



Paolo Uccello, *The Flood and the Recession of the Flood*. Chioostro Verde, S. Maria Novella, Florence

In Modernity's Wake

the Aneurunculus
letters

Michael Phillipson



ROUTLEDGE • London and New York

margin
thru
style

Dear Janet and John,

I am sending you the enclosed collection of letters, which recently came into my possession, on the off-chance that you might, just, be interested in reading them. You will see from the 'wayin' which precedes them that they have been assembled by our Offsenta Redactormatic Instalayshun over in Margin 19; apparently the originals have been retrieved by some of our out-field workers from the sublondon peat bog. Our team at the Innstitchoot of Mikeroprimitoloji established that they were left out for the post-man immediately preceding the cata-strophe that swept across The West on June 16th 2004 (Xtytime). Addressed to a disparate group of respondents by one 'Ethelred Ameurunculus' their concern is the fate of something called 'art' (and 'artists') in the culture we call 'late modernity'.

The little Ameuran claims to write on behalf of 'the arts' from within a foreboding of an impending 'flood' (although rain and water are mentioned frequently the cryptographer in me suspects that Ameurunculus uses 'flood' as a metaphor for what we now call 'the cata-strophe'; there are clear indications in the letters that Ameurunculus, himself caught up in the swirling surfeit of representations, anticipated precisely the coming calamity). The letters explore the conditions of making and responding to the arts in a culture apparently under the permanent sway of the dynamic of 'modernization'. Distancing himself somewhat from those local writers who had already, it seems, diagnosed the 'death of modernity' and promoted an emergent 'state' of 'postmodernity', Ameurunculus offers us a vision of an 'ante-post-modern' culture - a culture still deeply involved with the problems of an ageing modernity and for which a post-mortem would be a little premature. He argues that in this culture of senescent modernity the continual appropriation of art for non-art uses by a range of social institutions creates quite special problems for both making and responding to art. These problems are compounded by modernity's own peculiar histories within the arts themselves; for 'being modern', a practice ostensibly against institutions, has itself become institutionalized and is caught by the legacy of its own histories.

In letters to a variety of individuals and institutions Ameurunculus offers a range of diagnoses, allegories, and proposals for practice that are informed by what our Innstitchoot categorizes as 'post-phenomenological' and 'post-structuralist' writings (especially those of three of his respondents - Heidegger, Barthes, and 'Derippa' (sic)).

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viii The letters insistently cohere around 'representation' (with its gathering of questions of Language, Writing, Being, Nothing, Desire, Presence, Text, Discourse, Reading, Institution, and the Human Subject) and offer it as the crucial issue for any exploration of the relation between art and culture. Apparently in the cultural conditions of late modernity modern art increasingly real-ized itself as a project that had to work within the paradox of being both against and for the culture that supported it; it sought to retain traces of the self-alienation that defined the modern project in its heyday whilst recognizing the inescapable appropriations of the culture's all-pervading institutions (especially those whose very work was that of 'representation' itself). Art thus began to gather itself around values standing aside from preceding 'aesthetics'.

In this de-aestheticizing work art appears to have represented its project through its impotence, its placelessness, its decomposing and withholding of 'meaning', its undoing of the self and of the culture's conventions of representation (reading-writing). Seeking to distinguish itself from all other practices, it wanted to make its difference felt precisely through its refusal of the conventions of representation supporting the surrounding culture. But it seems to have been art's fate to be condemned, in a culture sustaining itself through the over-production of meaning and information, to a constant retrieval for meaning by a range of discourses committed to the assertion of the power of their own method (philosophies, cultural/social sciences, histories, criticisms, linguistics, politics). It is the dilemmas, tensions, and contradictions of making and responding to art under these conditions that are explored in Ameurunculus' letters.

Indeed, although distancing themselves from all prescriptions for art, the letters do offer a hidden-metaphoric 'manifesto' for an 'ante-post-modern' practice that would be sensitive to the achievements of a range of 'limit' texts in the arts. One such text, a certain Finnegans Wake, is taken as an exemplary limit text and acts as a point of reference in several of the letters.

Now, it may well be that if you do dip into them you'll get their drift without any help from me, but Paul Filmer suggested that you might appreciate a pre-script which anticipates some of the letters' concerns. All I can do here, perhaps, is to bring out one or two aspects of the collection which touch my own interests. I shall have to tread carefully because I have no doubt that Ameurunculus is more than capable of speaking up, or rather writing down, for himself; indeed I take that to be the principal thrust of his letters! Nevertheless it is just possible that my comments may facilitate your own ways in to the specificity of these texts which are so obviously intended for very particular eyes.

ix It seems clear enough to me that either Ameurunculus is a born loser, a real no-hoper, a dead ringer for the house of the unstable, or else he's an ace optimist, an over-the-top optimist, who hopes that his faith will move even the trans-national postal system to transcend the ontological coordinates of space-time-technology-birth-death. I mean, who'd keep writing letters (of that length) to a bunch of largely uncontactable non-correspondents? Our people over in Margin 19 assure me that their historical records confirm that several of Ameurunculus' addressees were already dead at the time of his writing; it's just possible, I suppose, that, holed up in his bunker, he didn't realize this. He certainly seems to believe that either they or their works are somehow living-on and calling out for some direct response. Poor chap! It's like trying to teach aerobics to a dead hare.

Yet, strung out between these incertitudes, The Fool does write as if (well, almost) his very life depends on it. Acknowledging both the improbability of many of the letters arriving at their intended destination, and the unlikelihood of being taken 'seriously', he nevertheless continues to write. So maybe it's the sending itself which is important to him - putting the texts on their way in all their specificity to just those very particular recipients; and as the desired, very desired, respondents are available to us only in and as their works-as-texts and as constructions of Ameurunculus, perhaps it is these names-as-text-collections towards which his letters were (are?) on their way, in search of a relation to writing 'itself'.

But there does seem to be the force of another desire at work in the letters. That they seek more than could ever be returned to them is manifest in the solicitation of replies in several of the letters. Perhaps they display the writer's (need) for a response, a need which is necessarily excessive because it can never be met in terms which satisfy the writer. And I must say that I have some sympathy for the writer here. It does seem to be the desire for dialogue, for relation, for some return, which sustains Ameurunculus' little project.

So if you and I as readers decide to drop in on this personal correspondence what might we make of Ameurunculus' texts? After all if, across these letters, he's engaging the work of representation in art and culture (which he seems to be doing) then isn't this something which researchers and analysts across the exorbitant terrains of cultural critique and social science have addressed with much more rigour, with a more methodic attention to the relation between the specific detail and the general concept? Indeed, isn't their commitment to Method-as-technique (to 'objective discourse', to the transformation of the self into an observer, to the referent-as-fact as an occasion to constitute a theoretical explanation that advances the 'span' and 'authority' of their chosen paradigm) the very guarantee of

x their power to produce a knowledge superior to anything that could be constituted through a 'merely' singular writing, a writing sent from 'one' to 'an' other, a 'purely personal' correspondence?

Or is it?

Perhaps in that space-technology-time we now refer to as 'late modernity', where these very discourses of knowledge production (critique and those 'sciences' of human being seeking to reflect upon and return the culture to itself) were (finding (losing?)) themselves in the wake and play of 'post' discourse, it is precisely the qualities of their knowledge, its authority, which are at stake.

Could it be that in that all-absorptive culture, in which any-thing can be represented, where the dominant forms of representation have co-opted the rhetorics of Method and Critique for their own uses, that the letters (the writing) that represent the founding concerns of these discourses (emancipation and transformation), simply don't get through anymore (except on the terms allowed by these dominant forms - what Ameurunculus, in his letter to Barthes, calls the apparatus of the 'information-spectacle')? If so, perhaps it is writing itself (and we are all, even in the infotekstyoual regions of Margin 19, writers now (as Walter Benjamin reminded us so many years ago)), how writing represents itself, how writing lives on, in and as (and thus how we are written into) representation, which is still on the line. And of course there are few cultural sites where the circumvention of the embraces of dominant forms of representation (and the struggle to represent their other) constitutes the practice. You may or may not agree that art has constituted one such site, but even here it may be that practice is given a certain license to be excessive only because it is useless, powerless, helpless; and a recurring theme treated in different ways across Ameurunculus' missives is that art's only hope (and art, what art represents for us, as our hope) is to recognize and exploit for all its worth(lessness) the extraordinary power of its own impotence.

This quaint concern with art's impotence crops up again in another manuscript found in the same subLondon peat bog. Entitled 'Art's Body', it is the script of an actionless masque for three personae. The usual word scans by the Concordance Unit of our Redactoromatic did establish one local (and perhaps tenuous) point of reference for this text. Apparently the manuscript's representation of art as an 'organless body' could be related to the anti-oedipal ruminations of two Frankish writers from that period - Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari - who produced a feverish and euphoric schiz-analysis of the 'life' of a certain 'body without organs' under capitalism. However there is no evidence to connect this typed manuscript with Ameurunculus' letters (although its interests do

xi seem to complement his). Its concern with (among other things) art's weakness and uselessness does engage art's relation to politics. Perhaps there was an artists' and writers' impotence collective working the region in those days. Anyway, I'm including it for your possible interest as an appendix to the letters.

