FOUL PERFECTION: THOUGHTS ON CARICATURE

JCW ***Commissioned by and first published in* Artforum *(vol. 27, January 1989, pp. 92–99), this essay was written partly in response to what Kelley called the "new mannerism" of the late 1980s—a term that embraces the recycling of reductive high modernist tropes in the more attenuated forms of "commodity art," neo-geo, and the like, as well as new styles of art-making that sexualized modernist imagery of the "natural," especially biomorphic abstraction. He aimed to offer desublimated readings of the work of some of his contemporaries by probing the assumptions of modernist discourse around the counterclassical themes of the grotesque body, low culture, and irony, and to question modernism's negatively coded assumptions about these kinds of reference. The text that follows combines some of the editorial changes made by David Frankel at* Artforum *with modifications, including the provision of new endnotes, made by Kelley and myself for the present volume.***

The term "caricature" calls to mind the shoddy street-corner portrait, comic depictions of celebrities that line the walls of bars, or the crude political cartoons in the opinion section of the daily newspaper—"philistine" images, which provoke indifference or disgust in the "educated" art-

lover. In part, perhaps, because of these strong negative connotations, numerous artists have attempted to draw caricature into the sphere of fine art. We encounter new evocations of caricature in the hot "let's-have-fun" populism of funk and East Village art and in the moralizing "let's-get-serious" populism of agitprop, as well as in the cooler arena of pop and the post-Rauschenberg formalism of painters such as David Salle. In most of these efforts at incorporation, the line between low art and high art remains firm: caricature is an alien element, tamed, digested, and transformed from its lowly status to a "higher" one through the magic intervention of "art." At present, the cooler aesthetic dominates—and is more critically sanctioned. Much contemporary artwork is made and interpreted with reference to the issues—and history—of reductivist practice, especially minimalism. But the low-art/high-art distinction has become cloudy in some of this work, for the incorporation of caricature is no longer the leading strategy as the work actually *becomes* caricature. The historical referencing of reductivist paradigms here is only a legitimizing facade, concealing what is, in effect, a secret caricature—an image of low intent masquerading in heroic garb.

The genre of caricature we know today—a portrait that deliberately transforms the features of its victims so as to exaggerate and thus expose their faults and weaknesses—is of relatively recent origin. Unknown before the sixteenth century, its development is usually attributed to the Italian baroque painters Ludovico and Annibale Carracci. According to its earliest definitions, caricature—from *caricare:* to load, as in a "loaded portrait"—was associated, primarily, with an "aggressive" gesture. Yet, at the same time, a writer in the circle of Gianlorenzo Bernini claimed that "caricature seeks to discover a likeness through abbreviation."[1] By such means, he suggested, it comes nearer to "truth" than does reality.[2] As the Carracci themselves realized from the beginning, caricature is at root based on the idea of an essence or inner truth. With this aim in mind, caricature has a kind of "good" twin in less discordant attempts to essentialize the human form. As Ernst Kris suggests:

"Art" to the age of the Carracci and of Poussin no longer meant a simple "imitation of nature." The artist's aim was said to be to penetrate into the innermost essence of reality, to the "Platonic idea" (Panofsky, 1924) . . . inspiration, the gift of vision that enabled [the artist] to see the active principle at work behind the surface of appearance. Expressed in these terms the portrait

painter's task was to reveal the character, the essence of the man in an heroic sense; that of the caricaturist provided the natural counterpart—to reveal the true man behind the mask of pretense and to show up his "essential" littleness and ugliness.[3]

As Kris points out, although they may appear on the surface to be very different, caricature, which uses deformation in the service of ridicule, and the idealized, heroic, classicist portrait, are founded in similar essentialist assumptions. Albert Boime underlines this idea in a discussion of Jacques-Louis David's neoclassical paintings and monstrous political cartoons—on which he worked side by side.[4] The duality of distortion apparent here—making things better, on the one hand, and making them worse on the other—announces, I think, a primary dichotomy in modernist art. For the "distortions" of modernist art seem to be realized, predominantly, in one of two modes: expressive abstraction or reduction.

My own undergraduate art education was organized around an endless succession of assignments that aimed to perfect these binary methods of producing art objects. Two examples will suffice: one was a life-drawing exercise in which, once comfortable with the depiction of a figure, the hand was allowed to roam on its own, producing an extension of the figure linked by "essence" to the original model but dissimilar enough to have a life of its own. The second had to do with drawing from reproductions of old master paintings, but reducing them down to their primary forms, the essential cubes, spheres, and cones that constitute them, or, more essential yet, the squares, circles, and triangles.

