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Text © Robert Hobbs

## Running Interference

Robert Hobbs

"Running Interference," a term used for offensive plays in football in which guards and often fullbacks clear paths for plays to be made and yardage gained, is a useful analogy for the goals of recent art. Instead of attempting to replicate external reality, this recent work appreciates the obstacles that make such an idealistic quest an impossibility. We might say that the overall aim of this art is to focus on an aesthetic interference and to emphasize those elements overtaking the role of direct communication such as acknowledged ideological constructs, mass-media imagery, the citation of particular genres, and discourses.

There are a number of precedents for this attitude, including contemporary linguistics and the art of both John Cage and Andy Warhol. Prior to the 1960s, linguists posited ideal channels of communication in which messages were unmediated by misunderstandings. They ignored the general cultural noise that interferes with the original intent of communiqués. Slowly, however, they became aware that there are no ideal speaker/listener situations and no totally homogeneous communities ensuring perfect communication.

These conclusions were anticipated by Cage in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, 1952, a four minute piece for twelve radios, with two people assigned to each radio: one was instructed to operate at will the dial determining the choice of stations while the other, acting independently, was to control volume and tone. The resulting piece of music accorded with a goal set by Cage in a 1937 lecture. "I believe," Cage said, "that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard."<sup>1</sup>

Cage's penchant for courting the impediments of sound as a means for bringing viewers closer to the actuality of life – a goal which he later ascribed to his study of Zen – was a crucial factor in Warhol's silkscreens in which the seemingly careless printing of colors off register created powerful images of individuals subsumed by mass media. His works dramatized the force of Marshall McLuhan's

contemporaneous meditations on the effects of such media:

*In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.<sup>2</sup>*

These forays in the realm of interference have become increasingly important. In the late 1960s a crucial change in the understanding of the interrelationships between people and their culture occurred when theorists no longer tried to relate their findings back to an autonomous human being but instead found humans to be socially constructed through the dominant media used and the subsequent culture created. At this point, people were no longer regarded as predetermined essences whose life's project was self-discovery. Instead, the self itself was viewed as an ideology predicated on a nineteenth-century bourgeois definition of individuality. Of particular significance to this major shift in perception are the ideas of French post-structuralist critic Jacques Derrida. In his early publication *Of Grammatology*, 1968, he described the necessary delays in communication that problematize direct transcriptions of meaning, causing crucial terms to be placed under erasure so that they are acknowledged as historically significant even as they are denied universal application. Derrida has traced his lineage to the language studies of German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger who placed terms such as “being” and “God” under erasure and who stressed humanity as a creation of language rather than vice versa. In addition Derrida sided with the slightly older French theorist Roland Barthes who described the dissolution of the traditional author's autonomy as a recognition of genre's power. In other words, authors are constructs dependent on the specific requirements of such genres as the novel, the sonnet, the lyric poem, etc. Going much further than Barthes, Derrida in *Of Grammatology* analyzed the conventions on which the eighteenth-century writer Jean Jacques Rousseau depended, showing in the process how they represent unresolved contradictions.<sup>3</sup> Then Derrida used these incongruities to deconstruct Rousseau's main arguments.

He concluded that Rousseau himself is a product of his text rather than its initiator and the outcome of a series of misaligned conventions rather than their creator.

For artists working in the late twentieth century Derrida's thought has had profound and wide-sweeping ramifications since it undermined the formerly accepted romantic role assigned artists as demigods capable of creating worlds and conveying their most private feelings in their work. Both products of their time and articulators of established languages rather than their originators, artists have had to settle for less elevated roles. But their compensation has been the opportunity to assume the far more direct and relevant position of appraising given genres and established conventions as necessary forms of mediation through which a culture constructs itself. The following analyses of the artistic sensibilities represented in this exhibition are intended to demonstrate how the utilization of social languages manifests itself in this new work and how these attitudes are running interference, or, "drawing restraint" to employ a term used by one of the exhibition's artists, Matthew Barney, who created in his early works such resistant forces as encumbering rubber cords so that the act of drawing would become as difficult as possible.

