

the egg & the I



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THE EGG AND THE I

In Which the Artist Tries, But Fails, to Leap Over His Own Shadow

A lecture given at the Arkansas Arts Center on May 26, 1995

by Warren Criswell

Lear: *Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where
are his eyes?*

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Fool: *Lear's shadow?*

Lear: *I would learn that. . . .*

King Lear, I:iv

What I would like to talk about tonight is the concept of complementarity—especially the complementarity of image and narrative, or of the separate and the continuous. However, I was only asked to talk about my paintings. So I'll start with that.

I have a bad habit of trying to change the subject like that whenever I'm asked to talk about my own work. I usually say something like, "I don't think artists should talk too much about their own work." Or, "Artists can only damage their own work by taking away the viewer's freedom of association," and so forth. Very old arguments—and I think they're correct. But basically they're just excuses—and maybe the most interesting thing about it is why I should feel the need to make excuses in the first place.

It's not just me. Almost every time I hear an artist talk about his or her work I sense a hidden uncertainty about it. But why shouldn't the artist be the best authority on his or her own work? Why is there apparently such an abyss between images and words? Why should something so much a part of us be so inaccessible to us?

I think that, if it's phrased that way, the

answer is hidden in the question. If the work really is a part of me, of my self, then I could no more be purely objective about it than I could be about my self. We can be objective only about objects, not about the subject that does the objectifying. Maybe that's the problem. If it seems more apparent now than in other times, maybe it's because today art has become so intensely subjective. We no longer look at art with an academic or metaphysical objectivity. But how did that happen?

These are questions that show up when I think about talking about not talking about art. So I'd like to follow this line of thought for a few minutes, and then I'll show some slides of my work in the context of my argument.

I. Complementarity

Of course we have to be objective to some extent about our work, or else we wouldn't be able to make judgments about it while we're making it. While I'm painting I'm constantly shifting back and forth between the subjective and objective modes. The subjective mode seems like a kind of trance to somebody outside it. My wife notices that I can't

talk and paint at the same time. I was going to use B. B. King as an example, since he never sings and plays the guitar at the same time. But then I realized he's the only singer-guitarist I know about who can't do both at once. So maybe B. B. King and I are the only examples of this phenomenon. But anyway—as I experience it—it's not unconsciousness but a sort of hyperconsciousness in which the painting and I become one thing—maybe like B. B. King and his guitar become one thing.

That "one thing" is a continuum without endpoints: a whole which can't look at itself. A good symbol for this might be the Ouroboros, the world snake swallowing its own tail, nourishing and destroying itself at the same time. It can't look at itself without breaking the loop, stopping the flow. So periodically I have to disengage from the work in order to see what I've done. I use a mirror for this. It helps me to see the work from outside my own head, so to speak. But it's important to understand that this objective view from the outside is completely different from the subjective view from the inside. It stops the flow. So I can't observe the phenomenon without altering it.

Painting, like every other form of communication, is directed outward toward someone—some real or imagined other or others—so in a sense I become that imagined other when I look at my work in this objective mode. But the actual work requires this other condition of intense subjectivity. Both modes are necessary for the work to be made, but they exclude each other at any given moment. You can't be subjective and objective at the same time.

Well, this mutual exclusivity of two parts which complete a whole is called complementarity. But this is a special kind of complementarity. Usually, when artists hear the word complementary we think of complementary colors: red and green, yellow and violet, orange and blue and so forth—colors which both define each other and cancel each other out. For engineers two complementary angles make a right angle. But in these cases we can look at the color wheel or the triangle from the outside. As observers, we're not part of those systems. But

the kind of complementarity I'm talking about doesn't allow us to get outside the system like that. I have to slip out of art into science for a minute, because the most dramatic demonstration of this kind of complementarity is found in quantum mechanics. It was from reading about quantum mechanics that I derived this application of complementarity to art¹

When particle physicists use this word they refer to the complementarity of wave and particle, or momentum and position. At the level of the atom, you can't detect both aspects at once. If you set up an experiment to determine the true nature of light, for example, you'll find it to be wave-like if you look for waves or particle-like if you look for particles. This is weird but true.

