Spear, Athena. "Some Thoughts on Contemporary Art." *Bulletin of the Allen Memorial Art Museum* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1973): 90–98.

Some Thoughts on Contemporary Art

With reference to Ann McCoy, Mary Miss, Ree Morton, Jacqueline Winsor Chris Burden, Scott Burton and Joan Jonas

If one were to remove the labels of "movements" from modern art, one might discover common currents running through the entire century. The questioning of the nature of art, starting with Duchamp and Dadaism (perhaps even earlier), could be defined as one of these currents, pursuing its course, generation after generation, until such recent "conceptual art" offsprings as the British "Art-Language" group and their associates. A great many twentieth-century artists have focussed uniquely on problems of art, have felt justified to produce "art on art," pushing the limits of art ontology *ad absurdum*. While it is possible that future generations of artists and art historians will look upon this body of work as idle questioning of a bourgeois art which became anaemic by removing itself from life, this trend is still with us, motivating in fact the great majority of avant-garde art.

Along with the constant redefining of art and the challenging of its limits goes an increasing tendency for reduction, a continuous testing of the rule "less is more." The whole history of twentieth-century art could be described in terms of reduction: breaking up the object (Cubism); eliminating the subject (Abstraction); getting rid of traditional materials and techniques (Dada to Pop art); denying the artist's choice (Found object); removing the emotional content (Minimal art); dropping any predetermined form (Process art); eliminating even the material support or the visual element altogether (Conceptual art); obliterating the distinction between art and life (Body art). What remains? Just the creative thought and act, the challenge of opening new horizons to sensitivity, the risk of breaking new ground and discovering art afresh.

Another characteristic that cuts across the century is an increasing fascination on the part of the artists with violence, sadism, masochism, danger — running from Dada and Surrealism to young living artists such as Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim or Richard Serra. Is this simply post-Freudian art, with the way open to an unrelenting exploration of body and mind? Is it the outcome of a dangerous age, infested by world wars, threatened by total destruction (through an atomic cataclysm, or irreversible overpopulation and pollution) and by return to the laws of the jungle? Whatever the reasons, much contemporary art seems to be committed to violence, sometimes to the point of glorifying physical brutality as an inherent artistic value. Even the consistent need for large scale implies an element of bravura that relates to the "tough guy" ideal of the Pollock-Morris-Serra heritage.

Perhaps a less recognized but more permeating trend in modern art is what first appeared in nineteenth-century architecture as Sullivan's "form follows function" rule, and later in twentieth-century sculpture as Brancusi's "truth to the material" dictum. The subjugation of form to function or the marriage of the two is probably the outcome of an industrial society dominated by machine-made utilitarian objects. But in my opinion, a number of later attitudes of contemporary art represent the same principle in disguise — a desire for artistic form to obey a logic inherent to the work but of extra-aesthetic nature. Being truthful to the material means that the form cannot be arbitrarily imposed by the artist. In order for it to be valid, form must derive from the needs of the material, comply with its natural laws, be the result of a close interaction of artistic conception and material support. There is only one step from "truth to the material" to "truth to the process," which still dominates a great deal of contemporary art. "Form follows the process" could easily be seen as the leading principle behind several generations of art, from Pollock's splash-and-drip paintings, to Larry Poons' thick-layered and crackled canvases, to Dorothea Rockburne's grease-soaked paper pieces and Serra's molten lead or sawn tree-trunk sculptures.

Compliance to the law of gravity as a structuring method is another manifestation of the same principle. Again it cuts across generations, starting with Brancusi's multiple-unit stacked pedestals which found their ultimate expression in Carl Andre's stacked pyramid sculptures. The nature of the material plus the pull of gravity create the changeable form of Oldenburg's soft sculptures and of much cloth and rope sculpture of recent years. Andre lowers his pieces all the way to the ground, each unit being in direct contact with the gravitational power holding it against the earth. Serra supports his precariously propped lead pieces by the sheer weight of the material interacting with the positioning of the lead slabs and rolls. And he determines the form of his sawn sculptures by an interaction of material (e.g., tree-trunks), process (e.g., the action of sawing) and gravity — which together determine the relationship of the parts.

