

Spring 2005

## Ballast Quarterly Review, v20n3, Spring 2005

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GUY DAVENPORT  
1927 - 2005

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IT'S FASCINATING that Guy Davenport, as refined as they come, came from an artless town in Upper South Carolina called Anderson. His father worked for Railway Express. Maybe this is why he never learned to be a host or a guest, why he kept his own company and sat in the parlor after a slap-up breakfast of a peanut butter sandwich on light bread and a cup of instant coffee?

**JONATHAN WILLIAMS**

"Farewell to My One and Only Kissin' Cousin, Guy Mattison Davenport, Jr." on The Jargon Society website.

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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We are creatures of habit; given a blank we can't help trying to fill it in along lines of customary seeing or saying. But the best poetic lines undermine those habits, break the pre-off the -dictable, unsettle the suburbs of our routine sentiments, and rattle the tracks of our trains of thought.

**HEATHER MCHUGH** in Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*. San Antonio TX: Trinity University Press, 2004, p. 79.

**LES COLEMAN**

Freud's mother-in-law routine always had them laughing.

i love the story  
of when the young  
belle of the blue  
grass who had just  
barely survived his course  
on ancient civilizations came  
up to professor davenport  
during a cocktail party  
at one of the  
horse farms outside Lexington  
and said professor davenport  
you're the most over-educated  
man i've ever met

**JONATHAN WILLIAMS** on The Jargon Society website.



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## The Hermit of Lexington: Guy Davenport, Writer and Artist

By Roy R. Behrens

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I SEEM TO have misplaced the copy of my first letter to Guy Davenport—the American essayist, fiction writer, poet, translator, painter, illustrator, university scholar, and a recipient in 1992 of a MacArthur Foundation “genius award”—who died of lung cancer on January 4, 2005, at age 77. But I do have his very first answer to me, written (as its elegant type-written heading reveals) on the birthday of Oswald Spengler on May 29, 1978.

That was 27 years ago, which means that Guy was fifty and a Distinguished Professor at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, while I was only 32 and teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I was, as I remain today, entirely undistinguished, and was only remotely acquainted with his writings.

However, I had read his essay in *The Hudson Review* (Spring 1978) on “Post-Modern and After” which reports his mixed reactions to *The Life of Fiction*, a book that I had co-produced with a colleague at the University of Northern Iowa, literary scholar Jerome Klinkowitz.

### LEFT

Cover of the *North American Review* (June 1979)

MY FAMILY, praises be unto the gods, never inspected anything that we were doing; criticism was strictly for adversities, and not very much for them. Consequently I spent my childhood drawing, building things, writing, reading, playing, dreaming out loud, without the least comment from anybody. I learned later that I was thought not quite bright, for the patterns I discovered for myself were not things from nearby models. When I went off to college it was with no purpose whatsoever: no calling in view, no profession, no ambition.

### GUY DAVENPORT

“Finding” in *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

### LES COLEMAN

A coat made from the fur of a fake animal.

**ANON**

Doctor, Doctor, last night I dreamed I was a teepee, and the night before I was a yurt.

Hey, you need to relax—you're two tents!

**RIGHT**

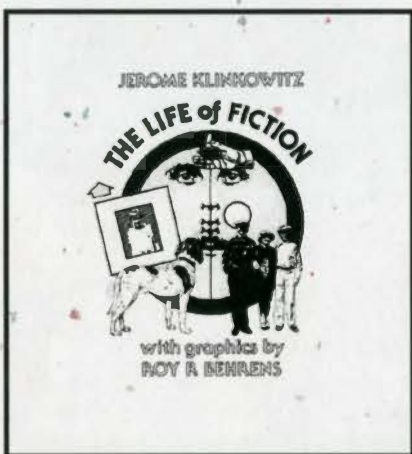
Cover of  
*The Life of Fiction*  
(Urbana: University of  
Illinois Press, 1977).

A PAGE, which I think of as a picture, is essentially a texture of images. In the stories "Tatlin!" and "Robot" [collected in *Tatlin!*] drawings appear as integral parts of the text: sculpture by Tatlin that probably no longer exists, drawn from poor photographs in bad reproductions; icons of Lenin and Stalin; quotations from Lascaux. The text of a story is therefore a continuous graph, kin to the imagist poem, to a collage (Ernst, Willi Baumeister, El Lissitzky), a page of Pound, a Brakhage film.

