

Flash Art

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Gerhard Richter, Apples, 1984.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 80 cm.

Portrait of the Artist as an Infant

Never before has the “young” artist so thoroughly incarnated the role of the *enfant gaté*, the myth of the divine child.

Giorgio Verzotti

OPENING

Sheets of black paper pasted up on advertising billboards. This system of communication includes certain structural pauses, or moments without messages, when the spaces designed to receive the ads are temporarily relieved of fulfilling their specific function. Keith Haring takes advantage of these pauses or absences or black-outs and presses them into the service of the de-scription of his own mes-

sages, as though establishing a squatter's right of appropriation over a neutralized space and a neutralized time. Neutral time is the time of the origins of human history. Haring is committed to a pictographic language that requires an order of reading that's radically different from those with which we are most ordinarily acquainted (texts, images, associations, and messages). His language is to be read in terms that relate to the codes of ancient hieroglyphics. In terms that relate to the origins of the

various forms of writing before the time in which the book began to separate them from the icon, which was in turn to be given the gregarious function of the illustration. Starting out from this series of exemplary gestures, the artist's work has been a kind of radical collapse back into childhood. Neutral time is a time in which fusions take place. Past and future fused into the emblematic act of an opening and a closing. One of Haring's more typical figures has been the radiant adolescent, the emblem of a condition that's both mythical and a fact of daily experience: the stasis of the myth and the speed of our systems of communication are linked together within the flatness of an ideogram that looks like an image from a comic strip.

THE YOUTHFULNESS OF THE ARTIST

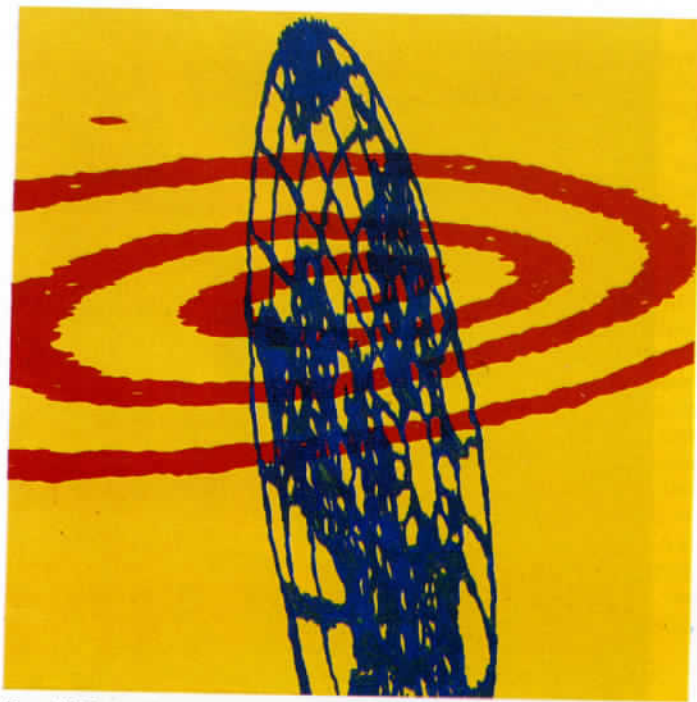
As technological potential comes to a culmination, and as everything else delegates its powers and responsibilities to technology, we find the conditions for the development of a delirium of omnipotence. Never before has the “young” artist so thoroughly incarnated the role of the *enfant gaté*. The myth of the divine child. The child, in the apocryphal gospels, who breathes life into birds that he has modelled out of mud. The artist creates and has success; he can do anything at all; the power of creation is one of his given characteristics; where creativity is concerned he plays the role of a king.



Salvo, *Untitled*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 25 x 21".
Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo eeva-inkeri.



George Condo, *Blue Painting with Trapeze*, 1985.
Oil on canvas, 27 x 22 cm. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.



Georg Jiri Dokoupil, *Spiral with Globe no. 9, 1986*. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy Paul Maenz, Cologne. Photo Schaub.



Aldo Spoldi, *Pierino Porcospino, 1985*. Ceramic, 160 x 60 x 40 cm. Courtesy Studio Marconi, Milan.

KIDS

So much has been said about “the kids” as the heroes of a new era. Mutant heroes, where the stage set of the telematic world belongs as well to the wild boys and their “partying signifiers.” Deleuze and Hanna & Barbera: in the work of Kenny Scharf, we find explicit quotations from comic strips, even though their functions as a source of relaxation are denied. Mass-media painting that has the glamour of a TV show, but frozen into scenes that are no longer relaxing, well on their way to black humor. And from here, he too evolves toward painting-as-writing, and to a form of figuration that becomes ever more synthetic (or “abstract”), with arabesques of grinning faces that hover against backgrounds of pure color, floating in empty space.

