

Summer 2003

## Ballast Quarterly Review, v18n4, Summer 2003

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FACTS ARE ventriloquist's dummies. Sitting on a wise man's knee they may be made to utter words of wisdom; elsewhere they say nothing or talk nonsense.

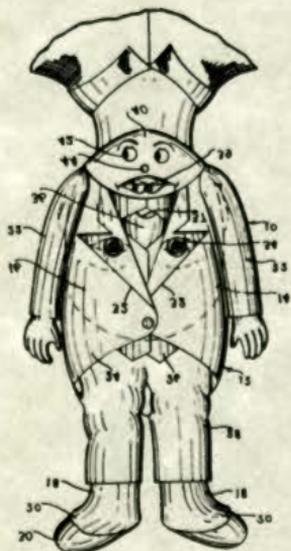
ALDOUS  
HUXLEY

*Time Must Have a Stop*  
(New York: Harper,  
1944).

*Ballast* is an acronym for Books Art Language Logic Ambiguity Science and Teaching, as well as a distant allusion to *Blast*, the short-lived publication founded during World War I by Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist artist and writer. *Ballast* is mainly a pastiche of astonishing passages from books, magazines, diaries and other writings. Put differently, it is a journal devoted to wit, the contents of which are intended to be insightful, amusing or thought provoking.

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ABOVE and  
OPPOSITE  
Drawing for  
U.S. Patent No.  
3,129,001 for a talking  
face mask invented in  
1964 by American  
ventriloquist  
Paul Winchell.

DOROTHY [Christopher Isherwood's maid] had never heard of [Igor] Stravinsky. She thought she recognized Igor as a Jewish comic on the Molly Goldberg show.

ROBERT CRAFT *An Improbable Life* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), p. 184.

I HAD A DIME and a nickel in my pocket. With the dime, the tenth part of a dollar, I bought a ticket. I went in and heard the ventriloquist and his dummy: "Will you spell a word for me, Danny?" "I'll try, what's the word?" "Constantinople." "Why do you tell me you can't stand on an apple?"

CARL SANDBURG [recalling a childhood experience at the circus] *Always the Young Strangers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 191.

## KNOCK ON WOOD: An Insider's View of Belly Speaking

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LEFT

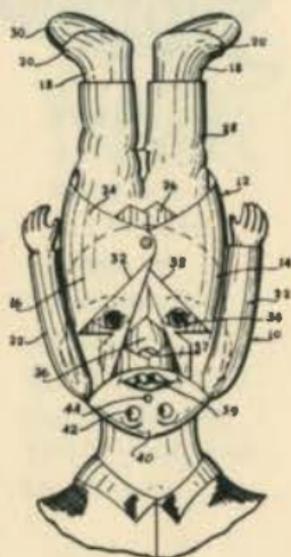
Subscription Boy  
[right] with wooden  
sidekick, practicing  
ventriloquism, c1956.  
Please note the com-  
plete lack of lip move-  
ment.

IN THE LATE 18th century, a British entertainer named James Burns, who was known as "Shelford Tommy," persuaded a freight carrier to empty his wagon in order to search for a child whose cries for help seemed to be coming from inside the load he was hauling.

During the same period, when a York shoemaker was accused by fifty witnesses of having tossed a crying baby into the river, he defended himself in court by producing a second crying baby, which he then shockingly beheaded—but which, upon closer inspection, was shown to be only an inanimate doll.

Both Burns and the shoemaker were experts at ventriloquism, the act of making it seem that a voice or other sound has emanated not from one's own larynx, but from some other adjacent object. A person who does this professionally is a *ventriloquist* or "belly speaker," a coinage that comes from the merger of two Latin words, *venter* (belly) and *loqui* (to speak).

Actually, ventriloquists do not really speak from the belly, nor do they, as people mistakenly think, "throw" their voice. Rather, they only create the illusion, which at times can be very convincing, that the sounds that they are making are coming from other sources. They do this not by throwing or projecting anything, but simply by taking advantage of our inherent tendency to see connections between certain things in our surroundings and to dismiss the connections between

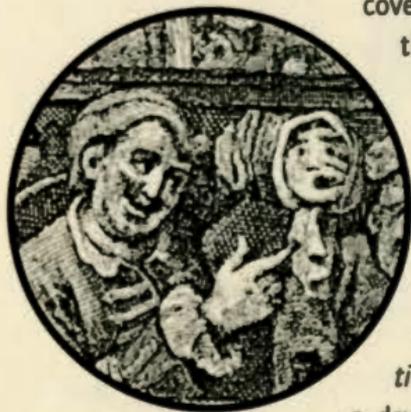


VENTRILLOQUIST [to dummy] Sing a song for the gentlemen.  
I'll give you a shiny new penny.  
DUMMY I'd rather have a dirty old nickel.

