulated in the 1960s and Ruby has subsequently employed as both theory and praxis when creating his work. Transversality's ability to provoke "illicit unions" not

only enables it to undermine residual traces of humanism by channeling them into partial subjects, but also to catalyze radical new ways of re-construing and elaborating on the unending dynamic of continuously changing subjectivities that constitute people's ongoing affiliations with themselves and their world. Such an unrestricted dynamic as transversality makes their lives ultimately much richer and fuller because they are no longer tied to monolithic and static roles. Because of its impact on Ruby's work, this transgressive method needs to be grasped historically, theoretically, and aesthetically, beginning with Guattari's account of it.

But before considering this fecund concept and its impact on reconfiguring the self, it helps to know that Ruby learned about it in the course of his studies in studio art at Art Center, Pasadena, where he culminated his graduate studies in 2005 with a widely discussed thesis show. Before he came to Pasadena, Ruby was open to the idea of a fluid and changing self. When he was still a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, he had been mistakenly diagnosed as bipolar and was prescribed the drug Lamictal. Because of his adverse reactions to this drug, he went to another specialist who found that he had been misdiagnosed and was not bipolar. Keenly aware of the self's fragility and one's ability to slip in and out of radically different self-conceptions, Ruby was consequently particularly open to the concept of transversality when he was introduced to it by the noted French editor of *Semiotext* and comparative literature specialist, Sylvère Lotringer. A close friend of Guattari since 1972 and a strong advocate of a "'materialist' semiotics" that superseded the linguistic model developed by Lacan,²⁵ Lotringer had served as a professor of French and Comparative Literature at Columbia University since the early 1970s where he had focused on both post-structuralism as well as the chaotic modernism of Antonin Artaud, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Georges Bataille that foreshadowed the tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust. Because Art Center, Pasadena, had become known as an excellent place to study both studio art and theory, Lotringer had agreed to teach there.

Art Center's most impressive faculty included the well-known multi-media artist Mike Kelley with whom Ruby worked; the esteemed video artist Diana Thater and the respected painter-critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, as well as the eminent L.A. sculptor Liz Larner and the remarkable L.A. MOCA curator Ann Goldstein with whom Ruby was well acquainted. Perhaps the most supportive faculty member for Ruby was the abstract and figurative painter as well as collagist, Richard Hawkins, who later wrote insightfully about his work.²⁶ In addition to being introduced to Guattari's work by Lotringer, Ruby was initiated into the pleasures of reading psychology as if it were absorbing literature by Kelley, who enjoyed Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, and Melanie Klein as enlightened fiction and appreciated in particular their metaphorical value.²⁷ Uninterested in Lacan's arcane theories and obtuse prose, Kelley has said that he prefers "psychological and psychoanalytical writing [that] that tries to tackle basic human motivations and problems," thereby perpetuating a basically humanistic outlook. But even though he confesses to ignoring Lacan, Kelley in his early work embraced the idea of abjection advanced by the Lacanian epigone Julia Kristeva, which involves the unbearable state of liminality, which confuses, agitates, or incapacitates identities, and which begins before the Mirror Stage when the child reacts against the mother who has been identified as part of the infant's self and abjects her.²⁸ At Art Center, Ruby followed Lotringer's insights into Guattari's transversality and Artaud's approach to theater at the same time that he moved beyond the psychoanalytic writers Kelley preferred, with the exception of a generalized appreciation for Kristeva's abjection, and steeped himself, as already noted, in the post-Lacanian psychology of Guattari and Irigaray.

25 Cf. Joan Waltemath, "A Life in Theory: Sylvère Lotringer," *Brooklyn Rail* (September 2006), <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/art/a-life-in-theory> (accessed October 19, 2008).

26 Ruby's thesis committee consisted of Mike Kelley, Bruce Hainley, Richard Hawkins, Patti Podesta, and Dr. Laurence Rickels.

27 Mike Kelley, "Language & Psychology," *Art: 21 (Art in the Twenty-First Century)*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kelley/clip2.html> (accessed October 19, 2008). This and the following references to Kelley's interest in psychology as absorbing fiction come from this revealing interview.

28 Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

In the early 1950s, before Guattari personally trained as a psychoanalyst under Jacques Lacan and was subsequently analyzed by this eminent figure during the years 1962–69, he was intrigued with groundbreaking changes in psychiatric hospitals that the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jean Oury had helped to initiate both during and after World War II. Innovations enacted by Oury and others include successfully opening these institutions to the outside world and beginning the process of introducing patients to workshops and group activities. When Oury asked Guattari in 1955 to work with him at La Clinique de Château de La Borde, which is located about an hour south of Paris, Guattari willingly suspended his philosophy studies to develop a Patients' Club at this institution. Despite Oury's important work, Guattari still found that institutions like La Borde, which specialized in working with psychotics, were essentially prisons that inadvertently encouraged patients' dependency to the point of turning them into institutionalized subjects. In a 1977 essay, which Lotringer later published, Guattari graphically describes the degeneration of both patients' and staff's attitudes that can occur in penal-like psychiatric hospitals:

Psychotics, objects of a system of quasi-zoological guardianship, necessarily take on an almost bestial allure, running in circles all day long, knocking their heads against the walls, shouting, fighting, crouching in filth and excrement. These patients, whose understanding and relations with others are disturbed, slowly lose their human characteristics, becoming deaf and blind to all social communication. Their guardians, who at the time had no training at all, were forced to retreat behind a sort of armor of inhumanity if they wanted to avoid depression and despair themselves.²⁹

Because traditional asylums were often more like penitentiaries than institutions for treating psychotics, Guattari began using the Patients' Club and the prestige accorded to him as its head as a means for de-emphasizing the highly cathected bond between patient and doctor—the traditional central core around which psychiatric hospitals were based. This taut relationship was predicated on Freud's theory of transference that offered patients the opportunity to project their intense feelings about situations, people, or objects onto their analyst in the hope of providing this specialist with a more acute appreciation of their condition, a process which was supposed to help with analyzing and understanding them. According to Guattari, this theory, which Lacan heartily subscribed to, was hackneyed, bourgeois, and regressive; it empowered analysts by promoting them into gurus at the expense of their patients' needs.³⁰ As a way of combating the effects of this debilitating process, Guattari revisited Lacan's theory that psychosis results from breaks in the semiotic systems comprising the Symbolic so that a patient's language no longer functions rationally. He then began to envisage what might happen if the patient were to be presented with a great number of possibilities to affiliate in distinctly new ways that broke through this impasse at the same time that these opportunities undermined both the analyst's power and the institution's implicit authority. Wishing therefore to find new techniques that would allow patients to break the institution's shackles and bond with the outside world, Guattari recognized that ensconced Symbolics usurp an individual's agency and will, since they all constitute situations that produce subjectivity rather than are produced by them.³¹ Guattari consequently realized that concerted attempts would be needed to break through the strictures of an overly controlling superego or Symbolic by providing many different options for forging new subjectivities.

29 Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), p. 177.

30 Ibid., p. 146.

31 Ibid., p. 182.

In order to defuse analysands' overweening focus on their analyst, Guattari knew he would need to undermine the hospital's rigid hierarchies, release patients from their jail-like rooms, abolish unnecessarily restrictive rules, and do away with invasive supervision. His first major goal was to reconstruct La Borde's administrative flow chart so that patients and the staff would be forced to assume new modes of interacting that would necessitate the formation of new subject positions. "At this stage of development," Guattari later wrote, "the institutional process demanded that an internal mini-revolution be undertaken: it required all service personnel work to be integrated with medical work, and that, reciprocally, medical staff be drafted for material tasks such as cleaning, cooking, dishwashing, maintenance, etc."³² While the medical professionals understood the reasons for the change and easily accommodated themselves to the relatively mundane daily chores of caring for the patients' physical needs, many members of the service personnel were apprehensive about giving shots or chairing meetings. However, some did grow into their new positions. A particularly inspiring example was the elderly washerwoman at La Borde who found that she enjoyed overseeing the print shop and heading the newspaper's editorial committee. Guattari's goal for the patients was to provide them with heretofore-unforeseen opportunities for expression and development. People from simple agrarian backgrounds, for example, were introduced to the arts; and administrators, teachers, and scholars were offered the chance to become involved in such physical activities as cooking, gardening, making pottery, and horseback riding. Guattari's mini-revolution was deemed a great success, as he himself noted, when he concluded that the goals of the Patients' Club were to "offer people diverse possibilities for recomposing their existential corporeality, to get out of their repetitive impasses ... [and] to resingularise themselves so that these singularities would be 'event-centered.'"³³

Guattari's description of the benefits that accrued from the experiments at La Borde when transversality was first consciously put into practice enables us to conclude that he was attempting to break the stranglehold created by interpellating a psychotic in terms of only one dominant Symbolic by multiplying this individual's possibilities so that no one subject position would prevail. Over the years Guattari came to advocate the development of only "partial" subjectivities that he defined as "pre-personal, polyphonic, collective and machinic"; he elaborated on this position by pointing out that the process of enunciation—Benveniste's *énonciation* considered from the point of view of the cultural field as a whole—is never complete. "Fundamentally," he writes, "the question of enunciation gets decentered in relation to that of human individuation. Enunciation becomes correlative not only to the emergence of a logic of non-discursive intensities, but equally to a pathic incorporation-agglomeration of these vectors of partial subjectivity. Thus it involves rejecting the habitually universalizing claims of psychological modelisation."³⁴ Related to this dynamic view of de-centered enunciations and the resultant partial subjectivities is *schizoanalysis*, a concept that proved to be important to the theories of both Guattari and Deleuze. Schizoanalysis is a means for analyzing the dynamic and changing enunciations of transversality; it views psychotic breaks as hyperbolic expressions of the everyday elisions that can be positively re-constructed to build new and dynamic partial subjectivities. Toward the end of his life Guattari described schizoanalysis in the following manner: "... rather than moving in the direction of reductionist modelisations which simplify the complex, [schizoanalysis] will work towards its complexification, its processual enrichment, towards the consistency of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation, in short towards its ontological heterogeneity."³⁵

Guattari's open-ended approach, as we will see, becomes a *modus operandi* for Sterling Ruby, who employs it as a working premise for his art. Since Althusser's letter to Daspre (cited earlier) indicates how

32 Ibid., p. 178.

33 Félix Guattari, "On the Production of Subjectivity" in *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 7.

34 Ibid., p. 21–22.

35 Guattari, "Schizoanalytic Metamodelisation" in *Chaosmosis*, p. 61.

ideology becomes art's subject rather than its means, we can ascribe to Ruby's art a similar concern with transversality as an exciting new iconography that requires supportive media, which in turn reinforce it at the same time that they effectively contravene its ability to interpellate the art's audience as its subjects.

Several years after his experiments at La Borde, Guattari described in "*Gangs in New York*"³⁶ a particularly successful form of grassroots transversality, which developed in 1972 in the South Bronx, New York, without the help of a behind-the-scenes professional orchestrating it. Because of its spontaneous development, the South Bronx's autochthonously developed transversality serves as an excellent model for Ruby's art and his desire to rethink the dynamics between different groups of people. In his brief piece Guattari outlines some of the advantages marginalized groups can offer society at large. Instead of considering gangs a "psychopathological" fringe, he suggests rethinking their insurgencies as perceptive critiques and particularly beneficial views of mainstream society's excesses and misdirected effects; such revolts—if viewed properly—can have the advantage of pricking holes in unquestioned norms and offering new ways to rethink ensconced societal assumptions and goals. The situation occasioning Guattari's thoughts was the takeover of the South Bronx's Lincoln Hospital by militants whose actions were incited by mounting racial tensions. Although most of the militants, who had held this institution hostage, left after a few weeks, those gang members—mostly ex-addicts—who had taken over the drug rehabilitation ward became so involved with its program and excited by their initial success in transforming its practices that they decided to stay. Instead of becoming assistants to the returning doctors, these former militants retained their hold over drug rehabilitation at this hospital, and they demonstrated continued success with such innovations as the extended use of methadone as a replacement therapy for hard drugs. They believed that it should be taken for years rather than for the few days that most detox programs specify, and their reasoning was based on the theory that, over time, addicts' emotional dependency would be dictated by re-conceiving illegal street drugs as prescription medications that can be taken only under the strict guidance of a professional. Put in terms of Guattari's transversality, their actions demonstrated an intuitive understanding of the new subject position of medicalized patient rather than ex-addict that these methadone users would eventually experience.

Guattari's description of the transformations taking place at the Lincoln Hospital detox clinic is an excellent example of transversality in action as is the revolution that he instigated at Clinique de La Borde. Both situations demonstrate how transversality, which was originally a topological concept, became a useful term for underscoring the many benefits achieved from transgressing limits, overturning norms, and remaining consistently open to life's dynamism. Although Guattari does not credit the theory of the *dérive*, which the French Situationist theorist and artist Guy Debord formulated in the late 1950s, as a source for transversality, it is highly possible that this concept was a factor in his thinking. Debord characterized the *dérive* as a "psychogeographic" process³⁷ that involves a purposive letting go, so that a walk through the city is at the behest of one's immediate desires and whims rather than any forethought. In this way, the *dérive* constitutes an open-ended perambulating form of transversality that enables the people enacting it to relocate, redefine, and enrich their relationship to an urban situation by letting go their habitual way of interacting with it. Because transversality refers to the processes of extending, cutting across, and intersecting discrete intellectual, emotional, social, economic, political, and concrete territories, and sometimes denotes breaking through entire fields of knowledge and resistance to achieve inter- or intra-subjectivities, it is a useful way to rethink the traditional parameters of that ultimate province, the personal pronoun "I," by providing a means for reconfiguring the self in terms of a group, assemblage, or plurality.

36 Guattari, *Chaosophy*, p. 291–295.

37 Cf. Guy Debord, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude," trans. Ken Knabb. First published in *Internationale Situationniste* No. 3 (1959), <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display315> (accessed April 3, 2007).

Moving away from Lacan's view of subjectivity as permanently grounded in an autocratic linguistically based Symbolic whose established codes permit some modes of expression while precluding others, Guattari's theory of the self is perpetually open. His non-monolithic subjectivity is nothing more than an ongoing assemblage or collection of pre-personal and/or supra-personal references perpetually subjected to machinic drives and flows that cut across it and in turn transform it. Apropos this transversal approach, which can be polyphonic, various, and multi-storied, Guattari notes, "The psyche, in essence, is the resultant of multiple and heterogeneous components." He then points out that its many engagements with verbal and nonverbal forms of contact include but are not limited to such collective assemblages of enunciation as constructed or built spaces, animal behavior, social and economic positions, and "ethical and aesthetic aspirations."³⁸

TRANSVERSALITY AND ART

The admixture of ethics and aesthetics making up Guattari's transversality, which is crucially important to his subsequent overall approach as well as that of Deleuze, is also the foundation for the epistemological premises and ontological ramifications of Ruby's overall artistic practice. Because of this connection between transversality and aesthetics, it is necessary to ask how this open-ended approach can be viewed aesthetically, and why, in fact, it should be thought about in this manner. We can begin by noting that Guattari's views of psychoanalysis are essentially aesthetic. Meditating on differences between psychoanalysis and science, Guattari has noted, "[Although, of course, psychoanalytic] treatment is not a work of art, yet it must proceed from the same sort of creativity."³⁹ This remarkable observation is predicated on an understanding of vanguard art's ability to provoke new responses by interfering with conditioned ways of thinking. Perhaps the clearest exposition of this concept is found in Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*.⁴⁰ Describing innovative art's mission in terms of its need to produce new codes, requiring viewers to break with their habitual ways of looking as they come to grips with the new work of art before them, Deleuze provocatively insists that art's goal is to provide viewers with something "imperceptible." Undetectable because it remains provocatively unrevealed, new art's imperceptibility is a distinct break in the semiotic universe of references formerly available to viewers so they are unable to comprehend its new terms consciously even though they can intuit the work of art's momentousness. In this type of situation viewers can no longer rely on the established language and socially ratified modes of thinking constituting Lacan's Symbolic as the basis for interpreting an aesthetic field; instead they are presented with something that can at best be considered in terms of conflated or hybridized semiotic codes or, more simply, "ruptures," the term that both Deleuze and Guattari use. The situation is akin to the problem facing a Zen initiate who is stumped by trying to figure out the irresolvable conundrum that koans present, until he or she recognizes that the contradictory saying constitutes, in its entirety, a metaphoric threshold to a new way of thinking and being. In addition, Deleuze's strange but useful conjunction between art and the imperceptible is similar to Kant's theory of reflective judgment, described in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, in which a work of art appears meaningful even though no one single meaning can account for it. "Beauty," as Kant begins his famous statement on reflective judgment that sounds almost like a koan, "is an object's form of *purposiveness* insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*."⁴¹

Similar to Deleuze, Guattari considers art in terms of the force of aesthetic ruptures. In his essay "On the Production of Subjectivity" he calls for "The invention of a new catalytic nuclei capable of

38 Guattari, *Chaosophy*, p. 191.

39 Ibid., p. 191.

40 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

41 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 84, from section 17, "On the Ideal of Beauty: Explication of the Beautiful Inferred from the Third Moment."

bifurcating existence,” and notes, “A singularity, a rupture of sense, a cut, a fragmentation, the detachment of a semiotic content—in a Dadaist or Surrealist manner—can originate mutant nuclei of subjectivation.”⁴² Guattari then connects the idea of this break with art:

The poetic-existential catalysis that we find at work in the midst of scriptural, vocal, musical or plastic discursivities engages quasi-synchronously the enunciative crystallization of the creator, the interpreter and the admirer of the work of art, like analyst and patient. Its efficiency lies in its capacity to promote active, processual ruptures within semiotically structured, signification and denotative networks, where it will put emergent subjectivity to work.⁴³

At another point in his discussion, the French theorist compares the creation of new subjectivities to the way an “artist creates from the colours on his palette.”⁴⁴ The ethics incorporated in Guattari’s view of transversality as an “ethico-aesthetic” process is thus an unlimited view of subjectivity, which is always in the process of being reconstructed in terms of innovative ontological catchphrases (“refrains”) that bring together heterogeneous elements in new ways. Both Guattari and Deleuze in their many writings on transversality—and its later incarnations schizoanalysis and chaosmosis—focus on rhizomatic, endlessly propagating zones of multiplicity, fluctuant identities, the art of thinking otherwise, and the ongoing process of de-territorialization. For them transversality is a fecund series of ongoing conjunctions or transitive verbs leading continually to new direct objects and to unfamiliar and undefined modes of being similar to Baudelaire’s long-celebrated voyage to the new. A form on the way station to other potential forms, artistically oriented transversality is the eminently open possibility of continually renewing temporary coalitions.