In the famous two-slit experiment a beam of light is sent through two slits in a thin wall to a photosensitive screen which records it. If you look only at the screen, a pattern of interfering waves shows up, proving that the beam is wavelike—because it had to come through the slits as waves into order to produce the interference pattern. But if you set up a device to observe the actual photons as they pass through the slits, nothing but two lines of light will be recorded on the screen—no interference pattern—proving that the beam is made up of particles, or quanta. The experiment can be done with one photon and the results are the same. You still get an interference pattern on the screen, unless you watch which slit the photon goes through, in which case only that photon will be recorded. This is called the "collapse of the wave function." I'll return to that expression in a social context in a minute.

But there's no getting around it. Einstein tried for thirty-five years and failed.² If you want to know a particle's momentum, you have to think of it as a wave; if you want to know exactly where it is, you have to think of it as a discrete particle. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle means that you can never know both at the same time. Each aspect is irreconcilable with the other, and both are necessary for a complete description of light, or any electromagnetic transmission. Now here's the impor-

tant part:

The irreconcilability comes from the fact that the observer is somehow a determinant part of the experiment. This is the kind of complementarity I'm talking about. You can't get outside a quantum universe, either logically or intuitively.³

II. Complementarity in Art Criticism

So I'm suggesting that this concept generally holds for any system of which we ourselves are the parts, such as culture, art, or even consciousness. The physicist can't get an objective view of the whole reality of quantum mechanics from the outside, because he or she is an undetachable part of that reality, just like I can't grasp the whole of my painting because I can't completely detach myself from it. Now, I realize that it's not impossible to be objective about one's own culture in the same sense as being objective about quantum reality, but it's not as easy as we sometimes think.

We can apply this to art criticism. People who write about art are generally coming from one of two distinctly opposing schools of thought, sometimes called contextualism and isolationism. Iconography falls in the first school, formalism in the second. A contextualist—like Erwin Panofsky, for instance—believes that a work of art should be considered in the continuum of its historical context, while an isolationist—like Clive Bell or Clement Greenberg—thinks that anything outside the individual work itself is irrelevant to it. The one sees art as a wave, you might say, the other as a collection of discrete particles.

But these are really complementary views, because although each excludes the other at a given moment, they're both necessary for a complete view of a work of art. To view a work as a link in a continuum can certainly enrich our understanding of that aspect of the work, but it can also cause us to lose intimate contact with that particular work. Its concreteness and immediate presence is diluted by the continuum: in other words, it becomes transparent to its meanings.

In a lecture about Kafka's "Metamorphosis,"

Nabokov says, "We can take the story apart, find out how the parts fit, but you have to have in you some cell, some gene, some drum which will vibrate in answer to sensations which you can neither define nor dismiss."⁴ The implication is that this "drum" is hard-wired into our emotions, not something we learn from the cultural continuum. This is essentially the meaning of Clive Bell's "significant form."⁵ The work is an opaque object to be apprehended by the emotions; you must not look for anything behind it.

It's true that the history of art is made up of artworks, objects, which are always separable from it and never completely explainable by it. But without some notion of the history of painting, for instance, this particular painting would make no sense at all. It's impossible not to bring something of the continuum of our culture to the painting. No matter how ignorant we are of art history, and no matter how resolved we may be to take the work on its own terms as an isolated, unique object, we come equipped by our culture to look at this thing as a picture.

As Wittgenstein says, "A picture represents its subject from a position outside it.... A picture cannot, however, place itself outside its representational form." This is really at the core of Wittgenstein's thought. He says that, just as logical statements can't represent logic itself, a "picture cannot ... depict its pictorial form..."⁶ In 1931, ten years after Wittgenstein wrote that, the mathematician Kurt Gödel proved that no system of mathematical axioms can prove its own validity.⁶ This is the same situation as the physicist who can't produce a classical theory of quantum reality. (In classical physics the experimenter is always separate from the experiment.)

In other words, as viewers, we can't get outside the "picturehood" of the picture, because it is integral with our cultural continuum. (By the way, this isn't true of all cultures; primitive societies which didn't have the picture concept have been reported. Imagine how hard it would be to look at our society from the viewpoint of one which didn't have the picture concept. Not impossible maybe, but very difficult. I'll give you an example of this in

a minute.)

So we need both the contextualist and isolationist ways of thinking to get a complete view of the work.

III. From Whole to Part in Western Culture

Now, maybe this concept can be applied to Western art in general. I said that today our own art has become intensely subjective; a thousand years ago it was exactly the opposite. From the Middle Ages to the present we can watch the emphasis swing from social whole to individual part. The early Middle Ages, in general, had only anonymous craftsmen. The individual artist-genius concept was suppressed. The guilds had identities, but the individual members were of secondary importance. Plainchant, Gregorian chant, was sung in unison, with no one voice differentiated from the others. The artistic expression of the whole culture, as it emerged from the Dark Ages, was directed toward God.

