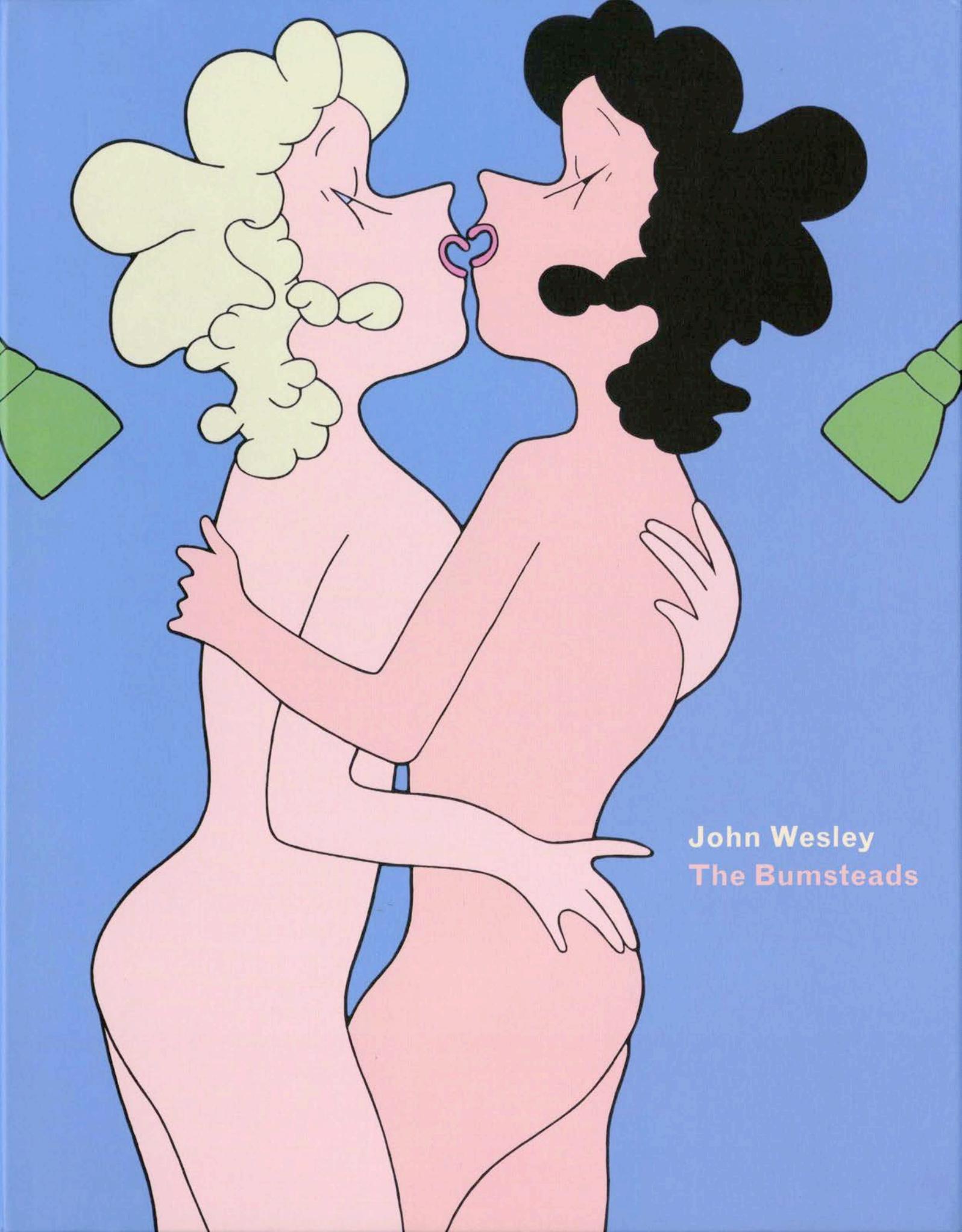


John Wesley: The Bumsteads. New York: Fredericks & Freiser, 2007.

Text © Robert Hobbs



John Wesley
The Bumsteads

John Wesley
The Bumsteads
Fredericks & Freiser
New York City
Essay by
Robert Hobbs

Searching for Bumstead

Robert Hobbs

In 1966, only four years after American Pop Art was first hailed as a new style, noted critic Lucy Lippard set out to codify its major tenets and to propose exacting limits for it in the extended essay “New York Pop.”¹ Assuming the rigorous perspective of the Minimalists, with whom she was at the time closely affiliated, Lippard attempted to align a small group of avatars whom she termed “hard core” Pop artists with the style itself. No doubt she regarded this epithet, reconfigured as an honorific, to be an effective means for setting in high relief the aesthetic transgressions of such artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol, since the descriptive term “hard core” is usually reserved for only the most seasoned criminals and prurient pornography. In undertaking such an extraordinarily combative assessment at a time when Pop Art’s overall intent and purview were still being developed, Lippard’s lucid short-circuiting of history, at times understandably, miscalculated the import of several artists’ work and misconstrued as well some major contributions of this style, particularly its dryly conceived, yet pungent, nostalgia for the not-yet-historicized recent past, most readily recognized in terms of its mass-media effects.

After denying the painter John Wesley admission to her hard-core group, Lippard characterized his art as latter-day Surrealism and second-wave Pop Art without attempting to see how this work extended Pop Art’s parameters in meaningful and compelling ways. The main problem with the Surrealist label, which Lippard probably intended as a back-handed compliment since her edited volume of Surrealist writings was published four years later,² is that it tended to ascribe Wesley’s innovations to a then 38-year-old style. In the 1960s Surrealism was unfortunately often known through the hackneyed disjunctions of its followers. Moreover, it did not look at this work’s past/present conflation of time as a preeminent innovation of Pop Art that accorded the past a potent yet unsentimental role in the burgeoning, fast-paced 1960s.