AGORAPHOBIA: PRE-TRANSVERSALITY IN RUBY’S WORK AND BACKGROUND

Several years before Ruby met Lotringer and became imbued with Guattari’s ideas of transversality, his art had already exhibited clues that he was moving in this direction, even though some of his early works focus on its polar opposite: the problems of being enclosed and sequestered. Most prominently, perhaps, in this regard is the 2001 video *Agoraphobic*, which explores a young bureaucrat’s claustrophobic fears about being hemmed in—the very opposite of transversality’s yearning expansiveness—and an approach close to Matthew Barney’s *Drawing Restraint* of the previous decade. In Ruby’s *Agoraphobic* this fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as its protagonist, a young corporate administrator, tries to break out of his closed world by climbing through the office building’s airshaft, only to find himself encapsulated in it.

The theme of agoraphobia is a subject position that can be moved back even further in Ruby’s life where it assumes the form of the socially conditioned 1960s–1970s hybrid of alternative-lifestyle anti-establishmentarianism. Sterling Ruby’s parents were quasi-hippies: his mother from the Netherlands and his father in the United States Air Force chose to live in a series of communes in Germany and the Netherlands before settling down on a modest rural Pennsylvania farm. Sterling’s first memories were colored by his parents’ efforts to escape bureaucratic conformism. Because farming did not provide enough income, Sterling’s father went back to school, earned a degree in engineering, became an expert in explosives, and was able to demolish superannuated buildings, factories, and bridges. In light of Ruby’s *Agoraphobic*, it is tempting to view his father’s work cathartically as a metaphoric way to explode some aspects of the bureaucratic world that he had earlier

42 Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 18.

43 Ibid., p. 19.

44 Ibid., p. 7.

attempted to leave behind. On several occasions, the honor of blowing up a building was conferred on the young Sterling, who remembers that at age eight he joined his father at work where he was given the memorable privilege of detonating, with the push of a single red button, an industrial chimney, while everyone around followed the prescribed protocols and ducked under trucks. Although fully sanctioned by his father's company, the opportunity to wield such an enormous destructive force, which was also heralded as constructive, no doubt had a liberating effect on Sterling Ruby. And this contradictory view of destruction as creation—a transversal approach in the very literal sense of the term—may be considered a distant precursor to the artist's later embrace of the tactic of moving across situations to create more and different subject positions.

STERLING RUBY'S ART AND TRANSVERSALITY

When Sterling Ruby does begin subscribing to transversality in his work, he, like Guattari, separated himself from the sacred associations that some earlier cultures have attributed to heroes' remarkable ability to move beyond the limits of their environment and at times even their gender in order to embrace other states of being. This traditional view of sacrosanct figures, who are able to transgress the norms of one order and live equally well in another, is evidenced in the myths and legends of a number of American Indian tribes, who regard as sacred creatures capable of thriving in more than one habitat such as land, water, or air. Consequently Native Americans have honored such animals as ducks, otters, beavers, snakes, and frogs that other cultures, not as concerned with adaptability, have overlooked. Many ancient groups recognized the transcendent value of the androgyne—another traditional yet transversal figure *avant la lettre*—whose asexuality or bisexuality freed it from being hampered by the constraints of only one gender.

By refusing to be shaped by such time-honored views, Ruby's art indicates a desire to discern evidences of the transgressiveness of transversality in the world he inhabits. He initiated an investigation of this open-ended approach in his art by first playing with words that begin with the Latin preposition "trans," which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means "across, to or on the farther side of, beyond, over." Among the most important words that have appeared with some regularity in his writings and conversations as well as in the critical prose about his art are the nouns "transience," "transgression," and "transference," which have enabled him to rethink his work and envision the type of situations that it could represent. As noted earlier, Taft, who had ample opportunities to talk to Ruby, introduced into the critical literature the word "transformation," which could be considered an overarching concept for the above three terms.⁴⁵ Other writers commenting on Ruby's work have suggested such additional possibilities as "transsexual," "transfigure," and "transcendence." While the first two of these words belong to a subset of the above three "trannies," the word "transcendence" can only work as a legitimate means for describing Ruby's art if it connotes an ongoing vertical movement or dynamic, not an ultimate ascent.

Once Ruby's three basic terms of "transience," "transgression," and "transference" were in place, his next project was to find social types that could represent these movements in the modern world. Although he would have found a number of new candidates on the world's stage in Jeffrey Deitch's forward-looking catalogue *Posthuman*,⁴⁶ which considers the innovations of genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, and mind enhancement, Ruby's work eschews this futurist orientation in order to focus on contemporaneous lowbrow and gritty types. Even though he became aware of the bizarre work of French Body artist Orlan, when she spent a year at Art Center, his art steers clear of

45 Taft, "Introducing Sterling Ruby," p. 25.

46 Jeffrey Deitch, ed. *Posthuman* (Athens: Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, 1992).

her highly theatrical view of the self. In her work she remains continuously open to change through, first, cosmetic surgery and intense psychological counseling, and later through Photoshop digital fantasies that morph her into at times mythic and at other times science-fictional characters. In addition to avoiding her flamboyant views of a transversal self, Ruby's innovative and post-humanistic work moves beyond a reliance on himself as an essential canvas on which to project future views and past identities. Instead, his art evidences a commendable desire to discover transversality at work in the world in a number of distinct types. The types he is looking for are extraordinary because of their intense need or ability to move beyond the predictable encapsulating world in which they find themselves in order to redefine themselves in terms of the ongoing dynamics of their choosing. His chief transversal candidates include male and female bodybuilders, transvestites, transsexuals, homeless persons, and gang members. Because of their movement from one type of subject position to another, all these types can be considered, in different ways, nomads. Following up on the section of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* in which nomads are described as the ultimate outsiders and are commended as "an absolute that is one with becoming itself, with process"⁴⁷ Ruby undertook in 2005 the ambitious three-part video *Transient Trilogy*.

This video occupies a crucial place in Ruby's art; in it he introduces a number of the major themes with which his work will be involved. These include incarceration, transversality, abjection, and post-humanism. The work is divided into three different parts—labeled respectively "transient," "creator," and "narrator"—which provide a structure and rationale for the entire work at the same time as they reinforce the basically transversal character of all artworks, which encourage viewers to move from the art to its creator and then to its commentator who reframes it. *Transient Trilogy* begins with a panning shot, providing a close-up of one of Ruby's purposefully overly-glazed ceramics that has been generously punctuated with holes. This slow scrutiny of the piece, with climatic background sound, calls to mind the introduction of Smithson's film *Spiral Jetty*. However, rather than being presented with footage of sun spots and an overview of Utah's Great Salt Lake through maps, books, myths, and establishing shots of the landscape, including a dusty road, Ruby's video opens with his own abject ceramic sculpture with its viscous drips appearing to cascade down its sides. Considered in relation to the rest of the video, this establishing shot inverts the Old Testament theme of God as the ultimate potter creating human beings out of clay; instead of revealing a sublime pot it presents a permeable, awkward, and deliberately amateurishly-constructed ceramic, which is subject to the open space around it and thus an inadequate container for holding anything, with the single exception of supporting itself.⁴⁸

Humanity's shortcomings are fully evident in the strange, almost guttural sounding basso profundo of the off-stage voice over narrator, who later reveals himself to be this modern tragedy's first main character, the transient, a role Ruby plays with affecting confusion. The transient begins his narrative by relating that he was kidnapped at age 12 by a man named Robert Lifton, who was involved in carpentry and ceramics and who had a kiln on his property. Although Robert Lifton in real life is the author of several impressive books on the subject he calls "apocalyptic violence,"⁴⁹ Ruby's video enacts a strange metonymic displacement of this critic of cults and crimes by viewing him as its perpetrator. In *Transient Trilogy* Lifton is credited with sequestering his young captive in a plywood box. After being discovered to be the 12-year-old's kidnapper, Lifton commits suicide by being incinerated in his own kiln. Years later, the video presents the transient finding Lifton's bleached skull, which he then carries around with him as he drifts through a despoiled landscape in the hills east of Los Angeles that also overlook it. The drifter wanders among graffiti-covered rocks,

47 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 494.

48 Cf. Isaiah 64: "Yet, O LORD, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand. Be not exceedingly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity for ever. Behold, consider, we are all thy people. Thy holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. Wilt thou restrain thyself at these things, O LORD? Wilt thou keep silent, and afflict us sorely?" Also, cf. "Shall the potter be regarded as the clay; that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me;' or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?" (Isaiah 29:15–16)

49 Describing his work, Lifton has noted, "I've studied apocalyptic violence for a long time. Most recently, I did a study of Aum Shrinrikyo, the fanatical Japanese cult [known for releasing poison gas in a Tokyo subway—Eds], and earlier I studied events like Nazi genocide and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even the Vietnam War. All of these I now realize have apocalyptic dimensions, by which I mean impulses toward vast destruction in the service of renewal and re-creation of the world." Sarah Ruth, "The Meaning of War," Interview with Robert Jay Lifton, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=617> (accessed November 11, 2008).

searches through the landscape for detritus to add to his plastic bags, plays with dripping blood-red nail polish on the walls of an abandoned building or on boulders, and makes ephemeral works of art along the way. Alluding to sexual abuse, the transient mentions that he became a "traveler" when he discovered "what intersexual was" and then muses, "If you had all the holes of a male and a female, you would be a third kind, a hermaphrodite. It [the hermaphrodite] is said to be angelic; it is said to be the body of harmony." But, instead of taking refuge in such a transcendent image, the transient is resigned to the desperate situation of "experience[ing] the energy of transient faith, [by being] evicted from one's own identity." When he asks the skull "if it is transitory producing or if it is one of those stationary objects for security," the enigmatic response that the vagrant then articulates is that it is "an interior burnt out with an outside rainbow." Ruby's abject transient, no doubt an extension of the slacker or pathetic art of hopeless losers important to a number of artists in the 1980s and 1990s including Mike Kelley, concludes the first section of the video by inserting his penis in the mouth of Lifton's skull, thereby joining sex—a symbol of the life force—with death. In doing so he reenacts the traumatic act of pederasty while dramatizing the futility of doing so.

The pathos of the transient is countered by the cynicism of the creator, who is characterized as the film's director and is also played by Ruby with energetic intensity. Yelling at the actor trying to create a believable transient, Ruby's creator spouts such sarcasms as "think of Hamlet, a character who could not make up his mind," an obvious reference to Lifton's skull as Ruby's equivalent to Shakespeare's "poor Yorick." He continues berating the actor playing the transient, saying, "there is nothing about you that has not been conditioned," and repeating, "there is no more inside." Demeaning human worth and the universal and eternal values of art, this director tells his actor, with little consolation, "you are to decorate the landscape, make art, but don't forget it will just grow over again; nothing is permanent," just "keep going."

After this abrasive interlude, Ruby initiates the third and final section of *Transient Trilogy* with the soothing voiceover of his special childhood friend, Sarah Conaway, an artist and a writer who had moved from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles, and whose dialogue reflects on the video's first segment. Assuming the role of a critic and narrator, Conaway weaves her thoughts with those of Ruby to establish a new position that moves inside and outside the work since she is both the artist's confidant and a perceptive interpreter. As she articulates the script, which Ruby has written, the camera surveys a desecrated landscape clearly enunciated with such persistent cultural signs as small piles of trash and graffiti liberally strewn over big boulders. She muses, "I have always thought of Sterling as a serial killer Joseph Beuys; there is a desire to destroy that which has been created," evidently referring to parallels between Ruby's transient and Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) in which the German artist spent three days in a room with a coyote in René Block's Manhattan gallery. Conaway correctly identifies Lifton's work with "ideological totalism or fundamentalism" and goes on to state obliquely that the "self has become its own cult." Then she counters this view of the self as an unassailable bastion by citing Guattari's transversality, which she characterizes as a "fragmented or mental space" where psychoanalytical terms are incomplete in order to permit the utmost freedom. She differentiates a "zone area" from a "trans space" and describes the latter as deteriorating, breaking down, and rotting.

Picking up on Lifton's suicide in the first part of *Transient Trilogy*, Conaway cites the French filmmaker Robert Bresson's 1977 film *The Devil Probably* (*Le Diable probablement*) about a completely disaffected young man named Charles who chooses suicide because of his inability to affiliate—even when relying on psychoanalysis—with an unsupportable world that cannot be redeemed through

either rebellion or religious conviction. With such a bleak outlook on the world, Charles cannot find even death a sublime experience, just life "cut short." By referencing Bresson's film, Conaway sets up a counter-narrative to the one offered by Ruby's vagrant, who can only view life through the lens of his arrested emotional development and openness to different forms of abjection. It is significant that Conaway follows up her reference to this film by observing that homelessness is a "sign of the loss of interiority," thereby reinforcing Ruby's overall transversal theme that is first evident in the transient's wayward life and then apparent in *Trilogy's* three different perspectives. Despite the measured prose of her exegesis of Ruby's work and her reassuring voice, Conaway's message is depressing: she notes, for example, that in Bresson's film the "viewer is not given the privilege of being converted by the film's illumination." She concludes her segment of the video as well as Ruby's *Trilogy* with a critique of artistic self-indulgence that partially undermines Bresson's film as well as Ruby's video. "If the subject matter of his work is so close to the heart of the artist making the work," she conjectures, "then, what takes place can only be the paradigm of fucking oneself." Viewed in tandem, the three acts of Ruby's *Transient Trilogy* demonstrate how artists, who are fully implicated in their work, are also ultimately as subject to its changes and to its array of new subject positions as Guattari's patients were at La Borde.

Related to this video and created during the same year is the photographic work, *REFRACTION BED OF JOHN*. Ruby discovered the source for this piece in the park of the Ranchero La Brea tar pits, which homeless people often frequent. His work focuses on the remains of a camp fire that transients built directly over an area of tar seepage—a small crack in the earth's crust occurring somewhere in this park almost annually, which might be regarded as a new subjectivity for the planet that discloses, in the form of a tiny fissure, a glimpse of an entirely different view of the earth's surface than the usual one. Ruby's photograph also reveals that the sandbags, which the Ranchero La Brea's staff had used to contain this leak, had served as the transients' fireplace. Documenting the layering of entirely different functions—one museological and conservational and the other improvisational and survivalist, this piece aptly indicates the multiple uses and transgressed barriers transversality can represent.

RUBY'S ART CENTER THESIS SHOW AND CERAMICS:

"INNATE" CREATIONS VS. "CONDITIONED" RESPONSES

After two intensive years studying at Art Center, Ruby felt, in his words, "violated" by the program's constant demands that its students must consciously understand and verbally articulate how specific theories apply to their art, often before they even begin making it. Despite his own impressive ability to understand and work with new theories, Ruby has recalled needing to clear space for himself in order to create. He wished to work intuitively so that ideas could be synthesized in new ways and in material terms that would frame and transform them. In particular he wanted to avoid the cumbersome and inhibiting process of having to preplan, dissect, and analyze his art in theoretical terms before actually creating it, and then be forced to assume the role of critic in defending—again in theoretical terms—the artistic decisions he had made, as Gilbert-Rolfe, among others, frequently pressed him to do. Rephrasing "transversality" as "transience," he made the decision to stop focusing on "end results" and direct his attention to his "drives and desires." In this way he hoped to invoke the principle he called "coming to find." For him, the problem with a great deal of contemporary art is that it entails too much preparatory work in order to fabricate it. Resisting this approach, he decided to make objects that were not calculated through exhaustive preplanning. Moreover, courting interference as

an essential process rather than an unnecessary impediment, he concentrated on work that remained "between the beginning and the end." This is the reason why several years later he found it very satisfying to work with such materials as clear or translucent urethane⁵⁰ that would only permit him five minutes to striate the colors he imbedded in cast blocks, and such means as opaque urethane that had to be quickly poured before the gravitationally formed material would set.

Ruby's act of stepping back from Art Center's program in order to assess differences between its pedagogical goals and his own artistic needs took the form of an extended discussion with members of his thesis committee regarding "innate" creation versus "conditioned" responses. Although Ruby wondered at the time if it were at all possible to "do something unfiltered," his desire to engage in process-oriented work did not move in the reactionary direction of a humanistic search for an intrinsic and essential self that could be revealed and celebrated in his art, as the Abstract Expressionists had done. After reading Guattari and working with Lotringer, Ruby was not at all humanistically inclined. Instead he wanted to plumb an ad hoc self as an assemblage, subject to the machinic flows that Guattari and Deleuze both described; consequently, he named his thesis exhibition at Art Center "Monument to Interiority: Burnt-Out Motif." Rather than making his monument a mode of access to something that has been lost and cannot possibly be recuperated, a goal that he believed most public monuments aim to achieve, Ruby wanted to create a new type of "monument to malleability." And since he wished to "dramatize sensibility" in relation to such "survivalist ideas" as those he explored that same year in *Transient Trilogy*, he wanted to include in the show an abundance of fearless, in-process work that would thematize desperation as the work's subject and means, without, however, losing its formal trenchancy.

Refusing to work with only "one idea," Ruby felt that his thesis show should be "over-the-top," a goal he intended to accomplish by incorporating "multiple media" pieces in an over-installed setting that privileged improvisational, relatively unfiltered, and definitely lowbrow work, even though its plebian connections were most assuredly seen through art's distinctive intellectual and consequently highbrow lens. Ruby's self-assigned charge to create in his "Monument to Interiority: Burnt Out Motif" a tribute to "malleability" has a basis in his work with ceramics, which are an important touchstone for all his work.

Both his thesis show and his works in clay, which were included in his thesis exhibition, represent a considered response to the early twentieth-century French theorist George Bataille's *informe* (or base materialism), which was originally employed to refer to the process of bringing low those qualities, which have been elevated, and to revel unabashedly in *informe*'s regenerative power, since it represents the downhill roll in a markedly gratuitous Sisyphean struggle. Bataille's *informe* had served as the basis for a 1996 survey exhibition of twentieth-century works of art that its eminent curators, the critic-art historians Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, related to this theory. Presented under the auspices of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Krauss and Bois entitled their exhibition *L'informe, mode d'emploi*. And the show's catalogue, which contains a useful and widely circulated text, was published in English the following year under the title *Formless: A User's Guide*.⁵¹

Two years after the publication of *Formless* and several years before coming to Art Center, during the academic year 1999–2002 to be exact, when Ruby was just beginning his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, he enrolled in a two-month-long weekend community class in ceramics that enabled him to explore, on his own, the idea of *informe* in an amateur setting; to consider the appeal of relatively unfiltered work; evaluate for himself the role that art can play in process-oriented

50 In the literature on Ruby's work, there has sometimes been confusion about the material he has used. He has chosen not to work with polyurethane since it remains toxic for two years after being made. Urethane, however, is relatively nontoxic and consequently is the material Ruby employs.