The cruciform ground plan of Romanesque churches and Gothic cathedrals was for the eye of God, not men (Figs. 1 and 3). There weren't any airplanes yet. The cathedral is like the great White Horse in Berkshire, England (Fig. 2), or the 1300 foot-long serpent mound in Ohio. They're for the eyes of the sky gods. Our own earth art, by contrast, is for the eyes of the aerial photographer.

In the same way, plainchant was not sung for a human audience. The chanters were like the Navajo medicine man who has to go out into the desert alone each morning and sing the world into existence. No human ear hears him. He sings for the spirits alone. Our early culture was like that. Art itself was unimportant except as a medium of praise, a concerted voice of an entire people preparing for the Day of Judgment. The individual artist was subservient to the structure of the whole. He was an imitator of nature—as it was conceived by

Scholasticism. To say he was a “creator” would have been blasphemous.

The world was at an end. The universe was a known object, a closed, crystalline egg. For Scholasticism, all knowledge was contained in scripture. Art was objective and didactic. There was no room for individual subjectivity. The culture expressed itself with one collective voice.

But Derrida⁸ thinks that all social systems are always in the process of deconstructing themselves—incrementally, at the edges—and that was the case here. Already in the last half of the 12th century—the beginning of the Age of Chivalry—the egg was being pecked at from the inside.

The troubadours' songs of courtly love were idealized and often abstract, but they were thoroughly subjective. We hear the voice of the individual lover. The monody of Gregorian chant burst into polyphony in the late Gothic period--“burst” both in the sense of a flower bursting into bloom and of a glass shattering. Again, nourishing and destroying are going on at the same time, depending on your point of view. It was as if a prism had been thrust into a beam of light, revealing the whole spectrum for the first time. The parts were beginning to compete with the whole.

And that prism was the awakening eye of the human subject-self: the eye of the I. The drawings and reliefs of the Carolingians were essentially panoptic—views that could have been seen only by an omniscient eye. Now this began to narrow down to a more human perspective. It was the beginning of a turning from the God's-eye view to the view of a single human eye located at a single point in space and time. It was a shift from community to individual. From wave to particle. So I wanted to suggest that the “collapse of the wave function” from quantum physics is a good metaphor for this historical trend.

We began to view ourselves as free individuals, not subservient parts bound in an integral

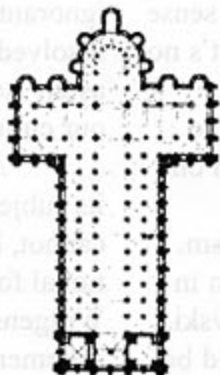


Fig. 1. Romanesque church of St.-Sernin, Toulouse, c. 1008—1120

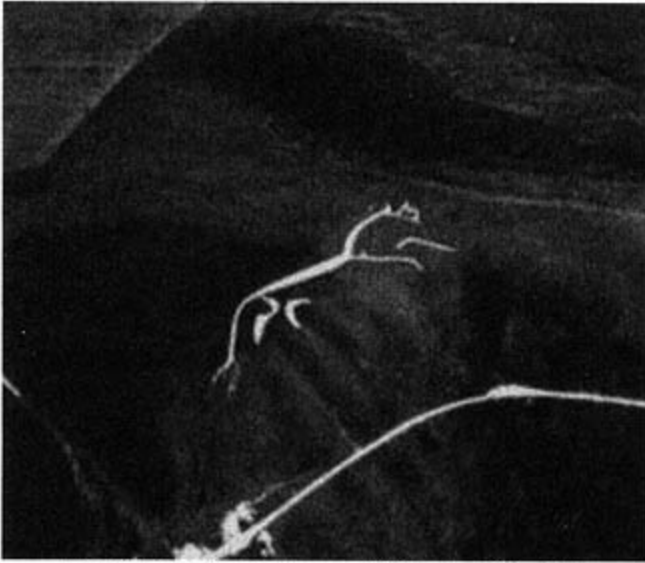


Fig. 2. The Great Horse, Uffington, Berkshire



Fig. 3. St.-Sernin, aerial view.

whole. Virtue began to detach itself from the common good and drift toward personal fulfillment. Only then do we start hearing the words “creativity” and “sincerity” applied to the arts. Only when the pendulum swings from community to individual,

does “creativity” show up as an important concept. Creativity is a creature of freedom. As the social structure weakens, the isolated individual must create a personal structure: without realizing it, we take over the work of God. With Michelangelo, the artist becomes Creator.

