



PRINT November 1982

## THE DARK SIDE OF THE BRIGHT LIGHT

*Artforum has always acknowledged the seminal role of artists who are also critics. We are fully confident of Mr. Lawson's position within this tradition. Because such a position can be complex, it must be noted that several of the artists illustrated here exhibit with the same gallery as Mr. Lawson.*

—Eds., (*Artforum*, October 1981)

**THE QUESTION STILL NAGS.** Why did the editors find it necessary to tag that little caveat onto the end of my last essay? It is not as though *Artforum* is a stranger to polemics; after all, its reputation as the most vital of American art journals is grounded in its history of publishing texts by artists attempting to locate the meaning of what they do within a critical framework. Indeed, I would argue that *Artforum's* brief history, since its beginnings in the early '60s, has mapped the complex intertwinings of an art practice caught on the watershed of a momentous change. So what has happened that suddenly we are worrying about market repercussions? Has the debate over commodity reification and the art object that dominated serious discussion of art in the late '60s atrophied to the level of gallery gossip, or have we uncovered a symptom that the discussion is entering a more complex phase? All of the work that has emerged to face the ending of the Modernist paradigm has been concerned, at base, with the problem of authority—both the authority of the individual act, and the institutional authority that act may reveal or conceal. But whereas the early work could succeed by a bare-bones epistemology, an absurdist reductivism serving to point to ideological contradictions, the work of a more advanced (in time) period must take into account a vastly more sophisticated defense (oppositional artists and critics can no longer assume, for example, that they are among the few who have read Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*). The issues central to that argument now revolve around awkward problems like the presentation and distribution of ideas and art in an increasingly spectacularized society in which critique is cynically appropriated as part of the show. Any coherent argument of dissent is

quickly decontextualized (even . . . assimilated), shown to be a shrill fragment of a greater whole which is presided over by the benign wisdom of greater security for better business. In such a situation critical thought, in all its manifestations, falters: a terrible uncertainty about its position is manifest. Too much is reduced to a superficial level, and on that level everything, every action may be tainted: no matter what one does, villainy is suspected. Distinctions can no longer be made with confidence; hype and the genuine promotion of ideas can seem indistinguishable. Few can tell who or what is exerting control, and so “the art world” is suffused by a general unease which is disavowed or ignored only by the most opportunistic.

At the risk of further irritating those who find my insistent subjectivity in these essays an intolerable intrusion (because it upsets a desire for an acquiescent coherence, because it refuses the tyranny of specialization—that white collar equivalent of the division of labor?) let me clarify further the editors’ statement, spell out the larger dilemma to which it points. My work revolves around a few basic procedures—collecting information, sifting and editing it, and then representing it in a variety of media. It is the variety, and disparateness, of media that seems to cause trouble, at least in part because of what it reveals about the means of distribution available to an artist, and how these means are controlled and are controlling. The part of my work that takes the form of paintings is handled—represented—by a commercial gallery, Metro Pictures. Another part is criticism and appears in various magazines, most notably this one. A third part, coming somewhere between the other two but perhaps less individualistic in appearance, is the activity represented by *Real Life Magazine*, which is an irregular publication of texts, verbal and photographic, that examine art, film, and related media from the perspective of artists whose work addresses the intersection of these areas in the culture at large. This refusal to settle down and be one thing or another—that is central to my activity as an artist. For it is precisely through the expediency of naming and categorizing that the culture entraps us, gives us an identity that can then be monitored. Those professional critics who isolate one aspect of my work and find it deficient miss the point, but in missing it, illuminate it.

[SUBSCRIBE NOW and get immediate digital access to the current issue, our complete archive, and a year of Artforum delivered to your door—starting at only \\$50 a year.](#)

As an example of this kind of piecemeal dismissal one might refer to Donald B. Kuspit’s review of my most recent solo exhibition (published here in the summer issue). In that review Kuspit chose to attack the paintings by attacking the writing, and to that end isolated part of an article from *Real Life Magazine* (ignoring its contextual explanation as a text written to accompany an exhibition of paintings, many of which contradicted it, a text then published as a preface to an issue of the magazine devoted to fiction), to construct a simple theory that he could then demolish. This isolation of a fragment of my work means to explain the painting, but does so by explaining something else. As a result the work itself is trivialized, reduced to a mere token of exchange, good (or bad) on the free market of ideas.

By no means do I intend any special pleading by this; my own case is simply a convenient and quick example of a tendency that has been with us for some time. A more complete example, and one which merits a fuller discussion than I can afford here, is to be found in the career of Robert Smithson, a career whose full ambition is still strenuously resisted. Over and over a fragment of his work will be examined in isolation in order to minimize or deny the impact of his larger

enterprise. Working during the period when it was first becoming apparent that the Modernist era was closing down, Smithson participated in the renewed attempts by artists to map out a nonauratic, nonauthoritarian, critically discursive understanding of what activities could henceforth be considered to result in art. Smithson was the first of his generation to attempt to fully articulate the idea that the work of art was a product of a critical subjectivity addressing many different kinds of coded information, visual and textual (literary). His ambition was to expand the idea of accepted art practice in such a way as to make its discursive nature more evident. Deliberately nonauratic and nonhierarchic, his work was diffuse and stubbornly quizzical, a practice at one with Jean-Luc Godard's dictum that one should not make political art, but make art politically, which is to say dialectically. By shifting attention away from the presentation of a well-crafted object in the gallery to a broader nexus of concerns and activities, Smithson fractured the auratic pretensions of the art object, made it dependent on a complex discourse which included travel, gathering information and material, a certain amount of transportation and construction, and the writing and publishing of an "explanatory" text. The finished art object, the sculpture viewed in the gallery, then became a negative center, the vortex of an ever-widening spiral of activities—its presence, its context, and the assumptions behind that context all brought into question as the absurdities of the artist's mushrooming chain of validations became apparent.