It seems as if truthfulness to the medium, process or system (parallel to the straightforward attitude implied by "form follows function") is the general principle underlying all recent movements — from process sculpture, to conceptual art, to body art, to videotape performances, etc. Contemporary artists feel the need for an internal logic which dictates the structure of the work and which is often extra-artistic. Subjective decisions are thus limited to the minimum, to setting up a situation or defining the starting "rules of the game," the system. Subsequent decisions are a result of the initial conditions and are pursued with no further interference by the artist. The work is simply structured by (or sometimes consists entirely of) the logic of its own making, or the logical proceeding of an action within a given space, or the interaction between body, action and medium. Sol LeWitt may be considered as the main progenitor of this attitude, and perhaps its most handsome summation is the recent exhibition of drawings by Dorothea Rockburne.[1] We here witness an attempt to eliminate or reduce the subjective factor of art, to achieve a maximum of detachment and honesty, an intellectual elegance and control comparable to that of scientific disciplines.

If convergence upon this "form follows logic" attitude of all the art movements of the past decade — from minimal art to body performances — is the only new development of established avant-garde art, one might observe that some other recent changes have passed unnoticed, as their effect is much more diffuse. During the last year or two, probably under the influence of the women's movement, an intense desire for individual expression has diversified the art scene to an unprecedented degree and has favored the production of much "autobiographical" art. Under the same influence, the artist has been relieved from a number of clichés and is free to tread on some new ground previously forbidden through feminine associations. The idol of the "tough guy" artist is crumbling. One no longer feels compelled to "work large." One can now afford to be pretty, soft and delicate, to work in intimate scale and luscious materials — to be oneself.

The artists invited to the exhibition and performance series of this festival are all extremely individual, in spite of sharing in part some of the general attitudes described above.

Chris Burden's work, for instance, is greatly involved with danger or physical hardship. It is not merely implied or potential danger, like that usually encountered in Vito Acconci's or Oppenheim's works. Nor

[1] Bykert Gallery, New York, January 27-February 22, 1973.

is it danger threatening the spectator, such as the possible collapsing of Serra's lead sculptures. It is often real danger or painful hardship that Burden chooses to impose upon himself, in the manner of religious penitents. Chaining himself naked on a concrete floor with two live (220 volt) electric wires floating inside two buckets of water nearby, the artist surrendered himself to the mercy of luck and passing spectators.[2] That electrocution was so imminent makes one shudder. Locking oneself up in a 2 x 2 x 3 ft. metal gym locker for five days, without eating for several days before (see p. 130), is reminiscent of medieval prison tortures. The experience must be such a uniquely unforgettable one that it generates a certain awe in the spectator. Burden's quiet and restrained personality, in some ways evocative of an Oriental ascetic, increases this effect. His work, devoid of pompousness or noise, transcends its use of physical violence, and emanates a mysterious power and spirituality.

Ann McCoy, the second California artist in this festival, represents in a very different way a kindred spirit. Her only links to contemporary art trends are the enormous scale of her work and the bravura of meticulous pencil drawing over the entire surface (comparable to Chuck Close's slow painting process). Actually both the size and the lengthy execution are necessitated by the requirements of her art. As she so eloquently explains in her statement (p. 103), the large size allows the spectator to be immersed in the work, in order to undergo a transcendental experience. And the detailed rendering of the image leads one to a slow and gradual reading — often enriched by the unexpected and enchanting additions of little creatures in the margins (penguins, fish, etc.). These seemingly extraneous elements (which she calls "personal notations"), disconnected from the narrative representation of the general theme of each drawing, are nevertheless ontologically related to the nature depicted in each case: fish in a landscape dominated by a lake, penguins on a picture of snowy mountain peaks, etc.

Despite Ann McCoy's denial of direct influence from Oriental art, one can hardly avoid the comparison with Chinese painting, both visually and in spirit: the pale colors of the ground, the broken-stroke drawing technique, the huge vistas of virgin nature — predominantly mountains and waterfalls — and the feeling of remoteness. Even the added elements of "personal notations" near the margins recall the arbitrary placing of collectors' marks on Chinese scrolls. Confronted with either art, one feels

[2] F Space, Santa Ana, Calif., October 9, 1971.

the smallness of man, the grandeur and awesomeness of nature. One becomes lost in contemplation, transported into a mystic union with the universe.

It is naturally no coincidence that a great deal of California art is related to Oriental philosophies and involved in mystical attitudes. After all, the West Coast is physically closer to the Orient and has long felt its impact through the steady stream of Chinese and Japanese immigrants.

Ree Morton, the only other of the "Four Young Americans" who is not a New York resident, seems also to have affinities with non-Western cultures. Her inspiration comes from ancient or "primitive" civilizations, from archaeological sites, ethnological museums and folk art — not in the theatrical sense of Rafael Ferrer, who also lives in Philadelphia and is a friend of hers, but in a quiet, restrained and more abstract way. Doorways, fences and benches are clearly visible, little sanctuaries and altars erected, topographical plans evoked. Her open ambiguous spaces are transformed into peaceful protective shelters.

