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# Automatism and art practice

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University of Plymouth

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**AUTOMATISM AND ART PRACTICE**

by

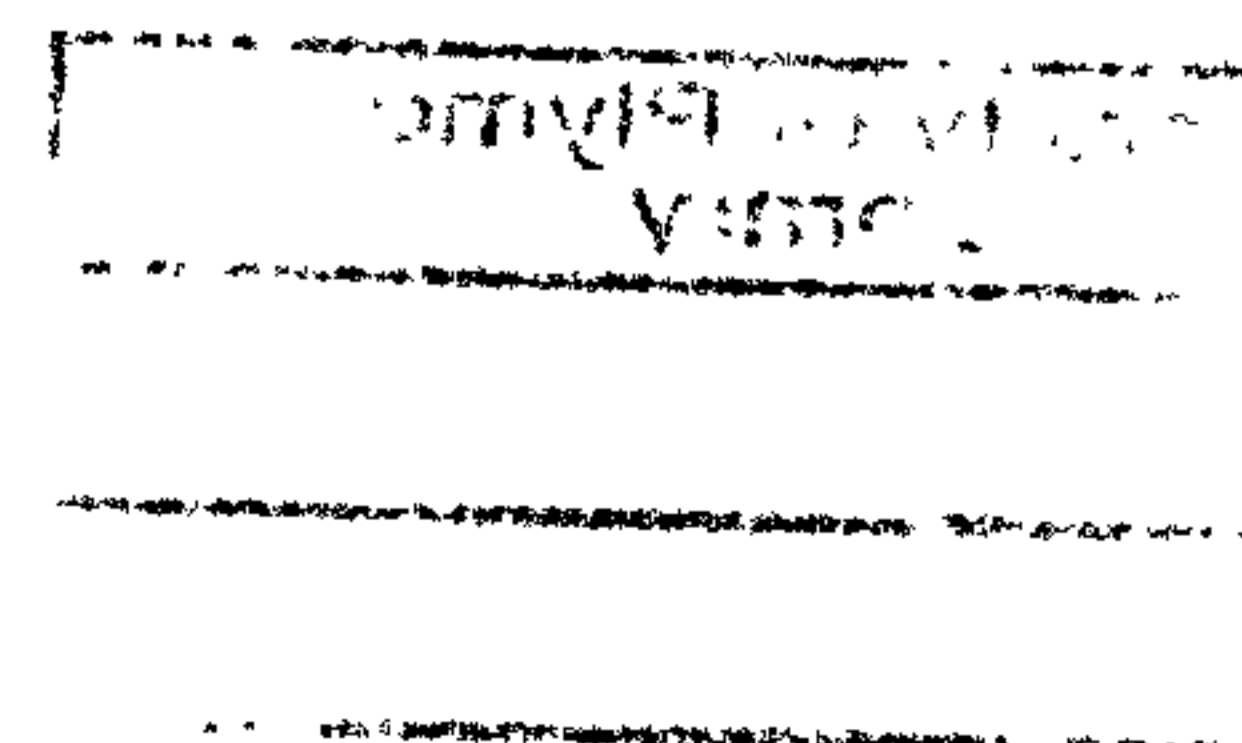
**ANNE MARTIN**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

School of Arts and Performance  
Faculty of Arts

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# **ABSTRACT**

**Anne Martin**

## **Automatism and Art Practice**

The research project is to develop an understanding of the use of automatism in the practice of art derived from an interrelationship between the material process of art and critical text. As these practices converge in their vocabularies of the psychic and the somatic, they formulate a discourse of interpretation.

The critical textual inquiry has identified an expanded language of interpretation for automatism within the vocabularies of three particular areas of investigation in, 1. Psychoanalysis, 2. Phenomenology and certain currents of thought in Existentialism, and in 3. The theory and criticism of art.

I have laid down an account of the field of research and my reading of it through six constituent writers: Freud, Ehrenzweig, Merleau-Ponty, Breton, Bataille and Rosenberg, determined from the artist-practitioner's perspective to be central contributors to an understanding of automatism. Four key terms have recurred in the material which I have identified in the research process as phenomena of automatist art practice; trauma, repetition, excess and gesture. As thinking continues in a contextualisation of art and critical theory they have provided further links to the theoretical language of current psychoanalysis and criticism by writers including: Agamben, Barthes, Foster, Krauss, Lacan and Lyotard.

The focus of the practical inquiry rests upon an exploration of the communion between the unconscious mind and the body in automatism, derived from a studio practice with emphasis on a modelling and casting process. It is developed through the four key terms used as bridges in a critical exchange between the material practice and textual theory including original automatic writing. The theorising function of the art practice has been to initiate the four phases of the process of automatism as phenomena to be re-theorised through the four key terms as they are exemplified by a reflexive studio practice of automatist methodology in action. The body of art presented for examination selects works in series completed from 1996 – 2006, in the following materials: bronze, paint, plaster, laser print and wax.

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Lastly, I should like to thank my husband David for his continuous support and to whom I wish to dedicate this thesis.



## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate committee.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included supervised information technology instruction.

Relevant art and art history and philosophy seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented; external institutions were visited for consultation purposes and several papers were prepared for publication.

Publications and presentations of creative work included: '21' Exhibition, Spacex Gallery 1999/2000. 'William Green' a DVD film, in collaboration with Roddy Maude-Roxby, 2000. 'Newman Now' Symposium, Tate Modern, webcast contribution to discussion with Mel Bochner, 2002. Written intervention to '100,000 Newspapers.' An inter-active installation by Gustav Metzger, 2003.

Presentation and Conferences Attended: 'Automatism Now', in "Intertextual Interrogations", Southwest Humanities Symposium, University of Exeter, 1999. "The Uncanniness of Freud's Compulsion to Repeat in 'The Spiral' of Italo Calvino", Regional Research Conference; 'The Complexity Debate', Dartington College of Arts, 2000.

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Signed.....*Anne Martin*.....

Date.....*21st April 2007*.....

## INTRODUCTION

Automatism has been under-explained. The aim of this inquiry is to reappraise its function in making art, through a textual study of contemporary criticism and theory, and personal studio practice which focuses on automatism with special emphasis on the direct and indirect transmission of energy in a modelling and casting process.

The research project develops an understanding of the use of automatism derived from its function within the material process in the creative practice of art and from the critical theory and discourse in the text. Thinking and feeling in the practice reflect the convergence of a mind and body relation as the psychic and the somatic become unified at a more fundamental level of subjective being.

The investigation has developed out of questions, arising from my own expanded practice, about the apparent dichotomy between the conscious and the unconscious mind. In a process of spatial evolution, from the two dimensional surface of painting into the substance of sculpture, the investigation has shown that the position of automatism has not been sufficiently explored from a material basis in art.

Within the field of research the emphases have been placed on what is important to me in my mode of knowing as artist-producer. The project was based upon the cumulative experience of practical work that I have previously undertaken, such as painting (tachism) and construction (assemblage and installation), which I have drawn on for this inquiry. The thesis position which has been formed by the nature of the practice in its transition from painting to sculpture, is that the artefactual outcome is to be regarded as 'that which has been made through the function of automatism'. Specific theoretical research into painting, whilst attached to the



University of Aix/Marseilles in 1960, included discussion with André Masson on automatism and Abstract Expressionism.

The role of practice is central to the research because the subject of the investigation is the practice of art. The desire which generates the practice also generates the necessity to reflect on practice. Because post-modern art is pluralistic (in its many different approaches) and excessive as it constantly transgresses its own parameters, it demands a reconsideration of the studio/philosophical position of automatism. A need for reassessment is under-lined by an acknowledgement (tacit or otherwise) of the psychic and somatic function of automatism which pervades the polymorphic character of the visual arts at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Automatism was initially defined in this research as the surrealist technique which sought to eliminate conscious control from the creative process. Sigmund Freud's tool of 'free association', of saying whatever comes into the mind in order to reveal unconscious conflictual forces, became an instrument of analysis which influenced André Breton in his methodology for creative practice in writing. It was a method later adapted (1924) for visual practice by members of the surrealist group he had founded such as Max Ernst and André Masson. Breton's technique of 'psychic automatism' was appropriated by abstract expressionism in order to gain access to the unconscious mind as a creative force. The significance of a use of automatism in what became known as 'action painting', lies not only in the imaginative dimension of access to the unconscious processes of the mind, but, by suspending conscious thought during the process of making, the body's own knowledge of the physical world can be experienced and expressed by artists. The primary process of the

unconscious mind can be seen as an instrument of precision for the creative scanning of undifferentiated material and also as being capable of exerting what Freud has called 'an influence of intense plastic power' on somatic processes.<sup>1</sup>

The research asks how we could speak of automatism and in what language we could do so. What are the vocabularies which will enable us to think of automatism now? Which would be the most useful and available discourses of conceptual theory and the most relevant processes in the material practice of art from which to form a current voice of interpretation for automatism? The theoretical inquiry has explored the location of a discursive textual language for automatism within the vocabularies of three particular areas of investigation.

1. Psychoanalysis.
2. Phenomenology and certain currents of thought in Existentialism.
3. The theory and criticism of art.

I have laid down a field of constituent writers whom I have perceived to be important theoretical contributors to an understanding of the function of automatism. They form the basis of my theoretical inquiry. The materials I have worked on are the following: I have taken a particular figure and considered what they have said and inquired into their major strategies as they appear relevant to automatism. Sometimes I have contrasted two people's ideas. I have written in an expository way about what they have said and done with regard to the unconscious mind and the sensing body and to automatism's relation to major movements in art. The six studies form a constituency for automatism in three areas I have found necessary to investigate by virtue of certain aspects of my practice. Within the field I include in, 1. on the unconscious mind: Sigmund Freud and Anton Ehrenzweig; in, 2. on the body and the

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund., *On Metapsychology* 'The Unconscious' (Penguin Books, London, 1991) p. 191.



senses: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and in, 3. on the theory and criticism of art: on automatism's crucial role as it is posited in two major art movements, that is in Surrealism (André Breton and the other approach of Georges Bataille) and in Abstract Expressionism (Harold Rosenberg).

What can be read as a form of conceptual tracking in the six preliminary textual studies can also be seen to have provided a number of keys or hooks with which to pull out and examine further ideas in the theoretical work of others who may not have been previously considered in this context. The writers who include, Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard, flag up a network of indicators towards new positions on automatism as thinking continues. In this speculative field of appraisal I have included some of the arguments of the new names but only where their contribution can be deduced to contribute further to an understanding of automatism in relation to key terms which have arisen in the inquiry.

These key terms, 'trauma', 'repetition', 'excess' and 'gesture', have emerged from both the action of the material practice and in the text as uncertainties within the research process. I am using those uncertainties as bridges between the concrete and the textual to move towards an integrated exposition for automatism. They are defined in the research process as phenomena which represent or exemplify psychic and somatic states or conditions through four sequential phases of the automatic process. As phenomena they are subjectively variable and therefore 'uncertain' which makes them adaptable as bridges between the textual and the practical.

## **METHOD OF INQUIRY INTO AUTOMATISM AND ART PRACTICE**

The four key terms make their appearance as they recur in my account of the six constituent writers. The experience of practice has opened up an awareness of the potential in these terms for revealing the inherent nature of an automatist process. In the contextualisation of the practice in Chapter Two, they are used as titles for sections of writing in the sequential order of the psychic and somatic phases being performed in the automatist process. The four terms are not mutually exclusive as each may contain an element of the others. I have also taken them to use as bridges between the art practice and the critical text. In the third and final chapter I narrate a journey through the studio work, where the production exemplifies the terms as they are re-interpreted through the function of automatism in the research process.

I have identified trauma, repetition, excess and gesture as phenomena that occur in the art practice. I will demonstrate through the research process how these phenomena may recur in the psychic and somatic functions of automatism in practice, as conditions and states of being. It must also be made clear that the specificity of language of practice is one which is irreducible. Because it is irreducible it is not descriptive. In this particular case, with regard to the four terms of interpretation in the material practice it is not about 'trauma' but it *is* trauma, it *is* repetition, it *is* excess and it *is* gesture. They are to be understood in the current work as component parts in sequence of four stages in the function of automatism as a methodology for the creative production of art. It is because of the irreducibility of the affective language of practice that I shall invade academic procedures to employ the additional use of small amounts of automatic writing in Chapter Two and Chapter Three for some of the text in a parallel creative process, to provide insights of an experiential kind into the material process.



## **THESIS PLAN**

The overall form of the thesis writing is of three main components: laying down a field of research, a contextualisation of practice and a description of the practical work. The components differ in length. There is a somewhat different strategy for each section.

1. The first section of the thesis, Chapter One, is the longest. It is an analysis in six parts of the ideas and strategies of the six constituent writers chosen for their contribution towards an understanding of the function of automatism in fine art practice.
2. Chapter Two, the second section is a set of writings concerning my particular conception of the automatic in practice as I see it. It demonstrates through the four terms, trauma, repetition, excess and gesture, and what my contribution to an understanding of automatism is which has not been addressed elsewhere – in writing from the perspective of a practitioner and through the production of a reflexive studio practice. In a contextualisation of the practice I have identified some new names first, of writers who add to an understanding of the four terms and then made my argument. This has included writing in a discursive style and the additional use of extracts quoted ahead from my automatist writing (which is original), in Chapter Three. The inclusion is to check the conceptual validity of the subjects by bringing the material practice further into the process of contextualisation.
3. The final section, Chapter Three, is a description of studio experiments. It refers to the previous experience of installation, followed by an account of testing the uses of a process of automatism for modelling and hot metal casting in five series of bronze and in the final clay sculptures lost and saved in another medium through transposition into

laser-printed panels. It takes the narrative form of a journey through the studio work. Although there is reference to conceptual theory innovated by the writers in the areas of psychoanalysis, phenomenology and art theory and criticism it is primarily a descriptive account of the works and their production in relation to the automatic process in action. Additional automatist writing is included, using a comparable methodology, to provide an experiential insight into the process of automatism in the production of art.



## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **A CONSTITUENCY FOR AUTOMATISM**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces six writers (in sections I - VI), whom I have perceived through practice to be important theoretical contributors to an understanding of the function of automatism. They form the basis of my textual inquiry.

The theoretical inquiry has explored the location of a discursive language for automatism within the vocabularies of three particular areas of investigation: Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology and certain currents of thought in Existentialism, and the theory and criticism of art.

The materials I have worked on are the following. I have taken a particular figure and written in an expository way about what they have said and inquired into their major strategies as they appear relevant to automatism. Sometimes I have contrasted the ideas of the constituent writers. I have considered them in order to form a constituency for 'automatism' located within the vocabularies of the three particular areas of investigation within the field of inquiry. In the case of my first writer Sigmund Freud, although the most obvious connection with automatism lies within the methodology of the technique of 'free-association' (through suspended conscious thought), a deeper level of explanation is implicit throughout the theory of Freud's psychoanalytic practice, of which I have quoted certain parts uncritically and quite extensively. It is an explanation concerned with important aspects of automatism. The psychoanalytic explanation at a deeper level is of, trauma and unconscious memory, the time of the unconscious, dynamic, conflictual or harmonising forces at work in the unconscious

mind, of the inner compulsion to repeat and the power of unconscious forces on somatic processes.

## **SECTION I: IN PSYCHOANALYSIS**

### **SIGMUND FREUD (1856 – 1939)**

Throughout human history there has been allusion to that which is concealed within the mind, as a motivating force for human behaviour. In the words of James Strachey, Freud's English translator and editor, 'Creative writers of genius had had fragmentary insight into mental processes, but no systematic method of investigation existed before Freud'. He continues, 'First and foremost, Freud was the discoverer of the first instrument for the scientific examination of the human mind.'<sup>2</sup> The discoveries of Freud's investigation have been summarised by Strachey under three headings – 'an instrument of research, the findings produced by the instrument, and the theoretical hypothesis inferred from the findings' – adding that 'all these groups were mutually interrelated'.<sup>3</sup>

A socio-cultural need to confront a latent knowledge in the world of what in the nineteenth century had not yet been termed 'the unconscious', represented a response to the repressions of an increasingly industrialised European bourgeois society.

It seems likely that even from his schooldays at the Vienna Gymnasium, Freud's earliest ideas may have been formed in part by the work of an early nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist, Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776 – 1841), who published in Konigsberg 1824 -5, 'Psychologie als Wissenschaft neu gegründet auf Erfahrung, Metaphysik und Mathematik; acknowledging that unconscious processes at work in the mind were essential to his system.

The ideas of his immediate teacher Theodor Meynert at Vienna University which Freud had

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<sup>2</sup>Strachey, James., Sigmund Freud: *A Sketch of his Life and Ideas*, First published in *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis* in Pelican Books [1962.] 1976. The Penguin Freud Library. Volume 1, 1991, p.18

<sup>3</sup> Strachey, J., 1991, p.17



entered as a medical student in 1873, were governed by those of Herbart. Meynert also much admired a Berlin psychiatrist of an earlier generation, Wilhelm Griesinger (1817-68).

After a year of two of following more general subjects including philosophy, Freud began to focus his attention first of all on biology and then on physiology. It was in the Physiological Laboratory under Ernst von Brücke that Freud began his first research. It is apparent that it was under Brücke that Freud formed the pattern of his approach to physical science in general. A belief in the validity of the law of determinism underlay all the work, derived from the school of Helmholtz, (Hermann von Helmholtz). Determinism, a doctrine of causation underlay all the work in the physical phenomena of Brücke's laboratory and later in mental phenomena. This may explain the strange confluence of disciplines in the profiling of Freud's later practice.

Freud graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1881, moving from his laboratory studies to work in Vienna General Hospital concentrating on cerebral anatomy. At the Institute of Physiology from 1877 he published on anatomy and physiology and also his research into the clinical uses of cocaine. In 1885, after being appointed a position similar to university lecturer, Freud gained a travelling bursary which enabled him to study under Jean-Martin Charcot, at the Salpêtrière (the Paris hospital for nervous diseases). The eminent neurologist, Charcot (1825-1893), was a pivotal influence on his subsequent development. Whilst carrying out his own histological studies on the brain, Freud would have been affected by Charcot's interest in hysteria and hypnotism. It should be noted at this point that there had been a publication by the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet, in 1893, entitled 'L'Automatisme psychologique' to which I will refer later as a contemporaneous approach in the field of psychology. His theory on

hysterical phenomena was elaborated by Freud and Josef Breuer. The influence of Janet was to be foundational to the future formation of the Surrealist movement in art.

Freud's gradual turning away from physical science led him towards an investigation of the mind, in the practice which he had set up in Vienna as a consultant in nervous diseases. At the same time he was becoming increasingly concerned in the treatment of neuroses. He turned from experimenting with electro-therapy to hypnotic suggestion and in 1886, in order to expand his understanding of this technique, he travelled to Nancy to study the methods of Ambroise-Auguste Liebeault and Hippolyte Bernheim. When it became apparent that these were not satisfactory he turned towards the approach of an older friend and Vienna consultant Dr Josef Breuer, who ten years before had successfully treated a patient suffering from hysteria. He persuaded Breuer to resume the practice of his former method.

The theory which lay behind the methods they used was that hysteria had been caused by a deep shock to the subject, in a forgotten event of traumatic nature. In order to uncover this event and to ameliorate its psychically damaging effect, the patient was induced to remember within a hypnotic state of consciousness. Although this approach began with promising results it was inconsistent and Freud came to rethink the underlying theory and to replace the use of hypnotic suggestion by a technique known as free-association. His divergence from Breuer in theory and application led to a break in their relationship. It was at this point in 1895 that Freud began to formulate the method for his great systematic investigation of the unconscious mind which became known as psychoanalysis.

Free-association, as an instrument of analysis, is where a systematic use of automatism began. Free-association was simply the method where patients were asked to say whatever came into



their minds. This scientifically methodological tool for the exploration of the unconscious mind led to surprising revelation and when association ceased there lay repression. It was this resistance which gave a clue to the dynamic forces at work in opposing the conscious will and became the basis of the theory of the mind as consisting of a number of forces, some of which harmonised, some of which were conflictual.

The regions of the mind that Freud first defined were: the unconscious, the pre-conscious and the conscious. Later in his life (in the 1920s), he redefined the uncoordinated instinctual strands of the mind as 'the id'; the logical and organised part as the 'ego'; and that of the critical, moralising function as the 'super-ego'.

Through long years of clinical practice and also through self-observation in the remarkable process of 'self-analysis', Freud found that the phenomena he observed in dreams were of universal occurrence. It was in order to discover ways in which to overcome and uncover the nature of resistances in the analysis of patients that Freud subjected himself to such a process. In a sustained correspondence from 1887 to 1902 with his friend Wilhelm Fliess, a Berlin physician, he described the development of his ideas. The interests of Fliess extended to human biology and the effects of periodic phenomena such as the solar calendar, in vital processes. The correspondence reflects a struggle to reinterpret the influence of revolutionary ideas about the mind into neuropathological terms which Freud later abandoned as he came to accept the validity of the concept of the 'Unconscious'. An essay of about 40,000 words which Freud sent to Fliess in 1895, named 'Project for a Scientific Psychology', whilst it struggles to maintain an account of psychology in neurological terms still represents an extraordinary account of the groundwork of the later findings of psychoanalysis.

Through his self-analysis Freud was able to develop methods, such as dream analyses, for overcoming the resistances of patients in the process of analysis through free-association. He came to understand why such resistance between the unconscious and the conscious mind should exist. Largely through the study of the interpretation of dreams, including the systematic examination of those of his own, he came to realise the very different nature of the primary and the secondary processes of thought. On one hand, the unconscious primary region of the instinctual mind, uncoordinated and driven by impulse and desire which may have once been the only existing state of an earlier primitive mind in humankind. On the other hand, the logical and ordered conscious mind which probably developed in response to danger and its avoidance by an adaptation to the reality of the outside world.

I am going to conclude the preliminary material on Freud's contribution to the function of automatism, with a note in his essay on 'The Unconscious' within the intervening period which appears to be of particular significance to somatic and gestural aspects of automatism. 'We are reserving for a different context the mention of another notable privilege of the Ucs'. He clarifies this note in a letter to Georg Groddeck (1917), writing, 'I will divulge to you what this note refers to: the assertion that the unconscious act exerts on somatic processes an influence of intense plastic power which the conscious act can never do.'

In the later stages of his work Freud constructed a Metapsychology of more general theoretical hypotheses in relation to his observation. I am now going to examine in greater detail two writings and a supplementary essay from the beginning of this final phase in order to consider in my account the material from Freud's work which appears most relevant to the terms I am considering on the subject of automatism with an emphasis in this case on 'repetition'. The first draft of the first of these writings *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was begun in March



1919. It was finished three months later at the same time as another paper on 'The Uncanny', but not published until 1920. It is in both of these works that Freud refers to repetition – to the compulsion to repeat.

In 'The Uncanny' which was published in 1919, Freud summarises 'recurrence' from the paper he wrote earlier, in the following way:

For it is possible to recognise the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children; a compulsion, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients. All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier in his paper Freud discusses the theme of the double, the *doppelganger*, in relation to the uncanny. In the discussion he uses the phrase 'and finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing', which his editor Albert Dickson remarks... 'seems to be an echo from Nietzsche (e.g. from the last part of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*) and which Dickson compares with the use of a similar phrase, put into inverted commas there, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – 'this perpetual recurrence of the same thing'.<sup>5</sup>

Freud goes on to say that,

the theme of the 'double' has been very thoroughly treated by Otto Rank (1914). He has gone into the connections which the 'double' has with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and with the fear of death; but he also lets in a flood of light on the surprising evolution of the idea. For the 'double' was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, 'an energetic denial of the power of death', as Rank says; and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 14, 1990. pp. 360 - 61. Edited by Albert Dickson. 1985.

? ikid<sup>5</sup> Penguin-Freud-Library-Volume-14, p. 356.

• ikid<sup>6</sup> Penguin-Freud-Library-Volume-14, 1990, p. 356.



Like the toy believed by a child or primitive to be capable of animism, the 'double' and the automaton (a self-moving mechanical figure) are not now to be perceived only in a sinister reverse, as the harbingers of death. The name 'automaton' of this 19c creation can conversely be used as a term to describe the involuntary movements of a living being. The latter seeming more sinister again in the uncanniness of a perceptual uncertainty about 'the dead' and 'the undead'. Freud observed that in the passing of primary narcissism (in the child's realisation of itself as separate from the mother and later understood as a realisation of the self and a mirror image) the objective faculty of being able to separate the ego from the self in this way led to critical self-observation, a censorship of the mind and the formation of the 'conscience'.

He says, being unable to explain the strength of feeling in the phenomena,

When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted – a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons. (Heine, 'Die Gotter im Exil'.)<sup>7</sup>

Freud does not think that the factor of repetition will have an uncanny feeling to the same degree for everyone but compares a certain feeling of helplessness under particular circumstances, with the dream-state. The example of this which he gives is as follows,

As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But having wandered about for a time without inquiring my way, I found myself back in the same street, where my presence was beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more only to arrive by another *detour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short time before, without any further voyages of discovery.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 14, 1990, p. 358.

<sup>8</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 14, 1990, p. 359.

He compares the feeling of helplessness to being lost in a mist, or being in a strange dark room and colliding time after time with the same piece of furniture, where the fateful and inescapable has taken over from 'chance'.

I have chosen as a means to examine the second paper *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a supplementary lecture published in 1933 because it summarises it and extends the theory of instincts. It is lecture 32. 'Anxiety and Instinctual Life', and it is the fourth in a new series of 'Introductory Lectures', that were to be a continuation of those of the earlier date (1915-17); but which were never intended to be delivered. Freud writes,

The instincts rule not only mental but also vegetative life, and these organic instincts exhibit a characteristic which deserves our deepest interest. (We shall not be able to judge until later whether it is a general characteristic of instincts.) For they reveal an effort to restore an earlier state of things. We may suppose that from the moment at which a state of things that has once been attained is upset, an instinct arises to create it afresh and brings about phenomena which we can describe as a 'compulsion to repeat'. Thus the whole of embryology is an example of the 'compulsion to repeat'.<sup>9</sup>

He continues to describe how this manifests itself in the mental field, overcoming even the pleasure principle, as relentless fate; and he asks how this self-destructiveness may be understood in terms of such instinctual conservatism.

Well, the answer is not far to seek and opens wide perspectives. If it is true that – at some immeasurably remote time and in a manner we cannot conceive – life once proceeded out of inorganic matter, then according to our presumption, an instinct must have arisen which sought to do away with life once more and to re-establish the inorganic state. If we recognise in this instinct the self-destructiveness of our hypothesis, we may regard the self-destructiveness as an expression of a 'death instinct' which cannot fail to be present in every vital process. And now the instincts that we believe in divide themselves into two groups – the erotic instincts, which seek to combine more and more living substance into ever greater unities, and the death instincts, which oppose this effort and lead what is living back into an inorganic state.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 2, 1991, p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 2. 1991, p.140.



This hypothesis is understood currently only in psychoanalytic terms because the biological theory, never proven, is now considered obsolete.

The next essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* contributes to (i) an understanding of Freud's thinking about the unconscious mind and consciousness and memory, and (ii), to an understanding of the function of automatism as a conduit between the two and why this is important for art.

Freud speculates,

Consciousness... 'may be, not the most universal attribute of mental processes, but only a particular function of them'.... 'What consciousness yields consists essentially of perceptions of excitations coming from the external world and of feelings of pleasure and unpleasure which can only arise from within the mental apparatus; it is therefore possible to assign to the system Pcpt-Cs (perceptual-conscious) a position in space. It must lie on the borderline between inside and outside; it must be turned toward the external world and must envelop other psychical systems.

Freud defines this as the outer corticle layer of the brain. He continues that,

Consciousness... is not the only distinctive character which we ascribe to the processes in that system. On the basis of impressions derived from our psychoanalytic experience, we assume that all excitatory processes that occur in the *other* systems leave permanent traces behind in them which form the foundations of memory. Such memory-traces, then, have nothing to do with the fact of becoming conscious; indeed they are often most powerful and most enduring when the process which left them behind was one which never entered consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

He continues by saying he is led to suspect, 'that becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory-trace are processes incompatible within one and the same system'. The excitation brought into consciousness left no permanent trace there because it was transmitted to the systems 'lying next within' and it was there that the trace was left. He speculates that because

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<sup>11</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 11. 1991, pp. 295 - 6.

so little is known of the origin of consciousness some consideration should be given to the proposition '*consciousness arises instead of a memory-trace*'.

Freud continues to explain this assertion, by saying that '*Protection against stimuli* is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of stimuli*'. He makes a comparison with 'feelers' which in trying to ascertain the direction and nature of external stimuli in their role as receptors 'make advances towards the external world and then move back from it'; and he will continue to explore these ideas in his paper, A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad' (1924)<sup>12</sup>.

It is at this point in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Freud re-introduces the subject of 'time' by saying that now through psychoanalytic exploration it is possible to discuss 'the Kantian theorem that time and space are 'necessary forms of thought'. We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'. He has discussed the characteristic earlier in his paper, 'The Unconscious' (1915). "The processes of the system Ucs are *timeless*, i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all. Reference to time is bound up, once again, with the work of the system Cs.

After a reference to Ewald Hering's theory, that 'two kinds of processes are constantly at work in living substances'<sup>13</sup> which Freud defines as 'the two instinctual impulses, the life instincts

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<sup>12</sup> 1925 Int. Z. Psychoanal., German Editions; 1961 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* by the Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London.

<sup>13</sup> A lecture delivered by Hering in 1870 'On Memory as a Universal Function of Organised Matter'. Trans. in 1880 by Samuel Butler and included in his publication *Unconscious Memory*.



and the death instincts?' he ends this work which was the culmination of his series of metapsychological writings by saying,

The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts. It is true that it keeps watch upon stimuli from without, which are regarded as dangers by both kinds of instincts; but it is more especially on guard against increases of stimulation from within, which would make the task of living more difficult.<sup>14</sup>

I shall conclude this chapter by briefly summarising some of the main points that have been covered in relation to the function of automatism: trauma as a shock which had bypassed the conscious mind, conflictual forces and unconscious memory, the polarity of the drives of life and death instincts, the inner compulsion to repeat and the power of unconscious forces on somatic processes. The deeper levels of Freud's psychoanalytic practice will have been understood by my next constituent the psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig but in another way. Unlike Freud he was able to recognise the potential significance that these discoveries had for the creative practise of art

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<sup>14</sup> Penguin Freud Library. Volume 11. 1991, p.338.

## **SECTION II: IN PSYCHOANALYSIS**

### **ANTON EHRENZWEIG (1908 – 1966)**

Anton Ehrenzweig was a native of Vienna who studied law, psychology and art. He settled in England in 1938 and was appointed lecturer in art education at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, where he taught until his death in 1966. It was as a fellow of the Bollingen Foundation 1956-1957 that he carried out some of the initial stages of research for his book, *The Hidden Order of Art A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*. It was published in 1967, the year after he died.<sup>15</sup>

Ehrenzweig unlike Freud concentrated on a psychology of art. His distinctive contribution to my inquiry is a psychological explanation of the necessity for a use of automatism in the practice of art. A use which can be seen to enable the creative process to withstand the trauma of unconscious conflictual forces in order to scan unconscious imagery which can be re-integrated into the material practice.

He sets out the argument of his book by saying it may be understood in principle by following any one of the many lines of thought contained within it. To give an example of this he describes the syncretistic approach of children. Although they cannot understand a great deal of a tale being told, they still profit from their incomplete understanding which may be due to the syncretistic capacity to comprehend a total structure rather than single elements.

Ehrenzweig says in the preface to his book,

All artistic structure is essentially 'polyphonic'; it evolves not in a single line of thought, but in several superimposed strands at once. Hence creativity requires a

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<sup>15</sup> Ehrenzweig Anton. *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967) 1971, University of California Press, USA.



diffuse, scattered kind of attention that contradicts our normal logical habits of thinking.<sup>16</sup>

He says of 'pictorial space',

...the plastic effects of painting...turn out to be determined by deeply unconscious perceptions. They ultimately evade all conscious control. In this way a profound conflict between conscious and unconscious (spontaneous) control comes forward.<sup>17</sup>

Firstly, in a general introduction to his thinking on the PRIMARY/SECONDARY PROCESSES Ehrenzweig describes the classically accepted concept (within psychoanalysis) of the primary process of the unconscious mind as that which forms unconscious 'phantasy'. To paraphrase him, he says that it has no structure, does not distinguish between opposites, fails to articulate space and time as we know it and that its boundaries melt into a confused mingling of forms. He writes in the late 1950s, that it is assumed within clinical study that the structure of art is exclusively shaped by the conscious, and the pre-conscious functions of the so-called secondary process. In 1958, Marion Milner in her Freud-Centenary lecture, said that 'a revision of the concept of the primary process was in the air; the problems raised by the nature of art pressed towards this revision'.<sup>18</sup>

In Ehrenzweig's own definition of the Unconscious he says,

Ordinarily, drives and phantasies are repressed and made unconscious because of their unacceptable content. Here it is maintained that images and phantasies can become unconscious because of their (undifferentiated) structure alone. This implies an expansion of the term 'unconscious'.<sup>19</sup>

Freud demonstrated the hidden meaning of dreams but as Ehrenzweig says he did not vindicate their seemingly chaotic form, that of the primary process. 'If the unconscious

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<sup>16</sup> Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, 1971, Preface, p. xii.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971. Preface, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup> Milner, Marion, 'Psycho-analysis and Art, *Psycho-analysis and Contemporary Thought*, London, Hogarth Press, 1958.