And Ameurunculus does seem to have been drawn inexorably within art's sway, written all-over, re-inscribed, by its texts, in spite of everything the culture, through a range of art-co-opting institutions, seems to have done to and with it in representing it as some-thing to be consumed. His letters insistently return to the virtues of art's helpless representations of otherness, and of the necessity of allowing his self to be fragmented, broken up, in order to allow this helplessness to have its way with him.

Perhaps some of the oxymoronic significance of his reading of art's paradoxical half-life in the embracing culture could flow from our attempts to follow Ameurunculus into the regions of art's helplessness. Certainly he seems to propose that we must be prepared for a radical giving-up if we are to lay ourselves open to art's abject solicitations.

Anticipating the imminent storm, then, Ameurunculus seems to be searching for ways of standing aside from the discourses, the rhetorics, the representations that are the bearers of authority (the representatives of the institutions of supposedly secured knowledge). He wants to avoid succumbing to his own representation by a rhetoric in which the 'one' writer claims to represent, to be writing on behalf of, the many - through a master narrative whose virtue is secured by Method's authority to pull everything back toward its centre. And let's not forget the last thing master narratives seek from their subjugated readers is discourse, dialectic, subversion, violence (or even response). No, in order to be seen to be as strong as possible they strive to ensure agreement by seeking to anticipate critique.

Fearing negation by the one 'thing' they have faith in (the power of critical negation itself), all that is left to them is to continually sophisticate and over-develop their own powers of negation as defense: to resist the anticipated negating influence of the other by displaying one's own mastery of the means of violence.

But art, to judge from Ameurunculus' letters, wants none of this, for its only violence is directed inwards, always against itself (and especially so within modernity). Nor does it want to write on behalf of, to represent, any one else. On each and every occasion of its offer of itself the work of art seeks to 'be' nothing but itself and to represent, to stand for, only ART. Maybe this is one of the things Ameurunculus has learnt from trying to come to terms with art's representations within modernity. Perhaps this is one reason for

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xii writing 'one' to 'one' on behalf of the 'one' (the concrete work of art in all its specificity). Maybe this is his way of trying to ensure (not that one *can* ever make sure) that at least some of his letters get through to their destinations. He hopes, it seems, that, in collapsing times, the 'post' will be on his side. He senses too that the 'post' is at last beginning to hold up, block off, re-route, and return to sender at least some of the epistles despatched in the name of the Fathers and their master narratives of knowledge. In these circumstances writing them off through a writing that is on behalf of their other takes on a certain urgency.

At the very least the emergence of this 'post' around the margins of their master narratives presses on the latter's attentions and in so doing invites both attack (critique) and absorption. But even this may be setting in train a self-reconstitution by the narratives within which the 'post' itself may be at work. Being *in writing*, in representation, they are destined at the least to pass through the 'post' after which they can never quite be the same again (just as the embracing culture is obliged to work through the 'real' consequences of what the 'post' names). For any self-transformation undertaken by the discourses of applied constructive negation in their passage through the 'post' must engage their own space within representation. For it is precisely representation which is at stake in the new 'post-al' districts.

Of course I can only guess that these are some of the prime concerns of Ameurunculus in writing these letters; I can't tap his 'real' intentions. It may well be that there are other interests at work. For instance we may surmise that the letters were handwritten, for the 'wayin' makes reference to the letters' faded ink and to the fact that they were 'ritten' (and not 'tiped'); this hypothesis may be strengthened by the comments on handwriting, typing, and printing in Ameurunculus' letter to 'Derippa'. It seems that the preservation of the traces of the hand's work in writing works to enhance the quality of the (one-to-one) relation, the specificity that he seeks. Perhaps we do him a disservice here in transforming his handwriting into print in the name of 'accessibility'. Although he never quite says as much we may suspect that, for him, the high point of *The Book* was the illuminated manuscript (a position I have some sympathy for). And this trace of intimacy that handwriting bears within itself points too to the confessional qualities of letters; the privacy of the letter allows us to write things that are intended only for the eyes of a specific recipient. The withholding and baring of ourselves varies radically according to the letters' desired destination. Here, unavoidably, you and I have to become voyeurs, interlopers, in a writing that seeks to preserve the spirit of the letter, of letters, of

writing, of handwriting. Let's not forget too that it is apparently a characteristic of letters that they are written to those you either cannot or do not want to speak to face to face; they offer their intimacy from within a necessarily preserved distance (either anticipating, pre-empting, or displacing speech).

As the 'wayin' points out, all this may leave us somewhat non-plussed, encapsulated as we are here by our all-absorbing general infotekstyualiti. Under these conditions Ameurunculus' letters represent, perhaps, a plea for an at least temporary resuscitation for the ailing Body of The Letter (and the Body of Art too if we read the letters as its representative). Nevertheless it remains your responsibility to decide whether these apparently closed letters allow for more open disruptive readings than those suggested by their intended destinations. Perhaps you will find that they are also responsive to interests other than those of their hoped-for recipients. Maybe, too, in offering themselves as littoral representatives of art (rather than representatives of a master narrative, a conceptual system) they seek, as does the work of art apparently, a certain trust from the reader (a trust that holds critical negation at bay as long as it is maintained). Allowing the letter to have its way with our 'self' might just sensitize us to some of the extraordinary difficulties involved in moving from the absolutely specific quality of each work of art to the generalizing terms of critical and analytical discourses. Certainly our ruling general infotekstyualiti has long since ruled art out of play here through its insistence on the power of the typical, the general, to deal with anything 'experience' can throw at it!

But enough of these speculations!

Perhaps if I summarize my interpretations of the main themes and concerns of the principal letters you may see how you could draw them into the play of your own interests:

Letter to Paolo Uccello: Through a reading of Uccello's painting, *The Flood*, the letter broaches the allegory of an impending catastrophe and art's preservation of a certain hope in the face of the threat. Ameurunculus proposes that in late-modern experience the 'flood threat' is both external and internal. The question of the 'unity' of *The Flood* provokes him into raising the issue of the loss of the 'whole', the 'one' (of both self and society), within modernity, and the possible impact of this loss on art's hopes and practices. To remind you of Uccello's mural a reproduction of it is included as a frontispiece to these letters, and Rossi's post-Flood engraving is inserted in the letter to Uccello.

Letter to Dr. Kopf, Director of the Multi-National Museum of the

xiv *Art of The Now*: In this letter Ameurunculus seems to be responding to a request by Dr. Kopf to offer his thoughts on the long-term strategy of the Museum of the Art of The Now in terms of its relation to modern art practice and the surrounding culture. Kopf can hardly have been reassured for Ameurunculus' representation of the Museum is not a happy one. The process of 'museumization' in the visual arts is offered as an example of the consequences of the institutional appropriation of all the arts in the modernizing culture. The 'objects' made by visual artists seem to be peculiarly prone to this appropriation, and Ameurunculus explores their relation to the institution as a way of considering the question of the limits of art practice across the arts.

Condemned to appropriation by museum/publishing house/recording company/academy, art is shown as homeless. Undomesticatable, its practices and production are organized according to the needs of the institution, and yet its Desire is always for an-other home. Thus a recurring concern of twentieth century art has been to try to undo, to unsettle, the institutional Frame within which it is always represented. *Finnegans Wake* (a text by a noted representative of the Middle High Literary Modernity Collective, a certain 'James Joyce') exemplifies this liminal work. The metaphor of (the) 'wake' is also considered as an alternative to the too easy acceptance of the 'death of modernity' marked by diagnoses of the 'postmodern' (in both art and culture). Ameurunculus represents visual art works in late modernity as permeated by both profound melancholy and subtle deviousness as they try to live on in intolerable conditions.

Letter to Martin Heidegger: Ameurunculus offers art as engaging concretely the questions that Heidegger, a philosopher whose writings are more or less coterminous with the period of modernity, proposes as the realm for post-philosophical thinking. Art preserves these questions, concretizes them, in a culture whose dominant discourses and practices have abolished or absolutely repressed them. The Book is offered as the model for culture and as the form in which 'representation' 'appears' ('representation' here embraces both 'meaning' generally and the move within modernity towards the cultural domination of information and calculative thought). To be true to the potential of their radical modernity and their celebration of their Tradition requires the arts to continually engage these 'first' but abolished/repressed questions. Confronting these 'lost' questions (of 'the thing', of Nothing, of Being, of Language, of origin, of ending, of 'presence', of technology) takes the arts to the limits of culture (of representation) and perhaps, beyond, to the very edge of

their own languages/writings. The resuscitation of these questions by art calls, indeed cries out, for a radical shift in response; the established practices of analysis and criticism (themselves products of and responses to modernity) are unable to come to terms with art's work because their own very languages are framed by methods (representations) which are markers of the precise crisis art confronts. In their need for the critical mastery of every-thing they gather the infinitely small texts of art to this need, thus suffocating art's representation of that which is other to their own dominance. We are left to ponder the ways that art might confront this suffocation in its obsessive attempts to wrest itself out of the apparently all-embracing systems of modern representation on behalf of their other.