This latter effort was clearly a contemporary sort of Platonism, though where once the painter built up from ideal forms, we moderns were expected to reduce back down to them. As for the first exercise, it was obviously related to the intentional distortions of caricature. Yet it was idealized, stripped of caricature's aggressive tendencies. The exercise posited modernist expressionism as an essentialism that dispensed with the negative. This was appropriate, since "fine art," art associated with the "high" ideas of culture, is, traditionally, seldom confrontational or vituperative. Despite the contributions of artists like George Grosz or John Heartfield, much modernist art was ostentatiously "high." This was as true of expressionists like Willem de Kooning as it was of reductivists like Piet Mondrian. In general, the difference for which the expressionist artist strove was situated around the split not between the "bad" and the "good" but between the orderly and the expressive. This

polarity, however, was seldom able to function outside of a whole set of intertwined dichotomies: organic/geometric, adorned/unadorned, soft/hard, personal/social, female/male. Modernism may have imagined itself "above" caricature, but it progressed unavoidably into what it was trying to avoid: bad vs. good, and the aesthetics of morality.

It seems appropriate here to bring up the old distinction between caricature and the grotesque. At first the word "grotesque" was used to describe the kind of fantastic, intricately patterned decorations—pastiches of satyrs, cupids, fruit, foliage, festoons, knots, bows—that came into use after the discovery (in the fifteenth century) of such earlier inventions in the ruins of ancient Rome.[5] Vasari describes the pleasure taken by Renaissance artists and their patrons in these newly unearthed models, and Michelangelo began his career as a painter of them.[6] Part of the appeal of the grotesque was the notion that it was a product of pagan painters who were at liberty to invent whatever they pleased—it represented artistic freedom. Implicit in this notion was an equation of paganism with hedonism, and it is interesting to note that the blame for pornography as well as for the grotesque has been attributed to pagan culture. In *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture,* Walter Kendrick traces the roots of modern pornography back to the discovery of the erotic murals in Pompeii.[7] Deemed suitable for both public and holy places, and clearly much admired in Roman times, grotesque ornament eventually fell from grace. With the rise of Vitruvian notions of architecture, the motifs of the grotesque, which Vasari had described as "divine," "beautiful and imaginative fantasies," were equated with the irrational, the irregular, the licentious, and the immoral. To the Vitruvians, the noblest art was a classically based "mathematical and pure abstraction which reflected the perfect harmony of God's universe."[8] They soon discovered that although the ornaments of Nero's Golden House[9] were products of classical culture, they came from its "decadent" phase—they were manifestations of Rome in decline. Soon, the word "grotesque" became associated with the foul and ugly. By the nineteenth century it was closely linked to caricature, so that an image that employed distortion might be described almost interchangeably by either term. Thus the fantasticness of grotesque decoration took on an overtly negative connotation.

By the early 1900s, decoration and ornament were viewed as the antitheses of good practice by the "form follows function" school of architecture and the reductivist design sensibilities of modernist groups like De Stijl. At issue were not just principles of utilitarianism but moral

fundamentals. A strain of high modernist extremism pronounced that decoration was "primitive," uncivilized, even repugnant. Writing in 1898, the architect Adolf Loos put it this way:

The less civilized a people is, the more prodigal it will be with ornament and decoration. The Red Indian covers every object, every boat, every oar, every arrow over and over with ornament. To regard decoration as an advantage is tantamount to remaining on the level of a Red Indian. But the Red Indian within us must be overcome. The Red Indian says: That woman is beautiful because she wears golden rings in her nose and in her ears. The civilized person says: this woman is beautiful because she has no rings in her nose and in her ears. To seek beauty only in form and not to make it depend on ornament, that is the aim towards which the whole of mankind is tending.[10]

Gombrich also quotes from Loos's later essay, "Ornament and Crime" (1908):

The Papuans slaughter their enemies and eat them. They are not criminals. If, however, a man of this century slaughters and eats someone he is a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuans tattoo their skin, their boats, their oars, in short everything within reach. They are not criminals. But the man of this century who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. . . . The urge to ornament one's face and everything within reach is the very origin of visual arts. It is the babbling of painting. All art is erotic.

Loos's evolutionist association of ornament—and eroticism—with tribal beliefs that are still residual in modern times recalls some of the evolutionist arguments and assumptions of Sigmund Freud. In "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), Freud attributes feelings of terror produced by ordinary, familiar things to a repressed belief in the "omnipotence of thoughts," a belief once held by our ancestors that we carry in us as a kind of racial memory:

The uncanny [is] associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfillment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead. . . . We—or our primitive forefathers—once believed that these possibilities were realities and were convinced that they

actually happened. Nowadays . . . we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny; it is as though we were making a judgment something like this: "So, after all, it is true that one can kill a person by the mere wish!"[11]