**GUY DAVENPORT**

"Ernst Machs Max Ernst" in *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

Our book's text consisted of comments by the latter, intermixed with snatches from writers of "postmodern" fiction (e.g., Hunter S. Thompson, Russell Banks, Kurt Vonnegut, and Gilbert Sorentino). At some point, the typescript was given to me, and I then made dozens of collages to "antagonize" the text, and designed the layout for the book. But the latter I did so ineptly that I still shiver slightly when I think about it—much less do I ever revisit the crime.



I was all but completely oblivious then to the most basic requirements of typography and page design, so Guy was entirely right to complain in his essay that the book was "printed in blinding Telephone Book sans serif, with the lines twice as long as the one you are now reading (so that losing one's place at line's end adds to the frustration of paying attention to a text that has the organization of a vaudevillian's scrapbook of notices and billings)."

Ouch! I surely must have felt when I first read that. But in the very next sentence, he not only restored my self-esteem, he elevated it. "Were it not for Roy Behrens' splendid collages," wrote Davenport, "(*scuola di Max Ernst* and worthy of that master), one would zing the book across the room as an impertinence, the equivalent of a mumbling lecturer who is having rough going with his notes."

In the face of such exuberance, how could I not respond to him? So I promptly sent what

he described as a "good-natured" letter, confessing that I alone (not Jerry K.) was to blame for both the abysmal typography and the estimable images in *The Life of Fiction*, and asked exactly what he meant by the phrase "*scuola di* Max Ernst." As he explained, *scuola di* is art historian speak for "school of" or "in the manner of"—although, he quickly added, "you're not a copycat. It's as if you learned everything in Ernst and put it behind you (or inside you) and took the next steps." A few years later, a title he gave to an essay was "Ernst Machs Max Ernst." At all times in his letters, he had an irrepressible wit, by which I don't mean humor (although he was wonderfully funny at times), but rather a gift for perceiving the most unanticipated patterns.

In addition to writing, Guy had drawn and painted since childhood (at age eleven, he had started an amateur newspaper in his hometown of Anderson, South Carolina, for which he wrote and also drew the pictures for all of the stories). As an adult, he used a crow quill pen to make the accompanying images for his own and the writings of others (I think the first of these I saw were in *The Counterfeiters* by Hugh Kenner), in which he nearly always used a tedious method called stippling (still used today in scientific illustration), which is the line art equivalent of Georges Seurat's pointillism.

The day before he wrote to me, Guy reported, he had labored for twelve hours on a stippled portrait of the composer Gioacchino Rossini (one square inch per hour, he claimed). Only recently had he tried his hand at collage, using "locomotives, cars, stamps, and things with lettering picked up on the street (and out of the laundry)." And, he added, it had been my collages in *The Life of Fiction* that had prompted him to experiment with it. It is evidence of his generosity, sincerity and openness that he said in that very first letter to me: "I wish I could think of a way to collaborate with you"—and shortly after that, we did.

For more than a decade, Guy and I exchanged letters of a length of one or two pages, sometimes as often as weekly. I still have all the letters he sent, with copies of nearly all of mine. To correspond with him for so many years was among the wisest things I've done. Yet in truth it was always exhausting, since the intensity of his letters was forever a woeful reminder that I was writing not simply to an ordinary person but to a remarkably talented man whose powers of observation were astonishing at least.

The muscles in my mind withstood a rigorous weekly workout during all those years—in part because, being so junior to him, I felt as if I had to craft every sentence as precisely as possible. In sum, he taught me how to write by writing regularly to him. Just as he said of my artworks that they were *scuola di* Max Ernst, I could hardly be more pleased if someone would say of my writings today that they were "*scuola di* Guy."

With the arrival of each of his letters—and their extended reading (not unlike the lingering rate of enjoying a serving of ice cream)—he told me magnificent stories about Viktor Shklovsky, Thomas Merton, Marianne

WHEN I was very young—four, five—I would go with my mother to the place she called the beauty shop and, while a woman named Beulah washed her hair, I would crawl behind the chairs, under the counters, and collect stray bobby pins and curlers. A small thing, but memorable enough that after I had started school, whenever I would see any of the women who worked in the beauty shop, they would ask when I was coming back, since now, they claimed, there was no one to pick up after them.

Skip ahead nearly twenty years. My family has long since moved, and I have gone off to college. I have occasion to return to our old house—and there, standing on the sidewalk, waiting for the bus home, is Beulah. I introduce myself. Beulah exclaims, "You've changed your hair!" Never mind that I had grown three feet taller and added a hundred pounds, a beard, and glasses.

**PETER TURCHI**

*Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer.*  
San Antonio TX: Trinity University Press, 2004.