Even so, the craft guilds lasted for a long time after the Renaissance. In France, it wasn't until the seventeenth century that the guilds took their first serious hit. Peter Walch, director of the University of New Mexico Art Museum, talked about that in his lecture here in March in connection with the exhibition of French oil sketches.⁹ We're accustomed to thinking about the Academy as the dinosaur it had become by the 19th century—the last barrier to modernism. But Peter Walch reminded us that the French Academy was founded by Louis XIV as part of his social reform movement against the conservatism of the guilds and the Church.

What was happening was that the direction of art was shifting from God to the King. It wasn't the intention of Louis XIV to elevate the social importance of the individual artist, but that was the effect the Academy had, and once it had started there was no going back. Modernism is really a child of the Academy.

Musically, polyphony gives way to the baroque concerto—a single instrument set apart from the body of the orchestra, first in peaceful coexistence with it, but later in confrontational relationships.

Pascal was writing his *Pensees* at this time, and he saw the way things were going. “The tendency should be toward the general,” he wrote, “and the bias toward self is the beginning of all disorder, in war, in politics, economics, in man's individual body.”¹⁰ Pascal was anticipating Freud and Jung. With them the individual would never again be indivisible.

As we internalize our Declaration of Independence and the pursuit of happiness, not only does the “wave function” of the social whole collapse, but the individual itself disintegrates into

warring factions.

By the time of Freud and Jung technology was trying to build a new egg of its own. Peter Walch talked about that, too: about how mass production was leading to a cloned, smooth-edged sameness in modern life, and how Modernism, in its rough, unfinished aspect, was in part a reaction to that.

But the other major trend of Modernism toward the geometrical and analytical was also a reaction to the mass culture. To analyze is to take apart. As the mass culture became outwardly more and more homogeneous, it was being dismantled from the inside by reductionism.

Maybe I should add here that I don't mean to condemn reductionism or exalt holism. They're complementary methods of investigation, like isolationism and contextualism. One requires the other for its existence. Reductionism was and remains an extremely powerful tool. The quantum itself, of course, was found by reductive techniques.

But this trend toward analysis, in art and science, was supposed to uncover all the components of reality, which up until now had been hidden in the Baroque shadows of ignorance. Electricity, psychotherapy, the gossip column, the Kinsey Report, Masters and Johnson, the talk show—all devices to throw light into shadowy places. We went from the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt to

the *plein air* paintings of the impressionists; from the early Van Gogh of *The Potato Eaters* to the Mediterranean Van Gogh; from Matisse to the indirect lighting of Alex Katz. My own work might be characterized as a shrinking back from that wall-to-wall lighting—a sort of nervous reaction to the Alexkatzification of our culture.

Because, somehow, the clearer things became, the less we really knew about them. The more we know about the parts, the less we know about the whole, and vice versa. This is the uncertainty principle in a cultural setting. The fragmenting of the self into its discrete parts is the culminating example. I might be able to analyze and expose all the demons lurking in shadows of my psyche—a sort of Alexkatzification of the soul—but I can never expose that which does the exposing.

I can't leap over my own shadow.

It was Hermann Weyl, the mathematician, physicist, philosopher, who wrote about that "consciousness which cannot leap over its own shadow."¹⁰ My subject self always moves one step beyond my grasp.

This is just the condition that produces the uncertainty principle in atomic observations. So it looks like uncertainty is a permanent condition of human consciousness, and I think it runs through all of this series of paintings I'm going to show you now.



Still Life with Egg, 1992, gouache, egg tempera, conte on paper, 32 x 24 inches. Collection. David Hostetler.



The Storm, 1992, oil-wax on linen, 48 x 36 inches



The Question, 1993, oil-wax on copper, 5 x 7 inches. Collection Rickey D. Medlock.

IV. The Divisible Individual

It's hard for me to backtrack to the sources of my images. They're often associated with something I'm reading or thinking about, but they never leap out of a text at me. They always come as imaginary perceptions, not as narrative concepts. In the case of *The Question*, (see above and front cover, two versions) I know I was reading Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which begins with a section called "The Question." But somehow it got mixed up with Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*—the chapter called "The Grand Inquisitor." Also, I was looking at El Greco's portrait of Cardinal Inquisitor Niño de Guevara (Fig. 4).