### **Cindy Sherman**

Behind every Cindy Sherman persona is the allusion of a healthy American woman cultivating a mask, playing a game, and assuming a posture. But after looking at a great number of her photographs, the illusion that behind every mask dwells a well-integrated and monolithic individual ready to be unveiled by discriminating viewers begins to appear as much a myth as the many guises that the artist assumes. One suspects without being able to prove it that the real Cindy Sherman is a fabrication too, another culturally constructed figure necessary for the smooth operation of this work. To appreciate the significance of this hovering persona behind the mask, we need to ask what would happen if there were no centralizing force holding together this body of work. At this point the phrase "body of work" breaks apart as Sherman's generative pun regarding her polyvalent corpus is recognized and redeemed: reality is masked both in the art and in the offstage

figure of a chimerical artist who is revealed as a socially accepted convention for anchoring a collection of disparate images.

### **Francesco Clemente**

Although Francesco Clemente appears to be obsessed with himself or at least his self image, he permits himself in his art the role of the seducer who is captivated by images of his ongoing metamorphosis. If the self is merely a construct, as most postmodernists contend, then Clemente has enlisted a range of historical artifices to create a transcultural, transhistorical, and transavantgard migrating self. A seemingly endless series of hothouse hybrids, Clemente's many visages recall the arcane perversity and giddy decadence of Salvador Dalí, similarly leaving one with a question that will be long debated: do Clemente's erudite artifices enrich our understanding of polymorphous perversity in the late twentieth century or merely complicate and accessorize them?

### **Eric Fischl**

When his first mature works appeared, Fischl seemed to have found a visual means for discerning the moral issues of a post-Freudian age. After decades of analysis augmented with numerous pop therapies, suburbanites in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s – the era of Fischl's childhood – seemed at last to have let go of their inhibitions and anxieties. They seemed to have settled on a position of willed openness capable of driving out or at least quelling the most recalcitrant demons that could issue forth from the unconscious.

However, Fischl's faux naïve manner of painting, which unfortunately connoted only technical incompetence to conservative critics, has served his art well by complicating his narratives, endowing them with an insidious irony that keeps easy moral conclusions at bay. Instead of putting viewers at ease by castigating a world of far too easy virtue, his technique had the opposite effect of making the ethical component of his paintings appear too pat, too similar to the staged soap

opera dilemmas appearing daily on national television that assuage and comfort more than they disturb. Instead of providing tableaux that we might objectively judge, he inveigles viewers into looking at his constructed narratives, turning them into voyeurs and thus posing the more provocative question of why they enjoy looking at these scenes and are willing to enter into tacit complicity with their protagonists.

### **Jean-Michel Basquiat**

If we attempt to find clues to Basquiat's inner essence in his completed paintings, we may well find ourselves frustrated in the attempt, for this artist joins a streetwise forthrightness and an expert graffiti artist's ability to collaborate with flat urban spaces with the insouciance of Larry Rivers and the finesse of Willem de Kooning. His art mixes genres, and in the process it colonizes both street art and aspects of the New York School.

In terms of a tradition, Basquiat's can most closely be grouped with the contrapuntal work of David Salle and Julian Schnabel, who both owe an aesthetic debt to German artist Sigmar Polke. Although it also takes from Rivers and de Kooning, Basquiat's art is less involved with their jazz-era tendency to improvise than it is with the postmodern conception of art as a momentary ordering of both aligned and nonaligned codes (think of Derrida) that we choose to read as aesthetic wholes. Whether he is ironic or co-opted, whether he is using primitivism or is a genuine industrial folk artist, and whether he wishes to critique the white art world or merely be accepted by it are questions that cannot be readily answered since his art is predicated on the uneasy, yet potent coexistence of disparate genres.

### **Terry Winters**

The botanical and mineral references found in Terry Winters' paintings would lead one to expect a reposition of the primacy of nature as the artist's proposed subject. But the insistence with which they are painted and the off-hand, seemingly casual

compositions in which they are organized all point away from the work and in the direction of the artist as a distinct and special sensibility capable of distilling and reframing nature into an extension of himself. However, this conclusion is soon thwarted when one recognizes the intertextuality at play that connects these works with notebooks of romantic naturalists, scientific diagrams of bisected and dismembered life forms, and microscopic images of cellular forms. Winters counters the personal with the scientific, pitting remnants of a pastoral tradition with cool objectivity. Observers are invited to look contrapuntally, alternatively using the lens of romantic sensitivity and scientific detachment to discern traces of each in the completed work.