51 Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, Zone Books, 1997).

art therapies; and, unbeknownst to him at the time, prepare the ground for his later empathic response to Guattari's innovations at La Borde where people were encouraged to affiliate with such new activities as making art and crafts and thereby fashioning new ways of being. The course, which met for six hours each Saturday and Sunday, was taught by one of the instructors in the art therapy department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Ruby at first enrolled in the course with a friend, who was a major in art therapy, because he wanted to debunk the idea that clay is an essential tool for art therapy. But he soon became an advocate of the technique he intended to discredit and developed an appreciation for the informal, relatively direct work beginning potters are able to make. He later reflected on his experiences in this class and also its impact on his thinking:

I was interested in the fact that my fellow classmates were not artists. During the first month of the class the teacher offered no real guidance—only a smattering of advice—and not really anything about building forms with clay. I became fascinated with the fact that very different people were making the same type of biomorphic and anthropomorphic work. A lot of it was sexual, with holes, extensions, and everything overly glazed. There were firings every week. I had to conclude that I was wrong: clay does give people an innate and unfettered sensibility. I loved it.⁵²

Although Ruby clearly found the first month exhilarating and important, he thought that the students' work during the second and final month of the class, when they were provided with instructions on building techniques, was far less appealing. "The second month was way less primal and there were fewer innate gestures," Ruby has recalled.⁵³ Reflecting on this experience, he has pointed out, "What I liked about the ceramic class is the fact that malleability, the absolute malleable and innate gesture gets truncated into the monument of what it once was; it gets frozen." The freezing of a gesture, so that the art is caught midstream, with a minimum of a priori (deductive or necessary) judgments or a posteriori (inductive or contingent) reflections, begins at this point to become an artistic ideal that Ruby continues to explore by making pottery, even as he continues to experiment with a range of other media that altogether allow him to test Guattari's transversality.

Monument to Interiority: Burnt Out Motif was held at the Art Center's new exhibition space, a converted NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory and California Institute of Technology wind tunnel. For this exhibition Ruby created a series of multi-media installations that included plywood staging areas liberally spray painted with black paint to create a charred and post-industrial ambiance—the torched "interiority" or depleted humanistic view of the self referenced in his title. In addition, the exhibition was comprised of several upended poured urethane sculptures (his "stalagmites"), a couple of his free-form ceramic pieces known as *Strategem Peace Heads*, as well as projected details of clay pieces liberally punctuated with holes, and a black soft vinyl bed chair known commercially as a "husband."

This soft sculpture plays on a number of meanings that had been ascribed to this particular subcategory of sculpture in the 1960s, which critic Max Kozloff documented in his 1967 article "The Poetics of Softness." In his essay Kozloff looks at work by such sculptors as the pop artist Claes Oldenburg, who moved from the traditional power associated with immobile sculpture to "surrender" to stuffed fabric sculptures evocating "fatigue, deterioration, or inertia," as well as other inescapably "human" implications. Rather than asserting distinct and unyielding form, soft sculpture acquiesces to it, and in the process this "indeterminant or provisional" form "correspond[s] to ... transient mortality."⁵⁴

52 Sterling Ruby, interview with author, Los Angeles, 21 August 2008.

53 Ibid. Ruby found that approaches during the second month could be divided according to broad generational lines: grandmotherly types tended to work in a straightforward and geometric fashion, while the kids went in for science-fictional imagery.

54 Max Kozloff, "The Poetics of Softness" in Max Kozloff, *Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1961, rpt. of essay in "American Sculpture of the Sixties," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April 28–June 25, 1967), p. 223 and 224.

In his extraordinarily painful, over-11-minute *tour-de-force* video *Found Cushion Act*, which he made in 2005, Ruby trades “mortality” for the astonishing vulnerability of a psychotic tearing apart a pillow, which he plays with tremendous compassion and intensity.

In addition to these works, *Monument to Interiority: Burnt Out Motif* included a series of blown-up photographs, some of which emphasize the extreme anxiety of the overall exhibition with the word “cry” emblazoned on them in a calligraphic style that resembles graffiti. Other images in the exhibition include the artist’s series of collages *ABSOLUTE CONTEMPT FOR TOTAL SERENITY* (2005), which pits a greasy and smoke stained young female pyromaniac against rectangles of unspoiled wilderness. In addition, the exhibition featured Ruby’s ersatz domestic interior, *This System II* (2006), in which he overlays the title’s text over a photograph of a bedroom filled with examples of patchwork country kitsch to indicate that even the most lowbrow taste bespeaks a specific form of subjectivity, i.e. a coordinated structure, as well as a political orientation. As critic Erik Frydenborg, one of Ruby’s close friends, astutely remarks of this and other such works,

The flayed remains of various Red State [Republican] garments (acid-wash denim, eagle-bedecked sweatshirts, deer hunter’s orange flannel) are quilted, merged into obscure heterogeneous lumps. Ruby’s melding of these already charged garments with peripheral images of horror infects them with a slightly sinister quality.⁵⁵

Unlike most art exhibitions that surround works of art with plenty of space in order to enhance them, Ruby often deliberately overloads the installation of his shows, so that they comment on the work by reinforcing its intense energy. His feel for concentrated space parallels the force of his subjects, and it also has a basis in Artaud’s theory about the unwavering force of the *mise en scène*—the production and staging of a play that this French director considers to be “the visual and plastic materialization of speech” and often of greater consequence than theater’s traditional reliance on language.⁵⁶

Ruby’s thesis exhibition was extraordinarily successful, and his achievement can be understood in terms of the discussion that it elicited not only in L.A. art circles but also a number of New York ones. Ruby was clearly perceived as an important newcomer, even if the ideas that his work was exploring and the new semiotics they were manifesting remained at the time so layered that they would be “imperceptible”—using Deleuze’s terminology—to those who did not have the key of transversality that would enable them to begin unpacking this art’s distinct multi-layered content.

RUBY’S THESIS SHOW RECONFIGURED: “LEARNED HELPlessness IN STUDENTS”

Ruby followed the success of his thesis show by reworking it and presented his reconfigured work in the very same space as his thesis exhibition so that it ironically comments on its earlier incarnation even as it plays on the Jet Propulsion Laboratory’s role as a leading center for robotic exploration of the solar system. In addition, this exhibition takes to task the Art Center’s overweening emphasis on directly and consciously applying theory to the making of specific works of art rather than allowing it to be an indirect factor that is intuitively summoned in the course of creating new art. Ruby’s exhibition does this by critiquing the futility of the Art Center’s theory-based pedagogy, suggesting that this school’s goal for training of students is to turn them into robots. His art undertakes this critique with the full knowledge that the teaching of art is a more important subject in the L.A. area than in most other urban art centers in the United States, including New York, since so many of the city’s

⁵⁵ Erik Frydenborg, unpublished typescript, Artist’s Archive, Los Angeles.

⁵⁶ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 41 and 69.

major artists like John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, Barbara Kruger, Paul McCarthy, and James Welling, to name only a few, have carved out important dual careers for themselves as artists and teachers. It also undertakes this critique during a time when students and young artists throughout the United States were beginning to question theory's relevancy and legitimacy.

Ruby titled this second emendatory piece most appropriately *Reconfiguration of Monument to Interiority: Learned Helplessness in Students*. Its subtitle, which parodies the school's teaching methods, actually sustains the tradition of some Mike Kelley works that take issue with the tortuous pedagogy—Kelley called it “abuse training”—to which he had been subjected during his art schooling, including being forced to make works in the mode of Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann's push-pull theories.⁵⁷ Ruby's subtitle also references one of his “all-time-favorite” works of art, which is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago; it is Bruce Nauman's *Learned Helplessness in Rats (Rock and Roll Drummer)* (1988), a multi-media work with three video feeds that alternate between footage of a rat trapped within the maze, a teenage boy frantically playing the drums, and live images of the now-vacant rodent's maze on exhibit in the museum. The idea for Nauman's work came from the 1987 *Scientific American* article entitled “Stressed Out: Learned Helplessness in Rats Sheds Light on Human Depression,” which looks at the extremely deleterious effects of too tightly controlled protocols on reprogramming behavior. Nauman's work would have had a particular resonance for Ruby because it differs so dramatically from Guattari's attempts to create new, positive situations at La Borde so patients could empower themselves. As Ruby has recalled,

Some of my classmates and I went through a bad identity crisis because Jeremy [Gilbert-Rolfe] wanted us to identify and have definitive answers for everything we did. We were asking ourselves whether learning was liberating or restricting us. We did not feel we could go into a work unless we had already formulated complete answers beforehand that would legitimize it. We felt like the lab rat in Nauman's piece, confused and overwhelmed by the drumming, with no way to get outside the maze.⁵⁸

Literalizing this effect, Ruby created a human-scaled unicursal labyrinth that culminated in a video featuring a series of exit interviews with students, who, like him, felt stymied by being required to make deductive art that came out of the theoretical principles that they were supposed to inventory before beginning to make such work. He interspersed these interviews with shots of himself—instead of Nauman's teenage boy—furiously playing a set of drums. The interviews revealed a number of related concerns. One student found that theory did not help her to get ideas for making her work; another was “entirely confused”; and a young woman complained that a cultural studies course only focused on marketing, which might relate to the merchandizing of her art but not the creation of it. Other students addressed such problems as being put in predetermined categories and then trying to break out of them; having a hard time finishing a work because it did not meet one's initial expectations; feeling that one is being trained to be a pompous “asshole”; and worrying that perhaps one is looking at a problem in terms of a labyrinth with its one entryway—a three-dimensional structure, which Ruby's installation reifies—instead of a maze with many entries and exits. At the end of the video, Ruby wields a baseball bat and repeatedly slugs the extra-wide vinyl “husband” that had been included in his *Monument to Interiority: Burnt Out Motif*, thus releasing tensions between the pre-formulated work and direct, unabashed action.

57 Kelley, “Day is Done,” *Art*: 21.

58 Ruby, interview with author, 20 August 2008.

Ruby's video *Reconfiguration of Monument to Interiority: Learned Helplessness in Students* pits the students' criticisms regarding Art Center's stress on theory against the orchestrated chaos of his percussionist interludes. Even though the ostensible purpose of his video is to critique theory, this work does not move far from it: in fact it enacts a classic Derridean form of deconstruction on the topic of pedagogy. Because the French theorist Jacques Derrida's deconstructive tactics put opposing forces into play so that connections and ambiguities can be found where none seemed to exist, it can appear to be a practical and down-to-earth approach and thus a particularly useful theoretical means for Ruby to use when he is taking theoretical approaches to task.

Deconstruction offers Ruby the distinct advantage of constituting ways to open up the all-important transversal situations that constitute his art's overriding theme, subject, and goal. Because deconstruction has been so important for Ruby and has taken the form of a practical means for pitting such assumed opposites against each other as those exemplified by the students' carefully reasoned comments and Ruby's seemingly chaotic percussionist episodes in his *Learned Helplessness* video, it will help to review briefly its *modus operandi*. An eminently applicable process for breaking apart the assumed centers of socially ratified and privileged terms, which are structuralism's basic building blocks, deconstruction specifies first the need to pinpoint a given practice and its privileged term before determining its apparently missing or downgraded binary opposition.

In the case of Art Center's pedagogy, for example, its favored term is theory and the maligned one is intuition together with its close relations, improvisation and blind feeling. After locating the position of these elements in the overall structure uniting them, the deconstructionist needs to demonstrate that these polarities are in fact not at all opposites but are actually implicated with each other as they both compete and cooperate with one another. Putting these terms in play demonstrates that the formerly assumed rules for linking pairs of opposites in terms of hierarchies are in fact inconsistent with their actual way of functioning. In Ruby's *Reconfiguration of Monument to Interiority: Learned Helplessness in Students* there are in fact two situations to deconstruct: one is the Art Center's approach to teaching and the other is students' criticism. Since all the students in the video are acutely aware of the problem of the school's overly enthusiastic dependency on theory, Art Center's overall teaching is obviously creating—albeit unconsciously—the need for theory's diametric opposite, intuitive approaches, so that both pedagogical conceptual schemes and the students' desire for instinctual responses are implicated with each other. In Ruby's work deconstruction is particularly transversal since it opens up a range of new subject positions where only polarized ones were once thought to exist; moreover by cutting across familiar subjects such as pedagogical goals and student disgruntlement, or stirring humanistic monuments and memorials to a “burnt out interiority,” his work creates layers of deconstructed and consequently transversal options.

BEHIND THE PEDESTAL: INTRODUCING A CRITIQUE OF MINIMALISM

Sterling Ruby's deconstructive critique of Art Center's theoretical approach to teaching had been anticipated two years earlier when he collaborated in 2003 on the video piece *Behind the Pedestal* with the feminist artist Kirsten Stoltmann to whom he was then married. This prescient work takes place in a science-fictional setting with an ersatz aurora borealis light show in the background. The video consists of one long and sustained four-and-one-half minute shot of the nude husband and wife—Sterling and Kirsten—crawling as if they were Neanderthals to the center of the proscenium stage and to the rear of the pedestal before having intercourse, after which they retreat from the

stage, each moving in opposite directions from which he or she entered the space. Dominating the center of this set is a sci-fi black monolith that resembles those found in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, based on Arthur C. Clarke's story where this form represents an extraterrestrial being, which, perhaps, had been sent to earth to gauge human development. In *Behind the Pedestal*, the plinth intentionally recalls some of Morris's Minimalist sculptures of the early 1960s and John McCracken's early works, which were originally made as comments on Kubrick's and Clarke's monolith. The plinth in Ruby and Stoltmann's video partially blocks out the rainbow constellation of projected background light, and casts a menacing and mysterious ambience on the foreground of the work. Preventing viewers from being able to verify the couple's actual act of lovemaking, the monolith assumes a powerful and sustained presence throughout the piece, leading one to the conclusion that it is as important a presence as the two artists. Because it also competes with the couple, we can conclude that neither the act of copulation nor the monolith per se dominates the video. Instead, both vie for attention, and in doing so they manage in part to deconstruct the work by establishing parity between themselves and also between the male and the female figures so that no one element is privileged, with the single exception of the male assuming a missionary position on top of the female during the act of lovemaking.

In addition to establishing an engendered theme, the video presents the monolith in an ambiguous way so that it can be viewed alternately as both phallic and vaginal, since it is a prominent and priapic vertical upright and the word "box" is slang for the location of the female's primary sex organs. In addition to underscoring connections between both genders and refusing to give one unquestioned authority over the other, *Behind the Pedestal* links together another polarity when it plays off art's assumed public role against the extraordinarily private act of a married couple having sex, a fact that the perceptive critic Charles LaBelle recognized when he noted that soon after making this video, Kirsten Stoltmann became pregnant, before adding a cryptic comment about "Freud's theory of the primal scene."⁵⁹ A highly suggestive codicil to *Behind the Pedestal* are the pair of Lambda prints *Kiln #1* and *#2* (both 2004) that counter the lofty phallic appearance of the monolith with the dark and forbidding gaping hole of a brick outdoor kiln. Surrounding it is an ersatz rainbow that plays on the humor of *Behind the Pedestal*'s light show as it breaks up the spectrum into prismatic colors.

Kubrick's monolith, which Ruby and Stoltmann's video celebrates and indirectly interrogates, appeared on the screen in 1968, which was an important year for New York Minimalism. According to art historian James Meyer in his book *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, both Donald Judd's exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1968 and Gregory Battcock's anthology on the movement that same year canonized Minimalism as a distinct and important American style.⁶⁰ Besides pastiching Kubrick's monolith, *Behind the Pedestal* is fully implicated in a critique of circa 1960s Minimalism since it alludes to the way this style displaced and also aggrandized the pedestal of traditional sculpture, underscores Minimalist art's emphasis on the role of the embodied viewer, most clearly refers to Robert Morris's upright *Column* (1961) as well as McCracken's sculpture, and finally references Kubrick's monolith, which can be considered Minimalism's popular-culture equivalent.

DONALD JUDD

In addition to the idea of undermining Kubrick's, Morris's, and McCracken's Minimalist-type object, *Behind the Pedestal* resonates with Ruby's own disenchantment with a graduate seminar devoted to Donald Judd's writings. Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing through the middle

59 Charles LaBelle, "Kirsten Stoltmann and Sterling Ruby: The Bower, San Antonio, USA," *Frieze* 81 (March 2004), p. 102-103.

60 James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 245-270. Meyer's book is an excellent source on this artistic style; it presents Minimalism as dynamic rather than static by emphasizing how the understanding of it was inflected by different exhibitions of this material in the sixties. Cf. Gregory Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968).

of the 1960s, Judd had reviewed exhibits for *Arts Magazine* and *Art International* and had contributed his articles to a number of other periodicals; he subsequently wrote general pieces for art magazines into the 1970s.⁶¹ A Columbia University-trained positivist, who embraced a number of New York critic Clement Greenberg's formalist ideas about the self-reflexivity of vanguard art, Judd reviewed as many as 15 exhibitions per month and wrote about them in a terse, matter-of-fact style. As a prescriptive and highly visible voice of emergent Minimalism, he "laid down the rules and regulations of Minimalism, totally territorializing it," according to Ruby, so that it appeared to be, in large part, his creation. For Ruby, Judd's view was too orthodox and constraining, and he found it hard to believe that the experimental faculty at Art Center would advise its students to read such dogma.

The year after he and Stoltmann created *Behind the Pedestal*, Ruby was relieved to read an article in *Artforum* by Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curator Ann Temkin that had the net effect of undermining Judd's authoritative position. While Temkin may not have intended to deconstruct Judd's art—only point out the difficulties museum professionals and conservators face in exhibiting and caring for it—her essay undercut some of his central tenets. In particular, it destabilized such principal Juddian ideas as art's ability to communicate the purity of its constituent materials and reveal its essential properties in an unmediated manner. In her essay Temkin holds up Judd's intransigence to scrutiny and demonstrates how vulnerable his seemingly invincible work actually was.

A key source and possibly an impetus for her article may have been the following introductory anecdote with which art historian Anna C. Chave introduced her 1990 watershed essay "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power."

While I was looking at Donald Judd's gleaming brass floor box of 1968 from a distance in the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art last Spring, two teenage girls strode over to this pristine work, kicked it, and laughed. They then discovered its reflective surface and used it for a while to arrange their hair until, finally, they bent over to kiss their images on the top of the box.⁶²

As a curator, Temkin would find such an action a major challenge, and she met this test in her essay with the comment, "When the art [of Donald Judd] was new, both its appearance and its industrial fabrication led people to assume that these were objects one might lean against, or set a drink on, or place outdoors."⁶³ She then points out that Judd wanted his sculptures to be seen in museums with the least amount of impediments possible, so they were easily accessible to viewers and their children, who, unbeknownst to him, often crawled through the one in MoMA's garden.

Temkin's article focuses on the destruction and deterioration that have occurred to this Minimalist's art:

The inevitable damage that has befallen Judd's work sets it within a complicated tangle of issues that are aesthetic, ethical, historical, physical, economic, and personal. The questions are fundamental. What is acceptable in terms of damage? What is acceptable in terms of treatment? ... In worst-case scenarios, he tersely informed the owners that his records now listed the piece as "destroyed." ...⁶⁴

61 Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints*, Nova Scotia Series (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975).