Moore, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Eudora Welty, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Vladimir Tatlin, Pavel Tchelitchew, Balthus, the Shakers, Stan Brakhage, Louis Agassiz, Charles Fourier, Vladimir Nabokov, Michel de Montaigne, and others.

In one letter, he reflected on the time he spent at Merton College at Oxford University, where he wrote an early thesis on the work of James Joyce, and where one of his lackluster teachers had been a "mumbling and pedantic" J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Much later, having settled in Lexington, Davenport met an older Kentuckian who had also studied at Oxford but a generation earlier, and had been a classmate of Tolkien. This fellow claimed he did not know of Tolkien's celebrity as a writer, but he remembered that he had back then an odd preoccupation with Kentucky, and had repeatedly asked him to spell out such common Appalachian names as Barefoot, Boffin and Baggins.

Guy was also closely linked with the American poet Ezra Pound, whose writings had been of interest to me since high school. During World War II, Pound had lived in Italy, and had broadcast numerous radio talks to U.S. soldiers that were pro-Fascist and anti-Semitic. At war's end, a half-crazed Pound was captured by the U.S. Army and imprisoned in an open pen (not unlike those that are now being used at Guantanamo Bay). Accused of treason, he was returned to the U.S., but instead of being tried, he was declared "mentally unfit," and ordered to indefinite confinement at St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Washington D.C. He survived that Bosch-like limbo for a dozen years, until, in 1958 (at age 73), through the efforts of various writers (notably Archibald MacLeish), Pound was eventually discharged, and returned to live harmlessly (in silence and seclusion) in the mountains of Italy.

Davenport (whose Harvard doctoral projects concerned the *Cantos* of Pound) was a younger but central participant in the effort to obtain Pound's release. Guy told me in his

letters that he visited Pound "fairly regularly for 6 years," beginning in 1952, and that it was he who "did the footwork and paperwork that got Ez out, and [I] have his letter of gratitude in my files."

Beyond our letters, Guy and I collaborated on two very interesting projects. They were not essays, but experimental short stories, bewildering in their intricacy, for which he did the writing while I made the illustrations. This all came about less than a year into our correspondence, and was triggered by my asking Robley Wilson, then editor of the *North American Review*, if he might like to feature a multi-page illustrated story by Davenport and Behrens, along with a full-color cover. Robley agreed, and a few months later Guy produced a story he had written with my work in mind.

Titled "Christ Preaching at the Henley Regatta," his story was a tribute to the visionary British painter Stanley Spencer, who was born and raised in Cookham, a village on the River Thames. Guy's title is a parody, since, when Spencer died in 1959, he was working on a painting (which remained unfinished) called *Christ Preaching at the Cookham Regatta*. It was typical of Spencer to portray an exalted and solemn event (such as the Sermon on the Mount) being held in a trivial setting (such as carnival-like boat race). Perhaps the most famous example of this is an earlier painting by Spencer, titled *The Resurrection, Cookham* (c1927), in which lots of local folk (neatly dressed, coiffure intact) are shown bursting from their graves and briskly springing back to life.

I really had enormous fun illustrating what Guy and I referred to in our letters as CPATHR. Given free rein on the layout, I extended the text of his story to take up eight full pages, with each page also playing host to one of eight collages. Looking back, I am now disappointed with nearly all the inside collages, but I still love the full-color cover (a burlesque of Albrecht Dürer's famous self-portrait in which he resembles Christ). Guy also liked it: "Your Christus with Coffee Pot and Primavera," he wrote, "is a grand piece of work." Some time later, I suspect because of the story alone (and his growing celebrity), that first collaboration was chosen for inclusion in *The Pushcart Prize VII: Best of the Small Presses* (1982).

In the meantime, Guy and I marched on to the sounds of our differing drummers. He had plans to publish next, through North Point Press, a collection of his recent short stories, of which CPATHR would be one. Preserve the original artwork for the cover of the NAR, he implored, in case that story should become the title story of the book. But that did not happen. The title chosen for the book was *Eclogues*. But inside is CPATHR and its eight grayscale images—without, of course, the cover art.

It also included our second collaboration, in which I again illustrated a new short story by Guy, this one featuring T.E. Hulme, the British literary critic, in the setting of Bologna at the closing of the first



**LES COLEMAN**

At the book fair, he sold a range of homemade jams.

**LES COLEMAN**

The Lady Godiva Riding School.

**LES COLEMAN**

As well as a cross to bear, we sometimes have a suitcase to carry.