ENFANT VIVIEN

The hero doesn't talk. He doesn't have the gift of verbal language, and he can't even properly be said to write. He photographs. Even in the sphere of the divine, the god-child is supposed to perform miracles, but isn't expected to have very much to say. But beyond and beneath this, he remains the Roman *infans* whose existence derives from the words of his father: he remains a man in miniature, or a dwarf, the monster incapable of growth. A myth can degenerate. The artist, however, can then be made a hero in the guise of the Old French *enfant*: the adolescent capable of extraordinary deeds, such as turning words into a carnival, putting figures where texts would be expected, or, in short, of turning himself into an infant for the purpose of the regeneration of all the forms of language.

THE CHILD'S VIEW OF THE BOOK

“For the child who speaks through images, it's not that things issue from the pages of books. It's rather that the child creates a place for himself among them through the process of contemplating them: rather like a cloud that satiates itself on the colorful splendor of the world of images. . . . It's in such a world—alive with colors, porous, and a place where everything flies into disorder with every step taken—that the child is welcomed like a playmate. Draped with all the colors he discovers through reading and observation, he comes to find himself in the middle of a costume party, and he actively takes part in it. As he reads, even the words, in fact, become a part of the masquerade.”

FLANEUR

It's a question of a discourse on authority and how to relate to it. In times of a general return to painting, one has to deal with the authority of history and tradition. We know that today's artists are well-armed with cynicism, and that they propend toward a field of operations that is as free as possible from drama. Repetition, in such a context, is an excellent device. Salvo works in terms of thematic cycles in which he returns to various *genres*, such as the landscape painting or the still life, constantly varying their connotations by confusing them with interiors or nocturnal cityscapes. By lightening his palette to the point of making it finally antinaturalistic, the artist pushes a *genre* back to a stereotype,

and pathos back to banality, and any possible epos to a witticism. He makes explicit reference to what we can think of as popular imagery or forms of expression, but he does so in order to create paintings made of things and of images that can be understood easily. And yet, he paints cemeteries bathing in sunlight and deserted nocturnal streets; he paints the absence of human beings or the small and melancholy crowds of bars lost someplace in the provinces. An elementary kind of painting, and an absence of heroes. The few human figures that appear in these paintings—the bicyclist, the customer in a bar—have been caught in some state of abstruse concentration or obtuse fixity: the man is as though a part of his bicycle or his pinball machine. The spirit of the times replaces the hero with the man who fiddles away his time, or the man-as-bachelor-machine. This isn't any sort of parody in answer to the tragic; it's rather a question of the tragic in some entirely minor version of itself, and of a sense of temporality that no longer has any kind of aura. The epoch fabulates in a minor key, entirely made of anecdote and entirely lacking in history. Thus it opens itself to daily living, and is in fact its incarnation.

THE CACTUS-MAN

Repetition robs things both of their power and of their drama. Even the body without organs and even the war machine can produce an epic. No matter how ungraspable a thing it may have become, the unconscious remains a topos fit for a full-scale novel. Needs of the epoch and



Milan Kunc, *Cactus Man*. Oil on canvas, 110 x 90 cm. Coll. Leceese, Milan. Photo Licitra, Milan.



Keith Haring, *Untitled*, 1985. Installation at Hammar skjold Plaza, New York. 140 x 70 x 40".

epistemological fractures. Milan Kunc's cactus-man is probably a way of decreeing the end of the epic, and has all of the naturalness of a character from some intermediate world, completed and indifferent, totally free of drama and victorious over us all. On such a scene, we don't encounter the poisons of repression, but a rhetoric of the comic that deprives the moment of perversion of any and all Promethean intent. What remains is language, an ascendancy of mass culture and youth-ridden imagery along with an optimism of the will: a project for a happy contamination, a radiant barbarization, and a *painless* dissolution of the subject.

BEING IMITATED

The new images aren't figures that deal with conflict. Rather, they are imbued with a perverted spirit of elegy. Figures of comedy that seem to have been made for a community of adolescents. Things, as Dokoupil has put it, to decorate the room of a teenager. In order to be able to exercise their power, all of the power to fascinate that belongs to the image. The artist, who doesn't hold sway over history, and who fiddles away his time, wants to find an exit that takes him outside of time. He wants, quite simply, to become an immortal.

LETTER TO THE FATHER

There's no real conflict, no real clash. The letter to the father hasn't been mailed, and the son in fact wrote it so that someone else would read it. As a way of ringing up the curtain on the conflict; as a way, finally, of creating literature (great literature). The father's expectations go disappointed. No evolution, no discovery of new and greater frontiers. Quite the contrary: the son regresses into infancy, unexpectedly and treacherously upsetting the very logic of filial affiliation. He belongs instantly and irremediably to some other realm, just as Gregor Samsa is suddenly and irremediably consigned to the realm of the insects. No filial relationships, nothing more than alliances. We have to think of Gregor as the insect's ally, just as the artist has turned himself into the ally of the carnival acrobat.