A number of rustic materials are used — tree-branches, slices and stumps of tree-trunks, clay-cakes, sand. Repetitive incisions on a branch, parallel lines or dots drawn on the wall, uniform wood pieces equidistantly aligned on the floor, all seem to be signals of a lost language or remainders of secret rituals. With an environmental combination of drawing and sculpture, an interplay of flat and spatial elements, Ree Morton creates a personal world, humble and poetic at the same time. Her work is strong and imaginative, intellectual and sophisticated, yet imbued with a peasant purity and modesty.

Jackie Winsor has become most known for her thick rope pieces, usually 4-inch hemp rope that she buys used and often combines with natural wood. In works where she has left the rope intact, such as her columns and circles, she has endeavoured to set forward the inherent strength and "muscularity" of the rope. As she explains herself in an interview of December 1971, ". . . I was interested in the activity that is concealed in the rope, to a certain extent — those pieces aren't static. But I didn't want to reveal movement directly, just let it lie concealed within the structure. . . It's a very slow movement that goes back on itself. I'm not at all concerned with a kind of asymmetry that implies dynamic movement, a linear movement in time."[3] Her *Double Bound Circle* (fig. 12), done with a single piece of rope weighing 600 pounds

[3] *Avalanche*, Spring 1972, p. 12.

and coiling upon itself, is a *tour de force* of execution, a masterpiece of contained power. Yet Winsor manages to avoid showmanship and brutality, and plays down her technical achievements. To her, the difficulty and slowness of the making is part of a "ritual" and "ceremony" that she prefers to enjoy in the privacy of her studio.

A number of her other works show in different ways one of her basic preoccupations: the expression of weightiness and density. *Chunk Piece* of 1970 is a massive bundle of 4-inch rope pieces, all sawn off to the same length (four feet), and tightly bound together. *Nail Piece* of the same year is a 7-foot long pack of wood planks, sandwiched together to a 7-inch thickness, and densely nailed to each other at every layer. "It took me a couple of months to nail all the nails in," relates the artist. ". . . It seemed like forever. I nailed two lengths of wood together on one side, flipped them over and then hammered on the other side, and so on until it was about the right thickness. I wanted the wood to be solid with nails . . . to compress the planks of wood so tightly and densely as to almost make it one piece of wood; but mostly I was interested in a feeling of concealed energy. I like the fact that each layer has tons of nails in it that can't be seen. The only way you can have a sense of the 50 pounds of nails in the piece is if you try to pick it up."[4]

The same preoccupation with density is apparent in more recent works, such as *Bound Square* and *Four Corners* of 1972 (figs. 14 and 15), in which Winsor has used the unravelled rope — reduced to twine or raw fibers — to bind together four tree trunks. In *Four Corners*, the wrapped joints become so massive that they almost entirely cover the trunks which lay between them and unite them. The twine knots, initially serving to hold together the wood elements, as in *Bound Grid* of 1971-72, eventually take over and overpower the underlying structure, engulfing it in their mass. (Here we have an example of form *not* following function!)

As an extreme case of her involvement with density, Jackie Winsor keeps in her studio a "sculpture" that most people would not look at twice: a plain sphere over a foot in diameter made of solid concrete. It is small enough to roll around, but just too heavy for any one person to lift. To her, it is a perfect symbol of density.

Mary Miss is perhaps the most diverse and elusive of the "Four Young Americans." One could claim that a number of elements in her work come from other artists or earlier movements: the grid pattern or repetition of the same unit and the minimal shapes are reminiscent of

[4] *Ibid*, p. 13.

artists such as Don Judd and Sol LeWitt; the structuring method of some of her fence-like timber pieces of 1970-71 depends on process sculpture and brings to mind Carl Andre or Bill Bollinger. Yet her forms never have the precision of minimal work; and the flimsiness of her materials — corrugated board, chicken wire, plywood — introduces sufficient irregularity and variation (I am sure intentional) to break the dryness and monotony of geometric forms. Her reliance on process art is also deceptive or occasional. True, her use of the materials is always straightforward (and casual), her means of support or attachment obvious. But her forms are most often unexpected and unrelated to a logical use of the material. One of the most original and refreshing things about Miss' art is in fact this unexpectedness of her simple forms which obey only their own illogical logic. A series of square corrugated-board sheets, with a V-shaped cut at their top edge, stands on the floor in a row, one behind another, their V-cuts accentuated with an X of black spray-paint (see cover). Long units made of layers of corrugated board and brown paper, all cut into a uniform lattice of rhomboids (her favorite shape), stand on the floor vertically, supported by occasional wood poles (fig. 7). Endless rows of pointed plywood units, nailed one behind another shingle-like, form a compact flat fence with irregular outlines, leaning against a wall (her work in the recent Whitney Museum Biennial). All are purposeless structures in a way, but they create the aura and mystery that makes a work of art.

