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Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris (Book Review)

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Robert Morris is not only a highly literate and theoretically sophisticated artist, but one who has consistently been concerned with the way in which the visual and the discursive, word and text, image and graphism, can intersect with or oppose one another. Morris's own writings, collected for the most part in Continuous Project Altered Daily, offer a chronicle of his readings of philosophers and art theorists, from George Kubler to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from Nietzsche to Jacques Derrida, and of the uses to which he puts them. These uses often take the form of manifestos explaining his own work or that of his contemporaries. The writings range from the high tide of minimalism in 1966 to newer pieces written for this collection. Because the previously published pieces will be better known, I will confine my comments to the more recent essays. But characteristic of the entire collection is a creative reading, writing, and making in which the artist seeks paradigmatic aphorisms that must be read every day; as one of the many personas in his reply to Roger Denson says, quoting but not naming Hegel: "'Only the slave achieves true self-consciousness.' You scratched that one up over the pisser didn't you?" (p. 314). The slavery or servitude is often to the texts of the modern and the postmodern; and the suggestion is that they cannot be avoided or circumvented, only followed, confronted, and then transformed or challenged. Inscribing Hegel's aphorism over the pisser, not Duchamp's Fountain, but the one that reminds the artist of the rhythms of bodily repetition that mark his and our finitude, is to burn the text into one's consciousness and unconscious. (That it is over the pisser acknowledges, at least unconsciously, that this is a masculine project.) But texts may be inscribed at a deeper level in the body, as Vox, Morris's main voice in that same essay, suggests (p. 312). The texts most deeply inscribed in or on Morris's body are those of thinkers of change and process, Heraclitus and Nietzsche, cited at the beginning and end of Morris's book. Nietzsche, or Neech the Screech (so styled in Morris's reply), asked "Now that God is dead, who is speaking?" and whether it was simply a compulsion of grammar to posit a doer behind every deed.

It seems that Morris requires a constant reliance on thinkers of mutability in order to deny a constancy in his work. Avatars of Heraclitus and Nietzsche are two more recent philosophers who emerge in Morris's work, providing epigraphs for the most recent essays: those by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. These essays have to do with the life or persona of the artist in relation to a variety of art theories; the first, "Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions)," is punctuated by reminiscences of Morris's boyhood in Kansas City, ranging from art lessons at the Nelson-Atkins Gallery to hanging around the stockyards with his father, to musing on the signs and architecture of the city, and there is a last aside devoted to a memory of a 1964 panel discussion with Marcel Duchamp.

At the head of "Three Folds" stand some words of Foucault, which mark an ethics and aesthetics of self-dispossession rather than of ownership and self-integration. Getting free of oneself would proceed by a process of defamiliarization, where what has more or less unreflectively helped to constitute us is turned around in a new light, so that it can become an object of thematic attention, to be shed or cast aside. In this essay Morris argues, in a Foucauldian vein, that art objects (and so their makers) are "totally mediated" by sign systems and discourses, that these are shaped by "subtle and pervasive systems of power relations," and that "the visual object itself is but one factor in the will toward an art identity that the culture demands for itself" (pp. 261-262). Three prevalent discourses are distinguished: (I) that of

modernist abstraction, which suppresses the linguistic dimension of art, and finds a typical expression in Clement Greenberg's demand for purity; (2) a sociopolitical discourse that would make art subordinate to the culture's "dominating logos" of truth and rationality (Marcuse's theory of art is a possible example); (3) a more negative discourse, inspired in part by Surrealism and Dada, involving confrontations with sexuality and death, and abandoning the assumption of art's eternity that typifies other approaches (Duchamp is invoked). This last discourse involves the celebration of difference or alterity; it transforms objects into events. It is not so much a productive program as an anarchic intervention in an artworld already constituted by other discourses.

Morris says that all these approaches are "texts of regularization and legitimation," and that "for each narrative, the other two represent what is repressed" (p. 284). What may appear at first to be a discourse of liberation turns out to be one of a set of positions that express a culture's attempt to construct an identity for itself through art and art theory. Morris loses himself through this knowledge by resisting the temptation to take any of these discourses for granted, much as Foucault distances himself from the human sciences and their disciplinary practices by showing their indebtedness to common, unexamined assumptions. Foucault envisions a day when the figure of man will be erased, like an inscription drawn in sand at the edge of the sea, and Morris says that a persistent theme of his own work is opposition to "the rotting sack of humanism." He concludes his archaeological survey by suggesting that "perhaps in the end, the three discourses in their extended sweep only whirl around each other like harmless dust devils, as innocent as they are impotent, hardly touching down into the wreckage that continues to accumulate as we approach the millennium" (p. 285).