STANLEY BURNS  
*Other Voices:  
Ventriloquism from BC  
to TV* (2000).

others. At the risk of being obvious, the basic, traditional methods employed by ventriloquists are the ways by which they make it seem that (1) the "thrown" voice is coming from the dummy, and (2) it is *not* coming from them.

Throughout history, ventriloquists have typically worked with human or animal effigies, which we, in the U.S., call "dummies." In England, the same prop is known as a "figure" because "dummy" there refers instead to a teething ring or pacifier [as modeled on our cover by British artist Les Coleman]. One of the oldest and easiest ways to make a dummy is to drape a handkerchief over one's hand, and, using the mouthlike crevice between thumb and forefinger, to simulate a pair of lips. The oldest known documentation of this may be in an engraving by British artist William Hogarth, called *The Election Entertainment* (1753). In that print, a drunken legislator is using his hand as a dummy to deliver a speech at a banquet.



ABOVE  
Detail from  
WILLIAM  
HOGARTH,  
*The Election  
Entertainment*  
(1753).

It was not until the mid-19th century that it became standard for ventriloquists to appear on stage with a dummy on their knee or held up beside them. The person who's usually listed as the first Vaudeville-era ventriloquist ("the father of Modern ventriloquism") was a British stage comedian named Fred Russell, who bantered with a dummy called Coster Joe.

When a ventriloquist performs well—when the voice is "thrown" successfully—the audience forgets momentarily that the dummy is an inert block of wood, and, without thinking, begins to perceive it as the source of speech. That this effect occurs at an almost unconscious or pre-attentive level is confirmed by a story from Paul Winchell, a well-known American ventriloquist.

In the 1950s, when Winchell was rehearsing for an appearance on the Ed Sullivan television show, he discovered that there was a problem with the volume of his dummy's voice. In those days, the actors' voices were amplified by large overhanging microphones (called "boom mikes"), out of the view of the camera, which were shifted from actor to actor, as each individual spoke. Whenever Winchell spoke for himself, the microphone was correctly placed over his head. However, the dummy's voice was inaudible because, as

#### A N O N

When told that a soloist would need six fingers to perform his concerto, Arnold Schoenberg replied, "I can wait."

it turned out, whenever Winchell spoke for the dummy (without moving his lips), the boom mike was being mistakenly placed over the head of the dummy.

Ventriloquism as a stage act was widely practiced during the early decades of the 20th century. Then, like other Vaudeville and music hall acts, its popularity faded as that of "talking pictures" grew. This is interesting, because the phenomenon of sound motion pictures is not unrelated to ventriloquism, since films also create the illusion that the actor's voice (although produced by the sound system) is somehow coming from the screen. (We are painfully aware of this when a foreign film is poorly dubbed, so that the lip movements do not match the dialogue; or, as often happened with old film projectors, when lips and sound are out of sync.)

During the 1940s and 50s, there was a major revival of ventriloquism in the U.S. that was spurred by the frequent appearance of ventriloquists not in motion pictures but—of all things—on radio programs. This is ironic because one of the methods by which ventriloquists convince the audience that *not* they but the dummy is speaking is by not moving their lips. And since radio is an invisible medium, how would the audience ever detect if a ventriloquist is or is not moving his lips?

Perhaps the best known and most successful American ventriloquist during this period was Edgar Bergen (actress Candice Bergen's father), who appeared in motion pictures, on radio, and later on television, as the straight man for a smart-alecky wooden companion, a dummy named Charlie McCarthy.

At nearly the same time, there was a daytime children's show on television that starred Buffalo Bob Smith and a talking cowboy marionette named Howdy Doody.

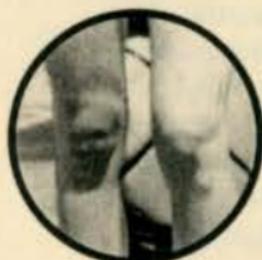
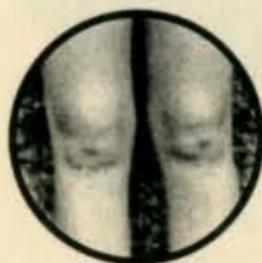
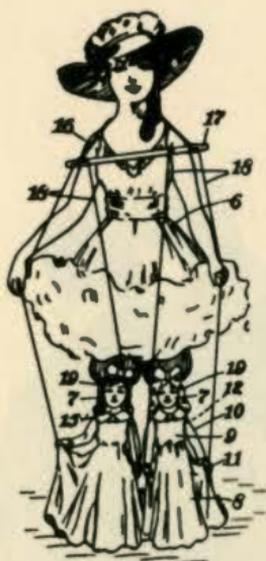
Later, in the 1950s and early 60s, two other television ventriloquists became immensely popular: Shari Lewis and her talking hand puppet named Lamb Chop; and Paul Winchell, who bantered with a dummy named Jerry Mahoney, and who, oddly enough, would later contribute to modern medicine by developing the first artificial heart valve.

