

LETTERS

TECHNOPHOBIA

To the editors:

This letter is a response to Timothy Druckrey's article, "SIGGRAPH '91: Gambling on Empty," in the March '92 issue of *Afterimage*. At times I found his claims not only grandiose but sadly reflective of a larger more serious crisis of technophobic disdain found so often in the dominant art world.

To the claim that "... the field of computer imaging as a whole is constitutionally incapable of self-reflection ..." is grossly untrue and blindly arrogant. For example, two works displayed at the SIGGRAPH '91 Art Show, Annette Weintraub's *Reconstruction* and Eva Sutton's *Disintegration #13*, represent an art practice embedded in a deliberate and ironic positioning of the "meanings" of the images employed. In both cases, the works attempt to undermine the associative definitions that viewers may impart to the pictorial elements and are quite obviously informed by theories of signification.

To require all technologically-based work to fit into a preexisting set of criteria not only misses the point, it obliterates it. Often, theories of art and technology are constructed and defended from an "outsider perspective" with too many answers and not enough questions. This allows very little room for the work itself to be experienced and is quite disturbing to any practitioner.

Concurrent to any of the ruptures of definition that art has withstood and absorbed throughout its history, there has always been this kind of myopic, self-righteous sureness about the exact recipe of art. For me, this kind of sureness does not acknowledge the depth of the ontological crisis that we find ourselves in the midst of.

Further, SIGGRAPH (Association of Computing Imagery—Special Interest Group in Graphics), a diverse and pluralistic organization, is perhaps, as any organization, not completely perfect but it has provided a forum for individuals to share their work, excitement and curiosity as artists, thinkers, and scientists when there was no other community.

In conclusion, I would hope that this response will serve to build a platform and dialogue between practitioners and theoreticians interested in posing questions regarding the integration of art and technology and its ensuing cultural applications.

—Maureen Nappi
New York City

Tim Druckrey responds:

Maureen Nappi's response to my review of the SIGGRAPH '91 art show is doubly welcome.

First it suggests the scope of intimidation by "the dominant art world" whose "technophobic disdain" is a "serious crisis." Because I'm in no way a supporter of the "dominant" scene, and am not, as Maureen knows, "technophobic," I can only speculate that the "disdain" that she identifies is uncertainty about the efficacy and marketability of images and technology that challenge so many assumptions about the relationship between technologies of imaging and theories of representation. Rather than "technophobic," perhaps the "dominant art world" simply doesn't accept the self-proclaimed art status of computer imagery. Any look at the SIGGRAPH shows would make this clear. The juried insider shows are chaotic and rudimentary. No attempt is made to give curatorial coherence to the work, no statement is made to suggest that the works, most often singular images, wholly decontextualized from whatever body of work they might be part of, are the production of considered positions. In essence the shows become lobby art to weary trade show attendees. In no way do I want to suggest that work in these shows isn't conscious or critical. Indeed the two examples Nappi uses do represent "deliberate" artists. The point is that the show doesn't represent them as such.

The second essential point is about editorial communication. Although the review bears my name it was extensively reworked by the editors of *Afterimage*. Because of editorial deadlines and a history of trust in the editorial work done, what I consider minor editorial clarifications are assumed. The sentence that Nappi quotes is one of those reworked sentences. The original sentence read: "Indeed it could seem as if the field is driven unreflectively, a perception not contradicted by the remainder of the conference." The deplorable editorial reworking is the responsibility of the editors and not of mine. I never said, and do not think, that "the field of computer imaging as a whole is constitutionally incapable of self-reflection." I was not supplied with a rewritten/edited version of the review. Because my name is on the article I would like to apologize for this lapse. I will not apologize for careless editorial rewriting. I hope that the editors do. I would like to add two other points: the original review bore the title "Learning from Las Vegas," not "Gambling on Empty," and the final sentence of the original paragraph read, "If there is any single lesson of the critical theory of the past decade, it is that culpability is an inescapable responsibility." This lesson was driven home once again.

I don't see where I require "all technologically-based work to fit into a preexisting set of criteria." If computer art isn't

responsive to the issues raised in the art world for the past decade, hoping that its techniques will shield it from critical scrutiny, then the "ontological crisis" is self-imposed. If I demonstrate, from what Nappi calls an "outsider" position, that the work is presented and legitimated by its own self-reflexive institutions, an insider position, then she cannot cry foul. Perhaps she should also address the SIGGRAPH board with recommendations to integrate the process of review of art work, one that would include critics, curators, and imagemakers whose contributions would ensure the building of the "platform and dialogue" that she, and I, hope for.