**RIGHT**

Illustration for "Lo Splendore della Luce at Bologna" as collected in *Eclogues: Eight Stories by Guy Davenport* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

**THE DIFFERENCE**

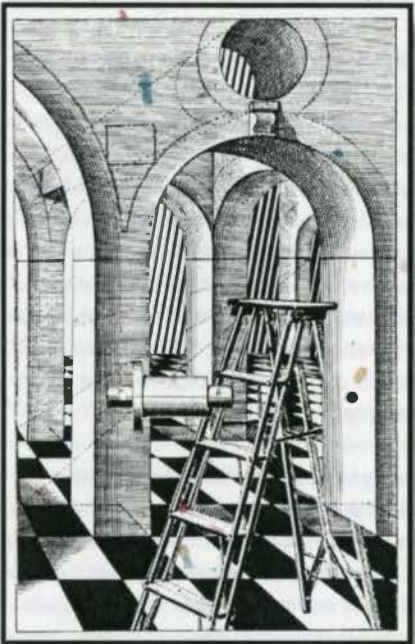
between the Parthenon and the World Trade Center, between a French wine glass and a German beer mug, between Bach and John Philip Sousa, between Sophocles and Shakespeare, between a bicycle and a horse, though explicable by historical moment, necessity, and destiny, is before all a difference of imagination.

**GUY DAVENPORT**

The title essay in *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

decade of the 20th Century (Hulme himself would later die during World War I). The title Guy gave to that story was "Lo Splendore della Luce at Bologna."

I doubt if I had heard of Hulme. And the more I read about him, the less ecstatic I became (not to mention the fact that my personal life was in a crisis state back then). As a result, our second collaboration was far more burdensome than the first. I simply could never identify with the story nor with its



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protagonist. And eventually I solved it by producing four collages that, to my mind, were a "hard and dry" amalgam of empirical British philosophy and the Italian interest in linear perspective. I still enjoy the illustrations, in the sense that they're more or less clever, but they surely do not have the verve or the passion that I felt while working on CPATHR.

Today, if you look at a copy of *Eclogues* (and affordable copies are easily found, because it was later reissued by Johns Hopkins University Press), you cannot help but notice that the book is dedicated "to Bonnie Jean." She is Bonnie Jean Cox, who was Davenport's loving companion for nearly forty years, and the

person who shaped his memorial at the University of Kentucky on Saturday, May 8.

I myself was not in attendance. But according to an article in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, it lasted about 90 minutes, and it began and ended with beautiful songs by the Shakers. "Every force evolves a form," as Mother Ann Lee and Guy would say, so a sweet gum tree was named for him, and a cluster of his dearest friends aired their fondest memories of "the Hermit of Lexington," as Jonathan Williams once called him, or "Dav," as Ezra Pound preferred.

Among those who spoke that day was Erik Anderson Reece, a former student of Davenport who authored *A Balance of Quinces* (New York: New Directions, 1996), the only book so far about Guy as a visual artist. He recalled that after receiving that \$365,000 genius grant from the MacArthur Foundation, whenever they would go to lunch, Guy would refuse to allow him to pay. Instead, he would invariably say, "Oh, let's let John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur pay for it."

Another speaker was Wendell Berry, the widely-admired essayist who taught at the University of Kentucky. He remembered that his and Guy's offices were adjacent. "By walking a few steps and leaning on his doorjamb, and saying a word or two of greeting, I could start Guy decanting whatever happened to be on his mind," said Berry. "But my metaphor is off. The flow started not from a decanter but from a stream, and somewhere upstream it was raining." ■

[AT HIS paternal grandmother's home] one never mentioned the moving pictures that played so great a part in my life, for Grannyport denied that pictures could move. It was, she said, patently illogical (she was absolutely right, of course, but I didn't know it at the time), and no dime could ever be begged of her for admission to the Strand (Hopalong Cassidy, The Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers) or the Criterion (Flash Gordon, Tarzan), for these places were humbug, and people who went to them under the pitiful delusion that pictures can move were certainly not to be financed by a grandmother who knew her own mind.

ONCE, on a plane, I struck up a conversation with my seatmate, who happened to be a doctor. After the initial give-and-take, he asked "What did you do to your thumb?"—having noticed a three-year-old scar the size of a kernel of corn.

**PETER TURCHI**

*Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer.* San Antonio TX: Trinity University Press, 2004.

**ANON**

According to recent news reports, the U.S. Postal Service has abandoned its plan for a series of stamps that would commemorate lawyers. During market testing, too many people were confused about which side to spit on.