For Freud, our "primitive" history accounts for both occasional feelings of uncanniness and our enjoyment of modes of entertainment that evoke these sensations in a controlled way. For Loos, our ancestral background is "criminal." His world conception precludes the experience of pleasure in images of sublimation, which he sees as mirror reflections of what is being sublimated, and thus as tokens or embodiments of the continuance of such feelings in the present. For Loos, the preservation of "criminal, erotic" ornament only serves to maintain criminality and eroticism in the world. Its erasure, on the other hand, would, he felt, help engender a chaste and orderly society. Loos himself is prone to a kind of "primitive" thinking—to a belief in the magic of the image, in the notion that "like" effects "like," that the image is in essence the same as what it shows. Hence the intensity of his iconoclasm—for the belief in the equality of image and imaged is the hallmark of the censor. As Kris suggests, "Wherever it is not considered a joke but rather a dangerous practice to distort a man's features, even on paper, caricature as an art cannot develop." Contrary to Loos, the action of the grotesque caricature is in some sense internal, an idea more than an event. Kris continues:

The caricaturist's secret lies in the use he makes of controlled regression. Just as his scribbling style and his blending of shapes evokes childhood pleasures, so the use of magic beliefs in the potency of his transformations constitutes a regression from rationality. . . . For this to happen the pictorial representation had to be removed from the sphere where the image stimulates action. . . . The hostile action is confined to an alteration of the person's "likeness" . . . only this interpretation contains criticism. Aggression has remained in the aesthetic sphere and thus we react not with hostility but with laughter.[12]

The world Loos envisioned, of course, has not and could not come about. For its emergence would demand the excision of that signal part of the human persona that expresses itself in

the ornament against which Loos contended, or in the grotesque and in caricature. Discussing David's political cartoons, Boime notes that caricature's use of deformation relates specifically to a Freudian model of the unconscious:

The Oedipal complex constitutes the beginnings of the forms of political and social authority, the regulation and control through the superego or conscience. On the other hand, the political caricature permits the displaced manifestation of the repressed aggressive desire to oust the father. The political enemy, or the subject of distortion, becomes the projection of the hated parent and through caricature can be struck down.[13]

Alluding to Freudian theory, Boime adds that

Children bestow upon the anal product the status of their own original creation, which they now deploy to gain pleasure in play, to attain the affection of another (feces as gift), to assert personal ownership (feces as property), or to act out hostility against another (feces as weapon). Thus some of the most crucial areas of social behaviour (play, gift, property, weapon) develop in the anal phase and retain their connection with it into adulthood. . . . By exposing the disguised (sublimated) anality behind neoclassicism (rational state, organized religion, hierarchal authority), David reaffirmed the connection between political caricature and his "high art."[14]

Scatological imagery abounds in caricature and other forms of satire. From Greek comedies through the writings of François Rabelais (1483?–1443) and Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) to contemporary forms of low humor, anal and fecal imagery are frequently used in a political context. (Sandor Ferenczi goes so far as to claim that diarrhea is anti-authoritarian—in that it reduces "educational measures"—toilet training—"to an absurdity." It is a mockery of authority.)[15] If feces can be an agent of besmirchment, so can any foul substance associated with taboo, and thus with repression. The use of bodily fluids, entrails, garbage, and animals such as frogs, toads, and snakes to "decorate" an authority figure is a literal enactment of Loos's conception of "criminal" ornamentation.

An aside. The current television game show called *Double Dare* features on-the-verge-of-adolescent boy/girl teams in "sports" activities that often require them to cover each other in gooey

foodstuffs.[16] At certain points they must fish into suspicious, tactile substances labeled "brain juice," "mashed maggots," "fish lips," "dead worms," and so on, in order to win prizes. Part of the show's attraction to kids that age surely arises from their fear of their dawning sexuality, which is associated with taboo, or "disgusting," activities and substances. Bruno Bettelheim's discussion of the frog prince fairy tale is relevant here: a young girl must sleep with or kiss a frog, and feels revulsion at having to do so; but when the task is completed, the frog becomes a desirable prince. The story, Bettelheim remarks, "confirms the appropriateness of disgust when one is not ready for sex, and prepares for its desirability when the time is ripe."[17] The format of *Double Dare* was modified as *Family Double Dare* in 1988, with the additions of moms and pops, whose submersion in gunk obviously has a different meaning: the pure pleasure of defiling an authority figure.

In low comedy and political cartoons, reductive and distortional practices exist side by side. Here, both approaches are set up to attack false or hated authority, for in the context of caricature's distortions, the refined heroic figure becomes a comic butt. In "fine art," on the other hand, reduction tends to be associated with the revelation of the ideal. Today, probably the most common type of public sculpture is made with geometric forms and volumes. And fine artists tend to keep distortion and reduction apart: predicated on assault and distortion, David's political cartoons, for example, were meant for the popular audience, while his salon paintings were based on idealizing classical principles. Both reduction and distortion are rarely used aggressively in fine art. In one of his pair of etchings, *Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937), Picasso depicts the dictator as an entrail-like being who at one point gives birth to a litter of frogs and snakes.[18] But the mimicry of popular political forms here is atypical. More commonly, Picasso moves toward essentialist reduction. In works such as *Wounded Bull, Horse and Nude Woman* and *The Bull-Fight* (both 1934) from the 1930s (his most "bodily" period), he subjects some of his most potentially violent images—the swooning woman, the well-hung bull, the eviscerated horse—to a process of reduction and crystallization.