### **David Salle**

In David Salle's work the two key postmodern strategies of appropriation and intertextuality reinforce a new way of conceiving art in terms of past work so that influences are not just admitted, they are in fact encouraged. Appropriation signals an informed act of borrowing so that the former use to which a given image has been subjected is sustained, creating tensions between old and new contexts. In Salle's paintings and assemblages this tension is maintained in his choice of soft porn images and references to such earlier artistic styles as minimalism, turn-of-the-century illustrations, constructivism, and expressionism. Rather than attempting to attain closure in his art, he aims to sustain as much openness as possible so that it maintains its viability as a perpetual tug-of-war between high and commercial art, propriety and vulgarity.

Working in tandem with appropriation and definitely related to it is intertextuality. This strategy enables viewers to see one work of art through another in much the same fashion that people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might have looked at a landscape with a Claudian glass, which would have darkened it, endowing it with old master status. In Salle's work this mode of looking is evident in his references to 1950s design, which causes the present to be read in terms of the past, much as the film *Blade Runner* is narrated in the manner of a 1940s film noir hero who turns the future into an antiquated vision.

## **Julian Schnabel**

In the early 1980s painted portraits were anachronisms suitable for regional gentry who applied to such places as Portraits Incorporated in New York or local practitioners content to paint in a *retardataire* manner. Although such important photographers as Robert Mapplethorpe consented to work in this genre and pop artist Andy Warhol toyed with its high fashion and *ancien regime* connotations by turning portrait painting into a thriving business, few painters were as intrepid as Julian Schnabel when he undertook a series of plate-painted portraits. In *Ross*, no doubt intended as an image of Schnabel's contemporary, the artist Ross Bleckner, we find heightened to an extreme the bifurcation of realism important to the mid-nineteenth century painter Gustave Courbet. Whereas Courbet felt the necessity to acknowledge and ameliorate the two realisms of external reality (imitation) while acknowledging the limitations and importance of his medium (representation), Schnabel placed the two in fierce competition, forcing viewers to hazard the obfuscatory broken crockery that shatters the image of Ross Bleckner at the same time that this collection of shards supports it. Even though one achieves, after a moment of initial hesitancy, the goal of seeing the depicted face of this painter, Schnabel's interference caused by the broken plates keeps reasserting and insinuating itself, making certain that its blockage becomes part of the work's content.

## **Robert Gober**

As much as we might wish to make Gober's sinks into surrogate beings, they remain sinks – not simulacra of sinks as they have been termed in the past, but their handmade copies – without plumbing and therefore without function, reduced to the level of an inert object and simultaneously elevated to the category of art. In their emptiness is to be found their pathos, and in their laborious handmade fabrication is to be found their critique of the industrialism that Duchamp's readymades readily acknowledge and minimalist sculpture seems to celebrate. We might term Gober's sinks, "readymades remade," and laboriously so, creating a space between themselves and their mass-produced counterparts – a quiet requiem



for the handmade which approaches the perfection of the mass-produced object without being able to emulate it.

### **Jeff Koons**

When modernist critic Clement Greenberg assembled in 1961 a collection of his writings for Beacon Press under the title *Art and Culture*, he included as his first selection the 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Probably the reason for this choice is that this essay permitted him the opportunity to establish at once the polarities of avant-gardism and kitsch and to assume the aristocratic point of view of the former by characterizing the latter as a rear-guard pandering to the masses. His characterization of this mass sensibility as corrupt is worth recounting:

*Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.<sup>4</sup>*

Greenberg's piece was written at a time when the United States was still suffering from the Depression, federal support for the arts was resulting in few truly outstanding projects, Stalin was being revealed as a despot, and an idealistic Trotsky was writing in exile that artists must remain true to their own vision because the socialist state needed their independence in order to keep it honest and on track. At this time an innovative leftist critic such as Greenberg could conceive kitsch as the enemy because it attempted to reduce art to the lowest common denominator of intelligibility to an uneducated working class who might possibly form an eventual proletariat. For Greenberg its problem lay in its inability to perpetuate an elitist position and thereby raise the proletariat to a new and higher level.

While Greenberg's political agenda is understandable within the context of his times, it severely curtails our present understanding of kitsch and thereby

impoverishes an urban vernacular sensibility deserving recognition. There is sufficient evidence to make the claim that kitsch replaced the folk culture that a rural bourgeois culture lost when it became urbanized and that kitsch can be regarded positively as well as negatively.

