POST-MODERNISM: Another Modernist Stepping Stone?

Visual Arts Ontario's second entry in the *Art Contexts: Creators & Curators, Critics and Collectors* lecture series was *Hallmarks of Contemporary Criticism.* On four separate nights in November of last year, four diverse critics lectured on art-historical issues and themes of contemporary art.

There was the clarity of Wolfgang Max Faust's analyses of contemporary German art and its determined relationship to social, political and existential situations: the art of Berlin and the everpresent wall, the artist's mistrust of socialism in the east and of capitalism in the west, and the critical use of art historical or art political references in the styles of German painting since the landmark work of Joseph Beuys.

There was Kate Linker's densely layered analysis of the "dislocations and political possibilities opened up by the phenomenon of post-modernism," which she described as "a cultural condition resulting from the erosion of the ideals of the modern period." She does not see post-modernism as a style, but "as an historical shift, occurring within, but not combined to the visual arts." It is seen as an assault "directed... against the unity sustained by the ideologies of the modern period, which... [are] the unities of self, of culture, of sign." Post-modernism is coincident with post-humanism. The modernist self is described as a constructed fiction, in order to "recontain the forces of dispersion unleashed by industrialization."

Robert Pincus-Witten, on the other hand, spoke about post-modernism as being "merely another stylistic step in the modernist dialectic." He looked at the central issues of modernism and the socialist attack on its bourgeois capitalism, and described this as being, in fact, an early post-modernism. His analyses are well-grounded and provocative, and he argues that post-modernism does not supplant the whole system of modernism.

The critic whose work is reproduced here does not speak about post-modernism, but does employ useful and astute art historical views about a contemporary art within a specific art community. As Wolfgang Max Faust focussed on a place and its artists, so did the Canadian critic John Bentley Mays focus on Toronto, on its Queen Street West art community, and on a critic working from within that community.

CRITICS AND PICTURES: Philip Monk in Toronto

Excerpted and Abridged from a lecture by John Bentley Mays for the Visual Arts Ontario series of lectures, Art Contexts: Hallmarks of Contemporary Criticism *held at the Ontario College of Art, November 12, 1986.*

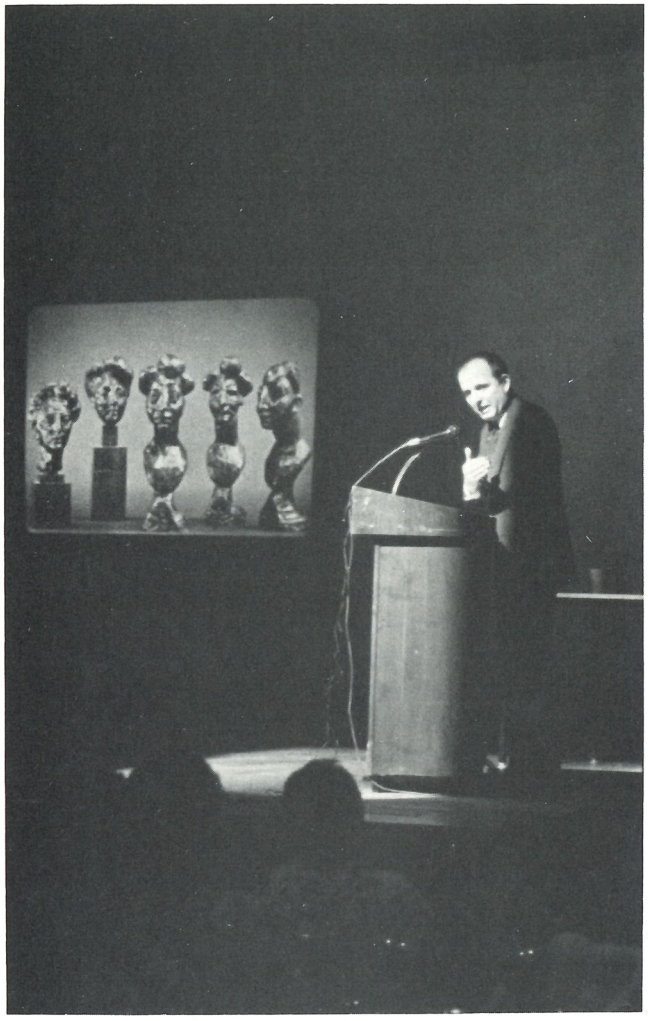
I am going to start this lecture in the final year of Philip's activities as an art critic — 1984, the year he was hired to be the Curator of Contemporary Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I want to start with a lecture which Philip gave at the Rivoli, and which was later reprinted in the May 1984 issue of *Vanguard Magazine.* And the name of this article and lecture was *Axes of Difference.*

The issue in this lecture was, as usual, representation, which was one of Philip Monk's most important words. That is to say, representation as the quality of a work of art, or the site of the work of art, in which a representation or *re-presentation* of the social world takes place and then is represented to a viewer, usually a *designated* viewer, or a viewer consciously held in mind by the artist.