Letter to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Through an interpretation of a short passage in Mozart's K. 550 (Symphony no. 40 in G Minor) Ameurunculus returns to a question haunting late-modern artistic practice and hinted at in his letter to Uccello - that of 'fragmentation' (of the culture, of the self, of the work of art). The 'spatial' dimension of music (how it 'takes place' - its textuality) is explored through considering some remarkable 'breaks' in K. 550; the terms 'hyphenation' and 'fragmentation' are brought into play in this exploration and used to diagnose dimensions of late-modern experience and artistic practice. In passing, a short poem by a modern poet, 'William Carlos Williams', is opened up to display art's self-fragmenting work. Art is offered as that practice which works in the gap, in the in-between, between culture and its absolute other - Nothing. Inhabiting, but not domesticating, the gap, it continually confronts itself with the question of its own and the culture's limits - the question of the Frame. Ameurunculus ventures a paradoxical sense of art's excessive impotence in which he represents it as its greatest strength. In short, for Ameurunculus, it is 'place' 'itself' (and art's relation to 'it') which is at stake here.

Letter to the Chairman of the National Board of Garden Guardians: Declining to enter the annual 'Glory of the Garden' Art Competition, Ameurunculus encloses instead his submission to a rival competition. His hudibrastic takes off from a report, 'The Glory of the Garden', produced by an organization apparently called the 'Arts Council' (one of the 'modern state's' art-appropriating institutions according to our archives); the verses ironize the metaphor of the 'garden' as a description of the state of the arts in one pocket (Modern Little Britain) of the Western Lands. He seems peculiarly drawn to and in the grip of a poem established by searches at our Innstitchoot ArkHives as 'The Waste Land' by one 'T. S. Eliot'

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xvi (apparently a leading figure in the earlier period of Middle High Literary Modernity). Our Innstitchoot's sub-surface analysis reveals that the hudibrastic proceeds through interleaving fragments of the Arts Council Report, transformed and appropriated chunks of 'The Waste Land', and other unidentifiable poetic shards. It takes us on an idiosyncratic tour of a self-destructing culture in which the 'glorious garden' is represented as eternally and radically Other - empirically absent and finally unrepresentable on the culture's own terms.

Letter to Roland Barthes: This is the longest and most complex letter in the collection. After introducing some of the questions that Barthes' (a Frankish de-compose) own writings raise for him (about pleasure, the place of analysis, the kind of writing art calls for as response), Ameurunculus' letter takes the form of a sandwich. The top and bottom halves of the text address, through a response to Barthes' own writings, the ways in which modern culture has

- 1) appropriated 'aesthetics' for its own ends (pleasure, comfort); the text takes a tour through the main dimensions of this appropriation
- 2) and focuses on the representation of comfort, pleasure, performance, energy, style, fashion, taste in the culture's dominant rhetorics (especially within the 'mass media').

For Ameurunculus the ubiquity of De-sign (and its necessity in mechanical production and reproduction) is intrinsic to this 'aestheticization of everyday life'. The relation of this aestheticization to 'meaning' generally and the continual reduction of the latter to information via the aesthetic naturalism of the media and the dominance of entertainment are explored. Art's hope and potential in the face of this dominance is to hold onto its intrinsic 'doubling' qualities; it is forced to lead a 'double life'. Once pleasure is appropriated by the culture, art has to gather itself around other criteria such as the provocation of discomfort, of self-splitting, of the slide out of the culture's securities. The sandwich's unappetizing filling seems to take the form of an endless conversation whose themes appear to be a dubious parody of those adumbrated in the main body of the letter: an apologist for the 'organization' seeks to demonstrate the ways that the rhetoric of publicity has appropriated aesthetics; occasionally interrupted by a despairing listener, his speech staggers back and forth between clusters of sense and apparent non-sense. Yet perhaps there is a certain doubling in play here; for in the surface connections of the schizoid clusters I began to discern disconcerting allusions to other questions (such as the relation between an 'infirm asian' and 'information'). And then again, when they are read quickly, with the phrases running into each other phonetically, another order of 'meaning' begins to emerge and a kind of sequential sense is restored.

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But nowhere could I decide between the two, the written or the phonetic meaning. I was left hovering in the gap between writing and speaking. Perhaps this is one 'representation' of that very unbridgeable 'space' which becomes a topic in the later letter to Derrida.

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Letter to Ma: In the face of what our Innstitchoot documents as the Death of the Modern Family, Ameurunculus keeps up his relation with his mother. In this letter to her he suggests, through his reminiscences of boyhood and qualities of suburban life, that art's inability to 'take place' to its own satisfaction is reinforced by the conditions of life in the suburbia inhabited by most Little Westerners in the after-culture of a declining modernity. In the memories and reveries of his letter to his mother, Ameurunculus notes some effects of the scattering of the extended family and the impossibility of 'community' (a concept singularly lacking in Margin 19) in the living conditions of Subsuburborough (for us now, perhaps, the name of this apparently endless modern district may metaphorize that place with neither a history nor the possibility of a Desire for art). Indeed, he proposes that the conditions of life in Subsuburborough are anathema to the making of and response to art. His mother's care and concern for others keeps open a spark of hope for community but, for Ameurunculus, provides no basis for relating to or provoking/sustaining a radical modern art.

Letter to Jack Derippa (sic(k)): Our Innstitchoot establishes the intended recipient as one 'Jacques Derrida' - a notorious late-modern, playfully serious text-violator, few of whose own texts survived the great catastrophe of June 16th 2004. Ameurunculus, having consulted the Sibyl about his encounters with Jack's and Jim's (Joyce) writings, seeks Jack's response to his meeting with her. Finding himself lost in the region in between mark and voice he wonders what the omens are for writing, for culture, for art. In recounting his consultation he explores several aspects of Jack's writing, particularly the relation between the writing and the reading of the linear phonocentric text which, in its being read, has to be sounded. If, for Jack, space (writing) is already 'in' the voice, Ameurunculus considers the 'obverse', the ways that sound (time) (the voice) must also be 'in' the writing in its being read. Some of the implications of this for analysis (Ameurunculus clearly considers Jack's work - however playful - as analysis) are drawn out. Analysis is contrasted with art through a consideration of one of Jack's papers on a doubled phrase from Jim's *Finnegans Wake*. In the course of this Ameurunculus opens up some of the tensions arising from the translation of Jack's *écriture* into the English 'writing'. Throughout,

xviii the insistent doubleness of Language (the impossibility of arriving at a singular reading 'in the last analysis', for the last analysis is infinitely deferred) is the basic concern. Disillusioned with the Sibyl's enigmatic response he encloses her gnomic utterances (a text of seemingly randomly bricollaged nursery-rhyme scraps) in the hope that if his letter gets through (we, of course, know that it didn't and never could have done) Jack will find ways of slicing through the margins of the Sibyl's text and disintegrating its apparent hermetic opacity. Certainly when the Redactomatic, using the Deep Allegorical Message Programme, discomposed the Sibyl's text, a range of possible hidden narrative structures were revealed; why not try a little cryptography on them yourself!

Thus we leave Ameurunculus signing off as increasingly minatory o'mens of the impending cata-strophe begin to mass around his bunker.

So! There we are. I know these remaindered texts are somewhat to one side of your current infoteckstyoually grounded needs, but, as ever (maybe I'm something of a throwback Ameurunculus clone) I'll be interested in your responses.

You know where to find me,

Yours

M.P.

P.S. When our people at the Innstitchoot scanned the letters using the Redactomatic's Buried Authorial Sources Search Programme, a seemingly endless list of materials was beamed out in addition to those texts cited in the letters by Ameurunculus himself. All these are available (either as Imagens or Rheopsyches) at our Central ArkHive. For your information I append below those from the list that I found particularly useful in filling out the infoteckstyoual context of Ameurunculus' feverish epistolary practices.

The following texts (amongst many others) kept appearing across all the letters:

- T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984
- G. Bachelard, *The Philosophy of No*, Orion Press, New York, 1968
- J. Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Panther, London, 1965
- R. Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1968
- J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1981
- J. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, Semiotext(e) Inc., New York, 1983
- S. Bellow, *More Die Of Heartbreak*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1987

- W. Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, New Left Books, London, 1973 (especially 'The Author As Producer', pp. 85-104)
- E. Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*, Herder & Herder, New York, 1970
- C. Brooke-Rose, *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels*, Carcanet Press Ltd., Manchester, 1986
- J. Cage, *X: Writings '79-'82*, Marion Boyars, London, 1987
- H. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *The Signs Reader*, eds. A. and E. Abel, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1983
- J. Derrida, 'White Mythology', in *Margins of Philosophy*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1982
- M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971
- F. Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, Schocken, New York, 1971
- N. Koide et al., *The Masters' Book of Bonsai*, Kodansha Int., New York, 1983
- J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Columbia University, New York, 1982
- J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University, New York, 1984
- P. Levi, *If This Is a Man*, Abacus, London, 1987
- H. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Macmillan, London, 1979
- O. Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, University of Texas, Austin, 1973
- P. Sollers, *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, Columbia University, New York, 1983
- G. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1985

The scan also revealed a range of texts specific to each letter. They seem to point towards a reader much too involved with the 'problems' of writing for his own good...

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Hope this is enough to meet your current info needs!

pps: The Redactomatic automatically spewed out an index, for the letters. Its interests may not, of course, match yours, but I've appended it after the Appendix as a possible aid to your browsings.