One of Jeff Koons' major contributions is his recognition of the strength and endurance of this industrial-era aesthetic. His approach has little in common with elitists who might embrace kitsch as a mode of cultural critique or irony. Instead, he looks at it as a form of taste that might be banal but is still revered by people who often occupy the lowest economic levels. When he integrates the scale and materials of high art, together with its placement on pedestals in pristine white art galleries, with low art subjects in his Statuary series, for example, the results are refreshing. His *Rabbit* (plate 9) calls to mind Brancusi's *Bird in Flight*, without compromising the naïveté and irrepressible ebullience of the original inflatable toy which the artist had cast in stainless steel, a material he has termed "proletariat silver."<sup>5</sup> Breaking with Greenberg's academic vanguard in his conjunction of modernist and kitsch genres in this piece, Koons both supports and undermines McLuhan's "medium is the message" dictum. In this work Koons' interference is double valenced, for it pits high against low, and rear guard against avant guard.

### **Mike Kelley**

While Koons invokes kitsch, Kelley often dramatizes it in his early work by setting up situations in which stuffed animals become surrogates for the missing adults who made them and the children who once played with them. "I don't think that I'm much involved with kitsch," Kelley has stated. But contradicting himself, he has also said, "I'm involved with using popular language because it is a commonly understood one."<sup>6</sup>

When he began, this Los Angeles based artist intended first to critique feminists who essentialized womanhood by embracing culturally conditioned practices such as sewing and knitting. Seeing no reason why these pursuits should be regarded as solely feminine, Kelley worked with castoff crocheted afghans and

stuffed animals. He has intended these works to function in a social realm rather than a personal one, commenting, "The stuffed animal is a pseudo-child, a cutified sexless being which represents the adult's perfect model of a child – a neutered pet."<sup>7</sup> To avoid falling into the trap of subscribing to the values usually associated with these winsome creatures, Kelley chose abandoned toys, pathetic in their abjectness with enough of a scruffy edge to keep them from being read as merely sentimental reflections of an idealized childhood. In their abjection they bespeak a loss of innocence.

### **Charles Ray**

Enlarging the divide between art and life and working in this highly ambiguous realm is an ongoing goal of Charles Ray's work. In *No* (plate 11) made in response to *Yes*, a convex photograph of himself made while under the influence of LSD, Ray first had a fiberglass body mold of his head and hands made and then had it painted to resemble him. This facsimile became the subject of Ray's *No*, a photograph of his surrogate.

In *No* Ray reverses the process initiated in the late 1960s by the conceptually oriented photo realist Chuck Close, who makes detailed paintings of snapshots to underscore the disparity between photographic and external reality. Rather than using art as an empirical means for understanding the world, Ray employs it as a symbolic mode to dissimulate and confound and also to construct and replace those elements we are accustomed to accept as real.

### **Kiki Smith**

Among the artists in this exhibition, Kiki Smith comes closest to essentializing the self through her investigations of the body's internal systems. She appears to be looking for a substratum of authenticity on which to base all experience and finds it in the body, which to her is a *sine qua non* for a sculptural space, which is internal as opposed to external and suggestively feminist in orientation. Even though Smith

and her associates have protested that she is not political, she seems definitely to be involved with a feminist oriented politics of the body and the battle over who controls it.

Although she searches for a commonality of human experience in her art, Smith is not entirely out of kilter with her postmodern times since the bodies she portrays are categorical rather than individual, disparate parts rather than cohesive entities, and representatives of the species rather than family members, friends, or associates. They are both distant and near and scientific as well as highly personal. Her sculpted delegates of the human race are generally found in the abject circumstances of losing control over their perimeters, dispersing into separate parts, or seen as *écorché*, flayed anatomies.

### **Julio Galán**

Viewing himself as other, as feminized self-portrait, and as a devotional image, Mexican artist Julio Galán captures traces of selfhood that are reassembled in wonderfully decadent confabulations which deconstruct the conventions of the individuality that they so playfully and eruditely produce. Instead of manifesting a believable self, his works resist this psychological truism as a no longer viable myth and opt instead for the trimmings of pageantry, grandeur, folk references, kitsch appurtenances, vanguard allusions, and regionalist flavors. The dialects are many and the intonations are varied, but the overall effects are as international as the Monterrey and New York locales where the artist has lived. The closer that the self is brought to front stage center in Galán's work, the more exotic, polyvalent, and elusive it becomes.