<sup>19</sup> Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, Appendix: Glossary, p. 291.

components of art, in the handwriting of marks, touches, traces, are analysed, their need to advance in a complex way can be seen to necessitate keeping contradicting options open'. He argues that, 'Creative work succeeds in co-ordinating the results of unconscious undifferentiation and conscious differentiation and so reveals the hidden order in the unconscious.'

Ehrenzweig says,

Clinical work knows little about how creative sublimation works, because it is mainly concerned with interpreting and translating the contents of unconscious phantasy. Once the unconscious conflicts are resolved, it is left to the automatic action of the ego to sublimate the revealed unconscious drives into useful creative work.<sup>20</sup>

In the following study I shall be examining aspects of Ehrenzweig's book for their potential as commentary on automatism. In particular I shall look at themes of, splitting and fragmentation; scanning and attention; and re-introjection; and his description of the 'three phases' of creativity.

In the initial (schizoid) stage of the creative process, he says that the projection of parts of the self into the work is necessary. I shall describe later how Ehrenzweig holds up clinical models in psychoanalysis to the first stage in the creative process of splitting and fragmentation.

Firstly it should be said that 'fragmentation' is also a phenomenon of nineteenth century western art. Its origins are usually linked to French Impressionism and in sculpture too the same historical phenomenon occurs in works by Auguste Rodin and Medardo Rosso. It was a time of expansive mechanisation, at the beginning of the epoch of 'hysterical expressions of repressed desire' referred to by Siegfried Giedion in his history *Mechanisation Takes*

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<sup>20</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 5.



*Command* (1948) which World war would follow. In *Automatic Woman*, Katharine Conley says, 'Modern technology and the notion of trauma came of age together and are intimately linked, leading to a more mechanistic view of the body and to an understanding of the human subject as particularly vulnerable to shocks.'<sup>21</sup> Fragmentation may be understood as part of an enormous shift in consciousness, against the background of an accelerating industrial revolution, which Walter Benjamin has described in other words, as a fundamental readjustment between the very new and the very old in Western culture. Ehrenzweig refers to the impressionist painter Claude Monet as perhaps the greatest protagonist of the oscillating picture plane and of how in his late works he can be seen as a precursor of modern sensibilities. Kandinsky was so dazzled by the brush marks even in his earlier *Haystacks* that he could not identify the subject. Monet's veils of space anticipate the post-cubist spatial strands of Pollock's large canvases.

Ehrenzweig describes the optical painting of artists such as Bridget Riley as attacking the gestalt principle of overall form (which exceeds the sum of its parts) 'in quite explicit, almost scientific terms. Its dazzle makes it impossible to focus on any single element'. Bruce Nauman and artists like him continue this disruption through time and sound in a 'creative shift towards dedifferentiation (decomposition) as aggressive fragmentation'.

He continues by comparing a study of art's unconscious substructure and the scanning processes in science in order to observe the creative techniques of the ego that can make use of the dispersed structure of the unconscious perception. He concludes, by saying,

The chaos of the unconscious is as deceptive as the chaos of outer reality...he (the scientist) will make a constructive use of his unconscious faculties and achieve the integration of his own ego. In creativity, outer and inner reality will always be

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<sup>21</sup> Katherine Conley acknowledges being directed to this conclusion by a seminar on psychoanalysis given by Diana Fuss at the 1995 School of Criticism and Theory.

organised together by the same indivisible process. The artist too has to face chaos in his work before unconscious scanning brings about the integration of his work as well as of his own personality.<sup>22</sup>

The important distinction here is not that the primary process (the unconscious) brings chaotic material to the ego to sort out but that the primary process itself 'is a precision instrument for creating scanning that is far superior to discursive reason and logic.'

Ehrenzweig discusses the different kinds of attention used by artists, both visual and audial in what he calls 'the "full" emptiness of attention'. He describes how,

The trained musician allows his attention to oscillate freely between focused and unfocused (empty) states, now focusing precisely on the solid vertical sound of chords, now emptying his attention so that he can comprehend the loose, transparent web of polyphonic voices in their entirety.<sup>23</sup>

He cites Paul Klee describing the same unconscious phenomena as 'multi-dimensional vision'.

The pulsating rhythm of repetition in 'serial' art, of one thing after another in a materials/process interaction, can be compared with strategies in modern musical composition.

Ehrenzweig says that,

The artist submits to the seemingly alien rules of number and geometry. Serialisation in music, too, seems to explore an external discipline of numbers. In all these cases the seeming unrelatedness of the objective – mathematical or physical – factors to any preconceived form, will set into motion unconscious scanning which can deal more effectively with such complex and unpredictable factors. This explains the paradox why Boulez has been able to write his most moving music when all he has seemed to be doing is to carry out mechanical serialisations, according to a complex mathematical chart. When he relented in this uncompromising acceptance of alienation, his work lost some of its emotional strength.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 143.



‘John Cage...systematised the arbitrary itself by devising structures according to deliberate chance methods for ordering relationships.’<sup>25</sup>

Dedifferentiation removes boundaries, as entropy it can be understood as the death wish or instinct. Ehrenzweig says,

I have proposed to attribute the ego’s innate propensity towards dedifferentiation to the death instinct, because it fits some of these aspects. It represents a temporary decomposition of the ego, at least in its deepest levels; it tends to weaken object relationships and favours narcissistic withdrawal; most significantly, as a structural principle dedifferentiation is tautological with Freud’s concept of the death instinct. Dedifferentiation (entropy) is part of life’s tendency to return to the inorganic state.<sup>26</sup>

The Minimalist sculptor Robert Morris says,

The linguist de Saussure sees language operating primarily according to oppositions and polarities, which he ascribes to mental activity itself...

...What resolves the duality as a tendency in behaviour at many levels is, for de Saussure as well as Ehrenzweig and others, the alternating passage between the two poles. Ehrenzweig reduces the oppositions to the basic conflict between the life and death urges or the Eros-Thanatos duality. Discontent with Freud’s admission in the late writings of not being able to distinguish between the two. Ehrenzweig reasserts their opposition but sees a constantly alternating swing between the two. ‘The act of expulsion (dedifferentiation) in the service of Thanatos is linked with containment (re-differentiation) in the service of Eros.’<sup>27</sup>

Ehrenzweig later discusses the way in which it is difficult to distinguish the initial fragmentation of modern art from the final manic self-scattering (dedifferentiation) which contains the seed of integration. In the initial stages of creative work, the projection, Ehrenzweig says, ‘it can be seen that “accidents” that crop up during work could well be the expression of parts of the artist’s personality that have become split off and disassociated from the rest of the self.’<sup>28</sup> In saying that fragmentation is a necessary part of the process he also

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<sup>25</sup> Morris, R., *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 296.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, 1995, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 102.



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The superego's scattering attacks drive the ego inexorably towards an extreme oceanic depth until the process of dedifferentiation even suspends the distinction between ego and superego...the superego's anal aggression is spent and the ego prepares for its manic rebound and rebirth.<sup>31</sup>

He continues his explanation, saying,

This dedifferentiation is not merely a 'controlled regression' (E. Kris) to more primitive forms of ego functioning. The point is precisely that the artist transforms passive primitive undifferentiation into an active faculty for moulding images of extreme dedifferentiation never achieved before.<sup>32</sup>

In this case as I have indicated, the processes and their terms in the stages of creativity which Ehrenzweig has described are not hard to relate to phases in the material practice. These processes and terms have also served to inform the key terms formalised in writing which describe the function of automatism. In my next section I shall be looking at a very different approach to the subject of automatism; that is an approach through phenomenology, but one where it is still possible to draw parallels with Ehrenzweig's thought on this subject.

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<sup>31</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 212.

<sup>32</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 205.



## **SECTION III: IN PHENOMENOLOGY AND CERTAIN CURRENTS OF THOUGHT IN EXISTENTIALISM**

### **MAURICE MERLEAU- PONTY (1908 – 1961)**

#### **General Introduction**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a philosopher whose main form of expression was in the academic-philosophical text. He was also politically influential and Sartre acknowledged him as a formative influence in this respect, notably during his period as political editor of 'Les Temps Modernes'. He played a vital part in the philosophical development of existentialism. Like other French intellectuals of his time, Sartre for one, Merleau-Ponty was himself influenced by a German phenomenological approach derived from Edmund Husserl (1859-1938).

In 1942 Merleau-Ponty published 'The Structure of Behaviour', a book he had completed in 1938, which was concerned with the philosophy of psychology, particularly in relation to Pavlov's theory of conditioning in reflex theory and to Gestalt psychology. It was after 1938 that he discovered the work of Husserl.

His seminal work 'Phenomenology of Perception' published in 1945, referred throughout to modern painting, especially to that of Paul Cezanne. At the end of the same year, in December, he published the essay 'Cezanne's Doubt'. It was the first of the three essays that he wrote on visual art which spanned the further development of his philosophical thought.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty can be seen as an important transitional figure on the path from phenomenology to early structuralism, from a modern to a post modern philosophy of art. Through his phenomenological approach he stands at a crossroads between philosophy and

science, and also between art and religion. His writing was of particular significance to visual artists, both in their increasing use of bodily and gestural means of expression in making art and in their diverse experimentation with materials.

I have laid out Merleau-Ponty's contribution to my constituency for automatism by grouping his material around a number of topics which I have 'head-lined' on the following pages. His thinking influenced by Husserl is in the first section followed by a distinctive account of 'the body'. The third and fourth sections cover 'art' and 'the three essays' which also includes the important final topic of chiasma.

### Ideas/Phenomenology moved against Mind/Body Dualism

The starting point of Husserl's profound influence on Merleau-Ponty was to be the phenomenological reduction of epoch, or bracketing. That is the disconnection from the given – of all previous knowledge about the world, theoretical or scientific, in order to gain access to the immanence, or the essence of the consciousness, of 'lived experience'.

John Lechte<sup>33</sup> quotes Husserl:

We fix our eyes steadily upon the sphere of Consciousness and study what it is that we find immanent in it.... *Consciousness in itself has a being of its own which in its absolute uniqueness of nature remains unaffected by the phenomenological disconnexion.*<sup>34</sup>

The study of the essence of things in consciousness opens up the field of science of phenomenology.

In his preface to 'Phenomenology of Perception' Merleau-Ponty says,

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<sup>33</sup> *Fifty key contemporary thinkers: from structuralism to post modernity*, Routledge, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Husserl, 'Ideas' *Ideas A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce-Gibson, New York, Collier Books, 1962, p.102 Husserl's emphasis.



The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears... The philosopher tries to conceive the world, others and himself and their interrelations...and establish it, by an act of initiative which has no guarantee in being, its justification resting entirely on the effective power which it confers on us of taking our own history upon ourselves. The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being.

The phenomenological world is an enactment of being.

We take our fate in our hands, we become responsible for our history through reflection, but equally by a decision on which we stake our life, and in both cases what is involved is a violent act which is validated by being performed. Phenomenology, as a disclosure of the world, rests on itself, or rather provides its own foundation.

Merleau-Ponty's stated purpose was 'to understand the relations between consciousness and nature: the organic, psychological or even social'. He found the key to these relationships in perception and his aim was to describe how perception works. Frances Morris writes that Merleau-Ponty's view of human existence stressed the preconscious origin of man's conscious activity. He rejected a mind/matter dualism and argued that man's physical body is the basis of his perception, for 'things in the world are given to me with part of my body, in a living connection, comparable or rather identical with that which exists between the various parts of my body.'<sup>35</sup>

Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty tried to overcome the mind/body dichotomy of the opposition of Rationalism and Empiricism and the way he sought to do so philosophically was through the study of perception.

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<sup>35</sup> Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-55. Frances Morris. Tate Gallery, 1993.



## The Body

In opposing the Cartesian cogito of 'I think, therefore I am', Merleau-Ponty says that 'to be a body is to be tied to a certain world' and 'our body is not primarily *in* space: it is of it'<sup>36</sup> and that, 'the perceiving mind is an incarnated mind'.<sup>37</sup>

In the earlier years of his development in 1935 Merleau-Ponty had reviewed a book by Gabriel Marcel, called 'Being and Having' which may also be thought to have had considerable influence on 'Phenomenology of Perception'. He summarised Marcel, in writing,

My body does not appear to me as an object, a set of qualities and characteristics to be linked up with one another and thus understood. My relation to it is not that of the 'cognito' to the 'cogitatum', the 'epistemological subject' to the object. I and it form a common cause, and in a sense I am my body.<sup>38</sup>

## Art: Part I

Francis Morris writes of Merleau-Ponty in a catalogue for the exhibition Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism

He believed that it was above all in the arts – in literature, music and painting – that the meanings and truths bound up with physical reality and experienced only through the senses could be unveiled.<sup>39</sup>

It may be of interest to compare his understanding of relations in a human world of ambiguity and contingency (as Francis Morris describes it) with Samuel Beckett's description of modern painting as in 'pursuit less of the thing than of its thingness, less of the object than of its condition of being object'<sup>40</sup>. In 'Three Dialogues' Beckett cites three painters, Pierre Tal-

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<sup>36</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London, Routledge, reprinted 1992, p.148 Merleau-Ponty's emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'An unpublished text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A prospectus of his work', trans. Aleen B. Dallery in James M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964. Eighth paperback printing, 1989, pp. 3-11.

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty: Texts and Dialogues, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and J. Barry [Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1990], p. 102.

<sup>39</sup> Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-55. Francis Morris. Tate Gallery, 1993.

Coat, André Masson and Bram van Velde as exemplars of the ways open to painting, two, in their adjustment to the term 'relation', the third Van Velde in a refusal of 'relation'.<sup>41</sup>

Beckett sees the third dialogue where there is no relation as an impossibility, it is where only the obligation to continue remains. It is that impossibility and the necessity of continuing which express the truth of modernity.<sup>42</sup> As the art historian Sarah Wilson has suggested there might at least be resonance here with Jean Fautrier's 'Otages', or with the last graffiti of the condemned on Fresnes' prison walls which she describes and Jean Dubuffet's *Les Murs*, a series of paintings of walls and lithographs made with ink on lithographic stone, images on stone coloured gravel and tarmacadam surfaces. The complex 'starting from scratch' of post-war European art.<sup>43</sup>

The footnote 2, p.49, in Paris Post War Art. III. Cezanne's Doubt: Painters of Failure. Catalogue p.30. 'Pierre Tal-Coat', exh. cat., Grand Palais (1976), refers to other sources as a probable impetus for Merleau-Ponty:

Tal-Coat lived in Cezanne's Chateau Noir during the war and returned to Aix in 1946-7. The combination of Cezannism and *Japonisme* of this new 'School of Aix' was enhanced by the presence of André Masson (in his 'orientalist' mode) and Georges Duthuit who had published *Mystique chinoise et peinture moderne*, Paris 1936, three years before Cezanne's centenary celebrations in 1939.

### Art Part II: The Three Essays (including Chiasmus)

A whole history of the development of his philosophical thought may be seen in the three essays Merleau-Ponty wrote on painting which spanned his work.

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<sup>40</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Painters of the Obstacle*, an essay published a month before *Three Dialogues*

<sup>41</sup> Beckett, S. *Three Dialogues* in *Disjecta*, London, 1983, p. 144.

<sup>42</sup> Caygill, Howard., in 'Thinking Art', ICA 1999, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Paris Post War: In Search of the Absolute. I. Wilson, Sarah p.26.



In 'Cezanne's Doubt' (1945), from the phenomenological influence of Husserl through to the structuralism of 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' (1952), overtly in contention with André Malraux but mainly addressing Sartre; and then to the ontology of 'Eye and Mind' (1961), in an implied dialogue with Martin Heidegger.<sup>44</sup>

In 'Cezanne's Doubt' (1945), Merleau-Ponty says of 'the lived perspective',

In giving up the outline Cezanne was abandoning himself to the chaos of sensation, which would upset the objects and constantly suggest illusions, as for example, the illusion we have when we move our heads that objects themselves are moving.<sup>45</sup>

He quotes Cezanne, saying, 'The landscape thinks itself in me', 'and I am its consciousness'.

Merleau-Ponty discusses Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* in relation to Cezanne and his identification with the fictional painter *Frenhofer*, who wants to express life through the use of colour alone. He continues this essay by saying:

The artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout.... The meaning of what the artist is going to say *does not exist* anywhere – not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason... toward a reason which would embrace its own origins.<sup>46</sup>

Colour as pigment became an essential expression of the fusion of self and the world, 'for pigment is both a bit of nature and a visual sensation, therefore the element of construction that could bind object and sensation'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Preface to *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill, 1993.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, Galen A., (ed.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 1993, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, Galen A., (ed.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 1993, p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, 1993, p. 12.



By privileging the lived-qualities of the world through sensation; sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, Merleau-Ponty sought to rediscover the primordial experience of the world we are born into in the fecundity of depth – as the ‘most existential dimension’ that of primordial space.

The theme of Merleau-Ponty’s second essay, ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’ (1952) is one of a critique of art institutions and of further work on, ‘a general theory of expression that would elaborate a philosophy of art and language which could be extended into a general philosophy of history and culture.’<sup>48</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the embodied or contextualised nature of artistic expression is echoed when he writes, ‘We shall see that the idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive – that it is if you wish, silence.’ This almost archaeological approach is repeated as the idea of *advent* in the original institution of the task of painting on the walls of Lascaux.

Despite the diversity of its parts, which makes it fragile and vulnerable, the body is capable of gathering itself into a gesture which for a time dominates its dispersion and puts its stamp upon everything it does. In the same way, we may speak of a unity of human style which transcends spatial and temporal distances to bring the gestures of all painters together in one sole expressive effort, and their works in a single cumulative history – a single art.<sup>49</sup>

‘... from now on something cannot fail to happen’, to paraphrase him, in the present of the future.

‘Eye and Mind’ (1961), the final essay, seeks the ‘originary’ in both art and in culture in general. In a lecture given in Geneva ten years earlier, diverging from the phenomenological

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<sup>48</sup> See Galen A. Johnson’s essay on ‘Structures and Painting’, p. 22. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, 1993, p. 105.

approaches of Husserl and Sartre who objected to the notion in not dissimilar ways, Merleau-Ponty drew attention to what he described as one of the most significant discoveries of the twentieth century, the 'unconscious', 'that osmosis between the body's anonymous life and the person's official life which is Freud's great discovery'. He gave increasing weight to the role of the 'unconscious' in the elaboration of the perceived object in the last years of his life. He defended the notion from Sartre's objection that it was 'ambiguous perception'.

### Chiasma

A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident befalls the body, undoing what no accident would have sufficed to do.<sup>50</sup>

He led up to the preceding paragraph by an accumulative emphasis on,

This extraordinary overlapping to which we never give thought.... Immersed in the visible by his body itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens onto the world.... My movement is not a decision made by the mind, an absolute doing which would decree, from the depths of a subjective retreat, some change of place miraculously executed in extended space. It is the natural sequel to, and maturation of vision. I say of a thing that it is moved; but my body moves itself; my movement is self-moved. It is not ignorance of self, blind to itself; it radiates from a self....

The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking.<sup>51</sup>

He preceded this with, 'that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.... The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being.'

He continues, quoting Cezanne, 'Nature is on the inside'.

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson, 1993, p. 125.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 'Eye and Mind', p. 24.



After discussing the Cartesian situation of making vision into a thought, of it. Merleau-Ponty concludes,

And then there is the vision that actually occurs, an honorary or established thought, collapsed into a body – its own body, of which we can have no idea except in the exercise of it, and which introduces, between space and thought, the autonomous order of the composite of soul and body. The enigma of vision is not done away with; it is shifted from the *thought of seeing* to *vision in act*.<sup>52</sup>

‘The painter – any painter, *while he is painting*, practices a... theory of vision.’ The ‘chiasma’ is the locus of reversibility for which the human body is an archetype. ‘Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted in its flesh...’. He refers to paintings and drawings as ‘the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside... for the imaginary is much nearer to, and much farther away from the actual – nearer because it is in my body as a diagram of the life of the actual, with all its pulp and carnal obverse exposed to view for the first time.’<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

It was this dynamic of ‘reversibility’ in itself which had become the subject of the painting described by another constituent, Harold Rosenberg as ‘action painting’. Merleau-Ponty’s importance within my constituency for ‘automatism’ lies not only in his emphasis on the phenomenological reduction called ‘bracketing’ but also on the significance to him of the body as a conduit of meaning and of the role of gesture in vision. He describes what might be a model for automatism, ‘My movement is not a decision made by the mind... my body moves itself; my movement is self moved’ as ‘the autonomous order of the composite of soul and body’.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> My italics. Johnson. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* ‘Eye and Mind’ p. 136.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, 1993, p. 126.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, 1993, p. 124.



My constituency for automatism will continue through the poet André Breton, in the third area of investigation, *The Theory and Criticism of Art*.

## SECTION IV: IN THE THEORY AND CRITICISM OF ART

### ANDRE BRETON (1896 – 1966)

A founder of the Surrealist Movement André Breton has provided the first major site for automatism within the practice of art. Born of a petit-bourgeois family in Tinchebray, department of Orne, France, he appears from his own earliest accounts to have been deeply affected by and responsive to physical phenomena of the natural world. It is in Breton's book *Arcane 77* first published in New York in 1945, that he follows the passionate account of an almost visionary, political awakening at a popular demonstration before the First War, where he saw the red flag unfurled, low in the sky, in its thousands, by saying that some of these flags were held,

in an inexorable attitude of sedition and defiance...this last attitude especially – of which there is no lack in the history of the intellect of illustrious respondents, whether named Pascal, Nietzsche, Strindberg or Rimbaud – has always seemed to me absolutely justifiable on the emotive plane, leaving out of account the purely utilitarian reasons for which society may repress such an attitude. ...I shall never forget the exaltation and pride which overcame me when as a child I was taken for one of the times into a cemetery, at the discovery – among so many depressing or ridiculous funeral monuments – of a slab of granite engraved in red capitals with the superb device! *Neither God Nor Master*. Poetry and art will always retain a preference for all which transfigures man (*sic*) in this desperate, irreducible demand which, now and then, he (*sic*) takes the derisory chance to make on life.

### Breton's contacts/influences, and his medical studies important to 'automatism'

André Breton began pre-medical studies at the age of seventeen, but also revealed a more personal inclination by publishing three of his poems a year later in 1914, at which time he met Paul Valéry. In 1915, the war having started, he was at first conscripted into the artillery but shortly afterwards transferred to the neuropsychiatric clinics for the shell-shocked as a medical auxiliary. Breton assisted Raoul Leroy (who had himself assisted the neurologist Charcot) at the neuro-psychiatric clinic of the second army at Saint Dizier in 1916. The following year he interned under Joseph Babinski (another student of Charcot) at the

neurological centre at La Pietie and later in 1917 he worked as a medical auxiliary at Val-de-Grace where he met Louis Aragon. The other young auxiliary, also a poet, was to become his collaborator and co-founder of the surrealist movement. It should be noted at this point that there had been a publication by the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet, in 1893, entitled 'L'Automatisme psychologique' a contemporaneous approach in the field of psychology. His theory on hysterical phenomena was elaborated by Freud and Breuer. The influence of Janet was to be foundational to the future formation of the Surrealist movement in art. Pierre Janet's theories on hysterical phenomena published in 1893 used for the first time the term 'Psychic Automatism'. It was in this year that the death occurred of the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. He, with Janet, had dominated the French School of Psychiatry which was predicated on the theme of hysteria and its treatment by hypnosis.

Here the reception of proto-psychoanalysis by the young medical students who were to become the surrealists can be seen to be in the first instance within a Janetian context of French psychiatric discipline. Breton also at this time met a soldier, the anarchic Jacques Vache (1896-1919), a patient in the military hospital at Nantes. He was an iconoclast and the theorist of black humour, 'umour'.

Later in a significantly descriptive lecture given in Brussels in 1934, called 'What is Surrealism?'<sup>55</sup> Breton said, 'Dada...whose germinating force has nevertheless been decisive and, by the general consent of present-day critics, has greatly influenced the course of ideas'. He continues by apportioning the greatest share of the ideas of the earlier more nihilistic movement (1915-1920); to Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Jacques Vache and Tristan Tzara, through their painting, criticism, letters, poems and manifestos. After referring to

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<sup>55</sup> *What Is Surrealism?* issued as a pamphlet in 1934, a slightly abridged English translation with other writings by Breton was published by Faber & Faber (London 1936).



'surrealism' as 'a word fallen from the lips of Apollinaire'<sup>56</sup> Breton describes a vivid experience received in a half wakeful state where a sentence clearly articulated came into his mind, he remembers it as, 'A man is cut in half by the window'. It was accompanied by the visual image of a man walking but split at waist height by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body. Following the idea of how he might use the material for poetic construction, he reflects how the image gave way to a succession of intermittent sentences, leaving him in a state which was astonished but detached. Breton continued by saying,

Preoccupied as I still was with Freud<sup>57</sup>, and familiar with his methods of investigation, which I had practised, occasionally on the sick during the war, I resolved to obtain for myself what one seeks to obtain from patients, namely a monologue poured out as rapidly as possible, over which the subject's critical faculty has no control – the subject himself throwing reticence to the winds – and which as much as possible represents *spoken thought*.

Les Champs Magnetiques (The Magnetic Fields) was the publication with which Breton and his co-author, the poet Philippe Soupault, launched surrealism in 1919.

#### The explicit introduction by Breton of automatism by name

In *The Automatic Message* (1933) Breton refers to a growing curiosity on the part of young writers and artists concerning various manifestations of automatic thought, confirming their close affiliation with Lautreamont and Rimbaud, and testifying to the need for such a sensibility in the first part of the twentieth century. He continues by saying,

In a quite different way, as is known, some of us trace to Charcot – at the very beginning of the magnificent and protracted debate on hysteria instituted by his teachings, dogmatic as they were – the responsibility for a considerable measure of the research in which we are engaged. (Dr von Shrenck-Notzing holds the honour of having insisted on the 'artistic value of the movements of expression in hysteria and hypnosis' at the first International Congress of Psychology, Paris 1889.)

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<sup>56</sup> From 1915-1918 Breton corresponded with Guillaume Apollinaire, considered the greatest French poet of his time and leader of the Parisian avant-garde at the time preceding the First World War.

<sup>57</sup> Breton could not read Freud in translation until 1922.

Breton also says,

We must make a precise distinction between 'automatic writing and drawing' as the word is understood in surrealism, and the automatic writing and drawing currently practised by mediums.<sup>58</sup> That is in the difference which lies between a 'charged' reconciliation of opposites and the 'other' directed, trance-like state.<sup>59</sup>

Breton refers to the difference which lies between a 'charged' reconciliation of opposites (as between the conscious and the unconscious mind) and a different, 'other' directed trance-like state. That is a state which would have been imposed on the subject by an outside agency such as the hypnotist or the medium.

### The question of authorship in automatic/surrealist practice

In the surrealist publication (1919) *Les Champs Magnetiques* the non-attribution of authorship to sections by either poet in the series of rapidly composed texts exemplified an ideal they wished to project, that poetry should be created by all (collectively or in partnership) and not by one alone.

In the introduction to *On Magic Art* (1957) published as an essay in 'Le Surrealisme, meme' (No.2) Breton writes,

The conception of a work of art as an objectification, on the material plane, of a dynamism of the same nature as that which presided over the creation of the world, is particularly emphasised among the Gnostics.... All the will of the artist is powerless to reduce the opposition which nature's unknown ends set against his own aims. The feeling of being set in motion, not to say being *played* with, by forces which exceed ours will not in poetry and in art, cease to become more acute or overwhelming: 'It is false to say: I think. One ought to say: I am thought.' (Rimbaud). Since then, ample room has been given to the question: '*What we create – is it ours?*'

The intention is made clearer in Breton's further definition and the critic Peter Burgher's following indication. It was from his experience of writing and the reception to his reading of

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<sup>58</sup> Flourney, Theodore., *Des Indes a la Planete Mars* (From India to the Planet Mars), an account by her mentor of the mediumistic experience of Helene Smith. Trans. Daniel B. Vermilye. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900,

<sup>59</sup> *The Automatic Message*, A.Breton. 1933

this earlier text, that, in the 'First Manifesto of Surrealism' in 1924, Breton redefined Apollinaire's word 'surrealism' as 'pure psychic automatism by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other means, the true functioning of thought'. It has been pointed out by the critic Peter Burger, that 'Given the avant-gardiste intention to do away with art as a sphere that is separate from the praxis of life, it is logical to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient.... The automatic texts also should be read as guides to individual production'. This statement has been identified by Katharine Conley in her book, *Automatic Woman*<sup>60</sup> as an argument that here for the first time the avant-garde movement had opened a potential door to women as participants who could produce their own text. The proto-surrealist group who experimented with automatic writing included: Aragon, Breton, Creval, Desnos, Eluard, Max Ernst, Peret and Picabia. Their aim was to overcome the polarity, to unite their own (masculine) conscious and (feminine) unconscious mind (as they saw it), the logical, objective self with the irrational, subjective, in order to generate one original faculty, as of eidetic (autonomous) imagery. They metaphorised woman's body as 'muse' or as the medium between the conscious and the unconscious mental processes of thought. Katharine Conley says it was in the linguistically determined self of the automatic text that women surrealists after 1930, or some of them 'like Carrington, Zorn and Mansour', would reject the linguistic, intellectual 'purity' of the male surrealists for a version of surrealism that acknowledges the body's role in the process of exploring the unconscious as a creative resource'.<sup>61</sup>

### The role of the body

The body's role is an important issue for automatism which is being raised here for the first time in the context of art making. The note in Freud's essay on 'The Unconscious' that I have

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<sup>60</sup> Conley, Katherine., *Automatic Woman*. University of Nebraska Press, 1996. p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Conley, 1996, p. 9.



quoted on page 22, is of particular significance for the psychic and the somatic functions of automatism in art practice... 'the assertion that the unconscious act exerts on somatic processes an influence of intense plastic power which the conscious act can never do.'

Breton explains that surrealism expresses the contrary of a transcendental attitude, 'a desire to deepen the foundations of the real; to bring about an even clearer and at the same time ever more passionate consciousness of the world perceived by the senses' ... 'and to assure ourselves that the results of these investigations would be capable of facing the *breath of the street*' ... 'the purely *intuitive* epoch of surrealism (1919-25) – at the limits, I say, we have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, of finally becoming *one*.'

He refers to what he has said about there being two epochs of surrealism, the second being a reasoning epoch, both of them running from 1919 until the present day, that is to say 1934. One important change which he wishes to make at this stage is in the dictionary definition of surrealism, based on the Manifesto of 1924, the view that *thought is supreme over matter*. This suggests that Breton had deceived himself previously in advocating use of an automatic thought removed from all control exercised by reason and disengaged from '*all aesthetic or moral considerations*'. He should have said all *conscious* aesthetic or moral considerations.

Breton emphasises that the first Manifesto of 1924 summed up conclusion drawn from,

the *heroic epoch* of surrealism, which stretches from 1919 to 1923. The concerted elaboration of the first automatic texts and our excited reading of them, the first results obtained by Max Ernst in the domain of *collage* and of painting, the practice of surrealist 'speaking' during the hypnotic experiments introduced among us by Rene Crevel and repeated every evening for over a year, incontrovertibly mark the decisive stages of surrealist exploration during this first phase.

### Political and literary influences on surrealism

It is my intention at this stage to return to those political and literary socio-cultural forces of the nineteenth century, to which the germination of surrealism may be attributed. The enormous influence of Isidore Ducasse, better known by the name of Comte de Lautreamont was acknowledged by Breton in his lecture 'What is Surrealism?' (1934). The locus of this

revolutionary and poetically rich epoch was the war of 1870, its coming and its aftermath.

Breton says,

Other and analogous cataclysms could not have failed to rise out of that military and social cataclysm whose final episode was to be the atrocious crushing of the Paris Commune, the last in date (the 1914-1918 war) caught many of us at the very age when Lautreamont<sup>62</sup> and Rimbaud found themselves thrown into the preceding one, and by way of revenge has had as its consequence – and this is the new and important fact – the triumph of the Bolshevik revolution.... ('Poetry must be made by all, not by one'), the field was not to our minds, open to anything but a revolution truly extended into all domains, improbably radical, to the highest degree impractical, and tragically destroying within itself the whole feeling that it brought with it both of desirability and of absurdity.

'This', he continues to say, 'cannot be dismissed as youthful exaltation, or in the general savagery of the time'.

I must, however, insist on this attitude of ours, common to particular men and manifesting itself at periods nearly half a century distant from each other. I should affirm that in ignorance of this attitude one could form no idea of what surrealism really stands for. This attitude alone can account, and quite adequately, for all the excesses which may be attributed to us but which cannot be deplored unless one gratuitously supposes that we could have started from any other point.

...*liberation of the mind*, the express aim of surrealism, demands as a primary condition, in the opinion of the surrealists, the *liberation of man*. Foster points out the resonance not only between Lautreamont, Rimbaud and surrealism, but between the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune on one hand and the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution on the other. He says that paradoxically this resonance 'charged with distant meaning' as it is, is what turns these two moments into revolutionary shock. The 'slit in time,' filled with 'the time of the now, [Jetztzeit]'<sup>63</sup>. Walter Benjamin writes further on a constructive principle in materialistic historiography, saying, 'where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.'<sup>64</sup> Breton's 'slit in time' defined in his foreword to Ernst's collage-novel *La Femme 100 Tetes* (1929)

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<sup>62</sup> Lautreamont was to die four months after the war had started, aged 24.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, Walter., Theses on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations* Fontana, 1973, p.255.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, W., Theses on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations*, 1973, p.254.