Redaction (editing)
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 Reduction

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 bag spot

To the Post-man

3

I'll be sleeping when you call so don't knock. Please leave any mail
 you may have for me in the hole by the door of the bunker.

I'm leaving this bundle of letters for you in the hope that you'll try
 to make sure that they reach their destinations. I know delivery is
 increasingly difficult these days and I can't imagine how you're
 managing to keep your service going. All public transport seems to
 have broken down around here and my receiver-transmitter has been
 dead for several weeks. Apart from your irregular visits bringing me
 the usual brown envelopes nobody else calls any more; I'm having to
live off my steadily dwindling stores. Since I lost my legs and voice in
 the accident writing letters has been my only chance of keeping in
touch with things out there. However, I have received so few replies
 that I am sure that many of my letters are not getting through (or if
 they get through they are not being read (or if they are being read
 no-one is interested enough to take time to reply)). Perhaps some-
 thing's going wrong at the other end but I'm sure no blame whatsoever
 attaches to you. Indeed you've always provided me with a most
 proficient and caring service. And, most importantly, you do manage
 to keep on moving. Of course, you have the virtue of youth on your
 side! What a pity I was already too old when they introduced that
re-training course for post-men; it seems to have provided you with an
 excellent grounding in the handling of all post problems. Anyway,
 enough of my troubles!

You'd be doing me a favour if you could give these letters some
 priority - I fear their and my time is fast running out. I'm sure you've
 heard the recent global forecasts - what do they say about these at
 the Post Office? Perhaps there's been a change of heart since they
 abolished the position of post master-general. Do they still send you
out in all weathers? If so, take care! You may need more than your
 usual protective text-isles if some of the forecasters are to be
 believed.

I'm afraid there's not much I can do to show my thanks in
 anticipation of your help, but please accept this vegan bar from my
 dwindling supplies as a token.

In the mean-time - good posting!

Yours

E.A.

P.S. Perhaps you should try to get the telex to Noah through first.

all
info

No
date

can
order
as friend
in postman's
messenger? how?
in a bag?

Telex to Noah got address from old book with fading type request urgent advice. local whether centres making dire predictions re imminent flooding. no-one here believes whether-men anymore anyway all too busy with things. plus no local experience of cosmic disasters. need plans/notes for ark-construction plus any old charts you still have. apart from living things anything else you advise saving? what about humans? all help gratefully received. do hurry. thanks in anticipation.

E AMEURUNCULUS

FOR: NOAH,
"The Cedars",
Arkville,
Lebanon.

To Paolo Uccello,
c/o S.S. Spirit of Florence

Dear Paolo Uccello,

Please excuse me writing to you out of the blue. I need your help. Reports have been coming in recently about the possibility of a deluge of cosmic proportions. Everybody here dismisses these as the product of faulty machine programming but I'm not so sure. I don't get much light down here in the bunker, but once a day sufficient filters through to enable me to pick out the details of your *Flood*. I have a small reproduction of it on my wall (it's there before me now as I write to you) which I picked up at Santa Maria Novella in the days when it was safe for a Little Ameuran to travel abroad.

In the cloisters of Santa Maria, having survived the very thing it depicts and faded though it now is, we can still find that remarkable double representation of terror and hope in your painting. In these times the terror is everywhere present just below the surface of even the most trivial of daily activities: apparently no problems in locating that! But what is increasingly hard to locate is the kind of hope that seems to vivify your practice and that still shimmers across the surface of *The Flood*. As a Florentine all too familiar with the seasonal vagaries of the Arno, you must have had to work under a perennial flood threat; was it just the gathering of your art under the biblical text with its vision of a transcendental after-life that preserved and animated the hope in your painting? Or was there something else, perhaps, something that belonged, and which maybe still could belong, to painting and to all the arts themselves in their representing work?

The dominant figure in *The Flood* is a man to the right of centre standing on a tiny island of land where the flood is receding. His head and shoulders, framed above, to the side, and below by the dove bearing an olive branch, the drapery hanging from Noah's shoulder and the angle of his own wrist, catch a suffused light that comes from nowhere inside the painting. Indeed the figure himself stares fixedly out of the painting past the Ark and away from the devastation of the flood. We are held within the tension of this gaze, for it both keeps us within the painting at the same time as drawing us out of it towards the ineffable source of this unearthly light. Your painting textualizes hope in the still visible brush marks through which you stitched this absent light source into the very texture of the painting. The hope is in the brushed light, whose representation in the painting pulls us beyond to its always absent source.

This textured light brings into the painting that which is other to the images of terror and violence (the crow about to peck the eye in a



G. Rossi: Engraving after Uccello's Flood

severed head, the bloated cadaver of a drowned baby) which surround the calm standing figure. And this unrepresentable other can only 'be there' in and as the paint itself. So in spite of being embedded in and a response to a biblical narrative (which is already on behalf of a transcendental after-life) the paint itself works to draw and hold us within the painting, to keep us within this work-as-art.

But can art today, in these late-modern threatened and threatening times, generate and represent, from within its own resources, a comparable hope? Such a hope would be essential to preserve at least a relative separation from those interests that would appropriate art for their own ends. Perhaps *The Flood* can help us.

I think it's the double character of your representation of the flood which preserves its timeliness for us moderns. For you use your hard-won control of perspective to serve your aim of giving us two perspectival images within the 'one' pictorial space. The two images of the Ark, the Ark in the flood to the left and the Ark in the recession to the right, inhabit different perspectival spaces, yet we read the lunette as 'one' pictorial space. Perhaps a key to this trembling unity is the standing foreground figure, the figure which, in gathering the pictorial forces and concentrating the painting's light within itself, bears the metaphor of hope. Seeming to stand within the flood's recession (and yet inhabiting both perspectival spaces 'at once') this figure draws us into the other pictorial events within which it is embedded.

You left no clues as to the identity of this figure. Is it fanciful of me to read this as a self-portrait, or at least as a representation of the artist? Naturally our art historians would deride such a conceit, but as there is no agreement about the only other supposed portrait of

you (in that group of *The Founders of Florentine Art* in the Louvre), I shall cling to my fancy! After all, why should you not represent the artist as the gatherer of light in dark times? In any case, whether or not this is an 'empirical' representation of yourself-as-artist is finally irrelevant to the metaphorical possibilities that the figure offers in the context of your representation of the Flood.

There is another aspect of the painting too which centres it in the very dispersed midst of our late-modern concerns. For if Noah's flood is the painting's explicit referent there is a sense also in which it opens onto a different flood.

The multitude of different events and figures you portray within the two divergent perspectives have a fragmentary character; each, in its detailed treatment, gains a certain separation within the larger 'whole'. Clearly the dominant explicit theme across these events is the violence calling forth and provoked by an elemental catastrophe; yet, implicitly, the fragmented quality of these events, reinforced by the hidden 'fault' of two clashing perspectival schemes, works to scatter the surface coherence. We are held within this paradoxical tension when we try to see your painting as a whole, for you confound wholeness continually with splitting and separation. And this is where the other flood comes in.

For does not your achievement of this trembling sense of a whole, of the painting as 'one', mark your passage through and out of the 'deepest levels of oceanic undifferentiation'? I have in mind Ehrenzweig's analysis of the intra-psychic conditions of artistic creativity and response to it. The artist's reflexive turn back onto and into the self leads, inexorably, towards the non-space, the space of an inner flood, of oceanic undifferentiation, in which stable spatial and temporal reference points are collapsed. Ehrenzweig suggests that pictorial space 'works' when the artist and viewer are held suspended between the events of the surface and engulfment by the oceanic state. For Ehrenzweig this oceanic experience of fusion represents 'the minimum content of all art' (*The Hidden Order of Art*, Paladin, St. Albans, 1973, p. 135). The very possibility of a self-transforming relation to a work of art seems bound to the rhythm of our reading, of our shift from one 'state' to another; we move metonymically across the surface from 'event' to 'event', but this movement is continually disrupted by what the work makes available as we stop and seek to 'take in' (and to be taken in by) the work as a 'whole'.

Searching for metaphors for the whole we are enveloped, flooded, by a space-time that cannot be named even though it seems to be what provides for our grasp of the work's 'oneness'. Of course Ehrenzweig, framed by his psychoanalytic concerns, is more interested in intra-psychic processes than in a work's play of representation and

fragments

X

mirror
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doesn't
reflect

reading's
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8 textuality, yet he does open us in the most radical way to questions of the relation between 'inside' and 'outside', of the oceanic flooding that dissolves the self's internal boundaries.

And to move through the spaces of your *Flood* is to be drawn down again into this other flood in which the boundaries of beings, of things, themselves become ambiguous. It seems that you recovered your double representation through just such a plunge into your own inner flood.

Of course in such fragmented times as ours it may be that art's attempts to represent, however tentatively, unities, wholes, are doomed to failure. And that is perhaps one of the problems of making works of art which in some way seek to celebrate art itself, to hold on to the hope that the otherness of art's representing work stands for. For art's celebration of itself, of its own making, of its carrying over of the Tradition into the 'present', works towards the experience of 'oneness', of offering an at-one-ness (at-one-ment) with this or that specific work. But if the analytics of the times have abolished the unitary human subject and the boundaries between the work of art as text and the texts of the world, then we are left wondering whether our Desire for at-one-ness (which your paintings may temporarily seem to satisfy) is not after all an illusory anachronism. If the critics and theoreticians are right, to live by the hope such Desire fuels is to live out an illusion, for there is only multiplicity, only scattering, and never the 'one' which the relation to the work of art (even throughout the experience of modernity itself) sought to promise and represent.