### **Jeff Wall**

Wall's carefully composed and reworked images cast doubt on the verifiability of photographs, causing one to question the self-evident truth and often ubiquitous reality they purport to represent. Through careful composing and computer

enhancement, Wall reworks and edits the external world, placing it under erasure so that it seems to be both affirmed and subjected to change.

Wall, a Vancouver-based former conceptualist, models his art on the modernist painting of Edouard Manet and on cinema. Wall speculates about how Manet in the mid-nineteenth century was positioned at a crossroads in which progressive painting soon closed off viable arenas of investigation such as photography as it moved in the direction of abstraction. Wishing to reenact this seminal juncture, Wall joins in his highly controlled images aspects of painting, cinema, and photography.

Although Wall strongly disclaims any association between his lightboxes and those used for advertising, his works do rely on this highly viable commercial medium that lends a healthy brashness and temporality to his long-considered images, making them appear both timely and immediate. In addition, this connection with the marketplace endows them with the authority of a corporate production, causing observers to consider them as specific communiqués. In this way, Wall can play with viewers' expectations and create tensions by purposefully avoiding easy conclusions.

### **Damien Hirst**

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger believed people must counter the accidental nature of their birth and the world view it entails by coming to terms with the inevitability of their death, for only when they perceive their own ultimate end are they equipped to lead an authentic existence. But coming to terms with this great hiatus may be easier to speculate about than to realize as Damien Hirst's works forcefully suggest.

A British artist coping with his Catholic upbringing and the great divide separating life from death, Hirst provides provocative images of death in the form of rotting flesh, maggots, dying butterflies, and sawed-in-half dead animals. Because the moment of self-realization described by Heidegger must be personally intuited and accepted, Hirst's sculptures and tableaux can only present viewers

with the finality of death as an aesthetic fact that is both mystifying and intriguing and surprisingly never as horrific as one might imagine. It is the facticity of death that becomes his subject, and it remains inexplicable. As Hirst pointed out, "Trying to explain or imagine death is like trying to imagine black by only using white. There's no way you can get to it, it's like the same thing but opposite. This is life and death isn't. I'm not happy with any of those descriptions."<sup>8</sup>

Although he describes his work in terms of traditional metaphors, he admits their limitations in the face of the sheer brute reality that is part of life itself as his explication of *Party Time* (plate 15), an enlarged ashtray indicates:

*The whole smoking thing is like a mini life cycle. For me the cigarette can stand for life, the packet with its possible cigarettes stands for birth, the lighter can signify God which gives life to the whole situation, the ashtray represents death. But as soon as you read it like that you feel ridiculous. Because I feel ridiculous being metaphorical anyway, but it's unavoidable....Ashtrays are like holes in our everyday situation and these holes get smaller and smaller but never actually disappear.<sup>9</sup>*

## **Kara Walker**

In the 1990s a number of African-American self-taught and educated artists, including Thornton Dial, Ellen Gallagher, Bessie Harvey, Glenn Ligon, Lonny Holley, Gary Simmons, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson, inaugurated a new phase of the civil rights movement when they began to appropriate derogatory Jim Crow era stereotypes in their work. They have permitted their work to engage in the tensions ensuing from the diametrically different world views of the post-slavery and post-Civil Rights eras. These artists have hazarded such an undertaking because of their belief that repressed racist imagery will only lose its horrendous power when it becomes part of an ongoing discussion about discrimination in the United States. Surprisingly their imagery has threatened an earlier generation of African-American artists who wished to support only positive role models. When members of this earlier generation used such racial stereotypes as Aunt Jemima,

they empowered them. But working with such innocuous material as Aunt Jemima has not impressed artists coming of age in the 1990s who have wanted to confront more challenging issues and far more disturbing images.

Of all the 1990s African-Americans working with stereotypical imagery, Kara Walker has proven to be the most controversial. An acrimonious debate has developed from a constellation of factors, including Walker's being awarded the MacArthur "genius award" only a few years after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design, and her uninhibited cut outs of silhouetted figures in Victorian period dress conducting a range of sexual acts and bodily functions that include sodomy and defecating. The major criticism lobbed at her work by Betye Saar and others is that her demeaning images of blacks have fed the racial prejudices of white collectors.