Foster says is close to, but not so dialectical as, the Benjaminian definition of the dialectical image: 'It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past; rather, an image is that in which the past and the now flash into a constellation. In other words image is dialectic at a standstill.'<sup>65</sup>

A text by Breton, 'Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism in the Plastic Arts'<sup>66</sup> first appeared in English translation in Peggy Guggenheim's 'Art of This Century' (New York, 1942); it is reprinted in *Surrealism and Painting* (translated by Simon Watson Taylor), New York, Harper and Row, 1972.

From the very beginning of the surrealist movement André Masson has been engaged in the same struggle as Max Ernst.... At the very outset of his research Masson came upon *automatism*.... Not content to trace the mere shape of objects, this hand, enamoured of its own movement and of that alone, described spontaneous figures within which, as experience was to show, these shapes were destined to be embodied. Indeed, the chief discovery of surrealism is that, without any preconceived intention, the pen that flows in writing and the pencil that runs in drawing *spin* an infinitely precious substance which, though perhaps not all convertible, none the less appears charged with all the emotional ardour stored up within the poet and painter at a given moment.... The surrealism in a work is in direct proportion to the efforts the artist has made to embrace the whole psycho-physical field, of which consciousness is only a small fraction. In these *unfathomable* depths there prevails, according to Freud, a total absence of contradiction, a release from the emotional fetters caused by repression, a lack of temporality and the substitution of external reality by psychic reality obedient to the pleasure principle and no other. Automatism leads us straight to these regions.

I have chosen two visual artists, Max Ernst and André Masson, as models of surrealist thought although reflection on painting was not of prime importance to the early stages of the movement. Pierre Naville was to review it thus:

I have no tastes except distaste. Masters, master crooks, smear your canvases. Everyone knows there is no *surrealist painting*. Neither the marks of a pencil abandoned to the accident of gesture, nor the image retracing the forms of the dream, nor imaginative fantasies, of course can be described.

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<sup>65</sup> Breton, A., [Theoretics of Knowledge] in Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p. 280. Note 38.

<sup>66</sup> Rosemont, Franklin., ed. Described in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, New York, 1972. p. 217.



But there are *spectacles*... The cinema, not because it is life, but the marvellous, the grouping of chance elements. The street, kiosks, automobiles, screeching doors, lamps bursting the sky. Photographs...<sup>67</sup>

Hal Foster argues that in order to construct a reading of surrealism which does not rest on the self-definitive frame of either Ernst's dream interpretation or Masson's automatism, it is crucial to consider the concept of *the uncanny*. He believes it to be the unconscious state of surrealism which is 'all but proposed' as its most famous point of definition in the 'Second Manifesto du Surrealisme, *La Revolution Surrealiste* 12 (1929).

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the uncommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point.<sup>68</sup>

Foster proposes in his reading:

The paradox of surrealism, the ambivalence of its most important practitioners, is this: even as they work to find this point they do not want to be pierced by it, for the real and the imagined, the past and the future only come together in the experience of the uncanny, and its stake is death.

A comparison can be made here with the paradox of convulsive beauty as 'frozen movement' and the Benjaminian definition 'of dialectic at a standstill'.

### Conclusion

Automatism in the somatic phase that I am identifying as 'repetition', is linked to uncanniness in its interrogation of the 'other'. Automatism is a route to the unconscious where the substitution of external reality by psychic reality permeates every aspect of surrealism as its

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<sup>67</sup> In Foster, H., *Convulsive Beauty*. 1993, p. xvi.

<sup>68</sup> Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor, 1972) University of Michigan Press.

methodology, often in unexpected ways. Automatism can begin with an intentional use but it is an uncontrollable process of the involuntary, driven for example through psychoanalytic aspects of trauma and repression – as repetition. It happens through the pleasure principle and in objective chance – in re-finding the symbolic object. It happens through hysteria and shock – as ‘the marvellous’ and convulsive beauty. It happens in irrationality – as black humour, and the slip of the tongue.

Breton’s socio-cultural reading of Freud had transferred his psychoanalytic methodology to the making of art. I shall be considering Breton’s material concerning automatism further in relation to the more transgressive views of Georges Bataille, in a triangulation of the three.

## SECTION V: IN THE THEORY AND CRITICISM OF ART

### GEORGES BATAILLE (1897 – 1962)

‘God, how the corpse’s blood is sad in the depths of sound’, were the lines of a music hall song which as Allan Stoekl<sup>69</sup> relates were carried on the first page of the earliest novel of Georges Bataille called *W.C.* It was subtitled on its cover ‘The Eternal Return’ and illustrated by an eye peeping from the neck-hole of a guillotine. ‘Dirty’ was the name of the heroine of the book which he later burned, although its content was preserved as the opening section of *Blue of Noon*. An obsessional or ascetic through the paradoxical nature of all of his writings, Georges Bataille was born one year after André Breton in 1897 at Billon, Puy-de-Dome near Clermont-Ferrant in central France. Developing from the same historical background he was a darker, or more transgressive, figure than Breton within the surrealist movement.

Fictive or biographical his oeuvre is of extraordinary complexity, to write of it is to attempt the ‘impossible’. Denis Hollier<sup>70</sup> states that: ‘To write on Bataille is...to betray him. At the same time to miss him. To write on Bataille is not to write on Bataille.’

Allan Stoekl says in his introduction to *Visions of Excess* that Bataille’s obsessions were of an Oedipal nature and related as Bataille himself would claim to the horror and terrors of his early childhood. His father was blind before his birth (probably from syphilis) and became partially paralysed before he was three years old. Bataille attended the Lycee at Rheims. Later in 1913 he boarded at Epernay College where beginning his baccalaureate he converted to Roman Catholicism as a supposed form of rebellion against his father. He was called-up to join the army but demobilised after a bout of tuberculosis. By 1917 he had joined the seminary

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<sup>69</sup> *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (translated by Allan Stoekl), University of Minnesota Press, USA, 1985.

<sup>70</sup> Hollier, Denis, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (translated by Betsy Wing), 1989, Cambridge: MIT.



of Saint-Fleur with a view to becoming a priest or monk, in the same year he was admitted to the Ecole des Chartes in Paris to study to be a Mediaevalist. Three years later he claimed that he had lost his faith and his vocation.

Trained as a Mediaevalist Librarian, Bataille's thesis which he presented in 1922 was an edition of L'Ordre de Chevalerie. He afterwards gained a fellowship at the School of Advanced Hispanic studies in Madrid. He is believed to have witnessed the death of the matador Manueto Granero, whose skull had been pierced by the bull's horn entering through an eye.

He met Bergson (who had dominated a period of French philosophy) in London, but perhaps more significantly he started to read Nietzsche and later Freud. By the end of the year Bataille had been appointed as a librarian to the Cabinet des Medailles at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, which was to be his profession throughout his life.

In 1923 Bataille studied under and was influenced by the Russian émigré philosopher Leon Chestov, and began to read Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Pascal but above all Nietzsche. Parallel to this he practiced a systematic debauchery. Perhaps influenced by Dostoyevsky and spurning the conventionality of Dada's 'no', he advocated a movement which would say 'yes' to everything. At this time through his friends, Michel Leiris, André Masson and Theodore Fraenkel he was introduced to surrealism but he found the atmosphere of the circle intimidating and distanced himself from it.

Early writings from this period express the obsessional and excremental fantasies which possessed him, apart from W.C. a book 'violently opposed to all dignity' there were 'The

Solar Anus' and 'The Pineal Eye'. The virulence of these texts led a friend, Dr Dausse, to arrange for him to have treatment from the liberal psychoanalyst Dr Adrien Borel. The treatment allowed him to regain control of his life by 1927, whilst maintaining his intellectual intensity.

What was Bataille? Was he a poet, anthropologist, theologian, political theorist or philosopher? Unclassifiable as he is, and Bataille was against classification, Michael Richardson has suggested that he was essentially a social philosopher. I can agree with his assessment if this can be understood in profoundly radical terms. Richardson says that Bataille speaks with a tone of complicity, and his difference from an anthropologist or sociologist is in that he does not gather data from the external world but from an inner world and his own sensibility. Why is he a part of my material? What part does he play in any possible discourse on automatism? Well, if his genealogy starts with Durkheim and social relations, it is also important to understand that the context in which he writes is a surrealist one. As a contradictory, alternative figure to Breton he expands an understanding of the terms of surrealism which continues to be worked upon. In the case of this thesis that is in relation to the key terms that I have taken as interpretive models of phenomena in the function of automatism, 'trauma', 'repetition', 'excess' and 'gesture'. Terms which Bataille might expand to: death and eroticism, structure without end, formlessness, abjection and rupture.

Referring to the fundamental principle of surrealism<sup>71</sup> in 'André Breton', as, 'Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death... cease to be perceived as contradictions'. Michael Richardson<sup>72</sup> says,

This statement relies upon the essential oneness of the universe and of our own experience within it. It draws in particular upon two sources: the Hegelian dialectic, based as it is on the complementarity of opposites, and the science of alchemy, which

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<sup>71</sup> "Second manifesto du Surrealisme" *La Revolution Surrealiste* 12 (1929).

<sup>72</sup> Richardson, Michael., *Georges Bataille*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 26.



took for its principle the hermetic principle that 'whatever is below is like what is above and that whatever is above is like what is below'.

He continues by saying that 'There can be no question that Bataille accepted this principle as the basis of his thought'. It is in this direction to which his thought is turned that an understanding of the psychic and somatic reasoning of my argument about automatism can also be expanded by analogy.

Bataille holds to the idea of society as a 'compound being' and to the impossibility of determining 'the point at which the human body begins or ends'. These are ideas close to surrealism but also explored by Pierre Mabille in a book 'Égrégores ou la vie des civilisations' (1937), it was re-issued in 1977 (Paris: Sagittaire). To paraphrase Richardson's explanation of Mabille,<sup>73</sup> an 'égrégoré', a term in alchemy, works on the chemical principle of precipitation between two things conjoined which make a third, for example in a child born of disparate beings, as a projection onto the universe and not without its own will, in effect, the universe itself is reborn at the moment of each person's birth.

The concept of 'axes' is so important to the innovative presence of Bataille's thought that I am going to discuss it at this point because it introduces an expansion of surrealist iconography into the 'abject' and the 'formless' which are of significance to automatism within the context of a contemporary practice of art.

Nietzsche's philosophy with which Bataille was to have great affinity, was first revealed to him by Chestov, whose own philosophy was based on a rejection of knowledge and its replacement by faith. John Lechte says,

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<sup>73</sup> Richardson, 1994, p. 27.



Nietzsche's philosophy becomes a cry in the wilderness. The very notion of 'cry', along with tears, anguish and laughter assumes a fundamental place in Bataille's own philosophical outlook. The cry is part of a series of terms which mark the presence of the horizontal axis (the axis of difference) in Bataille's thought.<sup>74</sup>

It is in the essay, *The Pineal Eye* (1930) that Bataille gives an explanation of the horizontal axis. 'Vegetation, occupies a position exclusively on the vertical axis, while animal life tends towards the horizontal axis, although animals strive to raise themselves up and so assume a certain literal verticality.'

It is only through understanding the influence of Hegel on Bataille that the full complexity of this relation may be understood. In 1933 he began to attend the idiosyncratic lectures of Alexandre Kojève at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes on the Phenomenology of Mind which were to have an overwhelming effect on his reception of Hegel. John Lechte has suggested that Bataille's article on Picasso, called 'The Rotten Sun' (1930), gave an intimation of how he would respond to Hegel's system of Absolute Knowledge, 'the extreme point of illumination is so illuminating that it opens the way to a certain blindness, just as one can be blinded by looking directly into the sun'. This would lead to a 'fall' – like the fall of Icarus. 'The Hegelian system, as the embodiment of the transcendental vertical axis makes no room for horizontality. Hegel's homogenising philosophical system hides a heterogeneous, material baseness'.

Materialism is a negative of idealism as the basis of philosophy. In the dialectical materialism of Hegel where matter has been given the role of thought it ceased to be abstract and became a contradiction. As a contradiction it lost its idealism and became material baseness.

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<sup>74</sup> Lechte, John., *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers* Routledge 1994, p. 98.

Bataille rejects the representation of matter by 'long dead' physicists and substitutes a representation coming from Freud based on psychological or social facts. A direct interpretation of raw phenomena without an ideological basis.

Bataille had begun to publish scholarly texts on numismatics in 'Arethuse' a journal of archaeology (1927). In 1928, with its editor Pierre d'Espezal, he persuaded the art collector Georges Wildenstein to support a review which would combine art and ethnography and be published by the Musee du Trocadero, later the Musee de l'Homme. The first issues bore the stamp of Bataille's rigour in content and in visual appearance, and he eventually became editor. Where the publication 'La Revolution surrealiste', had concentrated on the group's experiments in automatism, 'Documents' employing an anthropological methodology to examine data, created a dialectic between word and image. Michael Richardson describes how, 'Its appearance was especially impressive, for the visual material did not simply illustrate the text; it commented upon it and itself functioned as part of the text'. In each issue a 'dictionary' was featured which defined the meaning of particular concepts concerned with 'baseness', such as 'Formless':

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus 'formless' is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only 'formless' amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.<sup>75</sup>

In 1929, after a collapse of the Surrealist Group, a number of the dissidents, including Desnos, Leiris, Limbour, Masson and Vitrac, re-grouped around Bataille to publish in 'Documents'.

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<sup>75</sup> Bataille, G., 'Formless' in *Visions of Excess Selected Writings 1927 – 1939* (translated by Allan Stoekl), University of Minnesota Press, U.S.A. 1985, p. 31.

Breton in his 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' fiercely attacked Bataille as an obsessional and an excremental philosopher.

In M. Bataille's case, and this is no news to anyone, what we are witnessing is an obnoxious return to old anti-dialectical materialism, which this time is trying to force its way gratuitously through Freud. 'Materialism', he says, 'direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena, so as not to be considered as materialism in a state of senility, ought to be based immediately on economic and social phenomena.

'Documents' came to an end in 1931. Meanwhile Bataille had extended his anthropological thinking by attending the lectures of Marcel Mauss, in particular on his theories of 'gift exchange' which were to underlie Bataille's later book on economics *The Accursed Share*. At the same time he extended his political thinking through readings of, Hegel, Marx, Sade, Stirner and Trotsky. He joined the 'Cercle Communiste Democratique', with other dissident surrealists, and tried to found a popular university, 'Masses'. He also published his first two important articles, 'The notion of expenditure' and 'The psychological structure of fascism'.

I am now going to open a review of Georges Bataille's 'social' thinking. The cohesive element around which his thought revolved was the 'sacred' that which is on the margins and at the heart of human society; the sacred stood alone, not as the opposite of the profane and not like good and evil which are reflective parts of the same order of morality. The sacred was the communal desire to communicate, the putting aside of the self for meaningful community. It could only be reached through a transformation or a sacrifice (rupture). There were no graduations, a profane thing had to be purified in its essence to become sacred.

Bataille's use of the words, homogeneity (organised society based upon inflexible law and cohesion) and heterogeneity (social forms of co-operation, custom and ritual expression) is



based on Tonnies' distinction between 'gesellschaft' and 'gemeinschaft').<sup>76</sup> A heterogeneous society gave credence to what was on its margins as well as at the heart of its social being and it needed to engage with the sacred to crystallise the moment of rupture where different realities meet and real communication takes place. Excess and loss and the rupture of mutilation and sacrifice are all dysfunctional heterogeneous elements. The anguish of being leads to the establishment of taboos – of the forbidden, to control the prodigality of life. Transgression leads to acceptance of the prohibited as complementary to the vertical and homogenous life of organised society. Society could not exist without the sacred which is the cement that bonds it with the 'other'. The new materiality which emerged from the concept of heterogeneous society, defined by Bataille as 'base materialism', was represented by the acephale, an ancient gnostic divinity that symbolised matter as an active principle.<sup>77</sup>

The three books which are considered to be the most important of Bataille's writings are all analogues of chance, 'chance' which is the 'other' of any system. These three books, 'Inner Experience', 'Guilty' and 'On Nietzsche' were written between 1941 and 1944. Their form, or their formlessness, the shape they are, grows from a fortuitous practice of play and contingency and in the case of 'On Nietzsche', on a random 'throw of the dice'. John Lechte says that Bataille's text in this book is, 'an analogue of chance in the same way that Surrealism often aimed to be an analogue of madness'. He continues by saying that, 'The element of chance has to be included in any analysis of Bataille's practice of writing; for it is as a practice that chance fully assumes its place on the horizontal axis'. He adds, 'To appreciate chance in Bataille's theoretic writings, we recall that, since Laplace, chance has often been thought of as

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<sup>76</sup> Richardson, 1994, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Richardson, 1994, p. 36.

a symptom of the limitedness of human knowledge. Chance, in short would be subjective rather than objective in nature'.<sup>78</sup>

Bataille wrote, 'My life is a leap, an impulse, whose strength is chance. At this stage – at the level at which I presently gamble my life – if I lack chance, I collapse. What am I but a man setting chance possibilities for himself? Didn't I give myself that power – myself?'

Within me anguish contests possibility

My anguish considers vague impossibility to be at odds with my vague desire.

Within me, now, chance and a possibility of chance contest anguish. Anguish says 'impossible', and impossibility depends on whims of chance.

Chance is defined by desire, though not necessarily every response to desire is a chance.

Anguish can be defined as contesting chance.

Still, I grasp anguish as dependent on whims of chance, which contests, and alone contests, the right of anguish to define us.

It's said, 'Instead of God there is the impossible – not God'. It should be added, 'The impossible, which depends on the whims of chance.'

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<sup>78</sup> *On Nietzsche* (translated by Bruce Boone), The Athlone Press 1992, pp. 113 and 114.

## SECTION VI: IN THE THEORY AND CRITICISM OF ART

### HAROLD ROSENBERG (1906 – 1978)

Eventually becoming professor at the University of Chicago, but at this time poet and man of letters and later art critic, Harold Rosenberg wrote a 'momentous'<sup>79</sup> article on Abstract Expressionism in December 1952 entitled 'The American Action Painters'. It was published in *Art News*, on the abstract expressionist movement in general and it focused upon a crisis of consciousness which had been developing, particularly among those artists involved in the federal art projects at the time of the depression in the United States of America, in the 1930s.

Rosenberg who had shared a loft with Jackson Pollock and others in the thirties was at this time (1952) primarily recognised as a poet. The English art critic David Sylvester says

His speculative, provocative, epigrammatic essay, discovering an existentialist ethic a Kierkegaardian anguish and a Melvillean spirit of adventure in the aspirations and the practice of the artists, was primarily a sermon addressed to the unconverted world at large, meaning the literary as well as the artistic community.<sup>80</sup>

It also contained an almost political warning to artists to avoid established techniques which might bring with them complacency and a death of spirit. Harold Rosenberg (who, unlike the critic Clement Greenberg, allowed the influence of 'Surrealism' on Jackson Pollock's work)<sup>81</sup>, finally wrote his seminal essay, after what he described as 'years of hanging around' talking about European art.<sup>82</sup> In 'The American Action Painters', he says,

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

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<sup>79</sup> Sylvester, David. *The Burlington Magazine*, April 1995. The birth of 'Woman I'.

<sup>80</sup> Sylvester, 1995, in 'The birth of 'Woman I'.

<sup>81</sup> Naifah, Steven and White Smith, Gregory, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, Pimlico 1992 (1990).

<sup>82</sup> Naifah and White Smith, 1992, p. 356.



An anti-positivist anti-materialist stance had been slow to rise in the cultural unconscious of American art. Wayne Froman<sup>83</sup> in a critical essay on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics, refers to Heidegger who indicates in his 1955 essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', that art may yet hold out the possibility of extricating civilisation from the extreme danger of the 'technicity' of our world of an oblivion where the poetic nature of our existence is, in effect, paralysed by 'the measurable' and 'the calculable' in such a way that we can no longer avail ourselves of the dynamic of the poetic nature of our existence. Froman continues to refer to Heidegger's indication that,

The mode of world-apprehension characteristic of the modern epoch accelerates this extreme debilitation insofar as it seizes and submits any and every entity to a systematic order that is thoroughly accessible to measure and to calculation... This also results in the relegation of art to the status of the 'merely aesthetic'. These are two of the fundamental features of the modern epoch identified by Heidegger in his essay. In order that art may succeed in providing a possibility for extricating civilisation from the extreme danger of our world-historical situation, the relegation of art to the status of the 'merely aesthetic' must be brought to an end.

Froman says,

Action painting 'looks for' the dynamic in which the art of painting originates. Action painting proceeds by making the motion of painting the subject of painting. The open-ended movements of the painter, animated by strains or tensions in the traces left on the canvas of the overlap of the visual and motor fields, discompose the apprehension of World-as-Picture. In the oscillation of those traces between associations out of which images emerge and a sheer interplay with other such traces, action paintings held open possibilities for modes of world-apprehension other than the apprehension of world-as picture essential to the metaphysical foundations of the modern epoch. This makes action painting, foundational art.

'What 'automatic painting' had effected was the change from coming to the canvas as a place to render a prior image, to coming to the canvas as a site for acting.' He also usefully describes how, 'ways toward adhering to the dynamic that effects a synthesis of the visual and the motor

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<sup>83</sup> Froman, Wayne J. 'Action Painting and World as Picture', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (Summer 1988), pp.469-75.

sectors of bodily experience were discovered in the limitations [sic] encountered by “automatic painting”.’

As well as departing from the aim of representing a prior image a shift also takes place in process, in the way resolutions of strains and tensions in the painter’s perceptual field give way to new strains and traces and tensions, the result of which Rosenberg says, is that ‘dozens of paintings disappear’ in the final work.

When André Breton made the demand in his first surrealist manifesto of 1923, for a crisis in consciousness which would change man, the writer and critic Dore Ashton says such a literary and anti-rationalist movement took another seventeen years to filter through to the American cultural psyche at the beginning of the Second World War. She says, ‘it came stealthily in small forays that enlisted just a very few of America’s artists.’<sup>84</sup>

The modern European tradition which the artist regarded as far from his inner necessities was to lead him to reject it, for what was truer to the American experience. Paradoxically it was this very reaction against European culture at the root of a new ideology, which gave such force to what slowly emerged as a foundational art movement. It was an ideology which nevertheless inherited the spirit of surrealism by virtue of denying it.

The acceptance of Freudian theory by the Europeans had been facilitated by their experiences in the First World War. Dore Ashton<sup>85</sup> says in quoting one of the editorials in a *View* magazine of 1943, which looks back to the twenties and thirties, ‘the two main themes of inspiration were the *unconscious* and the *masses*’.

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<sup>84</sup> Ashton, Dore. *The New York School*, University of California Press, 1992 (1973), p. 85.

<sup>85</sup> Ashton, 1992 (1973), p. 20.



Harold Rosenberg writing in 1942, satirised Greenwich Village radicalism in, 'Breton – A Dialogue'. His greater scepticism towards the issues of the thirties which had been so endlessly discussed by artists, does not entirely mask his underlying belief in their seriousness. Earlier still in the Marxist-influenced analysis of art history by Meyer Shapiro in 1936, he wrote,

If modern art seems to have no social necessity, it is because the social has been narrowly identified with the collective as the anti-individual, and with repressive institutions and beliefs, like the church or the state or morality, to which most individuals submit. But even those activities in which the individual seems to be unconstrained and purely egoistic depend upon socially organised relationships.

Dore Ashton writes of,

two important considerations (which) appear to have shaped his [Shapiro's] work. The first is his conviction that the modern artist's rejection of history as such is unhealthy; the second is that the correct reading of modern art history must place it in a general historical context, or 'in society'.

Dore Ashton has said that the importance of little reviews, journals and periodicals should not be underestimated in their role as channels of information, although the thirties journals such as *Vanity Fair* and *Dial* were almost exclusively concerned with the European avant-garde in art. But as she says Rosenberg wrote in 1940, the fall of Paris had shut down the laboratory of the twentieth century. Many of the great protagonists of modernism's Abstraction, Surrealism and Existentialism were to reassemble on the American continent, including Ernst, Leger, Lipchitz, Masson, Mondrian and surrealism's founding poet and spokesman André Breton. Material as commentary by the poet Benjamin Peret and Kurt Seligman which had previously appeared in *Minotaure* in Paris now appeared in *View*, first published in New York in September 1940. Readings of Heidegger, Kafka, Joyce and Sartre influenced art criticism which in turn contributed to the growing sense of individualism among artists moving towards an existentialist subjectivity in the post-war period.



Rosenberg had lived through the optimistic belief of the WPA era that a change in society would happen with which artists could identify. He had been sent to Washington on the writer's project as national art editor of the American Guide series from 1938-42. Employing distinguished writers they remain exemplary in their field which was to set out the history and cultural history of the American regions.

In the autumn of 1947, Harold Rosenberg and the painter Robert Motherwell co-edited the fourth in the general series: *Possibilities*. It generated a reception which engaged the whole New York artist community. Statements by artists included those of Pollock, Rothco and William Baziotes. The editorial tone was existential and pessimistic... 'if one is to continue to paint or to write as the political trap seems to close upon him he must perhaps have the extremist faith in sheer possibility....' <sup>86</sup>

Rosenberg used this opportunity to present six American artists whom he placed firmly in the mainstream of international modernism. The six included, Baziotes, Gottlieb and Motherwell. He said, 'they are not a school, they have no common aim' and they have 'appropriated modern painting not to a conscious philosophical or social ideal but to what is basically an individual, sensual, psychic, and intellectual effort to live actively in the present...'. He concluded 'For each is fatally aware that only what he constructs himself will ever be real to him'.

In the 1952 text 'The American Action Painters' article, Rosenberg wrote of action on canvas, 'The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in mind; he went up to it with

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<sup>86</sup> Harold Rosenberg and Robert Motherwell, *Possibilities* (New York) Autumn 1947.

material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.' Later in the article he said, 'The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea.'

He continues to describe the painter being, 'guided by visual and somatic memories...' and of the relation of a 'good' painting in its reality as action, to a transforming process in the artist.

The canvas has 'talked back' to the artist... to provoke him into a dramatic dialogue. Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question. By its very nature, action painting is painting in the medium of difficulties.

He expanded this theme in 1958,

As other art movements of our time have extracted from painting the element of structure or the element of tone and elevated it into their essence, Action Painting has extracted the element of decision inherent in all art in that the work is not finished at its beginning but has to be carried forward by an accumulation of 'right' gestures. In a word, Action Painting is the abstraction of the *moral* element in art; its mark is moral tension in detachment from moral or aesthetic certainties; and it judges itself morally in declaring that picture to be worthless which is not the incorporation of a genuine struggle, one which could at any point have been lost.<sup>87</sup>

Continuing the important theme of 'Body and Gesture', I am introducing two other writers. David Anfam who gives Matta's explanation of bodily 'gestures' and recollects that at the time in New York circles it was commonplace to assume that direct gesturing was more powerful than verbal expression. He says the same premise underlay both 'Method' acting and Martha Graham's dance philosophy. Anfam also quotes Yeats's line 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' and the assumption according to which art that is physical has an organic life beyond words.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> H.R. 'A dialogue with Thomas B. Hess', *Catalogue of the exhibition: Action Painting*, 1958, The Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts, p. 356.

<sup>88</sup> David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, Thames and Hudson, 1990, p. 127.

My second writer on the theme of the body and gesture is the sculptor Robert Morris who was to describe later in 1993 how,

The body's activity as it engages in manipulating various materials has open to it different possibilities for behaviour. What the hand and arm motion can do in relation to flat surfaces is different from what hand, arms, and body movement can do in relation to objects in three dimensions. Such differences of engagement (and their extensions with technological means) amount to different forms of behaviour. In this light the artificiality of media based distinctions (painting, sculpture...etc.) falls away.<sup>89</sup>

Freud's methodological tool of 'free association', had reached another stage in its evolution as 'automatism' in abstract expressionist art or Rosenberg's 'action painting'. There is a common denominator in the relationship of the 'unconscious mind' and 'the body', between the compulsive gestures of the 'shell-shocked' and gesture mobilised as a creative force for making art. I have attempted to track an understanding of the path between these very different forms of expression of the human psyche.

With this sixth study I conclude my initial mapping of a conceptual field for automatism by these commentaries on some of the main contributors to the theory.

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<sup>89</sup> Morris, R. *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1993), The MIT Press, 1995, p. 75.



## CHAPTER TWO:

### THE CONTEXTUALISATION OF PRACTICE

#### SECTION I; PRELIMINARIES

The inquiry into automatism in 'the contextualisation of practice', takes place within the conceptual framework of a consideration of textual theory from inside the experience of the material practice of art.

The survey of a constituency for automatism has provided a theoretical framework for the development of an understanding of the parameters of automatism. I am mobilising the machinery used to deal with the written theory of 'the constituency' in Chapter One to contextualise the material practice of 'the seventh constituent' (identified as artist in the main introduction) within the theoretical framework of the thesis. The practice both frames and is framed by the theory. It frames through its own reflexive theoretical function. The investigation of the use of automatism in art practice develops through a sequential working of the states and conditions in process which formulate the key terms and also in a conceptual relation to the formation of the wider constituency. The practice is in turn, reframed by a wider constituency of reflective thought initiated by its own expression of an automatist process. The conceptual framework of the thesis is in this way formed by the textual theory and the theoretical function of the material practice. The psychic and the somatic converge as the practice of the seventh constituent is both material and theoretical *in its own way*, in a way which is concrete but inherently investigative. The sum of that contextualisation is the framework of this project.

The contextualisation of the practice of the seventh constituent – 'the artist' – within a constituency of others, develops an understanding of the function of automatism in a particular

way. Because of the specificity of the language of art forms I am continuing to use the key terms which arose from the theorising function of the practice, and were re-confirmed as they were re-interpreted in the sequential evolution of the automatist process. These four key terms, *trauma, repetition, excess* and *gesture* which are exemplified as stages in the material practice are also seen as terms of uncertainty. Because they act as bridges between theory and practice, they are as uncertainties in themselves 'especially fitting' in accommodating the more subtle differences and not easily classifiable correspondences between, 'the not so alike' as well as 'the alike' of a different nature. Their volatility permits 'the terms', in this, their role of uncertainty, to act as bridges between the language of the text and the language of material production. The ideas and strategies of the six constituents and some of their conceptual descendants as new voices, may now be understood within a context of greater fluidity to have correspondences with the language of facticity. The language of the material process may be seen as a new critique for philosophical positions .

Art works as autonomous objects of inchoate experience and affect are forms of exemplification. They exist in their own right. They exemplify states and conditions of phenomena such as *trauma, repetition, excess* and *gesture* in the embodiment of the process through which they came into existence and also non-personal autonomous states that are both physical and psychical properties of their own physical space and presence. The language of art forms is first of all experiential. Nevertheless it expands the interpretive understanding of 'a viewer' to know facts about their making. The language of the six constituents, varied though it is, is a discourse not with the non-verbal language of art forms but with automatism and how automatism engages with practice as a methodology, a means to creative production. The dialogue between the textual and concrete can explain what is happening in the process but it cannot explain the experience of it. Perhaps it explicates the nature of the experience.



The outcome of the function of an autonomist practice exemplifies the theoretical base of the thesis.

I want the writing to be simple not mystifying and the mystery but not mystification to remain in my material practice. The only language which might replicate that in any way is a language of difference. As artist producer I have found that a way I could write directly about personal methods of making art which did not compromise irreducibility, was through using a parallel form of automatism in prose produced in small amounts of experiential writing. I should make it clear that my aim is to investigate automatism as an artist's tool, not the import of art forms although I believe that facts about process impinge on import and vice versa. I am writing about the way we think now about using automatism for art practice. I am writing about our psychologies, our histories, our methodologies and about how we access the unconscious mind. It is at least conjectural that the unconscious mind would always have been recognised to some extent by artists. Now we have a more complex understanding of the mind. Sigmund Freud discovered a technique with which to examine to explore 'the unconscious'. Living at this time we know of or are using his technique of 'free association' or 'the stream of consciousness' for our own ends as artists. Ehrenzweig has explored some of the uses of this technique as a tool for visual artists. Does it change or deepen the quality of experience of the material works? As I have said I believe that there is an acknowledgement of the function of automatism which pervades the visual arts of the twenty-first century. It engages with the people we are now - both speaking and spoken to in this way.



## **SECTION II; INTRODUCTION**

This section includes a set of writings concerning my particular notion of the automatic in practice as I see it. The writing will demonstrate what my contribution to an understanding of automatism *is* which has not been addressed elsewhere. It will contextualise the practice of the seventh constituent within a framework of the six constituent writers expanded by some additional reference to their conceptual descendants where this is useful explanation. It will also include small amounts of automatic writing taken ahead from Chapter Three to use as touchstones for the theoretical material. These extracts will function both as a summary at the end of a section and as a form of scene setting for the following one.

I am setting up the residual names from my initial six sources first and then my argument. Conceptual tracking has provided a number of keys to the work of others including; Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Hal Foster, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Jaques Lacan, Jean-François Leotard, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Allan S. Weiss, not previously considered in this context. The new names offer an additional forum for an analysis into a more speculative field of appraisal.