ME-NA-NA TO PAPA-MAMMA

Identity is refused, rather than dissolved. The painter has no identity, he only plays a role, and he certainly doesn't identify with tradition. Tradition isn't any sort of inheritance to be brought back alive; it's rather to be dissipated according to the

logic of a negative dialectic. The new figurations have no interest in considering themselves to be a "breakthrough"; they don't assume a frontal position with respect to history, but erode it from within, slowly undermining its authority. It's demoted from its status as a patrimony of meaning and rendered a repertoire of styles; and art itself becomes stylistic exercise. A degradation of the image: images that are infantile, improbable, provisory, and banal. The artist changes his styles, and his own historical singularity is reduced into anecdote and episode. It all boils down to nothing more than a witticism: "He's changed his style." The artist busies himself with the power of images, but not with their heroism.

NOTHING IS IMPORTANT

There's also the temptation to set up a metalanguage, but outside of any hypothesis of real scientific method. It's a question, rather, of a para-logic. Manipulating language isn't understood as "game"—which contains the dramatic fatality of systems of rules and competition—but rather as "play," or the pure will to pleasure. Without apparent reason, painting is subject to the judgment of what Marcuse terms a

"performance principle." It follows that painting is disenfranchised of any and all possible power in the moment that the painter makes an appeal to the notion of history. George Condo tells us that the logic of an exhibition (referring to his most recent show with Bishofberger) can base itself upon the decision to show all the paintings and all the drawings completed in the course of the previous three months, thus establishing a kind of equivalence among all the works, including the works that the artist himself considers to have been unsuccessful.

IN THE INTERREGNUM

Klee remarks that the artist is concerned not with imagination, but with those spiritual realities that give him the predisposition to penetrate into the intermediate world, with a view toward projecting it outward, couched in equivalent forms. What characterizes children, primitives, and madmen is less a question of free and creative imagination, than of the ability to penetrate into the realms of the invisible. This marks the confines of an "otherwhere," but the return to infancy in the new figuration is "joyless," and neither angelic nor moral. The text doesn't even respect its own rules, and it fixes no goals, refusing, for example, to posit itself as a theater of perversion. It liberates us from all anxiety in the face of the idea of loss, since it gives witness to having said a definitive farewell to the world of nature and its processes.

The otherwhere in which it wants to take root is the otherwhere defined as a simulacrum of repetition; it's not a new world, but the world turned inside-out. The world of infancy maintains a relationship with the world of adults: it rewrites it. The child acquires experience of the book, of language, and of the alphabet; and what he posits is the becoming not of nature, but of language. He uses images as utensils for opening language up: opening it up to its inside-out, to the parody of itself. The artist as infant has no experience of nature and its secrets; his experience is of objects and the ambience they connote. He measures himself not against a mystery, but against a lack of meaning; against a flatness rather than a depth. He's aware, to put it briefly, that the subject has very little effect upon his own language. A theory of childhood: the feeling that objects and ambience conceive of the subject, rather than vice-versa, as Dokoupil has remarked.

THE STUDIO

Of Jiri Georg Dokoupil. On a stage or inside an "enchanted room"—but mortified by the lack of all magic—we find a grinning child. He turns toward the spectator and holds a brush in his hand. We see the child in profile, and in front of him stands a white canvas on which he is obviously about to begin to leave a sign. In the background of the scene, we have the world. Not the new world, but the old world, and all of it.

TERZERO DIA

By Francesco Bonami. Issuing from a deliberately scenographic sea—which doesn't make it any less livid—a child psychopomp leads a mummy to its destiny. Clumsy and antigracious, two doll-children are perhaps about to describe/divest the figures of liberation of all identity in becoming, and certainly of all historical foundation for the fabulation. The game is to be understood as a project for the world; and the parallel universe in which it finds its realization remembers the adult world with something on the order of grief. One can also see grief in the gaze of the angel, faced with the ruins of progress.

BAROQUE DRAMA

Something nourishes memory. Looking at the stereotype, one can still see the outlines of the mythic figure, of the archetype and its meaning, which one would have thought of as having a certain magnitude. Eeking one's way forward, never speaking, in order to listen to those voices, the voices of the dead, as Aldo Spoldi was to put it. *Ludus* as *luctus*—the ludic as the mournful, where the rhetoric of polymorphous perversity also gives access to the dimension of everything that passes. The project, voyage, and knowledge of the new figuration are generated by the thought of death.

(Translated from Italian by Henry Martin)



Kenny Scharf, *Espacio Caos*, 1983.
Acrylic and spray-paint on canvas, 176 x 130 cm.



Francesco Bonami, *Terzero Dia*, 1985.
Oil on canvas, 210 x 190 cm. Courtesy Studio Cannaviello, Milan.