More to the point Walker has found that the medium of silhouetting, with its obvious allusions to shadows and its underexamined overtones of constituting two-dimensional caricatures of a three-dimensional humanity, comprises an incisive critique of the stereotypes presented in her work. She equates silhouettes with stereotypes because each "says a lot with very little information."<sup>10</sup> In addition, she sustains the recent tradition of dealing with negative forms of blackness that gives a decisive edge to the fiction of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the comedy routines of Eddie Murphy, and the films of Spike Lee. She has noted that when she developed a format of monumental silhouettes for her work she "was thinking about blackness, and minstrelsy, and the kind of positions that I was putting myself in at home in Atlanta."<sup>11</sup>

Part of Walker's quest in making these tough works of art is to understand how racist practices stretching back to the nineteenth century have affected her life. "I saw myself as someone who was locked in histories, as a nebulous, shadowy character from a romance novel," she has related, "but not a novel that anyone ever remembered."<sup>12</sup> On another occasion, she remarked,

*At some point in my adventures I stored up some self-abusive language, and the term "black hole" kind of stuck. It's a little bit loaded, I guess – it's sexually and racially obscene, it's a frightening astronomical phenomenon, it's what you get when you cut black paper...all that in such a benign little craft.<sup>13</sup>*

In her work, humor is both a double-edged tool that uproots long sequestered imagery at the same time that it redirects the brunt of racist jokes so that their target is no longer assured. As Walker has concluded, "I use humor, but a type of humor that makes it difficult for myself or a viewer to decide just how hard to laugh. That uneasiness is an important part of the work."<sup>14</sup> In *De Flower of Georgia* (plate 16) an ambivalent punch line is apparent in the reference to a tree of life, taking the form of a sapling that winds through a young girl's body, becoming an anchor, a prison, an invader, and an instrument for deflowering and impregnating her.

### **Juan Muñoz**

Muñoz's view of humanity at the end of the twentieth century is a vastly impoverished one that can easily be replaced by dolls, mannequins, and ventriloquists' dummies. In his effort to uphold this abiding metaphor of a humanity realizing far less than its potential, he treads close to violating political correctness standards when he references dwarfs, disfigured figures, and traditionally dressed Chinese greatly reduced in both height and stature. But since art often functions in a manner akin to dreams by disregarding daily standards in an effort to shock, Muñoz's transgression of highly sensitive issues can be understood as an aesthetic device even if it cannot be entirely condoned. His apparent message is that ensconced traditions and accidents of physiognomy can be used to symbolize the ways that modern humanity has allowed itself to be unnecessarily encumbered and reduced.

### **Matthew Barney**

Performance artist, filmmaker, sculptor, and draughtsman, Matthew Barney is now concluding the fourth of his five proposed *Cremaster* films. Not made in consecutive order, these highly fanciful extravaganzas provide a vision of humanity at the dawning of a new age. Named for the cremaster muscle that determines sex differentiation in the fetus through ascent in the female and descent in the male, Barney's series appears to be concerned with gender issues. But according to the artist, his intentions



extend beyond such localized debates, "I'm less interested in the external debate about gender, which I don't think my work is about. It's more about the endless possibilities this organism can take on, the fact that it can occupy a field that is designated as feminine or masculine or androgynous, but I'm not more interested in one than another."<sup>15</sup> This fascination with the potentialities of humanity to deal with vastly different types of restraints may be a reason why Barney is intrigued with the Victorian magician Harry Houdini, who was able to disentangle himself from locks, straightjackets, and caskets.

In *Cremaster 1*, the second film to be completed in the series, Barney situates his work in a football stadium located in Boise, Idaho, his home town. The film suggests a cause and effect relationship between a female character named "Ms. Goodyear," seated beneath a table in a dirigible, who configures grapes in a variety of formations recalling the female reproductive system while eighty cheerleaders in sci-fi outfits with plastic helmets enact these positions on a playing field of blue astroturf. Simultaneously working through these positions, these figures recall the optimism of early Busby Berkeley films when the smooth and extravagant choreography of multitudes of showgirls on an extended stage seemed to symbolize the well oiled machinery of the streamlined era to which this filmmaker belonged. This misplaced optimism and its highly artificial dream effects seem to comment on elaborately contrived ideologies of the 1930s that were able to subjugate women into assuming mere decorative roles. After Ms. Goodyear descends to earth (plate 18), the entire ensemble gathers in a grand paean to traditional, Hollywood-style femininity.