The point about Smithson's practice is that it was aimed at revealing the conventions that frame meaning to be less than natural, and that the appearance of naturalness, the naturalness of categories and inventories, is culture's disguise. The Nonsites and Earthworks referred to the structures of the market and the discourse of the museum, indicated their intertwined complicity; the formal sculptures, in an interesting twist, then took this highly contextualized activity and returned it to the more abstract realm of esthetics. Locating itself in the position of a much-desired synthesis, the writing, which addressed but did not fulfill such expectations, focused on the field of art criticism. By mixing genres (esthetics, anthropology, and science fiction) and styles (from parody to visionary), Smithson muddied the waters, disrupting the flow of an art criticism that derives its authority in great measure from its apparent freedom from mediation and ideological content. Of course Smithson was not the only artist to attempt this sort of disruption at that time—Art & Language spoofed academic journalese in their own publications, and Robert Morris has continued to keep his parodies of art writing up-to-date. Nor was this kind of satire the only tactic—in the early '60s Donald Judd had made very effective use of the refusal of the idea of fairness as a useful notion of criticism, thereby underlining the arbitrary and fictionalized aspect of most judgments of good taste. What all this work has in common, what remains of its central motivation, is a rejection of criticism as explanation, a rejection of the entrapment of art in a net of overdetermined interpretation.

*. . . While many peasant populations, among whom scarcely the rudest practice of art has ever been attempted, have lived in comparative innocence, honour, and happiness, the worst foulness and cruelty of savage tribes have been frequently associated with fine ingenuities of decorative design; also, that no people has ever attained the higher stages of art skill, except at a period of its civilisation which was sullied by frequent, violent, and even monstrous crime; and lastly, that the attaining of perfection in art power has been hitherto, in every nation, the accurate signal of the beginning of its ruin.*

—John Ruskin, *Oxford Lectures on Art*, 1870

The corporate capitalism that developed after the Depression, a mixture of ideological superstructure, supranational finance, and the welfare state, is in a period of decline and change. We all know this: we know too well that lethargy of progressive entropy in which everything seems to grind slowly to a halt and thereby crack. In the current confusion the forces of reaction are succeeding to an alarming, if temporary, degree. We can see this very clearly in the economic and political spheres, but the same is happening in the arts, where the depleted stock of late Modernist ideology is still venerated by the progressive establishment and, simultaneously, the inflationary claims of those who would return to a bastardized version of the ideology of the early part of the century are eagerly touted by dreamers with a nostalgia for the gold standard of direct and unmediated expression.

This is why the re-emergence of figurative imagery in recent work has generated such passion. The critical establishment—old and new, left and right—is confounded by a situation in which the manipulation of the image implicit in all art has reached such a level of complexity that the usually thorny questions of intentionality and complicity seem impossibly muddled. It is generally agreed that all this new work is somehow concerned with the ways in which reality is represented and reformed through culturally determined imagery, and how that imagery is itself continually represented and reformed through the ongoing processes of art and the mass media. What still seems unclear to a surprising number of people is which artists know what they are doing and which don't, or don't care, and what position those who do know what they are doing actually take.

Given the bankruptcy of the dominant forms of Modernism, the idea of the avant-garde, with its mythos of perpetual change, has emptied out the whole system of Modern art by progressively eating away at all of the strategies and relationships possible in such a self-limiting system to the point where the work has become truly meaningless, and the power of negation essential to the functioning of an avant-garde practice is lost in a black hole created by that very practice. As this loss of power has become more and more evident the institutions of culture, the original enemies of the avant-garde, have come forward to protect it. The net result is that Modernist art is seen to be tamed, properly assimilated, and given permission to continue in a more proper, respectful manner. In such a deadlocked situation it is very clear that the marketplace might be seen as one of the only places left in which significant meaning can be thought to reside. Deciding to move in that direction, of course, is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is the ease with which reactionaries can co-opt the idea and make it their own, joyfully discovering the new in the very well entrenched and the fresh in what is clearly stagnant. But such a decision at least has the merit of facing up to a situation in which a bankrupt avant-garde has conspired, along with the media which have reported and explained its existence, to turn art into an equivalent of fashion. The search for the new has decayed into an unending desire for novelty, a seasonal succession of styles. The result has been to remove the threat of an observed discontinuity (it is reduced to a change of taste) and its replacement with the comforting and repressive subtext of “an unbroken tradition.”

As stated earlier, over the past twenty years or so critical writing has become a favored area of exploration for artists seeking paths out of the Modernist end game, for here, quite clearly, is an area untouched by the creeping sophistication that neutralized so much conventional avant-garde activity. A measure of the success of this tactic has been the failure to date of most professional

art writers to understand, explain, or assimilate these writings. Contradictions are happily discovered, lapses in logic gleefully pointed out, underlying meanings totally missed or glossed over. These critics eagerly lap up ideas of subversion in art and are willing to offer endless dissertations on the self-consciousness of any given individual's practice, but they never stop to consider their own practice as one ripe for a similar treatment. In short, a wide, contradictory discourse on the possibilities and conventions of art is available, but there has been barely a suggestion from these quarters on the equally complex field of writing about art, of representing art.

The situation is that most professional criticism has degenerated into an absurd exercise, an exchange of bland, "balanced" opinion whose sole purpose often seems to be descriptive—the validation of the exchange value of the work it pretends to discuss. A recent example of this kind of packaged information devised only to aid the digestion of half-baked ideas is to be found in the September 1982 issue of *Art in America*, devoted to "European Art." Here, with an array of stupefying categories which serve no useful discriminatory purpose, the American public is introduced to the new art of Europe in separate essays on French art, German art, Scandinavian art, and so on. Such an introduction is presented as authoritative—after all, it is the work of experts—but the information is so partial, so incomplete as to be virtually worthless. And it is presented as though nobody had ever questioned the linking of nationality to art production, as though nobody had ever doubted the usefulness of sweeping twenty years of activity by totally different generations with very different intentions and merits into a convenient whole. To read the bulk of material of this sort one must continually return to a primitive level of understanding, continually remind oneself that what has been written is most likely meant in the most straightforward, unthinking way. To these writers their medium is apparently pure, unencumbered with the various kinds of ideological baggage so easily perceived in, say, painting.