Within the contextualisation of practice and text, I am opening up the practice again by questioning it, to allow the other sources in with their explanations of the psychoanalytical, the phenomenological and the art critical. I am addressing the other sources in order to contextualise the experience of the artist as thinking continues.

There are questions to be asked first of all of the automatist process. What is it that is happening? What is the nature of the event so momentous to its producer that is performing itself in stages as the work becomes more autonomous through the different phases? To

paraphrase the writer Maurice Blanchot, automatism is not an easy route to the immediate because the immediate is not near, he says 'it is not close to what is close to us. It staggers us; it is just as Hölderlin said, the terrible upheaval.'<sup>90</sup> It is the extreme demand and he means that it is the demand for creativity in the face of the void after the disconnection from conscious knowledge.

A conscious choice has been made to employ a methodology of the uncontrollable for the practice, to address the unconscious mind through the process of automatism. There is a conscious and unconscious desire to explore an inward process of investigation through the material practice. It is the desire of the artist to 'make' which compels the articulation of the process but it is also an unconscious desire to find the subject which will transcend the known.

To paraphrase the art historian Rosalind Krauss on Julia Kristeva<sup>91</sup>, is the subject the psyche and the object the soma, or is the subject conscious being and the object its world? Is the subject being substantiated in a concrete form through this process as the psyche's attempt to find a conscious state?

When a commitment has been made to undertaking it, the automatic process once started appears to drive itself from within in a manner which is beyond my conscious control. Whilst automatism is inherently of the psyche and also inherently somatic, the phases collude as one or the other appear dominant in turn.

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<sup>90</sup> Blanchot, Maurice., *The Space of Literature*. Trans. A. Smock. University of Nebraska Press. 1982. pp. 177 –179.

<sup>91</sup> Kristeva, Julia, quoted by Krauss, R. in; *Formless: A User's Guide*, p. 237.



The phases of the mind in *trauma* and *excess* seem to exercise their dominance on the psychic side of enactment as the wound and sublimation. The somatic and gestural phases prevail in the interrogative machinery of *repetition* which is spun into *excess*, and as bodily movement in the summation of the autonomous process. *Gesture* as pure medium is a final reunion of the unconscious and conscious states materialised.

I shall show a further explanation of trauma and repetition within the area of psychoanalysis through reference to Jacques Lacan's thought on transference and to the 'bird's' rain of feathers as a metaphor for the body and the practice of art.

Rosalind Krauss will introduce the concept of simultaneity and sequence in modern sculpture. In my inquiry into automatism and *repetition*, I will cite the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who had initiated an understanding of ideas of opposition referred to by Ehrenzweig such as those of the arbitrary/non arbitrary division.

In the question of *repetition* in art the semiologist Roland Barthes introduces a paradox into his argument on Bataille's 'The Story of the Eye'<sup>92</sup> and I shall review Barthes' critique of this operation of the *informe*, considering an alternative reading of the loss of singularity. Within my contextualisation of the state of *excess* in relation to automatism and the practice I continue to explore the loss of singularity as it is understood by Merleau-Ponty and his notion of *gesture* referred to by Michael Fried.

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<sup>92</sup> Barthes, Roland., The Metaphor of the Eye (1963) in *Critical Essays* trans. Richard Howard (EvanstonIl. Northwestern University Press USA, 1972) p. 242 .



Foster proposes the 'uncanny' as the paradox in surrealism and I shall include the other view of Weiss<sup>93</sup> on the central paradox in the work of Bataille concerning sovereignty and issues of heterology and formlessness as they relate to materiality. All of these aspects of *excess* being significant to that phase of the practice.

There is an important reading of *trauma* which will link with the final notion of *gesture* again in the art historian Hal Foster's comparison of Breton's concept of 'the slit in time'<sup>94</sup> with the Benjaminian<sup>95</sup> definition of the dialectical image. It is a concept developed through the function of practice in the reconfiguration. I extend Freud's theories of *trauma* in relation to *gesture* through the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and also Roland Barthes writing on the 'Punctum'. I examine the dynamic of reversibility through Rosenberg and Merleau-Ponty. My inquiry into automatism and phenomenology includes a critique of Merleau-Ponty by Jean-François Lyotard in 'Discours, figure'.

I consider the subject of *gesture* further in relation to Giorgio Agamben in his book, 'Infancy and Experience'<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> Weiss, Allan S., *The Aesthetics of Excess*, State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 90.

<sup>94</sup> Foster, Hal., *Compulsive Beauty* (M.I.T. Press, U.S.A.,1993) p. 169 .

<sup>95</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations* Fontana Press 1992[1955] London p.25.

<sup>96</sup> Agamben, Giorgio., *Infancy and History* The Destruction of Experience, Verso 1993, p.139.

### SECTION III: ON TRAUMA

#### Summary

The first stage of the automatist process is identified as *trauma* through the methodology. This term has been confirmed as the first in a sequence of phenomena in states and conditions of the psyche and the soma through the practice of automatism. It has additionally recurred as a word which apparently resurfaces of its own volition in the text, again and again.

It is a *key term* which I have further qualified as a term of uncertainty. In this case I am using the term 'uncertainty' according to its normal usage and not in a more specific theoretical sense.

#### Trauma and the 'Unconscious'

In the theoretical investigation within the area of *psychoanalysis* I found that Freud, my first constituent, had regarded trauma as an event which had been repressed in the unconscious mind because of its unacceptable nature. He had seen the traumatised state in his treatment of neurosis in patients as one of conflict between the unconscious mind and conscious reality.

It was the particular contribution of Anton Ehrenzweig in his work on the psychology of artistic imagination to speak of trauma in relation to visual forms which had become unconscious because of their amorphous and indeterminate structure alone. It was his understanding that visual forms themselves which could not be differentiated and were chaotic, represented a form of conflict in the unconscious mind. It was at the same time necessary for artists to find ways in which to tolerate unacceptable chaos in order to achieve greater creativity. Ehrenzweig makes the distinction that it is not that the primary process 'the

unconscious mind' provides the ego with conflictual material to sort out but that it is itself a precise instrument for scanning material which cannot be dealt with consciously.

Breton saw trauma as a route to the unconscious in a release through 'psychic automatism'. It is a phase of the psyche which is the first stage of inward action in the dynamic process of automatism. That is a phase of the psyche which exercises its unconscious influence upon the state of mind of the artist (its subject).

The period of time of the 'traumatic stage' like that of the other phases is never of the same duration. It is a phase which may last for weeks as in creative angst or for seconds but I must repeat that the automatist process itself is a dynamic one where each successive phase *must* take place in order to compel another one – the next phase.

There is a low sense of immanence of an unconscious state of preparation mustering in the psyche at the intimation of engagement before the outward action begins in the physical world, *something must happen*. It is a phenomenon recognised by artists that even prior to a final decision being taken to act, or when the decision is consciously taken to engage with the action of practice, particularly in the methodology of automatism, an overwhelming feeling of lassitude prevails. There is a loss of energy in the subject to the point where a physiological vacuum occurs in which any stimulus is felt to be unbearable.

At the same time, separate and under the circumstances curiously objective somatic forces begin to manage the materials of transposition in a meaningful and deliberate way – they organise the concrete medium through the motor actions of the body of the subject in a manner seemingly both distanced and purposeful.



In fact, in the practice at this stage, the flow of consciousness is blocked before at the lowest ebb of inactivity a slow reversal starts and the body spontaneously begins to work the material. The voice of the artist in the unconscious mind had been mute until now. Conflictual demands had vetoed utterance in the physical world as a defence.

Freud's conception of trauma provides an explanation of this phase of automatism. He saw the block in his 'automatic speaking' process as one of the repression of events. Events which were of powerful significance to the subject because of their unacceptable nature. Where the flow of associations ceased their repression indicated dynamic forces at work in opposing the conscious will. Ehrenzweig has extended his recognition of events into conflictual formations of the visually indeterminate.

Trauma is there at the beginning (as the wound of the psyche, or in its possibility) in the conflict between instinctual forces within the unconscious mind and what is acceptable to the subject, the producer of art in conscious reality. The 'Do not destroy me!' is a primal call for survival in the unconscious, to exercise the safety mechanism of censorship. The block is a defensive reaction to a fear of damage.

There is a reworking of Freud's discourse in the seminar<sup>97</sup> of one of his conceptual descendants, Jacques Lacan, who posits the transference to the analyst as the enactment of the reality of the unconscious. I would suggest that the artist posits transference as 'a transposition into the material process of art', in an enactment of *the reality of the unconscious*. As a subject called to an engagement with 'otherness' the artist has taken the decision to open up a personal

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<sup>97</sup> Lacan, Jacques., *The Four Fundamental Concepts Of Psychoanalysis* London Penguin Books, 1994 [1973].

state of being to the 'universal' in the unconscious, to engage with a new condition of lived reality and one which may bring about an altered state of consciousness in the physical world.

There is a further explanation which Freud has revealed about the block in 'the stream of consciousness through free association'. He had begun to realise when writing about the victims of trench warfare, that an anxiety which could not be exercised by conscious preparation was being continuously rehearsed as a defence in dreams and through compulsive and uncontrollable body movements. He drew attention to the powerful influence of the unconscious mind on compulsive physical behaviour.

It was Freud's earlier biological studies which may have informed his later investigations into what became known as psychoanalysis. Notably, in this case, in his interpretative understanding of the apparent ability of human consciousness to screen itself from the potential threat of any stimulus which might overwhelm it.

In the question of sequence and in a study of terms *trauma* is there at the beginning but trauma also pervades the whole automatist process. There is an existential tension present at different stages in the sequence of its psychic states and somatic conditions.

It is existential in the sense that each act produces a new action. Out of the trauma of 'the unacceptable' as the wound that pierces me (Lacan's '*tuché*'), the repressed event, the void (the other real), I now take on the responsibility for an encounter with the unknown, for an engagement with conflictual forces. There is a sense of immanence, this is different, I was never here before.

The 'a part', the moment defined by Merleau-Ponty when the phenomenological disconnection from all given knowledge of the world takes place, is shocking in its enactment. The existential position of taking responsibility for ones own life as sovereign not slave is a violent act to face the void. It is what I have said has been called by Blanchot 'the extreme demand' of automatism., 'To make of the work a road towards inspiration – and not inspiration a road towards the work.'

The focus of Kojève's teaching on Hegel (1933-39) was concerned with the dialectic of the master and the slave, a state of 'Sovereignty' or servility, which Bataille essentially defines as,

The decisive moment in the history of the consciousness of self and it must be said, to the extent that we have to distinguish between each thing that affects us, no one knows anything of 'himself' if he has not understood this movement which determines and limits man's successive possibilities.<sup>98</sup>

*NOW, with the material of clay in my hands I suspend all conscious control and in doing so I face nothingness – nothing could be more traumatic than this absence. I am suspended in the projection between internal visualisation and the contingency of making – something must happen...*

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<sup>98</sup> *Inner Experience* (1943), trans. Lesley Anne Boldt, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988, p.109.



## **SECTION IV: ON REPETITION**

### **Summary**

In the initial (schizoid) stage of the creative process in the projection of parts of the self into the work, fragmentation is a necessary part of the creative process which the artist must be able to tolerate without undue persecutory anxiety by bringing scanning powers to bear. Ehrenzweig held up clinical models in psychoanalysis to the first stage in the creative process of splitting and fragmentation. He compares its traumas to the oral devouring and excremental scattering stages of infantile development.

In its evolution through marks, pieces and fragments, the material dimension of my practice mimics the course of the automatist process. The roots of this investigation lie in a fall. The dissolution in the practice of the media specificity of art forms such as painting and sculpture accompanies a spatial evolution taking place. There is a literal descent of matter onto the ground into an abasement of raw materials. As the marks on the wall descend they are materialised into the waste products of the world to become pieces of an encrusted surface built up by their own gravity. In one case as redundant wood chipped from a block of pine falls, the fragments are like those pieces of Lacan's 'bird' shedding a rain of its own feathers.

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Of those marks that I felt over my shoulder as I painted within their continuum, Lacan asks,

Should not the question be brought closer to what I called the rain of the brush?  
... What it amounts to is the first act in the laying down of the gaze. A sovereign act, no doubt, since it passes into some thing that is materialized and which from this sovereignty, will render obsolete, excluded, inoperant, whatever coming from elsewhere, will be presented before this product... We are faced here with something

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<sup>99</sup> Lacan, Jacques., *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* London, 1994 [1973] p. 114.

that gives a new and different meaning to the term regression – we are faced with the element of motive in the sense of response, in so far as it produces, behind it, its own stimulus.<sup>100</sup>

### Repetition in Practice

The material to be worked, handled and manipulated (no longer pigment but lumps of earth) has never before seemed so isolated by the reduction (and in time). If the opposite pole to death is life, ‘life’ seems too pale a word. Actuality is the temporal state of the clay that I grasp, clay like red mud. In the opening stage of this somatic phase of automatism I am a body looking and feeling the otherness of what is not me nor of my psyche. I am split. I seize the concrete strangeness of the material in my hands and I physically interrogate it by touching another world of which I am a part but which is not me, uncanny like a cadaver. I grasp a handful of clay and move it and I push this otherness together. The *action* has begun and each movement propels the next, one movement and then another until there begins an almost pulsile repetition of clay pushed to clay.

If the somatic as touch and gesture is also the medium of psychic impulse in the work and therefore perceived not only as originating it but as ‘originality’; there also follows afterwards a long process of doubling in the modelling and casting practice. There is a seriality in both the internal *making* where matter is added to matter and also subsequently in work succeeding work which continues to develop in a simulacral way driven by the machinery of its own impetus.

Doubling began for this practice in the expanded notation of image in photo-print, the same again and again. One thing after the same thing. In a reflection upon the compulsion to do this,

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<sup>100</sup> Lacan, 1973, p. 114.



the casting process became a form of material reflection. The art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss has discussed the 'modular working' of the sculptor Auguste Rodin's imagination.

If bronze casting is that end of the sculptural spectrum which is inherently multiple, the forming of the figurative originals is, we would have thought at the *other* end – the pole consecrated to uniqueness. But Rodin's working procedures force the fact of reproduction to traverse the *full length* of this spectrum.<sup>101</sup>

'Five articles of Separation from the Natural World', modelled in wax, develops through links between each of its stages. At this point I refer a reader back to Chapter One. Sigmund Freud had constructed a Metapsychology in the later stages of his work. In a paper 'The Uncanny' (1919), where he summarised 'recurrence' from a slightly earlier paper 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in the following way:

For it is possible to recognise the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses...a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, whatever reminds us of this 'inner compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny.<sup>102</sup>

He continues to discuss the theme of the double or *doppelganger* in relation to the uncanny as an insurance against the destruction of the ego and a denial of death. He does not think that the factor of repetition will be experienced to the same degree by everyone. He is unable to explain the strength of feeling in the phenomena. He compares the feeling of helplessness to colliding time after time with the same piece of furniture in a dark room where the fateful and inescapable has taken over from 'chance'. It is in this account of a heightened sense of involuntary happening that Freud begins to describe some of the phenomena in the experience of the process of automatism similar to the sensation of being worked by the material itself. His earlier bio-organic explanations gave way to a greater uncertainty about the causes of these impulses. Freud, largely through the interpretation of dreams, understood the

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<sup>101</sup> Krauss, Rosalind, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, USA, 1996 (1986), p. 154.

<sup>102</sup> Freud, Sigmund., Volume 14 *The Uncanny* (Penguin Freud library, 1983[1919]) p. 356



unconscious primary region of the instinctual mind as uncoordinated and driven by impulse and desire. This he believed may once have been the only existing state of an earlier primitive mind in humankind. His hypothesis is, that at the point when life may have proceeded out of inorganic matter an instinct may have arisen which sought to re-establish the inorganic state. He says if we recognise in this instinct the self-destructiveness of his hypothesis, we may regard that as an expression of a 'death instinct' which he argues must be present in every vital process. He believes that the instincts divide themselves into two groups.

The erotic instincts, which seek to combine more and more living substance into ever greater unities, and the death instincts, which oppose this effort and lead what is living back into an inorganic state.<sup>103</sup>

Anton Ehrenzweig's definition of repetition was of a pulsating rhythm, of the one thing after another in serial art as a materials/process interaction. He also compared it to strategies in modern musical composition. The description is of how the rules of production through 'mechanisms' which he does not explicitly name as 'automatism' free the artist from the conscious self of the ego, or self-consciousness, to compose from the (non-personal?) unconscious mind with greater expression. Repetitive action effects a return to the other, or to the otherness of the unconscious self through a dissociation from conscious reality. The primary action of the scanning function of the unconscious mind can take place – the interrogation of images and phantasms, unhindered by trauma and time.

It is important to stress that in any study of contemporary sculpture concerned with the passage of time in the conscious world, time cannot be separated from space. Rosalind Krauss states,

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<sup>103</sup> Freud, S., Lecture 32, *Anxiety and Instinctual Life* 1933. The fourth in a new series continuing earlier introductory lectures, that Freud had never intended to deliver.

...the history of modern sculpture coincides with the development of two bodies of thought, phenomenology and structural linguistics, in which meaning is understood to depend on the way that any form of being contains the latent experience of its opposite: simultaneity always containing an explicit experience of sequence... sculpture is a medium peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing. From this tension, which defines the very condition of sculpture, comes its enormous expressive power.<sup>104</sup>

Ehrenzweig is concerned with the oppositions such as those of the arbitrary/non-arbitrary division now also the subject of anthropology and linguistics with particular reference to the understanding of Saussure. He sees the conflict between the life and death instincts, not as Freud who eventually finds it hard to distinguish between them, but as a constantly alternating swing between the two

In the essay 'Eye and Mind' (1961), Merleau-Ponty placed an accumulative emphasis on 'overlapping'. I connect this overlapping in which Merleau-Ponty discovered the dynamic of 'reversibility' between the field of vision and the field of motor projects, to Harold Rosenberg's writing on action painting. He describes repetition as the way that 'Action Painting' sought the dynamic in which art originates, by making the physical movement of painting the subject of painting. It is a dynamic which achieves a synthesis of the visual and the motor aspects of the painter's bodily experience.

From his first gesture on the canvas... he establishes a tension on the surface – that is to say outside himself – and he counts on this abstract force to animate his next move.

Rosenberg says,

What 'automatic' painting had effected was the change from coming to the canvas as a place to render a prior image, to coming to the canvas as a site for acting.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Krauss, Rosalind, *Passages in Modern sculpture* The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1990, pp. 4 -5.

<sup>105</sup> Froman, Wayne J., Action Painting and the World as Picture, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Northwestern University Press, U.S.A., 1993) p. 345.



As well as departing from the aim of representing a prior image a shift has also taken place in process, 'dozens of paintings disappear' into the final work which will now be experienced as an event. What Rosenberg says can be compared with Merleau-Ponty's thought on 'overlapping' and to Lyotard's critique of phenomenology to be referred to later. I shall be developing the concept of 'vision collapsed into a body', in 'Chiasmus' and 'Excess'. I demonstrate the experience of modelling clay, in 'Shell' Case Study 2., through this principle of making where one piece of clay after another is condensed through driven repetitive action into a single autonomous form. (See Figs. XI , XIII, XIV. )

If abstract expressionism had made the action of painting the subject of painting, in a similar way two decades earlier, André Breton used psychic automatism to make the action of writing the subject of writing. He describes an experience of waking thought where an image gave way to a succession of intermittent sentences. He speaks of his resolution to seek in himself the rapidly poured out monologue he sought from patients, which without a critical control resembles 'spoken thought' as I have described on page 53. These experiments were carried over into the domain of visual art as *collage* by Max Ernst and into painting by André Masson. At the time when as Katherine Conley observes, an emphasis on the machine as automaton in Dada changed into an interest in the machine *process* in Surrealism.

In the context of repetition and compulsion, uncanniness and chance, Breton has written in *Le Surréalisme, Meme (No.2)*, of the conception of the work of art resembling the dynamism of the creation of the world, much emphasised by the Gnostics. He like Freud describes the artist's helplessness before natural forces set against his will, and a feeling of being played with by them which he calls 'acute' and 'overwhelming'. Repetition acting as a process of



intensification through bodily movement leads to a return to the 'other', to a recognition and an engagement with otherness. The cultural theorist Juliet Steyn has defined, 'a disappearance of the notion of the self (or subject) as that which is self-identical and thus always present to the self'. This she says is a theme essential to consciousness and creativity.<sup>106</sup> Steyn quotes Julia Kristeva. 'The discovery of the other in me does not make me schizophrenic' There is a fear of otherness which the scanning process of automatism can interrogate without harming the ego after the initial trauma of the 'a part' the disconnection from conscious knowledge.

Repetition *is* understood in this thesis as an interrogation of the other through bodily movement which is repeated to become a rhythmic process of autonomous intensity. Repetition is a machine for remembering it is a process of remembering without trauma, of remembering what has never touched the conscious mind because it threatened the psyche and could not therefore be consciously absorbed.

Merleau-Ponty understood Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language as a confirmation of the 'living present' of phenomenology in its enactment (*parole*) of language, through the practice of language as 'successive presents'. He focused on two principles of Saussure's theory: one, that linguistic meaning is in the diacritical relationship of signs, and two, that its evolution cannot be understood historically – diachronically. This is a statement which accurately reflects the material evolution of this practice of art through its successive presents, like language.

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<sup>106</sup> Steyn, Juliet, (ed.) *Other Than Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 3.

In his introduction to 'Art and Objecthood'<sup>107</sup>, Michael Fried acknowledges his debt to a particular essay of Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language'. He refers to him repeatedly invoking the notion of gesture in the essay, 'If it is characteristic of the human gesture to signify beyond its simple existence in fact, to inaugurate a meaning, it follows that every gesture is *comparable* to every other. They all arise from a single syntax'<sup>108</sup> Fried notes, 'I first suggested that 'the tension [in Merleau-Ponty's essay] between a Saussurian conception of language as difference (i.e. as "pure" relation) and a thematic of gesture and embodiment captures the difficulty of adequately theorising Caro's breakthrough achievement'.<sup>109</sup>

In conclusion the 'repetition' of bodily movement with materials is understood as an interrogation of the other which is repeated to the point where it gains volition to become an autonomous, rhythmic process of examination.

*In walking backwards and forwards, handfuls of wet clay are scooped and scraped from the water in a bin, and carried to the site of making again and again. A repetitious act of adding clay to clay, in handfuls pushed together into an upward accumulation. My forearm moves in time and space, the traces of matter are formed by movement in time but time is suspended in the now completely autonomous movement of the arms...*

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<sup>107</sup> The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>108</sup> Merleau-Ponty, in Johnson ed. 1993, ('Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', p. 105).

<sup>109</sup> Fried, Michael., on Anthony Caro, 'Midday', *Artforum* 32 (Sept. 1993): 139.

## **SECTION V: ON EXCESS**

### **Summary**

In the third stage of the automatist process identified as excess through the methodology, the scanning role of repetition is spun into a state of entropy. In this state the former lassitude of trauma was just a rehearsal for the bankruptcy of energy that occurs in this phase in the performance of the automatic process. [Look at the movement of clay in *Shell* where traces of this phase of excessive repetition can still be seen, Fig. XIII]. It is a second stage of repetition which can be understood as becoming ever more autonomous, where the body is consumed by its actions to the point of excess into an 'oceanic' state, into a passivity as it prepares for a final surge of energy into the 'certainty' of gesture in the last phase.

### **Excess as Entropy**

In Chapter One I have cited Freud's explanation of the instincts at work at the deepest levels of the psyche where alternating poles of opposition reach a state of entropy and he finds it difficult to distinguish between them. Their boundaries melt in a quickening swing between the two as the pulsating rhythm of repetition becomes autonomous. A psychic state is attained which Freud calls 'oceanic'. The sublimation which ensues is created by a surge of energy acting as the path for a return of the repressed or split-off parts of the self for re-introjection into the ego/ego-object, and reunified with the conscious and physical world. A parallel can clearly be drawn here with the function of automatism in the creative process. Ehrenzweig broadly concurs with Freud but includes a different interpretation of unconscious processes of the mind in the formation of images in creative art. Freud's concept of the primary process was, that it has no structure, does not distinguish between opposites, fails to articulate space and time as 'it is known to us' and that its boundaries melt into a confused mingling of forms.



Ehrenzweig has maintained that images and phantasies can bypass the conscious mind to become unconscious because of their undifferentiated structure alone.

Dedifferentiation removes boundaries; as entropy it can be understood as the death wish or instinct. Ehrenzweig says that his proposal to attribute the ego's innate propensity towards dedifferentiation to the death wish, is because it fits some of the same aspects. He describes these as a temporary decomposition of the ego at least in its deepest level as the tendency 'to weaken object relationships' and to favour 'narcissistic withdrawal'. What he finds most significant is that the structural principle of dedifferentiation agrees with Freud's concept of the death instinct, and 'dedifferentiation (entropy) is part of life's tendency to return to the inorganic state'. He describes how the unconscious scanning in the second (manic) phase of the creative process is necessary 'to integrate the total structure through the countless unconscious cross-ties that bind every element of the work to any other element'. He refers to the deepest, oceanic and undifferentiated levels of the unconscious mind. In the second phase at the deepest level reached by the rhythm of unconscious scanning, he says: that feelings of 'oceanic, cosmic bliss' are strangely contrasted by images of 'inexorable suffering and death'. He says that what seems to matter here is that death has been faced and the experience worked through before the 'oceanic-manic level of liberation and rebirth is reached fruitfully'<sup>110</sup>

Excess is probably the hardest part of the automatist process to describe because it is the least conscious. If I return to the works 'Shell', 'I Raise My Head' and 'Mitre' there was a sense of being driven beyond conscious control through a rhythmic working of material in making them. It is an experience which is true of all the works but these were the most excessive.

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<sup>110</sup> Ehrenzweig, Anton. *The Hidden Order of Art* 1971 p. 189.

Merleau-Ponty rejected a mind/body dualism and argued that the physical body (which he always designates as a man's, but is perhaps his own) is the basis of human perception. He says 'things in the world are given to me with part of my body, in a living connection, comparable or rather identical with that which exists between the various parts of my body'.<sup>111</sup>

John Lechte has pointed out an aporia which Jean-François Lyotard addresses in his critique of Merleau-Ponty in *Discours, Figure*. The aporia is of phenomenology's wish for a philosophy of consciousness through a sense of self-presence parallel to 'the lived experience'. Lyotard says,

The gesture as Merleau-Ponty understood it...is the sense of a meaning in which the sensed and the sensing make up a common rhythm, like the two sides of a common furrow, and in which the constituents of the sensible form one organic diachronic whole. The difficulty is that the gesture is relative if not to a subject, at least to a kind of subjectivity, be it an anonymous one...it structures the lived; it is based upon an unconscious that is not the object of repression, but the subject of constitution.<sup>112</sup>

Lyotard continues saying that at first the sensed and the sensible seem to go together but that this co-incident is undone as 'the phenomenological mask slips down to reveal... not the face of the unconscious that no one has seen nor will see... but the mask of desire. The falling away is that of phenomenology'. He suggests what an artist might seek, 'What Cezanne desired was Mount Sainte-Victoire to cease being a visual object and become an event in the visual field; and that is what the phenomenologist hopes to - and in my opinion cannot - understand.' The enigma of the event Lyotard thinks is a 'donation' which phenomenology cannot reach. The intention as act rests upon a passive synthesis which is the very donation of that which is intended'.

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<sup>111</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice., cited in *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-55*. Frances Morris Tate Gallery 1993.

<sup>112</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François in 'Discours, Figure', *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 1993, p. 309.



Can I understand the 'donation' of excess at its most entropic as an acceptance of otherness in the outcome of the process of automatism - the event - as autonomous and irreducible object.

Merleau-Ponty has rejected a Cartesian situation where vision is a *thought* about vision and he concludes:

And then there is the vision that actually occurs, an honorary or established thought collapsed into a body – its own body, of which we can have no idea except in the exercise of it, and which introduces, between space and thought, the autonomous order of the composite of soul and body.<sup>113</sup>

His rejection of the Cartesian situation should be seen as an important strand in the development of thinking about automatism and considered in relation to Rosenberg's writing on 'action painting'.

It may seem out of place within this context to re-introduce Breton's historical interpretation of excess which lies in his response to the political and literary forces of the nineteenth century. They were military and social cataclysms he incites that provoked a revolution which extended into all regions of life. He says it was, 'improbably radical, to the highest degree impractical, and tragically destroying within itself the whole feeling it brought with it, both of desirability and of absurdity'. It was this attitude alone which could account for, 'all of the excesses which may be attributed to us', and he is referring to originary moments in art movements first in Dada, and then in Surrealism.

In a later text he describes the struggle of surrealism being in proportion to the effort to 'embrace the whole psycho-physical field', of which he says:

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<sup>113</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 136.



In these *unfathomable* depths there prevails, according to Freud a total absence of contradiction, a release from the emotional fetters caused by repression, a lack of temporality and the substitution of external reality by psychic reality obedient to the pleasure principle and no other. Automatism leads us straight to these regions.

Others, such as the art historian Hal Foster, have argued that it is 'the uncanny' as the unconscious state of surrealism which is 'all but proposed' as its most famous point of definition in the 'Second Manifesto du Surrealisme' *La Revolution Surrealist* 12 (1929).

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point.<sup>114</sup>

Foster has proposed in his reading, as the paradox of surrealism, that whilst the surrealists seek to find this point 'they do not want to be pierced by it' for all of these oppositions come together in the experience of the uncanny, 'and its stake is death'.

Bataille was aware of the inherent ability of knowledge to undermine itself and he defined the central paradox of such slippage in his work, as a dialectical relation between knowledge and non-knowledge. The writer Alan S. Weiss points out in his book *The Aesthetics of Excess* (p.90), that where for Breton the goal of Surrealism (on both the psychic and material levels) was the reconciliation of opposites in surreality, Bataille has opposed such dialectical orthodoxy with the proposal of a *non-dialectical materialism*. The goal of which heterology is 'the transgression of norms by means of a pure, wasteful expenditure... where the primary goal is not collective social revolution, but individual sovereignty'. Weiss concludes that the differences between the two can be summed up as differences between 'a passive idealist

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<sup>114</sup> Foster, Hal., *Compulsive Beauty* (M.I.T, Press) p. 111.

dialectics and an active material heterology; between a sublimatory and a desublimatory aesthetics; between metaphysics and a sort of pataphysics.’

Bataille was excessive in personal life by practising an almost systematic debauchery and in advocating a movement which would say ‘yes’ to everything. ‘Yes’ to rupture and sacrifice, eroticism and mutilation, and material baseness as the heterogeneous in the socio-metaphysical axis of *horizontality* or ‘formlessness’, that is to bring down in the world as in excess and loss and tears and anguish.

Georges Bataille, in his early novel (1928) *The Story of the Eye*, weaves a textual fabric about an object – the eye – both at the level of its language and in the dimension of its events. The semiotologist Roland Barthes has argued that the book is a kind of structuralist machine opposed to chance. To paraphrase this: a grid is constructed from axes, and the crossing of these axes at their multiple points produces the precise images with which Bataille operates – such as when the sun, metaphorised as eye and yolk, is described as ‘flaccid luminosity’ – and gives rise to the phrase ‘the urinary liquefaction of the sky’. Barthes writes: ‘He thus leaves no other recourse than to consider, in *Histoire de l’oeil*, a perfectly spherical metaphor; each of the terms is always a signifier of another, without our ever being able to stop the chain.’<sup>115</sup> An operation of the informe to strip away categories and to undo the very terms of meaning. The argument by Barthes about Bataille opposing chance, ignores other possibilities implied by an openness in the almost synaesthetic mobility of language/events.

Bataille employs a use of chance serially in his later writing practice. Questions do arise as to whether he contributes to discussions or practices of ‘automatism’ strictly speaking, or

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<sup>115</sup> Barthes, *The Metaphor of the Eye* (1963) p. 242.



whether he simply offers a conceptual alternative to automatism with which he might share some common ground. To give a preliminary reply to this, Bataille, who is notoriously difficult to place, could be said to represent 'difference' within Surrealism and its methodology. He uses chance as one of a series of terms like tears and laughter and anguish which mark the presence of the horizontal axis (the axis of difference). It is what Maurice Blanchot has described as the 'a part' in Bataille's thought. In *Inner Experience* chance as 'difference', the difference of chance can be surmised less as an expression of the singularity of self-identity than as an interrogation of excess (the second stage of repetition). This raises an important aspect of repetition as automaton, as repetition in itself being a form of interrogation. This takes an interpretation of the bodily movements of the artist further than Ehrenzweig in his account of scanning.

When Breton refers to the point 'at which life and death...cease to be perceived contradictorily', Michael Richardson has said of this statement which is fundamental to Surrealism:

It draws in particular upon two sources: the Hegelian dialectic, based as it is on the complementarity of opposites, and the science of alchemy which took for its principle the hermetic principle that 'whatever is below is like what is above and whatever is above it like what is below'. This principle is based on the supposition that all things are interconnected and that it is possible to discover the correspondences between them.<sup>116</sup>

He continues by saying that, 'There can be no question that Bataille accepted this principle as the basis of his thought.' To take a concrete example I relate this thought in particular to the experience of phenomena in making the serial sculpture 'Five Articles of Separation' as the inner narrative moves from above ground to below. In the fifth and least conscious stage of the

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<sup>116</sup> Richardson, 1994, p.26.



process, all of the elements from the series re-assembled themselves in a completely new form. The work itself seemed to discover what it was seeking. It moved the subject from what was above ground to what was below, from the surface of the physical world into the psychic reality of the unconscious world and brought it back.