62 Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (January 1990), p. 44.

63 Ann Temkin, "Wear and Care: Ann Temkin charts the complicated terrain surrounding the preservation of Donald Judd's work," *Artforum*, Summer 2004, http://find-articles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_10_42/ai_n6232009/print?tag=artBody;col1 (accessed October 19, 2008).

64 Ibid.

Stories are legion about how Judd terminated his own sculptures, which had been fabricated in highly polished brass and copper as well galvanized iron, after he had detected ineradicable oils and salts on them that had been caused by fingerprints. Relying heavily on his prestige and power in the art world, insurance companies supported his decisions, even to the point, at times, of reimbursing the full value for such “destroyed” works.

Thus, Judd’s austere, programmatic, and industrially fabricated art was not just destroyed when it was connected with viewers’ touches and caresses; it was also deconstructed when such fragility was viewed in tandem with the works’ presumed strength. In addition, his sculpture’s assumed purity—achieved through relying on employing distinct materials to create wholly unambiguous objects—was also undermined and deconstructed by certain industrial practices of which he was unaware such as lubricating, during the process of fabrication, the metals he used for his art.⁶⁵ These processes destabilized Judd’s assertion in his ground-breaking essay “Specific Objects” that

Materials vary greatly and are simply materials—Formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Plexiglas, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material.⁶⁶

In response to the oppressiveness of Judd’s authoritarian opinions regarding Minimalism’s strict self-reflexivity and the unadulterated state of the specific materials comprising his own work, it is not surprising that the sculptures, which he declared null and void, rather than his still pristine works, have become the inspiration for Ruby’s purposefully impaired monoliths. These despoiled pieces include Ruby’s highly deconstructionist graffiti-like spray-painted wooden bases that look charred, and his Formica cubes that display etched representations of L.A.-style gang graffiti as well as prominent smudges, scuffs, and fingerprints.

MINIMALISM’S HEGEMONY IN L.A.

In consideration of the anticipation that attended two major Minimalist exhibitions that were scheduled to open in L.A. in 2004, it is not surprising that Ruby and Stoltman would create in 2003 *Behind the Pedestal*, with its prominently featured Minimalist monolith. In March 2004, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (L.A. MoCA) curator Ann Goldstein, who, as mentioned earlier, also held an adjunct position at the Pasadena Art Center, mounted the first comprehensive, historically-based exhibition of Minimalist art to take place in the United States. The show had been in the works for years, and without doubt it was an event that was eagerly anticipated by both Art Center faculty and students. When it opened, Goldstein’s exhibition included an impressive 150 works by 40 American Minimalists, and it was so big that it required a mammoth 25,000 square feet to house it, which is two-and-one-half-times the usual size of an important exhibition. Goldstein based the title of her exhibition on a question that she had found prominently displayed on the cover of the March 1967 issue of *Arts Magazine* pertaining to Minimalism’s future. Looking back at this once anticipated future, L.A. MoCA’s *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968* was conceived broadly so that both the cerebral New York brand of Minimalism and the alternative lush L.A. “Finish Fetish” version of this style were represented.

Not only did L.A. MoCA feature a Minimalist exhibition that year, but its friendly rival, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), opened in June 2004 curator Lynn Zelevansky’s

65 Ibid.

66 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965, rpt. Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Work, 1955-1968* [New York: D.A.P., 2002]), <http://cep.ens-lsh.fr/poetik/doc/judd-specific%20objects.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2008).

broad Minimalist-oriented survey, *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form 1940s-1970s*. In her show, Zelevansky included post-World War II geometric abstract works that had been created in Western and Central Europe as well as in North and South America. Although her exhibition singled out the work of three artists for special attention—François Morellet from France, Hélio Oiticica from Brazil, and Mel Bochner from the United States—it covered a remarkable array of stylistic developments, including Concrete art, Argentine Arte Madi, Brazilian Neo-Concretism, Kinetic art, Op art, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Process art, and Conceptual art.

Ensuring that Minimalism would be a citywide and yearlong event, the Getty Center, in association with the Getty Research Institute, organized and funded two related conferences. The first, entitled “Minimal Art in the United States,” was timed to coordinate with the L.A. MoCA exhibition; the second, held in conjunction with LACMA’s exhibition, was appropriately called “An Intercontinental Art World.” In addition to these two conferences, the Getty arranged for related film screenings and dance performances to take place throughout L.A. Among its featured activities were re-creations of performances originally presented at the celebrated New York City Judson Dance Theater by choreographers Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti, which had incorporated as props some of the first objects in the United States that could legitimately be called Minimalist sculptures. In addition to these performances, ACE Gallery in L.A. presented from May 5 to August 8 of that same year an exhibition of Rainer’s work, which was subtitled *Radical Juxtapositions 1961–2002*. Even though the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art in New York also held an instructive exhibition of Minimalist works in 2004 entitled *Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present*, which was co-curated by Lisa Dennison and Nancy Spector with work selected primarily from the museum’s collection, L.A. was the chief place to see Minimalist art that year. The only exception was the DIA: Beacon Riggio Galleries on the Hudson, which had opened its permanent installation of mostly Minimalist work in May 2003. Considered together, these presentations of Minimalist work on both the West and East Coasts ratified this style as a historically significant twentieth-century vanguard movement, thus upholding it as a paragon that rebellious young artists like Sterling Ruby would feel challenged to unseat and deconstruct.

DECONSTRUCTING MINIMALISM

One impetus for Ruby’s ambitious project to deconstruct Minimalism is his completion of an assignment made by Gilbert-Rolfe, who had wisely insisted that Ruby read Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*.⁶⁷ Even though Ruby, as mentioned earlier, hoped to make work that was unfiltered and unconditioned by theory and art history—a commendable yet impossible goal in consideration of Lacan’s view that all thinking is conditioned by language, i.e. the Symbolic—he did need, after absorbing so much theory, to create a space in which to make art so that his voluminous reading would not dictate the terms his work must take. Instead of veering away from theories, the problem was actually to find intellectual propositions that were liberating rather than constraining. Fortunately, becoming familiar with Bloom’s sixth type of misreading, *apophrades*—a rhetorical term denoting the destabilization of basic principles formative to a given social or historical construction—provided Ruby with the confidence and means to think he could offer a significant re-reading of Minimalism. The type of reversal that *apophrades* represents was particularly helpful since it does not dictate specifics about the form such a reevaluation should take. Because *apophrades*, according to Bloom, refers to “the return of the dead” or the “uncanny effect” that reverts historical precedence’s assumed priority so that a latecomer’s work impacts the way its antecedent is seen, this rhetorical term

67 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

and Bloom's exegesis of it challenged Ruby to take on 1960s-era Minimalism while providing him with the assurance that his work could indeed force Minimalism to be seen on his terms rather than its own. This was a considerable undertaking when one considers that it occurred at a time when *Frieze* critic Mark Godfrey was noting that Minimalism had become "the court painting of the late 20th century."⁶⁸

Although Bloom does not discuss recursion as one of *apophrades*' benefits, it does set up the possibility for an ongoing fluctuation between a work and its antecedent. This movement can be visualized as a type of nesting, so that both the work and its precursor are caught up in a typological manifold or Möbius strip in which the thoughtful viewer moves back and forth from source to a later emendation of it and vice versa. As we will see, Ruby's art entices viewers to travel mentally through a high/low and sacred/profane Möbius strip that runs in and out of Minimalism. The situation reflects an understanding of Bataille's *informe*, except that it is more insistent in moving in two directions instead of only one. In addition to bringing down high art (Bataille's base materialism), it also moves in the opposite direction—as a great deal of art ultimately does—and raises the abject to the level of fine art so that viewers' minds will ricochet back-and-forth between polar opposites as well as the spaces between them. The ensuing trajectory between these opposites is transversal in its ability to open up new subject positions for viewers along this pathway, while the strategy of putting high/low oppositions in play is deconstructive.

The path for Ruby's deconstruction of Minimalism had also already been prepared by Anna Chave's two provocative, ground-breaking articles that had been published twelve years apart: "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power" (*Arts Magazine*, 1990) and "Minimalism and Biography" (*Art Bulletin*, 2002).⁶⁹ Viewed together, the two articles enact an impressive deconstruction of Minimalism as engendered male; the first piece plays up a "masculinist" (a term Chave employs as the polar opposite of "feminist") theme as the style's central term, while her second essay reinscribes and also puts into play formerly sidelined feminist contributions to this style. Within a few years of her second article, Chave's approach so profoundly changed the overall understanding of Minimalism that *Los Angeles Times* critic Suzanne Muchnic could begin her review of Goldstein's exhibition with the quip, "If art movements were people, Minimalism would be a tough guy who sticks to basics and expresses no emotion," and this same critic could conclude, "if the result of [L.A. MoCA's *A Minimal Future?*] isn't a kinder, gentler Minimalism, it's certainly more expansive."⁷⁰

In "*Rhetoric of Power*" Chave lists the titles of early Minimalist works of art that privilege male sexuality. Her examples include Robert Morris's *Cock/Cunt* sculpture (1963); Dan Flavin's first fluorescent light piece *The Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)*, which Chave calls plainly phallic and which Flavin referred to as "the diagonal of personal ecstasy"; and Carl Andre's *Lever* (1966) about which the artist commented, "Most sculpture is priapic with the male organ in the air. In my work, Priapus is down on the floor."⁷¹ In addition to demonstrating that the explicit sexual overtones of these titles are at odds with the view of this style as universal and pure, Chave objects to Judd's language in his watershed essay "Specific Objects" in which he extols art's "plain power" and commends the use of "strong" and "aggressive" materials.⁷² "The masculinist note becomes even more explicit with the use of terms like masterful, heroic, penetrating, and rigorous," she writes, before adding, "what is rigorous and strong is valued while what is soft or flexible is comic or pathetic emerges again and again in the Minimalists' discourse as it does in the everyday language of scholars."⁷³ Chave's major focus, then, is on masculinist—as opposed to feminist—sexual tendencies in Minimalist art as well as on the role that power assumes in the work.

68 Mark Godfrey, "Dimensions Variable: 'A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968' at MoCA, Los Angeles," *Frieze* (May, 2004), http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/dimensions_variable/ (accessed October 19, 2008).

69 Cf. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64 (January 1990): 44–63. Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin* 82, No. 1 (March, 2000), p. 149–163.

70 Suzanne Muchnic, "Maximal Exposure," *Los Angeles Times* (March 14, 2004, Section E, p. 41).

71 Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts*, p. 45–46.

72 Ibid., p. 53 and 55.

Not surprisingly, Chave is unconcerned with the Minimalists' significant contributions to the role that the human body plays in the apperception of works of art—an approach crucially important to Robert Morris, which comes from his and others' readings of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose writings were being translated into English and published almost in their entirety in the first half of the 1960s. Minimalists such as Morris, Andre, and Tony Smith, in particular, created works in which the viewer's actual space and physical embodiment are increasingly important aspects of this art that invites its audience to enter into a physical dialogue with it and to become involved in epistemologically-oriented questions about seeing this work alternatively as art or as just prosaic objects, i.e. boxes. As Morris later explained, using the third-person perspective to discuss both Judd's and his work:

If Donald Judd appealed to a hard, reductive Deweyan empiricism, Robert Morris inserted the gestalt of unitary forms and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty into the game ... into bodily engagement with the self-reflexive. The transformation of experience from the optical to the haptic as the self-reflexive body's perception of a dualistic gestalt/space came to form the stronger formal core of Minimal art. The objects of Minimal art were in your space, and you had to confront them with both body and eye.⁷⁴

Chave's 1990 piece on the macho aspects of Minimalism served four years later as a catalyst for a thoughtful exhibition that Lynn Zelevansky, then a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, organized for this institution. Titled *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism*, the show's thesis was predicated on an if/then proposition, involving rewriting and rethinking Minimalism's purview. "But if [1960s] Minimalism," Zelevansky mused, "was largely a male preserve, Post-Minimalism, which coalesced toward the end of that decade ... achieved a kind of feminizing of Minimalism."⁷⁵ Pointing out the Minimalists' concern for the body, Zelevansky builds a case for the trenchant critiques undertaken by a number of women, including the L.A. artist Rachel Lachowicz's cosmetic sculptures that employ lipstick, eye shadow, and face powder to "parody icons of Minimalism" in terms of new sculptures that are "sensual in the extreme" but "infused with desire and memory, [so that] these works are as enticing as they are satirical."⁷⁶

This reliance on cosmetics as a means for destabilizing Minimalism's masculinist posturing is a tactic that Ruby also exploited in 2006 in his exhibition *Interior Designer* at the Marc Foxx Gallery in L.A. In this exhibition, his "trans-compositional" drawings called "mappings" are made on colored Plexiglas and employ such nail polish colors as Maybelline's Express Finish Racy Red and Wet Shine Cherry that he discovered by looking through such magazines as *Transformation*, *Lady Trans*, and *Transsexual* that cater to male-to-female transsexuals. The nail polish he used ranged in price from \$1.50 to as much as \$70.00 per bottle. Ruby employed these colors to create loosely conceived schematic diagrams, sometimes with pronounced drips, that he juxtaposed with pictures of carefully posed transvestites and transgender male-to-female subjects.

Following the success of her first major reinterpretation of Minimalism, Chave undertook in "Minimalism and Biography" to explore the lives of the male Minimalists and determine, among other goals, the contributions of the women near them whose dance performances and props were crucial for Minimalism's development. "The Minimalism that I construct in what follows," Chave writes, "isolates for case study certain figures commonly regarded as peripheral to the Minimalist icon, such as

73 Ibid., p. 55.

74 Robert Morris, "Size Matters," *Critical Inquiry* 26, No. 3 (Spring, 2000), p. 478–79.

75 Lynn Zelevansky, "Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism," *MoMA* No. 17 (Summer, 1994), p. 14.

76 Ibid.

Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and Eva Hesse, alongside some figures considered indispensable to it, namely, Robert Morris and Carl Andre. All these figures are here subjected to examination through what is, for Morris and Andre, at least, a rather unexpected critical lens: that of biography.”⁷⁷

In addition to honoring the work of these women, Chave takes Rosalind Krauss to task for so readily perpetuating the masculinist ideology of resolute force that a number of the Minimalists advocated.⁷⁸ Chave notes that Minimalism provided feminists with a ready counterpoint to the issues meaningful to them. She elaborates, “the burgeoning feminist art practices of the 1970s and after—with their embrace of the body, subjectivity, biography, and expressivity—owe the very possibility of their existence to the famously depersonalized, or ... distinctly masculinist movement of Minimalism.”⁷⁹ In 2000, Morris confirmed, albeit negatively, the Minimalists’ highly masculinist desire to resemble “industrial frontiersmen exploring the factories and the steel mills” and to have their “artwork ... carry the stamp of *work*—that is to say, men’s work.”⁸⁰ He also describes in this essay the flip side of the Minimalists’ macho-inspired activity as fear of being associated with womanly concerns:

The great anxiety of this enterprise—the fall into the decorative, the feminine, the beautiful, in short, the minor—could only be assuaged by the big and heavy. This work was going to bang your body, threaten your space and flesh, make you walk around its beetling sublimity.⁸¹

Ruby’s work does make a few attempts at extending the type of male-female deconstructions of Minimalism that Chave and Zelevansky undertake. His *ANTI-PRINT* #2 (2005), for example, pits an image of a Minimalist Tony Smith fabricated steel sculpture in the upper section of the work above a close up of a male and female engaged in intercourse, with the female on top, to create an art/life opposition that then sets up a recursive in-and-out pathway between the two. Surrounded by an array of mechanical looking drips, the Smith is surmounted by three lines of mechanical type with the words, “THE ABSOLUTE VIOLATION COMES FROM INSTITUTIONAL”; at the bottom of this piece is the word “PRECEDENCE” that looks as if it has been handwritten. Since the title *ANTI-PRINT* appears in capital letters as does the phrase referring to organizational abuse, viewers are encouraged to consider this work a deconstruction of itself so that the mechanical and the human are put in play. In addition, linking the words into a complete sentence resists placing priority on either the mechanical or the human as well as on either art or life.

Ruby would have been keenly aware of the feminists’ conclusion that Minimalism had been engendered as macho through his conversations with Stoltmann and her like-minded feminist associates as well as with the professors and students at Art Center. Although Ruby assumes a feminist position in some of his work, as we will see, in terms of his embrace of some of Luce Irigaray’s ideas that inform his stalagmites, it is evident from his etched, gouged, smudged, and fingerprinted Formica monoliths that Minimalism’s widely proclaimed hegemony in the art world—its masculinist orientation, its absolute and unyielding position, and its coercive tactics vis-à-vis the viewer—was problematic for Ruby precisely because it reified the life force. Masculinism cut Minimalism off from the dynamics of living as surely as did the rigid institutional practices that Guattari had found at La Borde. While Ruby’s work is post-humanist, it is not anti-human, and so in his art he places in opposition signs of a desperate abjectness with Minimalism’s unwavering inflexibility. Consequently, his abject monoliths re-evaluate Minimalism as inhibiting and incarcerating rather than just masculinist, a stance that differs from the open and liberating Merleau-Pontian one adopted by Morris, in which

77 Chave, “Minimalism and Biography,” *Art Bulletin*, p. 149.

78 Ibid., p. 156.

79 Ibid.

80 Robert Morris, “Size Matters,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, No. 3 (Spring, 2000), p. 478.

81 Ibid.

his and others' inert geometric forms catalyze the epistemological quandaries of viewers' experiences as they (the observers) make fundamental decisions about a given work's art/non-art status.

Clues to understanding Ruby's approach to the Minimalist cube or monolith can also be found in the pejorative vocabulary employed in the 1960s to critique Minimalist art as "ABC art," "primary structures," "literalism," "rejective art," and "The Art of the Real." At a conference held in conjunction with Goldstein's show, the veteran L.A. and New York art dealer Virginia Dwan revisited some of the initial epithets critics lodged at the work that became known as "Minimalism." Her list includes: "bleak, numb, severe, hollow, morbid, programmatic, deductive, anti-compositional, not enough art, not enough work, neutral, redundant, austere, static, frozen, deathly, end-game, capitalistic, reductive, comatose." Although not all of these words apply to Ruby's abject monoliths, it is remarkable how many do provide insights into his very different way of working with Minimal forms.