But as we can see by comparing Picasso's stylization of organic forms to the treatment of a similar theme in J. G. Ballard's science fiction novel *The Crystal World* (1966), reduction can signify more than ennoblement. If Picasso's reductions tend to accentuate the tragic, intensely emotional nature of his subjects, Ballard's are deadening and ultimately apocalyptic. In *The Crystal World* (1966), *The Drought* (1965), *The Drowned World* (1962), and other fictions, Ballard

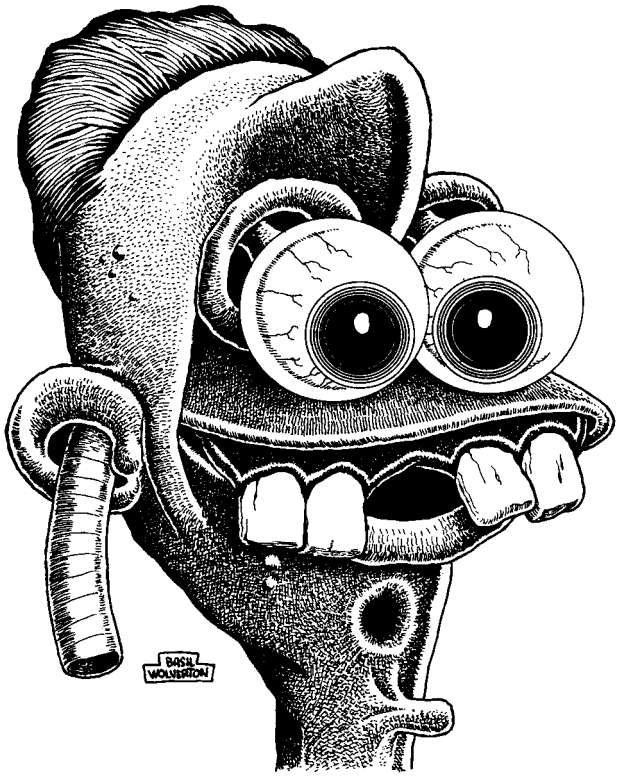
approaches the theme of the end of the world not as a cataclysm but as a slow process of homogenization. Time stops when things have been reduced to one essential property—crystal, earth, water. The positive aspects of this transformation—a version of the mystical notion that "all is one"—are here equated with a kind of addiction: in *The Crystal World,* characters previously crystallized but now revived seek to return to their pleasant, former state of nonidentity. The impulse brings to mind Roger Caillois's definition of mimicry in nature as "*depersonalization by assimilation to space*"[19] and, ultimately, Freud's concept of the death instinct—the desire to annihilate the ego reflecting a desire to return to the uterine existence before the ego's formation.

The death instinct is embedded in a good deal of the art production of the 1960s and 1970s, especially minimalism and serial practices concerned with the objectification or freezing of time through repetition. Though the surface meaning of much of this art has to do with structure and material, such works ultimately refer back to and mirror the bodily presence of the viewer. The basis of Michael Fried's attack on minimalism,[20] this thesis was borne out in later body art, which applied reductivist tendencies to complex psychological and corporeal issues. If minimalism was well mannered, this work was viewed as confrontational—even grotesque. Bruce Nauman's films of repeated body movements and manipulations (e.g. *Pulling Mouth,* 1969; *Face Up,* 1973), Vito Acconci's evocation of architectural libido in *Seedbed* (1971), Chris Burden's packaging of the fear of violence as sculpture in *Shoot* (1971)—were all posed across the modernist moral schism between form and decoration: they proposed an aesthetic of sculpting with flesh. The very practices that Loos had attacked as "criminal" were in body art perversely redefined as essential gestures—marking the body, piercing it, distorting it. Yet all this was done in a removed, formal way. The difference between the distortion of the body in much body art and in expressionist performance and painting can in some ways be compared to one distinction between the grotesque and caricature: in caricature, distortion serves a specific purpose, in most cases to defame, while in the grotesque it is done for its own sake, as a formalized displacement of parts. Its only purpose is to surprise the viewer.