A state of excess, or entropy, appears to be mandatory to the practice of automatism, as the rhythm of the scanning process speeds up and poles of opposition in the deepest levels of the mind are spun into oblivion before the final surge of transformation and a re-introjection into the ego-object can take place in the creative process. A form of death and a re-birth have been enacted in the process of automatism at its most automatic stage where the psychic and the somatic become one.

Bataille has argued that 'eroticism' simulates death because it requires the same dissolution of self control, which is also an essential element in automatic writing. The notion of loss which must be as great as possible is essential to this stage of the psychic and somatic process in automatism. It relates to Ehrenzweig's accounts of a symbolic death having to be worked through before the next stage in the process can take place.

It seems to be appropriate to quote here what the critic Michael Fried says of Hegel, 'What Hegel has in mind... is the moment when the internal becomes external, that turning or veering by which we merge with others, and the world as the world and others merge with us. In other words, action.'

*The movement becomes a machine of its own making, the dynamic of making drives me and I am its machinery...*

## SECTION VI: ON GESTURE

### Summary

Between the blind driving force of the universe and its traumatic interface with individual human existence there is the screen which protects the subject, the individual psyche. The screening repetition of, 'the missed encounter is an accident which nevertheless contains an element of structure in the return as it keeps coming back'.<sup>117</sup> Its function proclaims a lack, some displacement, something repressed, bottled up – until the cork pops and the subject erupts from the screen, piercing the web of signifiers (automaton) to touch the image. What is this traumatic content that cannot be born? Is it the shock of an experience of alterity?

The *leap* is inspiration's form or movement, an artist does not work from inspiration but works in order to discover it. There is the rupture of a return of what is 'radically different'. In the course of the psychic and somatic events taking place the physiological pattern seems to follow at first a passivity and then a mobilisation of raw energy through the new somatic phase of gesture, in 'the leap' (gestural action) into the final materialisation of the object in outer reality. It is a transposition into matter. Here the psyche and the soma are united through gesture in the surge of the final stage of the automatic process.

### Gesture is Addressed as Reconstitution

The conscious mind is unable to cope with the memory of what is not present. It cannot damage the ego and beyond that the psyche with unconscious memory and in particular memory of what is important to it. There are times to an artist when it is impossible to handle even a photographic image of work. I have to look at it in a semi-darkened room and in a state

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<sup>117</sup> Lacan, 1994, p. 50.



of mind I can only describe as switched off. The purpose of automatism is to work with the substance of memory which is dangerous like radio-activity, without being irradiated by it.

Giorgio Agamben speaks in a different way of 'gesture' as pure medium. Gesture which has no end is not a means to an end but it has an ethical dimension and is there at the very centre of aesthetics. 'What is gesture?' Agamben says of an observation of Varro,<sup>118</sup>

He inscribes gesture in the sphere of action, but distinguishes it clearly from acting [agere] and doing [facere]:<sup>119</sup> ... what characterizes gesture is that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting. In other words, gesture opens the sphere of *ethos* as the most fitting sphere of the human. But in what way is an action undertaken and supported? In what way does... a simple fact become an event?

Agamben says of his problematic, Aristotle contrasts them thus: 'Action [praxis] and production [poiesis] are generically different. For production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is to do merely what is right.'

Rosenberg wrote in his essay 'The American Action Painters', of the painter being, guided by visual and somatic memories and of the relation of a 'good' painting in its reality as action, to a transforming process in the artist, 'the canvas has "talked back" to the artist...to provide him with a dramatic dialogue. Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question. By its very nature action painting is painting in the medium of difficulties'.<sup>120</sup>

Rosenberg expanded this theme in 1958, saying that Action Painting, 'has extracted the element of decision inherent in all art that a work is not finished at its beginning but has to be

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<sup>118</sup> Varro, cited in Agamben, Giorgio., *Infancy and History*, Essays on the Destruction of Experience London, Verso 1993, [1978] p. 139.

<sup>119</sup> Agamben, p. 140., identifies Varro's distinction between *facere* and *agere* as derived from Aristotle's the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

<sup>120</sup> Rosenberg, 1994, p. 33.



carried forward by an accumulation of “right” gestures’. He argues that: Action Painting... it judges itself...in declaring that picture to be worthless which is not the incorporation of a genuine struggle, one which could at any time have been lost.<sup>121</sup>

In Chapter 9 of Jacques Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ‘What is a Picture?’<sup>122</sup> he says, as another view, after referring to his recent conversation with André Masson on the question, ‘For me it is at the radical principle of the function of this fine art that I am trying to place myself’ Should not we see that this first principle, Lacan continues, is as Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, not choice but something else,

There, that by which the original temporality in which the relation to the other is situated as distinct is here, in the scopic dimension, that of terminal movement...that which, at the outset of any new intelligence, will be called the moment of seeing.<sup>123</sup>

The product of the fourth phase of automatism – *gesture*, bridges the relation between the unconscious and consciousness as it leaps from the psyche, carried by action into a somatic materialisation in outer reality, into a form bearing the scars of its passage.

Freud has speculated (see page 26) that perhaps ‘*consciousness arises instead of a memory-trace*’ and that memory traces are left in systems other than the conscious ‘are most powerful and enduring when the process that left them behind was one which never entered consciousness’. In the case of art practice Ehrenzweig suggests these would be traces of somatic memory.

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<sup>121</sup> Rosenberg, 1994, p. 34.

<sup>122</sup> Penguin Books Ltd., 1994, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis 1977. First published as *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan*, Livre XI, ‘Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychoanalyse’ by Editions du seuil 1973.

<sup>123</sup> Lacan, 1994, p. 114.

If the compulsive gestures of the 'shell-shocked' rehearse a protective preparation against a trauma, they can also be seen as an attempt to externalise a protective anxiety in outer reality. It is this theory which I want to explore further in relation to gesture in the practice of automatism with regard to Barthes writing on the subject of the 'Punctum'. Foster points out the resonance not only between Lautreamont, Rimbaud and Surrealism, but between the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune on one hand and the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution on the other (like Breton). He says that this paradoxical resonance 'charged with distant meaning' as it is, is what turns these two moments into revolutionary shock. The 'slit in time' filled with 'the presence of the now'.<sup>124</sup> Breton's 'slit in time' defined in his foreword to Ernst's collage-novel *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929) is to quote Foster (see pages, 57, 58,) close to but not so dialectical as the Benjaminian definition of the dialectical image: 'It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past; rather, an image is that in which the past and the now flash into a constellation. In other words image is dialectic at a standstill'. Rosalind Krauss has spoken of simultaneity always implying sequence. It is Barthes 'floating flash' of the punctum that has pierced the screen which protects the psyche to connect an inner to an outer reality. It is in gesture which also has the certainty of constitution from the power of the unconscious, where the artist takes on the responsibility of supporting autonomous action with a distanced attention. It is as autonomous but ethical gesture that the soma bears the psyche to the material world.

Ehrenzweig has said that 'clinical work knows little about how creative sublimation works'; being more concerned with resolving unconscious conflict in patients, 'it is left to the automatic action of the ego to sublimate the revealed unconscious drives...'. He continues by comparing a study of art's unconscious substructure and the scanning processes used in

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<sup>124</sup> Benjamin, Walter., *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. 1973, p. 252.



science, in order to observe the creative techniques of the ego that can make use of the dispersed structure of unconscious perception. 'In the third stage (in the creative process) of re-introjection, part of the work's hidden substructure is taken back into the artist's ego on a higher mental level.'<sup>125</sup> This proposes a more 'integrative' thinking. The work talks back.

Ehrenzweig writes of Freud saying that the rhythm inside the ego gives us a sense of time as well as death and speculating that time could be the mode in which the ego works.

The superego's scattering attacks drive the ego inexorably towards an extreme oceanic depth until the process of dedifferentiation (entropy) even suspends the distinction between ego and superego...the superego's anal aggression is spent and the ego prepares for its manic rebound and rebirth.... The point is precisely that the artist transforms passive primitive undifferentiation into an active faculty for moulding images of extreme dedifferentiation never achieved before.<sup>126</sup>

In 'Eye and Mind' Merleau-Ponty seeks the 'originary' in both art and culture. He speaks of the overlapping of the body and the world, and of movement as the autonomous 'maturation of vision'. After referring to vision as thought collapsed into a body of itself he concludes 'The enigma of vision is not done away with; it is shifted from the "thought of seeing" to vision in act.' And: 'The painter – any painter, *while he is painting*, practices a...theory of vision.' The '*chiasma*' is the locus of reversibility for which the human body is an archetype.

It was that dynamic of 'reversibility' (this introjection), which became the subject of Harold Rosenberg's 'Action-Painting'. As in the automatic writing of surrealism where writing itself became the subject, here it is the dynamic of painting in itself which has become the subject.

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<sup>125</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, pp. 102 and 103.

<sup>126</sup> Ehrenzweig, 1971, p. 205.



As I have found that at a certain stage in modelling with very wet clay, through the gesture of automatism the material form of the sculptural object has completed an image propensity. The uncompleted image held within the mind at an unconscious level has been confirmed. Forms held in the unconscious mind have coalesced to become symbolic. Disparate strands of experience have become concrete through bodily gesture with materials and the (sculptural) object linked with underlying meaning in a three-dimensional enactment of 'reversibility'. Breton has identified the substitution of conscious reality by psychic reality and the role of bodily gesture itself as a unifying medium of creative practice.

Bataille believed that society was a compound being and that it was impossible to determine the point at which the human body began or ended. He has written, 'My life is a leap, an impulse, whose strength is chance'. It is in the use of these methods for writing that he comes closest to a use of automatism. He makes it clear that he only does so at a level at which he gambles the loss of life itself. The 'leap' is an important concept within a consideration of gesture in a constellation with loss and chance. The leap is only possible from the passivity of entropy in what I am terming the phase of 'excess' where there is a complete slippage of meaning to the point of a 'death' being faced before reconfiguration can take place.

Rosenberg wrote, 'At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act'. He says that the aesthetic has been subordinated to 'gesturing with materials' and that what matters most is the revelation contained in the act which whatever it is or is not must finally be a *tension*. He footnotes an explanation.

With regard to the tensions it is capable of setting up in our bodies the medium of any art is an extension of the physical world.... If the ultimate subject matter of all art is the artist's psychic state or tension.... The innovation of Action Painting was to dispense with the *representation* of the state in favor of *enacting* it in physical movement. The action on the canvas became its own representation. This was possible because an action, being made of both the psychic and the material, is by its nature a

sign – it is the trace of a movement whose beginning and character it does not in itself ever altogether reveal; yet the action also exists as a ‘thing’ in that it touches other things and affects them....<sup>127</sup>

Rosenberg sums up the process saying, ‘The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a “world” – and thus transcends it’. He talks about the role the painter assumes in the ‘act’ of painting as though he were in a living situation. He also mentions ‘visual and somatic memories’ which the painter has suppressed until his (sic) gestures revealed them.

There is a certainty in the gestural action in the final outcome of the materialisation, or at least the experience of a sense of inevitability being present. This state of certainty is followed by a feeling of critical intolerance towards the unfamiliar, the unknown, the ludicrous arrival. Then the heart starts to beat because an event has taken place and left a residue. Something *has* happened.

*Out of this driven state the object is revealed in the making of itself? A sublimation has taken place and all is certainty in the NOW of automatism, a leap into the tension of the present before the time of critical consciousness begins again.*

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<sup>127</sup> Rosenberg, 1994, p. 27, footnote, H.R. from Hans Hofman



## **SECTION VII; ANALYSIS OF CHAPTER TWO**

The earlier stages of the automatic process are analogous to dreaming without sleeping but their corollary is in waking through the gesture of the leap. Chapter Two, within the thesis has reflected the 'unconscious mind' with an unconscious desire of its own, in its slippage and its timelessness.

The contextualisation of the practice of the seventh constituent (the artist/producer) within the survey of a constituency for automatism has provided a framework for the consideration of an inward process and of its projection into the bodily behaviour of creative production in outer reality.

In this account of the four terms taken as uncertainties in the field of inquiry, trauma has been understood as that which is other to me, which is not me, and which I cannot accept. Repetition on the other hand is understood as an interrogation of the other which is repeated to the point where it gains volition to become a rhythmic process of examination. Excess is understood as a loss of identity, a vacation of subjectivity where all known boundaries blur, it is a psychic state beyond all parameters. Gesture is now understood as a return, the return through a certainty of action in the 'leap' of a new subjectivity where all former values held have been re-configured to integrate 'otherness', and newness and oldness become one in a form which did not exist before.



## CHAPTER THREE:

### A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF THE STUDIO PROJECTS AND THEIR PRODUCTION THROUGH THE AUTOMATIC PROCESS

#### SECTION I: PRELIMINARIES

The section which follows is to position the research process within the practice and to position the practice itself within the wider context of a history of art.

I have been directly involved with developments in modern painting from within the arena of a group of artists working in the 1950s and the 1960s and still living and mutating in the present. I formed a part of the reception in Britain (1958) to American *Action* painting (Abstract Expressionism) which included painters previously associated with the Royal College of Art such as Michael Chalk, Robyn Denny, John Edkins (deceased), William Green, Roddy Maude-Roxby and Richard Smith. Heroic qualities of scale and colour in the new paintings coincided with an openness to mass culture and technology which exceeded purely *Pop* art and redefined the artists as performers in a revolution of consciousness about the new possibilities that lay within painting and sculpture. It defined the 1960s and a group of artists, in an arena which is still developing; David Annesley, Gillian Ayres, Anthony Caro, Bernard Cohen, Robyn Denny, William Green (d.2001), Philip King, John Latham (d.2005), Gustav Metzger, Bridget Riley, Richard Smith and William Tucker.

In 1959 I left England for a year and travelled to Rome where there were contacts with the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning through an American painter David Porter. In 1960 I worked in France, at Chateau Noir near Aix-en-Provence. I had been awarded a French Government scholarship to research the European roots of post-war American painting. I met André Masson in Paris at Rue Ste. Anne, expressly to discuss Surrealism in relation to

Abstract Expressionism [and also Abstract Impressionism in which I had a particular interest at the time. In painting I was concerned with trying to create an optical image of the sensation of 'place' both actual and as a state of mind. I shared a further interest with Masson in Eastern art where a pictorial use of signified affects of conditions of weather such as mist or wind, gives substance to space and forms light and movement.]

Masson has emphasised to me the depths of experience that the artist must bring as an essential contribution to the process of automatism in practice, without which it would be nothing. He has compared it to plus and minus signs, where (+) and (-) = plus, as set against (-) and (-) = minus, in other words, if you bring nothing in psychological depths to the process then after the disconnection from conscious thought – the result will be nothing, a negative. As the writer Thomas de Quincey has said of the dream experiences of opium, 'He whose talk is of oxen will probably dream of oxen'.<sup>128</sup>

In a series of paintings carried out at studios in Notting Hill (1961), scale was extended to the limit of peripheral vision and the length of human reach. The canvas became a surface to be changed by thought through the *action* of the process of painting. In 1993, a painting from this previous period, in a section under the heading **ACTION**, was included in a survey exhibition 'The Sixties: Art Scene in London' at the Barbican Art Gallery which reassessed British art of the 1960s<sup>129</sup>.

As the space in the paintings flattened onto the picture-plane it also gave the sensation of extending in all directions. At this stage I began to develop ideas for constructions:

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<sup>128</sup> De Quincey, Thomas *Suspira de Profundis* in 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings', Penguin Books, London, 2003 [1845].

<sup>129</sup> Mellor, David., *The Sixties: Art Scene in London*, Phaidon, 1993.



'Fabrications in a Wooden Room' (1963) for a proposed exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, and a giant, standing 'Forest of Letter Forms' for Theo Crosby's preliminary designs within Euston station.

At the same time (1966), circumstances led to teaching becoming a major field of action for the continuous application of skills relating to a use of the senses involved (through touch, balance, scale and spatial orientation), in order to demonstrate their significance to students at the London Institute (now, the University of the Arts) and at the Architectural Association. The material subjects were by nature analogical: a river of fish or landscapes of poured cones of coal and ice representing qualities of darkness and light. Sometimes a tension was created in making these subjects before an audience. The students could see that it was difficult to do and that I might not succeed. In fact an almost autonomous sense of what was right for the idea took over at certain stage of the action and then some of the subjects became symbolic. For instance, in setting up an installation the concrete elements within it began to relate to a wider underlying theme as the formless became frozen in space. I saw the process of painting being paralleled by a charged atmosphere created for teaching. This was teaching which arguably presaged the climate of development for the younger British artists known as the 'Sensation Group', some of whom I was to exhibit with later at the Spacex gallery.

After the painting space had flattened to become non-perspectival, it extended in all directions as in a space continuum and led to new methodologies. In the 1970s I carried out some 'combine drawings' with the sculptor David Annesley that he had initiated for my students at the Central School of Art. One person's mark was the response to another person's previous mark on a flat sheet of paper on the floor. The marks did not over-lap so the surface assumed a live sensation and separate marks accrued to an image like a giant puff-ball. The interesting



conclusion was that as the drawing progressed from person to person's response, the drawing itself took over and the protagonists began to feel a third presence - the work itself began to make demands – which were felt as a strong controlling force. It was an endorsement of my own experience of giving a physical sensation to space and allowing that space to emerge from within the work as an internal necessity in giving form to the formless.

My drawing then grew more metaphysical, and this was extended by the experience of Joseph Beuys' landmark drawing exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1974. I developed a new imagined space, if I drew sea I saw it as an inverse hill. If the drawing was no longer abstract its character had changed because to quote Rosalind Krauss, 'it had been away'. The two-dimensional image of space had shrunk into a pocket or envelope around the subject as a penumbra and finally condensed into a single form on the picture-plane. 'In Memoriam' (Fig. I.) These were not drawings leading to paintings and in the 1990s the realisation slowly grew that all my ideas in drawing and construction might be continued in another way.

From a deep felt need to change the transitory nature of installation into a durable form, due in part to a sense of its continual loss over time but also in order to give form to the transitory itself, I made the decision to use the very malleable materials of clay and wax because they were so responsive, and to cast into bronze because it was a material of perpetuity. I found that a modelling process was what the sculptor William Tucker, has called 'the direct transmission of energy from the human body into matter, without mediation of tools, without censorship of eye or brain'. The idea of a direct and indirect transmission of energy into matter was to become a locus for automatism. Some fortuitous coincidence played its part at this point as the opportunity arose for me to learn hot metal casting. A Foundry Course was funded by the Worshipful Company of Founders, London, and I was given materials support by the (then)

Worshipful Company of Founders, London, and I was given materials support by the (then) London Institute. Several studies were completed to explore what the method revealed in its potential for a larger body of work.

Although the factors I have briefly described have a long sequence in time and precede the research investigation there is a strong element of recurrence present in them within a circular process of development which is echoed by this inquiry.

## **SECTION II: INTRODUCTION TO THE PRACTICAL INQUIRY**

I have made an exploration of the materials/process parameters in going to the limit of making through the behavioural action of materials in the investigative disciplines described. The practical work has explored a creative language for automatism in the vocabularies of the material process. To this end three areas have been identified for detailed research.

1. The conceptual and constructual developments in taking a two dimensional use of automatism into three-dimensional forms of expression. Exploring a use of the senses in the phenomenology of making, where raw materials act as a vital force for action through the manner of their behaviour in space and gravity. (The studio comparative dimension). Figs. II and III.
2. A controlled choice of materials and their unconscious use in two different forms of the 'uncontrollable' explored in the paradox described, for example, by Jean Paul Sartre – of living and desiring matter versus 'petrification'. The stages and manner in which the modelling processes and techniques of production in a bronze-casting foundry intervene in the use of automatism in making. (Case studies) Figs. 1V - XXIII.
3. A consideration of memory and chance in the material practice/the traditional working practices of sculpture. (Studio critical inquiry). Figs. XXIV - XXIX.



### **SECTION III: THE FIRST AREA OF PRACTICAL INQUIRY: FROM TWO DIMENSIONS INTO THREE**

The first part of the programme rests upon a cumulative body of experience in work previously undertaken as installation and referred to in 'Preliminaries'. This work has been centred around a use of the senses in the ordering of phenomena. Through making installations I have gone to the limit in a response to the action of materials such as: dust, coal, ice, bone, yolks, sticks, skin, wax, clay, plaster, bronze, wood, cloth, plastics, water, metal, pigment; in: marks, pieces, fragments; through: scattering, burning, melting, petrification, pouring and hanging; in: assemblage, installation and casting. (Case histories of previous work are cited in sections entitled, Egg and Dart, and 'Sellafield'.)

As the practice evolved spatially it was consistently driven by an unconscious desire to move towards the three-dimensional as mass in a sculptural mode. Marks on paper became replaced by 'pieces' of material such as 'chips of wood' through a sequence of changing works within the spatial evolution of the practice. Other pieces in different processes became larger 'fragments' such as 'coal', and then aggregates of fragments such as 'rocks of plaster' became three dimensional forms. There was a behavioural definition of form in two interconnected ways as the heterogeneous materials such as poured ice were in themselves subject to laws of temperature and gravity and also to the gestural movements of the body in time and space. A poured sack of coal formed a cone through both the condition of gravity upon its falling and the gestures of my body.

There was a performative aspect to installations and a tension was created in making these subjects before an audience of viewers who could see that it was difficult to do. What I have already noted was that in this charged atmosphere as the process of making began to work

spontaneously and bodily movements replaced conscious thought, it was possible for elements of form and imagery held on a deeper level of consciousness to become more symbolic in the act of their materialisation.

The first stage of automatism in the process of making art is what has also been called in mainly philosophical terms a 'sovereign' act, as for example by Georges Bataille. It is a decision to break from the world and to suspend conscious thought in order to make a transference into the mode of the somatic in repetitive bodily action as the event of creative materialisation. In what might arguably be seen as 'the stream of consciousness' (or better understood as the spoken 'unconscious') this manifest process of automatism in practice is able to accommodate, or said more strongly to incorporate in its final stages, the reconstituting gesture as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls 'tuché'. It is the wound that pierces as Roland Barthes' 'punctum'. The tuché is the leap, the connector, the instantaneous flash between the general and the particular, in an exchange between the impersonal as 'otherness' and vivid personal experience which I have explained in Chapter 2, on page 108. It is importantly the autonomous action which is brought to term in the chiasmus of gesture with materials, to become vision in action, in the event of the autonomous object as thing.

The text which follows speaks from inside the experience of the process of making art and starts with an earlier stage in the spatial evolution of the practice which may now be understood as a rehearsal for the main focus of the practical work.



## Case History 1:

### 'Egg and Dart' (Fig II)

*How difficult it is to start work with objects when the subject lies hidden. There is the necessity to stop time, to step out of time to make a real time. Out of this real time something speaks with the timelessness of thought. There is a clear recognition, as though in a dream, of the sense that nothing else exists outside it. There are no other terms but these. I do not want to be aware of any sensations other than these. My thoughts and movements act together with one accord. Space is concentrated. This is the arena in which to act, to carry out those inward instructions. These long pointed files must be placed at an oblique angle to the raised plane like a flattened rainstorm above the plinth. A slight decision but everything depends on it. They asked to demarcate the surface of the box in this way. There is other material – a crow's nest – an assemblage of small sticks, as broken lines built for eggs and brought here by chance. I recognise it as something familiar, connected to my mode of thought. I place it amidst the darts and then I experience a sense of strangeness in their interactions as though something very large has brushed by me in space and time. I have the uncanny feeling of being brought into contact with an underlying content of life and death through a symbolic re-enactment of an ancient theme.*

A very simple almost primitive means of acting with materials in space has brought me into contact with real content. The 'subjectivity' and 'otherness' of this event is drawn in space registering a material imprint. I made choices about materials and the work spoke back.



## Case History II:

### 'Sellafield' (Fig. III)

The next case history has been chosen to describe the dedication of a site for automatism on a surface through the repetitive action of the body in space. [The title refers to the nuclear power station of that name because of an apparent affect from it on the appearance of a fore-shore to which the work was analogical.]

*I have paced up and down in an attempt to intensify the space, as though my movements in it would make it palpable. By overcoming barriers of doubt through an involuntary arrangement, the unthinking hand has traced its gestures in a detritus of fish and seaweed. On the forensic flatness of a polythene sheet there lies a residue of blobs and stains. As a tidal force might have left in its wake a paraphernalia of drowned tissue, here lies a web of signifiers. Small wrecks transmuted into linear diagrams of themselves in visceral imprints of another world.*

My previous paragraph describes, even embodies a still-life set-up (an installation), it embodies because the writing also engages with an automatist methodology. The research process itself has been formed by the root from which it develops. Automatism has functioned through an exploration of the body's use of the senses in making and an engagement with the behavioural action of materials in space.

#### **SECTION IV; CONCLUSION TO AREA ONE**

In using the detritus of the real world as raw materials which were unconventional for art practice it was a discovery of the research process to find that I could allow the intrinsic, behavioural actions of the materials themselves to collude in shaping and making form. There was at the same time a compulsion that developed from within the practice which I discovered to be harnessed to the affect of fragmentation. It was the compulsion to move towards three-dimensional mass. It developed parallel to the use of these informal materials, from marks to extraneous wood chips and discarded sticks to fragments such as coal and through to the solidity of aggregates. One achievement of the experimentation through a use of expanded material over time was in the spatial evolution of the practice through the 'formless' from two dimensions into three, from the surface of painting into the substance of sculpture. It was not only an 'achievement of the experimentation', but also a discovery of the research project that automatist principles could be pursued - and also pursued successfully – in seemingly unlikely three-dimensional processes.

Through a decision taken to intervene as little as possible with the natural action of matter itself I let the material perform in its own way, which, through its dispersal in space for assemblage and then installation was both behavioural and collusive. The materials themselves had their own performance which also charged the gestural movements of the body. Allowing an automatism of this independent nature to take place within physical movement extended its field of influence. I understood this 'charge' from the action of materials to gesture as an important influence which impacted upon the psyche to become an active conduit for the unconscious mind. Underlying themes and complex structures held in the unconscious mind could enter into the physical world as materialised content.



## **SECTION V: THE SECOND AREA OF PRACTICAL INQUIRY: THE CONTROLLED CHOICE OF MATERIALS AND THEIR UNCONSCIOUS USE**

From an inner necessity to change the transitory into a durable form, referred to in 'Preliminaries', I made the decision to model in wax and to cast into bronze using the 'lost wax' process, a choice which I shall explain further in the investigation which follows.

### **The Modelling and Casting Process**

Two case studies into the use of ceramic shell moulds were completed and evaluated to define what the method revealed in its potential for casting into bronze. The first case study in the research programme was made with the aim of understanding the casting process in order to make use of its inherent qualities, (liquefaction and petrification). The function of automatism through the very malleable, (micro-crystalline) wax modelling stage was one form of the uncontrollable. Another form of uncontrollability was the trauma of burning out the wax and pouring molten bronze into a paradoxical double of the space which had been previously occupied. It also lay in the fact that a completing part of the making process was structurally automated in the casting process and uncontrollable in another way. This was an intervention in the control/lack of control of the artist. More of the world as chance could also enter into a process which was now placed beyond personal choice through the accidents of foundry.

Ultimately there was a sense of revelation in the simulacral doubling of the wax through its fine definition into another state in bronze, a substance of presence in actuality and of endurance through time.



The aim of the investigation has been to carry out a 'self-reflexive' series of experiments to test the use of automatism as a methodology for making sculpture. I am swallowing a draught of the experience of the uncontrollable by re-experiencing automatism within the gesture of sculpture in order to observe the effect.

### Case Study: 1

#### 'Five Articles of Separation From the Natural World' 1993-6 (Figs. IV - VIII.)

The work of the first experiment began in the London Institute foundry in Southampton Row with the aim of making an autonomous series of bronze casts of small elemental forms constant in the natural world. It became a series, like a ledger of metal hieroglyphs, recording a transformation into ever more involuntary sculptures.

The first stage of the material process was made by floating hot, liquid wax into sheets on the surface of water-tanks to cool. I then used flakes torn from strips of the warmed wax which my fingers pinched together until I had a condensed fist-sized mound of handled pieces. *Thought was suspended* to privilege touch (which the terse written description reflects). It was like a suspension of disbelief in favour of a trust in the body's own senses.

Repetitious movement took over the trauma of handling the starkness of a raw material compelled to change within the process of transposition into object.

The second stage rapidly transcribed the contour of the first into the loop of a ribbon of wax pressed out by finger and thumb and indented by their touch.

In the third stage my hands quickly rolled a sheet of wax into the stretched-out bone of a fallen tree-like form. My hands thought for me.

The fourth stage was the most awkward, as a more directly narrative combination of rolled and squeezed stem and bud which after sprueing for casting and being cast was turned again into a horizontal position, pulling over its bronze cup to eventually expose the turmoil of a now set but once molten base.

It was the fifth stage which became the outcome, in a synthesis which was surprising to me as a re-invention of all of the elements. It was as though they were free now to re-assemble themselves in a new order. The composite even included an entrail of root pulled up it seemed from underground, implying links with another world that would normally be hidden. In moving from the rooted to the uprooted state analogically the unconscious mind was given an image as it was transmitted through the gestures of making.

As piece succeeded piece it was apparent that an episodic dialogue had begun from one to the other through the links of succession. Each form spoke to its successor through a breach – an incompleteness - until a new synthesis of all the elements in the chain ended in a final chiasmic and gestural demonstration of itself as an autonomous object.

### The Bronze Casting Process

At the bronze-casting stage using the 'lost wax' process there was a further intervention in the making of the series. The modelled forms acquired wax cups and sprues (cast wax rods) as channels for pouring the molten bronze into the moulds which they would become after being coated with ceramic and burnt out to leave only the ceramic shell. After the wax modelling



stage for the bronze casting process in the foundry workshop, a ceramic shell mould was used for the lost wax method. A colloidal or refractory gluing action in the ceramic shell gave great strength to the moulds built up in three layers. The shell build-up of slurry coat/ stucco, was carried out through dipping or pouring on a plastic sheet for larger pieces, followed by drying and repeated to a minimum of three times. The fully dried out mould containing wax was placed on a grid above a tray to catch melted drips. (Fig. IX.)

In the propane gas burning out of wax from the ceramic case by torch, beneath a heat trapping bin, the subject became present by its absence. It was now a unique work through this process as all that had existed before in wax was lost, including the spaces of the sprues and cups. All that was absent became filled with molten bronze poured from the crucible and revealed after cooling as a new solid form after the final cracking open of the ceramic shell to break out the bronze. Four of the pieces were left to become domiciled in the architecture of the casting method, the sprues and cups. I cut off the fifth figure from its bronze appendages because it was complete in itself - to stand free - or, in this case to lie grounded as an involuntary sculpture.

It is in the outcome of this experiment that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological explanations may be understood in the conclusion reached in pages 48 and 49 on reversibility, in the movement of body and mind, of vision in action. An automatist methodology was used throughout the process of making but it had its own charge which grew stronger through the series in the phased manner of the states and conditions of trauma, repetition, excess and gesture that I have described in Chapter Two. The gestures of making becoming wholly automatic in the last stage of the wax series in the leap into a re-configuration of all the elements in a new form.



Different levels of uncontrollability have been demonstrated in the repetitive gestures of the automatist act of making and in the behaviour of the material at the modelling and casting stages. The liquifaction of wax is opposed by an incongruity in the choice of bronze as the ultimate material of petrification. It is, however, a choice which reflects the conundrum of automatism where uncontrollability can exist only when its opposite is in play. The petrification of bronze is echoed by the photographic image of the whirling dancer in Man Ray's 'Fixed Explosive', the next work I will refer to. The spontaneously arising gestures of automatism in making are frozen in time and the image. The casting process re-enacts and mimics the frozen, active image throughout its absence in the mould and its presence in the bronze.

### New York

In 1992, the year prior to the Barbican Gallery 'Sixties' exhibition, a magazine article on New York galleries in 'Art and Antiques' with blurred but strangely engaging photographs of formless, physical lumps of bronze sculpture by William Tucker, mysteriously appeared through my letter box, I have never found out why. Like David Annesley who put me in touch with him, he was one of a group of mature students taught by Anthony Caro at St. Martin's School of Art, in the early sixties. They had superceded the new generation of painters exhibiting at the Whitechapel Art Gallery by replacing a projected show of the painters' three-dimensional work scheduled for 1964, one in which I had been involved at the preliminary stage in a collaboration with the artist Geoffrey Reeve.

I decided to consult William Tucker about large-scale casting methods. Again, by chance I was able to contact him at a remote studio in Upper New York State to arrange to meet in his summer workshop at the New York Studio School. I believed I did this in the spirit that Henri Matisse in order to be thorough about working methods in sculpture, had worked with Antoine Bourdelle. In a sense New York became my *Unheimlich*, the 'unhomelike', or a 'another place' where artists go to experience disjunction in order to see the world in a new light. The disruption of a break from everyday life by living in another continent enabled me to encounter a less conscious part of myself. With haunting serendipity, a sculptor of post-war New York, Helen Phillips Hayter (wife of the engraver) offered to lend me her apartment in Greenwich Village. It faced the Westbeth Studio block where Merce Cunningham still rehearsed, a dancer and choreographer associated with Martha Graham. The brownstone house was poignant in its memories of the past and a still evocative place with carved marble lying among overgrown ivy in the yard whilst indoors were scores of welded wire sculptures in many banked glass show-cases, there was a Man Ray photograph he had sent to Helen Phillips above the telephone and a 'This is Tomorrow' participant's catalogue from the seminal show at the Whitechapel art gallery.