After announcing his general topic, representation, Philip talks about the perceived axes of difference in Toronto art, but before making a discrimination, which is by now notorious, if not famous, about who is representing and who isn't, or at least who is representing in a way that Philip finds useful and who is not, Philip Monk says:

> The lines of difference [in Toronto art] are not so much those between expression and mediation, men and women: they are really between a passive resignation and melancholy despair, pessimism, nihilism, and decadence on the one hand, and the sense of the possibility of action on the other. In other words, it is what the works *lead to* that is the important question.

The retreat into despair, Philip suggests, was being led principally by male artists, and found its characteristic site within "a traditional system — the gallery, art history and



JAY BARRY

Robert Pincus-Witten

recurrent ties to the market," as part of what he calls maintenance of male cultural values of a traditional nature," the institution, the market place, the discourse of mastery.

To make these kinds of distinction, or generalizations about Toronto art, is not so unusual. But Philip's address doesn't end there. What caused the fuss over this article, which was an extraordinary fuss, was Philip's going on to name names, laying charges against a number of Queen Street artists.

On the one hand, those who exemplify passive resignation, melancholy, despair and all the rest are a group of four male artists: David Clarkson, who is characterized as presenting "romantic idealism" and a "nostalgia for immortality"; Andy Patton, accused of a withdrawal into conservative subjectivity; John Scott, charged with a nineteenth century "sentimental humanism"; and Marc de Guerre is charged with a "will to self-destruction" and "nihilistic expressionism."

In contra-distinction to these paralyzed people, Philip mentions four female artists, who in his view, create work which potentially leads to action or at least to some sort of social outcome. And these four artists are Shelagh Alexander, Joanne Tod, Janice Gurney, and Shirley Wiitasalo. The women, Philip tells us, have "the conditions of representation inscribed in them" — the social world is written on their bodies — and so they are "aware of the conditions of representation in every aspect of their own representational stance." They are therefore equipped — compelled — to engage in their work the process by which images become a part of us, constituting the ways in which the social world can be understood.

This presentation, and the subsequent publication of it in *Vanguard,* drew many responses. But the most pained response was the one heard on the streets, that had very little to do with the actual philosophical underpinnings of what had been said, and everything to do with what was believed to be a *double-cross.* It was said that Philip had come up within the scene of Queen Street West and had betrayed it. That some important loyalty had been somehow breached or violated. That Philip had been supporting the Queen Street scene, and had suddenly turned against half of it, the male half of it.

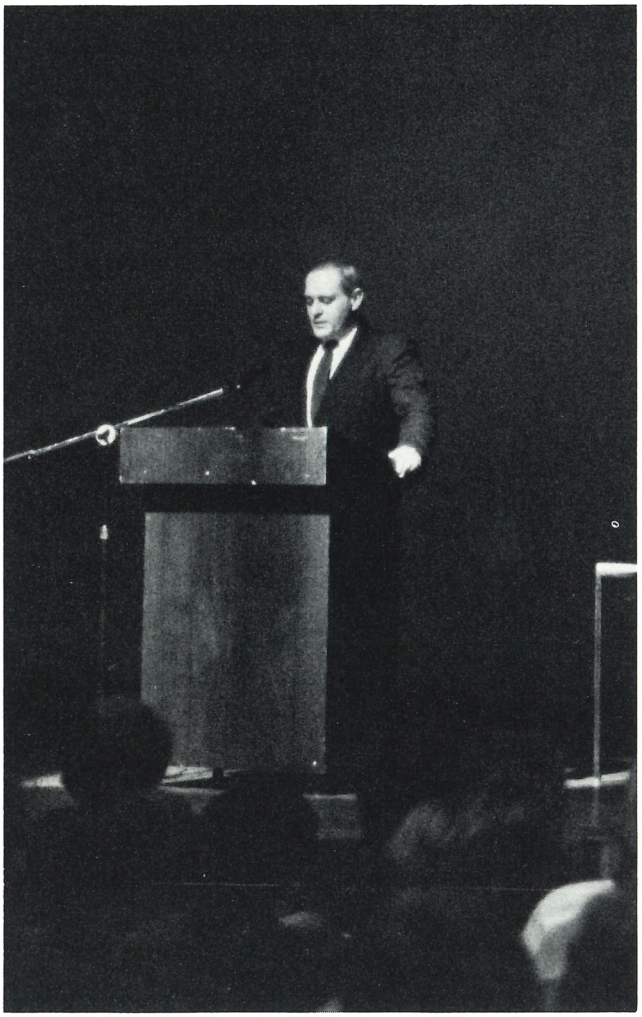
I must say that at the time I was surprised by the lecture, it seemed to come like a bolt from the blue. But looking back on 1984, and looking back over Philip's previous criticism, I think that I should have known, in fact we all should have known what was coming.