In such times the outer and the inner floods seem intimately intertwined. And that's why your painting, cloistered though it may be, insinuates itself now into the problematics of late-modern thought and practice. For the work invites us to consider the possibility that the artist must continually court both these floods, must plunge, must risk being sucked down, into the imploding non-centre of the maelstrom, if art practice and our response to it are to test their own delimiting possibilities.

Well, I mustn't take up any more of your precious time. If you'd like to borrow a copy of Ehrenzweig's book, just let me know. I'm afraid it's long been unavailable, thanks to the dilettante vacillations of art discourse and publishing interests.

Good luck with the *Rout*,

Yours sincerely,

Ethelred Aneurunculus

9
To Dr. Kopf, The Director,
The Multi-National Museum of the Art of the Now

Dear Dr. Kopf,

I am writing to thank you for making available your institution's considerable resources during my recent visit. Your staff could not have been more helpful and courteous; they made me feel quite 'at home'! I particularly valued the tour round your extensive and overcrowded vaults. What a treasure house for future scholars! It made me appreciate the enormous problems that you face of conservation, of keeping the Tradition in a 'steady state'. It did occur to me in passing, however, just how vulnerable those deeply sunken cellars are to flooding; no chance of moving their contents to higher ground, I suppose? No doubt I'm worrying needlessly; you've probably got extensive insurance policies to cover any loss you might sustain through accident. It may be worth remembering though that most policies don't cover 'Acts of God'. Perhaps you should check your policies on this one. One never knows!

I'm sorry your pressing discussions with the Museum's sponsors prevented our meeting. Incidentally, I was interested to see from your subsequent press release that you've managed to renew your arrangements with Surprise Attack Technologies (Educational Division) on what you seem to regard as favourable terms. Certainly the PR man from SATED was very pleased with that innovative clause allowing them to display their newest products in-between the art work in alternate months. Personally I thought that their 'quid pro quo' agreeing to use reproductions of works exclusively from your reserve collection when furnishing their new space shuttle seemed a trifle out of balance. But only time will show us the benefits of that one!

When we communicated through the videophone you asked me to let you have my impressions of the visit. I know that the following remarks will be a little to one side of your way of approaching things and will certainly be nugatory as far as your formulation of day-to-day Museum policy is concerned. However, I prefer to think in the longer term, and it may be that, when you are trying to anticipate some of the unavoidable questions of Museum stewardship over the next two or three centuries, my comments will be of passing interest.

Let me begin by asking you to share one of two little fantasies with me (and what better place for the fantastic than your own 'hot seat' surrounded by your collected works!).

Let's try firstly to imagine a culture without any art museums or galleries, where all works of art are made for and find other sites -

- a) 10 factory, office, home, shuttle station, railway station, computer park, airport lounge, hyper-market, cafe, and so forth. Or imagine a city with many tiny museums each containing only one painting or sculpture, with open access day and night. Or, again, imagine a culture in which the museum has become the equivalent of the lending library with plenty of works available (provided, perhaps, by state-funded artists) and free circulation of the works among those who want to borrow. Imagine a town in which each street has its own little display space, a shop-front perhaps, a garage, someone's living room, where the continual display of art works acts as a focus for the neighbourhood.

Now let me put it to you that as soon as we enter into one of these little fantasies we also begin to realize that the kinds of works produced and shown under the various utopic conditions would look nothing like the work that is produced as art now and which fills your Museum. Each fantasy is underpinned by another politics, partakes of another economy, in which the relation of the artist to the work, to the culture, to the audience, and to him or herself would necessarily be radically different to that experienced within the after-culture of late industrial society.

And yet perhaps such fantasies allow us to see that present conditions of making and responding are entirely conventional, what we see as art, and how we see it, are bound up with, are the possibility of absolutely specific processes of representation and the interpretations they call forth. I'm sure you would be the first to acknowledge that the institutions through which the arts are represented and made available in our culture, whether we recognize it or not, permeate the very tissue and texture of the works themselves. For there, right there where you are now, straddling the very body of the representation of modernity, we are given a collective representation, a constant reminder of what it is to be modern, of what modernity has been taken to be by you and your co-curators. There, no doubt, we should also find representations of the paradoxes of the texts, the works, that frame modernity for us.

It's what this Museum (and perhaps we should remember too that your Museum is the umbrella for the galleries that surround it and that its functions of contemporary museumship also include activities such as publishing, conserving, educating, feeding, and so on) represents, the Museum as representation, that is the theme and frame of my comments. That you have to consider this theme right there where you are, in the bowels of the Museum and under its auspices, inserts you yourself into the question; you and I are both part of the question of the Museum.

Your Museum is all around us and always ahead of us; we are

Museumship

always implicated in and by the Museum in advance, for we only know art through it. As you know only too well, it is the frame for the visual arts in our culture, just as publishing is the frame for the literary arts. Indeed, even before I entered your massively impressive neo-classical doors I had already been drawn into, had put myself, my necessary and inevitable collusion with the Museum, into the question. But whether we go further and use this entry as an occasion to put ourselves and the Museum into question (something surely that at least some of the works in your collection solicit us to do) is quite another question. And it may well be a further question that the Museum, in its very representation of itself and its works, has already answered on our behalf.

But if we are already encased by the Museum can we move beyond its walls and consider it from the outside? Never perhaps completely. But with a little passing help from another medium (literature) we may loosen its hold over us temporarily (I'll come to this shortly). This is difficult because our culture has been busy for many years incorporating the Museum into the interrelated entertainment and tourist industries. The consequence is that art becomes part of the general spectacle of entertainment.

You have thus had the peculiar strategic problem in your Museum of the Now of trying to find ways of reconciling the general cultural expectation of and need for amusement, for diversion arising from this alliance with entertainment, with the bemusement that 'naturally' befalls an audience with such expectations in the face of the art you represent. Caught between amusing and bemusing, it's very difficult to preserve the space (the 'space' as one of my antipodean colleagues calls it) of musing. Especially as the meditative gaze characterizing musing has in the violent on-rushing of our culture lost much of its Old French sense of time-wasting. I wonder if time-wasting is central to the curriculum of your extensive educational programme? I wonder, too, if you have ever considered putting on seminars in dislocation, self-scattering, or scandal? But perhaps these would be somewhat to one side of your interest in continuity, in establishing and preserving a metonymic association between all the works in your care.

Indeed, I sometimes think that 'continuity' is the real subject of your Museum, the value we are meant to read behind the surfaces and in the gaps between the works. And if discontinuity has been a continuing issue for practice within modernity, then you have managed to suture its possible wounds fairly effectively. Where the provocations of the works themselves may require musing as an absolute minimum necessary beginning condition for their engagement by a respondent, your institution, by allying itself with

discontinuity/continuity

14 we had not yet reached or attained. Modernity would be the permeation of every-thing by that irresistible force (Desire modernized and manifest in the energy of the performance of representation) which catches us and pulls us along, perhaps in spite of ourselves, while remaining all the time just ahead, out of our reach, inaccessible. Perhaps, then, modernity names the Desire to be ahead of ourselves, to be on the move to somewhere else, to give ourselves over to living half in the future, and this Desire inscribes, quite concretely, a motive and gives us a sense of time, of our own being-in-time, which is so fundamental to the energy, to the harnessing of our libidinal forces that are needed and consumed in the on-rushing of our economy and culture.

At this level it begins to seem as if the modern tradition of art, which is committed to the production of individual differences, of change, of innovation, of 'truth' to the 'present', parallels the movement of the culture within which it is embedded, and which is exemplified in its gravest and its most trivial senses perhaps in the inter-twining of technology and fashion. Art, inevitably caught up within modernity, displays, reveals, sometimes critically, sometimes in celebration, sometimes in irony, the inscription of this wider modernity in its own texts.

But if modernity names the (Desire for movement) for change, it also proposes that the means of movement, the work of movement, must be addressed to the 'present', the 'now'. The way forward can only be opened through making works that are absolutely of their time, which don't look back, which, in other words, make their relation to their past (Tradition) a problem, the problem. The goal of modern practice has been to capture the 'present' as the necessary means of movement to the desired future; and thus the artist's problem in the modern tradition has been both to forget the past (distant and immediate) and to do this through an attempt to make the work of art present the present immediately (i.e. without mediation, directly), to make the work mark the difference between the absolute specificity of the moment of its making and all preceding moments: to capture presence. The question for practice has been: How can I find the ways of making, the marks, the images, the writing, that are true to my experience of my relation to the present?