In Dostoevsky's story Ivan tells his brother Alyosha, who's a novice in a local monastery, a sort of parable about a Second Coming of Christ during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The hero of the parable is a Cardinal Inquisitor who arrests Christ and interrogates him. His plan is to burn him at the auto-da-fe in the morning, along with



Fig. 4. El Greco: *Cardinal Niño de Guevara*

the witches and other heretics.

In Dostoevsky's story, Christ represents personal freedom, which would dismantle the protective structure of the Church. With personal freedom comes the burden of personal responsibility, a theme Sartre would elaborate on in the next century. Adorno has written that it's a major aim of our consumerism to conceal this unpleasant truth from us,¹¹ just it was the aim of the Roman Church during the Counter-Reformation movement to relieve us of it. So the Cardinal correctly identifies Christ as an enemy of the Church.

But in my painting I've reduced the dialogue to its "atomic" components, so to speak: instead of an interrogation of the individual by society, I interrogate myself. This is the culmination of the trend I've traced from the Middle Ages, from social continuum to human particle. It's not important that the men in the painting are both me—or even that they're men—but it *is* important that they're both the same person. Because this person is bifurcated—an individual no longer indivisible.

The concept of a question is interesting all by itself. A question implies a lack. I lack an answer. And yet without the existence of a question, how could I know I had no answer for it? So question and answer are complementary parts of a whole. But at the same time, the question is destructive to the whole, because there can be no question without a separation. The question cracks open the egg of the closed universe.

If I question myself, from whom do I expect an answer? The transforming process I described for Western culture begins with self-questioning, and I think that same process is mirrored in the individual. But I think that the uncertainty of who is questioning whom runs through all the paintings in this series.

I always thought I knew the Cardinal perfectly, with all his self-importance, and corruption. He seems to have an exquisite sense of shame and guilt. Here (Fig. 5) he strikes the same pose as Marilyn Monroe in *Bus Stop*, but his expression signals just the opposite of her attitude of voluptuous



Fig. 5. *On The Grate*, 1993, acrylic and oil on paper, 36 x 31 inches

abandon. *Table Dancer* (Color illus., opposite) is one of several drawings I did on the theme of temptation—maybe a connection with the story of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the desert, which Dostoevsky's Cardinal chastises his prisoner about.

But who was the prisoner? Most viewers seem to associate the prisoner with the Dionysian—the animal urges—and the Cardinal with the Apollonian—the need to understand the meaning of things, to control oneself. In Freudian terms, the prisoner would be the id and the Cardinal the super-ego.

I agree that those elements are part of the image. But for me it's not that easy. For me, somehow, the prisoner represents this wholeness which I can't get outside of—the shadow I can't jump over—and therefore can't identify. In that case, these images might reflect—instead of a dichotomy, as I used to think—a complementarity of whole and part. Maybe all dichotomies are complementaries in disguise.



Table Dancer, 1992, acrylic and oil on paper, 28 x 23 inches. Private collection.



The Cardinal Reading, 1992, acrylic and conté on paper, 22 x 30 inches



Fig. 5. Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1458-60

Painting one's likeness, of course, doesn't solve the problem of identity but only multiplies it. After *Table Dancer* the artist himself began turning up in these pictures. And parts of one painting will bud off and turn up in a later one. Here in the sky of *The Storm* (color illus., P. 8) you can see echoes of the carved snakes on the back of the Cardinal's chair, which suggests that this whole landscape is in some sense the tabletop in *The Question*.

In both *The Storm* and *The Diver* (color illus., p. 23) the artist is in a bottle, and in *Hunter's Moon* (color illus., p. 17) he's in a spacesuit. He seems to have the illusion that he's a detached observer, hermetically sealed off from the drama he's depicting. But from our viewpoint we can see quite clearly that he's an integral part of the whole picture. He can divide himself endlessly and the problem persists.

The trio in the foreground of *Hunter's Moon* is a quote from Piero's *Flagellation of Christ* (Fig. 6). Piero's figures, too, seem strangely detached from the main action going on in the background. This quote has the unforeseen effect of associating the werewolf with



Fig. 7. Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1863

Christ and the Nefertiti-Diana figure with Pontius Pilate....