Editors note: All writers whose work appears in *Afterimage* receive a hard copy of their manuscript with copyediting and editorial suggestions subject to their approval.

A LITTLE SEXIST

To the editors:

I would like to respond to a few of Nadine L. McGann's observations in her article "Dumb Luck at SPE" in the May 1992 issue of *Afterimage*. As an on again, off again participant in both the regional and national conferences, I too have been frustrated at SPE's lack of coherent identity. At the closing of the last three national conferences I felt as if I had witnessed the tower of ineffectual babble as opposed to the utopian symphony of the polyphonic voice that it so earnestly desires to be. I would also agree that the Women's Caucus and more recently the Multicultural Caucus have been responsible for some of the most engaged programming over the last few years. But let's face it, SPE is an easy target: it is a lumbering organization. In fact, its decentralized yet bureaucratic decision-making process defies any quick response to political situations. Its structure was decidedly not a model for ACT-UP.

SPE has always been and continues to be a largely white, middle-class academic organization. SPE reacts to cultural change; it reflects rather than produces. It is finally a contemplative body or a collection of bodies. For better or worse SPE is not an activist organization. Perhaps this is appropriate for a "society" based on the fairly passive medium of photography. But, as so often happens on college campuses, what seems so crucial in the academic bubble seems utterly irrelevant to the outside world. But eager and mostly marginalized in the culture at large, the artists and academics who participate in SPE have great expectations for our once a year convention and ultimately we participate in a tempest in a teapot.

All of that being said, allow me to continue to stir the tea, I would like to take issue with two sections of McGann's article. The panel "It's a Dick Thing: Men Looking, Looking at Men Looking" was organized and moderated by yours truly. It was curious that my name was omitted from your criticism of the panel. Was it out of deference because I had recently written for your publication? Or was what you had to say too horrible to print? Or worse yet was what I had to say completely irrelevant? I will be the first to admit that the panel was not all that it should have been and I would like to take responsibility for at least its structural failings (for example, that no discussion followed the presentations). But I found your criticisms of Alan Labb and Barbara DeGenevieve to be petty and insensitive. Ostensibly the panel was to address the question of how and if feminism has changed the way male artists image themselves and others; both Labb and DeGenevieve made presentations that were eloquent, personal, and provocative. To dismiss Labb's presentation as too general about feminism ignores the articulate humility in which he discussed his relationship to his body. His presentation hardly provided "the male body with a new position on the traditional pedestals of privilege." In fact, it did the opposite.

Barbara DeGenevieve is not the enemy and your complaint that her presentation was heterosexist is just plain heterophobic. Although the binary opposition of male and female, on which she allegedly depended and whose usefulness you found highly questionable, is not the only frame of reference from which to approach this subject, it most certainly is useful. Your catty remark about DeGenevieve's "dips into essentialism" is elitist, smug, and only serves to show your disrespect for struggles and philosophies that have come before you that have helped create the position in your citadel from which you speak. You also failed to mention DeGenevieve's solo presentation on Saturday concerning sexuality and censorship that was fully attended and provoked some of the liveliest discussion of the conference. This omission reinforced your unjust comments as something personal.

Lastly, your attack on the "misogynist photographer" Robert Heinecken was quite gratuitous. He too is an easy target. I will not (nor does he need anyone to) defend his work that I also find sexist at times. But Heinecken was being honored for 30 years as a devoted educator who founded the photography program at UCLA. Heinecken has taught photographic studies to thousands of students at a public institution. This has made his gifts as a teacher accessible to working class students who could not afford to otherwise attend lofty private institutions where one learns the turf language of the politically sanctimonious. You superficially

gloss over the likable bell hooks's presentation into your tirade against Heinecken, in which you quote an unnamed source as proclaiming that denying Heinecken the forum would not be censorship because "freedom of speech was not the issue, particularly because the situation was not value-free." What? Please tell me, what situation is value-free?—so I can know in advance when I'm allowed to open my mouth.

—Mark Alice Durant
Los Angeles, CA

Nadine L. McGann responds:

I stand by my account of the panel Durant organized. That Barbara DeGenevieve's and Alan Labb's talks were "personal" does not insulate them from analysis; if there's anything to be learned from post-white-liberal feminism it is that being personal is usually not enough. I certainly didn't know being "[sensitive]" was a prerequisite of criticism, nor do I think "humility" is an antidote to generalization, particularly in the context of a conference presentation.