After considering these terms in relation to Ruby's distressed and definitely unidealized geometric forms, it is tempting to think back to the games that the young Frank Stella and Walter Darby Barnard played in the 1950s with published art criticism. Discerning potent gaps between art criticism and the art it attempted to describe, they would select and read aloud passages of recent art criticism without revealing the name of the artist or work being referenced and then let the other person try to guess exactly whose art the writing was attempting to elucidate.⁸² The enormous benefits to be gained from this interactive game can be discerned in the differential between perceived content and actual form that became a basis for Stella's *Black Paintings*; this series for example is the logical conclusion to Clement Greenberg's view of Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman's works as deductive structures whose internal shapes, i.e. *zips*, were determined by the works' governing edges.⁸³

Most assuredly, Ruby's reversals of Minimalism's purview, which resembles more the first critical assessment of it than the Minimalists' own statements of intent about it, develop the latent and darker aspect of this art. In the process, they serve as extraordinarily trenchant critiques of this style at the very time that it is being lauded as the regnant vanguard style. Ruby's work also looks at Minimalism generically. Rather than taking on the work of particular Minimalists, his art reduces this style into basic geometric shapes that might at first resemble some of Morris's works in his mid-1960s Green Gallery shows; however, Ruby's use of Formica as a material of choice for his Minimalist pastiches constitutes a generalized critique of this overall style. Moreover, his frequent use of colored Formica purposefully debases the cool rationality associated with New York Minimalism, making it both decorative and kitsch. His solid colored boxes and monoliths also veer away from the faux bois and faux marble Formica that Artschwager employed for his Pop-Minimalist hybrid sculptures, which at times resembled liturgical furniture. Ruby's decorative objects depart as well from the precedent established by the rigorous modular pieces in Formica that Douglas Huebler made before he became a conceptual artist.

MINIMALISM AND SUPER-MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISONS

The beginnings of Ruby's reappraisal of Minimalism can be traced to works like his prescient yet modest collage, *Prison* (2004). This work joins a collaged image of a less-than-ideal Minimalist cube in the form of a jail cell with hand-drawn polygonal shapes, which under different circumstances might suggest an ideal Platonic realm. However, the diagrammatic lines in this work are so interconnected that they constitute a second web surrounding the bars of the cell, so that the two together

82 For a discussion of this game and its impact on Stella's thinking cf. Robert Hobbs, "Frank Stella: Then and Now" in *Frank Stella in 2002* (Singapore: Tyler Print Institute, 2002), p. 18.

83 Ibid. Greenberg's statement is as follows: "Newman's [straight lines] especially, do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself ... With Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and makes the picture, instead of merely being echoed. The limiting edges of Newman's larger canvases, we now discover, act just like the lines inside them: to divide but not to separate or enclose or bound; to delimit, but not to limit."

Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," (1955 and 1958) in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 226 and 227.

84 Writing about the connotations of Tony Smith's sculpture, Chave free-associates about its dehumanizing approach in a manner that foreshadows Ruby's subsequent tack: "*Die* (!) is also a verb form, constituting a command—the cruelest command that the empowered can issue to the powerless: a murderer to his victim, a judge to a convicted criminal, or a soldier to his enemy captive. The blackness, the sealed state, and the human scale of Smith's cube help reinforce this reading of the title, which—considering that the command is directed at the viewer—renders the work a gruesome gesture: a bleak crypt presented to the viewer with succinct instructions to perish. 'Six feet has a suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under,' wrote Smith, who related *Die* also to a passage by Herodotus about a chapel found in the enclosure of a temple."

Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," p. 52.

85 Charles "Chaz" Bojorques, "Los Angeles 'CHOLO' Style Graffiti Art," <http://www.hiphop-network.com/articles/graffitiarticles/cholostyle.asp>, (accessed October 19, 2008).

86 In an important early essay on Robert Morris, critic Annette Michelson, who studied in France with Merleau-Ponty, develops this idea. She undermines the authority of Suzanne Langer's *Feeling and Form*, then a canonical philosophical text in the United States, in which Langer claims the "virtual space [of sculpture] to be entirely distinct from the space in which we live and act. It is, then, not an operational space, nor the space of experience, but of vision." In contrast to this space of vision, cf. Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in *Robert Morris* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), p. 35. For a discussion of Michelson's essay, cf. Hobbs, *Alice Aycock*, p. 43–45.

87 Laura Sullivan, "Timeline: Solitary Confinement in U.S. Prisons," NPR.org, July 26, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=5579901> (accessed October 18, 2008). The following discussion of the history of solitary confinement is indebted to Sullivan's fine timeline.

represent both a critical reassessment of Minimalism as incarcerating and a view of its idealist references as unnecessarily encumbering. Seen together, the cell and its ambient web destabilize residual associations with Minimalist purity. The negative theme of this work appears to be reinforced by Ruby's *Smith on Marbleized Paper* (2007), with its pointed reference to Tony Smith's sculpture *Die* (1962), whose ostensible imperative regarding death seems to be underscored by the picture of a bony cranium peering above it.⁸⁴ However, if one reinterprets *Smith on Marbleized Paper* from the perspective of the iconography of Latino prison art, which Ruby has on occasion collected, the collage takes on a different meaning because skulls in this type of art connote rebirth, not death.⁸⁵

Works like *Prison* set the stage for Ruby's recursive, deconstructive, and transversal project of rethinking Minimalism by considering it in terms of an entirely new set of associations that include super-maximum security prisons and the indexical traces of graffiti, abject clues of use, as well as abuse and death. These correlations stand in opposition to Minimalism's privileged openness vis-à-vis the viewer and its emphasis on the artist's preeminent individuality. The ensuing competing pairs of polarities that result from Ruby's deconstruction of Minimalism can be schematically represented first in terms of freedom vs. incarceration, and then in relation to the individual as form giver vs. a street gang's subscription to conventional graffiti styles. In addition to interplays between these two sets of terms that Ruby's art endorses, both approaches—Minimalism's and Ruby's—can clearly be linked together in terms of their ongoing interactions with actual space rather than the separate virtual envelope of aestheticized space—ultimately a visual space—with which traditional sculpture has been involved.⁸⁶ But in place of the Minimalist art participant's vital and embodied involvement with abstract three-dimensional geometric form, Ruby's distressed Formica cubes, blocks, and benches implicate viewers in a range of symbolic and figurative deaths. These vary from associations with cult membership and solitary confinement in supermax facilities, to gang fights and street killings over turf that are marked in the victor's community with the type of L.A. graffiti that Ruby has carefully reproduced on the surfaces of these monoliths.

In four key exhibitions held between the years 2005–08, he relied on the controlling metaphor of super-maximum security prisons as a basis for his Minimalist-type sculptures. Featuring, among other works of art, his inscribed and painted plinths or monoliths, these exhibitions include: *SUPERMAX 2005* (Marc Foxx), *SUPERMAX 2006* (Christian Nagel Gallery, Cologne, Germany), *SUPEROVERPASS* (2007, Foxy Production, New York), and *SUPERMAX 2008* (L.A. MoCA Pacific Design Center). Since the subject of super-maximum security is crucial to understanding Ruby's withering pastiches and penetrating deconstruction of Minimalism, it is imperative to look more closely at the development of this type of incarceration and the heinous practices it espouses.

Initiated in California in 1989, supermax prisons with their overriding emphasis on extreme punishment in the form of continuous and unrelenting solitary confinement have notable antecedents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁷ The initial idea of solitary confinement as a way for treating and hopefully redeeming prisoners was proposed by well-meaning Quakers. Armed with their pietist doctrine involving waiting patiently for God's presence to make itself known to worshippers, they convinced officials at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia to separate inmates by placing them in individual cells with only a Bible as a companion, in order to provide them with both the space and time necessary for thoroughgoing self-reflection and sincere repentance. Instead of coming to terms with themselves as God's creation, prisoners suffered a loss of sanity, became suicidal, and were increasingly unable to cope with others. Although this well-intentioned practice was eventually

abandoned as hopeless, the idea of isolating prisoners for periods of time was not. In 1934 the United States Federal Government completed Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay with the intention of housing the country's most incorrigible offenders and reserved its "D Block," in particular, for the solitary confinement of such criminals as Robert Stroud, who was later celebrated as the Birdman of Alcatraz.

The state of California constructed in 1989 the prototype for a totally new type of prison, the supermax facility, which was named Pelican Bay. In the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, the federal government had declared a war on drugs and had stipulated particularly harsh sentences for drug users and dealers without providing funds for rehabilitation. During this same decade, states working in tandem with the federal government eliminated paroles, increased prison terms, and decreed harsh mandatory sentences. California enacted its widely debated habitual offender law known as the "three strikes law" for the number of serious convictions that would automatically ensure even tougher sentencing. In addition to responding to these increasingly severe initiatives that extended throughout the 1980s, the idea of the supermax facility grew out of increased violence in regular prisons that many seasoned penal specialists have attributed to overcrowding, longer sentences with fewer opportunities for early release, and cutbacks in educational and rehabilitation programs that resulted in bored and idle prisoners.

Pelican Bay was built on a 275-acre site cut out of a dense forest near Crescent City at a cost of \$290 million. Centrally isolated, it is 11 miles from the California-Oregon state border, 370 miles north of San Francisco, and more than 750 miles north of Los Angeles, despite the fact that most of its inmates come from the L.A. area and it is a known fact that there is less recidivism for prisoners who are in regular contact with their families. Perhaps, because of the enormous costs of over \$50,000 yearly to house each inmate at Pelican Bay, California legislators in the years soon after this facility was built were fond of bragging about the cost benefits of no longer needing to construct a yard or a cafeteria or to fund prison classrooms and workshops.

Known formally as a Security Housing Unit or SHU (pronounced "shoe"), Pelican Bay is divided into separate pods or clusters of cells, radiating like spokes on a wheel from a central axle—Jeremy Bentham's panopticon—where a guard sits and controls the prisoners' doors. Prisoners in this SHU are sequestered in 8-by-10-foot cells for 22 ½ hours each day where they are plagued by isolation and a lack of stimulation. According to this SHU's Associate Warden Larry Williams, "Everything [in the individual cells] is gray concrete: the bed, the walls, the unmovable stalls. Everything except the combination stainless-steel sink and toilet."⁸⁸ Instead of a yard, prisoners are individually taken to an exercise pen less than 15 feet in length with cement walls 20 feet high, which have been capped by a metal grate.⁸⁹ Because prison authorities rather than courts decide who is to be interred in a SHU, there are no published guidelines about exactly who is to be placed in these isolation cells and no regulations about how one gets out of such facilities, leaving supermax prisoners in a hopeless limbo.⁹⁰ Because so many of Pelican Bay's inmates, who are all male, are former members of street gangs, the unofficial word is that an inmate can get out of this supermax facility and back to a regular prison if he can demonstrate his un-involvement with gang activities for a period of six years or if he is willing to divulge information about his gang affiliation, including his contacts and their activities—a process called "debriefing," which usually takes two years. Since 50% of the prisoners in Pelican Bay are serving life sentences, there is little incentive for them to expose their former associates and a certain grim satisfaction in knowing that members of their gang hold them in high esteem since time in prison and even more so in an SHU are considered rites of passage and badges of honor.

88 Laura Sullivan, "At Pelican Bay Prison, a Life in Solitary," "All Things Considered," NPR, July 26, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=5584254> (accessed October 19, 2008). Williams' emphasis on a mundane gray interior could apply equally well to Robert Morris's 1964 installation of seven geometric plywood structures all painted gray in the Green Gallery in New York.

89 This space resonates with some of Morris's 1960s works that Chave describes in "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," p. 57. "Morris's cage-like construction of 1967 ... with its steel materials reminiscent of chain-link fencing," Chave explains, "evokes not corporate, but carceral images, of discipline and punishment, that intrude aggressively on the viewers' sensibilities. A fenced-in quadrangle surrounded by a fenced-in corridor evokes an animal pen and run, both without exits."

90 The difficulty of this situation is expressed in Ryan Kirkpatrick's poem "Loneliness" about his long and empty days in supermax detention. He writes:

"I sit in a cold dark room
Listening intently
For something that's not here

It's just another empty space
Another empty day
Another empty moment

There's nothing to do
But listen to my thoughts
And they are empty as I feel

I am lonely but no one can help me
For I am lost with myself"

Ryan Kirkpatrick, "Loneliness" in *Prison Poetry and Liberation Lit*, <http://liblit.wordpress.com/2008/02/26/prison-poetry/> (accessed October 20, 2008).

Of course, the huge drawback for all SHU prisoners is their inability to know when their time in isolation will end. Some inmates have been housed in Pelican Bay's SHU since it opened. The mental cruelty of not knowing when the isolation will be terminated is coupled with physical abuse so brutal that it became the subject of the notorious Madrid vs. Gomez trial that lasted for several years and was finally decided in January 1995 after a year of deliberation by Federal Judge Thelton Henderson. The judge wrote a strongly censorious 344-page decision pointing out that the California Department of Corrections had violated the Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution through the "grossly excessive" force allowed its guards and through the SHU's lack of adequate medical and psychiatric care.

Known as SHU-Syndrome, the psychiatric disorder suffered by inmates at Pelican Bay and other supermax prisons, is similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, and its symptoms include clinical depression. In a 2003 article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Supermax Prisons Creating Mental Cases," journalist Vince Beiser cited two psychiatrists on the mental disorders afflicting Pelican Bay inmates. With decades of experience working with prisoners, Dr. Terry Kupers of Oakland was equipped to take note of the danger signal represented by supermax inmates cutting themselves. "I've almost never seen self-mutilation among adult males anywhere else," he told Beiser, "but it's very common in SHU's."⁹¹ In addition to Kupers, Beiser talked to Dr. Stuart Grassian, a lecturer at Harvard University Medical School who has studied solitary confinement and its deleterious effects for more than 20 years and who drew the following conclusions about this modern-day form of torture:

Supermax prisons can literally drive inmates crazy ... The [symptoms] include hallucinations; hypersensitivity to external stimuli; paranoia; panic attacks; hostile fantasies involving revenge, torture and mutilation; and violent or self-destructive outbursts, to the extent of gouging out one's eyes, smearing oneself with feces or biting chunks of flesh from one's own body.⁹²

At the time this news article was published, the United States was spending \$24 billion on its prison system and was keeping behind bars close to two million men and women.

In his research on supermax facilities, Ruby has relied on a number of sources, including the findings of the highly respected medical anthropologist Lorna A. Rhodes. In her highly acclaimed 2004 book entitled *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*, Rhodes laments the tragic plight of America's mentally ill and the fact that many of them have been forced to live isolated in SHUs, often without adequate psychiatric counseling. At the time of her book's publication, she estimated that there were perhaps as many as 60 supermax prisons in the United States, with inmates numbering somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 people, and she believed that 15 to 24 percent of these prisoners were mentally ill. Her concern draws not only on her ethnographic research involving talks with inmates, guards, and administrators in Washington State's SHU, but also on her earlier book *Emptying Beds* in which she investigated the plight of severely mentally ill patients in the secured emergency area of a Baltimore public psychiatric facility.⁹³ She later realized that this type of hospital over time had not been able to cope with the challenges facing it, and she drew attention to the fact that the mentally ill, including psychotics, have often been dumped in prisons and are often kept isolated and unmedicated in supermax facilities.

91 Vince Beiser, "Supermax Prisons Creating Mental Cases," *Los Angeles Times* (Sunday, October 26, 2003), <http://www.usenet.com/newsgroups/misc.activism.progressive/msg04079.html> (accessed October 18, 2008).

92 Ibid. According to Pizarro and Stenius in "Supermax Prisons," p. 251, "[W]omen living in a high-security unit experience claustrophobia, chronic rage reaction, depression, hallucinatory symptoms, defensive psychological withdrawal, and apathy ... inmates placed in an environment as stressful as that in a supermax prison begin to lose touch with reality and exhibit symptoms of psychiatric decomposition."

93 Lorna A. Rhodes, *Emptying Beds: The Work of an Emergency Psychiatric Unit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

In an article in the *New York Times* dated November 1, 2003, Dr. Sally Satel, a psychiatrist and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, cites a sobering Human Rights Watch report regarding the fact that American prisons and jails hold three times more mentally ill persons than psychiatric institutions do. She then moves to her main subject: explaining the circumstances that give rise to this change in attitude toward the treatment of such severe psychiatric illnesses as schizophrenia, manic-depression, and clinical depression.⁹⁴ In 1963, working under the then understandable misconception that community health centers were much better equipped to care for seriously mentally ill patients than large bureaucratic state institutions, President John F. Kennedy signed into law the Community Mental Health Centers Act. Instead of trading the mentally ill's former "reliance on the cold mercy of custodial isolation" found in state institutions for "the open warmth of community concern and capability," as Kennedy predicted, great numbers of former state-hospitalized and protected patients—some have calculated the number as great as seventy percent—found themselves without adequate protection and ended up homeless, incarcerated in jail and prisons, and ultimately, decades later, isolated in supermax isolation cells.

Schooled as Ruby was in Guattari's transversality and aware moreover that this theorist had transformed La Clinique de La Borde so that some of its psychotic patients could begin the process of working their way back into the world, the artist found the situation in the United States where the severely mentally ill are treated as unredeemable prisoners a disgraceful practice. One way that his art begins to take on this situation is through the type of symbolic substitution and polyvalent meanings that is art's basic *modus operandi* as well as the recursive, transversal and deconstructive process that is fundamental to his work. These approaches are formative to collages like *Prison* in which the resonances of different social and cultural threads like Minimalist cubes, jail cells, and drawn lines that can refer to either idealist polygons or a schizophrenic's doodles, become as enmeshed as the mixture of mentally ill patients and former gang members that are housed in Pelican Bay. In addition to mining supermax prisons as a subject matter for his work and a metaphorical means for critiquing Minimalism, Ruby began to look at prison art and the iconography of Chicano inmates. In many of his collages, for example, he incorporates the candles, knives, and pinups that are found in Chicano prison art, although his pinups, in the interest of transversality, present male and female bodybuilders as well as transsexuals.

L.A. CHOLA-LATINO-GANG-STYLE GRAFFITI AND RUBY'S ART

Recognizing that eighty-seven percent of Pelican Bay prisoners are brown or black and that more than half are suspected of being either members or associates of prison gangs,⁹⁵ Ruby began looking at the people around his East L.A. studio in Hazard Park, which is frequented by transients, migrant workers, and gang members, some of whom are connected to the inmates housed in Pelican Bay. His art began to reflect his multiple concerns with Minimalism's unreasonable values as well as those of supermax prisons, and also the intensely desperate lives he witnessed daily in East L.A. As he looked around, he began to focus on the distinct rectilinear style of East L.A. graffiti, which emulates the "Old English" typeface and always appears in capital letters. Over the years, he has photographed thousands of examples of these "Placas" (or plaques) that stake claims to a gang's territory. Perhaps the oldest continuous style of graffiti in the United States, the L.A. Cholo-Latino-gang style, according to the former graffiti writer Charles "Chaz" Bojorques, may have antecedents going back to the beginning of the twentieth century when Latino shoeshine boys would write their names on walls.⁹⁶ It became prominent at the

94 Sally Satel, "Out of the Asylum, Into the Cell," *New York Times* (November 1, 2003), <http://www.schizophrenia.com/New/jan%2004/prison.htm> (accessed January 2, 2009).