When Barney frames the stills for this film in a self-lubricating and frictionless plastic identical to Teflon (which he does for most of his film stills), he uses a material readily "accepted by the body."<sup>16</sup> This material heightens the irony of his film since it implies that not only the frame but also the work of art it surrounds can be internalized as part of humanities' vision of itself. As Barney explained apropos his early drawings that were framed with a prosthetic plastic which he later replaced with a self-lubricating variety, "The drawings became an internal space that a prosthetic orifice opened up to reveal."<sup>17</sup> Although Barney

presents images of traditional femininity in *Cremaster I*, his intent is not simply to use it ironically to support a feminist party line. Instead of championing gender politics, his art in this film, as in his others, is to point to internalized restraints – ideologies, that entertain and beguile even as they seduce humanity with the apparent naturalness of their highly artificial visions.

### **Andreas Gursky**

In his monumental photographs Andreas Gursky presents images of humanity caught up in forces far greater than the capacity of any single individual to alter them. They range from such mundane activities as swimming, skiing, May Day celebrations, and stock brokers carrying out their daily activities to landscapes bearing the marks of civilizations. The omniscient view that might have represented an offstage narrator or idealized artist in former times is limited in Gursky's art to the wide-angle lens of an elevated camera. And the concomitant sublimity of a transcendent experience veers away from the romanticism of a Caspar David Friedrich painting in which individual power is extolled. Instead of elevating individuals, Gursky's images reduce them to patterns, mere cogs in a vast machinery that can alter them as easily as the artist can rework the pixels on his computer software and thus edit his photographic images of the world.

To appreciate Gursky's ambitions it is necessary to understand his participation in a particularly vital artistic community located both in and around Cologne and Düsseldorf that includes his teachers, the minimal documentary photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, his classmate Thomas Struth, and a number of luminaries who once contributed to its vitality such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. His ambition is nothing less than the task of critiquing the romantic tradition which was initiated in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany before it became an international phenomenon and encouraged other countries to espouse beliefs in a secularized God, a spiritualized nature, and their individual country's destiny. To counteract this, Gursky has chosen to photograph nature schematized, bounded by pavement, reduced to patches of weeds, artificially

constructed as massive gardens atop buildings in Hong Kong (which itself is a highly artificial political entity), and subdivided and parceled out in utopian architectural projects gone awry and reduced to the barricades of cell-like blocks. His images of power focus on its dispersal in a series of incredibly large and immaculate factory interiors and in his views of stock exchanges in both Hong Kong and Chicago where an individual's sovereignty is reduced to that of an automaton or a crowd member.

### **Rachel Whiteread**

Whiteread's reputation was established overnight by the critical acclaim accorded her 1993 *House*, a concrete casting of the interior of an entire three-story row house in a working-class section of London slated for demolition and urban renewal. Since then she has become respected for the poetic evocations of absence created by her castings of usually the negative spaces formed by bathtubs, beds, chairs, morgue slabs, books, and floors. Although ostensibly owing a debt to such works by Bruce Nauman as *A Cast of the Space Under My Chair*, 1965-1968, Whiteread's sculptures in plaster, rubber, polyester resin, and now aluminum and bronze, which evoke internal forgotten and derogated areas, can be aligned with the aspirations of feminists who wish to understand internal as opposed to external spaces and who externalize them in order to know them.

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## Endnotes

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3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).
4. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 10.
5. Roberta Smith, "Rituals of Consumption" *Art in America* 76, no. 5 (May 1988): 170.
6. Robert Storr, "An Interview with Mike Kelley" *Art in America* 82, no. 6 (June 1984): 91.
7. Michael Duncan, "Kelley's Junk-Shop Pop" *Art in America* 82, no. 6 (June 1984): 88.
8. Adrian Dannatt, "Damien Hirst: Life's Like This, Then It Stops" *Flash Art* 26, no. 169 (March/April 1993): 63.
9. Ibid., 62.
10. Alexander Alberro, "An Interview with Kara Walker" in *Kara Walker: Upon My Many Masters – An Outline* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 14-May 13, 1997), n.p.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Sydney Jenkins, "Interview with Kara Walker" in *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!* (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, September 23-October 22, 1995), 11.
14. Alberro, "An Interview with Kara Walker," n.p.
15. Jérôme Sans, "Matthew Barney: Modern Heroes" *art press* no. 204 (July/August 1995), p. 28.
16. Ibid., 31.
17. Ibid.