Stanley William Hayter had an engraving and print workshop, Atelier 17, on 8<sup>th</sup> Street in the 1940s, where Jackson Pollock who had been taken there to work at night by another artist Reuben Kadish had first been struck by the all-over appearance of Andre Masson's print 'Rape'. It was an influence which he later acknowledged. The use of automatism by Masson and Hayter was a major aspect of their work at the time.

The practitioner's intelligence and the language of William Tucker were very important to me in understanding sculpture. Neither he nor another colleague, Garth Evans, also previously from



✕St. Martins' sculpture department were modellers, they said. I was in a sense a modeller with a tactile approach to adding clay as a 'volume material'; which was perhaps closer to assembling marks of coloured pigment in painting. The context for working was insightful and inspiring. I returned to the workshop two years later to develop my methods of investigation and finally in 2001 to work with Garth Evans, in the aftermath of the terrorist destruction of the twin trade-towers.

I believe that I was alone in privileging automatism through sculpture in my investigation although a cognisance of its methodology underlay the practice of both these sculptors. There was a personal aim on my part at the start to make sculpture that could relate to an Abstract Expressionist redux which I do not now consciously pursue. Dore Ashton has coincidentally observed a connection with abstract expressionism in the working methods of William Tucker in the contingency of building up wet plaster forms for bronze casting.

## Case Study: 2

### Shell

#### 'Assemblage of the Human Body [Turning]' 1993 Drawing (Fig. X)

In New York, at the New York Studio School on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, prior to the next case-study an automatist drawing was made with black paint materialising what it feels like to be within the human body, moving. The sense of my interior space and the whirling movements of my body, in the execution of (and dancing with) the work experienced, are at the same time a fixed image. I discovered an eerie analogy later with a photograph 'Fixed-explosive' taken by Man Ray and used by André Breton to illustrate his concept of 'convulsive beauty'. In the



section of his book 'Mad Love'<sup>130</sup> which refers to this, the idea is linked to conventions of hysteria and oppositions of image and action in surrealism which he claims that, for him as a poet, automatic writing personifies.

### 'Shell' 1993 - 2000 (Fig. XI)

The roots of this work lie in the first area of practical research previously described. The history of the work has already begun as a mark making process on paper (tachism) defining a post-cubist space. To put the process of making into context, it is based on the earlier experience of graphic marks used as a spatial calligraphy in creating an illusory sense of the substance of space. At a later time and metaphorically I have taken those marks off the paper and translated them into actual pieces of volume material. Wood chips left over from another process have been collected and poured into heaps that rise like a crust out of the plain on which they lie. This experience has been extended in other works into fragments of coal, or of ice. Those larger lumps have been poured onto the ground where being subject to gravity in falling they are cored by their own internal symmetry, a perpendicular axis in an invisible centring of the form.

The subject 'Shell' arose out of a studio discussion with William Tucker, who has said in the studio, 'You experience yourself through others and in reflections and traces of yourself amongst the confusion and contingency of the outside world but if you shut your eyes and turn inwards you are at the centre of your own space.' It was to be a materialisation of this *internalised* space, analogous to making a pot, which was to become the subject of my study.

### Analysis of a Work in Progress:

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<sup>130</sup> Breton, André., *Mad Love* trans. Mary Ann Caws. Bison Books, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1988 p. 20.

*Now, with the material of clay in my hands I suspend all conscious control and in doing so I face nothingness – the void – nothing could be more traumatic than this absence. I am suspended in the projection between internal visualisation and the contingency of making. Something must happen. In walking backwards and forwards, handfuls of wet clay are scooped and scraped from the water in a bin, and carried to the site of making again and again. A repetitious act of adding clay to clay, in handfuls pushed together into an upward accumulation. My forearm moves in time and space, the traces of matter are formed by movement in time but time is suspended in the now completely autonomous movement of the arms. The movement becomes a machine of its own making, the dynamic of making drives me and I am its machinery. Out of this driven state the object is revealed in the making of itself? A sublimation has taken place and all is certainty in the NOW of automatism, a leap into the tension of the present before the time of critical consciousness begins again. Each lump of clay is held in relation to all the other lumps. The space that is revealed is an organic space in the bowl of the clay mass. The mass has taken on a shell-like form heavy with accretions but holding its own shallow space, my internal space? A cup, or a shell, or a vessel with a prow, a space my space recognises from memory, the space within the volume of the sea in a bay with a cliff, the space in the small of the back, a space that my space is now adding to itself to become part of its own entity. It is the entity materialised. A space of collective memories held in the unconscious mind – the memory materialised.*

The function of automatism in the modelling process has exposed new haptic possibilities in a dynamic of reversibility between the psychic and the somatic. I have found that at a certain stage in modelling with wet clay, through the repetitive gesture of automatism the material form of the sculptural object completes (reflects) the image propensity. ‘The uncompleted image held within the mind at an unconscious level is confirmed. The object feeds back



information to the maker to trigger a response. It can then change the direction of the creating of itself in this final stage of the function of automatism'.<sup>131</sup> It is the return of the new through the inspirational leap into consciousness of gesture with materials in the real world.

The novelist Marcel Proust has described a comparable experience where involuntary memory triggered by the senses, in his case by the taste of the 'madeleine', releases a flood of memory as re-experienced childhood. He contrasts this with the conscious memory which retains no similar trace of past experience because that is beyond the reach of the intellect.

The significance of the outcome in the sculptural object lies in the fact that through the intrinsically tactile qualities of clay as handled volume and through the automatist technique of suspended consciousness, it is possible for forms held in the unconscious mind to coalesce and become symbolic. Disparate strands of experience become concrete through repetitious bodily gesture with materials and a simple (sculptural) object links with underlying meaning in a three dimensional enactment of 'chiasma' or 'reversibility'.

The clay 'Shell' survived its loss into a bin and the chance retrieval by a weight-lifter for casting into an invaluable industrial mould through a friend at Smith College. The second case study 'Shell' set out to exploit the possibilities discovered in casting the first study. But, the conclusion I reached from new information here was that the ceramic shell method worked best for small scale, solid, hot metal casting. In the larger piece the bronze did not completely fill the mould which left an absent bitten shape in the whole (see 'Exhibition' Fig. XLII). Problems with coring and burning out in larger, hollow casts (Fig. XII) led to a use of the investment method of casting and foundry assistance which became a further form of

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<sup>131</sup> As discussed with the mathematician Peter Werba.



intervention. I accepted that this was where more of the world entered into the project. The next three case studies were modelled in clay and cast into bronze using the investment method (Figs. XIII and XIV). In the intermediary stage between clay and bronze, moulds were built and there were preliminary casts made of plaster.

### Case Study: 3

#### 'I Raise My Head' 1995 -2000 (Figs. XV - XVIII)

I am using the method in clay modelling from amongst many possible approaches to explore the function of automatism. In the context of such plurality it is essential to examine the way in which I use the methodology in my own practice further.

I have chosen a material of fluidity, opposed in quality to the final state of bronze. I also wish to test its properties in the most arbitrary manner by building it up against gravity. Red clay the material is an oozing mud, potent with possibilities, for working by touch alone.

To the question, of how to do this? 'chance' supplies a ready-made construction site in reply – a series of square, wooden boards with short wooden armatures, like sticks for lollipops. The 'found' site which has presented itself to me will also determine the form of the piece. It will be a series or a set but it will not develop sequentially. As far as possible I shall work on all the parts at the same time whether these are identical or idiosyncratic parts of the whole. It is a production line of thin masses like stems - a row of necks?

I place the row of armatures at waist height on a work-bench and move up and down the line pressing handfuls of very wet clay onto the side away from me, working always from the obverse. What I cannot see becomes sensitised to touch, a haptic space. I move up and down

the row working on the group from both sides. I am giving up all conscious control of the subject and my hands think for me. The set grows to head height in places. (Fig. XV.)

The subject is memory's unconscious reprise of a much earlier work of *papier mâché* on sticks in a new manifestation. Thinner or thicker masses are supported by necks. A row of phantom heads?

These are inchoate forms, featureless heads of clay almost congealing in the humidity of summer temperatures of 104°. There is just one piece that characterises the generic title in itself, perhaps through a more lateral expansion. This one could be removed from its supporting role among the anonymity of the set to remain a separate piece. Its singularity interests me. I treated them all mechanically but this one found a voice. (Figs. XVI – XVIII.)

#### Case Study: 4

'Flora' Assemblage, Wood and Metal (Fig. XIX). 'Mitre' Plaster 1995 - 1997 (Fig. XX)

'Mitre' Bronze 1995 – 2000 (Figs. XXI, XXII)

I made an assemblage of off-cuts of wood and scrap metal in a rusting tin bath: “the bowl of roses is not dead” observed the critic Karen Wilkin, as she walked past through the studio.

The next starting point was a large block of clay. I determined to experiment by using the automatic process with clay in an opposite condition to liquefaction. I pounded it together with a thick length of wood from as many bags of clay as I could carry. A cubed metre of such a stiff consistency that it was only just workable: a parameter of material resistance. My main tools would be knives and a wire attached to wooden pegs at each end like a cheese cutter.



The aim was to carve the block automatically but to maintain the overall volume by subtracting and adding clay very quickly, I was working too rapidly for time to think, cutting and peeling and adhering clay again to the mass. The block metamorphosed but it kept up a monumental identity in its different states. Forms like the sheer cliff-face of vertiginous islands, copes and mitres passed and led me after them, coming and going until there remained a hulk of rocky cusps.

The process of making is part of a struggle to reach a further state of consciousness. We did not begin life like this, it is not a gift that comes with us. We do not start with the subject here but we have to work to discover it in the form of 'meaning' perhaps as an attempt of the psyche to take the unconscious into the object world of human being.<sup>132</sup>

#### Case Study: 5

##### 'Dürer's Wing and Hoffmann's Breast' 1999 – 2002 (Fig. XXIII)

Archbishop Romero's words 'The quick and the dead, the carnal and the incarnate...' remind me of a found drawing, the in/consequential pencil sketch of a bird attributed to Hoffmann but more probably by Dürer, and inexplicably satisfying to me - the memory of which I use as the impetus for a short series of modelled forms for casting. The remains of the bird incarnate, the enigma of body and its alterity in being the complete fragment of the incomplete bird incarnate. The idea of the bird is embodied in clay and later wrapped in a shroud of damp rags to keep the clay moist. One more modelled clay torso follows, reminiscent of Hoffmann's copied bird and then another with a wing. These works made as an autonomous replay of

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<sup>132</sup> Kristeva, Julia., cited in Krauss, R. *Formless* 1997, p. 237.

memory and chance will bring me to a new body of work which will complete the sequence through the third area of the research.



## **SECTION VI: CONCLUSION TO AREA TWO**

The methodology developed in Area One was transferred to a modelling and casting process in Area Two. The research finding in the second area of exploration was that the former method could be consolidated in the bronze series. The contingent behaviour of materials in the modelling and bronze-casting process formalised earlier procedures in the phenomenology of making with informal materials. (See pages 116, Section I and 124, Section V) The body's response to materials through the senses was confirmed in the modelling and melting and pouring and by the physical presence of autonomous bronze objects with an expressive life of their own as outcome of the process. This is exemplified, for example, by wax and clay modelling of objects as diverse as 'Five Articles of Separation From the Natural World' and 'Shell' - works which were cast in bronze using the lost wax and the investment methods found best suited to smaller and larger scale casting.

The casting process itself was an intervention which I have concluded extended what was already created within its own automatism of process. The trauma of loss in the burning out of molten wax and its replacement by the pouring of liquid bronze into the mould, had, I discovered through its characteristic 'lost and found', the transformative power to expand the original production into a material substance which further revealed the gestures of handling. The modelling became more felt and more visible as an expressive channel for 'the unconscious' in process as the inner mind and the body conspired to reconstitute unconscious form in the material world. Through repetitive gesture there has been a scanning of the unconscious mind which Ehrenzweig in Chapter One, Section II, in the thesis has described as 'a precision instrument of the primary process [the unconscious mind], which is superior to logic and reason and in which the work's hidden sub-structure is re-introjected, taken back, into the artist's ego on a higher mental level'. (Thesis, page 35) In this case it has been carried

through to concrete expression by the gestural movement of the body with material. The discoveries of the sculpture series can be related to Chapter One, Section VI, in the thesis in relation to Abstract Expressionism (albeit painting) where Rosenberg has described the painter [sic] being 'guided by visual and somatic memories' and of 'the relation of a good painting [sic] in its reality as action, to a transforming process in the artist'.

## **SECTION VII: THE THIRD AREA OF PRACTICAL INQUIRY** **A CONSIDERATION OF MEMORY AND CHANCE**

The third area of inquiry in the material process has emerged from the theory and from the practical work previously carried out. It takes place within the conceptual framework of a consideration of memory and chance from inside the experience of the process of making.

Preamble: NEW YORK (28<sup>th</sup> September 2001)

The pavements are strung with unbearably intimate, copied images of happy family photographs of missing people.

Saturday, and I begin to hunt for materials at North Soho Art Stores; melt gun, Stanley knife, drill etc., and at Barney's hardware store...tools have sinister connotations in their present association with terror.

I walk down Mercer and Greene Street to Pearl Paints in Canal Street. Soho like everywhere else is draped with flags. A cement mixer has 'God Bless America' written on it with all the fragile sentiment of the freshly wounded.

Sunday is cold and wet, so many brownstone churches, so many memorial services. Canvas tents and marquees appear on public spaces to meet the sudden need for somewhere to counsel and help bereaved families. I go to a soup bar in Greenwich Avenue where police and the interns from St Vincent's Hospital are eating. Later, I look for more materials, a roll of drawing paper on Seventh and Fourth near Cooper Union. I go up to Union Square, it is raining hard and it seems a strangely gritty local place to remember disaster after the Merchant Ivory, colonial style of Grosvenor Square where it resonates.



Monday, what a cold day, my bones feel like iron and there is a smell of burnt metal and glass in the air. At the studio, mixing plaster in a square tank, handfuls of plaster are sprinkled endlessly onto water and suddenly there is a cheesy warmth of drying plaster as my hand scoops out an armful giving it a slight twist and the arm leaves a hole where two horns of plaster curve around the space of the wrist. The whole foamy lump like a trussed bird, but as perfectly white as a polar landscape.

I draw the object from my internal experience of making it, over and over again. Am I to modify such a completely accidental form? How could I develop the form of chance and contingency? Work on this piece is to be resumed later.

Friday evening. Out of sequence.

The plaster was made by a natural force, how can I change it but through another natural force.

#### 'McDougal Alley' (Fig. XXIV)

I take my object lump outside to a yard (McDougal Alley) and throw it across the tarmac and concrete. I want all those too precious crusts and protruberances to break off. I subject the plaster to a violent process, kicking it across the concrete ground and on from each place it settles. Now the surprising thing is that for all its apparent fragility it is amazingly strong and not much of it comes off, just some ghostly hand-writing on the ground. The pattern of an erratic Tourette's walk written on the hard surface. White plaster traces in a quirky wandering line. Klee's idea of taking a line for a walk is translated into this 'reverse' wolf track in snow across McDougal Alley. The plaster is silent and oddly intact after uttering its strange linear expression of itself. (Fig. XXV)

Later on Monday a figure is standing in the warmer studio. How to sum this up by a line with a single piece of fairly unwieldy, thick, square-section wire. How can such unpromising material express such complexity. First of all tacking down the wire on a base like an armature with pins hammered over it to secure it to the board. I take up a length bending it with pliers like writing the figure in space with head and hair waving like a wind-cone, streaming back.

Retrospectively I see that if I upended my plaster walk with the lump at the top it would look something like this wire. Is this *a priori* knowledge. I make a second more expressive and volumetric figure.

I draw my second wire figure. The key to the drawings is in a central spinal twist to one side. I cannot draw very freely. The drawings are strangely constricted because I am trying to describe the line more than express it. I make a wet clay head like a foot-ball on a stick, perhaps an action replay of the heads I raised at an earlier date? (Fig. XXVI)

2 p.m.

I collect cardboard boxes from the Sixth Avenue organic store. I cut the card into strips of different lengths and sizes. Then, I begin to make a tower-like construction. A figure but a tower influenced by the incised gaps in towering street blocks. So like what I will see tomorrow when I transverse New York up the Westway to my destination on upper Westside, the banality of Trump developments and the gigantic (balsa-wood model) real/unreal, grey battleship museum. I make a very tall staged tower (stacked later), very geometric. The glue gun is difficult to work with fluency, glue comes out in burning blobs or not at all. I just about manage to get some adhesion on the edges of the card. At each stage it is when I reach an absolute void that the repetitious activity suddenly 'makes itself'. I cannot re-do it logically.

The construction is suddenly there and I make another. The card collapses and is impossible to re-assemble. I draw the card and do achieve a freedom of expression of the intention then the tower reverts to a fairly abstract standing figure cleaving the paper in half. Again a reflection of the vertiginous blocks or buildings.

A group of men (from India?) haul bricks on a rope pulley up to the roof from the yard. There is amazing co-ordination between weight and men and pulley. Perhaps this is how Norman castles were built.

### Case Study: 6

#### 'Witness/Voyeur' 2001 – 2006 (Fig. XIV)

I make a series of clay bricks as large as possible, beating them out with blocks of wood. I use the largest bricks, the bricks soar up from the improbable pile, is it a possible task to start to balance them? Gravity and wet clay make this almost impossible, they fall easily because of their softness and the enormous weight of the structure. I balance the large clay bricks in a vertical column automatically with the weight going backwards and forwards which gains more stability. Dumb material, **DUMB CLAY**, I put one upon the other and then I make a slight turn of plane and this is strangely cohesive to the structure I get. Because there is some empathy with the standing figure in the room the bricks soak up an unacceptably descriptive reference against my will but the stack now works quite spontaneously. The first tower holds itself with alternative gravity weight backwards and forwards looking almost like the stones of Machu Picchu. I am working in unison autonomously with clay. (Fig. XXVII)

With slightly smaller oblong bricks I continue on a new figure stack. I make another almost gestural turn of plane which opens up the language of the piece and this one is more animate



and interpretive. I automatically make a different stacking pattern using bricks on end and two together as a stage. It is more varied and a bit lighter and it falls. I find I can remake it out of the sense (a memory trace?) of the feeling of the twist of the plane, but not easily. (Fig. XXVIII) It stands, there is a strange synchronicity with my own spine, in the dumbness of the material, between the angles and the vertical linear directions of the stacks and they empathise with each other in their correspondences and differences in a vertical dialogue ; my spine - two stacks – two figures – two towers? (Fig. XXIX)

### Epilogue

Later: up Westway to Upper Westside between Amsterdam and Columbus.

The next morning: Downtown.

Thursday, murder on the subway, I share a yellow-cab with green faced right-wing extremist.

“It’s about time that the rest of the world started to show some respect for the American flag.”

He paid his share of the cab and left it in a traffic jam. On arrival at the studio I bend down to pick up a pencil and my back symptomatically seems to fall in half as the discs within it slip. I lie on the gallery floor on a long sheet of paper and reflect upon the apparent symbiosis between the two stacks and my back. Afterwards I draw with liquid clay, two figures, ‘Rose L’Anglais’, I see colour could come into sculpture in terracotta as a possible end in itself.

### Appendix II. Drawings: ‘Voyeur, Witness’ (Fig. XLV)

Chance and accident have characterised the process in the evolution of this work. The two stacks were fired as terracotta. They were cast in the petrification of their own material substance, as fired earth. Shortly after firing they disappeared without explanation from the studio. They were either destroyed or perhaps stolen. There were photographs recording them at the clay stage which survived. My photographic series was made to record the sense of scale and gravity and presence of the two towers and their relationship to each other within the

spatial environment of the studio. The photo-series was translated into large laser prints of approximately human scale. I intervened in the recording process further by working with the intervention of the laboratory technician through written directions controlling the colour process in the image.

The original work had its own automatic life – growing up and falling down – to build up again to be held in the wet clay state, then petrified by firing and lost. The images have survived as simulacra in different photographic media. There is a history of control and uncontrollability through the process held together in the chiasma of the leap as bodily gesture defined the consciously unknowable. The twin stacks continued to develop repetitiously through time. They were almost thinking themselves through a simulacral voyage of material transformation. Their imprint is embodied in each stage as an automatist synthesis of provisionality.

In these works, the laser prints express the power of the unconscious will to recreate what was largely suppressed memory, felt on a deeper level. The subject that was not in my conscious mind, the subject that lay below the surface was that of the moving string of images of lost people I first encountered in New York when I came here to work. It assumed a final concrete recognition after many transformations into the display of the series as a line of images. This work is not the traced description of the image of an event both psychic and visual but a poetic and symbolic form in its own right. Memory and chance work through the autonomous process at the excessive limits of materiality. A transposition of images scanned from the deepest levels of the unconscious mind is metamorphosed into the active working with raw matter. It develops as in a parallel way the unconscious mind is productive of dream imagery during sleep. It is a domain of blocked remembrance which was hypothesized by Freud and

explored in psychoanalysis. Ehrenzweig concurs with this but more specifically as unresolved visual memory in his psychology of art. Freud's methodology experienced by Breton is used by him as a creative source for expressing the surreal in art. The automatic process of repeated physical action together with the chance action of materials shields the psyche from the pain of the unspeakable and the visually indeterminate as it is enabled by scanning 'the unconscious' in this autonomous way. In its simplest form the action occurs in spoken language as a slip of the tongue or in the instantaneity of humour in both tragedy and comedy. Only after complete regression can re-introjection occur. Entropy allows the final piercing leap of the punctum, that simultaneous connection between signifiers where all points (monads) reconnect to form a constellation of new meaning.



## **SECTION VIII; CONCLUSION TO AREA THREE**

The research process importantly uncovered one major finding in this area which is the persistence of unconscious memory. Forgotten memory retrieved by scanning through the process of automatism was reconstituted in concrete form. The two towers had a duality of identity with twin figures. There was a hierarchy (of traumatic feeling) in the emotional significance of unconscious content which had sufficient force to select itself and to re-surface as though by accident across the re-formed series in different media. There was a certain uncanniness (or, denial of death) expressed by the chance retrieval of the sequence of laser images of the lost terracotta stacks. They were so reminiscent of the strung-out lines of copied photographs of missing people stretched along the New York sidewalks. The conclusion I reached was that this was not accidental but that it was a persistent and unconscious intention of the psyche to express emblematically what had troubled it, structurally and emotionally, as a finally concrete, visual and somatic memory.

# CONCLUSION

## SECTION I: EXHIBITION

(Figs: XXX – LXVIII)

### The Final Presentation Addresses the Importance of the Practical Component

The significance in the primacy of a modelling and bronze casting practice to this research process is demonstrated by the physical presence of the works in their concluding exhibition. The strong sense of a bodily intelligence at play is a very important strand of my argument which could not be made by other means. The exhibition exemplifies the methodology of automatism as sculptural outcome.

There are very specific findings being demonstrated in the exhibition. The unconscious mind speaks to the body through the unifying movement of gesture. Gesture with clay and wax is perpetuated in the concrete form of the cast series. In a return from entropy and formlessness the body harnesses the inner compulsion to repeat through action with materials. I have privileged the automatic in order to emphasize the body's role in communion with 'the unconscious', the unconscious that helps the body to think. A simple original technique of 'free-association' has become a singular method of working which is being articulated within the gestural practice of sculpture.

As the unconscious mind has communicated through the repetitive movements of the body in the process of making, the totality of space and form in the exhibition has become the materialised modelling of a whole world dredged up from underground. It is as though the sea might have receded from a shore to uncover hidden rocks. There is a sensory orchestration of

all the pieces in their relationship with the viewer. The exhibition of the series is a corporate work, it is the last sculpture, the final production.

The cast bronze and other series in plaster and laser print have become a theatre of pieces as the sum of all the bodily actions that made them comes to life again in actual space and they communicate to one another. Correspondences and differences within sculptural form are transmitted through vibrations of autonomous gesture and repetition in the works. They have moulded space itself as their corporeal relationships also animate it from the positions they occupy. There has been a revealing degree of determination in the work towards a manifestation of itself in serial form. The works demonstrate an involuntary desire for repetition which is also reflected in doubling as an inner need to have structures by which it can also mimic itself externally in the formation of mirror images. It defies its own destruction through continuation. The existential practice of automatism has opened up a route to the unconscious mind and oppositions of the life and death drives of creation and destruction. These are poles of opposition where one cannot exist without the other. Re-introjection must start from the entropy of de-composition.

The series have differing identities. Their serial nature reflects the compulsion of the repetitive actions of automatism. They are the outcomes of the differing aims of 'case-studies' in the research process. In the first experiment, 'Five Articles of Separation From the Natural World' I set out to use the automatist methodology through a *progression* of modelled forms. The result of this experiment was that the series developed swiftly through handled wax in an increasingly autonomous manner from one piece to another through to the fifth stage which was the least conscious work. In its re-juxtaposition it was both familiar and completely unexpected in an unconscious summary of the previous stages which it transcended. Through



gestural handling, the wax had developed a life of its own as it dragged a composite of all the other stages from my unconscious mind and put them together in a new form. The last stage appeared as a gift or what I have referred to on page 99, in Chapter Two, as the phenomenological donation cited in Leotard's critique of Merleau-Ponty. In the exhibition the series have been installed vertically in a transparent, show-case tower supporting the progressively bio-morphic forms of cast bronze in sequence, from above to below.

There was no reason other than an inner desire to make a volume container of interior space continued in a simulacral series such as 'Shell'. The work is shown in a series of three. There is a bronze cast with a patina of black and a second of an umber, bronze patina. The third cast in wax was chosen as distinct from experimental bronze alternatives simply for its contrasting colour of red ochre similar to the red clay used for modelling. It rests as a conundrum, appearing 'the same as' in form but physically different from the other two casts in substance. The driven wet clay modelling rides out the contingencies of facture and mould-making where wax mimics clay. I did not regard any of the series as endless although that possibility remains. Each one seemed to make an autonomous demand to direct its narrative length through the cast bronze and other stages of production. In the same way the titles I gave them which were distinctive had a life of their own and they emerged into conscious thought as a linguistic residue of action in practice.

At the modelling stage the physically contrasting case studies, of 'I Raise My Head' and 'Mitre' tested the phenomenology of autonomous movement through extremes of the material uses of clay from an almost liquid state to its stiffest and most inflexible condition. In both cases they were spontaneous, chance interventions in the modelling stage which I allowed to enter the process to overcome the practical difficulties of material excessiveness. These were

contradictions in making which affected the outcome. In 'I Raise My Head' the found wooden armatures were adopted expeditiously as a site for the simultaneous construction of that eventual plaster series as a whole. It was an arbitrary decision, conditioned by an inner desire and practical necessity, to build up vertical form in a slushy material consisting largely of water. The clay's fluidity made it so sensitised to touch that I could work with it up and down the production line by a haptic sense alone. In 'Mitre' there was use of a wire tool to work the single cube of hard, dry clay with requisite speed for automatic action without conscious thought, enabling the interaction between the unconscious mind and the body to come into play. It was an important part of the process of automatism that the contingency of action from material necessity became a conduit for 'the unconscious'. The two subjects shown were cast first in plaster series and then as select casts in bronze. The bronzes were exhibited among a group of mainly younger artists including, Gary Hume and Richard Long but also Bridget Riley, to celebrate a 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Spacex gallery at the millennium.

The cast-bronze case study 'Dürer's Wing and Hoffmann's Breast' was a preliminary investigation into the recall of memory through the acuity of the inner mind in scanning as it is activated by autonomous movement in working the material of clay. Clay was used as the most basic material of plasticity to register human response.

The bronze casting stages of the investigative process had continued to extend the metaphor of trauma through formlessness and excess to the rupture of accident and loss in burnt out wax and molten bronze and through to a final re-constitution. The doubling of foundry process became a method for another form of the automatic to transpose unconscious imagery into new material states.

The final stage of the inquiry 'Voyeur/Witness' developed further by tracing how unconscious memories are condensed in a dreamlike way. Their timelessness manifests itself as image in a new order of material form, combining all that seems logically incompatible. The inquiry at this stage developed through transference into a different medium, from clay (terracotta) to a hung series of laser printed panels. It was a cyclical return from three dimensions into two. It resonated as the echo of an actual event located in a historical moment; the terrorist destruction of the twin trade towers.

I subscribe to the idea that the work of art remains attached to the psyche of its maker and spills out into the surrounding space where, as well as giving something out, it pulls something back into itself again from that surrounding world which it absorbs as it also affects it.

A single object of art is a more enclosed world with its own laws which are separate from those of the real world. A series breaks out of that enclosure to operate in another way, it shares its own space with a viewer, working and interacting with the material world. It takes on the physical terms of that world as part of itself. It extends its field of influence into the real and changes actuality to give it a new status in an experienced 'otherness' of what has not existed before.

To a viewer moving through the exhibition space, works mutate into changed configurations, creating a constellation of relationships. It can be seen how the process of making the pieces develops in time and space through serialisation.

It was the role of plinths to become a means to display the sculpture, to put the works back into space at the height at which they were made in relation to the human body. 'Shell' was



the exception and placed differently to allow a reading of the internal spaces in the three pieces. 'Shell' stands as a model for the investigation. The condensed form has simply developed from the driven and repetitive movement of the body with pieces of clay in hand.

The final exhibition remained an unknown factor until the end of the inquiry but it was intended to be a summation of the research process to that stage. The exhibition installation became a manifestation of the thesis, the final experiment in which the process of automatism might be revealed in creative production. The unforeseen result was an atmosphere created by the physical engagement of all the series with a particular space and with each other in a collective presence. The whole exhibition became a theatre of pieces as concrete works enacted a mutating relationship in space. They responded through the compulsive power of the material gestures that had made them through touch, in doubling and in repetition. The series appeared frozen and active at the same time. There was the further revealing sense of their physicality being extended by colour. Red clay has stained plaster and paper, there is red wax and there are the sulphides and nitrates of the differing patina of the bronze series. It is the actual colour of process that can be associated with the earth pigments of pre-history cave painting.

The outcome of the function of the automatist process in the exhibition exemplifies the theoretical base of the thesis.

## **SECTION II: OVERVIEW OF THE INQUIRY**

The aim of the investigation is an understanding of the function of automatism as a tool for creative production in art, by showing and saying how it works through a communion of the

power of the unconscious mind with the resourceful body in a material outcome. The achievement of the research has been an understanding exemplified in the exhibition through the body of works in paint, plaster, wax, bronze and laser print and in the written thesis submitted in association with it. The theorising function of the practice has been to instigate a new understanding of automatism as the sequential performance of phases of the psychic and the somatic in the phenomenal states and conditions of trauma, repetition, excess and gesture. I have summarised my reading of Ehrenzweig's stratification of the interaction of the three stages of creativity as: (1) the projection of the first schizoid phase of splitting and fragmentation (in my terms as trauma and repetition), (2) integration in the manic (oceanic) phase of dedifferentiation (de-composition) when scanning takes place (in my terms as repetition and excess), (3) the final phase is of re-introjection (in my terms as gesture) to a conscious level where the work 'talks back' to the artist whose creativity is extended by an acceptance of 'otherness' that goes beyond the personal. The artist has transformed the *pre-primordial* in 'the unconscious' into a faculty for shaping and making images from formlessness, where the oppositional polarities of the life and death drives function as an oscillating pulse continuously starting again from nothing.

The interaction of the artist/producer with raw materials in a situation of uncertainty has produced a speculative investigation through the serial embodiment of a subject in material objects. The practical work has made it possible to think. An experimental and experiential understanding of phenomena in process is formalised in text. I have interrogated six constituent writers and the thoughts of some of their conceptual descendants, explaining how the three areas of investigation: 'Psychoanalysis', 'Phenomenology and certain currents of thought in Existentialism', and, 'The Theory and Criticism of Art', engage with my practice. The focus of the research process has been on an understanding of automatism in art practice



through a contextualisation of the practice and the critical theory in an exchange between two different forms of inquiry. The textual and the concrete theory/practice relations made it possible to understand the sum of the automatic actions in the art practice. The compulsion in the unconscious mind to repeat has been re-enacted through autonomous gesture, doubling and repetition in the series. There has been a realisation in the outcome of the inquiry in 'Voyeur/Witness' about the persistent way that memory and the timelessness of 'the unconscious' can function through an interaction with the body in material practice.

In evaluating the project's degree of success in developing an understanding of the use of automatism in the practice of art, it is necessary to consider the way that the bronze series and other art works condense the phases of the phenomenal process that has been experienced by the artist/producer into a very specific physical result. The successful function of automatism in the works can be judged by their outcome as *autonomous* objects in the exhibition. Because of their irreducibility as the objects of art practice I have had a certain anxiety over whether it is ethical to write of them because they are about what cannot be spoken. I want them to speak for themselves. I have approached this problem in a speculative way by another route. A form of automatic writing has been generated by the experience of practice. Words have come at the end of the unconscious/body relationship and the sculpture series have attracted to themselves a linguistic element. Automatic writing has invaded academic procedure and this has also been breached in another way: as an artist I have been placed in a position of privilege with regard to theory. I have a breadth of concern because of my overview through practice. It is by virtue of aspects of my practice that I have chosen procedures that would not normally be countenanced in different kinds of academic discipline but are quite defensible for me to be making as an artist. I have not been a disciple of any one constituent within the field of research but of automatic practices, together with recent fellow-travellers such as William



Green and John Latham, and Gustav Metzger who survives them. The arena of the 50s and 60s is living and mutating in the present as it is continuously re-formed by its practitioners. I have been able to keep a distance, to step back when I have taken what has been perceived through the practice to be relevant to automatism in art. In this way it has been possible for me to develop an overview of the value of a bodily intelligence in action in the process of automatism in practice. Automatism has produced a thinking body in the production of art.