**GUY DAVENPORT** in "Finding" in *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays by Guy Davenport* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

AFTER THE BOOK [*Tatlin!*] was published, I had the strange and exciting experience of talking with a man who had known Tatlin. I heard details I would like to have known before: Tatlin's love of children, who were invariably fascinated by his own childlikeness; his atheism (which still shocked my interlocutor); his mistresses ("just women, one of them very beautiful"); his friendship with the watercolorist Bruni; his singing; the whiteness of his stark rooms in the bell tower of the New Maiden Monastery in Moscow. I learned that he never joined the Communist Party, that his eyes were slate gray, that he was a dark blond, that his voice was baritone, and that "he was a very complicated man, restless, disillusioned, silent, stubborn."

**GUY DAVENPORT** in "Ernst Machs Max Ernst" in *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays by Guy Davenport* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

### ■ Keeping It Real

A film by Sunny Bergman. 2004. VHS. 51 minutes. Color. Distributed in the U.S. by First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st floor, Brooklyn NY 11202. Website: [www.frif.com](http://www.frif.com).

THIS IS A documentary film that proposes to investigate an aspect of postmodern culture that we are well-acquainted with through so-called "reality" programming on television, phenomena that could be said to be "popularized" (and hence also "popular") quests to show reality in ways that are more "truthful" or "authentic" than the mundane joys of daily life. By way of a series of interviews with individuals and/or businesses who promote intense encounters with "real life" as a manufactured commodity, this film tries to shed some light on the symptoms of a very odd "identity crisis"—which is a crisis of values as well—that is an increasing problem in Western societies.

The question of which human experiences are "authentic" is fraught with complications, and, of course, a larger and even more troublesome problem is the challenge of knowing for certain what, if anything, is "real." This film (in large part because of its subject) requires unusual patience to watch, in exchange for which the viewer gains from the film's poignancy, its candor, and the targeted and intelligent way that it looks at a cultural anomaly in a way that is purposely trendy.

Oddly, as the film embarks on an attempt to expose the phoniness of the media in contrast to authentic experience, or the pretentiousness of Western kitsch versus the more genuine cultural artifacts of third-world societies, it does it in such a theatrical way that one wonders if the film itself (unwittingly or not) is no less artificial than the phony stuff that it condemns.

The film's outlook is somewhat indebted to Rousseau, in the sense that it favors the virtues of searching for one's "true self" (which of course has great appeal in Western societies), and regards that as a genuine need that is inherent in each individual. One cannot help but sense from this a certain nostalgia for the simpler, "more natural" or hippie-like life of the 1960s (which the film suggests as a model), in which each person relies for guidance on his or her own instincts in struggling to determine what is true and genuine, and thus may be less often deceived or misguided by the mass media into living (or re-living) the reality of someone else.

The debate about which aspects of one's self are "natural" or genuine (as in the age-old discussion about whether or not each of us is born with an "innocent eye"), and the extent to which we all are shaped by mass media and other social influences, has been a central issue in critical writings on culture since at least the 1980s. To some extent, this film belongs within that tradition of study—but the pesky and unresolved question remains of how seriously it should be taken. In the end, does it clarify any of these questions, much less provide us with answers? Or (as we are forever complaining about television documentaries) does it succeed primarily by duplicitous "info-tainment"?—Reviewed by Artur Golczewski.

LES COLEMAN

Lake: Island of water.

■ **Bauhaus: Less Is More** A film by Eliseo Alvarez. 2005. VHS. 32 minutes. Color. ISBN 1-4213-1429-0.

■ **Dessau's Bauhaus** A film by Frederic Compain. 2000. VHS. 29 minutes. Color. ISBN 0-7365-5124-7.

Both films are available (in VHS or DVD) in the U.S. and Canada from Films for the Arts and Humanities, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton NJ 08543-2053. 800/257-5126. Website: [www.films.com](http://www.films.com).