I can remember some of this because, as a child, I too was a ventriloquist. I don't recall how it started, but by the age of ten or so, I was performing ventriloquist acts. Unable to purchase a dummy, I made my own. I modi-



ABOVE  
Drawing for  
U.S. Patent No.  
D129,255 for a hand  
puppet invented in  
1941 by ventriloquist  
Edgar Bergen.

EDWARD  
APPLETON  
I do not mind what  
language an opera is  
sung in so long as it  
is a language I don't  
understand.



ABOVE  
Drawing for  
U.S. Patent No.  
1,505,942, consisting  
of a puppet show in  
which ones kneecaps  
are used as the faces  
of the puppets, invented  
in 1924 by Elma Blanton.  
Below that are  
details from two photographs  
of actual  
knees with baby faces  
on them, from Mark  
Sloan et al., *Dear Mr.  
Ripley* (Boston: Little,  
Brown, 1993).

fied the rubber head of a doll that my sisters donated, by painting on hair, a moustache and goatee with black shoe polish, and fashioning a moving mouth. A retired next-door neighbor, who whittled as a hobby, carved an entire body out of wood, with a cavity in the back; and my mother and a family friend, who was a professional tailor, constructed a whole suit (with tie and spats and everything) of miniature clothing. I christened this makeshift companion "Mitchell Mahoney," arrived at by joining the last name of Jerry Mahoney (Winchell's dummy) with the first name of Mitch Miller, a television band leader who hosted a popular musical show in which people sang along by "following the bouncing ball."

Using recycled Vaudeville jokes (e.g. Who was that lady I sawed with you last night?), I entered myself and the dummy in a classroom talent show. Our performance was flawless. The jokes and my fledgling ventriloquist skills were received with such enthusiasm that, until the last moment, it seemed inevitable that I would win the competition. But the final contestant was an unimaginative classmate who, devoid of inventive alternatives, had taken up accordion playing. In the closing moments of the contest, he became the crowd favorite when he chose to play a portion of Rossini's *William Tell Overture*—a passage that everyone knew in those days as the theme for the popular *Lone Ranger and Tonto* television series. Okay. End of contest. Ouch!

That same year, as a Christmas present from my parents, I was given a genuine Jerry Mahoney ventriloquist's dummy. It was the economy model, which meant that it had a moving mouth, but no head or eye movement. I used it in performances for at least another year or so, but gave it up soon after that. I don't remember why I lost interest, but it may be that I or others believed that I was too old to be playing with dolls.

More than forty-five years later, I still have that dummy. He lives here with my wife and me—along with the dogs and the parrot(s) and cat. However, his paint is irreparably damaged, and he hasn't said a word for years.

Looking back, I suppose I was never impassioned about becoming a ventriloquist.

But I do know that, throughout my life, I've had an insatiable interest in all kinds and varieties of puzzles, illusions and conundrums—among them ships in bottles, sea horses, camouflage, the man in the moon, riddles, distorted rooms, pictures that contain themselves, metaphors, puns, magic tricks, afterimages, mirages, anamorphic distortions, hand shadows, living plants that mimic stones, chameleons, stage illusions, distorted mirrors, giants and midgets, concrete poetry, logical paradoxes, Mexican jumping beans, constellations, mimes, shapes in clouds or oil pools, the Northern Lights, auctioneering, pen pals, chalk talks, rainbows, yodeling, Japanese finger traps, music boxes, bonsai trees, wishbones, dowsing rods, strip poker, sumo wrestlers, lava lamps, walking sticks, smoke signals, saddle sores, spinning tops, tree houses, cat's-eye marbles, Mohawk haircuts, wooden nickels, crazy quilts, that song in which the lyrics say "I was looking back to see if you were looking back to see if I was looking back to see if...", sand paintings in a jar, loco weed, flying squirrels, snow domes, weeping willow trees, all turtles, sea monkeys, x-ray specs, yo-yos, pogo sticks, juggling, scratch 'n sniff, dung beetles, tadpoles, Venus-flytraps, wax lips, school paste, plastic puke, cotton candy, beach blanket bingo, pipe dreams, kaleidoscopes, and cricket cages.

