ABSTRACTION/REPRESENTATION/FIGURATION

PART II

APROPOS: THE PROTESTANT AFFLICTION

AN EXHIBITION OF WORKS BY IAN FRIEND FOR THE AUSTRAL GALLERY ACAF-3 INSTALLATION CATALOGUE, 1992

These remarks take up and extend a meditation on the conditions of non-iconic abstraction that I began in the catalogue for the exhibition *Representation-non-Representation* in California (1990).[1] Ian Friend's installational series of five pieces collected under the common title *Protestant Affliction* opens up the problem of abstract-representation to several further considerations. These converge most immediately on the conjunction of abstraction and the death of the body.

There is a sense in which these images engage in a form of ironic necrophilia with the dead body as model. The site of this sacrilege is the whole weight of the prohibitionary discourse paradoxically developed in the name of 'spiritual individualism' by that panoply of religio-political events signed as the Reformation: the mortification of the flesh, the circumscription of carnal pleasure, the resurgence of religion-inspired iconoclasms, the closing down of inter-action between bodies—in sum the fall of the body from Grace.

Of course these prohibitionary discourses are diverted by Friend from their *source* in the early 16th. century to other zones of body-denial active in our recent past. Thus the proportional, body-loving geometries of Friend's upright-prostrate abstractions offer an implicit challenge to the conceptual and post-conceptual ''death-discourse'' of pictoriality. This is Joseph Kosuth (''Necrophilia Mon Amour'', 1982):

> what one is talking about is the death of a certain belief-system, the death of certain meanings. In fact, this continuation of painting as a kind of 'painted device' is a necessary part of that 'dying' process.[2]

Ironic, because in thinking through the 80s diatribes for and against the return of (expressionist-type) painting, Friend proposes to wedge his rectilinear forms between the contending shapes of the envisioned body: the rational, perspectival, body of Cartesian vision; the controlled body that is activated only as a function of social (institutional) restraint; the fluctuant body of excess, motility, consumption and exchange; and the nullified body of censorship, denial and absence.

These works seem proposed to disabuse the freefall of painting as intention (the ''entropic tailspin'' as Kosuth describes it), and to recode the hysterical contention that neo-pictoriality is inscribed in the postmodern artworld only as a form of ''terminal illness'' whose product is gorged upon by the ''cannibalistic'' historicism of the 'neo' artists. It is for this reason that they are s/cited on, arranged around, the Symbolic body of the dead Christ.

This is the body interrogated by Julia Kristeva in her essay, ''Holbein's Dead Christ'', one of whose section headings, ''The Protestant Affliction'', Friend has borrowed for the present exhibition. We should note that he has also borrowed the *possibility* for his images from the Kristeva text. Beginning with an account of the painting from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot,* the second part of her essay goes on to describe Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1522) in the following terms:

> The rounded chest suggests a triangle within the very low, elongated rectangle of the recess that constitutes the painting's frame...the empty stare, the sharp-lined profile, the dull blue-green complexion, are those of a man who is truly dead...''[3]

Friend has participated in the process of what Kristeva calls the ''well-nigh anatomical stripping of the corpse'', ''the surrender of all architectural or compositional fancy''; the 'reduction to a minimum', and the ''economy of motion'' that define the anguish of an utterly dead body.[4] But he has not only extrapolated the painting in these terms, but also attempted to reinvent the ''purpose'' of its ''peculiar dimensions'' (which are, nevertheless, followed quite scrupulously in the disposition of his own triangles and rectangles).[5]

We are invited to imagine that the points joined up in Kristeva's essay resemble the coordinates of the envisioned body renegotiated here by Friend. The existential, doubting anguish at the mutilated body (via Dostoevsky) coheres with the body-in-description (colour and geometry), and is set out against the ''separated'', segmented body of the melancholic imaginary.

Thus Kristeva discovers in the isolation of the Body of Christ ''*an act of composition*'' that exceeds what she terms the ''components inherent in line and colour''.[6] Setting up panels that are equally ''cut off from us'', and cut off from ''Heaven'', Friend replays not only the imagistic spareness (''Holbein isolated, pruned, condensed and reduced'') but also the contextual abandonment (''distant and without a beyond'') of this vision of death.[7]

Again, just as Kristeva interprets the Holbein as animated by a kind of 'humanist melancholia' that reacts to the recent visual precedents of Gothic ''enthusiasm'' and ''expressionism'', so Friend situates his quietly inflected organless bodies against the third coming of pictorial expressionism in the organ-bloated 80s. Both re-visions share that ''modicum of *irony* towards transcendence'' (the transcendence of the body, the transcendence of modernist abstract utopianism) that Kristeva represents as the historical flicker of a post-Catholic, pre-Protestant quasi-humanism (the moment of Erasmus, in fact), and Friend notates as an alternative envisioning of the body to those over- and under-rhetoricalisations (corpofilia and necrophilia) that have recently dominated the artworld.

We might ask in conclusion whether the commentary on the colourful linearity of death in Friend's recent work can be aligned with the ''technician's amoralism without consideration of the beyond'' that ''form of beauty somewhere between deprivation and profit'' that Kristeva reads into the motivational structures of the artist Holbein. Are we confronted here by two types of ''disenchanted verist''?[8] Can we say that:

> The *form* (of art) alone gives back serenity to the waning of forgiveness, while love and salvation take refuge in the execution of the work. Redemption would simply be the discipline of a rigorous technique.[9]

Or should we not—which is what I rather hope Friend is finally suggesting. For in some sense to accept this conclusion would be to cross over the ''edge of belief'' and the ''threshold of nonmeaning'', to trespass on ground that the sublimations of modernist abstraction have already captured. In the last analysis Friend is answering a Kristevan question, using Kristevan terms, but offering a wholly different mediation (different materials, contexts, interests). ''Is it still possible to paint when the bonds which tie us to the body and meaning are severed?''.

Well yes, can't you see? *Necrophilia sans Amour.*

NOTES:

1. John C. Welchman ''Abstraction/Representation/Figuration'' in exh. cat. *Representation-non-Representation,* Security Pacific Gallery, Costa Mesa, California (1990), pp. 3-13.

2. Joseph Kosuth ''Necrophilia Mon Amour'' *Artforum* 20, no. 9 (May 1982), pp. 58-63; reprinted in Joseph Kosuth *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966-90* ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 203-8.

3. Julia Kristeva ''Holbein's Dead Christ'' in *Zone* no. 3 ed. Michel Freher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi ''Fragments for a History of the Human Body'' Part I, p. 241.

4. ibid.

5. ibid., p. 242

6. ibid., p. 243

7. ibid., p. 243, 245

8. ibid., pp. 256-57

9. ibid., p. 263

''WHERE THERE LIVES A MELANCHOLY PERSON, THE DEVIL HAS DRAWN HIS BATH...I HAVE LEARNED HOW ONE MUST BEHAVE DURING TEMPTATION. WHOEVER IS BESEIGED BY SADNESS, DESPAIR OR ANY OTHER DEEP AFFLICTION, WHOEVER HARBOURS A SERPENT IN HIS CONSCIENCE MUST FIRST HOLD TO THE CONSOLATION OF THE DIVINE WORD.''
MARTIN LUTHER, 1532