The "autobiographical asides" in this essay contrast with Foucault's warning "do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order." Part of the story that Morris tells is of having from early on followed a track outside the humanistic lens through which traditional art education and art history focus on classical Greece and the Italian renaissance. Foucault, Duchamp, and Morris all reverse the Christian principle that one finds oneself by losing oneself; it is rather that (with Neech the Screech) they find or remember themselves in order to lose themselves. Another form of self-loss is enacted in Morris's reply to Roger Denson. Here the central epigraph from Jacques Derrida's The Truth in Painting says that unless a philosopher problematizes the very question "what is art?" she is in danger of unwittingly assuming and repeating a whole raft of ontological assumptions-not just the philosopher, we might add, but also the philosopher-artist, like Morris, one of that new breed that Nietzsche prophesied. Morris's reply to Denson participates in Derrida's project of transforming and subverting the vestiges of traditional aesthetic questions that remain in Denson's queries. Morris the reader and the writer defends the space of art, its necessary differences and deferrals, from the tyranny of the logos, that is, from the ambition of an all-inclusive discourse whose implicit goal is some version of Hegel's thesis that art must come and has come to an end in order to transform itself, knowledge, or science (for example, art history). The insouciant subtitle of the reply ("Or Is That a Mouse in My Paragone?") evokes the ancient contest between the visual and the linguistic while signaling that the artist's words must be interrupted from the inside so that they will not be conducive to the illusions of the master discourse whose form he is calling into question. Krazy Kat and Ignatz the mouse, set loose in the paragone, effect a shift in the discourse from the first-person artist whom Denson expects to stand up and give an account of himself.

In the reply, Morris in effect asks the interviewer, who posed lengthy questions about his identity as an artist and the continuity or discontinuity of his work: "whom do you think you are addressing?" The expected subject does not appear. Instead, the curtain goes up on a Krazy Kat scenario, where the various personas who have acted, performed, made, and written under the signature Robert Morris are summoned up as characters who occupy or differentiate a space. It is a gesture that Derrida would call a "becoming space of time." Ignatz and Krazy Kat play their sometimes violent game of cat and mouse; Neech the Screech is invoked as an irascible trickster who drops into the studio from time to time.

It is a polyvalent, polyvocal space that recalls the "polylogue for n+ I female voices" that is Derrida's response, in his "Restitutions" essay, to Martin Heidegger's and Meyer Schapiro's "debate" over the ownership of some shoes painted by van Gogh. "Why must there be an owner?" Derrida and Morris ask, both in what they say and in how they say it. Why must there be a succession of artistic selves who can be given a narrative coherence in some later story told by the art historian, the philosopher, or the artist who has been trapped into assuming one of these roles? This is what is presupposed by Denson's thirteen questions, which the reply contemptuously refers to as tickets of identity that must be punched. But there they all are, fighting it out among themselves, occupying and continuously altering the space of their engagement, rather than letting themselves be collapsed into a Vasaritype "life" with its predictable trajectory of stylistic development. It is not a question of getting rid of the subject, but of situating and pluralizing it (or them). Vox alludes to "old Neech the Screech" who proclaimed "the idiocy of positing a doer for every deed. 'The illusion of identity.' You scratched that over the pisser, didn't you?" And Nietzsche, as so frequently in Morris's recent texts, is accompanied by Derrida, as when Vox protests: "Let's not get into our Pharmakons of poison as remedy, and who did what to whom .... Would you want to tell them about how you tattooed 'Chance' and 'Multiplicity' on Body Bob's derriere so he couldn't sit down? lgnatz, all they want is a simple 'either/or' answer. This 'both/and' is not going to get these tickets punched" (p. 293). This is, more prosaically, Derrida's logic of undecidability, exemplified by the pharmakon which may be a cure or a remedy, poison or balm; if the artist is going to write, he does so as a reader.

The paragone of Robert Morris is a demonstration and enactment, as it always has been, of the irreducible difference marking this extended body of work which forms an extended archipelago through the art of the last four decades.

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