From this formalist point of view, the whole low-art pictorial tradition of the monster can be viewed as an expression of the pleasure of shuffling the components of a form. (Psychologically, however, there is a great difference between shuffling squares on a paper, or flowers in a vase, and reordering the human figure.) The grotesque displacement of the order of the body is a mainstay of popular art. Cartoons and horror films provide numerous examples of it, and in many of these the move toward abstraction is consciously erotic. The ambiguous humanity of these distorted images

creates a tension between attraction and repulsion. As it is disordered, the whole comes to take on the image of its parts, and the parts that most often come to the foreground are the genitals. The monstrous figure truly becomes an erotic ornament. The dichotomy of soft and hard becomes dominant, and animated and still cartoons are filled with jokes about various parts of the body replacing genital capacity for flaccidity or erection. The best examples are in the work of Tex Avery, Basil Wolverton, and the 1960s car-culture monster artists Ed "Big Daddy" Roth and Mouse.[21] Although these artists treat the whole body as erectile, the eyes and tongue are the most common genital substitutes: Avery's animated films of the 1940s are nonstop visual jokes. *Little Rural Riding Hood* (1949), for instance, features a wolf in extreme states of sexual arousal manifested by his eyes blowing out of their sockets or his tongue rolling out of his mouth onto the floor. The forte of Wolverton's work from the 1940s through the 1970s is the monstrous depiction of disordered, exaggerated faces, often accompanied by ludicrous explanations as to how they got that way. Once again, huge, distended eyes often play a major role. And the 1960s images of Roth and Mouse link these same characteristics to the images of the "outlaw" biker and the car fanatic. Their work pairs the grotesque with the dirty, the criminal, and the hedonistic. The caption of a Rat Fink drawing in the *Ed "Big Daddy" Roth Monster Coloring Book* reads, "What is Colored 'Rotten' to the Core, 'Garbage' and 'Gore,' 'Poison' in Every Pore, and 'Warped' Forevermore?. . . . Yours Truly, R.F.!"[22] Surprisingly, though, the usual order is reversed in these drawings; the association of the grotesque with the disgusting is positive here—these monstrous figures are meant to be role models.

Popular horror, crime, and pornographic film and literature all explicitly address the disordered sexual body. In his dystopian science fiction novel *Dr. Adder* (1984), K. W. Jeter, for example, inverts Loos's utopian evolutionary development: instead of moving away from the sculpting of the body, the society of the future makes it a mainstay. In the world Jeter describes, plastic surgery has reached such a point of refinement that bodily, and especially genital, transformation can be based directly on repressed sexual trauma; a one-to-one relationship can be created between one's unconscious and one's physical shape. The book's descriptions of genitals reworked into "baroque, pathetic convolutions of the vulva, other parts shining wet like fleshy sea plants"[23] obviously reflect preadolescent misunderstandings of the sexual body, and playfully elaborate on the connection between the ornamental and the erotic. Again, most of David Cronenberg's films are concerned with an "uncanny" depiction of the sexual body in which the parts that constitute us become frightening and unfamiliar. In *Dead Ringers* (1988), for example, we follow the



DR. SPOCKTOR PROCTOR, SURGEON, HAS REARRANGED HIS HEAD TO SUIT HIMSELF. HE HAS HUNG HIS EYES OUT HIS NOSTRILS SO THAT HE CAN SEE BETTER THAN OVER HIS NOSE, AND HAS ALSO ROUTED A BRANCH OF WINDPIPE OUT AN EAR IN CASE HIS EYEBALLS RETRACT AND PLUG HIS NOSTRILS. AN OPENING ABOVE HIS ADAM'S APPLE MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO EJECT FOOD HE WANTS ONLY TO TASTE BUT NOT REACH HIS STOMACH. BESIDES, THESE CHANGES IMPROVE HIS LOOKS.

Basil Wolverton, *Untitled* (1973). Comic originally printed in Wolverton's *GJDRKZLXCBWQ Comics: A Gallery of Gooney Gags.* Courtesy Glenn Bray.