95 Marilla Argüelles, *Extracts from Pelican Bay: An Anthology of Prisoner Poetry, Drawings, and Essays* (Berkeley: Pantograph Press, 1995), p. 29.

96 Charles "Chaz" Bojorques, "Los Angeles 'CHOLO' Style Graffiti Art," <http://www.graffitiverite.com/cb-cholowriting.htm> <<http://www.graffitiverite.com/cb-cholowriting.htm>> (accessed November 5, 2008). Most of the following history of the L.A. Cholo Latino gang style of graffiti comes from this excellent and informative oral history.

beginning of the 1940s with Latino Zootsuiters, who prided themselves on speaking the special dialect they invented by cobbling together bits of English and Spanish and naming their patois "Calo" after the slang then being spoken by gypsies and bullfighters in Mexico and Spain. Although it certainly represented the rebellious act of declaring a neighborhood a particular gang's territory, Cholo style graffiti was also traditional, decorous, and highly abstract even when it was quickly drawn.

Despite its strong allegiances to its past, this graffiti is now employed by particularly violent gangs, who are willing to defend a territory to the death. In L.A. there are a number of ethnic gangs. Among the most important for Ruby's art are the Crips and the Bloods, as well as MS-13. The first two groups are the step-children of sixties-era Black Panthers and other African-American empowerment groups that failed to attain political credibility so they went underground and supported themselves with the various nefarious activities with which gangs have traditionally been associated. Far more violent is the more recently aligned gang named MS-13, which was originally formed by El Salvadorian immigrants, who had established a group in order to protect fellow immigrants from the brutal gangs that harassed them when they moved to L.A. Over time, however, MS-13 began to make victims of the people it hoped to protect. The origin of the name MS-13 has been debated. The most likely scenario is that "M" stands for a street in El Salvador that is also a name of a Salvadorian gang; "Salvatrucha" is a reference to Salvadoran guerrilla fighters; and "13" signals 13th Street in Los Angeles. When early members of MS-13 were deported to El Salvador, they were placed in Guezaltepeque Prison where they thrived by inducting new adherents into their cult. Although only Salvadorans were at first qualified to be members of MS-13, the group now welcomes Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans. Until recently, members of this group could be readily identified by their exotic appearance: in addition to wearing the blue and white colors of the Salvadoran flag, they were notable for the many black and indigo tattoos in Gothic script embellishing their head, neck, arms, and upper torso. The tattoos had the distinct advantage of ensuring members would never leave the cult, and it has been said that the only way to escape this group is death. Over the years this particularly violent gang, whose weapon of choice is the machete with which it beheads enemies, has increased its members in the United States so that in 2005 it numbered as many as 50,000 members on both the East and West Coasts. Because of its size and extensive range, it has become an international organized crime syndicate. MS-13 members support themselves through smuggling and selling drugs, running prostitution rings, dealing in black market guns, stealing cars, overseeing the illegal entry of immigrants into the United States, committing robberies and burglaries, kidnapping for ransom, and contract killing. Many of their leaders have been put away in both regular prisons and supermax facilities where they manage to keep control of their gang members on the outside, and it is for this reason that some people think the number 13 in the gang's name is an homage to the California prison gang known as the Mexican Mafia.

Because the crimes of these L.A. street gangs are so many and heinous—between 2004–07 there were 80 gang-related shootings that included 20 murders in the L.A. area—one might be inclined to condemn Ruby's many references to their graffiti, their lives in prison, and even their existence by pointing out that his citations might result in raising these gangs and their members to the level of urban folklore heroes where they could be glorified as urban outlaws. In order to appreciate how this objection runs counter to Ruby's work, it helps first to reintroduce the recursive process that his work enacts between its streetwise subject matter and Minimalist allusions so that one position

in turn critiques the other. It also helps to cite Richard Hawkins' vivid account—a passage worthy of William Burroughs—of the many types of abjection that are referenced in Ruby's *Supermax Wall* (2006), which was shown, together with a group of collages presenting images of ceramic pots and knives, at the Christian Nagel Gallery in Cologne in March and April of that year. The type of desecration occurring in the four-panel, Plexi-grid *Supermax Wall*, which Ruby called “time poetry,” informs all his *Supermax* pieces to a greater or lesser degree. Hawkins writes:

The freestanding *Supermax Wall* (2006) ... serves as the surveillance booth and less-than-conjugal visitor's center for the series. Four panels of loogy-proof Plexi-windows record crudely incised tags, vain attempts at bore-holes, greasy smudges, spatters, smears, scummy wipe-marks and cum shot drip-and-slides, capturing emanations which, though intended for visiting civvies on the other side of the glass, catch and suspend discharges onto the transparent walls of the institution, lubricating, desecrating, obscuring, and in the end reinforcing the barrier between outside and in. Whoever is imprisoned behind this forced-field obviously wants out but simultaneously writes (or marks, scratches, spits or cums) himself back in.⁹⁷

WALTER BENJAMIN: SIGNS AND MARKS

While *Supermax Wall* plays on the indexical traces of abject body fluids, most of Ruby's boxes and monoliths, as mentioned earlier, are embellished with graffiti and smudges. Ruby has pointed out in conversation that a source for discrete bits of graffiti, which are drawn or incised with a high speed Dremel, relate to his reading of the remarks on painting by the German critic Walter Benjamin, in which he discusses differences between *signs* and *marks*.⁹⁸ Writing in 1917, Benjamin equates *signs* with drawings because they are impressed on the surface of paper and refer indexically to something other than what they signify. Important to Benjamin and also to Ruby's graffiti and abject smudges is the relationship that these elements have with the surface on which they are drawn. Benjamin stressed that a graphic line inscribes a distinct metaphysical space separate from the plane on which it appears. “The graphic line confers an identity on its ground,” he notes, and then continues by pointing out, “The identity of the ground of a drawing is completely different from that of the white surface on which it is located.”⁹⁹ This distinction is of great importance to Ruby's work because it indicates a metaphysical difference between the actuality of the Formica boxes and the metaphysical integument that is consistent with it and yet substantially different from it. This distinction, ensuring a doubling of readings, enables the Minimalist elemental forms and the graffiti overlay found in Ruby's art to be seen by turns as separate and yet united.

Benjamin's reference to the *mark* becomes the basis for the spray paint which Ruby used at first to cover bases and backgrounds of drawings and then later employed as his primary means for making the paintings that he began creating in 2007. Although this last development will be discussed later, it is important to note at this point that Benjamin equates marks with painting. Not “imprinted” on surfaces like signs, the mark “emerges” primarily “on living beings” such as “Christ's stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks.”¹⁰⁰ Benjamin continues his essay by asserting twice that paintings do not have “ground[s].” The reason for this is that he wishes to establish a different type of spatial relation from signs and drawings in which there is interplay with the ground—not unlike Mallarmé's white sheet of paper—which moves between prosaic and metaphysical meanings. By asserting that painting itself is its own as a ground, Benjamin is able to move outside the circularity of meaning found in drawings,

97 Richard Hawkins, “Sterling Ruby: Long Live the Amorphous Law,” *Flash Art* (October 2006), p. 79.

98 Walter Benjamin, “Painting and the Graphic Arts” and “On Painting, or Sign and Mark” in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, and trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 219–25. An excellent discussion of the problem of the sign and the mark is found in Andrew Benjamin, “Framing Pictures, Transcending Marks: Walter Benjamin's ‘On Paintings, Signs and Marks’” in Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Benjamin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., p. 222.

which are akin to the analogy of recursive Möbius strips that I have used to describe the Minimalist/graffiti opposition at work in Ruby's Formica sculptures. By regarding the emergent ground of marks, and, by extension, paintings, Benjamin is able to emphasize the self-referential quality of painting as well as its "nameability," that is, its ontological latency and critical accessibility that depend on being related to something different from itself. Although Benjamin does not point to Kant as a source, this philosopher was important to his early thought, and Benjamin's approach to painting works in concert with this philosopher's idea of reflective judgment. According to Kant the aesthetic object does not create pleasure for viewers; instead, viewers experience pleasure in the "quickening" of their "cognitive powers" that are involved in investigating situations in which there is the apprehension of "purposiveness without purpose."¹⁰¹ Benjamin regards heightened cognitive awareness in terms of interpretative criticism and the intuition of the ontological possibility of painting's potential to be "*something that it is not ... [a] connection ... achieved by naming [critiquing] the picture [i.e. the painting].*"¹⁰²

In light of Benjamin's theories about drawing and painting and their ramifications for Ruby's art, we might at this point hypothesize that drawing reinforces a circularity between Minimalist actuality and an abjectly drawn conterminous layer of metaphysicality, while his paintings release criticism (viewers' imaginations) to a far less restricted realm, more akin to Kant's free play of the faculties, with which viewers are encouraged to become engaged. Among Ruby's first forays with spray paint are the walls of his graduate show and its offshoot, where the effect of a burned out interior, complementary with the work's title and orientation is pursued. Whereas this openly sprayed surface is much closer to Benjamin's discursus on impressed signs, the much more impacted sprayed surfaces of Ruby's paintings on canvas approach the Benjaminian ideal of painting. These works on canvas are implicated in a number of the allusive figurative references that are immersed within them, such as burned surfaces, graffiti, skulls, and even aspects of the southern California landscape that in certain seasons is essentially red or pink and green. But these iconographic associations, in conjunction with Benjamin's theory, point to an outside world and sets of meaning beyond the works' perimeters, thus their "nameability."

ANTI FORM: THE ART OF DIALECTICS

Following almost immediately the Christian Nagel exhibition featuring *Supermax Wall* is Ruby's exhibition entitled *Recombines* at the Emi Fontana Gallery in Milan.

The exhibition includes a series of six large prints known under the group title of *Physicalism*, *The Recombine*, which join images of candles (pedestrian symbols of enlightenment) with pictures of transversality in the form of males and females, who have radically transformed themselves through bodybuilding. In addition to these two-dimensional works, *Recombines* features two of Ruby's poured urethane sculptures, which had been shown earlier in his thesis show and in a group exhibition at Dave Kordansky Gallery in L.A. Poured onto armatures affixed to the ceiling of his studio, Ruby's stalactite forms, which are indexically gravitational, are then upended after they have set so they become stalagmites. The resultant pieces, which constitute an entirely different body of sculpture from the monoliths and are as important for Ruby as the Minimalist works, can be compared to such anti form hanging pieces as Eva Hesse's *Right After* (1968), made of resin-saturated fiber, which is far removed from the then contemporaneous Minimalist art. Although Hesse's work was not at all predicated on renouncing or veering away from Minimalism, since it develops from an entirely different tradition, it has nonetheless been viewed as Minimalism's antithesis.

101 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 68 from Section 12, "A Judgment of Taste Rests on A Priori Bases."

102 Benjamin, p. 224.

The artist who most self-consciously invoked anti form as a way of moving beyond Minimalism in 1968, the year of its hegemony, is not Hesse but Robert Morris. In April 1968 he wrote the article "Anti Form," which was published in *Artforum*.¹⁰³ No doubt drawing on Hesse's example as well as the late 1950s and early 1960s Happenings of Allan Kaprow and the more contemporaneous writings of Earth artist Robert Smithson, Morris wanted to move away from the necessary pre-planning of Minimalism in order to theorize an art in which the materials themselves participated fully in the formative of the work of art. Instead of subscribing to Greenberg's theory of immanent causation in which each artistic genre, such as painting and sculpture, was seeking to discover the essence of its constituent media, Morris wished to defer responsibility for the work's final appearance to loose arrangements of basic industrial materials, including cast-offs and remnants such as thread and felt, and to rely on gravity, fortuitous accidents, and unforeseen possibilities as formal tactics. Similar to Minimalism, he wanted anti form works to be rigorously self-reflexive, that is to be so totally involved with their materials' properties and chance arrangements that transcendental allusions would be a mere gloss. Meaning was supposed to come from the semantics pertaining to the works' constituent materials and their combinations and not from transcendent values.

Working in accord with anti form attitudes even before this approach was codified into a stylistic category, sculptor Richard Serra compiled during the years 1967–68 an impressive list of potential procedures. His "Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself" begins with such infinitives as "to roll, to crease, to fold," but his enumeration of possibilities also includes such acts as differing, disarranging, opening and spilling, drooping, flowing, curving, and lifting, in addition to such processes as smearing, rotating, and swirling.¹⁰⁴

Smithson did not maintain the strict formalist stance that Morris endorsed for anti form. In his work, Smithson meditates on far more open-ended, entropic forms that enrich the anti form approach by connecting it to life. His classic statement in this regard is the opening paragraph of his essay "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," which connects the first and more frequently used definition of entropy referring to the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the channeling of energy into unavailable states, with a second one found in cybernetics and pertaining to information overload:

The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I call "abstract geology." One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason.¹⁰⁵

Despite Morris's efforts to view anti form as Minimalism's antithesis and disassembling nemesis, thus exceeding it and redirecting it through inversion to distinctly new ends, this artistic approach actually developed from substantially different issues than those formative to Minimalism. This is the reason why anti form cannot be seen as Minimalism's self-conscious opponent, even though its approach is certainly implicitly critical of Minimalism. And this is also a reason why Ruby's poured urethane sculptures cannot be viewed simply as the dialectic opposite of his Minimalist critiques, because they develop, as we will see, from an entirely different position from his monoliths and consequently present another view of transversality. Art writer Cindy Nemser touches on the idea of a completely

103 Like Minimalism, anti form was canonized in the late 1960s. In addition to his 1968 *Artforum* piece, Morris curated 9 in a Warehouse: An Attack on the Status of the Object in the winter of 1969 at the Leo Castelli Warehouse in Manhattan, which included Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra, among such others as the Italian arte povera artists Giovanni Anselmo and Gilberto Zorio. In 1968 Marcia Tucker and James Monte curated *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* for the Whitney Museum of American Art; and that same year gallerist John Gibson organized *Anti-Form* that included Hesse, Panamarenko, Robert Ryman, Serra, Alan Saret, Keith Sonnier, and Richard Tuttle.

104 http://www.demec.ufmg.br/port/d_online/diario/Ema101/AnalisePCriativo/SobreObraDe/RichardSerra/VerbList.htm (accessed January 2, 2009).

105 "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum* 7, No. 1 (September 1968), p. 44.

different historical trajectory for anti form from the relational one Morris adopts in an intriguing yet far too brief essay published in 1970 and entitled "Art Criticism and Perceptual Research." In this piece Nemser indicates that the move from such styles as Minimalism, with its reliance on the transcendent perceptual ability to see holistically in terms of Gestalts to such an approach as anti form may be attributed to artists' growing awareness of the more recent contributions of such experiential perceptual psychologists as Franklin Kilpatrick and F.H. Allport who researched the effects of observers' "environment, assumptions, and actions" on what they see;¹⁰⁶ in this manner these psychologists cast aspersions on Gestalt psychology's emphasis on instantaneously intuited patterns that subsume under their auspices the specifics of seeing.

LUCE IRIGARAY

Whatever the reasons for the differences between Minimalism and anti form, looking back at this latter style and its great differences from Minimalism enables Ruby to advance his overall interest in transversality in a new direction by joining aspects of anti form with some of the most recent and radical ideas of the post-Lacanian feminist psychologist, linguist, and philosopher Luce Irigaray, whom he has enjoyed reading periodically for years. In particular, his stalagmites work with certain Irigarayan ideas, specifically her views on female sexuality, inter-subjectivity between males and females, and mucous. Ruby's urethane sculptures can be considered in relation to Irigaray's concept of the *in-between*, her deconstruction of the polarities of male and female subjectivities that put them into play in the new hybrid that she calls the "sensible transcendental." Because this is a complex set of interrelated ideas to disassemble and because clarifying them will enable us to appreciate the iconographic import of Ruby's new work, it will help first to look at Irigaray's differences from Lacan as well as her goal to write a feminist philosophy before concentrating on both her deconstruction of Plato's cave and her quest for a new female-male inter-subjective. In this way, her complex theories will be able to shed light on Ruby's art, and his art in turn can be understood as illuminating her ideas, even as it connects them in new transversal ways.

Two years younger than Guattari, Irigaray was born in Belgium where she studied philosophy and literature, and received an M.A. at the University of Louvain in 1955. She followed up these studies by moving to France where she studied psychology and linguistics. After earning degrees in these fields, Irigaray attended Lacan's seminars and was awarded a second Ph.D. in philosophy in 1973 for her dissertation that was published two years later under the title *Speculum of the Other Woman*. This publication caused her, however, to lose her teaching position and to be ousted from Lacan's École freudienne de Paris since it was critical of two of Lacan's most sacred theories. Because of her linguistic studies, Irigaray was unable to accept Lacan's view that the Symbolic order is fixed and a-historical; she was convinced that, similar to linguistic systems, the Symbolic is socially, historically, and politically constructed and therefore subject to changes in power. In addition, Irigaray found totally unconvincing Lacan's view of the Phallus as a master signifier of the Symbolic order that, according to him, is entirely separate from the penis; she regarded his explanation as yet another example of patriarchy's attempts to dissimulate its power while still retaining it.

Although Irigaray is definitely a feminist in terms of her view that all gendered relations are socially and historically constructed, she has avoided the type of partisan attitudes that divided the women's movement in the 1970s into a number of competing subgroups and has continued to be responsive to a multiplicity of approaches. However, despite her openness to feminism in general,

106 Cindy Nemser, "Art Criticism and Perceptual Research," *Art Journal* 29, No. 3 (Spring, 1970), p. 226 and 327.

Irigaray has taken issue with this movement's goal of achieving parity with males because she views such an approach as an attempt to erase inequities. As we will see, maintaining difference between the sexes is central to her overall critique of masculine dominance. Irigaray believes furthermore that it is impossible to construct a female subjectivity in an overall male economy because such a system excludes women at the outset. Instead of subscribing to the well-defined trenchancy of male univocality, women's language, according to Irigaray, is intricate, multifaceted and inclusive. Using Guattari's terminology, we can say that this feminist language is transversal, even though Irigaray does not do so. She relied on Derridean deconstruction to initiate her feminist project by first looking at the key privileged term in Western culture, patriarchy, and then noting its overall effect of excising its polar opposite, matriarchy, which it appeared to kill off at the beginning of the Western cultural tradition.