This enervating collapse shares characteristics with the art on which it feeds and with the larger, mass media into which it feeds. It is not just high culture that is withering—the idea telegraphed by the slogan that painting is dead—nor is it simply a matter of the vacuousness of the mass media. We are facing a more widespread contagion, with all forms of representation in danger of becoming inert and the free flow of real information and opinion stopped. Gradually the discourse of culture, which can offer a significant opportunity for the expression of dissent and negativity that is the essence of freedom, is replaced by a hollowed out, meaningless jabber, an eviscerated, dead thing which serves only too well as the genteel mask of an increasingly repressive society. So as long as this slough continues we must bear with a bleached-out art discourse dominated by despondent academics and morose poets who write as though mesmerized by the power they imagine they wield.

This collapse of meaning, which all too easily leads toward authoritarianism, is pervasive, we see it wherever we look: but perhaps nowhere is it more completely expressed than in the mass culture. Here it is the so-called free press (both printed and electronic) that has caused the most damage, indiscriminately overloading us with staggering amounts of information of all sorts until no one thing seems any different or any more important than any other. The least event is turned into a spectacle, while major economic and political events appear as staged and fictionalized as beauty pageants and game shows. Lip service is paid to the notion that a free society remains free

so long as it allows an exchange of informed opinion, but the critique we are offered remains one-dimensional, a neutered caricature of what is possible. The explanations are left partial, “uninteresting” details are glossed over, so that in the end meaning is further mystified.

The media’s relation to art is symptomatic in this regard, offering unnerving parallels to the situation in general. Here, in a realm of received ideas and comfortably familiar images, the art world is known as a place of wild parties and vicious intrigue, often on an international scale. Artists are represented as strange, given to bizarre behavior and funny clothes, but capable of tapping hidden depths which they plumb to form insightful/troubling/meditative/joyful/transcendent visions of life. Art and artists are used as props for the “creativity” of designer or photographer, as tokens of cultural value which handily play a double role, providing the shock of the new which inspires consumerism with the contradictory stability of a tradition. What we get are fictions woven from details which are themselves often less than true. In short, art is most often reduced to an equivalence with fashion, with the added gloss that it is understood that it is supposed to have “higher meaning.”

One of the most devastating historical examples of this kind of banalization is the treatment of Jackson Pollock in the original *Life* magazine, in 1949 and 1959. Here the image of the artist at work is transformed into an icon signifying the complete misappropriation of Pollock’s enterprise, an icon which is then used over the years as a recurring motif to help remind us of art’s dubious claims to seriousness. It is allowed some poetry, but its critical content is removed and the empty form is left looking pretty damn silly. Art is reduced to the spectacle of a grown man engaged in a manifestly daft gesture, and looking tortured about it. One of the great triumphs of Modernism—so easily trivialized, neutralized almost as it was made. This provides a convincing demonstration of the futility of attempting to counter the dead weight of representation (in art and of art) through the simple declaration of presence. that proud independence of the Abstract Expressionist generation. All too easily that necessary presence evaporates as the information is processed and disseminated through the media: all that is left is an empty sign, no more moving than the advertising images that flank it and come to dominate it.

Andy Warhol’s loving assault on the public aspect of the media, by which I mean its ability to transform and reduce individualism to an image, was once the great example of how an artist can work and survive, to a point. Nowadays his nonchalant posturing seems mannered, a fashion gone out of style, and indeed in many ways the media have caught up with him, making the suburban bohemia he now represents perfectly legitimate and safe. Now anybody with enough money can buy a loft and an attitude, and parade as an avant-gardist, but in the process Warhol’s parody has come unstuck. His presence no longer unsettles the media: he has been assimilated, swallowed whole.

Now a new generation has come along, one which has absorbed the lessons of these two very different artists. Part of this generation suffers from a hopeless longing for those apparently simpler times in which Pollock lived, when an artist could express himself (rarely herself) “directly” with paint. Despite an insistence on individuality, a drumbeat of personality, these new artists recognize the convenience of good packaging. Seamless presentations like the “transavantgarde,” “*Arte Cifre*,” “Naive Nouveau,” “New Wave,” and “The Wild Painters” abound—more show than substance. Essays are written, books published, but there remains a

remarkable dearth of solid information or theory about who or what belongs to any one grouping. Which is hardly surprising, since these artists are an essentially conservative group of painters, masquerading as a new wave, who favor the use of expressionist devices to record the tremblings of a sensitive subjectivity in the face of the imposing and implacable structures of history. Their work is supposedly private, individualistic, but is so in a nostalgic, historicist manner alien to contemporary experience.

But they are not totally lost in some never-never land of the imagination: they do belong to the latter part of the 20th century. They have learned from Warhol that no act—no matter how authentic or deeply felt—is accorded cultural meaning unless it is represented through the mass media. And they know that to attract the attention of the media they must be operatic, in order to create a space for the kind of fantasy only the media can fulfill. At the simplest level it can be said that these artists aim to short-circuit the conventional meanings of culture by overloading them, piling reference upon reference in a delirium of nay-saying—a not unfamiliar idea; the originality here lies in the strategy of presenting this negativity through the marketplace, the site of an earlier generation's worst fears and greatest loathings.