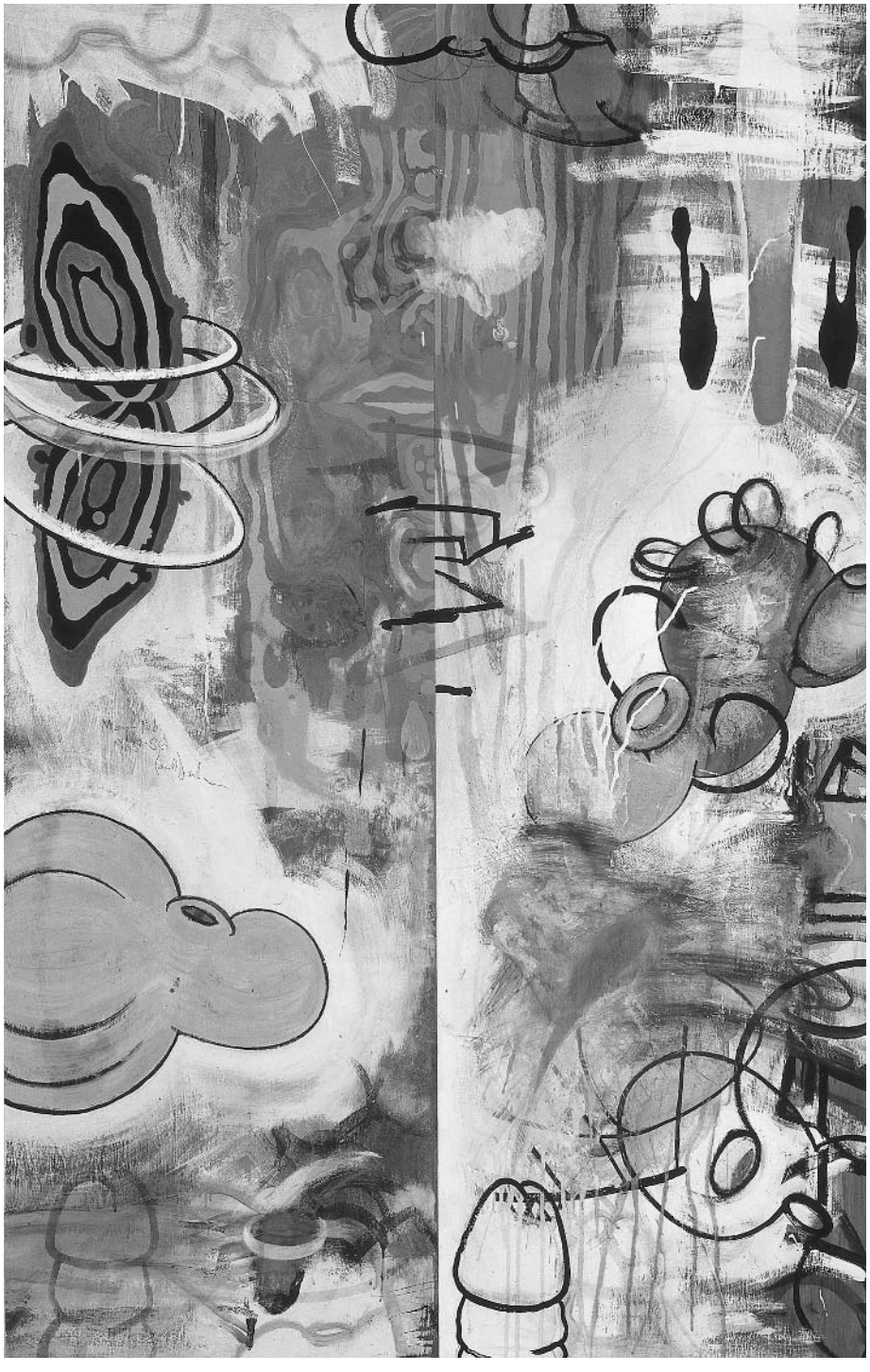
development of two identical male twins from their youthful ignorance of the specifics of sexual difference to their adult careers as gynecologists and then to their double death in a black parody of sexual union and psychotic gynecological surgery.

Because it is supposedly a picture of "real" life, perhaps most disturbing is the genre of the "true crime" story. Behind the fixation in this literature on the mutilation murder is the attraction/repulsion of viewing the abstracted body. The description of the crime scene in *Killing for Company* (1985), Brian Masters's account of the career of mass murderer Dennis Nilsen, is almost loving in its detail, clinically informing us how the killer broke a body down to pack it into a series of shopping bags, carefully dissecting it until he came to the innards, which were "all mixed together in a disgusting, impersonal pottage."[24] Nilsen also made drawings of his victims, sometimes in stages of dissection, which are literally "still lifes" (*natures mortes*)—a genre quite different from the harmless aestheticization of caricature proposed by Kris. The murderer has countered the frightening complexity of the body with a counter-urge to package it, to break it down into controllable lumps, to find its essence (of course, unsuccessfully).

Recent horror films, called "splatter films" because of their copious blood and gore, continue the depiction of the body as grotesque.[25] As in the original Roman decorations, the body becomes an accumulation of pieces at odds with each other—a group of parts that refuse to become whole. While the horror film has always been concerned with the uncanny presence of the body, its recent incarnations stress the body's composite nature with increasing intensity. The monster in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) may be made up of components from many sources, but it is ruled by a mechanistic notion of wholeness. Like a modernist collage, although it is fractured, composed of multiple scavenged pieces, it still operates as a totality. The erectile intestine that blows out of the torso of a walking corpse to strangle its victim in the horror film *Re-Animator* (1985), on the other hand, reflects the fetishization of the body part. Here the body is not total but corporate—a linked compilation of separate entities. Both *Re-Animator* and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) feature pastiche creatures that when cut apart simply keep on existing as part-beings. What could be more horrific to an essentialist like Loos than this depiction of the world as an accumulation of animated ornaments stripped from their primary forms?

Interestingly, pornography is organized in much the same way: it tends to be body-part specific. Pornographic photographs and films often use close-ups, encapsulating the erotic entirety in the fragment, as if sex were a puppet show acted out by detached members. The whole terrain of pornographic magazines is organized according to body part or substance: there are male or female genital magazines, ass magazines, breast magazines, feet magazines, cum magazines, etc. While a cartoonist like Roth pictures the genitals obliquely, as distortions of other corporeal parts, pornography shows them literally. At the same time, pornographic parts are cut out and isolated, and thus no less metaphoric: they become objectified stand-ins and irreal substitutes for themselves. In this way they gain the distance of the fetish.[26] Repressed into abstraction, they rise pleasurably back into consciousness in their new form.