Lippard’s Surrealist qualifier needs to be acknowledged and understood before proceeding further with this essay on Wesley’s Pop affiliations in general and his Bumstead paintings (1973–present) in particular because it has had such a tremendous impact on later critical and art historical portrayals of this artist’s painting. These writers have commendably discerned a special eerie quality haunting Wesley’s patently condensed works but have been limited by the discourse on its quasi-Surrealist affiliations that Lippard initiated. Because her description of Wesley’s work is responsible for placing it in a purgatory that was neither completely Pop nor sufficiently Surrealist, it is important to cite her critique at length:

The second wave included artists who were working towards a Pop style by 1961 and others who were influenced but not overwhelmed by the hard core. Among the former was John Wesley....Wesley’s whimsical emblems, enshrined in floral or decorative borders and painted in a deceptively sweet poster style, celebrate old-fashioned sports figures, ladies’ lacrosse teams, Indians, nudes,

squirrels, and presidents, often in pale blue and white with pink-and-green touches and black outlines...The strength of Wesley's work derives from its apparent innocence, even coyness, fused with an underlying eroticism. His wit is a curious one—partially subtle and Surrealist (the juxtapositions of cows and dancing nudes, baseball players and garlands), but also broadly humorous in the sight-gag tradition.³

Lippard's "partially subtle and Surrealist" articulation of Wesley's work was picked up seven years later by New York poet/critic Peter Schjeldahl, who reluctantly employed it as a way to approach a special quality in this artist's paintings that he detected but could not pinpoint:

Wesley came to prominence a decade ago as a sort of Pop artist. Within his emblematic style, however, he is a unique, hermetic visual poet somewhat of the order of Bill Copley. He is a kind of Surrealist, I suppose, though no label seems very helpful in this case.⁴

In 1974 noted novelist Hannah Green, who was married to Wesley and was also deeply involved with his work, tried to express its allusive qualities by moving beyond Pop's presumed public stance and focusing on its more idiosyncratic and private aspects. "Jack is still associated with the Pop Movement in the public mind," she admitted, "but as time has gone on, it has become clear that he is, rather, an eccentric, absolutely individual, a humorist, a surrealist, 'an hermetic visual poet,' as Peter Schjeldahl called him in the *Times* last year."⁵ Later, in 2000, in the extended chronology for the catalogue accompanying museum director Alanna Heiss's full-scale P.S. 1 retrospective of Wesley's paintings, Green categorized her husband's work as full-fledged Pop during the years 1963–66 before citing Lippard's "New York Pop" statement relating to its putative Surrealist overtones and then going on to acknowledge Schjeldahl's judgment of the previous year when she concluded, "Wesley no longer seemed to be a 'Pop artist.'"⁶

Green's first-Pop-then-Surrealist way of designating Wesley's art that she gleaned from both Lippard's and Schjeldahl's writings has subsequently helped to reinforce this way of looking at his work. Even as late as 2006, museum professional Martin Hentschel, who provided an essay for an important German traveling retrospective of Wesley's drawings, conceded that "the 'Surrealist' label...often given to him is only partly right," before adding, "Wesley was intent rather on depicting the habits and common places with which we fill our daily lives as darkly humorous and he did so with all conceivable visual cunning."⁷

Given the hold that the quasi-Surrealist tag has continued to have on these and other writers over the 40-year period since Lippard suggested this approach, the long overdue question now facing us is how to understand this elusive aspect of Wesley's art that a Surrealist label approximates and also obviates. The question needs to be accounted for if we are ever to grasp the significance of his work and see how it makes distinct and important contributions to Pop Art.

While Lippard cites Wesley's wonderfully preposterous juxtapositions, Schjeldahl his hermeticism, Green his unconventionality, and Hentschel his black humor as possible reasons for deeming his work somewhat Surrealist, I am convinced that there is another way to locate this difficult-to-describe and little-understood quality. In order to do so, we must be willing to forgo our view of art as necessarily cohesive and monolithic and instead reassess its ability to be far more open-ended—even schizophrenic—than formerly assumed, so that its content moves beyond the threshold of any given work's actual perimeters and is in part lodged off-stage where only active viewers can discern it and others can intuit it.

Instead of looking for this content as entirely manifested *in* Wesley's work, then, I propose considering it both on and off his art's exacting two-dimensional stage, which is populated with telling references and even more evocative gaps. Wesley's pervasive attention to positive/negative spaces in his work is a thematic on the formal level which points us in the direction of the presences and absences found in his art's content. For example, when we focus on one form or set of colored shapes in his work, we relegate others to the background, and our subsequent move to a different form or color causes the formerly perceived positive shapes to be looked at as negatives. Taking this mode of viewing to the thematic level, we can say that Wesley's subjects exist in a contrapuntal relationship with overt, tacit, and intuited references so that a positive/negative relationship also comes to define our awareness of them. Thus, when we concentrate on his interlocking shapes fitted tightly together like pieces of a puzzle, we are less likely to be conscious of their potential meanings, and then when we focus on their possible content, we tend to deemphasize the authoritative presence of these formal elements. In consideration of this operative that works on both a formal and thematic level in Wesley's work, I suggest that, instead of respecting the form of Wesley's art as an envelope enclosing a discrete content—a concept stemming from G. W. F. Hegel's definition of classic art—I wish first to reconsider briefly the differential between form and content that Hegel employs as a means for characterizing symbolic art.⁸ Then, I intend to re-frame Hegel's symbolic so that it can be used to understand Wesley's art in general and his ongoing and open-ended Bumstead series in particular, because this series also functions as a screen memory as we will see, using Freud's term, that overlays a series of traumatic events that took place when the artist was five years old.⁹

Turning to aesthetics late in life in a series of lectures, which were later published, Hegel set out to describe art as a historical development predicated on humanity's growing awareness of the ways that a personified and pro-active "Idea still seeks [i.e., determines] its genuine expression in art."¹⁰ Hegel viewed this teleological process as eminently historical even though he regarded history as being enacted by a dynamic and self-actualizing overriding philosophy in the form of a personified, god-like Idea. According to Hegel, this progression begins with a symbolic phase before moving to a classic moment, and it culminates its natural conclusion in the art of his own time, which he labeled "romantic." Hegel believed symbolic art to be an early artistic development in which an inadequately understood content (again, the Idea incarnate) corrupts and falsifies the forms (the art) attempting to manifest it. Redirecting Hegel's

term and his emphasis on the differential between a work's form and its content to new and different ends, I propose rethinking the category of symbolic art so that it can describe the post-modern situation of misaligned form and content in general and traumatic memory in particular. This more objective repositioning of the symbolic has the distinct advantage of leaving viewers free to be moved by a given work's dimly perceived content, which may be alluded to without being entirely confined to elements within its perimeter. Hegel describes symbolic art as constituting:

In general a battle between the content which still resists true art and the form which is not homogeneous with that content either. For both sides [content and form as well as meaning and shape], although bound into an identity, still coincide neither with one another nor with the true nature of art, and therefore they struggle none the less to escape from its defective unification.¹¹

While Hegel regards symbolic art pejoratively as an early and not clearly thought out pursuit, I'm suggesting that the symbolic can be productively rethought as an art in which part of its content, for various reasons, is located outside the work's frame. This out-of-the-frame connection, which depends on viewers' active participation in order to be discerned, constitutes a standard way of conceiving snapshot photography and can be construed as one reason for its compelling power. We might regard some of Weegee's crime-scene works as pertinent examples because they allude to tangential, out-of-frame, and possibly relevant information and events, even as they preclude viewers from seeing beyond them. In addition, we might look at French structuralist/post-structuralist critic Roland Barthes' theorization of the concept, "punctum" (literally, piercing), which depends on the viewers' subjectivity to discern and define it. Punctum is an attempt to locate within a photograph a key element capable of puncturing its surface and its related sense of autonomy and closure, thereby enabling viewers to catch a glimmer of the extraordinary reality outside an image's given boundaries, which the photographer and camera initially excised from it.¹² Barthes calls this reader-initiated process "the metonymic expansion of the punctum."¹³

While Barthes' out-of-frame reference can be triggered *within* a photograph, even though it depends on viewers to discern it, the dialectical concept of internal form and the external content that it exploits can also be understood as a poetic trope. Consequently, this dialectic can be regarded in terms of metaphors, synecdoches, and/or metonyms. In this way painting and sculpture can be construed as suggesting or implying tremendously important and pertinent bodies of information beyond the object's physical limits that viewers must imaginatively supply and grasp if the work of art before them is to be understood. Earth artist Robert Smithson realized the potential significance of the off-frame component in his Non-Site sculptures of 1968, which are made of dislocated boundary markers, making them synecdoches as well as potential metonyms, which are situated in such formal art situations as art galleries and museums. The Non-Sites contain references to their Sites in the form of samples from the earth's crust together with maps and photographs that refer to places

outside customary art networks. Smithson's Site/Non-Site dialectic plays on tensions between visual or given forms and out-of-sight or withheld references. His unequal equation between the seen and the unseen (the referenced Site), which can be regarded in terms of Hegel's symbolic, encourages viewers to invest themselves in the process of interpreting this type of work in order to fill in either its referenced or its intuited gaps. At the same time, viewers' intuition of a partially absent content creates a poignant and even a piercing void that haunts the work (the Non-Site per se), and one's awareness of this gap is capable in turn of catalyzing a desire to complete the art by partially filling it in or personalizing missing components.

Looking at this sequencing in Smithson's art may partially help us to understand the Surrealist reference that critics and historians of Wesley's art have attempted to use even as they have recognized its limitations. The situation, which I am describing and which I intend to demonstrate as a *modus operandi* for approaching Wesley's art, is one in which the work of art, for one reason or another, is deliberately less informed—even though it may be thoughtfully constructed—than either the artist or his viewers. In this type of situation the artist's knowledge, which is communicated in a variety of ways to viewers through statements, interviews, etc., and which is also implied in the title for the first paintings in this series in terms of the gerund "searching for Bumstead," creates a differential between the perceived form and the implied content, thus resulting in the assessment that this type of work is a haunting and/or intriguing puzzle. As Hegel concluded,

Therefore the representations of symbolic art which were intended to be expositions of the content remain themselves only enigmas and problems, and they testify only to a wrestling for clarity and to the struggle of the spirit which continually invents without finding repose and peace.¹⁴

Viewers' expectations of a transcendent experience when viewing Wesley's painting can only be fulfilled if these same viewers fill in the blanks that the art itself leaves open-ended and purposefully unresolved. This situation is dramatized as a hopeless quest in the first *Searching for Bumstead* paintings because the cartoon figure is literally absent from the works. And the disparity between the cartoon character, his world, and the everyday circumstances of his public is an ongoing operative for other *Bumstead* paintings whose humor depends on the preposterousness of an established two-dimensional cartoon character:

1. Going crazy (*Bumstead in Bedlam*);
2. Transgressing its norms by having sex;
3. Becoming involved in a battle with itself that is allegorized as a mistral, a strong, cold, dry northeasterly wind in the south of France;
4. Committing suicide or merging with the elements (*Bumstead Out the Window*);
5. Dancing on waves in such a way that the act both liberates the figure and imprisons it in wallpaper designs (*Orange Wine*) (also a punning of comic strips as strips of wallpaper) since *Bumstead* is one construct embedded within another;

6. Interacting and even sleeping with the enemy, high art, in the form of female Utamaro ukiyo-e woodblock figures, which have been ratified as fine art personages for the more than one and a half centuries.

When Bumstead appears in *Bumstead Out the Window* to be flying or jumping, he seems to be reenacting the real-life aspirations of the mid-twentieth-century French artist Yves Klein, who wished to climax his life-long aspirations for a dematerialized art with the mythic act of actually flying into the void. But unlike Klein, a judo expert who might stage a dramatic leap from a second-story window, Bumstead, a definite type, has neither the capacity to be the motivator of his own actions nor the ability to be seen as anything other than a stereotype.¹⁵

In all of these works the tension between the conventional and the everyday is staged as a break in character, providing Bumstead and Blondie with roles they were never programmed to assume and thereby making them humorous when they are forced to play against type. The characters are both liberated in Wesley's paintings and also entrapped in them. Bumstead's and Blondie's desires for real and direct experience and the impossibility of their attaining it are both hilarious and tragic because they are ill-equipped to handle it and are not programmed to confront it. In the process of viewing them, we are granted the opportunity to begin the process of recognizing the constructed nature of our own selves and our related difficulty in breaking out of socially created and personally ratified roles. Searching for Bumstead, then, is an affirmation of parts we all assume; it also reveals the high comedy as well as the tragedy involved in attempts to break out of society's confines.