It is also necessary to consider whether the automatic writing has been helpful in understanding the material practice of art, I believe that it has. I have used this form of writing as a touchstone to test the validity of critical theory in the text. A self-awareness as artist/producer has made it beneficial for me to carry out the inquiry for others to understand as a particular *kind* of contribution to art theory. I am writing as an authentic voice speaking from within a practice.

✗ Why has this study been necessary? What can be learnt from it which cannot be learnt elsewhere - not critical theory - but learning about and understanding important aspects of the corporeal intelligence of practice, of how automatism becomes the methodology for a thinking body in the process of making. Where the strategies of practice are productive of a collusion between my unconscious mind and my body. Where my body is moved, it is self moved and ✗ in moving with material, leaves concrete traces and manifestations of matter as it grasps the inchoate and the unknowable from underground. One of the important findings of the research process has been the discovery that there is a complicity between the psychic and the somatic in the unconscious mind and the body's own knowledge of the physical world. They can communicate directly in bypassing the conscious mind through an automatist suspension of conscious thought and through the autonomous movement of gesture in the practice of art.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I

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## **APPENDIX 2**

### **EXHIBITION ILLUSTRATIONS: XXX – LXVII**

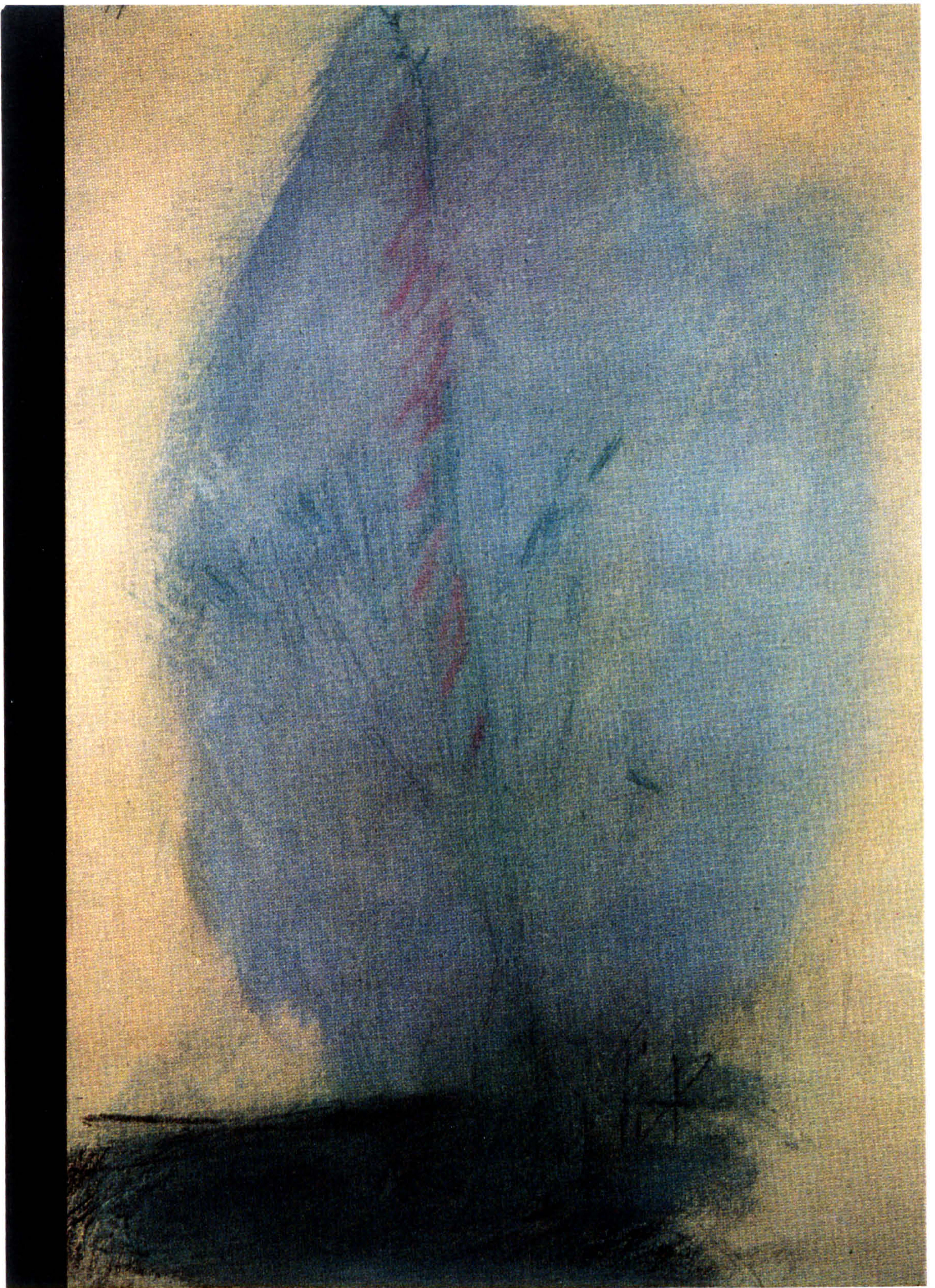
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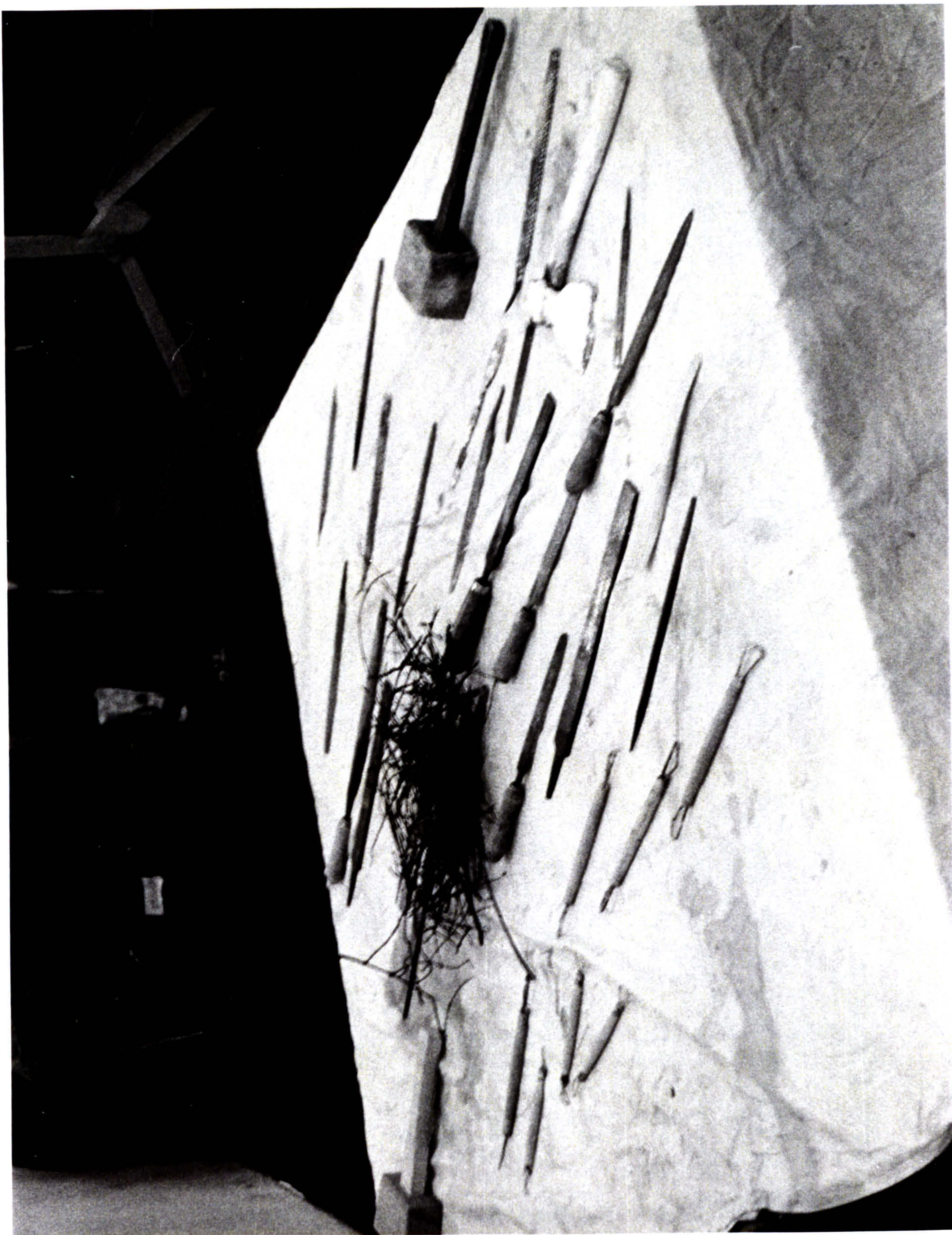
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I. In Memoriam (Oil Pastel and Pencil) 59 x 39 cm





II. Egg and Dart (Installation) Mixed Material





III. Sellafield (Installation) Mixed Material





IV. Five Articles of Separation From the Natural World: Stage One (Bronze) 13 x 17 x 10 cm





V. Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World: Stage Two (Bronze) 19 x 18 x 9 cm.





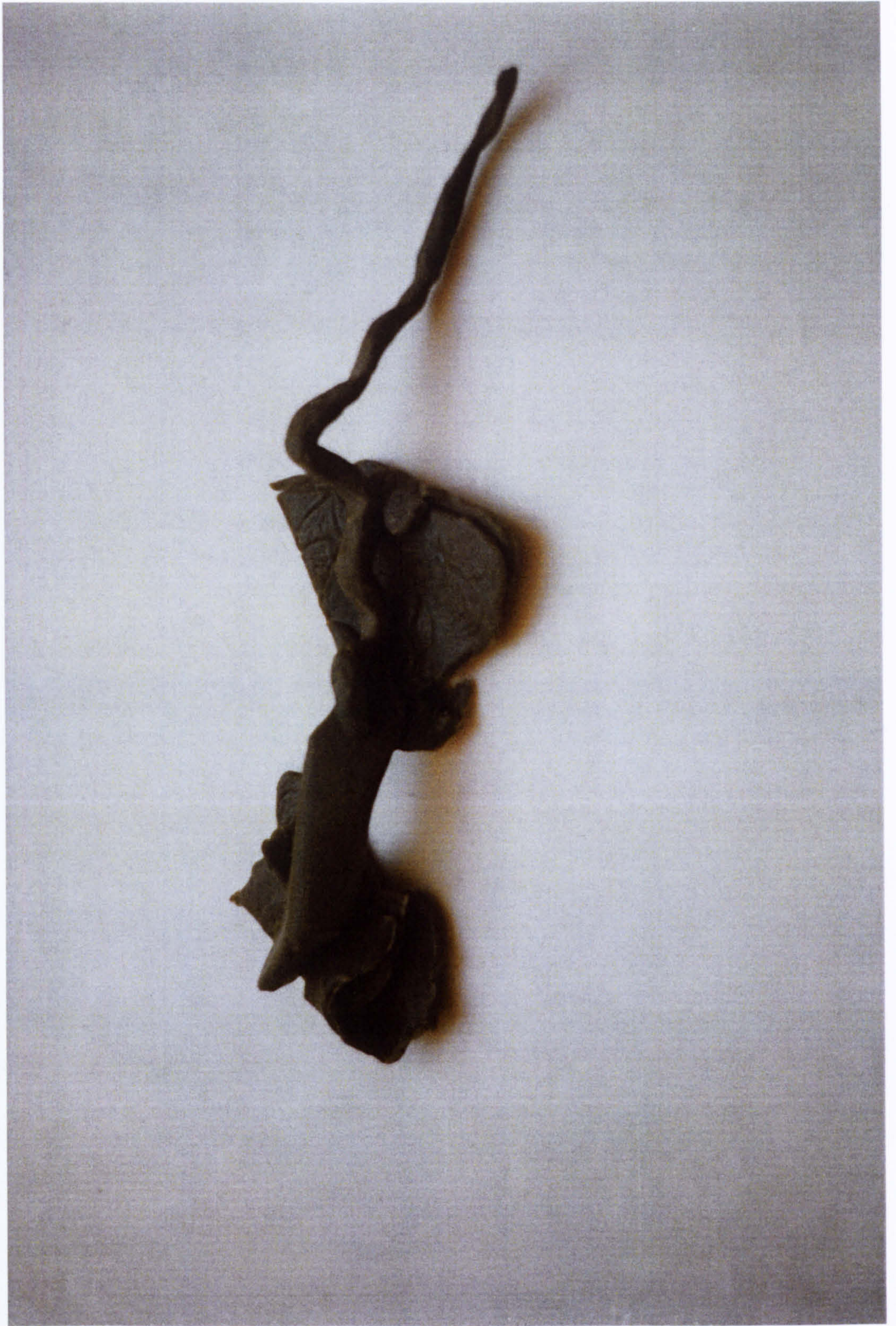
VI. Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World: Stage Three (Bronze) 18 x 20 x 9 cm





VII. Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World: Stage Four (Bronze) 13 x 23 x 11.5 cm





VIII. Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World: Stage Five (Wax) 5 x 31 x 10 cm





IX. Foundry 'Burning out' Lost Wax Method





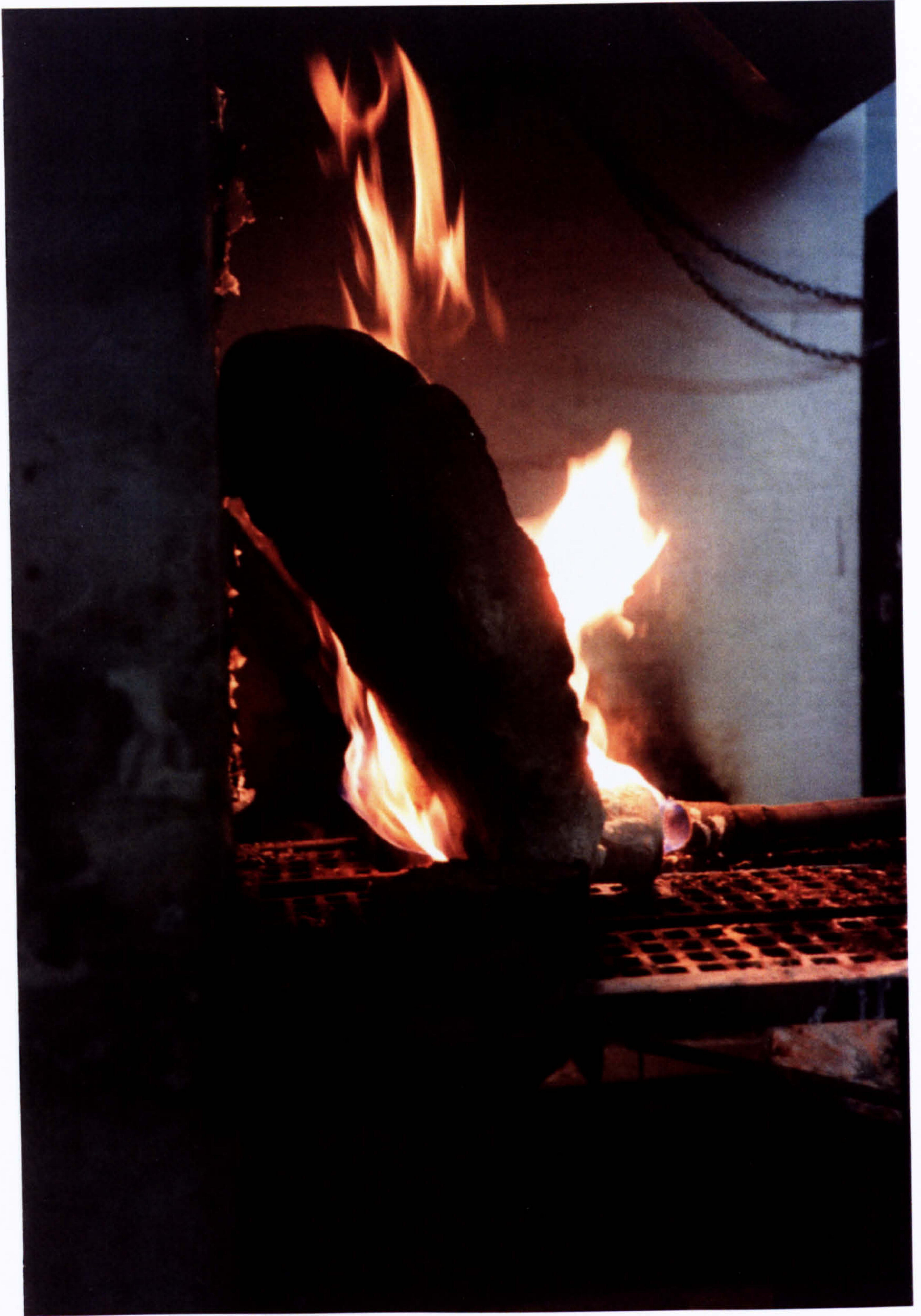
X. Assemblage of the Human Body [Turning] (Black Pigment and Water) 223 x 105 cm





XI. Shell (Clay) 21 x 45 x 55 cm  
171





XII. Shell (Wax Mould/Ceramic Shell) Burning Out Failed Cast 22 x 46 x 56 cm  
172





XIII. Shell (Bronze) Investment Method from Plaster Cast 21 x 45 x 55cm





XIV. Shell (Bronze) 21 x 45 x 55 cm





XV. I Raise my Head (Clay) Preparing Plaster Moulds





XVI. I Raise My Head (Bronze) 51 x 27 x 13 cm





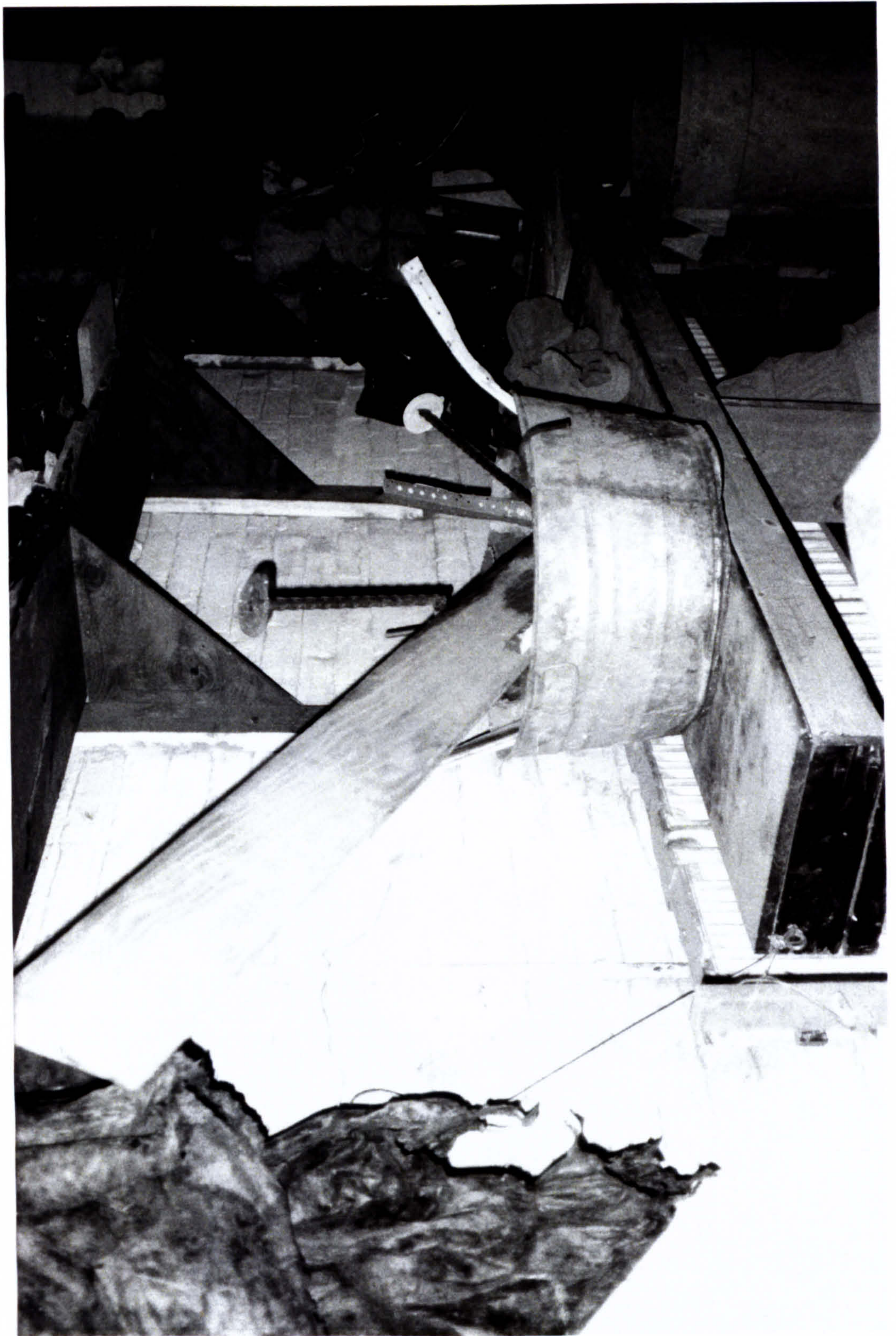
XVII. I Raise My Head (Bronze) 51 x 27 13 cm  
177





XVIII. I Raise My Head (Bronze) 51 x 27 x 13 cm Spacex Gallery





XIX. Flora (Assemblage, Wood and Metal) 92 x 61 x 99 cm





XX. Mitre (Plaster) 46 x 49 x 28 cm





XXI. Mitre (Bronze) 46 x 49 x 28 cm





XXII. Mitre (Bronze) 46 x 49 x 28 cm Spacex Gallery





XXIII. Dürer's Wing (Bronze) 9 x 24 x 17 cm; Hoffman's Breast I (Bronze) 9 x 33 x 13 cm; Hoffmann's Breast II (Bronze) 13 x 31 x 14 cm





XXIV. Macdougall Alley  
184





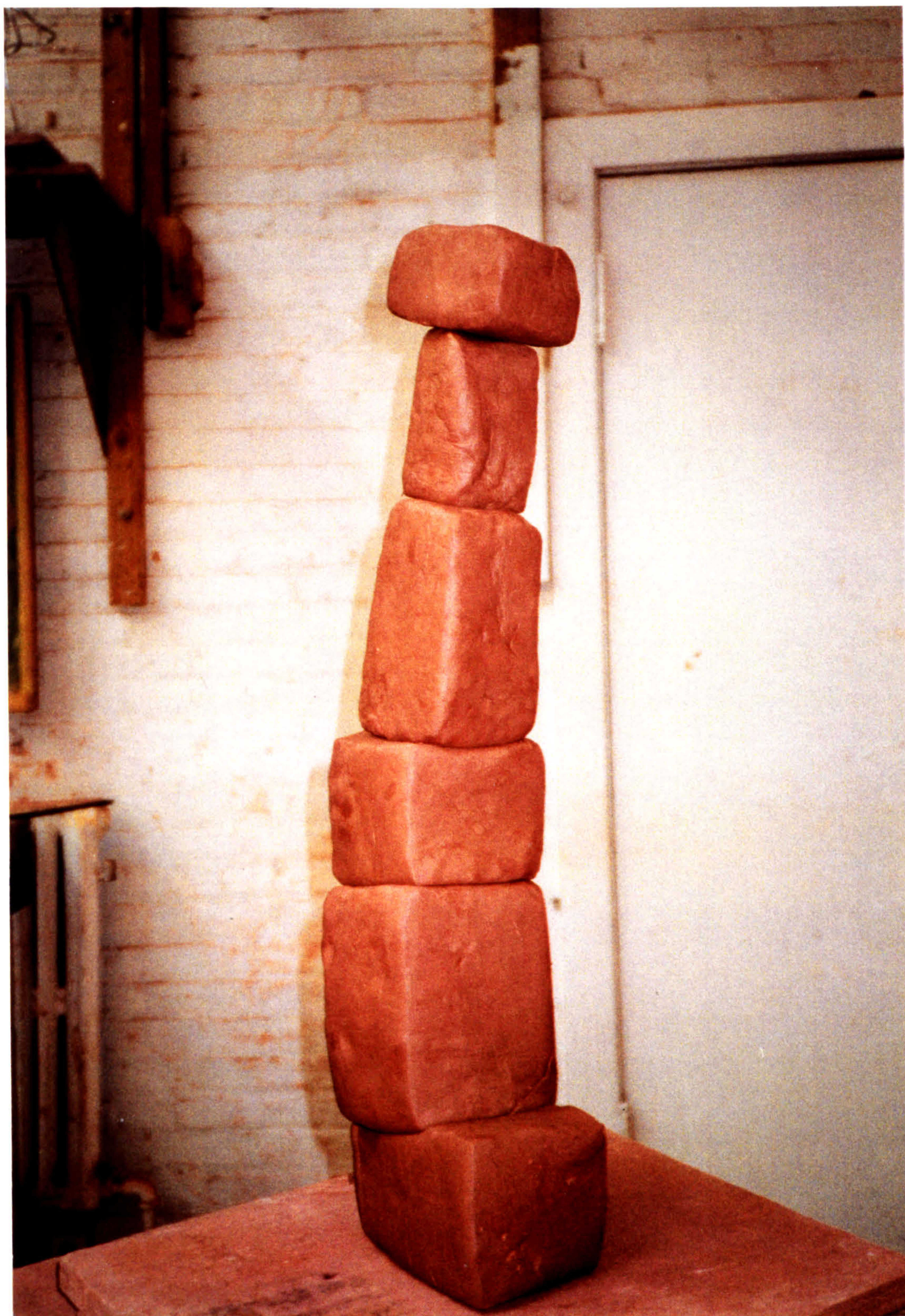
XXV. Plaster 41 x 26 x 19 cm and Tracks





XXVI. Football Head (Clay) 61 x 21 x 21





XXVII. Witness (Clay) 107 x 20 x 26 cm





XXVIII. Voyeur (Clay) 90 x 18 x 22 cm





XXIX. Voyeur/Witness (Clay) 90 x 18 x 22cm/107 x 20 x 26 cm





**XXX. Exhibition General View, Front and Right**





XXXI. Exhibition Left, Shell Series, Assemblage of the Human Body, Five Articles of Separation. Show Case 160 x 46 x 46cm





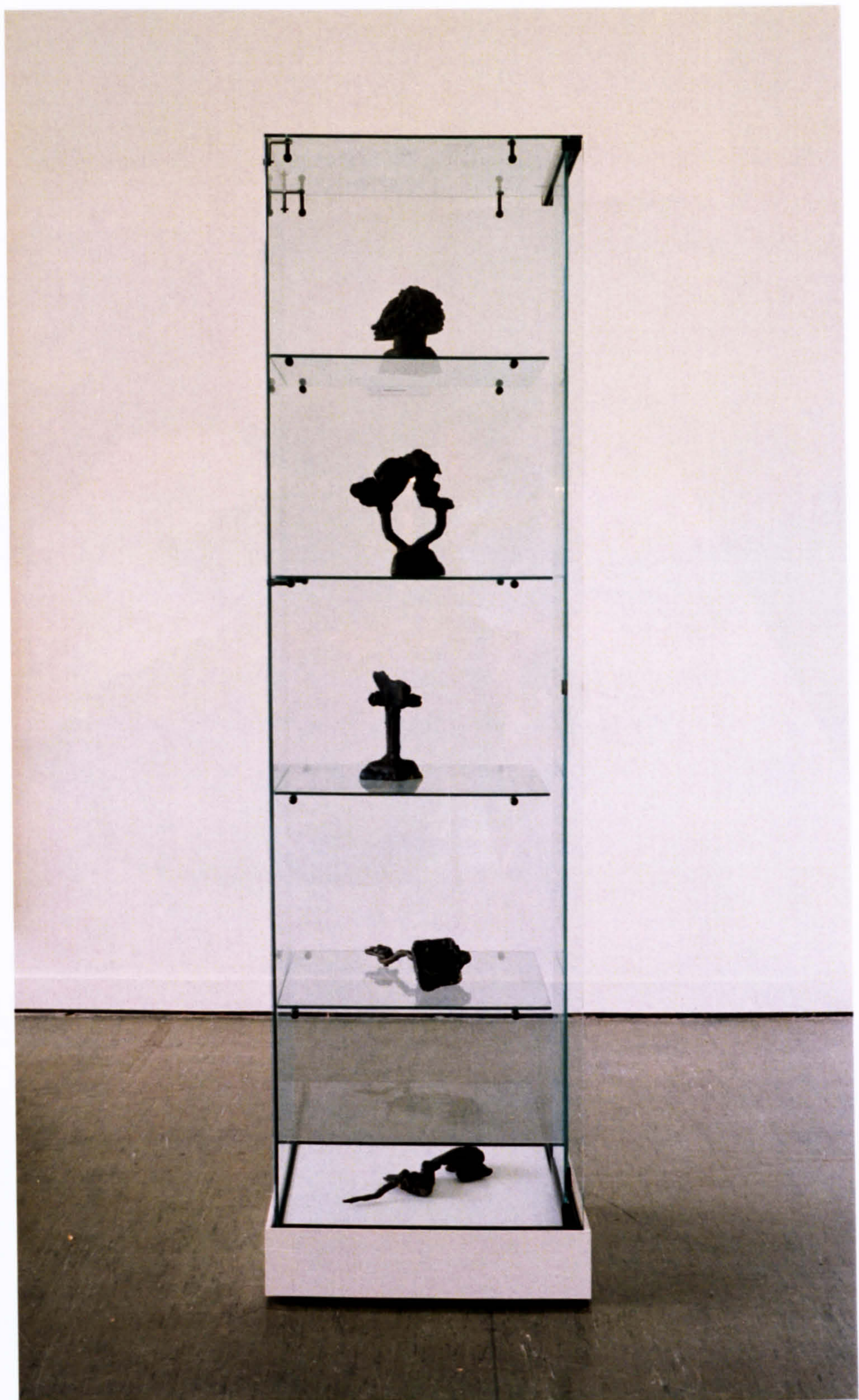
XXXII. Assemblage of the Human Body, Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World





XXXIII. Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World. Sc. 160 x 46 x 46cm





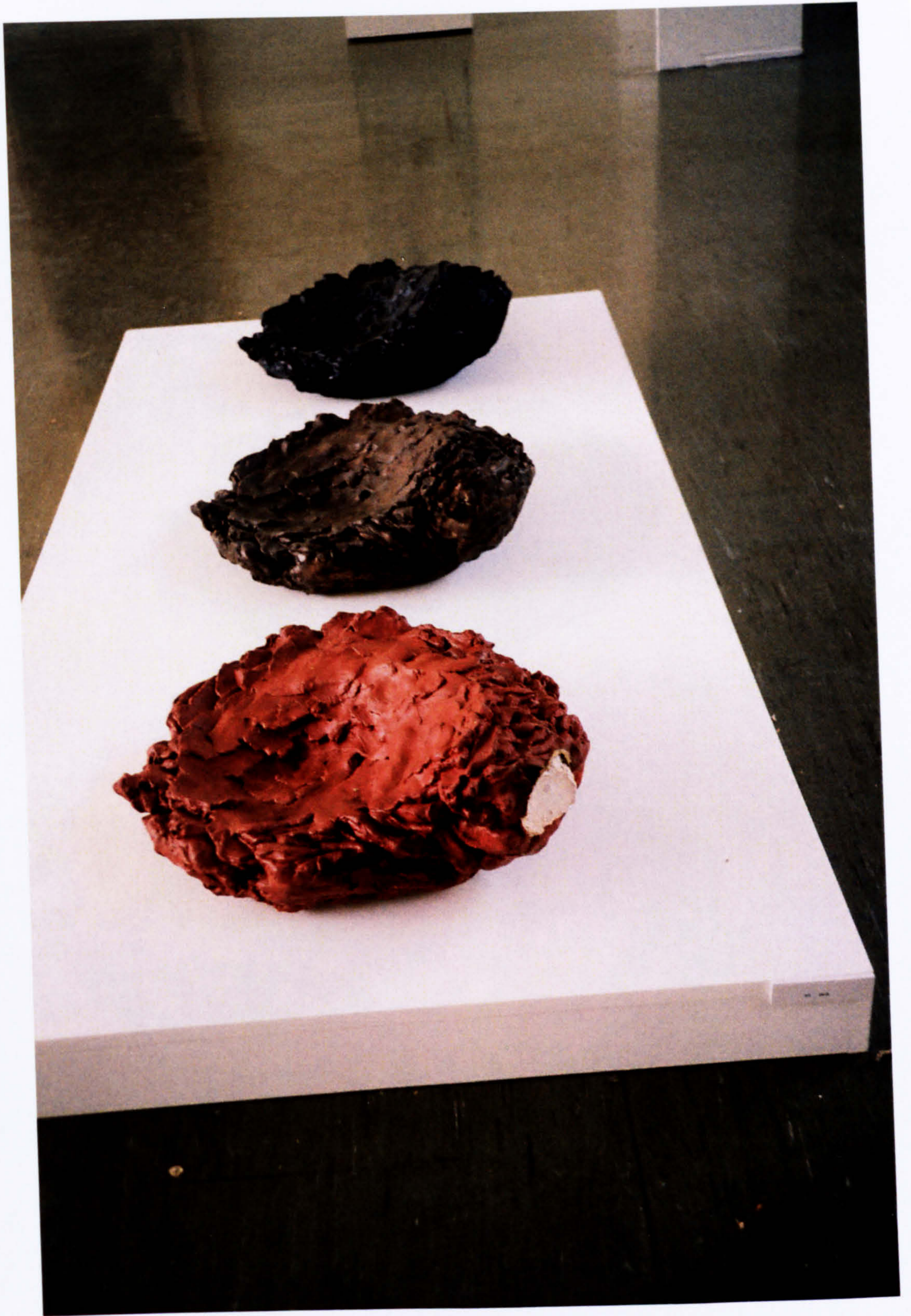
XXXIV. Five Articles of Separation from the Natural World. Sc. 160 x 46 x 46cm