THESE ARE current educational films on the Bauhaus, the most influential art, design, and architectural school of the twentieth century. The school was established (at the risk of repeating what everyone knows) in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, moved in 1927 to an important new building designed by Walter Gropius in Dessau, and was eventually forced to relocate in 1933 to Berlin, where it was closed by the Nazis. Currently available to school libraries are two longer, more compelling films on this same subject: One is a balanced, well-edited view of the school's history and legacy by British historian Frank Whitford, titled *Bauhaus: Face of the 20th Century* (available from the distributor of these films); while the other is a memorable, detailed account of the school's American influence (enriched by brief excerpts from rare historic films and recent candid interviews with eyewitness participants) by Judith Pearlman titled *Bauhaus in America* (available from Clifofilm at <[clifofilm@mindspring.com](mailto:clifofilm@mindspring.com)>). Of the two new films considered here, neither stands up to the quality of those earlier films, and, of the two, the newer one, titled *Bauhaus: Less Is More*, is easily more disappointing. In an ironic misuse of the slogan "less is more" (popularized by Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe), it consists of a jam-packed overview of the thirteen-year history of the Bauhaus in a mere 32 minutes (an average allocation of about two minutes per year). Despite such excessive ambitions, it is still a helpful, informative view of Bauhaus personalities, products, buildings and historic events. Unfortunately, whatever its visual virtues, the film is sabotaged by what, in the credits, is called a "music mix," and which sounds like canned music ad nauseum ("chewing gum for the ears"), of the sort that we have to endure in the waiting rooms of dentists, or on the telephone, whenever we are put on hold. No doubt canned music has its place, but the subject of this film is artistic innovation (at the Bauhaus), and the annoying use of auditory wallpaper (along with other anomalies) is a conspicuous contradiction of that—the film preaches one thing, but practices the opposite. In contrast, at the real Bauhaus, the students formed a makeshift band (not unlike today's student rock bands) that played improvisational jazz at school parties, mixed in with avant-garde classical scores. The second of these two new films, called *Dessau's Bauhaus* (which is also half an hour long), is far more successful, in part because it focuses on a single aspect of Bauhaus history. Produced in cooperation with the Pompidou Center, it too provides some historical context, but it does so while always remaining within the topic of the Dessau Bauhaus, the now-famous cluster of buildings designed by Gropius. It offers an in-depth analysis of this architectural classic, making ample use of sketches, vintage photographs, historic film footage, and even comparative aerial views, showing its changes in setting, then and now. Of particular value is extensive footage from a tour of its buildings in their current state (all aspects are being faithfully restored), photographs of the bombing damage during WWII, and animated diagrams of the plan of the buildings, which clearly reveal how the architect made a structure that would effectively function in support of the school he envisioned.—RB

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**PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO** (*New York Times*) To shock for shock's sake does not good art make—Kiki Smith's *Tale*, a sculpture showing a crouching figure defecating in *The American Century, Part II* exhibition now at the Whitney, will never hold a place in the pantheon of great art alongside that of Lorenzo Lotto's *Allegory of Marriage*, now in the Met's collection, depicting a naked putto urinating on a naked Venus. One is simply disgusting and devoid of any craft or aesthetic merit; the other is of superior aesthetic quality.

## ■ Hokusai

By Gian Carlo Calza, with additional essays by others. New York NY: Phaidon Press, 2004. 520 pp., with 500 color and 200 b/w illus. Paperbound, \$95.00. ISBN 0-7148-4457-8.

AS A STUDENT, I was introduced to the work of the three major artists in the Ukiyo-e tradition of printmaking: Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), and Ando Hiroshige (1785-1864). I was awe-struck then (and still am) by the phenomenal work of these masters, along with a handful of others. What I didn't know at the time was that, a century earlier, a large number of artists and art collectors in Europe and the U.S. (Frank Lloyd Wright, for example) had admired and collected the prints of these artists in a tsunami-like wave of influence called Japonisme. Dating from the 1890s, there is a photograph of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec dressed in a kimono and holding a Japanese doll and a fan. And as is well known, there are Ukiyo-e prints, paintings of peacocks, vases, shoji screens and other Japanese artifacts in the backgrounds of paintings by Edouard Manet, James A.M. Whistler, and their various contemporaries. Van Gogh repeatedly painted copies of these prints, in the hope that he might become better at pictorial composition. In this book (which is breathtaking just to hold—after all, how often are we treated to a volume that provides us with 700 reproductions, 500 of which are in color?), the focus is primarily on Katsushika Hokusai, whom everyone knows for his image of “the great wave” (titled *Beneath the Wave of Kanagawa*), which was from a series called *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (c1834-35). Hokusai was world famous forty years ago, and scores of books and studies about Ukiyo-e, Japonisme, and Hokusai have been produced in the meantime. Nevertheless, this book is a welcome addition, surely because of the excellence of its many reproductions, but also because it provides us with eight interesting essays (informed by the latest developments in the practice of art history) on aspects of the life and work of Hokusai, with studies of his youthful work, his Western influences, his murals, his erotic art, the relation of art to literature in Japan, his late works, and his letters. Of particular value to readers is an annotated list of works that runs for more than 75 pages, and includes invaluable details about the context and interpretative signs for each of the book's reproductions. Text and reproduction space is given to Hokusai's many caricatures, his “how-to” diagrams about pictorial composition, his influence on Western artists, and his effusive depictions of love-making (the so-called “spring pictures” or *shunga*), as in such fantastic scenes as *The Jeweled Merkin* and *Diving Girl Ravished by Octopuses* (wow!). Whatever topics chosen by this astonishing master, he always made powerful images that so far have survived the dreck of more than 150 years of art criticism—and will assuredly still be admired far into the future.—RB

### LES COLEMAN

The first person to swim the English Channel single-handedly.