Durant says he wishes to "take issue" with my discussion of the panel, but his complaint really only comes down to the fact that my responses were not the same as his own. First, Durant defends the binary opposition of male and female as "useful," but does not explain just what it might be useful for beyond supporting several thousand years of patriarchal oppression. Second, he is offended by my criticism of DeGenevieve's essentialism. Assuming (rather generously) that by "struggles and philosophies that have come before" me he means feminist critiques of patriarchy that employ essentialist categories, whether or not I have respect for these is irrelevant to their use in a contemporary critical context, especially around such issues as masculinity and the power of the gaze.

Durant's defense of Robert Heinecken,

educator, as opposed to Heinecken, maker of work that is "sexist at times," baffles me. Is Durant saying that Heinecken's sexism can be excused because he teaches working-class students? Accepting Heinecken's institutionalized power (professor emeritus, department of art, UCLA) to bring photography to the masses without questioning the content or basis of his teaching relies on the same logic with which his position as honored educator was defended by members of SPE's board at the plenary session. When the choice of Heinecken for the honor was criticized by members, Rod Slemmons, chair of SPE's national board, countered, "He's an artist," as though that absolves Heinecken of any responsibility for the implications of his work. It was to this perspective, specifically, that my unnamed source was referring when she declared the situation "was not value-free." Of course no situation is; and the particular sense in which this one wasn't was that SPE was collectively, actively selecting a particular person for a particular honor who has a perspective on photography (and education) that many find offensive.

I wonder whether the fact that Durant thinks SPE is an easy target means its conferences should not be reviewed at all, or just that they should not be reviewed critically. Indeed, the question of SPE's structure and process is a bit of a dead issue, which is why I chose not to focus on this in my coverage. (I really have no idea why Durant compares SPE to ACT UP; I believe there are a number of options for organizations between inaction and direct action.) However, the discussion about designating Heinecken honored educator exemplifies the falsity of distinguishing between "react[ing]" to cultural change and "produc[ing]" it. SPE, its actions, or its inactions do not exist outside of politics, any more than photography is a "passive medium."

CONTENTS

News

1992 AFTERIMAGE READERS SURVEY page 3

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY by Lynn Love page 4

IMAGES AND IDENTITIES: FILM AND VIDEO IN CANADA

by Laura U. Marks page 5

MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE '90S by Patricia Aufderheide page 7

1992 NEA VISUAL ARTS ORGANIZATIONS'

PUBLICATIONS GRANTS page 17

Features

BIOGRAPHICAL STATES: THE FILMS OF SERGEI PARADJANOV

by Erika Suderburg page 8

SYNTHETIC REALISM: THE MYTHOLOGY

OF COMPUTER GRAPHICS by Lev Manovich page 12

Reviews

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE MYOPIA OF PRIVILEGE

by Bill Gaskins page 15

Notices

COVER: Still from *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969) by Sergei Paradjanov. See "Biographical States: The films of Sergei Paradjanov" by Erika Suderburg, p. 8.

Afterimage is published monthly, except July and August (ten issues), by the Visual Studies Workshop for its members. Editorial and membership offices: 31 Prince St., Rochester, NY 14607. (716) 442-8676. Second-class postage paid at Rochester, NY. *Afterimage* (ISSN 0300-7472). September 1992, vol. 20, no. 2. Membership in the Visual Studies Workshop is available to individuals for \$30.00 in the U.S. and \$35.00 elsewhere; to institutions for \$40.00 in the U.S. and \$45.00 elsewhere. Foreign subscriptions must be drawn in U.S. funds payable by a U.S. bank. *Afterimage* is indexed and abstracted by the International Repertory of the Literature of Art and supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. All contents are copyright of the Visual Studies Workshop, unless otherwise noted. Reprints require written permission and acknowledgment of the article's previous appearance in *Afterimage*. 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, and 105mm microfiche and article copies are available through University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346. (313) 761-4700.

© Visual Studies Workshop 1992.

Board of trustees, Visual Studies Workshop: William Edwards (chair), Carl Chia-enza, John Giancola, Stephanie Gradinger, Estelle Jussim, Arthur Kramer, William E. Parker, Clarissa Sligh, Charles Traub, Anne Tucker, John Wood. Honorary members: Robert Forth, Robert Frank. Director, Visual Studies Workshop: Nathan Lyons.

Coeditors, *Afterimage*: Grant H. Kester, Nadine L. McGann. Assistant editor: Lynn Love. Composition: Kurt Jones.

Afterimage welcomes unsolicited manuscripts. Manuscripts must be typed double-spaced and cannot be returned unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope is included. No responsibility is assumed for loss or damage.

Letters in response to articles published in *Afterimage* intended for publication should be clearly addressed to the editors. Letters may be edited for length.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Afterimage*, Visual Studies Workshop, 31 Prince St., Rochester, NY 14607.