Scott Burton's art has mostly been performance-oriented with divergences into conceptual art, environments and street-works. While some of his earlier pieces appear to have been somewhat Surrealist in feeling, his recent and most important work to date, *Behavior Tableaux* (fig. 19), displays an extreme, almost minimal, austerity and formalism. It is a very ambitious and perfectly controlled hour-and-a-half sequence of over fifty silent *tableaux vivants*, separated by brief and equally silent blackouts. The scene, or rather scenes, takes place in a sparsely furnished office space, containing a centered table with five chairs, a couch at the right and a bench at the left. The furniture is plain, but so clean-cut and precisely placed that it sticks in the mind in an almost haunting way. Five lean young men in light shirts and dark pants enact different situations and confrontations reminiscent of numerous aspects of the bureaucratic world: the president of a company holding a conference with his board; relationships of boss and employee or office colleagues; interviews; waiting in antichambers of offices — the entire complex and dreary atmosphere of corporate routine. Some of the tableaux are brief

and totally motionless, some longer and entailing a sequence of slowly changing positions or moods.

In spite of the use of an old-fashioned genre and the almost pedantic neatness of presentation, Burton's work evades theatricality or triteness through an extreme economy of means, the extended silence (the performers wear soft-soled shoes) and an unreal smoothness of movement, reminiscent of slow-motion cinematography. In a way very unusual for contemporary art or theater performances, the spectator is kept at a distance, watching a remote world, like an underwater scene. But the coolness and intellectual elegance of the presentation do not conceal the quiet tragedy that emanates from this work.

Joan Jonas' performances could almost be described as the extreme opposite. Her multiplicity of images and media; her use of uncommon props and exotic costumes; her interspersing of dance, pantomime, films, live and taped television; her casual collaging of different "episodes" — all create an atmosphere of circus. Yet, the casualness is only apparent and the exposing of the mechanics of her pieces does not imply amateurism. Her performances are among the most tightly organized and professionally put together that I have seen.

Her outdoor performances are very different, much more loose and diffuse, with a number of participants carrying out activities — successively or simultaneously — in an enormous expanse of space. The individual performers or groups often act independently, and visual or auditory events occur here and there, at various distances, subtly related to each other. It is one of Jonas' intentions to define the boundaries of her outdoor space by the spectator's limits of vision — a stimulating and, to my knowledge, daringly new idea.

An obsessive fascination with mirrors and with bright portable light-bulbs is among the most constant elements in Jonas' art. The almost ritual carrying of a huge mirror by two of the performers along the front of the "stage" is a device used at the beginning of each one of her performances (vaguely reminiscent of medieval or itinerant theater, or again of circus). The audience is being asked to look at itself, in a sense reflect upon itself, become aware of its watching a play, of its entering an unreal world.

Mirrors perhaps led Jonas to television, which became recently her principal and most masterfully used medium. The monitor is really another mirror with additional properties: you can see yourself in it from any side, even obliquely or upside down (by moving the camera); you can constantly readjust your action and relationship to the camera

through looking at the monitor; you can overlap images through the property of the phosphor to hold the light for a short period after the source has been extinguished; you can appear next to your previously taped image and interact with it; you can show through the monitor parts of a performer that wouldn't normally be visible to the audience, or blow up on the screen selected details that would often be too small to see in reality; you can deform the image through the control knobs in ways limited only by the imagination of the artist.

Joan Jonas exploits these possibilities and many more. She takes full advantage of all the properties of the medium, of its immediacy, of the fact that it is visible in a lit environment, that it can multiply an action, offering to the spectator many points of focus in space. Her use of the television, live and taped, is perhaps the most direct and imaginative of any I have seen so far.

A younger generation of artists has started working in this medium, often exclusively, exploring its unique properties in personal ways. A program of videotapes by young artists (see p. 136) will include some of these new achievements.

Athena T. Spear

Four Young Americans, April 29 - May 27

Marilyn Ann McCoy

Born Boulder, Colorado, 1946.
B.F.A., University of Colorado, 1969.
M.A., U.C.L.A., 1972.
Lives in Los Angeles.

One-Artist Exhibitions:

1972: Lithographs, Betty Gold Gallery.

Group Exhibitions:

1972: Art Council, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
"15 Young Artists," Pasadena Art Museum.
"Los Angeles 1972," Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.