NOR COULD I sing “the Birmingham Jail” at Granny Fant's [the home of his maternal grandmother], as Uncle Jamie had once spent a night in that place. Nor could we (later on, in adolescence) mention new births in Uncle Jamie's presence, for at forty he still did not know the facts of life, and Granny Fant was determined to keep up the illusion that humanity is restocked by the stork. She was, as my father and I discovered in amazement, wrong. It turned out that Jamie thought that pregnancy came about by the passage of a testicle into some unthinkable orifice of the female. He remarked reflectively that if he'd married he could only have had two children. “And I don't think I could have stood the pain.”

GUY DAVENPORT in “Finding” in *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays by Guy Davenport* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

### ■ Charlotte: Life or Theater?

A film directed by Richard Dindo. Produced by Esther Hoffenberg. 1992. VHS. 62 minutes. Color. Distributed in the U.S. by First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st floor, Brooklyn NY 11202. Website: [www.frif.com](http://www.frif.com).

BY THE CAREFUL selection and editing of images and narration, this film commemorates the life of Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943), a Modern-era Jewish painter. It does this in a manner that not only celebrates her artwork, but, in the process, becomes a work of art itself. Her own large innovation, on which this film is closely based, was an operetta called *Life? or Theatre?: A Play with Music*. She made it from a series of 769 of her gouache paintings, arranged in deliberate clusters to form "acts" and "scenes."

Salomon's play-like "autobiography" was multi-media. As recreated in this film, it is a visual, literary and sometimes musically augmented stream of consciousness in which she recounts the developments in her personal life, by a mixture of real and imagined events. The two transcendent aspects are a pattern of suicides among her family members, and the brutal realities of simply trying to survive as a Jewish woman in Berlin in the late 1930's (she was eventually captured by the Nazis and murdered at the Auschwitz concentration camp). These and other factors are the existential background for the challenges Salomon dealt with as she struggled to maintain a life that, in spite of everything, was somehow still worth living. As recounted by this film, it was through her artwork that she was able to maintain a *Life? Or a Theatre?* in which her daily life becomes a play of sorts, through which she seeks peace of mind, shapes her self-identity, and deflects the ever-present threat of Nazism.

The concept of the art-making process as a perpetually evolving act of designing (or re-designing) one's existential space in terms of an intricate balance of esthetic and emotional sensibilities is of course suggested by the title of the film. But it is even more powerfully realized in the play-like presentation of her paintings, within which incidents sometimes lack the conventional linear ordering of time and space. Nor is their meaning crystal clear. These aspects can work to one's advantage, in the sense that they enable her to perceive situations from surprisingly different perspectives, and to arrive at "distorted" conclusions that may remind us of the work of such Modernists as Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso.

This film supplies a narrative for events in Salomon's life and art without at all diluting their inherent complexities. It is of particular value that the film begins and ends with statements by the artist, in which she herself describes her artistic intentions, then relates the nature of her work to one of the play's main characters, whose death and resurrection (or self re-creation(s)) provide us with vivid analogies for Salomon's own life and artistic process. By combining dramatic close-ups with articulated journeys through the often crowded scenery, the filmmaker takes on the challenge of simulating the artist's meandering, uncertain search. As a result, when the curtain falls, most viewers are likely to leave with a greatly enriched comprehension of Salomon's unceasing efforts to shape, redefine and "stage" her own self-identity. **Reviewed by Artur Golczowski.**

#### WILLIE MORRIS

*(My Cat Spit McGee)* What have I really learned as a human being from my cats? In the first place, they do not do a lick of work. They may think they do, but they do not.

#### STEVEN WEINBERG

With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.

## LES COLEMAN

Birthday suit made  
by Versace.

■ **William Roberts: An English Cubist**

By Andrew Gibbon Williams. Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2004. 154 pp., with 100 illus. color and b/w. Clothbound, \$70.00. ISBN 0-85331-824-7.