And so, with an eye for the media's love of heroics, recent, unglamorous approaches to art production are abandoned in favor of a highly visible, posturing "avantgardism" which is comfortably familiar to the undemanding art lover looking for something resoundingly generalized rather than difficult and particular, for a combined image of art and artist that allows for the speediest comprehension and assimilation. This is a tricky position to take and it is clear that few artists are going to be able to sustain it. It becomes more and more clear that most of these young turks are perfectly decent citizens whose only ambition is to earn a good living making untroubling but glorious bourgeois art, who are happy to go easy on the idea of making art to pursue the more sensible one of making money.

None of this is particularly surprising. What is more telling is the sudden enthusiasm of the mass media, once again—twenty years after Pop art—seeking glamor and excitement in the art world. What is most interesting is not the suddenness but the scope of this coverage. In the normal course of events the media will begin picking up on something after it has received consistent coverage in the art press and appeared in one or two museum shows. But since Pop art such interest has been sporadic and limited—one need only think of the relative failure in this respect of Pattern and Decoration, despite its heavy promotion in the market and in some magazines. It's too easy to say that Pattern painting is simply too predictable or lacks panache. True, perhaps, but it was a coherent package, far more of a movement than the amorphous groupings under discussion here. These new "movements" are of such uncertain delineation that their main characteristics, as described in the media, are a string of commonplaces: personal, idiosyncratic, steeped in art history, romantic, daring, internationally national, youthful, paintings. But this lack of specificity is of paramount importance, for it allows the work to be turned with such ease into unwitting carriers of the dominant ideology. With a touchingly naive belief in the artist's power to do anything, these artists wanted to consummate an impossible union, and so create an imaginary golden age in which culture would appear again unified. We know the divisiveness of such a dream: we also know its potency. It is a dangerous dream, because although it seems impossible to achieve there is one place that can make it appear to happen, and that place, the illusory realm of the media, holds sway over a growing part of our lives and thoughts. In the

media, contradictions can be telescoped, differences turned into compatibilities, terrorists into statesmen. Only when moved to the timelessness of the media-space, where historical and theoretical barriers collapse, can Pollock's daring energy be rendered as an equivalent of Warhol's Youthquakers and Superstars. But in entering this pact with the media a terrible price is exacted. The art loses its autonomy, becomes a mockery of its own vaunted individuality as it is reduced to a cipher of rejuvenation, a convenient piece of propaganda in a period of worsening economic recession.

In the broadest possible terms it might be argued that the interlocking codes of representation of the culture at large are so overwhelming in their impact, not only on the possibility of art-making but also on the possibility of individual consciousness, that they constitute the most important subject for any activity that can be described as belonging to the humanities. In terms of an art practice this means undertaking an examination of the interconnected destinies not simply of high and low culture, but, more complexly, of the meaning of the image, the fate of the picture, in the discourse of art, in the discourse of the mass media, and, equally important, in the difficult area where these touch one another. Despite the problems outlined above, which part of the younger generation exemplifies, we are beginning to see other work that focuses on the interplay between private experience and public, mediated life. More and more we see work that searches for that moment when genuine feeling turns to scripted melodrama, for the gesture that betrays more than it should. We see work that juggles with comfortable givens, looking for some private truth to fall out by accident. We see work that attempts to stare into the blank, reflecting surface of the media and its images, hoping to find there the faint reflection of individual consciousness. This, is all rather morbid, to be sure—a knowing flirtation with decay in the hope that the rot will grow, will come to life. It is such work that is properly, if unimaginatively, labeled “post-Modern,” meaning simply the activity of artists searching the ruins of a discredited ideology for a renewed sense of purpose and authority. This search has typically taken the form of an investigation of text and context, of the impure situation in which art finds itself, and of the means it uses to represent itself.

One last, brilliant attempt to revitalize the Warholian technique of beating the media at its own game is the work not of an artist, but of a dealer—Mary Boone. Her deconstruction of capitalist manipulation has displayed with a tidy eloquence what leftist artists have been trying to explain for years. Boone has moved beyond hyping her artists, beyond hyping herself, to hyping the idea of hype, thus making its operation totally clear. Her immaculately manicured gallery is itself a diagram of this strategy, with its sophisticated play of seduction and refusal. A glass street front recalls the spectacle of department store windows beckoning passersby to enter, while the gray baffle wall behind, preventing a clear view into the gallery, denies that kind of attraction, that kind of easy entry. Inside, there is the promise of a progression from a large room to a smaller, more intimate one, in which a sale might be consummated. A desire is aroused, but it is deliberately held in abeyance through a complex of psychological stratagems, most of which are totally familiar to the art world.

Boone managed a similar deconstruction of the press this spring, appearing in magazine after magazine, from *Life* to *Savvy* to *Metropolitan Home*, heavily touted as the rising star of SoHo, the most successful dealer since Leo Castelli. She exhibited her success by displaying the evidence of her newly earned wealth—a splendid loft apartment, and stunning collections of



clothes and shoes, in company with the art in question. Rarely has the connection between our notion of merit and our understanding of the power of hard cash been so clearly demonstrated, nor has the incidental and totally subservient nature of most art practice been revealed so strikingly. Outdistancing conventional strategies and argument, Boone simply pointed to a truth about art and the media with such panache that many must have been profoundly shocked by what they saw.

*Thomas Lawson* is a painter, a critic and the editor of *Real Life Magazine*.

**Thomas Lawson**

*Artforum* has always acknowledged the seminal role of artists who are also critics. We are fully confident of Mr. Lawson's position within this tradition. Because such a position can be complex, it must be noted that several of the artists illustrated here exhibit with the same gallery as Mr. Lawson.