I also still remember the endless childhood hours I spent, after listening repeatedly to Gene Autry's recording of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, trying to decide if he [Rudolph] would "go down in history" or "go down in *his* story." Even now, I have yet to determine the answer to that. ~



ABOVE  
Drawing for  
U.S. Patent No.  
3,308,479 for a child's  
barbering cloth (featur-  
ing sleeves with built-in  
hand puppets) invented  
by Wayne Sesco, Jr.  
This and other patent  
documents (both text  
and drawings) can be  
searched for and print-  
ed out at the U.S.  
Patent Office website.

WHEN I WAS a student at Yale, [American painter] Stuart Davis came as a visiting artist. He walked into my studio and looked for a long time at my paintings and then began to speak. As he spoke, his cigarette never left his lips. It wobbled up and down at the corner of his mouth. I watched as the ash got longer and longer and finally flopped onto his shirt. As the cigarette burned down and got shorter and shorter, I realized that I hadn't heard a word he'd said. I was afraid that the cigarette would burn his lips, which had already turned brown from years of tobacco—life process interfering with art.

AUDREY FLACK *Art & Soul: Notes on Creating* (New York: Penguin Arkana Books, 1991), p. 118. Suggested by Daniel Weiss.

THE FOLLOWING are brief passages from recently published scholarly books, as cited in an article by Robert Fulford, titled "They should know better: Humanities scholars spend lots of time reading, so why can't they write?," in the *National Post* (Canada), July 15, 2003. Suggested by Mark McBride.

G E O R G E  
O R W E L L

In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning.

- Kay Armatage, *The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema* (University of Toronto, 2003): "We can see a socio-sexual parallel between the geography of the wilderness and the topographies of narrative in this genre, which organizes a particular spatial itinerary and social anatomy."

- Paul H. Fry, *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (Stanford University Press, 1995): "It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absention of actuality from the concept in part through its invitation to emphasize, in reading, the helplessness—rather than the will to power—of its fall into conceptuality."

- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2001): "In the logic of colonialist representations, the construction of a separate colonized other and the segregation of identity and alterity turns out paradoxically to be at once absolute and extremely intimate."

WHEN CRITIQUING painting students [at Yale University], it was customary for [Josef] Albers to ask the students what they were trying to do. If the student responded in terms of color, space or form, Albers engaged in meaningful discussion with the student. If the student responded in terms of feelings, or some esoteric rationale, Albers would throw up his arms and in a loud voice exclaim, "Gotten Himmel! Don't show me your intestines." He would avoid that student for the next few weeks.

ROB ROY KELLY "Reflections of Josef Albers" in R. Roger Remington, project director, *Everything is a Work of Progress: The Collective Writings of Rob Roy Kelly on Graphic Design Education* (Rochester NY: School of Design, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2002), p. 139.

T A C I T U S

Style, like the human body, is specially beautiful when the veins are not prominent and the bones cannot be counted.

C H A R L E S  
D I C K E N S

The office door was opened by the dismal boy, whose appropriate name was Blight.



LEFT  
World War II-era  
toilet tissue.

■ **The Architecture of Doom** a film by Peter Cohen. 1991. VHS video. 119 minutes. Color. Available from First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201. Website: <http://www.frif.com>.

There are countless historical videos on Adolf Hitler, the Third Reich, and the circumstances of the death camps, but this is assuredly one of the best. From its beginning moments, which consist of a drawn-out, completely mute flight over a tranquil German village, this film demands our attention, then holds us firmly by the throat for a full two hours. Its power in part is undoubtedly due to the nightmarish subject matter (I couldn't sleep after watching it). Yet, few accounts of World War II Germany are as memorable, which I think is mostly attributable to the images used (photographs, revealing documents, artworks, and rare and often shocking films, especially those made by the Nazis), the artfully insistent pace of the editing, and the persuasive clarity of the narration. It is not a film that is summarized easily, but its underlying premise is that Hitler (who had initially wanted to be an artist, then an architect) was not entirely irrational, but rather that the things he did, while outrageous and revolting, were seemingly logical methods by which he could "art direct" or "design" society. A devotee of Darwinian natural selection, he believed that the natural process by which the weak (or unfit) are self-extinguishing was being subverted by permissive social practices, which he also perceived as analogous to the threat of contagious diseases. Like many of his contemporaries, he was a great admirer of the composer Richard Wagner, especially his elaborate operas, which combined different arts (music, theatre, literature and visual art) into a harmonious single event, for which Wagner used the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* (German for "total work of art"). Surprisingly, this film does not mention that famous word, although it was widely and commonly used by turn-of-the-century architects and designers, among them Henry van de Velde, Peter Behrens, Josef Hoffmann, and Frank Lloyd Wright (who called it "organic form"). In those days, when the finest architects were asked to design a building, they were likely to refuse to make only the basic shape or shell. Instead, they tended to design the entire building (much as William Morris did with the interior of his own residence, Red House), to make it consistent by also designing the furniture, the fittings, the dinnerware, and, in some cases, even the ideal clothes to be worn by the building's residents. This was taken one step further in 1899 when Josef Maria Olbrich was invited to design (as a deliberate *Gesamtkunstwerk*) the setting and most of the houses for an artists' colony in Darmstadt, Germany. This film does not mention that colony, but it does say that, as Chancellor, Hitler began to imagine himself as the set designer, director and leading actor (or perhaps what designers now commonly call the "corporate designer") of a colossal Wagnerian opera called the Third Reich, for which he really did design certain uniforms, flags, standards and buildings. It also claims that, in addition to Hitler, at least half of his leading officials had direct and significant links to the arts. Those artistic involvements were not incidental, the film argues, because the Third Reich was in certain ways an aesthetic movement—a perversely misguided attempt to improve the world for the German Volk, and to reunite art with everyday life. ➤