There are three of these self-images, or iterations, in both *Highway 61* (color illus., p. 21) and *The Judgment* (opposite). *Highway 61* is a blatant appropriation of Rembrandt's *The Angel Stopping Abraham from Sacrificing Isaac*, with the prisoner playing the part of Isaac and the artist playing the angel. The prisoner seems to be the only one aware that their inner drama is about to be rudely interrupted by the outside world. Or is the driver of the truck—that is, the viewer—just another of his incarnations?



Fig. 8. Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael, *The Judgment of Paris*, (detail) engraving, c. 1520.

In *The Judgment* there are three of him again—six if you count the goddesses (See color illus., p.13). In Medieval interpretations of the Judgment of Paris the goddesses represent life choices: you can chose a life of pursuing wealth, wisdom or sensual pleasure. Those are aspects of myself, that I can objectify and choose between.

The foreground figures here look familiar because of Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, (Fig.7) but this design goes back to Raphael's *Judgment of Paris* (Fig. 8), and to the Roman relief he took it from. The woman is Oenone, Paris's first wife. The figure on the right—a river god, Oenone's father in Raphael's design—reminds me of the ancient Egyptian pictures of Geb, the earth, who's usually shown in a very similar pose (Fig. 9)—the angularity of



Fig. 9. Geb, the earth, separated from Nut, the sky, by Shu, air, the breath of life. This suggests another possible set of identities for the foreground trio in my painting. See Fig.12.



Hunters' Moon, 1994, oil-wax on linen, 44 x 60 inches



The Judgment, 1993, oil-wax on plywood, 44 x 49 inches



The three goddesses. Detail of *The Judgment*, see p. 11.



Highway 61, 1993, oil-wax on plywood, 48 x 36 inches.



The Diver, 1993, oil-wax on plywood, 59 x 44 inches.



Changing Woman, 1992, oil-wax on linen, 48 x 36 inches.

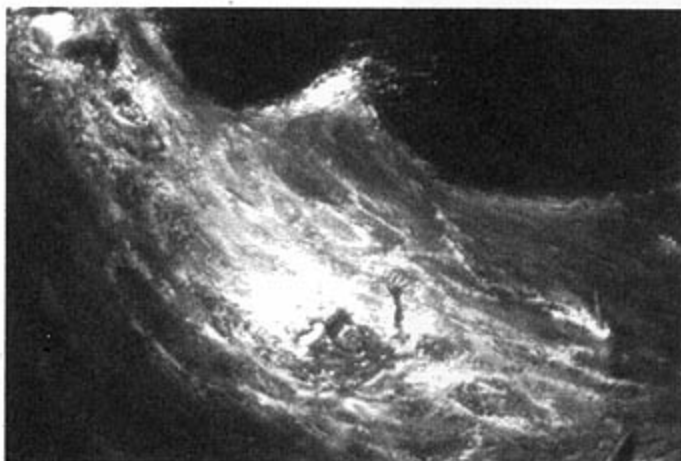


Fig. 10. *The Diver* (detail). See color illus., p. 25.

his elbows and knees representing mountains and river channels, the solid structure of the earth. That works for me, because the Cardinal desperately needs a structure to cling to—just what he doesn't have in *The Diver*. This is his worst nightmare: the abyss (Fig. 10).



Fig. 12. *All the King's Horses*, 1992, oil-wax on linen, 48 x 36 inches.



Fig. 11. *The Animation*, 1992, acrylic and conte on paper, 34 x 30 inches.

There are five iterations in *The Diver*--six if you include the woman on the shark . . . maybe his feminine component at its most ferocious. The Cardinal, the prisoner, the artist--and in the sky, the prisoner and the Cardinal again. Like the landscape in *The Storm*, the sea is a version of the tabletop.

In *Changing Woman* (color illus., p. 25) and *The Animation* (Fig. 11) the tabletop itself becomes a stage. Maybe we're seeing here the hatching of the self, which is always at least dyadic, never monadic. There's an allusion to the twins Castor and Pollux, who were also hatched from an egg. One was immortal, the other mortal. In the Navajo religion Changing Woman, like Leda, is the mother of Twins who set off on a quest. Every question is a quest. Changing Woman's sons were called Monster Slayer and Child Born of Water.¹³

In these images twins seem to represent the divided self, the questioner and the questioned: the interrogator and his prisoner. The egg of our mythical wholeness has cracked open, like Humpty Dumpty.