I'm not suggesting that Philip had pursued a calculated strategy. I don't think there's any evidence of that in his writings. Critics who are as vulnerable as he was to the various forces of the art world, without an institutional alignment, find themselves pushed around a lot by editors, by lecture dates, by the general problem of the granting system, and so on. Nor am I suggesting that there is a simple unity in his work. Like other critics, Philip has developed parallel discourses in order to deal with the art and cultural experience which has been given to him. But I will maintain that if anybody had been really paying attention to Philip's activities and his criticism, for the six years before 1984, it would have come as no surprise in 1984, that he would be making these charges against artists in these terms....But before getting into all that, a glance backward to the beginning of Philip's critical career.

Between 1976 and 1978, we saw the opening of Queen Street West to the artist community in the way that we understand it today. And that opening may conveniently be dated from 1976, and the opening, on Duncan Street, of the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication, known as CEAC.

CEAC stood, like parallel galleries today do not stand, for the most part, at a crossroads of extraordinary and conflicting cross-currents of art, punk, counterculture, radical politics, trendy European philosophy, and gay activism. Under the leadership of Amerigo Marras, Suber Corley, and others, CEAC during these two years was turned into a hugely active workshop for performance,

video, experimental film, and for endless political discussion. The stance of the space was radical, and vividly oppositional to capitalism, to the state and to the police, to traditional sexual and political roles, and to the art world in all of its manifestations, including museums, commerical galleries, collectors — even the very existence of the artist as a privileged creator, and even the artist run centers, such as they were in 1977 and 1978....



JAY BARRY

John Bentley Mays

During the moment between the collapse of CEAC's radical discourse, in 1978, and the launch of Queen Street as we know it now, there was *Artists Review* and there was Philip Monk (who had just finished his graduate work in Art History at the University of Toronto). *Artists Review* was a useful mimeographed handout, which filled the gap between the very stately *Arts Canada* on the one hand and, really, nothing at all. There were traditional reviews of painting and sculpture, as they appeared in the traditional art institutions, and new ones or new kinds of ones like artists' co-ops, which were still traditional in their look and in their attitude and their programming. This was the new world defined by *Artists Review,* the new world of A.C.T., Mercer Union, and YYZ, and the reconstituted Queen Street version of A Space, and later the Ydessa Gallery and S. L. Simpson, and so on. It was this world, this new world, in which *Artists Review* came to be, and where Philip Monk entered and quickly rose to prominence.

But Philip entered on his own terms. If you read through *Artists Reviews*, the conventionalism of the art reviews usually matches the conventionalism of the art itself. But Philip avoided both the standard U of T academic discourse and the kind of popular reviewing style available to him. He had apparently been reading Roland Barthes, and perhaps Baudelaire, at this point, and he adopted in his early reviews a dandified stance, which seems to be more akin to what CEAC was up to, than to the rather more staid environment of *Artists Review*....

Philip ends one review with this particular tag: "Philip Monk is a man without identity." All the way through the reviews there is this sense of Philip Monk as a man without identity, a sense of extreme loss, of not having a history. Even though he had just finished in Art History at the University of Toronto, he had no art history for himself and for his magazine. Instead of history, Philip's principal creative source is his immobility, which is only confirmed by the work of art, standing there in the gallery, in its white space, in its privilege and authority and alienation.