The comic-strip genre is a lowbrow form on par with prose—the dull and at times picturesque language of everyday life, which is as ephemeral as the daily newspaper. Wesley's appropriated comic art plays on both the ephemerality of his sources and the lasting power of art, becoming in the process a paean to the endurance of the ephemeral. In this situation the source of daily comics affirms a prosaic norm through the following circuitous process: the act of transgressing assumed rules alludes to these directives and thus indirectly ratifies them. Wesley's Bumstead paintings of Blondie having sex with first Herb and then with the Tootsie-Woodley-look-alike Ynez Sanchez¹⁶ and of Dagwood sleeping around function in this manner. In doing so, they also recall the “bootleg” comics, also called “Dirty Comics” or “Tijuana Bibles,”¹⁷ that were published in the two decades separating the late 1920s from the late 1940s. Only eight pages in length, each of these black-and-white, low budget, anonymously produced publications, which were typically sold under the counter, usually maintained the trope of stereotyped characters even as they were placed in atypical situations. The humor of the “bootleg” editions of *Blondie* and *Popeye* and also the visual wit of Wesley's art depends, in part, on seeing a conventional figure forced to contend with graphic sexual antics. Dirty Comics and Wesley's art also inadvertently pun the comic strip by turning its name into a function, i.e., into a strip tease.

The differential between form and content in symbolic art that thus far has been considered in terms of the cartoon's conventions and the reader's everyday world is crucially important to Pop Art because of (1) its emphases on actively appropriating



Leap into The Void, 5, rue Gentil-Bernard, Fontenay-aux-Roses, October 1960. Artistic action of Yves Klein. Silver gelatin print, 13.75 x 10.5 in. (35 x 27 cm). Courtesy of ADAGP, Paris. Photo Shunk-Kender.

the look of mass-media ephemera and (2) the resultant necessary disparity between popular culture sources and high art protocols such appropriations entail.¹⁸ British art historian Stephen Bann viewed this type of unequal transposition from lowbrow sources to highbrow approaches in terms of the rhetorical strategy known as catachresis. Often denoting figures of speech that willfully contravene tacitly agreed upon meanings and uses, catachresis in Bann's usage focuses more on contextual displacement and the consequent reassignment of reading protocols than Hegel's symbolic, which alludes to the inequities between a given work of art and its presumed content: catachresis involves a situational transposition of reading situations tantamount to genre displacement, while the symbolic centers on a structural gap or void within the work of art. Writing on catachresis, Bann conjectures, "the shock of seeing a particular image transported from the mass media to the statement of fine art, is therefore immediately followed by the realization that it is not the same image any more, Pop Art is a contradiction in terms; or rather it is a catachresis whose effect depends precisely on maintaining the incongruity of the terms which are forced into unwelcome association."¹⁹ These different approaches that Bann regards as catachresis can also be summed up in terms of Barthes' readerly (relatively straightforward) and writerly (far more difficult and open-ended) ways of reading, provided we view the former in terms of the popular culture's implicit and well-understood rules for engaging ephemera and the latter in terms of high art's ongoing challenges.²⁰ Bann's catachresis also accounts for the conflicted feelings viewers experience when looking at Roy Lichtenstein's reconstituted romance comic book paintings. Art historian Bradford R. Collins regards these emotions as "express[ing], simultaneously [the process of] ridiculing and embracing their subjects," and Lichtenstein's once part-time student and companion, the psychologist Letty Eisenhauer, clinches this viewer-oriented experience by referring to it as "doubleness of feeling."²¹

The symbolic differential between mass-media communication and high art's long entrenched codes—an ongoing, purposeful misalignment of form and content involving gaps and voids—can be extended even further in John Wesley's Bumstead paintings in terms of conflations and disparities between the social and the personal. This differential can also be discerned in terms of the similarities and differences ensuing between the publicly received images of the *Blondie* comic strip inspiring this series and the biographical facts that Wesley regards as particularly significant for him and pertinent as well to his paintings. Murat Bernard "Chic" Young's phenomenally popular daily newspaper comic strip *Blondie*, which has been in continuous circulation from 1930 to the present, became such a ubiquitous part of American culture that comedian Bob Hope once quipped "America knows the Bumsteads as well as any neighbors. And probably likes them better than any relatives."²² In addition to selecting this comic strip for its ongoing ability to poke fun at accepted American mores, Wesley read a deeply personal narrative in paintings based on it. This personal narrative joins his father Ner Wesley, who died of a stroke at age 38 in the bathroom of the family's home on a Saturday at 12:00 noon in 1934 when John Wesley was five years old, with Dagwood Bumstead. It is significant that Bumstead is missing from the initial group Searching for Bumstead even though he is metonymically represented in terms of the

rooms in his house and by such accouterments as his slippers beside the bed and bathtub filled with water. Green relates how Wesley articulated the highly personal import of these paintings:

“It’s really my house when I was little,” he says. “Those lamps, those curtains, that chair. They were in my house then,” he says.

“It’s really my father I’m looking for,” he says another time. “My father was like Bumstead. He was thin like Bumstead and he wore a tie to work, and when he came home from work in the evening he tipped his hat to the neighbors.”

“I’m seeing Ner Wesley,” Jack said. Ner was the name of Jack’s [John Wesley’s] father as well as the name of his [only] son.²³

So, we might conclude that the artist’s search for both Bumstead and his father is also a quest to find himself. The Bumstead paintings correlate with an abiding quality in Wesley’s work that Green describes as “the theme of mortality: the fleeting, intoxicating joy of life, the ever presence of death waiting to claim us one by one.”²⁴

In light of the personal significance Bumstead held for Wesley, it is perhaps not coincidental that Dagwood Bumstead’s name, in my opinion, constitutes a rich semantic field. A cursory look at this character’s surname suggests affinities with “homestead,” while his first name joins the Norwegian word “dag,” referring to day or daylight, with “wood,” which can be construed as a tree-of-life symbol, thus playing on its phonetic similarity to “dogwood” trees. At the same time, the suffix “wood” is a homonym for the conditional tense of the verb “will,” which could be a way of signaling this character’s willfulness as well as his astonishing vulnerability to the same predictable traps (conditions) surrounding him, making him their subject rather than their initiator. Thus, Dagwood’s first name can be aligned with light, the tree-of-life, and the possibility of a more equitable and less frazzled life (the wood/would conditional connection), while the surname Bumstead characterizes him as an inveterate bum (even though he holds a job) whose vulnerability and close ties with home and family make him ideally suited to be the popular media’s everyman.