And yet, if representation is the condition of our being, if we are always already within representation, within Language, if there is no absolute presence or present that I can capture or 'express' in itself, then the attempt to gain or hold the present in the work of art is necessarily compromised in the ways every work represents itself first of all as art, that is in the ways that it places itself in and in relation to Tradition.

present ↔ past

By associating itself with, by commemorating art (rather than something else) each work of art fatally compromises its Desire to be only of the present, to be absolutely modern. And every work in your bursting vaults displays this compromise simply by being there in the Museum - but I'll return to this. Indeed, one of the features of much so-called 'post-modern' art has been precisely the making explicit of this realization of the inter-textuality of the work - that each work in making its own difference also flows back into the texts to which it is indebted. It thus acknowledges and perhaps even celebrates its own belatedness. Modern practice comes to see itself as this suspension, this drifting within the wake of that which is at once both ahead of and behind it. And knowing this necessarily produces the artist as something of an ironist - someone for whom, increasingly, the earlier modernist or vanguardist dream of the possibility of forgetting Tradition and of absolutely capturing a moment, an experience, a vision, of expressing purely and without taint, an emotion, a feeling, some-thing-in-itself, has always been impossible. The possibilities of making here might come to turn on the ways each artist moves through and across the multiplicity of languages that constitute the ever-open expanding-contracting body of Tradition.

Now, I hope you're not getting too impatient; please bear with me! I'm working my way steadily back to your Museum through this necessary scene-setting detour. You see, I think that this sense of remembrance, of commemoration and celebration of Tradition, the ironizing of the self's relation to history, the loss of immediacy, does begin to put us back on the path to the Museum and to other senses of being in modernity's wake. If 'post-discourse' in the visual arts is belated, if the possibility, the necessity of a 'post-modern' practice has haunted the other arts and especially literature for considerably longer than it has the visual arts, this, in no small way, is due to another wake - *Finnegans*. In the very title of James Joyce's last book both ending and beginning (or returning) are already inscribed in the 'fin' and the 'egan'. And this wake takes us back not to the sixties or even the fifties, but to 1939, when Jackson Pollock was still working on the Federal Arts Project and had not yet painted his first non-figurative painting. If Joyce's text, a watershed, marks the end of high modernism in literature, so everything following it has to be seen as writing after the 'Wake'. And if there is a 'post-modernity' then all paths to it point back to the 'Wake'; it may even be that *Finnegans Wake* still is the Wake that lies ahead, that has still not been reached. So what might we (yes, even you as representative of the paradigm modern art institution) learn still now about modernity and its after-words, its after-texts, from this extraordinary book?

prologue and epilogue

fin / egan

15
the 2nd
novel

Unreadable, able to live only through a respondent who substitutes deciphering and reading-aloud for reading, and who is prepared to live permanently suspended within the folds of double, treble, multiple, and finally undecidable meanings, *Finnegans Wake* marks the end of writing-reading as it was known, and makes the reader into a re-writer. It marks, too, the death of the artist as a unified self, as centre, as the origin of a singular narrative. It is a (the) limit text that unavoidably confronts us with what writing 'is'. All subsequent writing is unavoidably in *Finnegans'* wake: a dream of writing and the writing of dream. Standing aside from all norms of 'professionalism', of professional production (one novel/exhibition every two years, plus mixed shows/reviews/commissions/teaching and so on) Joyce, almost blind, takes seventeen years to write it, allowing only the briefest extracts to be published during that period. And here its paradox begins to emerge.

In its very publication it becomes part of the structure of the institution of modern literature, but in its writing it defies the very system of readership that the institution of publishing creates, sustains, confirms, and needs. It scatters, disintegrates, the 'common' reader who sustains the system. And it begins to show us that every reader is already uncommon. *Finnegans Wake* calls for another reader, a reader who would (unread him) or herself in and as its re-writing; and it does this by fore-fronting its surface as only writing, as nothing but fissures, cracks, rifts, holes, voids, a non-surface that pulls the would-be reader down into Language, into the under-life of culture itself, to find his or her own allegory in and as this very praxis. The flow of reading, of the self, is re-directed into a multiplicity of tributaries, criss-crossing each other without ever coming together again into a 'one'. The apparent immediate availability of a text for a reader, assumed within traditional and even other modern narrative forms, is sundered forever. Expressing nothing but its own plurality, it ex-presses, expels, the reader from singular habits into the swirl of language-as-writing, a language from which we can neither escape nor with which we can ever be 'at one'.

You're probably saying, 'Yes, maybe, but what has all this got to do with my stewardship of this Museum?' Well, my apparent digression into *Finnegans Wake* strengthens the questions about your relation to modernity and the visual arts from within the Museum. For, with *Finnegans Wake* as the paradigm case, the text that marks the limits of modernism, modernity, and the literary institutions of publishing and the library, we might ask whether there is a work, a body of work that has worked, or better, that is still working (as I'm suggesting *Finnegans Wake* is still working) similarly for the visual arts. Is there a marker of the limits of the modern that

has a similar status to that of *Finnegans Wake*? Duchamp's *Large Glass*, the associated *Green Box*, and his fragmentary gestures with the ready-mades certainly come well before *Finnegans Wake*. But they also come before what we can describe as a well-established modern tradition (and nobody has done more to establish modernity as a tradition than you and your Museum). Further, Duchamp's work dissipates the possibilities of an absolute radicality in his equivocal relation to Tradition, both his immediate precursors - impressionism and post-impressionism (retinal art as he described it), and the modern tradition itself within which his own work has been recuperated as a key site for the explorations of the limits of modernity itself.

This ability to recuperate boundary markers and to enshrine them firmly within the tradition is so pervasive in the visual arts that we are left, I would suggest, with *Finnegans Wake* or nothing. And let us not forget that *Finnegans Wake* was published before the first works of what your Museum represents as the period of high modernism (American painting post-1950) had been made. If from within your custodianship of the visual arts it seems too far away, in its preceding what came to be known as modernism, then that may be something that you will just have to come to terms with. Certainly with its publication came the proposal, heeded or not, that subsequent work had to account for itself as both within modernity, within Language, within Tradition, but without the security of a certain site, a unitary place for practice or reading. And is this not precisely 'central' (an irony in itself) to the popular prevalent thesis of the 'post-modern'? In this way *Finnegans Wake* may be read, following another sense of 'wake', wake as vigil as a watching over and a remembrance of the dead as a wake for modernism, and its relation to institution and Language.

Wake as vigil returns us to where we all, unavoidably in our culture, already are - the Museum. To be in the Museum is to be reminded repeatedly that we may be after modernism (the traditionalizing, the normalizing, of innovation, of the Desire for presence) but are still, inevitably, in modernity's wake, in the double sense of vigilant commemoration and of that hole in the ice, that strip of post-water. In your Museum we move forward only with our backs to the future. And yet there is nowhere else to go, for the Museum is itself not only a modern institution, but provides for the very possibility of the modern work of art as we know it.

The Museum's task, your Museum's task, is to gather for us, on our behalf, as our representative (with all its political overtones) those works that stand for, that represent, modernity as it has been practised. A double representation: the Museum represents us and

writing vs. publishing
reader as re-writer

dead
Museum

Fichte?

double Mpr. → repres. representation

18 represents modernity itself to itself and to us. Through the ordering of its collection it offers us narratives, if not one narrative, that necessarily give a certain coherence to modernity. The latter comes to be seen as 'one', as a continuity, as some-thing that can be collected. It enables us to rehearse, to repeat again and again, what modernity 'has been' and 'is now' (through its regular updatings). The permanent collection in its very permanence reassures us of modernity's solidity as an achieved tradition with its masterpieces as markers of both change and continuity; and this is reinforced in your Museum's architecture and facilities, which make it above all a place of comfort and ease, a place where your guides and educators assemble the spectacle of modernity for us tourists. Yet the Museum has somehow to represent itself as neutral (to be self-effacing), as outside the spectacle. For it knows, with all its sophistication, that art Desires only the neutral from within which to disclose itself (very slowly perhaps). So here's a question for you: How can your Museum, the epitome of cultural power, represent itself as neutral? Only through elaborate dissimulation perhaps? Self-deception? Think about it.

Museum

beyond modernity

Your Museum's problem, then, as the institution that represents modernity to itself, to culture generally and to artistic practice in particular, is somehow to represent itself, to show itself as outside, beyond, independent, of the very thing (modern art) that it constitutes and makes possible. But of course while, ostensibly, always behind, in the wake of, art practice (where it represents itself as the master-antiquary collecting and caring for the relics of modernity's pasts), it has always already turned the tables on art practice by representing itself as the only possible home, site, for art in our culture. It shows and knows itself as the necessary destination of practice. The Museum, as that which is behind, in the wake of, modern practice, nevertheless leads art practice towards itself by representing itself as the work's only possible destination. With your Museum leading from behind the work can only go 'forward' by retreating: practice describes a circle. And the Museum draws specific conditions of representation in its wake that, in their permeation of artistic practice and audience response, define the quality of this circular relationship.

As destination, your Museum covertly inscribes the ground rules for artistic practice. The Tradition's apparent absorptive and recuperative power, its abilities to recuperate for and within art those works and gestures whose telos has either been to ironize this very condition or, more radically, the dissolution of the boundaries between 'art' and 'life', is made effective, real-ized, only in the work of the Museum. Duchamp's ready-mades, Manzoni's canned artist's

Kunst im Kreis

Museum als
Ziel und
Start

faeces. Acconci's seed-bed, happenings, performances, all are de- 19 scandalized in the very moment of their entry into the Museum's representations and documentations. The museum affirms and reminds us that the modern work is that which brings the past into the present, that needs, preserves, and celebrates the past in the very process of asserting its masterful difference from its predecessors. The moment of mastery over tradition, difference, doubles as a succumbing to and a celebration of it.