IN 1953 he [the Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky] broke off his connection with Hollywood's two Russian [Orthodox] churches, for the reason that the priest-confessor had asked him for an autograph.

ROBERT CRAFT  
*An Improbable Life* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), p. 147.

SHIRLEY TEMPLE  
I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six. Mother took me to see him in a department store and he asked me for my autograph.

WILLIAM JAMES  
*(The Will To Believe)*  
Not every man fits every hour...A given genius may come either too early or too late. Peter the Hermit would now be sent to a lunatic asylum. John Stuart Mill in the tenth century would have lived and died unknown.

■ **In the Mind of the Architect** directed by Tim Clark. Produced by Janne Ryan and Tim Clark. 2000. VHS video. 165 minutes. Color. Available from First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201. Website: <http://www.frif.com>.

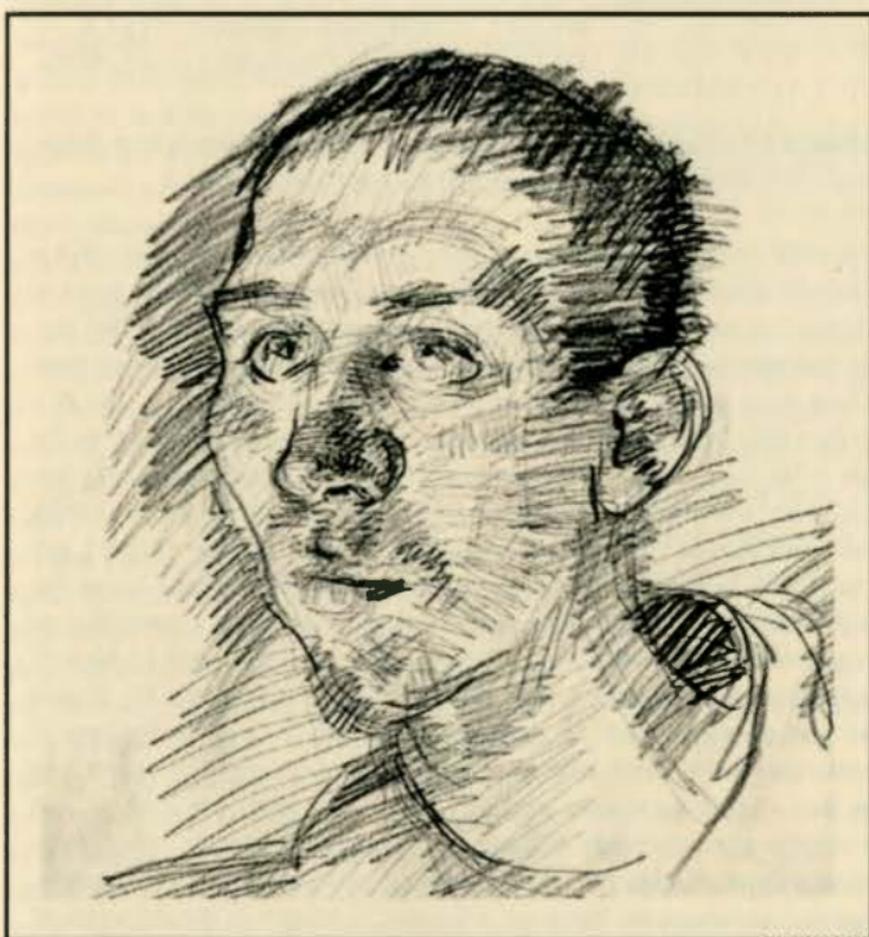
This is a 3-part award-winning documentary about contemporary architects and their imaginative buildings in relation to the daily needs of the people who reside, work or otherwise exist within those spaces. Filmed in Australia, it is specifically about the architects and architecture of that country (already well-known for its buildings, particularly the Sydney Opera House), but the range of the issues presented is as rich and diverse—and familiar—as those in any urban society. From the opening seconds (in which a number of architects, one by one, are asked to come up with a synonym for their profession), it is clear that the film's purpose is not to propagandize (in the sense of promoting a dogma) but to encourage wide-ranging discussions about the perplexing and sometimes unpleasant effects that come from the melding of architects' dreams with the realities of their clients; about commercial construction in relation to larger societal goals; and about the potential of architectural designers (and enlightened contractors) to prevent and/or to solve the ills of society in the future. Some of the most stimulating ideas come from off-hand comments in various interviews with architects, clients, building workers and opinionated passersby. To one architect, foremost is the issue of whether architects should "give us what we want or lead us where we haven't been." To another, "architecture goes for the jugular," a statement that may explain partly why, in Australia when this film was made, only three percent of all new buildings were designed by architects. Throughout the three films (each lasting 55 minutes), the audience is introduced to a variety of construction projects, each with its own set of problems. An architect who designs his or her own house can count on a different experience than a person who designs a home for someone else. The requirements for a church or a crematorium are hardly the same as a school or a bank. In one segment, we are taken to a wonderfully interesting Postmodern courthouse, where the architect and a few of the people who work there explain how certain aspects serve to remind the occupants of the building's lofty purpose (etched on glass partitions, for example, are typographic excerpts from the country's constitution). Australian citizens will relate to all this more easily than Americans, but the films are sufficiently interesting that nearly everyone (regardless of nationality or occupation) will identify with certain scenes. Furthermore, the issues discussed are applicable not just to architecture, but to any profession that involves creative problem-solving, the balance of form and function, and revisions brought on by societal needs. ↗