—Eds., (*Artforum*, October 1981)

The question still nags. Why did the editors find it necessary to tag that little caveat onto the end of my last essay? It is not as though *Artforum* is a stranger to polemics; after all, its reputation as the most vital of American art journals is grounded in its history of publishing texts by artists attempting to locate the meaning

example, that they are among the few who have read Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*). The issues central to that argument now revolve around awkward problems like the presentation and distribution of ideas and art in an increasingly spectacularized society in which critique is cynically appropriated as part of the show. Any coherent argument of dissent is quickly decontextualized (even . . . assimilated), shown to be a shrill fragment of a greater whole which is presided over by the benign wisdom of greater security for better business. In such a situation critical thought, in all its manifestations, falters: a terrible uncertainty about its position is manifest. Too much is reduced to a superficial level, and on that level everything, every action may be tainted, no matter what one does, villainy is

represented—by a commercial gallery, Metro Pictures. Another part is criticism and appears in various magazines, most notably this one. A third part, coming somewhere between the other two but perhaps less individualistic in appearance, is the activity represented by *Real Life Magazine*, which is an irregular publication of texts, verbal and photographic, that examine art, film, and related media from the perspective of artists whose work addresses the intersection of these areas in the culture at large. This refusal to settle down and be one thing or another—that is central to my activity as an artist. For it is precisely through the expediency of naming and categorizing that the culture entraps us, gives us an identity that can then be monitored. Those professional critics who isolate one

## THE DARK SIDE OF THE BRIGHT LIGHT



of what they do within a critical framework. Indeed, I would argue that *Artforum's* brief history, since its beginnings in the early '60s, has mapped the complex interwindings of an art practice caught on the watershed of a momentous change. So what has happened that suddenly we are worrying about market repercussions? Has the debate over commodity replication and the art object that dominated serious discussion of art in the late '60s atrophied to the level of gallery gossip, or have we uncovered a symptom that the discussion is entering a more complex phase? All of the work that has emerged to face the ending of the Modernist paradigm has been concerned, at base, with the problem of authority—both the authority of the individual act, and the institutional authority that act may reveal or conceal. But whereas the early work could succeed by a bare-bones epistemology, an absurdist reductionism serving to point to ideological contradictions, the work of a more advanced (in time) period must take into account a vastly more sophisticated defense (oppositional artists and critics can no longer assume, for

suspected. Distinctions can no longer be made with confidence, hype and the genuine promotion of ideas can seem indistinguishable. Few can tell who or what is exerting control, and so "the art world" is suffused by a general unease which is disavowed or ignored only by the most opportunistic.

At the risk of further irritating those who find my insistent subjectivity in these essays an intolerable intrusion (because it upsets a desire for an acquiescent coherence, because it refuses the tyranny of specialization—that white collar equivalent of the division of labor?) let me clarify further the editors' statement, spell out the larger dilemma to which it points. My work revolves around a few basic procedures—collecting information, sifting and editing it, and then representing it in a variety of media. It is the variety, and disparateness, of media that seems to cause trouble, at least in part because of what it reveals about the means of distribution available to an artist, and how these means are controlled and are controlling. The part of my work that takes the form of paintings is handled—

aspect of my work and find it deficient miss the point, but in missing it, illuminate it.

As an example of this kind of piecemeal dismissal one might refer to Donald B. Kuspit's review of my most recent solo exhibition (published here in the summer issue). In that review Kuspit chose to attack the paintings by attacking the writing, and to that end isolated part of an article from *Real Life Magazine* (ignoring its contextual explanation as a text written to accompany an exhibition of paintings, many of which contradicted it, a text then published as a preface to an issue of the magazine devoted to fiction), to construct a simple theory that he could then demolish. This isolation of a fragment of my work means to explain the painting, but does so by explaining something else. As a result the work itself is trivialized, reduced to a mere token of exchange, good (or bad) on the free market of ideas.

By no means do I intend any special pleading by this, my own case is simply a convenient and quick example of a tendency that has been with us for some time. A more complete example, and one which merits

a fuller discussion than I can afford here, is to be found in the career of Robert Smithson, a career whose full ambition is still strenuously resisted. Over and over a fragment of his work will be examined in isolation in order to minimize or deny the impact of his larger enterprise. Working during the period when it was first becoming apparent that the Modernist era was closing down, Smithson participated in the renewed attempts by artists to map out a nonauratic, nonauthoritarian, critically discursive understanding of what activities could henceforth be considered to result in art. Smithson was the first of his generation to attempt to fully articulate the idea that the work of art was a product of a critical subjectivity addressing many different kinds of coded information, visual and textual (literary). His

aimed at revealing the conventions that frame meaning to be less than natural, and that the appearance of naturalness, the naturalness of categories and inventories, is culture's disguise. The Nonsites and Earthworks referred to the structures of the market and the discourse of the museum, indicated their intertwined complicity; the formal sculptures, in an interesting twist, then took this highly contextualized activity and returned it to the more abstract realm of esthetics. Locating itself in the position of a much-desired synthesis, the writing, which addressed but did not fulfill such expectations, focused on the field of art criticism. By mixing genres (esthetics, anthropology, and science fiction) and styles (from parody to visionary), Smithson muddied the waters, disrupting the flow

*savage tribes have been frequently associated with fine ingenuities of decorative design; also, that no people has ever attained the higher stages of art skill, except at a period of its civilisation which was sullied by frequent, violent, and even monstrous crime; and lastly, that the attaining of perfection in art power has been hitherto, in every nation, the accurate signal of the beginning of its ruin.*

—John Ruskin, *Oxford Lectures on Art*, 1870

The corporate capitalism that developed after the Depression, a mixture of ideological superstructure, supranational finance, and the welfare state, is in a period of decline and change. We all know this; we know too well that lethargy of progressive entropy in



Article on the Venice Biennale in *Life* magazine, July 6, 1962. Full spread.

