

## ***MEMO***

FROM: Doug Hall

TO: Advanced Projects

RE: Some reasons for why it is that I gave you all that reading (in a studio class)

DATE: April 18, 1999

Last week I asked you for a response to my question as to the effectiveness (or not) of my combining readings with critique. Based on some of the responses, I realized that the reasons for my having done this are still unclear. I think it's important that I attempt to clarify my thinking.

Here's what my interests were not: in proving that a relationship exists between philosophy and art-making. My concerns are with art and theory's relationship to it and not with philosophy. Furthermore, I didn't think I could add anything to the art/philosophy debate beyond that which has already been expressed by others (Arthur Danto and Joseph Kosuth being two examples among many). My interests had to do with something more specific. I was seeing in the work of some of our advanced (and not so advanced) students certain tendencies that I also saw in the work of more established, younger artists and I was eager to find more appropriate ways of thinking and talking about those tendencies. Much (but certainly not all) of the work tends to be fluid, anti-heroic, self-conscious, porous, transparent, superficial, fragmentary, heterogeneous, corporeal, anti-formal (or is it hyper-formal?), organic, cynical, ironic, depleting, jaded, coy, smart (or is it smart-ass?), non-visual, post-grammatical, anti-aesthetic (or is it hyper-aesthetic?), irrational, psychological, dumb, etc. These descriptions aren't meant to be pejorative but descriptive.

So my question is this: was this way of working merely stylistic, a convention of the time or did it represent something else, perhaps more interesting and, if so, where could one look to find a theoretical basis for this work—something that could help raise the level of our discussions? Since I am one of those who believes that art is part of something else, that it reflects broader epistemological concerns, I thought it might be useful to look at

precedents for a kind of thinking that would support the ideas reflected in the work that many of you were doing. I reasoned that I might find examples by looking at some particular philosophical, theoretical, and critical writings. I was encouraged to do this through earlier readings I had done, particularly the work of Martin Jay (*Downcast Eyes*) and Jonathon Crary (*Techniques of the Observer*) who had suggested some of the places where I might look. I had no intention of conducting a philosophy course in which I would provide you with scholarly and definitive exegesis of philosophical texts (something which I'm neither interested in nor qualified for). Rather I wanted to use these writers as reference points and as possible sources for developing more appropriate analogies and metaphors for discussing (and understanding) your work (and mine too for that matter). I decided to look where Martin Jay starts: with the occularcentrism of Descartes and to proceed from there by noting tendencies away from Cartesian rationalism toward a way of looking that was less "reasonable" (I decided to call it counter-rational) in which the act of looking and knowing were problematized, partially by virtue of their being seen as corporeal not just mental. In other words, I wanted to put the I (eye) back in the body and introduce the concept of doubt, which, I suspected, laid the groundwork for heterogeneity and, thus, for multiple interpretations.

To clarify the nature of the problem, I had you read Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood*, an essay which, although elegantly reasoned and written, I found to be idealistic, rigid, and formal. I saw it as representing the rationalist (and closed) position. It also pointed out some interesting problems, some of which we've referred to throughout the semester. One stands out. How, he asks, can we make any aesthetic judgments if we can't establish the criteria by which such judgments can be made? He argues that as soon as you no longer agree on particular qualities and grammars based on materials, you erode the boundaries that separate artistic disciplines, creating a theatrical rather than aesthetic space. Like Kant, he searches (in vain I believe) for a unifying, homogeneous set of rules by which we can account for aesthetic pleasure. And once accounted for, he wants this visual experience to be mystical, essential, and transcendent. The obvious problem for us is what to do with all that work that doesn't function in this way, which is the work that many of you (us) are doing.