SOME PEOPLE (myself included) have long admired the second tier of artists in Vorticism, a hybrid Cubist-Futurist group that formed in London at the start of World War I (in part in opposition to Roger Fry's *Omega Workshops*). The founders of the movement were British painter and writer Wyndham Lewis and American poet Ezra Pound, who together are also remembered as the originators of an irreverent short-lived magazine, titled *BLAST*, that premiered in 1914. While the fame of Lewis and Pound is well-deserved, of added interest is the work of others in the group, of whom the three most worthy may be American photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, and British painters Edward Wadsworth and William Roberts. A lot is known about Coburn (thanks in part to his autobiography). Wadsworth's daughter also wrote a biography of her father, which describes his wartime service as a dock supervisor for the bizarre "dazzle camouflage" of ships, of which he made wonderful paintings and prints. As for William Roberts (1895-1980), one might assume that, if anyone, he was surely a loyal and active Vorticist, if only because his best-known painting is a group portrait of eight of its members (himself among them), seated at a table in a famous London restaurant called the Tour Eiffel. Three of them have copies of the first issue of *BLAST*, and the painting's formal title reads *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel: Spring 1915*. Unlike most "docudrama," this painting is of value both as an esthetic achievement (regardless of subject matter) and an historical record as well. As it turns out, Roberts' connection to Vorticism was ambivalent at best. As detailed in this first biography, he eventually grew very spiteful of Lewis, who had let it be known without asking, that Roberts was his protégé (his compliant underling), while Roberts claimed that he had made individual and important contributions to Vorticism. He made that group portrait not in 1915 (that date is part of its title instead), but, curiously, more than 45 years later, in 1961-62, when Roberts was past retirement age. By that time, resigned to less than stardom, and more resentful of Lewis than ever, instead of correcting the notion that he was a Lewis disciple, he must have decided to capitalize on the advantage of that stereotype. In earlier years, he had done whatever he could to bolster his own reputation, in the hope that he might be able to earn a better income. It is not commonly noted, for example, that it was he who made six pencil portraits (of British diplomats and military officers) and a drawing of a camel march for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922), the autobiography of T.E. Lawrence (*Lawrence of Arabia*), and following that, in the same year, painted Lawrence's portrait in an airman's uniform. Ten years later, he was commissioned by John Maynard Keynes to create a double portrait of the eminent economist seated with his Russian ballerina wife (both smoking cigarettes). He also did commissioned work for Frank Pick and the London Underground, failed miserably as a War Artist during World War II, then later made beautiful drawings for use as illustrations for his son's poetry. Perusing this endlessly interesting book, which includes fine reproductions of artworks by Roberts that most of us have never seen (there are 100 images in all), it is tempting to conclude that his most lasting works are those that are virtually unknown. He was, it seems, especially skilled at portrait drawing (see his self-portrait drawing made in 1909-10, or the red chalk portrait of his son from 1941), and at highly patterned figurative works that matured about 1930, and which slowly allowed him to settle in a lonely but exquisite harbor beside Cubism, Purism, Fernand Leger, and Art Deco.—RB

**RODNEY DANGERFIELD**

This girl phoned me the other day, and she says: "Come on over, there's no one home." So I went over—and no one was home.

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A FRIEND of mine—a girl called Jacqueline—worked in a poetry library in London that Ivor Cutler used to visit. She became good friends with him, and went round to his house for tea a few times. She was pretty young, and pretty attractive as well. I think she was a little gauche, thoroughly charmed by the literary excitement of it all, and didn't realize he was maybe a little more amorous than she gave him credit for.

She described the scene to me of how she rejected him outright because he was just an old man. She said: "Why would I possibly be romantically interested in you?" And he replied: "You see me just as an old man, but I'm looking at you with the same eyes that I had as a young man."

**ALEX KAPRANOS** in "Ivor, My Inspiration" in *The Guardian* (Friday, 15 April 2005, p. 9).

FOR THIS issue, we are especially grateful to

**WILLIAM**

**DRENTTEL**, a noted book designer, and an editor for the New York-based design blog called Design Observer. It was he who first suggested a memoir on Guy Davenport, with the result that an earlier version of the essay printed here appeared initially on that blog.

Our indebtedness continues to our friend, British artist

**LES COLEMAN**, whose cryptic sayings have enriched this and earlier issues.

We also appreciate the efforts of the poet **JONATHAN WILLIAMS**, a Black Mountain College alum, whose website for The Jargon Society we visited recently and found not only his memoir about Guy Davenport (his longtime friend), but also a selection of brief and hilarious extracts from the writings of others. A few of those are reprinted in this issue of BALLAST.

**NOTE**

The stippled pen and ink drawing on the cover of this issue is by Guy Davenport and was originally used on the cover of *The Geography of the Imagination*.



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