Richard van Buren (left pages) and Richard Serra (right pages) in *Life* magazine, February 27, 1970. Full spread.

ambition was to expand the idea of accepted art practice in such a way as to make its discursive nature more evident. Deliberately nonauratic and nonhierarchical, his work was diffuse and stubbornly quizzical, a practice at one with Jean-Luc Godard's dictum that one should not make political art, but make art politically, which is to say dialectically. By shifting attention away from the presentation of a well-crafted object in the gallery to a broader nexus of concerns and activities, Smithson fractured the auratic pretensions of the art object, made it dependent on a complex discourse which included travel, gathering information and material, a certain amount of transportation and construction, and the writing and publishing of an "explanatory" text. The finished art object, the sculpture viewed in the gallery, then became a negative center, the vortex of an ever-widening spiral of activities—its presence, its context, and the assumptions behind that context all brought into question as the absurdities of the artist's mushrooming chain of validations became apparent.

The point about Smithson's practice is that it was

of an art criticism that derives its authority in great measure from its apparent freedom from mediation and ideological content. Of course Smithson was not the only artist to attempt this sort of disruption at that time—*Art & Language* spoofed academic journalisms in their own publications, and Robert Morris has continued to keep his parodies of art writing up-to-date. Nor was this kind of satire the only tactic—in the early '60s Donald Judd had made very effective use of the refusal of the idea of fairness as a useful notion of criticism, thereby underlining the arbitrary and fictionalized aspect of most judgments of good taste. What all this work has in common, what remains of its central motivation, is a rejection of criticism as explanation, a rejection of the entrapment of art in a net of overdetermined interpretation.

... *While many peasant populations, among whom scarcely the rudest practice of art has ever been attempted, have lived in comparative innocence, honour, and happiness, the worst foulness and cruelty of*

which everything seems to grind slowly to a halt and thereby crack. In the current confusion the forces of reaction are succeeding to an alarming, if temporary, degree. We can see this very clearly in the economic and political spheres, but the same is happening in the arts, where the depleted stock of late Modernist ideology is still venerated by the progressive establishment and, simultaneously, the inflationary claims of those who would return to a bastardized version of the ideology of the early part of the century are eagerly touted by dreamers with a nostalgia for the gold standard of direct and unmediated expression.

This is why the re-emergence of figurative imagery in recent work has generated such passion. The critical establishment—old and new, left and right—is confounded by a situation in which the manipulation of the image implicit in all art has reached such a level of complexity that the usually thorny questions of intentionality and complicity seem impossibly muddled. It is generally agreed that all this new work is somehow concerned with the ways in which reality is repre-

sented and reformed through culturally determined imagery, and how that imagery is itself continually represented and reformed through the ongoing processes of art and the mass media. What still seems unclear to a surprising number of people is which artists know what they are doing and which don't, or don't care, and what position those who do know what they are doing actually take.

Given the bankruptcy of the dominant forms of Modernism, the idea of the avant-garde, with its mythos of perpetual change, has emptied out the whole system of Modern art by progressively eating away at all of the strategies and relationships possible in such a self-limiting system to the point where the work has become truly meaningless, and the power of negation essential to the functioning of an avant-garde practice is lost in a black hole created by that very practice. As this loss of power has become more and more evident the institutions of culture, the original enemies of the avant-garde, have come forward to protect it. The net result is

As stated earlier, over the past twenty years or so critical writing has become a favored area of exploration for artists seeking paths out of the Modernist end game, for here, quite clearly, is an area untouched by the creeping sophistication that neutralized so much conventional avant-garde activity. A measure of the success of this tactic has been the failure to date of most professional art writers to understand, explain, or assimilate these writings. Contradictions are happily discovered, lapses in logic gleefully pointed out, underlying meanings totally missed or glossed over. These critics eagerly lap up ideas of subversion in art and are willing to offer endless dissertations on the self-consciousness of any given individual's practice, but they never stop to consider their own practice as one ripe for a similar treatment. In short, a wide, contradictory discourse on the possibilities and conventions of art is available, but there has been barely a suggestion from these quarters on the equally complex field of writing about art, of representing art.

The situation is that most professional criticism has degenerated into an absurd exercise, an exchange of bland, "balanced" opinion whose sole purpose often seems to be descriptive—the validation of the exchange value of the work it pretends to discuss. A recent example of this kind of packaged information devised only to aid the digestion of half-baked ideas is to be found in the September 1982 issue of *Art in America*, devoted to "European Art." Here, with an array of stupefying categories which serve no useful discriminatory purpose, the American public is introduced to the new art of Europe in separate essays on French art, German art, Scandinavian art, and so on. Such an introduction is presented as authoritative—after all, it is the work of experts—but the information is so partial, so incomplete as to be virtually worthless. And it is presented as though nobody had ever questioned the linking of nationality to art production, as though nobody had ever doubted the usefulness of sweeping twenty years of activity by totally different



Jackson Pollock in Life magazine, August 8, 1949. Full page.



Jackson Pollock in Life magazine, August 8, 1949. Detail of upper half of spread.

that Modernist art is seen to be tamed, properly assimilated, and given permission to continue in a more proper, respectful manner. In such a deadlocked situation it is very clear that the marketplace might be seen as one of the only places left in which significant meaning can be thought to reside. Deciding to move in that direction, of course, is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is the ease with which reactionaries can co-opt the idea and make it their own, joyfully discovering the new in the very well entrenched and the fresh in what is clearly stagnant. But such a decision at least has the merit of facing up to a situation in which a bankrupt avant-garde has conspired, along with the media which have reported and explained its existence, to turn art into an equivalent of fashion. The search for the new has decayed into an unending desire for novelty, a seasonal succession of styles. The result has been to remove the threat of an observed discontinuity (it is reduced to a change of taste) and its replacement with the comforting and repressive subtext of "an unbroken tradition."

generations with very different intentions and merits into a convenient whole. To read the bulk of material of this sort one must continually return to a primitive level of understanding, continually remind oneself that what has been written is most likely meant in the most straightforward, unthinking way. To these writers their medium is apparently pure, unencumbered with the various kinds of ideological baggage so easily perceived in, say, painting.