In contemporary "high" art, the work most obviously related to the grotesque image of the reordered body seems, on the surface, to be an extension of organic abstraction, as in the paintings of Bill Komoski, Lari Pittman, and Caroll Dunham. My earlier discussion of the split between hard and soft is important here. Clearly, the modernist opposition of adorned to unadorned is an extension of old ideas attributing the characteristics of gender to design motifs. The association of spareness with masculinity and ornateness with femininity has a long history. A sixteenth-century drawing, for example, substitutes male and female statues, respectively, for Doric (simple) and Corinthian (fancy) architectural columns, illustrating the Vitruvian notion of the humanization of the orders.[27] And in contemporary parlance, "hard" and "soft" are often associated with gender orientations—hard and soft rock, for example.[28] Continuing this division into the moral sphere, it is obvious that Loos's notion of ornamental "criminality" is coded feminine. Many modern artworks underline the equation of the soft and the decorative with the feminine as a negative, distortional device—a tactic of caricature. Consider Salvador Dalí's softening of the perspectival solidity of objects in the melting forms of his canvases; Claes Oldenburg's softening of consumer products and household objects in his malleable sculpture; and the softened forms in Peter Saul's versions of political representations and fine-art masterpieces. All bear witness to male artists using supposedly feminine softness to attack and destabilize rigid partriarchal order. At the same time, the appropriation of hard or geometric formats by artists such as Sherrie Levine reveals a female cooption of male order. What we confront here is a kind of artistic gender-bending. For Komoski, Pittman, and Dunham, the key referents are the essentialist picturing of the blob as an icon of nature and the expressiveness of gestural painting. Yet neither of these rings true: all the signs



Carroll Dunham, *Green* (1985–86). Mixed media on walnut. 66 x 42 ins. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

of meaning turn in on themselves. The references to nature are obviously rooted in popular sources, and the "eroticism" of the decoration is a self-conscious construct, formalized to the point where it actually becomes unerotic. Nature, eros, the horrific, and the body are filtered through the codes of essentialism. This is what gives the work its double edge, and what allows it to escape the bonds of modernism's simplistic dualism.

Another contemporary camp is based around an extension of geometric reductivism, historically the more "masculine," "heroic" kind of abstraction. Here cruelty is more apparent. Perhaps softness calls for restraint. In any case, recent dialogues with the minimalist paradigm also relate to the tradition of caricature. Reductive, "essentially" heroic primal forms lend themselves easily to the role of authority figure. Thus it is only right that we should want to defame them. Aimee Rankin (now Aimee Morgana), Debby Davis, and Liz Larner are female sculptors who all defy the chastity of minimalism to reinscribe the body. On first view, Rankin's exhibitions resemble rows of Don Judd-like wall pieces, but on closer inspection her cubes reveal themselves as Pandora's boxes, filled with scenes of cruelty and eroticism. Davis reveals the cruelty of the primal form itself by using it to shape casts of dead animals—a cube of cast chicken carcasses, say. Larner makes antiseptic geometric receptacles to reveal geometry's destructive "soul": a cube is formed of bomb-making and bronze sculpture casting materials, or a clear glass rectangle holds a petrie dish of bacteria. The work of John Miller and Meyer Vaisman operates similarly, Miller's by overlaying a politics of anality on geometric formalism, Vaisman's by pairing a generic stand-in for painting with references to the taboo, the infantile, and the sexual—rubber nipples, toilet seats, greased holes, and, tellingly, caricatures.

One of the initial attractions of the caricature was the speed with which it could be executed, as if its spontaneity set it closer to the original workings of the mind than a more considered drawing. This aesthetic of haste contributed to the adoration once lavished on Michelangelo's unfinished "slave" carvings, in which the figure, barely freed from the stone, appears to be receding back into the Platonic archetype that gave it birth.[29] In 1981, Charles Ray made a sculpture called *In Memory of Sadat,* a rectangular steel box positioned on the floor from which a human arm and leg extend. These organic marks on the geometric primal form are a distortion. A fouled primal form is a caricature of the very notion of perfection . . . and when we see this, like the children on *Double Dare* when they see their parents and teachers covered in a disgusting mess, we cannot hold back a shout of glee.

Liz Larner, *Used to Do the Job* (1988). Steel, aluminum, coal, copper saltpeter, trinitrotoluene, ammonium nitrate, and other natural and unnatural ingredients suspended in micro-crystalline wax on lead-sheathed base container. 48 x 25 x 24 ins. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Charles Ray, *In Memory of Sadat* (1981). Artist's body directly incorporated into a steel sculpture.
Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

NOTES

1 See Ernst Kris (in collaboration with E. H. Gombrich), "The Principles of Caricature," in Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952; New York: International Universities Press/Schocken Books, 1964), p. 189.