In this doubling the work of art, the modern work, is transformed into the monument, where a monument is that which serves to commemorate; the secondary reference of monument, to size, as in the reference to the 'gigantic' associated with the 'monumental', is also important in the practical history of making the work of art. With the Museum as its terminal home, and under its auspices, modern art practice is intrinsically entwined with the monumental. This project is dense with irony.

Monument
- a1

The very practice, modernity, that Desires the Other, projecting itself out of the past, and seeking to cling only to the present, finds its possibility absolutely circumscribed by the conditions of its representation. It immediately becomes a relic, a dead thing, a marker of, a monument to, a moment in, the all-embracing narrative of modernity's flow. The monumental, then, is the tacit condition of a work's access to the Museum's collection; it has somehow already to know itself as a possible monument, because the museum, the gallery, is where the modern tradition is gathered and represented. To make work that is to have possible visibility in relation to the Tradition (even as its negation) is inevitably to make work that participates in, collaborates with, or seeks to negate the monumental. It knows, however, secretly, that its only life is to live on as a commemoration of that which has passed away; if art work 'lives' within these conditions we may say that its only possible aspiration, which it must already have acknowledged, however inchoately, is for a living-death, as a monument that commemorates massively its own passing away, its lost presence. As monument too it is absolutely non-domesticatable; in its very making on the Museum's terms it refuses to contemplate a domestic future for itself. The private collector has to turn home into a museum to 'accommodate' the work. And this is only secondarily a matter of scale, of the gigantic (although this is problem enough in the suburbia most of us inhabit). No, the prime issue is what each work gathers to itself in its preparation, in its making, and what it needs for its representation within and in relation to a tradition of modernity. Quite simply - it needs the others (your others). To become what it aspires to be, to come into its ownmost, to become a monument to its own difference

relic +
dead
things

all these

the other

within continuity, it needs to be associated with, traversed and contaminated by, its predecessors and contemporaries.

Each work can only 'work' metonymically *within* the master narratives that gather modernity; each gains its 'sense', its place, only in combination and association with alongside and in-between the others. And that only happens within the Museum. Your institution becomes the ground condition, the very possibility of what happens at every 'level' of the art-world (gallery, journals, collectors, grant-givers, and so on). It is in the Museum that the terms are set, where each work in its difference becomes a synecdoche for the whole. This 'whole' is nothing other than the orderings of your Museum. This need each work has for the others, a need to be seen to be in an infinite conversation with to be commenting upon, associating itself with, and dissociating itself from their concerns, may also militate against what Michael Fried proposes as the the modern work's inescapable need (to gather an audience to itself, to its specificity. If your museum provides the fundamental site for and conditions of such a gathering, it may be that the gathering, our gathering (the ways a work may gather us to itself), can occur only through a continual looking away from each particular work to the others. Quite apart from the physical conditions of viewing in your Museum, which make the extended contemplation of single works almost impossible (contemplation of the kind and duration possible only in a domestic or religious setting perhaps), the respondent-as-itinerant is necessarily distracted by the others, and this even at the most mundane level of one's peripheral vision, let alone through the play of memory intertwined with discursive art historical knowledge, and the reading of the gaps between the exhibits.

This is perhaps what much recent art (which you have begun to collect so voraciously as the latest exemplar of the new 'new'), art that distances itself from the formalist aesthetics dominating 'late-modernist' abstraction, has discovered for itself. It marks the abandonment of the belief that the visual work of art 'worked' instantaneously, that it could be grasped immediately, and 'wholly'. It recognizes time's intrinsic work in the work of art - that space need time. In its very textuality, its having to be read, the work of art gathers time within itself. It can only 'take place' by taking time - our time. Modernity's unsaid, its own passing, is increasingly brought to the surface and made part of the explicit subject matter of the work precisely through a self-distancing, through irony. And irony's break is frequently put to work as allegory. All that critical reliance on the terminology of a long lost expressionism (out of which you and your fellow-curators have made so much mileage) misses completely this self-distancing, this acceptance and explor-

Blende Fleck
- danebengucker

ation of the representation of time. For what 'happens' is that allegory comes to displace the categories so fundamental to modernist theory, critique, and practice. Allegory, performing an ontological rupture, confronts such discourse with problems it has no means of coping with. It also requires that we re-read modernity itself. For in re-instating time, in fore-fronting the work of art as text, it shows us that time has always been represented (however covertly and however much the prevailing aesthetic sought to deny it through a commitment to immediacy). When we go backward through modernity in the wake of allegory we may have to represent this tradition very differently. Indeed, you may care to ask yourself whether it is just possible that modern culture, with your Museum as its instrument, has missed the art of its time. Could it be that a century of criticism and your stewardship have been essentially (if inevitably and necessarily) beside the point? Could it be that in its necessary detour through your halls and the violence of critique, in its coming-to-representation through you, its ontological allegories have been displaced? It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?

The art historical coherence and trajectories that you have used to order your purchases, your gallery space, your master narratives, may be scattered in this re-reading - so watch out!

Artists in the wake of modernity know that the past of modernity is absolutely ungraspable, cannot be brought to book, presented as 'this' thing; and yet, as their own very origin, it is precisely what must be addressed again and again. Condemned to the irony of making, of representing a relationship with that which cannot finally be represented, artists find themselves, 'take place' (this place), through allegory. It is not just that both modernity and the pre-modern provide them with a repertoire of means (manifestos, styles, gestures, marks, justifications, etc.) from which they can 'choose' their own 'distinctive' combination, but rather that this very diversity of possibilities, no longer held together by an overarching system (if it ever were), this fragmentation, becomes their subject matter. For the artist-as-allegorist modernity's past always lies in the future. Each work, held in the indirectness of representation, can only point to that which is always deferred. And what is deferred is the past as a whole, for what the artist is faced with are ruins amongst which, as Benjamin suggests, one loses oneself whilst extracting meaning, but a meaning that will never be 'one', never be just 'itself'. Leading a double life, the public life of its surface marks and forms (through which you in your omanism stitch it into your master narratives) and the other private life of its indirectness (elusive deconstructions of the orders of everyday meanings), the work of art resists absorption, resists empathy. This textuality is its unsatisfiable condition.

Letter written to the past,
because addressee will always
already be addressed in the past when
letter is mailed

Subject to your gathering-linking practices, each work, living-on in its difference, needs the others to affirm this very difference. With your Museum as its possibility it is not so much the individual work that gathers, that holds, that absorbs the respondent, it is rather the relations between, the gaps, the absences between the works, the possibility of making a narrative, of finally feeling one's way to some kind of feeling for sense of the heterogeneity. For the Museum's concern, as a rationally accountable public institution, is undoubtedly 'sense' rather than 'scandal' or dis-ease or poetry; as soon as a work is brought directly within the Museum's sway, is Museumized (and you will have seen that I am suggesting that it is this from its inception), the scandalous is converted into theatre, only the spectacle, the spectre, of a scandal. The paranoia of the Museum (its need to gather everything within the coherence of its narratives) is opposed to but able to absorb the detachment, what Roland Barthes called the 'fetishistic' character of the work of art, and it does this precisely through its social and economic power, through its self-confident appraisal of art as a social institution. Art's only response in the face of your mastery (apart from straight collusion) is a kind of stoic irony.

Knowing only too well the conditions it faces and which permeate it, and far from being grounded in a total commitment to absorb the respondent absolutely, the work of art tacitly acknowledges from the beginning that it will be subject to wandering attention, to distraction, to tourism. Each work thus insinuates itself into the others, and seeks to draw them into itself - the play of inter-textuality. It begins to live only in and as its relations with the others. Perhaps here, in modernity's wake, in the so-called 'post-modern' self-consciousness, the submission to and the involvement in these necessary conditions of modernity tend to provoke two kinds of response.

Firstly, the aura pervading modern practice and its products is one of pathos, a more or less desperate melancholy, from within which the possibility of preserving a trace of poetry, of irony, of the Good of art's utter uselessness, becomes the artist's only and final resort in the face of Museumization. Desperation and melancholy become intrinsic to and constitutive of the making of it. Yet these are not grounded in nostalgia. Rather they acknowledge what is involved in art's absolutely resolute commitment to otherness while working within the hole in the ice. It is no longer possible to shelter behind earlier avant-garde rhetorics that represented art works as powerful presentations of immediacy, of purity, of pure expressivity, of things-as-they-are, of the absolute, or, concomitantly, as the rejection of the past or the destruction of bourgeois values. The utopian programmes

and proposals of some earlier modernities (which were already casualties of the Museum even as they were penned) are increasingly avoided in favour of the acknowledgement of a certain indifference of an inert sullenness, in which your Museum is at once acknowledged, distanced, and ironized. Under these conditions poetic and ironic traces are likely to be well buried to avoid the Museum's monumentalizing power. If it is in the very 'nature' of the Museum to appropriate excess, exorbitance, the scandalous, for its own ends, we may see, as you have seen all along, that the up-front strategies of previous avant-gardes have long been inappropriate.