This enervating collapse shares characteristics with the art on which it feeds and with the larger, mass media into which it feeds. It is not just high culture that is withering—the idea telegraphed by the slogan that painting is dead—nor is it simply a matter of the vacuousness of the mass media. We are facing a more widespread contagion, with all forms of representation in danger of becoming inert and the free flow of real information and opinion stopped. Gradually the discourse of culture, which can offer a significant opportunity for the expression of dissent and negativity that is the essence of freedom, is replaced by a hollowed out,

meaningless jabber, an eviscerated, dead thing which serves only too well as the genteel mask of an increasingly repressive society. So as long as this slough continues we must bear with a bleached-out art discourse dominated by despondent academics and morose poets who write as though mesmerized by the power they imagine they wield.

This collapse of meaning, which all too easily leads toward authoritarianism, is pervasive, we see it wherever we look, but perhaps nowhere is it more completely expressed than in the mass culture. Here it is the so-called free press (both printed and electronic) that has caused the most damage, indiscriminately overloading us with staggering amounts of information of all sorts until no one thing seems any different or any more important than any other. The least event is turned into a spectacle, while major economic and political events appear as staged and fictionalized as beauty pageants and game shows. Lip service is paid to the notion that a free society remains free so long as it

often reduced to an equivalence with fashion, with the added gloss that it is understood that it is supposed to have "higher meaning."

One of the most devastating historical examples of this kind of banalization is the treatment of Jackson Pollock in the original *Life* magazine, in 1949 and 1959. Here the image of the artist at work is transformed into an icon signifying the complete misappropriation of Pollock's enterprise, an icon which is then used over the years as a recurring motif to help remind us of art's dubious claims to seriousness. It is allowed some poetry, but its critical content is removed and the empty form is left looking pretty damn silly. Art is reduced to the spectacle of a grown man engaged in a manifestly daft gesture, and looking tortured about it. One of the great triumphs of Modernism—so easily trivialized, neutralized almost as it was made. This provides a convincing demonstration of the futility of attempting to counter the dead weight of representation (in art and of art) through the simple declaration of presence, that

artists. Part of this generation suffers from a hopeless longing for those apparently simpler times in which Pollock lived, when an artist could express himself (rarely herself) "directly" with paint. Despite an insistence on individuality, a drumbeat of personality, these new artists recognize the convenience of good packaging. Seamless presentations like the "trans-avantgarde," "Arte Cifre," "Naive Nouveau," "New Wave," and "The Wild Painters" abound—more show than substance. Essays are written, books published, but there remains a remarkable dearth of solid information or theory about who or what belongs to any one grouping. Which is hardly surprising, since these artists are an essentially conservative group of painters, masquerading as a new wave, who favor the use of expressionist devices to record the tremblings of a sensitive subjectivity in the face of the imposing and implacable structures of history. Their work is supposedly private, individualistic, but is so in a nostalgic, historicist manner alien to contemporary experience.



Jackson Pollock in *Life* magazine, November 9, 1959. Full spread.

Article on Abstract Expressionism in *Life* magazine, November 9, 1959. Detail of left-hand page.

allows an exchange of informed opinion, but the critique we are offered remains one-dimensional, a neutered caricature of what is possible. The explanations are left partial, "uninteresting" details are glossed over, so that in the end meaning is further mystified.

The media's relation to art is symptomatic in this regard, offering unnerving parallels to the situation in general. Here, in a realm of received ideas and comfortably familiar images, the art world is known as a place of wild parties and vicious intrigue, often on an international scale. Artists are represented as strange, given to bizarre behavior and funny clothes, but capable of tapping hidden depths which they plumb to form insightful/troubling/meditative/joyful/transcendent visions of life. Art and artists are used as props for the "creativity" of designer or photographer, as tokens of cultural value which handily play a double role, providing the shock of the new which inspires consumerism with the contradictory stability of a tradition. What we get are fictions woven from details which are themselves often less than true. In short, art is most

proud independence of the Abstract Expressionist generation. All too easily that necessary presence evaporates as the information is processed and disseminated through the media, all that is left is an empty sign, no more moving than the advertising images that flank it and come to dominate it.

Andy Warhol's loving assault on the public aspect of the media, by which I mean its ability to transform and reduce individualism to an image, was once the great example of how an artist can work and survive, to a point. Nowadays his nonchalant posturing seems mannered, a fashion gone out of style, and indeed in many ways the media have caught up with him, making the suburban bohemia he now represents perfectly legitimate and safe. Now anybody with enough money can buy a loft and an attitude, and parade as an avant-gardist, but in the process Warhol's parody has come unstuck. His presence no longer unsettles the media; he has been assimilated, swallowed whole.

Now a new generation has come along, one which has absorbed the lessons of these two very different

But they are not totally lost in some never-never land of the imagination; they do belong to the latter part of the 20th century. They have learned from Warhol that no act—no matter how authentic or deeply felt—is accorded cultural meaning unless it is represented through the mass media. And they know that to attract the attention of the media they must be operative, in order to create a space for the kind of fantasy only the media can fulfill. At the simplest level it can be said that these artists aim to short-circuit the conventional meanings of culture by overloading them, piling reference upon reference in a delirium of nay-saying—a not unfamiliar idea, the originality here lies in the strategy of presenting this negativity through the marketplace, the site of an earlier generation's worst fears and greatest loathings.