Irigaray's research into this matricide took her on an exciting intellectual journey that included reviewing the story of Plato's mythic cave with its enchained prisoners who are only able to see shadows on the cave's walls that are mere reflections of objects that in themselves are only copies of transcendent generalized ideas. Realizing that the cave itself is only alluded to in passing and that the thin shadows on its wall and the references to transcendent knowledge supplanted any idea of a material origin for this drama, Irigaray deconstructed this view of Platonic universals and the shadowy world in which men live to demonstrate the important yet unacknowledged role that the cave as womb actually assumes in Socrates' story. As she points out:

This project, or process, by which the *hystera* [cave] is displaced, transposed, transferred, metaphorized, always already holds them captive ... [I]t [the cave and also womb] is never susceptible of representation, but produces, facilitates, permits all representations since all are always already marked, or re-marked, in the incessant repetition of this same work of projection ... The *hystera*, faceless, unseen, will never be presented, represented as such. But the representation scheme and sketch for the *hystera*—which can never be fulfilled—sub-tends, englobes, encircles, connotes, overdetermines every sight, every sighting, face, feature, figure, form, presentification, presence. Blindly.¹⁰⁷

This cave (Irigaray's *hystera*, with its uterine connotations) can never be adequately represented in terms of a patriarchic system. According to Irigaray, this is due to the symbolic matricide that attempted to kill off the female, making the origin of life and the material basis for ideas appear to disappear. This realization leads Irigaray to theorize the idea of a "sensible transcendental" that refers to the forgotten pathway in the cave that links the intelligible and the material, and deconstructs the polarities of male presence and female absence that have been so important for western philosophy. As literary specialist Margaret Homans has noted, "Because Plato stages his myth of the creation of reality in a cave, he implies that the womb is a metaphor for his cave, rather than the other way around."¹⁰⁸ Or as Margaret Whitford, one of the most important scholars of Irigaray's thought, has noted, "From the point of view of feminism, Irigaray is sometimes seen as an exemplar of hysterocentrism, a kind of reversal of phallocentrism in which the womb, the maternal function, is privileged instead of the phallus."¹⁰⁹

After working on deconstructing Western philosophy and demonstrating the offstage yet important role that women play, Irigaray has challenged herself with the problem of how to represent a female subjectivity without falling into the trap of defining it in male terms, so that it is objectified as a part-object female breast, for example, which belongs to the same type of representational system as

107 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 245.

108 Margaret Homans, "The Woman in the Cave: Recent Feminist Fictions and the Classical Underworld," *Contemporary Literature* 29, No. 3, Contemporary Literature and Contemporary Theory (Autumn, 1988), p. 383.

109 Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 125-26.

the other major objectified part-object, the penis. Although she felt that she had discovered a means for discussing it in terms of the two lips, which are intended to be the equivalent of Lacan's phallus, her two lips can be compared to the labial lips in the same way Lacan's phallus can be equated with the penis. Because this reference has seemed far too literal in its reliance on the anatomy, many feminists have considered it to be an inadequate metaphor for female subjectivity.

In 1982, according to Whitford in her illuminating essay "Irigaray's Body Symbolic," this philosopher began to rethink female subjectivity in terms of the thick bodily fluid known as mucous.¹¹⁰ Since the appearance of wet shiny surfaces resembling mucous are a crucial aspect of Ruby's purposefully over-glazed ceramics, which sometimes are re-fired as many as seven times to achieve the desired luster, and also is a vital qualitative element of the wet glossy surfaces of his urethane sculptures, it is important to understand how Irigaray posits female subjectivity in terms of the body's protective secretions. In her excellent summary of Irigaray's dispersed references to her quest to find an adequate image to re-symbolize women's bodies, Whitford acknowledges that this viscous substance can seem overly literal to some people, and it certainly has the drawback of being associated with abjection. But its advantages have tended to out-weigh its downside, as she explains. Unlike the male penis or the female's breasts or labial lips, mucous focuses attention on the interior of the body or at least on those liminal orifices that are neither outside nor inside. In addition, it moves away from the sense of sight that has prevailed in Western culture in favor of touch. As a secretion that coats the body rather than comprises its flesh, mucous resists being co-opted by the male views of the female anatomy. Part of a process rather than an inanimate object, mucous resists becoming reified into one particular symbolic system; in fact it could be seen as "represent[ing] the non-theorized."¹¹¹ Also because mucous is a dynamic and in-between substance—being neither firm nor totally yielding—it resists being the binary opposite to the penis. Besides, males also have mucous membranes, so mucous becomes a means of inter-subjectivity. The reason for this is that both genders secrete mucous, and this substance is essential to a number of bodily functions, including the mutual exchanges constituting the act of love. In heterosexual sex, this fluid connotes intimacy, permeability, an interval of the greatest consequence, and the "carnal mode of the between."¹¹² Referencing mucous and selecting discrete, carefully chosen Irigarayan phrases, Whitford describes the heterosexual or inter-subjective union as an ideal way for the sexes to relate:

*Love, the mediator, is a "shared outpouring," a "loss of boundaries," "a shared space," "a shared breath," bridging the space between two persons, two sexes; it does not use the body of the other for its jouissance; each is irreducible to the other or to the child. The loss of boundaries does not lead to a fusion in which one or the other disappears, but to a mutual crossing of boundaries which is creative, and yet where identity is not swallowed up.*¹¹³

Although this idealized state is a romanticizing of male-female subjectivities in terms of their intimate contact through mucous, it also avoids reifying women as closed containers—one of a number of possible readings of the masculinist-oriented Minimalist boxes Ruby's monoliths deconstruct.

Since feminists have done an excellent job of lobbying for a new mutuality between the sexes, the question is how to create one that is both compelling and true to contemporary circumstances. When the Irigarayan one begins to wax rhapsodic and to revive sentimental ideas about a revived and reinvigorated humanism, it is clearly out of sync with Ruby's ongoing quest

110 Margaret Whitford, "Irigaray's Body Symbolic," *Hypatia* 16, No. 3, Feminism and the Body (Autumn 1991), p. 98. Part of the following discussion is indebted to Whitford's excellent analysis of this symbolic operative in Irigaray's writing.

111 Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 163.

112 Simone Roberts, "Sticky Stuff," *Reconstruction* 5, No. 1 (Winter 2005), <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/051/robertssticky.shtml> (accessed October 24, 2008).

113 Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 167.

to re-represent human beings in a transversal manner so that their subjection to flows and not an essential core humanity will become evident. He does this by finding a technique that allows him to recall aspects of Plato's cave at the same time that he also alludes to the post-industrial world in which he lives. Employing PVC pipe, he began making stalagmites by constructing armatures that are hung upside down—almost batlike—from the ceiling of his studio and then he pours urethane over the armature until it has congealed into a number of overlapping flows assuming the form of a stalactite. One might think of this form, which has acceded to the viscous flows of this industrial material, as both female and male. When it is turned upside down and planted on a base, frequently with supports Ruby calls "crutches," the resultant stalagmite might appear more phallic except for the fact that it is not aggressive. In addition, its attenuated drips appear to be far more involved in a frustrated yet still awe-inspiring striving for transcendence that is unavailable to this type of very materialized polymer and purposefully unsteady sculpture. In terms of this resolute artificiality, reversed direction, and precarious stance, Ruby's stalagmites deconstruct sculpture's traditional associations with indomitable strength as well as its often-proclaimed idealistic aims.

ANTONIN ARTAUD AND THE BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

Contradicting the appearance of this quest for transcendence is the lugubrious Goth-like quality evoked by most of Ruby's urethane sculptures. Like the Tony Smith sculpture *Die* that Ruby so admires, they are haunted by specters of a no-longer-relevant-yet-still-vestigial humanism that continues to plague them even as they are the embodiment of fortuitous flows. This Goth-quality has a basis in Ruby's early attraction to punk music in the late 1980s and early 1990s when he would visit the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C. as many as two to three times per week. During this period he was also intrigued with early 1980s dystopian films focusing on a gritty Cyberpunk world such as *Escape from New York* and *Blade Runner*. The Goth character in Ruby's work becomes even more evocative in his later urethane sculptures that are circular and resemble the ersatz Native-American trinkets called "ghost catchers," which Ruby prefers to regard ironically as "dream catchers." Reviewing the Emi Fontana exhibition for *Artforum*, critic Cecilia Alemani emphasizes the uneasy darkness and force of Ruby's two attenuated urethane sculptures as follows:

Two black sculptures rise as from low pedestals like totemic idols. Both dubbed "monument Stalagmite," they contaminate the notion of the monument by overturning it ... Resonating with Lucio Fontana's black formless ceramic sculptures, these inverted monuments, like the photographs that surround them, evoke power through control and violence through domination. Ruby's imagery is uncanny, but at the same time sensual and almost erotic.¹¹⁴

This uncanny effect suggests an entirely different way of framing the doleful stalagmites and by extension the oozing heraldic dream catchers. Instead of viewing them only in terms of Irigarayan inter-subjectivity, it is possible to discern in these sculptures connections with the horrific abjection of Artaud's opening essay for the collection of his writings entitled *The Theater and Its Double*, an important source for Ruby and a text he studied under Lotringer's tutelage. In order to make his image of theater as compelling and horrific as possible, Artaud compares it in his opening essay to the intense drama of the bubonic plagues or black death that assailed Europe in the Middle Ages

114 Cecilia Alemani, "Sterling Ruby: Galleria Emi Fontana," *artforum.com* (July 6, 2006): *artforum.com* (accessed November 19, 2008).

and early part of the Renaissance. He describes, for example, "the poisonous, thick, blood streams (color of agony and opium) which gush out of the corpses."¹¹⁵ Instead of Irigaray's vital and intimate mucous, we find in the metaphor of the theater as plague "the troubled body fluids of the victim as the material aspect of a disorder which, in other contexts, is equivalent to the conflicts, struggles, cataclysms and debacles our lives afford us."¹¹⁶

In consideration of Ruby's commitment to Guattari's transversality, it is also important to note that Deleuze, with the full cooperation of Guattari, took the idea of the "Body without Organs," which plays an important role in their *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, from the following lines of Artaud's 1947 radio play "To Be Done with the Judgment of God":

By placing him again, for the last time, on the autopsy table to remake his
anatomy.
I say, to remake his anatomy.
Man is sick because he is badly constructed.
We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to scrape off that
animalcule that itches him mortally,
god,
and with god
his organs.
For you can tie me up if you wish,
but there is nothing more useless than an organ.
When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic
Reactions and restored him to his true freedom.
Then you will teach him again to dance wrong side out
As in the frenzy of dance halls
And this wrong side out will be his real place.¹¹⁷

115 Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 23.

116 Ibid., p. 25.

117 Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Susan Sontag and Don Eric Levine (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 570-71.

118 In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud described the audience's awareness of theater's profound message as a possibility of becoming: "There is, again an idea of Becoming which the various details of the landscape and the way they are painted ... introduce into our minds with precisely the effect of a piece of music." (p. 36). In a letter to M.B.C. dated September 15, 1931, Artaud wrote: "It seems, in brief, that the highest possible idea of the theater is one that reconciles us philosophically with Becoming, suggesting to us through all sorts of objective situations that furtive idea of the passage and transmutation of ideas into things, much more than the transformation and stumbling of feelings into words." (p. 109).

There is definite pathos in Artaud's role as the inspiration for the theory of Body without Organs since he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. A central problem for schizophrenics is the permeability of the body's parameters that customarily demarcate one's inside or personal space and the outside or public world (already noted with N.N.). Viewed as a metaphor of modern life, this schizophrenic permeability robs a society of its integrity and undermines humanism, with its traditional reliance on unified bodies with organs working in tandem to form integral wholes. Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the Body without Organs is eminently post-humanist since it is therefore open to the machinic flows and assemblages that determine its partial subjectivity and ongoing enunciations with other subjectivities, reducing it to the process of a temporally based ontology of continually becoming itself as it also becomes other than itself.¹¹⁸

In terms of its amorphousness and streams of fluids trailing from its missing viscera, the Body without Organs is strikingly similar to Ruby's ceramics. In this regard, it worth looking at another one of Artaud's horrific evocations of the plague's climax because it serves as a stunning portrayal of some of Ruby's ceramics:

Soon the body fluids, furrowed like the earth struck by lightning, like lava kneaded by subterranean forces, search for an outlet. The fieriest point is formed at the center of each spot; around these points the skin rises in blisters like air bubbles under the surface of lava, and these blisters are surrounded by circles, of which the outermost, like Saturn's ring around the incandescent planet, indicates the extreme limit of a bubo.¹¹⁹

The bubo, a swelling of the lymph nodes found in bubonic plague victims, has a geometric and geological equivalent in several of Ruby's ceramic sculptures, including *Pyrite Fourchette* and *Cobra* (both 2007), in the spherically shaped piece of pyrite (fool's gold, a symbolic means for deconstructing the alchemical associations often ascribed to Ruby's ceramics) that has been screwed into these fired clay sculptures. These foci contrast with Ruby's sprawling ceramic sculptures that are notable for registering finger-shaped depressions created by hand-building the pieces as well as the copious number of drips decorating their surfaces. Also playing on the concept of the Body without Organs is a number of Ruby's other ceramic sculptures that resemble rib cages, bony torsos, and skeletal masks that serve metaphorically as woefully inadequate containers for an integral old-world humanism.

The Body without Organs appears also to provide a *raison d'être* for Ruby's stalagmites since this Guattarian and Deleuzian concept "is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by made or transitory particles."¹²⁰ In addition, this Body without Organs is a double-edged symbol that succinctly captures the type of female dehumanization found in patriarchal societies, which Irigaray has criticized.

Ruby's stalagmites received critical approval not only in Milan but also in L.A. In 2006, *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight reviewed a stalagmite being exhibited at the 2006 California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art and called the piece "a rousing contradiction in terms." Then, he thoughtfully explained, "The phallic structure rising overhead is a pillar at the brink of collapse, an ancient natural form rendered in the starkest modern terms of plastic artifice," and added respectfully, "It's the weirdest thing in the show, and among the best."¹²¹

ASSAILING THE DIHEDRAL: *interior designer*

After presenting his haunting stalagmites in Milan, Ruby moved in an entirely different direction for his next show in which he presented four small clear urethane cast sculptures revealing interiors with striated colors. Called *Interior Designer*, the exhibition opened in September at the Marc Foxx Gallery, and it was a tremendous hit. It was so topical in fact that critic Emma Gray wrote in *L.A. Confidential*, "Your name [Sterling] was on the lips of every critic and writer I encountered on September 9—and this was two hours *before* your show opened."¹²²

The word "interior" in the title *Interior Designer* is both a further comment on Ruby's thesis exhibition *Monument to Interiority: Burnt Out Motif* that took place the preceding year, and the subject of a new body of work that revolves around a post-humanist self that is transversally open to new and changing subjectivities. The major goal of the exhibition was, in the artist's words, "cutting down the dihedral or monolith,"¹²³ referring to the right angle separating vertical human figures from the horizontal plane of the earth supporting them. In addition to his four urethane sculptures with their frozen interior flows that resemble three-dimensional film stills of ongoing movements, Ruby included a number of monoliths in the form of Formica cubes parodying East Coast Minimalism that serve as bases for West Coast L.A. "Finish Fetish" clear urethane blocks in which different

119 Ibid., p. 13.

120 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 40.

121 Christopher Knight, "The 2006 California Biennial: Art Review: The Faces of this place: Artists and art reflect diversity amid a turbulent world in the Orange County Museum of Art's estimable survey," *Los Angeles Times* (October 7, 2006), p. E1.

122 Emma Gray, "L.A. Confidential," *Artnet.com* (October 12, 2006); <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/gray/gray10-12.asp> (accessed October 12, 2008).

123 Sterling Ruby, email to author, January 30, 2009.

colors have been suspended. Ruby has referred to this California Minimalism as “candy-colored California cool,” and it can be associated with such artists as Peter Alexander, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, and DeWain Valentine. Conceived as ongoing conjunctions of these two Minimalisms, the sculptures in *Interior Designer* are also wry comments on Ann Goldstein’s blockbuster exhibition that contrasted and compared these two stylistic options.

In addition to this transversal move between East and West Coast versions of Minimalism, *Interior Designer* played up the transversality of collaged images of both pre- and post-operative male-to-female transsexuals, which are contrasted with dripped polygonal shapes on tinted Plexiglas and foil paper that are made with nail polish. Although the nail polish is enormously decorative, it also resembles blood, becoming an ironic and mordant semiotic that extends Irigaray’s idea of mucous as the new feminist imaginary into the realm of body fluids even as it—the nail polish/blood—unites the two genders referenced in Ruby’s collages into a new inter-subjective transsexual and transversal whole. As Frydenborg has thoughtfully noted, “Sterling Ruby’s new installation *Interior Designer* explores the erosion of the unitary form, revealing the amorphous viscera and scarred flesh of a transfigured geometric labyrinth.”¹²⁴

As part of *Interior Designer*, Ruby included his video, *Dihedral*, in an adjoining space. The piece is a complement to the clear cast urethane blocks in the exhibition. Consisting of a series of extraordinarily beautiful hues created by slowly dropping different food colors into an aquarium filled with water for the full length of this eight-minute video, the continually transformed and transforming radiant atmospheric clouds of color begin to resemble a Turner painting. This visual symphony is accompanied by a very deep voiceover of the artist reading an abridged version of the essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” by Roger Caillois, the former Surrealist and co-founder with Bataille of the Collège de Sociologie. Caillois’s essay looks at mimicry *positively* as a defensive and protective camouflage employed by insects and animals, and *negatively* as a schizophrenic spatial dispossession of one’s integral humanism, and it is this second aspect of the essay that is germane to Ruby’s video. Viewed in terms of *Dihedral*, the passage focusing on psychasthenia, which Caillois considers to be “disturbance[s]” that can develop between “personality and space,” can be seen as a meditation on the permeability of the self, which is as vulnerable to the space around it as are the luminous and vivid colors in the video that are diffused and absorbed by the ambient fluid in which they have been immersed. The video can also be viewed in terms of Ruby’s interest in Guattari’s transversality, as can Caillois’s text, so that the first line stating “the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction” begins to sound like a problem for the staff at Clinique de La Borde rather than the beginning of an essay that looks mostly at the habits of animals and insects. If one thinks about this piece in relationship to Irigaray, then the dispersion of the various hues in the water can be construed as a particularly luminous form of inter-subjectivity in which differences are ameliorated and contained.