In *All the King's Horses* (Fig. 12) the egg



Two Manikins, 1992,
mixed media on paper,
25 x 35 inches

has come back together, but the container has shattered. That is, the logos, our language-defined world, has vanished. Human consciousness depends on the broken egg.

In Dostoevsky's story the Cardinal does all the talking. Christ never says anything. This fits with my feeling that the prisoner is somehow outside of the Cardinal's language-defined world. He's either preliterate or postliterate—a sort of emblem of the continuum of nature of which I am an integral part but from which I am forever excluded.

At the end of the interrogation Christ stands up and kisses the Cardinal. He's released, and that's the end of the parable. The Cardinal was destroyed

by this simple act of forgiveness. In my painting, too, (*The Kiss*, color illus., p. 29) he's utterly appalled and horrified by it, but in this case it's self-forgiveness—and, as pointed out to me once by a viewer—a very aggressive and threatening attempt at it, too. I don't pretend to understand the implications of forgiving myself. But I feel that it involves, somehow, a threat to my identity as a discrete individual. Do I have the right to forgive my own transgressions without first suffering those transgressions myself—becoming my own victims, as it were? If it were possible to do that, could I ever crawl back into the shell of my self? For me, these questions and others, all unanswered, are embodied in *The Kiss*.



The Kiss, detail. (See color illus., p. 29)



The Kiss, 1992, oil-wax on linen, 48 x 36 inches.



The Trespasser, 1993, oil-wax on linen, 60 x 48 inches.

This is *The Trespasser* (color illus., p. 27). It wasn't the last painting in the series, but for me it summarizes the whole thing. This frozen moment of confrontation is like the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy opens the curtain on the Wizard. The sudden contrapposto of the surprised artist here is completely at odds with the serene frontality of the monument. But like the other oppositions we've looked at tonight, these two states are really complementary. Neither can exist except as a negation of the other, but together they complete a whole.

I'll read Donald Kuspit's description of this painting from an essay he wrote on my work a couple of years ago:

"In *The Trespasser*, 1993, we see Criswell urinating on a museum installation of an ancient Egyptian temple. He has not only crossed the rope barrier separating the viewer from the space, doubly sacred by reason of being a museum as well as temple, but treated it profanely--a double act of disrespect, all the more daring by reason of its nonchalance. Moreover, he is caught in the act by a flashlight, presumably that of the museum guard, in the viewer's position. In other words, he is in the museum at

night—a third breaking of the rules. Criswell is a criminal, a transgressor, all the more so because of his everyday appearance--the banal white plastic bag dropped on the floor beside him is a wonderful touch of realism—in the mysterious awesome place. But our outrage at him, and the darkness of the scene, may blind us to the fact that it is his own temple that he is violating, as the giant statues of him, flanking either side of the phallic monument,

indicate. Thus, with narcissistic grandeur, the artist immortalizes himself and his sacred art in a museum, but with comic realism recognizes, through an everyday act—a necessity of nature—his ordinary humanity, vulnerability, anxiety, and, implicitly, mortality."¹⁴

Kuspit sees urinating as a symbol of death! Life leaking away. Beautiful. I always thought of

this as a pompous monument to self-interrogation—or introspection—with this bum—the artist—demonstrating his opinion of its true value.

With the Grand Inquisitor and his prisoner frozen in stone, permanently objectified, it might seem for a moment like the artist is free of them at last. But in the moment of his freedom the light hits him. And at that moment he sees himself as we see him—as a shameless desecrator of property—and the whole cycle begins again. Because what we call the "self" is always an object in the eyes of the Other. Again, the observer and the observed are complementary components of a single system, and must therefore, as I've tried to show, always contain a

measure of uncertainty.

But although the work is directed at some Other, as the painter I have to play the part of that Other, as I said at the beginning, and in that sense, *I'm the one who's caught myself in the act!*

So in this painting, not only am I the Cardinal and his prisoner—By the way, several versions of them appear on the column (Fig. 13); the



Fig. 13. *The Trespasser*, detail (see color illus. p. 31)

hieroglyphics are from a passage in the Egyptian Book of the Dead in which the deceased is being interrogated about his life.—Not only am I the Cardinal, the prisoner and the trespasser, but the guard with the flashlight as well! So I can no more escape from this solipsistic universe of my self than the Medieval artist could escape from the closed universe of God.