And so, with an eye for the media's love of heroics, recent, unglamorous approaches to art production are abandoned in favor of a highly visible, posturing "avantgardism" which is comfortably familiar to the undemanding art lover looking for something resound-

ingly generalized rather than difficult and particular, for a combined image of art and artist that allows for the speediest comprehension and assimilation. This is a tricky position to take and it is clear that few artists are going to be able to sustain it. It becomes more and more clear that most of these young turks are perfectly decent citizens whose only ambition is to earn a good living making untroubling but glorious bourgeois art, who are happy to go easy on the idea of making art to pursue the more sensible one of making money.

None of this is particularly surprising. What is more telling is the sudden enthusiasm of the mass media, once again—twenty years after Pop art—seeking glamor and excitement in the art world. What is most interesting is not the suddenness but the scope of this coverage. In the normal course of events the media will begin picking up on something after it has received consistent coverage in the art press and appeared in one or two museum shows. But since Pop art such interest has been sporadic and limited—one need only think of the relative failure in this respect of Pattern and Decoration, despite its heavy promotion in the market and in some magazines. It's too easy to say that Pattern painting is simply too predictable or lacks panache. True, perhaps, but it was a coherent package, far more of a movement than the amorphous groupings under discussion here. These new "movements" are of such uncertain delineation that their main characteristics, as described in the media, are a string of commonplaces: personal, idiosyncratic, steeped in art history, romantic, daring, internationally national, youthful, paintings. But this lack of specificity is of paramount importance, for it allows the work to be turned with such ease into unwitting carriers of the dominant ideology. With a touchingly naive belief in the artist's power to do anything, these artists wanted to consummate an impossible union, and so create an imaginary golden age in which culture would appear again unified. We know the divisiveness of such a dream; we also know its potency. It is a dangerous dream, because although it seems impossible to achieve there is one place that can make it appear to happen, and that place, the illusory realm of the media, holds sway over a growing part of our lives and thoughts. In the media, contradictions can be telescoped, differences turned into compatibilities, terrorists into statesmen. Only when moved to the timelessness of the media-space, where historical and theoretical barriers collapse, can Pollock's daring energy be rendered as an equivalent of Warhol's Youthquakers and Superstars. But in entering this pact with the media a terrible price is exacted. The art loses its autonomy, becomes a mockery of its own vaunted individuality as it is reduced to a cipher of rejuvenation, a convenient piece of propaganda in a period of worsening economic recession.

In the broadest possible terms it might be argued that the interlocking codes of representation of the culture at large are so overwhelming in their impact, not only on the possibility of art-making but also on the possibility of individual consciousness, that they constitute the most important subject for any activity that can be described as belonging to the humanities. In terms of an art practice this means undertaking an examination of the interconnected destinies not simply of high and low culture, but, more complexly, of the

meaning of the image, the fate of the picture, in the discourse of art, in the discourse of the mass media, and, equally important, in the difficult area where these touch one another. Despite the problems outlined above, which part of the younger generation exemplifies, we are beginning to see other work that focuses on the interplay between private experience and public, mediated life. More and more we see work that searches for that moment when genuine feeling turns to scripted melodrama, for the gesture that betrays more than it should. We see work that juggles with comfortable givens, looking for some private truth to fall out by accident. We see work that attempts to stare into the blank, reflecting surface of the media and its images, hoping to find there the faint reflection of individual consciousness. This is all rather morbid, to be sure—a knowing flirtation with decay in the hope that the rot will grow, will come to life. It is such work that is properly, if unimaginatively, labeled "post-Modern," meaning simply the activity of artists searching the ruins of a discredited ideology for a renewed sense of purpose and authority. This search has typically taken the form of an investigation of text and context, of the impure situation in which art finds itself, and of the means it uses to represent itself.

One last, brilliant attempt to revitalize the Warholian technique of beating the media at its own game is the work not of an artist, but of a dealer—Mary Boone. Her deconstruction of capitalist manipulation has displayed with a tidy eloquence what leftist artists have been trying to explain for years. Boone has moved beyond hyping her artists, beyond hyping herself, to hyping the idea of hype, thus making its operation totally clear. Her immaculately manicured gallery is itself a diagram of this strategy, with its sophisticated play of seduction and refusal. A glass street front recalls the spectacle of department store windows beckoning passersby to enter, while the gray baffle wall behind, preventing a clear view into the gallery, denies that kind of attraction, that kind of easy entry. Inside, there is the promise of a progression from a large room to a smaller, more intimate one, in which a sale might be consummated. A desire is aroused, but it is deliberately held in abeyance through a complex of psychological stratagems, most of which are totally familiar to the art world.

Boone managed a similar deconstruction of the press this spring, appearing in magazine after magazine, from *Life* to *Savvy* to *Metropolitan Home*, heavily touted as the rising star of SoHo, the most successful dealer since Leo Castelli. She exhibited her success by displaying the evidence of her newly earned wealth—a splendid loft apartment, and stunning collections of clothes and shoes, in company with the art in question. Rarely has the connection between our notion of merit and our understanding of the power of hard cash been so clearly demonstrated, nor has the incidental and totally subservient nature of most art practice been revealed so strikingly. Outdistancing conventional strategies and argument, Boone simply pointed to a truth about art and the media with such panache that many must have been profoundly shocked by what they saw ■

Thomas Lawson is a painter, a critic, and the editor of *Real Life Magazine*.



Robert Rauschenberg in *Life* magazine, July 10, 1964. Full spread.



Mary Boone in *Life* magazine, May 1982. Detail of left-hand page.



Sculptures by Linda Bengtson and Ericaceus by van Creel & Arps in *Town and Country*, May 1982. Full spread.



Keith Haring, untitled, 1982, acrylic and Magic Marker on cardboard, 7 1/2 x 12 x 6", for a Miano of Florence shoe, from the "Shoebones" collection, courtesy Interview magazine. Appearing in *Interview*, October 1982.