Mimesis was also an important strategy for Irigaray, who formulated it early in her career in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*. She believed, for example, that liberally incorporating in her text quotations by male writers would have the critical and ironic effect of mirroring prejudicial statements back to their patriarchic senders, and she was convinced that such a tactic could underscore essential differences between the two genders and protect women from being co-opted by paternalistic discourses.¹²⁵ While her mimetic strategy is critical and therefore does not relate to the way mimeticism works in nature, it does provide a transversal link to the different form of dispossession

124 Erik Frydenborg, Typescript, circa 2006, Artist’s Archives, East Los Angeles.

125 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). The relevant passage is the following: “To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible,’ of ‘matter’—to ideas, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible.”

through overwhelming space that mimeticism or camouflage can enact on dihedral or monolithic forms, making them as permeable as schizophrenics. This “devouring force” is the central role that Caillois’s text assumes in Ruby’s *Dihedral*. Caillois’s examination of the debilitating effect of space enables Ruby to distance himself from dihedral, monolithic, and ultimately patriarchic views of the world and to present more liquid ones in line with the visuals in his video. In his essay Caillois describes this dihedral position before he indicates how the “psychology of psychasthenia” overwhelms the dihedral male:

[T]here can be no doubt that the perception of space is a complex phenomenon: space is indissolubly perceived and represented. From this standpoint, it is a double dihedral changing at every moment in size and position: a dihedral of action whose horizontal plane is formed by the ground and the vertical plane by the man himself who walks and who, by this fact, carries the dihedral along with him ... It is with represented space that the dream becomes specific, since the ... [individual] is no longer [of] the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself.¹²⁶

To conclude his video, Ruby edited the following quotation by the psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski, which Caillois cited, and then added his own statement (Ruby’s emendations are in italics):

Dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space, the distinction between inside and outside are ... [*confusing*]. *It is perhaps more important that the individual’s monolith, its dihedral organ, be seen as an external perception, which plays only a modest role and can be easily gotten rid of.*¹²⁷

In this way, Ruby reinforces a transversal as opposed to a unitary and dihedral view of humanity as he counters Caillois’s meditation on the dispossessing power of mimicry with Guattari and Deleuze’s theorization of the advantages of schizophrenic or partial subjectivity. As Guattari wrote in his last book *Chaosmosis*,

Schizoanalysis obviously does not consist in miming schizophrenia, but in crossing, like it, the barriers of non-sense [dispossessing space] which prohibit access to a-signifying nuclei of subjectivation, the only way to shift petrified systems of modelisation.¹²⁸

KILLING THE RECONDITE

The following spring, in an important show at New York’s Metro Pictures gallery called *Killing the Recondite*, the figure of the transient—Ruby’s personification of transversality, who had made his first appearance two years earlier in the video *Transient Trilogy*—reappears in terms of indexical signs assuming the form of destruction’s abandoned traces. These remains in the sculpture also named *Killing the Recondite* included the burning and defacement that have brought low this Fascistic-type monument. The source for this piece was a peculiar six-inch-tall meditation fountain that the artist’s mother had given him shortly before her death. Reminding Ruby of similarly shaped constructions often seen in commercial plaza centers, he increased the piece’s size to larger-than-life proportions, using lumber and low-grade plywood before distressing it with black spray paint so that the work would appear to

126 Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” trans. John Shepley, <http://underconstruction.wdfiles.com/local--files/imprint-reading/caillois.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2008). The extraordinary power of this and other passages in Caillois’s “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” can be understood by pointing out that they were formative to Lacan’s understanding of the need to theorize the Mirror Stage.

127 Ibid. Ruby’s additional sentence has been transcribed from “Dihedral.”

128 Guattari, “Schizoanalytic Metamodelisation” in *Chaosmosis*, p. 68. In this same essay, Guattari defines schizoanalysis, which relates to transversality by taking advantage of psychotic breaks in reality as a model for a new and dynamic form of partial subjectivity. “Schizoanalysis,” he writes, “rather than moving in the direction of reductionist modelisations which simplify the complex, will work towards its complexification, its processual enrichment, towards the consistency of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation, in short towards its ontological heterogeneity.”

have been sabotaged and torched. He replaced the static forms of his model with a stalagmite and a circular gate or dream catcher to create an eerie trickling Goth-like monument, which he has fantasized as “mere traces of something that has passed through ... [So that the sculpture] present[s] formal similarities to the derelict shanties and repurposed freeway underbellies that we associate with the transient occupant ... [particularly] the scarification of lunatic ciphers and antisocial debasement which embellish peripheral urban space, establishing a sort of ritual reenactment of marginal behavior.”¹²⁹

To make *Killing the Recondite* not only did Ruby go back to the shadowy psychotic of the first section of his *Transient Trilogy*, but he also revisited his concerns regarding the exhortations of Art Center’s faculty to employ theory as a prefatory rationale rather than a means for questioning the legitimacy of an entire field, thereby creating a generalized space in which to make art. In his excursus on *Killing the Recondite* Ruby belabors the “impotency of conditioning” and contends that “rarified knowledge of theory and precedent will invariably stanch the flow of any and all primitive or unlearned impulses, [creating] a sort of fugue of schizoid static, where the actor is overcome by bouts of reflex and doubt, unable to distinguish between freedom and repression.” He goes on to explain that “indeterminacy [can also be attributed] to the transient figure, which wanders a desolate landscape with no discernable goal other than to keep moving, “endlessly seeking without expectation for resolution.”¹³⁰ This situation creates a polarity between abstruse or recondite responses and untaught and naïve ones as well as between overly rationalized explanations and psychotic ones. Although the sculpture’s tacit subject is overturning the overly erudite, it celebrates what it ostensibly denigrates and perpetuates the type of elitist approach its imagined transient figure vandalizes. This cycle of creation and destruction is evident in the loosely conceived gold luster ceramic mortar and pestle positioned at table height near the entrance of the Metro Pictures exhibition and directly in front of the sculpture *Killing the Recondite*. The ceramic serves no doubt as a symbol of humanity’s traditionally assumed power to transform lowly substances into gold, while the nearby fragmented human torso with its pools of color representing the body’s fluids dramatizes the human limits that undermine alchemy’s grand pretensions.

This sculpture, which resonates with ersatz Fascistic suburban fountains that, according to Ruby, are the distant progeny of such Third Reich monuments as Albert Speer’s Zeppelin Tribune or Nazi Party Rallying Grounds (1934–37) in Nuremberg, constitutes a meditation on the evanescence of world power. Ruby has pointed to the importance of Speer’s “Theory of Ruin Value” for *Killing the Recondite*, which demonstrates that creation and destruction no longer have to be antinomies but can be part of the same ongoing operation. Speer relates his story regarding this “Theory of Ruin Value” in his extensive memoirs, *Inside the Third Reich*, which detail his intimate connections with Nazism in general and Hitler in particular.¹³¹ Since Speer recognized that even the most advanced construction methods of the 1930s would not sustain the onslaughts of centuries but would be reduced to rubble after being devastated by fire, neglect, and time, he suggested to Hitler that, irregardless of the expense, he should approve for the Third Reich’s major building projects only those materials that would age well. Speer even had a romantic image drawn so that Hitler could see “what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still clearly recognizable.” Although Hitler’s top officials were horrified by the idea of aestheticizing the ultimate denouement of the Third Reich, which they were only beginning to build, the romantic scheme appealed to Hitler, and he promptly approved the plan to use more expensive and substantial materials.

129 Sterling Ruby, “Killing the Recondite,” typescript, Artist’s Archives, Los Angeles.

130 Ibid.

131 Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc, 1970), p. 102–16. In this section, Speer describes this enormous commission and his successful completion of it, even with an impossible deadline.

PAINTING SUBTRACTIONS

Incorporating spray paint liberally as a means for connoting the transient's act of burning and defacing his *Killing the Recondite* monument, Ruby began to see how painting might be taken off its hierarchical pedestal as the artistic genre of ultimate value, and used in a much more transversal and incapacitating manner. This new direction came about when Ruby began to perceive that the "soft aerosol gesture[s] of the spray paint made the geometry [of the underlying wooden forms] disappear a bit or at least it became somewhat abstract and undefined."¹³² The difference is a qualitative one that is not apparent in the completion of *Killing the Recondite* where the spray paint continues to work in accord with Benjamin's theory of the sign, but it did indicate to Ruby how painting could become a mark that would emerge from the background rather than impose itself on it. Instead of transfiguring a background as his etched graffiti signs do with the Formica cubes on which they are inscribed so that the ground is both metaphysical and prosaic, a painting becomes its own ground, its own *raison d'être*, so to speak, which is not formalist per se but neither is it preeminently referential. This difference may have been slow in coming because Ruby had been introduced in 1983 at age 11 to New York graffiti art at an extraordinary exhibition of this material at the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam that emphasized spray paint as a way of imposing signs on subway trains and other components of the urban landscape. Taken to this exhibition by an aunt on one of his annual trips to the Netherlands, Ruby was able to survey in the show the full range of New York graffiti artists, who were all known by their tags and who appeared in the show both in terms of their work on canvas and in the informative videos located throughout the exhibition that presented interviews with the artists. One of the graffiti writers, Blade, summed up the attitude of this eminently calligraphic work when he said, "The whole thing about graffiti is the lettering. That's what graffiti means: becoming famous because your name is all over the city, on the trains. That's what graffiti always says and what it should be."¹³³

Moving away from signs to marks, even though he at times retains signs that appear to emerge out of the marks, Ruby, who had painted throughout his undergraduate years, began to make large paintings after his Metro Pictures exhibition that reference Frank Stella's pre-black works and the black and maroon paintings that Mark Rothko made for the Tate Gallery as well as the canvases included in his chapel in Houston. Closer to Stella's early paintings in terms of their self-referentiality and removed from Rothko's transcendent and Burkean sublime aspirations, Ruby's canvases are particularly subversive since they employ spray paint with its semiotic connections of vandalized surfaces to destabilize the elitism of both Stella's and Rothko's works. Roberta Smith aptly identified this quality when three of Ruby's works were first included in a group at the Jeffrey Deitch's exhibition *Substraction* in the spring of 2008, curated by gallery director Nicola Vassell:

art hovering just below the threshold of abstraction and at the border of acceptability (as in subculture, substandard) ... the grittiness of contemporary street and graffiti art ... Sterling Ruby is the main event, with three canvases whose dark, toxic, fluorescent-tinged atmosphere pushes graffiti art's staple—spray paint—to new heights as well as depths. One smart wag is calling them "Gangsta Rothkos."¹³⁴

Smith's review correlates well with Vassell's explanation of her neologism "substraction," which joins "substraction" with "extraction" to move away from the traditionally idealized views of modern

132 Sterling Ruby, email to author, January 30, 2009.

133 *Graffiti* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans van Beuningen, October 22–December 4, 1983 and Groningen: Groninger Museum, January 14–February 26, 1984), n.p.

134 Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Substraction," *New York Times* (April 25, 2008).

abstraction with its assumptions regarding the reduction of forms down to Platonic universals so that the resultant essences would reveal ultimate truth as distilled and transcendent reality. In place of these august sentiments, Vassell's *Substraction* demonstrates

how today's abstract painters are updating New York School abstraction with the energy of the streets, and the jam-packed frequencies they dispense. The title "substraction" is meant to invoke the reductive and sub or "low" influences these artists draw on: the tougher, darker and dangerous. Think subway, subwoofers and sub-prime.¹³⁵

Instead of aligning themselves with such painters as Yves Klein and Jackson Pollock, the artists in *Substraction*, according to Vassell, were more prone to "the grittier abstract of Lucio Fontana and Robert Rauschenberg."

Employing spray paint, Ruby begins each work as if he is drawing—making signs—so that the canvas gets tagged with intense hues and often with neon paint. Then he contains the space, and some of his early works in the genre reveal that he was thinking of landscape references and also prison-like barriers. As he works, painting layers of aerosol over one another, his paintings evidence the convoluted truth of Benjamin's statement on the interactivity of painting:

The actual problem of painting can be discerned in the statement that a picture [a painting] is indeed a mark; and, conversely, that the mark in the narrower sense exists only in the picture, and, further, that the picture, insofar as it is a mark, is only a mark in the picture itself.¹³⁶

Because, as Benjamin points out, "there is no ground in painting," Ruby's spray paintings represent a process of immersion and submersion. Beginning with rich hues that are toned down with black, which has the effect of aging them, and then made atmospheric with additions of white, Ruby has discovered that his spray paintings—ironic comments on the vacuous post-painterly abstract spray paintings of Jules Olitski—can be eminently transversal since they appear to embrace by turns the subjectivities concomitant with abstract painting's elitism, its quest for transcendence, its appropriation and sometimes pastiches of other art, and its despoliation of this genre's high-mindedness.

Because spray paint will sputter and create drips when an aerosol can is close to empty, most graffiti writers work hard to avoid these telltale splatters. Blade in fact is on record, complaining, "I hate drippings, I never let anything drip. When it happens, I keep on blowing on it until it disperses."¹³⁷ Far from avoiding these telling marks, Ruby's paintings are punctuated by them. The marks, which can also be considered Benjaminian signs, have the distinct advantage of setting up tensions between the surface of the canvas and the penumbral atmospheric effects created by the atomized colors. In addition, their reference to process makes the act of painting appear to have been abruptly broken off because the paint in the aerosol appears to have run out. Thus Ruby's painting is eminently transversal because these sputtering drips are open-ended. Because they work in opposition and in tandem with the spray-painted atmospheric fields, these fields and the drips resting on the surface can be regarded as setting up such polarities as high/low, transcendent/de-sublimated, and additive/subtractive between which a number of subject positions can be discerned.

135 Press Release for "Substraction," March 29, 2008–May 24, 2008, New York, New York.

136 Walter Benjamin, "On Painting, or Sign and Mark" in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, p. 224.

137 Blade, interview in *Graffiti*, n.p.

RIPPERS

The polyvalent semiotic, which painting on canvas has provided Ruby, has in turn affected the way he approaches his monoliths. Instead of only enveloping them in etched signs in the form of L.A. Chola graffiti tags and abject scumblings, he also has begun to spray paint them. In a trilogy of exhibitions held in the fall of 2008, all linked by the word “ripper” as in *GRID RIPPER* at GAMeC in Bergamo; *ZEN RIPPER* at the Emi Fontana Gallery; and *SPECTRUM RIPPER* at Sprüth Magers in London, Ruby has returned New York spray-painted graffiti to its vandalistic function as he spray-paints huge plinths of Formica that he then stacks as if they are greatly enlarged early wooden Minimalist pieces by Carl Andre. In each of these installations the dihedral monoliths, which Ruby had formerly adhered to, are transformed into horizontal arrangements. The term “ripper” in each of these situations is intended to suggest a complex and layered subject that the artist has explained in the following manner:

Ripping means a bunch of things to me: the first is that the word generates a sense of tearing; it also has the “jack-the-ripper” history; rappers like to use ripping to describe taking someone down, especially when in association with a bullet proof Kevlar vest.

These dark and violent connotations work in concert with Ruby’s spray-painted bold Formica forms. Rather than keeping these works pristine, Ruby intends to leave them open to the vagaries of being transported and handled, as well as being scuffed, scraped, and scratched so that they refer indexically to histories of change and movement that can only indirectly be inferred as they become different works over time. In this way ripping is both the subject of these works and also the process through which their artistic surface is gradually worn away, leaving their ontological status as works of art open and eminently transversal.

CONCLUSION

In his magisterial study, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, art historian George Kubler noted, “The shapes of time are the prey we want [works of art] to capture.” He continued, “Every important work of art can be regarded both as a historical event and as a hard-won solution to some problem.”¹³⁸ Certainly Sterling Ruby’s many emendations and desecrations of Minimalism, anti form, and color field painting from the 1960s, as well as his redirection of abject art from the 1980s, provide a sense of time passing, styles weathering, ideas recycling, and meanings changing. But this is not the primary goal of his art: just a considerable benefit. The aim of this work is evident in the twin positions of the supermax prisoner and the transient—today’s victims of societal changes—who may or may not be mentally ill, even though substantial numbers are. Caught on the margins of twenty-first century life, in the past these individuals would have been mourned as the passing victims of a still nascent humanism, but Ruby, who is keenly aware of Félix Guattari’s work on the enormous advantages of transversality, views them differently. His art considers them in terms of subjectivities that have been forged by the laws, languages, and protocols of the world in which we live, even though changing circumstances will enable them to move into other situations that will enunciate them as entirely different subjects. Less actors than acted upon, these inherited, hybrid, and newly formed subjectivities are partial, varied, and, fortunately, continually open: their fate would be irrevocably sealed if they were to be molded into only one type of subject.

138 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 32–33.

Because art since the Renaissance has participated fully in the ideology of humanism, it has often assumed the role of a surrogate being or presence and demanded to be regarded in this manner. We need only think of the great and indomitable Renaissance and Mannerist portraits, the enlightened understanding of history painting, the surrogate observers in landscape paintings that direct onlookers how to frame sublime natural views, the casual impressionist scenes that reduce looking to a glance, the distilled abstractions that point to elevated sensibilities, and the Abstract Expressionist musings on the unconscious mind's ability to generate archetypal images, in order to see that traditional work and modern art have both fallen prey to the mindset of a humanistic consciousness and its presumed ability to hold up to universal understanding discrete portions of the world. Coming from a very different tradition that negates humanist pretensions to magisterial knowledge, Ruby's far less august yet crucially important artistic project reminds us that our affiliations with the world create us, so that we become only briefly transversal assemblages that are clustered today into one type of constellation and tomorrow into another. This passive view of human existence—so radically different from humanism and yet incorporating fragments of it—has demanded a different conception of being; a sense of artistic style as no longer monolithic; and a radical perception of gender, which is no longer as polarized as was once thought to be the case. Using deconstruction as a strategy, Ruby puts both artistic genres and received views of humanity into play; in the process he creates opportunities for the scrambled hybrids and the new subject positions that inhabit his art.

But even though Ruby's art engages in this important cultural work of envisioning proliferating subjectivities positively, the question still needs to be asked regarding whether a residual humanism reappears in his work in the form of an omniscient intelligence that collaborates with Guattarian transversality and Irigarayan feminist deconstruction, and if this essay on his work is in fact a humanist enterprise. Is there not after all a predominant consciousness that subsumes under its auspices all the proliferating and fecund partial subject positions that these theories afford? The answer has to be a qualified "no," because humanism at the present time is still so completely woven into the fabric of humanity's self-regard that it cannot be completely eradicated as an intellectual means and goal no matter how great the effort. Despite its characterization of Ruby's art as post-humanist, this essay is a clear example of a frustrated desire to extend our understanding of his work so that its post-humanism can be contradictorily subsumed under an essentially humanist framework. But since this essay will eventually be one among a number of contributions on this artist's work, it too will need to be regarded as representing the benefits and also the blinders of a specific historical perspective and thus cannot attain the type of universality traditionally associated with humanism. In both this essay and in Ruby's art, then, humanism can be deconstructed and put into play in a manner similar to the analytic cubism of Picasso and Braque that does not completely eradicate empiricism but instead rethinks it in terms of the fractured, incomplete, and contingent views necessary for coming to terms with discrete aspects of the world. Similarly, in the partial subjectivities with which Guattari replaces humanism's once all-seeing awareness, the engendered views of the self that Irigaray deconstructs, and the material representations of hybridized selves that Ruby's art projects, there are brief glimpses of a shattered humanism. Channeled into separate flows, humanism loses its idealized central position and reveals its insights to be fortuitous and intuitive forays in an increasingly complex world that has produced them as one of its many effects.