LATER I would be taught to wonder...whether anything of which we were normally unaware might have taken place between one tick and its following tock (molecular doings, quantum leaps), because if you ran past a picket fence at the right speed, you would seem to see the green field beyond, as if the fence weren't there. Walk more slowly, and you might receive nothing but board. Going about at lifespeed, mankind might be missing...well, who knew what?

WILLIAM H. GASS *Finding a Form* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 14.

BELOW

Pencil drawing by New Jersey-based artist and filmmaker JOSEPH PODLESNIK (2003).

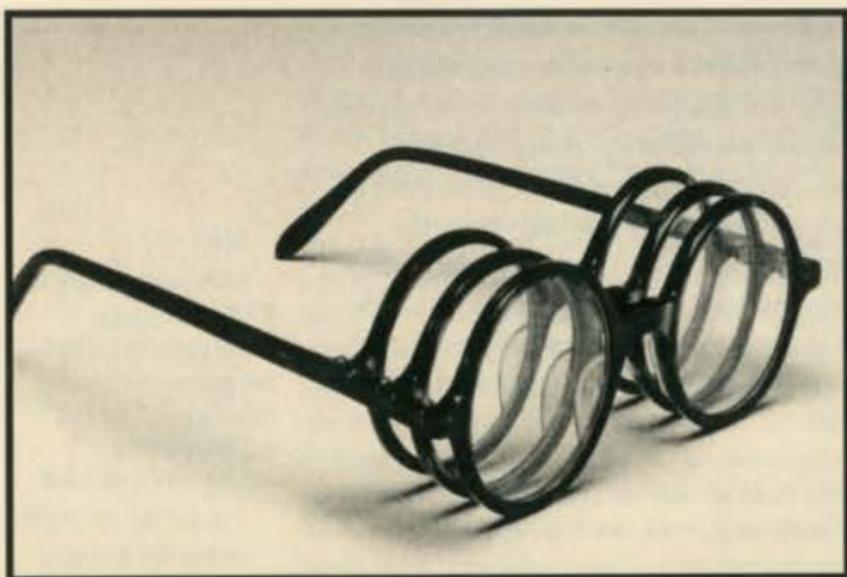


[MUSEUM CURATOR Peter Morrin] stated that it was important for the intent of the artist not to be absolutely clear. If the intent is clear, the work becomes only propaganda. Ambiguity is important. If the work reveals only the artist's intention, it is less than what it could be. The work becomes important when the meanings contained are greater than what the artist had in mind when he or she created the work. Ambiguity helps the work transcend itself.