And so I come back to the triviality I started

with—the problem of talking about one's own artwork. Though images and narratives may be complementary, the abyss between them remains. My own work may be a little aberrant in today's art world—if anything can be called aberrant in today's art world—but I think this a valid question for all artists: Can we say anything about our work that won't damage it for the viewer, or are we always just pissing in the museum?

Notes

1. There is a rash of books on the market today on this subject, the good ones written by physicists for readers who are not. A couple of the best are: John Gribbon, *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) and M. Kafatos and R. Nadeau, *The Conscious Universe: Part and Whole in Modern Physical Theory* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990). The latter is not a New Age restoration of metaphysics as the title suggests, but a serious investigation of the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics. It is unique in this literature, I think, in being a collaborative project by a scientist (Kafatos) and a humanist (Nadeau). More technical but equally readable texts are: Paul Dirac, *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics* (New York: Oxford Press, 1982) and Richard Feynman, *QED, The Strange Theory of Light and Matter* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988). Feynman is hilarious, as usual, in these lectures. He guarantees in advance that his listeners will not understand what he's going to tell them. "You see, my physics students don't understand it either. That is because I don't understand it. Nobody does." (p. 9.)
2. The famous debate between Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr began around 1925 and lasted until Einstein's death. J. Gribbon (1988), p. 100 (see note 1) See also Max Born, *The Born-Einstein Letters* (London: MacMillan, 1971). The principle of quantum uncertainty makes reality a game of craps, and Einstein could never get used to the idea of God shooting dice.
3. This interpretation of quantum irreconcilability is suggested by M. Kafatos and R. Nadeau (note 1). It's the central theme of their book.
4. Vladimir Nabokov, "Franz Kafka: *The Metamorphosis*," from V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970)
5. Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, eds. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), p. 100.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 2.172, 2.174. The first German edition was in 1921.
7. Kurt Gödel, *On Formally Undecidable Propositions* (New York: Basic Books, 1962; A translation of Gödel's 1931 paper, with some discussion.
8. Jaques Derrida, "Afterwards: toward an ethic of discussion," trans. S. Weber, in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 147, quoted by Charles Spinoza, "Derrida and Heidegger" in *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 284: Derrida says here that social norms appear to be stable but really aren't: "They depend upon socio-institutional conditions, hence upon nonnatural relations of power that by essence are mobile and founded upon complex conventional structures that in principle may be analyzed, deconstructed, and transformed; and, in fact, these structures are in the process of transforming themselves profoundly and, above all, very rapidly . . . 'deconstruction' is firstly this destabilization on the move." Applying this theory to the Middle Ages is my idea, not Derrida's.
9. Peter Walch, *French Oil Sketches and the Academic Tradition*, Arkansas Arts Center, March 26, 1995.
10. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (1670), VII: 477.
11. Hermann Weyl, *The Continuum: A Critical Examination of the Foundation of Analysis*, trans. Stephen Pollard and Thomas Bole (New York: Dover Publications, 1994; republication of Kirksville, Mo.: The Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1987), p. 93.
12. Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938), essay reprinted in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995).
13. Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. 1: Part 2: Mythologies of the Great Hunt* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 244.
14. Donald Kuspit, *The Narcissistic Sinner: Warren Criswell's Pictures* (1993), unpublished essay.

Collections

The Question, 1991(cover): Collection Chester Phillips
Still Life With Egg, 1992 (page 6): Collection David Hostetler
The Storm, 1992 (page 8):Collection Julia J. Norrell
The Question, 1993 (page 9): Collection Rickey D. Medlock
On the Grate, 1993 (page 10): Private collection
Table Dancer, 1992 (page 11): Private collection
The Cardinal Reading, 1992 (page 13): Private collection
Hunters' Moon, 1994 (page 17):Collection Robert and Sherrie Kinton
The Judgment, 1993 (page 17): Collection Rickey D. Medlock
Highway 61, 1993 (page 21): Collection Robert and Sherrie Kinton
The Diver, 1993 (page 23): Collection Rickey D. Medlock
Changing Woman, 1992 (page 25): Collection Robert and Sherrie Kinton
All the King's Horses, 1992 (page 27): Collection Robert and Sherrie Kinton
The Animation, 1992 (page 27): Collection the artist
Two Manikins, 1992 (page 28): Collection the artist
The Kiss, 1992 (page 29): Collection Robert and Sherrie Kinton
The Trespasser, 1993 (page 31): Private collection

