PHILIP MONK
SENTENCES ON ART

Rivoli Tavern, Toronto
November 22, 1982

I went because I wanted to hear what Philip Monk would have to say about theory. I also went because I could always get a drink, if nothing else, and this was important given the uneven quality of public lectures. I went chiefly because there seems to have been certain changes in Toronto's energy patterns in the last two or three years, changes which require notice.

This is not in itself a review of those changes, because they deserve more attention than I can give them here. I want instead to comment briefly on the Philip Monk talk alone because it seemed an interesting consummation of the basic purpose of two series of public critical lectures sponsored by A Space on the one hand and YYZ on the other. Together they marked an important, if problematic, development in the city's continuing struggle to establish a sense of focus and maturity.

Initially, following on the general pattern of YYZ's series, Monk was matched with another speaker: Benjamin Buchloh. I already knew Buchloh would not be there, and in a way I was disappointed. He has a reputation for being clever and entertaining, and I looked forward to hearing him in a Toronto context. I do not know whether he's ever been in Toronto, but it wouldn't surprise me. That he did not come, however, served to radicalize YYZ's objective. From being a forum to allow Toronto artists/critics "equal time" to debate general issues with their foreign counterparts, the evening became a unique solo performance by a Toronto critic devoted to the public criticism of a significant member of Toronto's art establishment. And Philip played it for all it was worth.

The Rivoli space is small and cheap, on the north side of Queen Street West, just east of Spadina Avenue. There is a small bar at one end, and a raised stage at the other. The room was packed when we got there. I propped myself at the bar, bought a beer, and counted: there were well over two hundred artists, critics, dealers, students and assorted others. It was a real party; I wondered how long I would last in the cigarette smoke. About a quarter of an hour after the announced time, Philip made his way politely through the crowd and seated himself on the stage. I was suitably impressed. He had chosen to wear a black leather coat set off by a red rose in the lapel. With his shock of unruly fair red hair falling over one side of his forehead, and his firm features with set jaw and pursed lips, he reflected the slightly nervous self-assurance and moral rectitude of a presbyterian minister. I sipped my beer and considered how much Anglo-Canadian intellectual history had been written by Presbyterian ministers; I wondered how many of them wore red roses in their lapels; I wondered how deliberately Philip Monk was playing to them.

I filed this away for future research. The microphones had been adjusted, the slide projector fine-tuned against the screen at the right back of the stage, and the moderator was explaining Buchloh's absence. Philip began, his soft voice reading with calculated deliberation and pausing from a prepared text with slide accompaniment which he made clear would take an hour and a half before questions would be considered. It did take an hour and a half, and I want now to leave Philip talking, and consider what he had to say.

The substance was simple, and its focus was political. Taking as his departure two quotations from Nietzsche and Brecht respectively, Philip raised the question of trust and the degree to which language may be seen as vehicle for dissimulation or vehicle for truth. In order to raise this question at all, he proceeded to launch an attack on structural critique, with its basic assumption that language — and hence reality as we know it — is a closed self-referential system independent of any referent. Philip's question was: "When things are not taken at their word, what type of aesthetic system does that signify, and more importantly perhaps, what type of social place for art?"

Having linked the problem of social relevance to the critical use of language (or, we could say: having asked what price we pay for action by limiting ourselves to intention), he proceeded to isolate the strategy of "inhabitation" or "appropriation" — a strategy he in turn linked to the 1970's and a decadent and even moribund social dilettantism (he suggested that the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan held a resemblance to the 1933 emergence of Adolf Hitler in terms of the effectiveness of such strategies) — and their use by artists to find a "social place for art". For Philip, this represented a delusion which he then used as a fulcrum for addressing the general problem of judgement, a problem which is of course central to any process of criticism. If this strategy of inhabitation could be seen to paralyse judgement by claiming through structuralism's self-referential critique of reality that the only — or *all* — reality lays within the boundaries set by the work, then Philip could state with some confidence that such strategies were dissimulative rather than truthful, and consequently suspect as a vehicle for addressing questions of social engagement. The freedom to judge is, after all, the cornerstone of all freedom: the test of truth. It is the basis of what is real for us.

To examine this phenomenon, Philip chose General Idea as a model for analysis. The balance of the lecture became a lengthy critique of their work, in which he noted the "fascist" nature of their attempt to appropriate at once all meaning and all challenge to that meaning, and their flirtation with mega-capitalism; and he painstakingly elaborated their rhetorical appropriation of "French textual theory" (structuralism). Despite their rhetoric — indeed, because of their rhetoric — Philip questioned whether General Idea simply accommodated itself to the realities it pretended to critique. In the end, he asked, is General Idea simply form: "that in mirroring mirrors, General Idea has discovered its tautology, its image and fetish in capitalism?"