AUDREY FLACK *Art & Soul: Notes on Creating* (New York: Penguin Arkana Books, 1991), p. 56. Suggested by Daniel Weiss.

E. B. WHITE

A poet's pleasure is to withhold a little of his meaning, to intensify by mystification.



ABOVE Artwork titled *Trispectacles* by LES COLEMAN (1995). Photograph by Nancy Fouts.

■ **Fluxus Experience** by Hannah Higgins. University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 2002. 260 pp., 57 illus. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 0-520-22867-7.

In the mid-1970s, I was sitting in an office in a Midwestern university when a colleague walked in with an out-of-town guest. I doubt if I had ever heard of Fluxus or Something Else Press, so when this person was introduced as Dick Higgins from New York, it meant nothing to me. But my interest was aroused when he held out a recently self-published book. Its outer appearance was that of a standard Bible (the title gold-stamped on a black pebbled cover, red ink on the edge of the pages, with a ribbon bookmark hanging out), but inside was a text of irreverent thoughts about art, life and what have you, titled *Foew&ombwhnw* (now called F,O,E,W for short). I've never forgotten that book (nor Higgins), and as recently as six years ago, I was finally able to obtain my own copy. I have also since discovered that Higgins was interested in Merle Armitage, a maverick book designer who died the same year as Higgins' visit, and about whom I have written too. He was working on a book about Armitage, when, at age 60, Higgins died prematurely in 1998. To get to the point, Higgins was the husband of another well-known Fluxus artist named Alison Knowles. I don't know how long they were married, but at some point they gave birth to twins, one of whom is an art historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and is now the author of this volume. As a result, when I heard that this was coming out, I was terribly excited, eager to learn about the Fluxus art movement in relation to the daily lives of Higgins, Knowles and others. Unfortunately, instead it's a dressed-up edition of a doctoral dissertation, so austere, pro forma and scholarly that it might have been written by any art historian. In contrast to the claim on the book's jacket, it's hard to believe that the author "makes the most of her personal connection to the movement by sharing her firsthand experience." There is a surplus of "scholarly" books on Fluxus (a diffuse neo-Dada group that produced mail art, Happenings and sight gags in the 1960s), most of which read like they must have begun as doctoral dissertations. What is still lacking is a candid eyewitness memoir by someone who was there, in the eye of the hurricane, yet did not directly participate in the creative maelstrom. A good candidate is Hannah Higgins, who might have done that here if she had chosen to write openly about her father, or both her parents. Or about growing up in that context, since throughout her childhood, as she states in the preface, "I explored Fluxus objects that sat in our living room; attended Fluxus concerts and Happenings; and shared dinners, demonstrations, and avant-garde festivals with these people." Sadly, nearly the entire book is a formal, impersonal treatise that is, I find, far less interesting. As she herself says in the opening line: "This project has passed through me, but is not of me." >

■ **The New Wave By Itself** directed by Robert Valey and Andre S. Labarthe. 1995. VHS video. 57 minutes. Color. Available from First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201. Website: <http://www.frif.com>.

In the mid-1960s, when I was a student at a Mid-western university, no bars were allowed within a mile of the school, nor could beer or wine be sold. And of course this was long in advance of videos, cable tv or computers. One way in which students entertained themselves was to go to the on-campus screenings of foreign films (maybe twice a month), then sit up all night drinking coffee, talking about them. We saw very few non-Hollywood films in those days, and they were of such power, that I still have vivid memories of all of them, including such unforgettable works as *Wild Strawberries* (Bergman), *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini), *Knife in the Water* (Polanski), and so on. In those same years, we were also introduced to the work of various avant garde French filmmakers (all of whom had been born around 1930), whose efforts were commonly said to comprise a New Wave in filmmaking, among them Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Chabrol. As a result, it feels nostalgic to watch this collection of interviews (enriched by brief clips from their films) with some of the movement's best-known participants, including Truffaut, Godard and Chabrol, along with a handful of others, less familiar to American audiences, such as Jacques Demy, Georges Franju, Jacques Rivette, Jean Rouch and Agnes Varda. In these informal interviews (recorded originally in 1964 for French television), they touch on all the issues and problem-solving strategies that we, as undergraduate art students, talked about forty-five years ago, after having viewed their films: How to make purposeful use of mistakes. How to accept limitations (financial, technical or otherwise) as advantages, rather than being burdened by them. Having learned the right way to do something, what would happen if we did the opposite? While benefiting from experience, can we also learn from the "innocent eye" of an amateur, naif or outsider? And so on. As I watched this documentary, it occurred to me that I would be wise to revisit the work of all these French directors (which I am able to do now through video stores), to experience their famous films in a new time frame. I would learn more about filmmaking, but I think I might also revisit some truths that I learned long ago when I first witnessed them. ♪

M E L B L A N C

[voice of Bugs Bunny,  
the epitaph on his  
tombstone]  
That's all, folks!