Wesley clearly remembers reading daily installments of *Blondie* with his father. During the years 1933 and 1934, when he was four and five years old, respectively, he would have been keenly aware of the extraordinary media attention that *Blondie* was then generating. The strip was followed by an increasingly wide readership watched during Dagwood and Blondie’s courtship, and it became a topic of national concern during Dagwood’s dramatic 28 day, 7 hour, 8 minute, and 22 second hunger strike to convince his parents of his unrequited love for Blondie to the point that Walter Winchell broadcast daily medical bulletins on this cartoon character’s health. Dagwood may have resembled Ner Wesley, but there were also significant differences that may have exacerbated the comparison, making the similarities much more compelling and poignant. While Dagwood survived his hunger strike, Wesley’s father died; and while Blondie’s long-anticipated marriage took place in 1934 to the nation’s delight,

his mother, whom he regards as her real-life equivalent,²⁵ became a widow. Later, when the birth of the Bumstead's first child, Baby Dumpling, was followed by an attentive nationwide readership, Wesley was facing the dismal realities of being orphaned and placed for a year in the orphanage known as the McKinley Home for Boys.²⁶

Wesley's personal involvement with the Bumstead series may go back to these life-shattering events, and these connections certainly help to explain reasons for his personal investment in this strip in which the cartoon characters enjoyed a comforting and humorous normalcy at a time when Wesley was suffering multiple traumas. But Chic Young's ability to establish ongoing parallels between *Blondie's* characters and twentieth-century American life is itself a compelling reason why Wesley may have appropriated this strip for the Bumstead series. For a time the United States and *Blondie* seemed to move in lockstep, one with the other. These parallels are evident in several of the significant stages people in the United States underwent, including:

1. The end of the jazz age (*Blondie* was originally Blondie Boopadoop, a happy-go-lucky flapper);
2. The onset of Depression-era realities (Bumstead may have married Blondie, but his wealthy parents disowned him, and he was forced to work for the Julius Caesar Dithers construction company, a job not unlike Ner Wesley's at California Hardware);
3. The dethroning of the often-unemployed father during the Great Depression who needed to cope with a tyrannical boss or face the consequences of the dreaded pink slip (this is Dagwood's ever-present situation and definitely a possibility during the Depression when his family disowned him for marrying Blondie);
4. The media blitz attending the birth of the Dionne quintuplets in 1934, truly an example of an orchestrated diversion in the midst of the Depression, if there ever was one (the Bumsteads' dog Daisy had five pups that were named for the famous quintuplets, with the exception of Elmer, the male of the litter²⁷);
5. The increasing ubiquity of the nuclear family and consequent drive to achieve a semblance of normalcy during World War II when masses of soldiers were deployed abroad in (1941 the Bumsteads' second child, a daughter, Cookie, was named through a readers' contest that drew 431,275 submissions, even though the prize money was only \$100, and her birth made the Bumsteads a preeminent nuclear family);
6. The woman's liberation movement in the latter third of the twentieth century (*Blondie*, at long last liberated, joined forces with her neighbor Tootsie Woodley to initiate a catering business).

Because of this comic strip's ubiquity and its distinct role in American history, Wesley could be assured that viewers of his Bumstead series would readily comprehend the ongoing jokes about middle-class mores and frustrations that his paintings extend in new directions.²⁸

As has already been suggested, Wesley's utilization of *Blondie* as a template for an ongoing yet infrequent series extending over three decades enabled him to

symbolize and thereby confront painful and no doubt unresolved conflicted feelings from his childhood. We can view Wesley's reconfigurations of *Blondie* cartoons as screen memories, recreations of childhood events that were not fully experienced due to the traumatic lack of effect that attended their original occurrence. Soon after his father's death, Wesley's attractive mother, Elsa Marie Patzwaldt Wesley, a German expatriate, found that her meager salary at the local telephone company could not support both her and her son John. After his mother married one of his father's co-workers, She was able to bring John home from the orphanage. Unfortunately the prelapsarian bliss of Wesley's first five years was not to be revisited during his childhood: he remembers his stepfather as an extraordinarily tyrannical and mean-spirited obstructionist until he became large enough to physically defend himself.²⁹

Because of Wesley's personal connections with *Blondie*, it is tempting to regard his Bumstead series as assuming the force of Sigmund Freud's fetish, that is, a displacement and consequent substitution that enables one to cope with a traumatic event—Ner Wesley's death in the family bathroom—by cathecting an object metonymically associated with it, in this case Young's comic strip. It is significant to note that the Searching for Bumstead series was initiated in 1973, the year Young died.³⁰ Wesley's heightened focus on the cartoons, functioning as a fetish, could in turn be used to explain the interconnected personal and public presences and absences at work in the Bumstead series that Green regards as "bring[ing] to life a sense of absence which is presence."³¹ And we can certainly describe a series of ongoing presences and absences as occurring in and outside of Wesley's Bumstead paintings. His father, together with his surrogate Bumstead, enacts an ongoing presence/absence dialectic: Ner Wesley is physically absent from the series, and his absence is emphasized by Bumstead's presence. But whenever we consider the artist's father when we look at these paintings, Bumstead's authority is severely compromised because he becomes in those moments a stand-in for Ner Wesley. In consideration of such a dialectic, we are able to conclude that in these works the presence/absence of these two figures enacts a life in death and a death in art. We can also deduce that the *Blondie* cartoon that is a vehicle for memorializing the artist's father also memorializes the comic strip itself, so that *Blondie* is both representational and self-reflexive and elegiac as well as self-affirmative. But a psychoanalytic approach can only take us so far because such analyses are difficult to justify and defend since works of art are social artifacts as well as personal relics and participants in a cultural discourse as well as subjective views. Thus, it is debatable where the social leaves off and the personal takes over, and vice versa. The most that can be concluded in this regard is that such contents are off-frame and are constellations of possibilities for understanding the work, but not imperatives for viewing it.