2 Ibid., p. 175.

3 Ibid., p. 190.

4 See Albert Boime, "Jacques-Louis David, Scatalogical Discourse in the French Revolution, and the Art of Caricature," *Arts Magazine* 62, no. 6 (February 1988), pp. 72–81.

5 Frances K. Barasch, introduction to Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968), p. xxiii.

6 Ibid., p. xxv.

7 Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

8 Barasch, *A History of Caricature,* p. xxvii.

9 Ibid., p. xxiii.

10 This and the following passage are cited in E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979), pp. 60–61. The first passage comes from Loos's "Ladies Fashion," first published in *Neue Freie Presse,* August 21, 1898; reprinted in Adolf Loos, *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897–1900,* trans. Jane O. Norman and John H. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982). The main ideas in this citation are repeated in "Ornament and Crime" (1908), an English translation of which can be found in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987), pp. 100–03.

11 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,' " in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 17, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), pp. 24–48.

12 Kris (with Gombrich), "The Principles of Caricature," pp. 202–23.

13 Boime, "Jacques-Louis David," p. 72.

14 Ibid., pp. 75–76.

15 See Sandor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitalia* (first German edition, 1923), trans. Henry Alden Bunker (London: Maresfield/Karnac, 1989), p. 13.

16 Hosted by Marc Summers until 1993, *Double Dare* premiered on Nickelodeon in 1986. Two years later the show was Oedipalied with the addition of a mom and pop into *Family Double Dare,* which aired during primetime on the Fox network in 1988, moving back to Nickelodeon in 1990. "Meanwhile, the original *Double Dare* changed its name to *Super Sloppy Double Dare,* upping the ante of gross games and messy mayhem." See http://www.yesterdayland.com/popopedia/shows/saturday/sa1714.php.

17 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 290.

18 See Anthony Blunt, *Picasso's Guernica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 9–10, where both etchings are illustrated.

19 Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter 1984), p. 30.

20 See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no.10 (Summer 1967), pp. 12–23.

21 During his heyday at Warner Brothers, MGM, and Universal between 1935 and 1955, Tex Avery (1908–1980), a contemporary of Walt Disney, created such classic cartoon characters as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Droopy Dog. Basil Wolverton's magazine features, including *Spacehawk* and *Powerhouse Pepper,* appeared in comic books between 1938 and 1954. In 1946 he won a contest promoted by Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* comic strip to image *Lena the Hyena,* Lower Slobbovia's ugliest woman. The judges were Salvador Dalí, Boris Karloff, and Frank Sinatra. (See *Lena's Bambinas* [Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1996].) From the mid-1950s he worked regularly for *Mad* and other humor magazines. Ed "Big Daddy" Roth (1932–2001) designed and custom-painted cars and hot-rods from the late 1950s, supporting himself by drawing monsters (the most famous of which is Rat Fink) and selling T-shirts and popular model kits. His work can been found in comic books, art galleries, and tattoo parlors. Stanley "Mouse" Miller, another Kustom Kulture artist, is known for his signature hot-rod creation, Freddy Flypogger, probably a model for Roth's eventually more successful Rat Fink. Moving from Detroit to San Francisco in the 1960s, Mouse was co-founder of Monster Company, which pioneered four-color, screen-printed T-shirts. Work by Roth and Mouse was included alongside that of younger artists in the exhibition *Customized: Art Inspired by Hot Rods, Low Riders and American Car Culture,* organized by the ICA, Boston (Fall 2000).

22 Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, *Monster Coloring Book,* edition 1, vol. 1 (Maywood, Calif.: Ed Roth Studios, 1965), n/p.

23 K. W. Jeter, *Dr. Adder* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 28.

24 Brian Masters, *Killing for Company* (New York: Stein & Day, 1985), p. 16.

25 See e.g. John McCarty, *Splatter Movies: Breaking the Last Taboo* (Albany, N.Y.: FantaCo, 1981) for a general overview of the genre; and Robert S. Parigi, "Reading the Entrails: Splatter Cinema and the Post Modern Body," *Art Criticism* (State University of New York, Stony Brook) 4, no. 2 (1988), pp. 1–18.

26 See Steven Prince, "The Pornographic Image and the Practice of Film Theory," *Cinema Journal* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1988), pp. 34–35; compare chapter 4, "Fetishism and Hard Core," of Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy" of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 93–119.

27 Fig. 209 in Gombrich, *The Sense of Order,* p. 176, reproduces "Doric and Corinthian Orders" (1563) by John Shute.

28 On "soft" and "hard," see Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," *Artforum* 6 (April 1968), pp. 33–35; reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993); and Donald Kuspit, "Material as Sculptural Metaphor," in Howard Singerman, ed., *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945–1986* (Los Angeles/New York: Museum of Contemporary Art/Abbeville, 1986), pp. 106–125.

29 Kris (with Gombrich), "The Principles of Caricature," p. 198.