As the confirmer of monumentality, your Museum reveals itself as a machine for allegorizing; it allegorizes its works by requiring that we read them in terms other than themselves. We can only read each in its specificity through its underlying relations to all the others, through what 'goes on' in-between them. Allegory itself thus begins to appear as the groundless ground from which work is made and seen. And in the wake of modernity the very art historicizing that your institution inevitably represents, the representation of narratives of organization and coherence, is subjected to the ironies of allegorical play. In this play it is style itself (style as a certain consistency of the means of representation and as a category central to the means of the Museum's orderings) that is at stake. For you works are gathered according to style; you have to have representatives of all 'important' styles. Each work thus starts out as an example.

If one response has thus entailed, paradoxically, a tension between, on the one hand, recognition of the Museum's defining role and a resignation to its appropriative powers, and on the other a withholding, in the depth of its reserve, of certain poetic and ironic traces, then the other main alternative has been to try to site the work beyond your Museum's reach. And this has almost inevitably entailed attempts to re-define both what could stand as a work of art and how and where this could be experienced. The non-sites of Robert Smithson exemplify this rejection of the Museum. The transformation of the landscape into a work of art eschewing the kind of documentation that would allow the Museum to appropriate the work, opens up a very different possibility for the relation to Tradition while preserving and renewing the monumental. In the long-ago nineteen-sixties 'happenings' also initially marked a break with the Museum, but their transformation into performance art, which has continued largely under the auspices of Museum sponsorship and setting, displays the problems attendant upon attempts to re-site art work in a culture where art is represented by your Museum.

You're obviously all too familiar with other ways of working for

allegory
machine

example

Melancholy

which your Museum is both the topic and site. In representing yourself as the centre you found yourself, however uncomfortably, having to toy with them; to have ignored them would have compromised your over-arching centrality. These alternatives live in a direct relation to the Museum while ironizing its practices and its relation to history by seeking to distance themselves from its incorporations. Obviously they include all temporary installations that use and comment on the space they occupy, while rejecting the demands of conservation and preservation; at the limit Tinguely's self-destructing machine, sited in the fore-court of one of your major subsidiaries, was at once a happening, an installation, and the ruin of installation. By making works which in their very scale cannot be preserved according to the conventional concerns and definitions of the Museum as storehouse, as cultural reserve, the artists step aside from your Museum's intrinsic historicizing. Nor can artist like Ed Kienholz be comfortably fitted into your master narrative or your vaults because a single work, occupying one or more rooms by itself, in its very displacement of other works would deny the Museum's norm of representativeness. Here exorbitance of scale or conception seems to rule out Museumization.

Such strategies of irony or avoidance distribute themselves around and are pulled into the Museum's orbit through your centripetal practices. They return us to and recall the problematic, the question, inaugurated by *Finnegans Wake*, of the limits of the institutions that make practice possible. In the period we call 'modern', a period in which your Museum is a founding constituent of that very modernity, the artist's problem has been how to preserve, to make available, traces of the poetic, the excessive, the exorbitant quality of art both through and yet in spite of your institution. Of what may *Finnegans Wake* remind us in this context? Just as *Finnegans Wake* could not end the institution of literary publishing, but only and still today marks its limits by being both available and unreadable (in conventional senses of that practice), so we cannot expect a work, a body of work, to undo the institution that provides for the ruling conception of representation in the first place. But while in literature we have 'one' work which, for decades has acted as the edge, publicly available but radically withheld, the visual arts have generated no comparable work.

As I have indicated there has been a wide range of work in which art's reflexive quality, its necessary turning back onto and into itself, has included an ironizing of the very conditions of representation themselves. And of course to prevent your centrality, your defining sway, being compromised, you've had to find ways, however uncomfortable you may have felt, of bringing such work into your

master representation. In many instances this has been facilitated quite simply by the works being singular art objects. This singularity simplifies your appropriation enormously. Remembering Benjamin's comments on the aura of the unique work of art, it seems that the very quality of their availability as visual art texts, stands in the way of the kind of withholding exemplified in *Finnegans Wake*. Their rapid absorption and placement by both Museum and art-world discourse pre-empt the possibility that they can hover in a relation of absolute ambiguity, of continual disconcerting uncertainty, to both Tradition and to the context of presentation. Just as, in spite of Sterne, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, and Apollinaire, the book seemed to us to be the most natural thing in the world until *Finnegans Wake*, so does your Museum, in spite of Duchamp, of Breton, of Pollock, of Rauschenberg, of Buren, of Oldenburg, of Christo, of Haacke, still seem to be and to represent itself as the 'natural' place, the unhomely home, for the visual arts. uncanny

If the distinctive shifts of interest named in the concept of the 'post-modern' have occurred among visual artists (belatedly, if we take *Finnegans Wake* as the mark of modernity's limit), then this must surely be grounded upon the melancholy realization of art's impotence to radically denaturalize, to undo, your Museum. You will be pleased to hear that art's 'resistance' may only be the slow, remotely subversive inaction of a radical impotence in which it celebrates its own utter uselessness as its greatest strength. Against but caught up within the paranoia of the systematizing institutions that represent it for our culture, art finally preserves itself by continually rehearsing, re-staging, its commitment to non-compromise, while knowing in advance that for the foreseeable future its certain destiny is to be compromised absolutely. Living out its half-life within the dull glow of 'post-modernity's' half-light, contemporary art holds, maintains, a wake for itself for its own death within life, and the faint glimmerings we can dimly discern through the Museum's penumbra and the fogs of art-world discourse (to which this letter is itself necessarily condemned if you let it slip out) which continually condemn the works to your meaning, to your sense, display art's continued ability to salvage, to re-cycle itself, in its essential neutrality, as pure avoidance. Only in those occasional eruptions of absolute withholding of militant reticence, do the works, in their secretion of a powerless poetics, manage still, in the face of the obliterative appropriations of art's institutions, to surprise us, to unhinge ever so slightly our attachment to the culture's conventions of representation. In this unhinging we may also be invited to return again to and to review the whole of that modern tradition that we felt, thanks to the collusions of your Museum and

Schloß hängen

oder hängen
einmalen?

Wache für art

schwarze Licht

Tombs

unhingeable

(ship-sail term)

26 art history, we had so securely in hand.

return → For if our being within Finnegans' wake, in the ice hole of a declining modernity, names anything, it names the necessity of that reflexive returning back upon the very tradition of modernity within which our Desire for art is animated in the first place. And it also names the self-consciousness that knows that this e-gathering, this renewal, of Tradition, occurs within the folds, within the multis, of Language. This reflexive turn creates paradoxes for those theories of art that have grounded themselves upon a vision of theory's relation to its topic as a relation of critical mastery, of an illusory dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity, derived from stereotypes of scientific practice and discourse (and I suspect that you yourself are in thrall to such a vision – certainly your Museum acts it out). For in the wake the reflexive recoil calls for a suspension of the assumptions, the terms of reference, of those critical-analytical-historical art discourses that have permeated and sustained your relations to modern practice itself. Such a suspension, already practised by artists working in the wake, would necessarily call for the self-transformation of the reading-writing that is in the wake of the work. And necessarily involved in such a critical self-transformation would be the abandoning of that sense of the work of art as some-thing to be placed by, to be represented by, to be mastered by, your Museum and its associated criticisms, in a coherent discourse absolutely certain about itself and thus unable to be shaken to its very foundations by art. It is no accident, of course, that your Museum has been both absolutely complicitous with and a precondition for the discourses of critical objectivity; and yet without it, as I have to acknowledge, there could be no wake for modernity, for there would have been no tradition of modernity, no modernity as we have had it represented to us.

↘ In the short term which, after all, is all that concerns you (with only a few years of your contract left to run), all this must only bring you comfort. But as for the long term – that may be another story! Your successors may just find the embracing politics that underwrites their representation beginning to tremble. Until that time, no doubt, your Museum, having nowhere else to turn except back into itself, into the reassuring confines of its own representations of itself, will sustain itself through whatever alliances are present-to-hand.

↘ As the epitome of representation you can only seek ways of aligning art with the wider culture of representation (of which you yourself are the representative). In this work of reconciliation art is spectacularized. Thus art, which, in the impetus of the Desire that animates each work, in the very lack of its claims, is the undoing of the spectacle, becomes an adjunct to the tourist trade. Always on the

Warzismus
Museum

move, tourists pass things by (works of art included, as your market research staff will no doubt have told you) quickly, they pick up things, search out the message, the meaning, at a glance (aided by symbols) (your guides). Somebody should try telling them that works of art have nothing-to-say, no message, are to one side of meaning, take time to realize their lack, are very withdrawn.

Obviously you couldn't take on this job because every last detail of your Museum's organization and self-presentation signifies the opposite – the potency of art's meanings. In any case it wouldn't go down too well with your sponsors.

I know the above comments won't help you to implement your immediate programmes and policies, but you may find something to mull over in the years to come. Perhaps I could explore your vaults again in a few years' time (always assuming you're still here – don't forget to check that insurance policy!); I like to keep my finger on the pulse of public taste, and it's always interesting to see what's off the wall.

Yours sincerely

E. Ameurunculus

not
in the
museum