We can, however, conclude that Wesley has periodically returned over the years to his Bumstead series, with all its tragic/comic associations, and insisted on its humor. His demand implies an intense desire for humor to serve as an effective tool for warding off the tragic while leaving visual wit firmly in place. This debatable assumption articulates the tragic/comic central tension on which this series is predicated. Apropos the humor in Searching for Bumstead, Green noted Wesley's imperative:

"It better be funny," Jack says, trembling with feeling. "It better be funny," he says. It better be funny—meaning life the human predicament.³²

Continuing to explore the personal tragedy that Wesley has chosen to couch in humorous terms, Green recounts:

After seeing Jack's show [featuring the Searching for Bumstead paintings] a year ago Charlie Pratt said in his marvelous booming voice, "First Jack's paintings make you laugh. Then you get tears in your eyes." Romulous Linney said "Jack teaches you a new way to laugh. Then he teaches you a new way to cry."³³

The inability or refusal of Wesley's art to adequately conjure up the image of his father's presence through the figure of Dagwood Bumstead is a significant tragic/comic basis for his series of paintings and its off-frame *raison d'être*. This inability or refusal becomes a poignant blank or void at the heart of the work. Moreover, Wesley's drive to make his paintings humorous—or, at the very least, tragic/comic—can readily be understood in terms of Lippard's acute observation that "after World War II the tear glands of the world dried up from over-use."³⁴

Although Lippard understood the need to use deadpan humor as a weapon to avoid the melodramatic at all costs, she was less prepared to acknowledge the crucially important role that nostalgia assumed for Pop Art. On this subject she was ambivalent: she at first proclaimed in "New York Pop" that this style was "more involved with the future than the past." Later, she contradicted herself when she noted that Lichtenstein's comics are "not up-to-date" but "closer to the comics of the 1950s," Warhol's Brillo boxes take the commercial design of an Abstract Expressionist, and Tom Wesselmann's paintings and installations reveal his fondness for "Del Monte labels because of their strong, simple, and slightly old-fashioned ensembles."³⁵ In addition to Lippard's characterizations of these artists, Oldenburg mined a relative's old scrapbook of collaged mass-media imagery, composing dizzying arrays of differently scaled items for his oversized soft sculptures, and Robert Indiana in his art looked back at the once plentiful, circa 1930s road signs that marked the many moves his parents made during his childhood, as inspiration for his art. For all these men, as well as for Wesley, their artistic considerations of the detritus of everyday life, which they validated as Pop Art, became a means for coping dryly with often intense feelings about the transience of their own personal lives and the ephemerality of the worlds encompassing them. Although Pop artists and their works have maintained the cool appearances of detachment, they are thoroughly steeped in a deep nostalgia for the past as these and other examples clearly indicate. Thus, we might deduce that at the same time these Pop artists plumbed the mass-media imagery of their childhoods and adolescences, they also played on gaps between this ephemera and the new meanings they assume as art. The fundamental divide between the past and present meanings, which Bann terms "catachresis" in order to underscore the process of reframing mass-media culture as high art, I am calling "symbolic" in order to underscore the hiatuses attending such recontextualization, which is perhaps more evident in Wesley's

art than in any other Pop artist's work. A number of his early works reference images found in a leather-bound folio documenting the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics that had been given to his father; later ones come from a number of familiar childhood sources: they include Popeye and Olive Oyl as well as Wiley Post, *Alice in Wonderland*, Dracula, and, of course, Dagwood and Blondie.

In his art, Wesley sets up a tension between the mass-media ephemera of his youth, which in the hands of a lesser artist could easily become merely sentimental and romantic, and a type of painting that is so abbreviated and succinct that it precludes such comforting associations. In my estimation, the contradiction between encouraging viewers to look at the past—a slower paced pursuit—and forcing them to see the work all at once stems from (1) the artist's desire to reconnect with traumatic childhood events in which the public collapses into the private, and (2) his development of holistic shapes indicative of Gestalt psychology, which were of crucial importance to the Minimalist paintings of his second wife, Jo Baer.

With each new work, Wesley begins slowly by enacting an activity he calls "tracing,"³⁶ a process well equipped to enable him to mine childhood memories. Similar to memory, tracing is a repetitive process in which nuances are discovered and opportunities for compounding and refining a given composition or lodged memory can be discerned and developed. In the course of tracing an image, one can become acutely aware of contrapuntal positive/negative patterns and thus have opportunities to elaborate on them, which Wesley does. Apropos his penchant for tracing, Green notes, "During what would seem, so described to be a mechanical process [i.e., tracing], strange and irrational and funny things go on. Accidents are let to happen, the original image is slowly transformed, sometimes repeated and combined with others in moments of wild inspiration."³⁷

The process of tracing to achieve greater concision and to speed up the perception of images, which are rendered holistically, thus ensuring their modernity, may have antecedents in the artist's experience with Northrop Aircraft in the 1950s, where he worked for five years as an illustrator in the Production Engineering Department. But, seen in retrospect, Wesley's brief marriage to Jo Baer, who was well schooled in the refinements of Gestalt psychology, may have played a critically important formative role in this aspect of his art. Before meeting and marrying her, Wesley was working in an Abstract Expressionist mode; "a paint slinger," he has on occasion quipped.³⁸ Soon after their marriage in 1959, both Wesley and Baer were painting in an entirely compatible hard-edged manner, and this parallel approach strongly supports Hentschel's claim that a productive dialogue between their works was then taking place.³⁹ In 1952 Baer had been a member of the New School's Graduate Faculty in Physiological Psychology, and at that time she familiarized herself with Gestalt theory. Subscribing to a field theory of perception, Gestalt theorists are convinced that vision is not built up of small incremental steps connected to subtle movements of the eye, as was formerly believed and Cézanne's paintings suggest. Instead of seeing in terms of discrete segments, the eyes depend on the brain's capacity to organize and simplify sense data according to holistic patterns, thereby being able to see symmetrical forms (i.e., patterns) more easily than non-symmetrical ones. Instead of proceeding from the

particular to the general, then, Gestalt theorists believe the reverse to be true. Patterning, an ongoing strategy in Wesley's art, is not only consistent with Gestalt theory, but it also becomes a means for making visual jokes that he has described as "the Henry Ford Syndrome": "If you say foot foot foot foot foot foot foot foot," he has explained, "then foot becomes hilarious....If you paint 40 Nixons, it puts Nixon in his place."⁴⁰