XXXV. Shell Series (Wax, Bronze) Plinth 183 x 61 x 91 cm





XXXVI. Shell Series (Wax, Bronze)





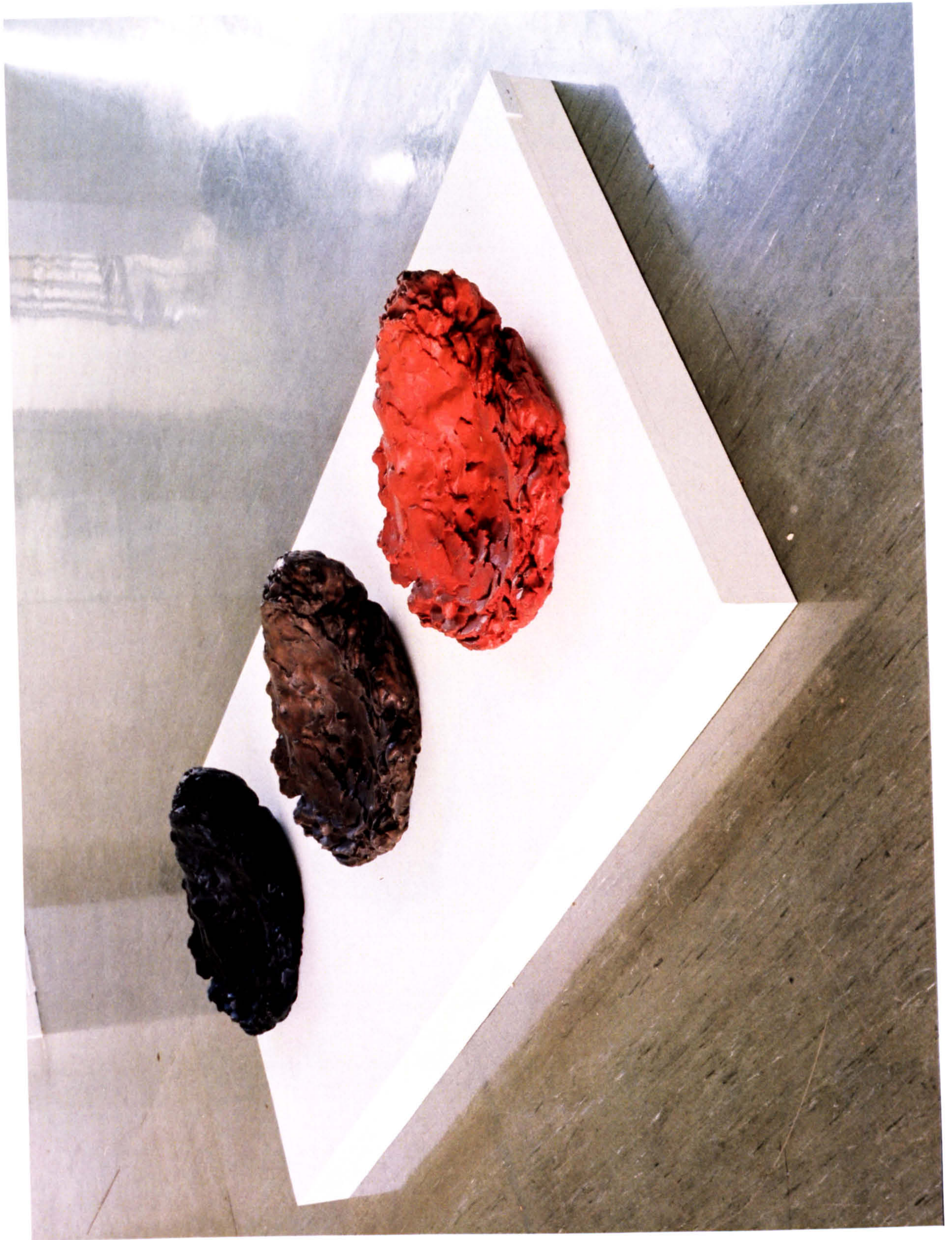
XXXVII. Shell Series (Wax, Bronze)





XXXVIII. Shell Series. Front (Wax, Bronze)





XXXIX. Shell Series. Left (Wax, Bronze)





XL. Shell Series. Left (Wax, Bronze)





XLI. Shell Series. Left (Wax, Bronze)





XLII. Failed Shell Cast and Fibreglass Case for Wax in Rubber Mould. Pl.183 x 91 x 10cm





XLIII. Five Articles of Separation. Voyeur/Witness in Background





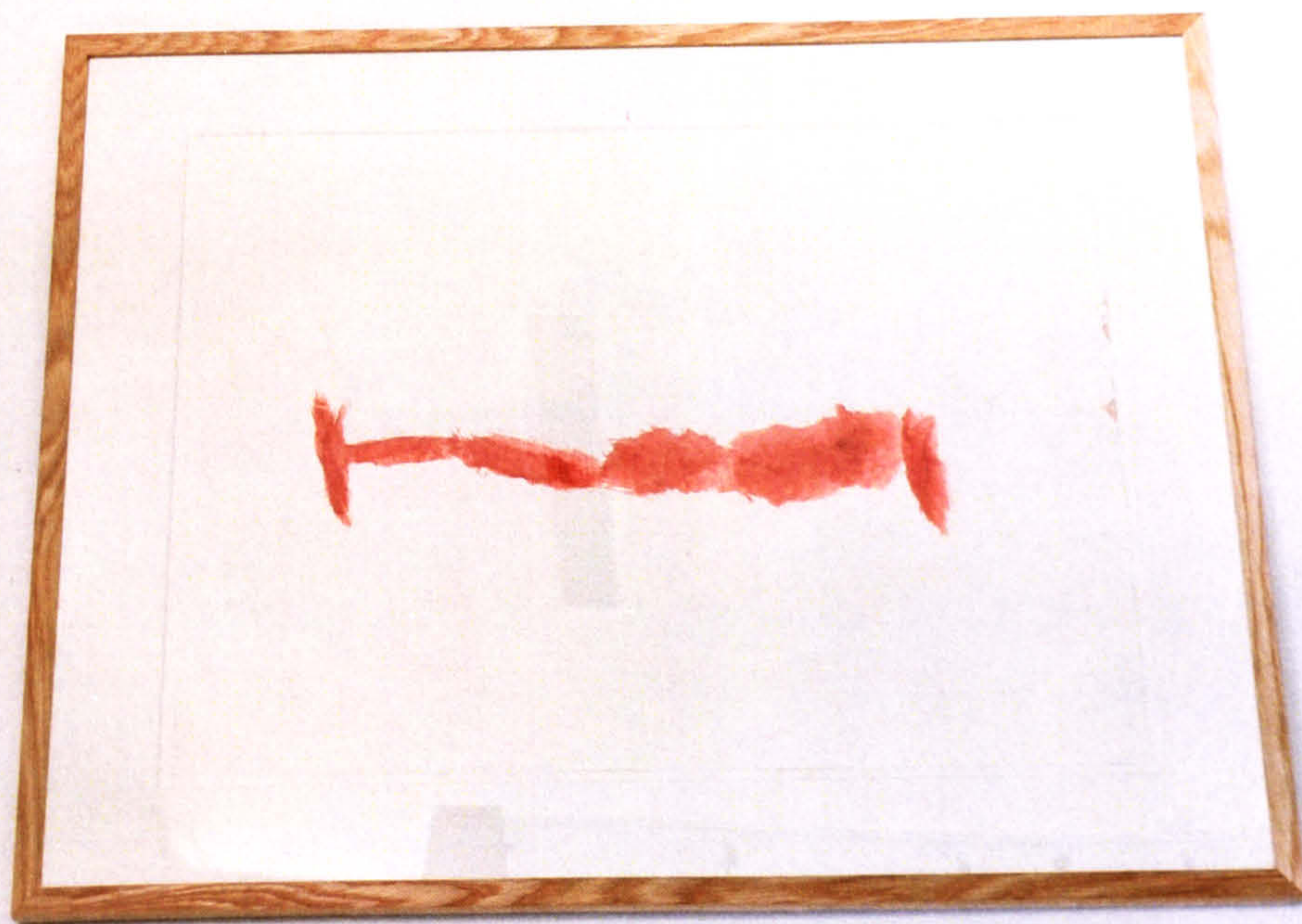
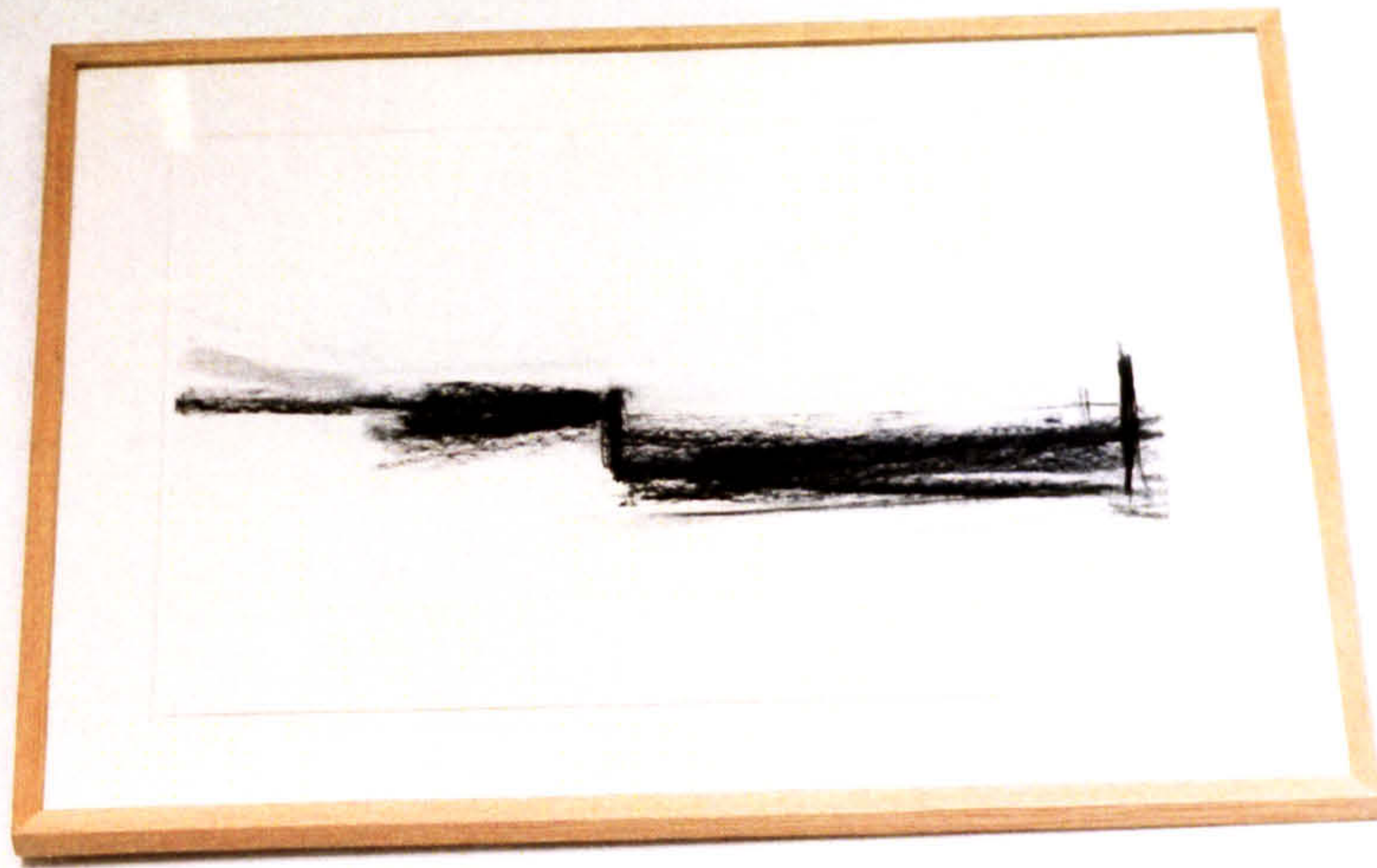
XLIV. Shell Series. Five Articles, Dürer's Wing and Hoffmann's Breast in Show Case (Bronze). Twin Mitre (Bronze, Plaster)





XLV. Twin Mitre, Voyeur, Witness 2 Drawings (Red Pigment, Black Chalk) 76 x 56 cm





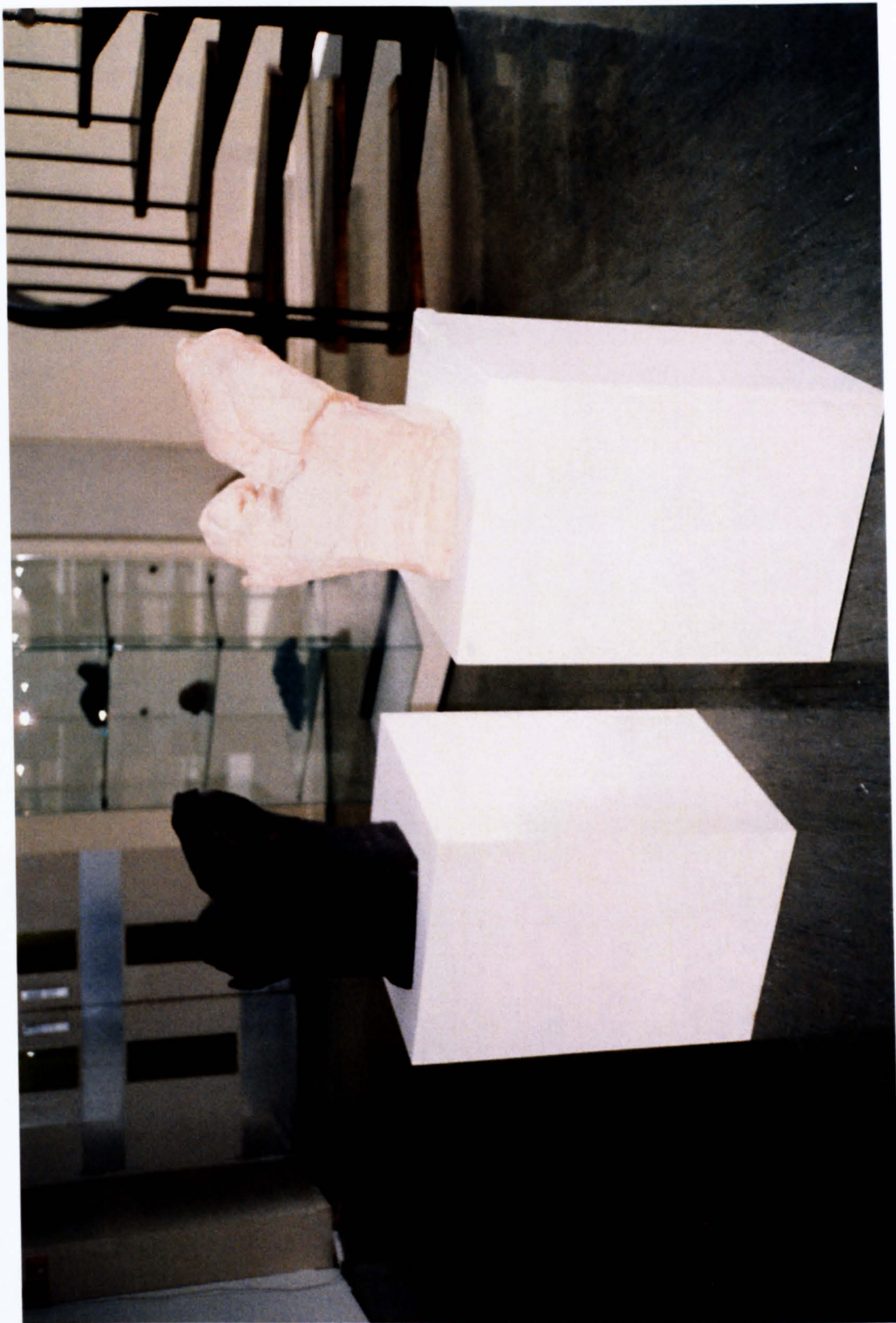
XLVI. Voyeur, Witness 2 Drawings (Red Pigment, Black Chalk) 76 x 56 cm





XLVII. Dürer's Wing and Hoffmann's Breast I. Hoffmann's Breast II. Sc. 152 x 61 x 46cm





XLVIII. Twin Mitre. Dürer's Wing Show Case 152 x 61 x 46cm





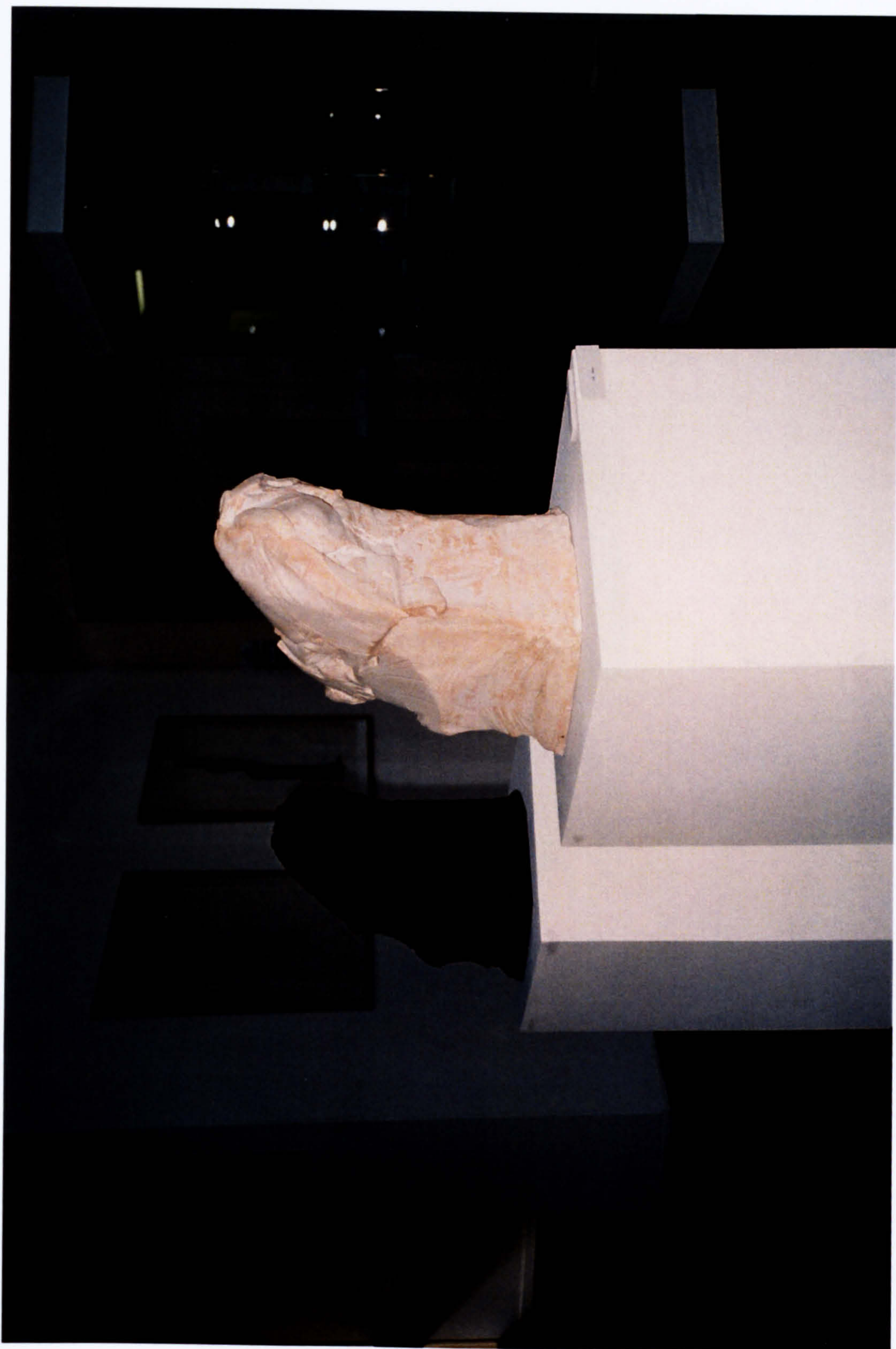
L. Twin Mitre (Bronze, Plaster)





LI. Twin Mitre (Plaster, Bronze)





LII. Twin Mitre (Plaster, Bronze)





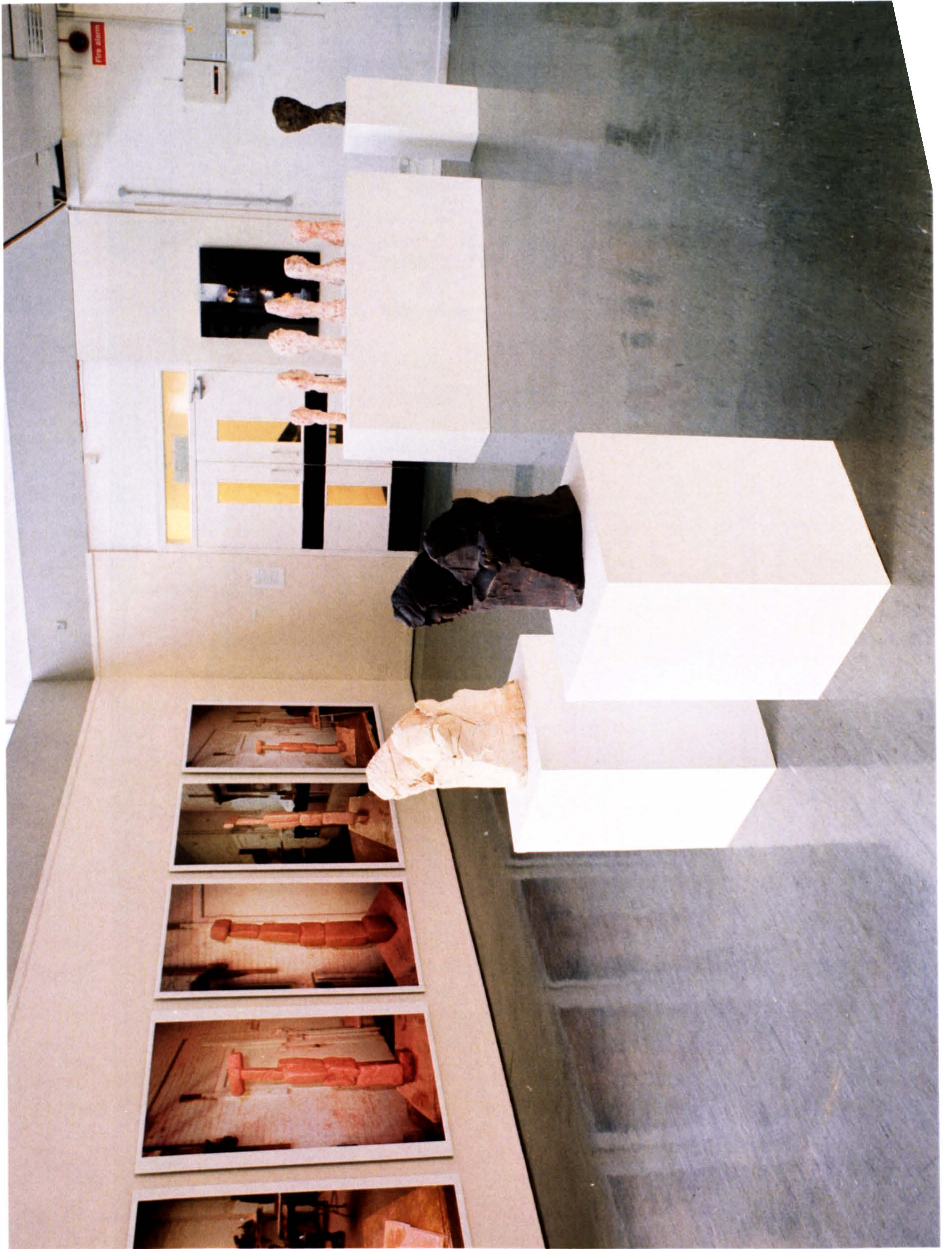
LIII. Twin Mitre, I Raise My Head, in Background





LIV. Voyeur/Witness, Dürer's Wing, Mitre, I Raise My Head





LV. Mitre, Voyeur/Witness, I Raise My Head





LVI. Mitre, Voyeur/Witness, I Raise My Head, Shell





LVII. Voyeur/Witness. Mitre





LVIII. Voyeur/Witness, I Raise My Head





LIX. I Raise My Head (Plaster Series) Left View, Plinth 183 x 61 x 91cm





LX. I Raise My Head (Plaster Series) Right View





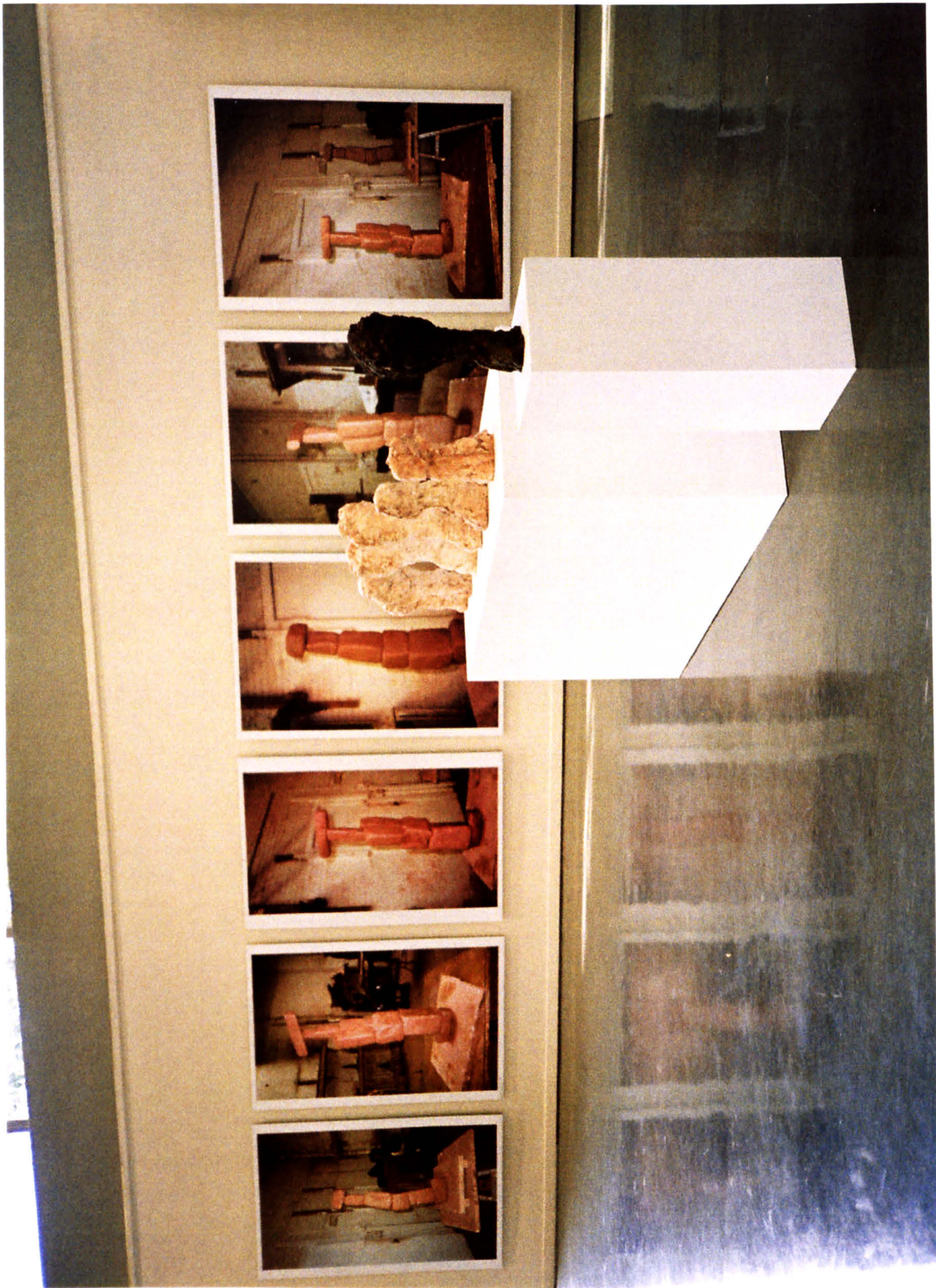
LXI I Raise My Head (Plaster Series) Voyeur/Witness





LXII. I Raise My Head (Plaster Series) End View





LXIII. I Raise My Head (Plaster and Cast Bronze) Voyeur Witness (6.Laser Prints) 175 x 125cm





LXIV. I Raise My Head (Cast Bronze and Plaster Series) Voyeur/Witness (Laser Prints)





LXV. I Raise My Head (Bronze and Plaster Series)





LXVI. I Raise My Head (Plaster Series and Cast Bronze)





LXVII. I Raise My Head (Cast Bronze) and Burning Out (Laser Print) 100 x 76cm





LXVIII. I Raise My Head (Cast Bronze), Mitre in Background. Plinth 91 x 35 x 35cm



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## RESEARCH TRAINING

### RESEARCH SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES ATTENDED:

- 1998/99 :** Workshops for Post-graduate students in Art and Design, University of Plymouth MPhil/PhD Students and Supervisors Research Seminars: Site Space Location Place  
The Art Historian's Group Research Seminars  
  
'Time and the Image' Seminar, Birkbeck College  
  
Conference 'The Resistance of a Poem' Centre for Research in modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University  
Conference, 'Rethinking Genius', Institute of Contemporary Art  
Symposium, 'A Fight for the Object', Institute of Contemporary Art  
Matrix IV Conference, The London Institute  
  
Seminar papers : 'Automatism as Pure Process', : Site Space Location Place Research Group.  
'Work in progress', The Art Historian's Group  
'Automatism Now', "Intertextual Interrogations" Southwest Humanities Symposium, University of Exeter
- 1999/2000:** The Art Historian's Group Research Seminars  
'Time and the Image' Seminars Birkbeck College  
The Slade Lectures  
  
Conference 'The Poetics of Materiality' Institute of Contemporary Art  
  
Seminar papers: "The Uncanniness of Freud's Compulsion to Repeat in 'The Spiral' of Italo Calvino" in "The Complexity Debate", paper given at Dartington College of Arts  
'Freud and Others' The Art Historian's Group
- 2000/2001:** The Art Historian's Group Research Seminars  
'Practice and Trauma'  
'21' Exhibition, Spacex Gallery (Bronze sculpture)
- 2001/2002:** PhD studies suspended due to illness
- 2002/2003:** The Art Historian's Group Research Seminars  
  
Conferences attended: 'Newman Now' Symposium Tate Modern,  
'Encountering Eva Hesse' Conference CentreCATH with Tate Modern  
'Flashing into the Shadows: The Artists Film 1966 – 76'. Topologies, Seriality, Performance, Counter Narratives  
Psychoanalysis Seminar. CentreCATH and Tate Britain  
The All New Artwriting. Tate Britain



In the Shadow of Empire. Debate (inIVA) 'Changing States: Contemporary Art and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' Tate Britain

'The Way of Love' Luce Irigaray. Institute of Contemporary Art  
Psychoanalysis and the Modern World. Jaqueline Rose with Marina Warner,  
Purcell Room

'Hurry up it's time' 'The Waste(d) Land' Gustav Metzger, Tate Britain

Publications and conference papers:

Newman Now, Symposium Tate Modern, contribution to webcast discussion  
with Mel Bochner, Thierry de Duve.

100,000 Newspapers. A Public-Active Installation by Gustav Metzger. Written  
intervention.

**2003/2004:** PhD studies suspended due to illness

**2004/2005:** The Art Historian's Group Research Seminars  
Faculty of Arts, Research Studies, Post-Graduate Workshop, 'Mapping the  
Field'.

Research Methods Workshop 'Voices'

University of Westminster, 'Democratising Space'.

The French Institute, Forum for European Philosophy, 'Epicurus'.

Tate Modern, 'Art Since 1900', Debate.

Seminar paper given to The Art Historian's Group 'Kaleidoscope; Art and  
History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'.

**2005/2006:** Art and Architecture Research Seminars

Courtauld Institute Research Forum, *Art Switched on: A Symposium on Dan  
Flavin*