In 1979, in a work called *Theoretical Dance: This Body is in Creation*, Philip writes in a self-interview:

> I think our bodies are created by history and economy, invested and inscribed with the relations of power and domination....In reaction to the political technology of our bodies, against the body's destruction and collapse, all that is left to us in our bodies is our own physical disgust and convulsions, our own control of our bodies in the willed loss of control and usurpation by cataclysmic desire.

The phrases "willed loss of control" and "usurpation by cataclysmic desire," and related notions, come up like Wagnerian leitmotifs in Philip's work of this period — the imagery of convulsions, of devastating desire, considered as a critical performance at the edges of what he calls the *network.*

In the small pamphlet that was published in 1979 by Rumour Publications, called *Peripheral Drift*, Philip defines a *network* in this way:

> A network seems to coalesce as the 'site' of the peripheral drift, composed as it is of shifting subjects...The network is...perverse because it does not serve or seek to communicate a meaning. Nor is it expressive: it is performative.

But here Philip separates himself from the perversity of CEAC, the radically political, the radically anti-art and conceptual. He goes on to say:

> My perversion is peripheral; but it is not transgressive....While seeming to abandon society, I inhabit its systems at their limit...Since symptoms are, at once, both collective and individual, it is easy for me to anonymously disguise myself within society's symptoms, by accepting them as a means and a site. The individual is no more a subject than society; to speak of symptoms is to conceive the subject; to accept symptoms is to deny the subject, to make it a fiction.

Such meditations are pursued in other articles that would come in the subsequent years, *Violence and Representation* and the brilliant brief work *Breach of Promise*, published in *File Magazine* in 1982.

Taking such flamboyant statements as these, we find that what is being created is a myth of the contemporary male ego, the male creative identity in crisis, symbolized in this criticism by the self in convulsion. The problem being faced by men in the culture generally at the turn of the decade — not merely the artistic culture, but the popular culture — was the reduction of the male body to celibacy by feminism — and to impotence by the inventory of images and by the authority of institutions, by the society of spectacle and of symptom.

The solution to the complex crisis of male ego which Philip declares, and the programme which he outlines in the beginning of his work, is to abandon the whole male-dominated notion of avant-garde tradition à la CEAC — the traditional radical and aggressive and transgressive avant-garde — and "to take on society's symptoms, to develop them intensively, obsessively and logically, that is perversely, and represent them to society freed from their ideological cover."

And now we return to 1984 and *Axes of Difference*, which now will not seem quite as strange, as unexpected, as novel as it did at the time. Reading the article in the light of these preceding writings, and these paradigms, and passionate ideas, we find that in Philip's view three strategies are possible in the face of the revolutionary ungrounding, the castration being perpetrated ceaselessly by capitalist society against the self. The first is active transgression. In the writing of Philip Monk in the 1970s, this appears as a doomed artistic strategy, as it will in 1984 — simply, because capitalism has so much greater power to transgress. The second strategy is nihilism, romantic escapism, nostalgia, self-destruction — all the things, that is, of which he accuses the male artists in *Axes of Difference*. They are all *failed* transgressions, the self-consolation of the defeated male ego, which has been brought into crisis with itself, by super-male transgression, and has not survived its own provocation. Finally, there is representation, as he defines and describes it in *Peripheral Drift*: an embrace of the symptomatic chaos, and the development of society's powerful symptoms and malignant fascinations, and then their subsequent *re*presentation to society, stripped of mystery, *castrated*. And this is what, in Philip's view, the female artists do in the painting and photographic work mentioned in *Axes of Difference*.

Thus, representation becomes the strategy by which the powerless can disarm the violent culture of commodity and images, but at the same time avoid the chief danger to all previous avant-gardisms: the temptation of the powerless to become the powerful. Having castrated the father, representation doesn't go on to *become* the father, preferring instead the essential liberty and mobility of peripheral drift.

In Philip's view, the crisis of the art world of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Toronto is to be resolved, not by ransacking our history books and reviving old forms of authority, such as grand manner painting, heroic sculpture, and so on, but by embarking on the critical path suggested by representation. Or to paraphrase this in terms of the basic mythic movement of Philip Monk's own writings: the crisis of the male ego is not to be cured by dressing up in old macho images, but by becoming radically *feminized*. Instead of trying to get the father's penis, his sceptre and his crown, the male — the creative artist — finds within his castration the *very ground* of his identity and liberty, and the source of a new artistic strategy beyond avant-gardism, uniquely equipped to deal with the power-saturated culture of images....