Patterns formed of repetitive images of figures and animals abound in Wesley's art. At the same time that this repetition of elements works to reinforce his visual wit through exaggeration and emphasis, this reiteration embellishes their importance as subject matter and also undermines it in the interest of increasing abstraction. Although Wesley maintains strong figure/ground relationships in his insistently flat compositions—an approach entirely consistent with Gestalt theory's emphasis on alternative patterns as ways of seeing—he has not chosen to reduce his work to shapes echoing framing edges, a trademark of Baer's mature works. Instead, he has retained discrete margins working in concert with figurative elements, and these borders help to schematize his paintings and flatten his pictorial space to a shallow plane, thereby underscoring their status as painted objects. In his early works, Wesley's margins took the form of filigreed borders, looking, for example, like the perforated perimeter appearing in *Stamp*; later he opted for both wide and narrow discrete white edges that have the same effect, although less obviously so. Even though Wesley claims to be consciously unaware of Gestalt theory and probably is, his advice to Green demonstrates how much its concepts have permeated his way of thinking and working. At one point Green cites Wesley as instructing:

"Keep the eye in the painting. Keep the eye in one locked device, limited by edges." One of the secrets of composition is to keep the lower right hand corner empty. "Keep the lower right hand corner empty and the eye will go back into the painting."

"Keep the lower right hand corner empty," Jack says again. If you put the most interesting thing there (in the lower right hand corner) the eye will leave the painting as it would the page in reading when it gets to that point.⁴¹

Wesley's interplay between reading and viewing protocols indicates a keen awareness of the need to make his works visual wholes on a par with Gestalt ideas so that viewers are discouraged from wandering away from them.⁴²

Reconceiving the past in terms of the increased velocity of the present, Wesley plays with time and space in his Bumstead series. These works unite a search for this artist's brief idyllic childhood with a holistic mode of seeing that reduces differences to rapidly perceived patterns. Instead of apportioning the past a special space akin to a refuge to which one might periodically return for renewal, Wesley conflates past and present into a distinctly new realm that partakes of both while belonging to neither one. In his Bumstead paintings, he characterizes both in terms of the comic strip stereotypical married couple, Blondie and Dagwood Bumstead—surrogates for his

parents—who are forced to play against character so that their antics appear comic, even if the futility of their undertakings is ultimately tragic. A Pop artist and not a latter-day Surrealist, Wesley extends Pop into a new psychological field relatable to Freud's screen memory and also his characterization of the fetish as alluding to intense contents that must always remain off-frame and outside the work of art's purview, even if viewers must imaginatively reconstruct aspects of these primal events and partially fill in the voids that these paintings so eloquently adumbrate. In order to understand the off-frame content in Wesley's art, which historians and critics have persistently referred to as somewhat Surrealist in recognition of this work's disarming evocative-ness and this stylistic qualifier's inadequacy, I have reformulated Hegel's concept of symbolic art so that its inability or refusal to grasp fully its acknowledged content is productively rethought as an epistemological understanding of art's limited ontological range. Therefore, instead of viewing art as replete with being, we need to understand that it often, if not always, encompasses gaps and voids, even as it alludes to the type of off-frame meaning that viewers must imaginatively construct. Looked at in terms of the symbolic, Pop Art plays with the polarities of past and present time, public and subjective space, popular culture and high art, as well as off-frame and in-frame contents. Neither strictly one nor the other, Wesley's Pop Art signals a cautionary note in the increased historical pace from the 1960s to the present: re-inscribed in Pop Art's increased velocity is another concept of time in which the present also incorporates the past, and perception is the complex, speeded-up process of seeing things one already knows, yet seeing them again differently.

Robert Hobbs holds the Rhoda Thalhimer Endowed Chair, Virginia Commonwealth University and is a regular visiting professor at Yale University. He is the author of many books, including monographs on Alice Aycock, Edward Hopper, Mark Lombardi, Lee Krasner, Robert Smithson, and Kara Walker.

The author gratefully acknowledges the thoughtful suggestions of Professors Dario Libera Gamboni and David Spurr, both faculty members of the University of Geneva, and the wonderful research assistance of Timothy Andrus.

Notes

- ¹ Lucy R. Lippard, "New York Pop," in *Pop Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966), pp. 69–138.
- ² Lippard, ed., *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970).
- ³ Lippard, "New York Pop," p. 128.
- ⁴ Peter Schjeldahl, "Something Funny's Going On," *New York Times* (January 7, 1973).
- ⁵ Hannah Green, "A Journal in Praise of the Art of John Wesley," *Unmuzzled Ox* 2, no. 3 (New York, 1974): p. 55.
- ⁶ Hannah Green, "John Wesley: A Chronology," in *John Wesley: Paintings 1961–2000*, ed. Alanna Heiss (New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2000), pp. 167–69.
- ⁷ Martin Hentschel, "John Wesley's Wondrous World," in *John Wesley: Works on Paper Since 1960*, ed. Martin Hentschel (Krefeld and Nürnberg: Museum Haus Lange and Kunsthalle Nürnberg, 2006), p. 13.
- ⁸ In referring to Hegel's symbolic, I am taking one aspect of this philosopher's work and am not subscribing to either his deterministic Idea or his overriding Zeitgeist.
- ⁹ The type of screening found in Wesley's art parallels trauma's elisions and is the subject of Chapter IV of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which theorizes memories of childhood as occurring with visual immediacy even though they are later displacements of events that have been masked out due to their difficult or painful contents. Psychologists J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis provide the following succinct definition of screen memory: "A childhood memory characterized both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content. The analysis of such memories leads back to indelible childhood experiences and to unconscious phantasies. Like the symptom, the screen memory is a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence [sic]," see Cf. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp. 410–11. While a psychological analysis focusing on traumatic events and screen memory is sufficient for justifying on- and off-stage elements crucial for Wesley's work, I wish also to consider Hegel's symbolic in this essay to demonstrate the wider applicability of this term and the fact that this type of on- and off-stage operative can go beyond traumatic contents and screen memory resolutions.
- ¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 300.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- ¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ¹⁴ Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, p. 438.
- ¹⁵ Thomas McEvelley has an excellent account of Klein's leap in Thomas McEvelley, "Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, in association with Arts Publisher, Inc., New York, 1982).
- ¹⁶ Ynez Sanchez is Wesley's own creation and name for this Latino addition to the *Blondie* cast of characters.
- ¹⁷ This type of underground comic is described in Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), p. 34.
- ¹⁸ Lawrence Alloway, who is responsible for naming the earlier, British manifestation of Pop Art and who subsequently became an important critic of its subsequent New York development, emphasized the role that mass-media source material assumed for all its practitioners. "The term," he wrote, as he summed up the overall development of Pop Art, "refers to the use of popular art sources by fine artists; movie stills, science fiction, advertisements, game boards, heroes of the mass media." Lawrence Alloway, "Pop Art Since 1949," *Listener* 67, no. 1761 (December 27, 1962): 1085.