[ABBOTT H. THAYER]  
sometimes excelled  
them [his children] in  
the invention of fanci-  
ful nonsense, as when  
his daughter Gladys  
painted the face of an  
Irishman on the back  
of Thayer's bald head,  
the scant dark fringe  
of his remaining hair  
serving for the beard.  
When he entered the  
room walking back-  
wards and giving life  
to this grotesque  
apparition by flexing  
the muscles of his  
scalp it was startlingly  
effective.

N E L S O N

C. W H I T E

*Abbott H. Thayer: Painter  
and Naturalist* (Hartford:  
Connecticut Printers,  
1951), p. 99.

M A E W E S T

I'm the girl that works  
at Paramount all day  
and Fox all night.

L E W I S C A R R O L L

'Which of your teachers do you value the most highly, those whose words are easily understood, or those who puzzle you at every turn?' I feel obliged to admit that we generally admired most the teachers we couldn't quite understand.



ABOVE

Artwork titled *Candle Salesman* by L E S

COLEMAN (1995). Photograph by Nancy Fouts.

■ **First Kill** directed by Coco Schrijber. 2001. VHS video. 52 minutes. Color. Available from First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201. Website: <http://www.frif.com>.

in early 1968, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, head of the South Vietnamese police (and, later, a Maryland restaurant owner), led a bound Viet Cong POW into a Saigon street, pulled out a pistol and, in full view of journalists, shot him point-blank in the head. By chance, an Associated Press photojournalist raised his camera at the same time (not knowing the general's intention), and captured everything on film. And yet, as that newsman confesses in an interview in this film, he had witnessed so much brutality by then that the killing did not phase him and, indeed, a few moments later, he wandered off to go to lunch. It is largely because of the violence shown (or described, in painful detail) that this film is so very disturbing, sometimes almost unbearably, and yet, it is also so riveting that one cannot help but continue to watch. But that is exactly the point that is made by the filmmaker, Coco Schrijber: In human experience (deeply ingrained in the animal brain of, at least, young males), there seems to be some kind of perverse delight (in this film, repeatedly likened to sex) in malicious violence, and, specifically, in killing. In the words of one Vietnam veteran who is interviewed, to kill a perceived enemy is "better than any dope you can get on the street...it's a high that you cannot imagine." Or, as war correspondent and author Michael Herr (writer of the screenplays for *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*) puts it: "If war was hell and only hell," people would simply not put up with it. Rather, we do it because we apparently get some kind of exhilaration (an unparalleled involvement) from the experience of stalking and murdering things. In spite of the fact that the footage consists mostly of interviews with Vietnam War veterans (both soldiers and journalists) and scenes of the tourists who visit there now (where, next to a sofa-sized Mona Lisa, they can also buy a painting of General Loan shooting that Viet Cong prisoner), it would be a terrible error to think that this film is specifically or even primarily about that particular era. It's really about American society at this very moment, in the sense that the questions it raises pertain to events in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the widespread appeal of ultra-violent video games, to explicit violence in films (including this one), and to the shootings of peers and superiors by high school students and factory workers. Deservedly, this film has won several awards at international film festivals. It is smartly and superbly filmed, conceived, and edited. A cry of concern, it is a stunningly beautiful work about the most terrifying of subjects. ➤

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AS FOR his [Prince Albert's] sense of fun...I never could discover it. He went into immoderate fits of laughter at anything like a practical joke; for instance, if anyone caught his foot in a mat, or nearly fell into the fire...the mirth of the whole Royal Family, headed by the Prince, knew no bounds.

MARY ELIZABETH (Lady Ponsonby), quoted in Richard Kenin and Justin White, eds., *The Dictionary of Biographical Quotation* (New York: Dorset Press, 1978), p. 12.

#### Cover

Artwork titled *Face Event* by our friend British artist LES COLEMAN (1992). Photograph by Charlie Holmes. As explained in this issue's essay, in the UK the word "dummy" refers to a pacifier, not to a talking doll used in ventriloquism, which is itself a "face event."

STEPHEN  
LEACOCK

Writing? Writing's easy. All you have to do is put down whatever occurs to you. But the occurring, now that's hard.

LES  
COLEMAN  
(*Unthoughts*)

It becomes unsettling to stay in one place too long.

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