What seemed curious and puzzling about Philip's analysis was his failure to define his terms for dissimulation and truth, beyond linking them to a vague reference to political action. It appeared more or less clear from his context that in "taking things at their word" he hoped to return art-making to a concern with the enduring questions of justice and truth, and their moral and social dimensions. After all, his presentation was Presbyterian. But if his objective was to free art from syntactical self-absorptions such as "appropriation" and modernism itself, it seems even more curious that he chose to couch his thesis in such a way as to depend on audience understanding of structural and semiotic vocabulary in order to "take things at their word". Philip intentionally chose to adopt an inhabitation of his own: the black leather coat and rose in the lapel echoed the style of General Idea itself. But irony is a two-edged sword; whether directed at General Idea or at Derrida, if "taking things at their word" implies a desire to cut through "style" to the "thing itself", irony is a dubious choice of weapon: the audience is left wondering whether the sword cut Philip or General Idea. And when all's said and done, does the final irony belong to Derrida?

I do not want to dismiss this issue simply because the intricacies of attempting to understand what is real require more subtle analysis than Philip was able or willing to devote to it in his lecture. We all wish to confront what we conceive of as the basic purpose of our existence, however complex and formidable the barriers to that confrontation may appear. Indeed, Philip was addressing what most artists now have been turning to for several years, and perhaps he's right that 1980 marks that point: if in the 1970's we found that the structures of existence do not by themselves clarify what they represent, how can one find what lies beyond them? Is it hopeless? Is it even a validly formulated question? And what of the audience? I could go on; what is clear is only that the answers are not.

Critical direction, however, was not the principal element at issue for me: in openly challenging the members of General Idea by seeking to take them at their word in a public forum of their peers, Philip accomplished his real — and stated — objective: to return critical debate in this city to its realities. Criticism in Toronto, and no doubt mostly everywhere else, has been dominated by French and American values to such an extent that their proper attachments have remained largely hidden. It would be naive to accept the few desperate remarks by Philip Monk that evening at the Rivoli as a coherent and defensible formulation of a native criticism; but as a brave and honest bid for one it cannot be ignored. Philip threw down a challenge, and if it is ignored, Toronto's art institutions — and its artists and critics — cannot complain that no-one is interested: over two hundred people were witness.

IAN CARR-HARRIS

RAYMONDE APRIL

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Most people dream in black and white. The substance of the dream dissolves into light or into lightless void. Ambiguities promise revelation. Insight is enclosed in paradox. Illusion may be wiser than fact. Anyone, from Joseph among the Egyptians to Freud in the clutches of Helmholzian mechanistics, will be prized if he does a good job interpreting dreams. Freudian theory, however, is not exactly based on the proposition that illusion is wiser than fact. In Freudian theory, illusion is the opposite of fact. The real object of desire stands in physical defiance of the fantastical symbol that is invented to represent it.

The *Personnages au Lac bleu* photographs at their best present images so deeply eroded by light and shadow that they seem as incorporeal as dream. Seemingly as dimensionless as light and lightlessness, these images of fabrics, walls, slips of paper, even faces, can only be perceived as illusory, as fabrications made from shadows. Yet the nature of illusion which is emphasized, indeed treasured, in these photographs and which is in some sense intrinsic to art-making, is not, as Freud porposed, how illusion is distinct from what is real, but how illusion is an extension of something real.

The romantic sensibility that Raymonde April presents is familiar, almost conventional. Yet in a delicate, solitary way she reveals mysterious qualities of ordinary things. She reveals how an illusion can be formed from an unassuming object when it is perceived as an ambiguous one. There is one photograph in the series "Moi-Même, Portrait de Paysage " which is sweet and introspective, an illustration of April's fascination with illusion: the head of a woman is turned facing a dingy wall. The side of her face gleams like a pearl. The shadow she casts is so intensely dark it is a silhouette cut through the wall. Fine shadows from peeling paint like fragile veins give the wall the membranous vulnerability of skin. A nameless garment hangs near a corner. On the dingy wall, beside the silhouette, is the object of the woman's gaze, a tiny smudge of a shadow. The shadow is essentially a toy: it takes the shape of a tiny dog. We know the shadow has been cast by bits of paper or mundane objects, but the silly little shadow dog is so pert and magical that all it would take is a wish and it would scamper or wag its tail.

If, as in a psychoanalytically interpreted dream, the daffy little dog were taken as a symbol of something needed or longed for, whatever is unique in April's perceptiveness could be missed. This image, like several others, especially in the series "Miniatures",