- ¹⁹ Stephen Bann, "Pop Art and Genre," *New Literary History* 24, no. 1, Culture and Everyday Life (Winter 1993): 116.
- ²⁰ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 12. When progressing through a readerly text or in looking at advertisements, the reader's reactions are almost entirely anticipated and substantiated, while in writerly prose (art), clarity is held suspect, and readers are forced to devise their own interpretations because meanings are not self-evident. In writerly works there are often many competing codes rather than a hegemonic one that might provide easy answers. Simply transposing a readerly image, such as an advertisement or comic strip, to the writerly format of art increases the codes and problematizes the reading of an image. This can be understood as what Bann refers to as Pop Art's catachresis.
- ²¹ Letty Eisenhauer, as cited in Bradford R. Collins, "Modern Romance: Lichtenstein's Comic Book Paintings," *American Art* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 75.
- ²² Bob Hope, "Introduction" in *Blondie & Dagwood's America*, ed. Dean Young and Rick Marschall (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 6. In literature on comic strips, *Blondie* is frequently singled out as one of the most popular comics in the history of the genre. By the mid-1950s it was appearing in 1,300 newspapers; in 1981 it was being published in 1,800, more than any of its revivals, and its team of artists could boast at that time a worldwide readership of 150 million. In 2005, these numbers climbed to 2,300 newspapers in 55 languages, including translation into 35 languages. Over the years *Blondie* has served as the basis for a series of comic books that were published between 1937 and 1976; over twenty movies (the first was made in 1938); a weekly radio show from 1939 to 1950; two television situation comedies, each lasting one season, in 1957 and 1968 respectively; two television specials; a restaurant called Blondie's situated in Universal Orlando's Islands of Adventure theme park; a U.S. commemorative postage stamp (one of twenty Comic Strip Classics); and a series of sandwich shops, which opened in the spring of 2006. In light of this phenomenal success one could say that Chic Young was correct in observing four basic elements that would connect his family with those of his readers: "eating, sleeping, raising a family, and making money," Maurice Horn, ed., *100 Years of American Newspaper comics: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), p. 58.
- ²³ Green, "A Journal in Praise of the Art of John Wesley," p. 58.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ²⁵ Marianne Stockebrand, "A Conversation with John Wesley" in *Chinati Foundation Newsletter* 10 (October 2005): 3. Wesley relates, "My father was gone by the time I was five. So Bumstead is an image of some loss. And later, by making Blondie such a sex symbol, I think that that had to do with my mother. My parents were a great-looking couple."
- ²⁶ John Wesley, conversation with author, 19 October 2006, New York City.
- ²⁷ According to Chic Young's son, Dean, who took over the strip and co-authored with Rick Marschall, *Blondie & Dagwood's America* the pups were named for the Dionne quintuplets, see Young and Marschall, eds., p. 28.
- ²⁸ According to LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, and Jaret, "the ability to 'get' the joke – requires some familiarity with the multiple realities embodied in the joke. Thus, for example, a cartoonist who intends to make fun of fathers' diaper-changing efforts must presume that the audience knows the 'conventional reality' (which generally is the case) so that he or she can juxtapose this reality with the 'unconventional reality' for comic effect. As for the social functions of humor, 'though jokes feed on subversive thought, on deviations from the normal and expected, they re-inform established views of the world'... In both cases what is being reinforced is the established view that people need to 'know their place.'" Ralph LaRossa, Betty Anne Gordon, Ronald Jay Wilson, Annette Bairan, and Charles Jaret, "The Fluctuating Image of the 20th Century American Father," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (November 1991): 995.
- ²⁹ John Wesley, conversation with author.
- ³⁰ Timothy Andrus, conversation with author, June 2007.

- ³¹ Green, "A Journal in Praise of the Art of John Wesley," p. 61. Green goes on to cite, "'Absence is condensed presence,' Emily Dickinson wrote and you, Jack, paint. The chair is empty, as the shoes, and the clothes bodiless in the closet, and the hats fly in the wind, and yet everywhere the condensed presence." Regarding the concept of the fetish and the space off-frame in film and photography, a key source is Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 81–90.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Lippard, "New York Pop," p. 98.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 90.
- ³⁶ Green, "A Journal in Praise of the Art of John Wesley," p. 48.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ³⁹ Martin Hentschel has reproduced Wesley's *Stamp* (1961) and Baer's *Untitled (Black Star)* (1960–61) in Hentschel, "John Wesley's Wondrous World," pp. 10 and 13, to convey the reciprocity between the two artists' works.
- ⁴⁰ Green, "A Journal in Praise of the Art of John Wesley," p. 53.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁴² Wesley's paintings relying on comic strip imagery reveal his success in working against comic strips' customary protocols, which create gaps in individual images in order to encourage the reader's quick movement from image to image. Wesley's paintings establish different temporalities from those usually associated with comic strips since he keeps his images wholistic Gestalts that are perceived instantly and yet are powerful enough for sustained viewing. His unitary works thus make up a different temporality from the nostalgic reveries that 1930s ephemera usually catalyze and from the comic strips that served as inspiration for his art: they are both more abbreviated than the first group and capable of more sustained study than the second one. Thus, in his art, Wesley sets up contradictions between the ensuing gaps in his paintings, which this essay has associated with screen memory and Hegel's symbolic, and his creation of satisfying Gestalts, thereby establishing them as one of the principal tensions on which his work is predicated.