I then suggested that in our time, which seems to be all about visibility and surface, there is an accompanying distrust of the visual and suspicion about the rationalizing capacity of illumination. I tried to illustrate this point through two presentations. One was by using a long excerpt from *Blow Up* and the other was by pointing out the difference between the illuminating light of rationalism in Vermeer and the obliterating (and obfuscating) light in Camus' *Stranger*. I also referred to a painting by Caravaggio and to the opening scene from Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (suggested to me by Sean Bluechel) as a way to discuss the role darkness might play in our understanding. Looking ahead, I thought this established a basis for thinking about Bataille's conflation of the sun's brightness with the body's internal darkness and about his switching of the organs of reason and communication (eyes, ears, and mouth) with those of excretion and sexuality (anus, vagina, penis).

I don't think it's necessary to go through all of the authors and supporting materials to discuss how they fit into this study. If you were paying attention, you can do that on your own. For me, certain issues were made more clear through the readings and other supporting materials (films, videotapes, etc.). For example, the problems with perspectival looking (what Victor Burgin termed the cone of vision) were clarified. Persectivalism assumes that that which is knowable is out there and material. Because it's outward looking it can't account for a shifting subject nor for that which is interior, coporeal, and psychical. Both Crary and Panofsky also shed light (speaking of visual metaphors of illumination) on this. My hope was that the readings would help establish a broader context and an expanded vocabulary (one that we shared) for describing the uncertainty that arises when the distinctions between ourselves as viewing subjects and viewed objects have been blurred or erased. These notions of blurring of inside and out/of me and you (or what Benjamin might call porosity) take on different implications in various writings. I'm thinking of Raymond Carver's *Why Don't You Dance?* and Kafka's *The Hunger Artist*, among others. As artists we are strengthened—made better artists—by broadening our theoretical understanding of the issues that arise through our representations.

From the readings, one could gain a (little) better understanding of the philosophical precedents for this dilemma. I reasoned that one way (among many) to approach this was

through an investigation into the idea of “bodily knowledge” which I saw contrasted with “ideal knowledge”, a product of Western liberal humanism. I wanted to see where this shift occurred. I found this in Schopenhauer’s work (reinforced by Sluga’s presentation and other readings about Schopenhauer). In class I pointed out how Schopenhauer’s Will might have a relationship to Kant’s Thing in Itself. Both seemed to refer to a kind of knowing that resisted rationalization. I further realized how much Schopenhauer’s ideas of The Will corresponded to Freud’s notion of the Unconscious, although we only noted this in passing. We also observed how this idea of The Will becomes celebrated in Nietzsche, as opposed to something to escape through the elevated and liberating experience of art as it does for Schopenhauer. In Nietzsche and even more so in Bataille darkness becomes a means to knowing (or maybe it’s that knowability has become so derationalized that true knowledge is both impossible and irrelevant). I was particularly interested in Bataille’s idea of The Formless as a way of thinking about art. I’d first learned about it from Nathan Weber last year. In a way, I thought it a possible antidote to the formalism of Michael Fried and others. After thinking about it more and after having read how this concept was being (mis)used by Rosalyn Krauss, Yves Alain Bois, and others I was less optimistic. In their hands, it seemed that what was liberating about Bataille’s ideas had become categorical, dogmatic, and defining. But I do see how, in our *own* hands, it can broaden an understanding of the art of our time. Such notions as depletion, abject, debased, sublime, corporeal take on expanded meanings when viewed in relation to Bataille’s “definitions”.

I’m not going to fall into the trap of trying to sum all of this up, to fold it into a neat package. Pretending that after a few brief, cursory readings we are suddenly capable of formulating a fixed and coherent way of looking at and discussing works of art would be presumptuous. It would also be anathema to the heterogeneous approach I want to encourage and which has been supported by the readings and our discussions in class. Knowledge isn’t fixed. Neither, by the way, is ignorance. Walter Benjamin wrote in *One Way Street*: “Fools lament the decay of criticism. For its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was possible to adopt a standpoint.” He goes on and says that commercial advertising has replaced criticism and concludes with a question that he then

answers (ambiguously): “What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt.” And that’s where I end my ramble, looking into that same fiery pool which is both beautiful and, perhaps for some, a little bit frightening.