

# CAVE ART NOW

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One should not conceal and corrupt the facts of how our thoughts have come to us. The profoundest and least exhausted books will probably always have something of the aphoristic and unexpected character of Pascal's *Pensées*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*,  
New York: Vintage Books, 1968

PREFACE (February 23, 2003)

Art is dying, if it is not stinking already. Every trick has been attempted to bring it back to life, but to ever less effect. The demise is palpable and even painful. If there is a way out, it will be by way of a detour. And a detour spanning much of human experience. We can all agree that cave art was not a trick—so, let us begin there.

This book—a tangled diary of a discovery, as it were—will not be easy to read. Although it is chronological in structure, following the development of my ideas, it jumps all over the place. Well, the *addenda* have their own chronological order, which is sometimes confusing. The links are to be discovered and pursued, tracked and travelled, before the reader gets anywhere. Worse, the book points at a vast repository of similar texts on the Internet, *Residua* ([www.residua.org](http://www.residua.org)), that hides many an additional clue. But this is as it should be. This selection from my book, which goes back to 1976 and counts more than a million words, both invites and repels. It selects.

The detour into the prehistory will require several others. Most important, it will require an appreciation of archeology, cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, brain science, and the like. The brain is the last frontier. The very last frontier, that is. This is where artists and scientists have much to learn from each other. This is where tricks will no longer do.

What is art? Why has it appeared in human evolution? Where is it heading? Much has already been done to answer such questions, but most of it remains undigested. If this book sheds only a bit of light on our art endowment, both intellectual and emotional, it will have been a great success already.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have given me their thoughts on earlier drafts of this book. Without any wish to implicate them in my ravings, I am grateful to Goran Djordjevic, Will Hughes, David Lee, Rachael Luck, Annabel Molyneaux, Nathan Paternostro, Diane Pernet, Ivan Pesic, and Arnd Schneider for their comments and suggestions. By the way, many of my friends suggested that I abandon my fragmentary text and go for a real book with a sustained thrust. For better or worse, this will never happen, although it would undoubtedly make my arguments easier to fathom and thus more persuasive. Fragments remain my lot.

KANDINSKY (September 5, 1981)

If one considers that constipated face under a ridiculous hat in the blurred group portrait of the Bauhaus luminaries, or the flatness of his narrative geometry and his rather large canvases loaded with symbols that were so readily assimilated by the blooming bourgeois "art" between the two wars in Europe, one can hardly believe that Kandinsky could ever draw tears from a cold museum visitor, somewhere in New York, today. That would be wrong, though. I am a witness. Kandinsky's mad courage, his deliberate recklessness, his urge and his will combined, astonished me for the first time, as though I was a novice, someone unaccustomed, a mere amateur. The abandon of his early canvases is so well concealed that one is likely to mistake it for something else, indeed opposite. Only the scaffolding of his excursions remains, the constitutive *rigor mortis*. The rigor of Kandinsky's two-dimensional constructs is perhaps the only visible remainder of the terror that had propelled him into the unknown. It is so palpable that it congeals, solidifies, and provides the sole connection with the dead master. Every line, every cut, thus suggests the outlines of a ghost—the live content that cannot be domesticated by bourgeois aesthetics. Kandinsky is still there, between the lines.

A VULGAR HYPOTHESIS CONCERNING OUR SPIRITUAL  
HERITAGE (June 28, 1982)

It is conceivable that the only salvageable moment of the religious life of the species, which will not be simply discarded and forgotten, is precisely the sum of its practical traditions—its material substratum, as it were—congealed and preserved in a constellation of techniques, devices, procedures, expressions, physical arrangements, and rules of thumb appropriate to specific conditions and situations. It is indeed conceivable that the stupidest routines and the most dreadful details of religious performance (and religious labor?) contain the essence of our spiritual experience. An enormous amount of testing, sifting, and refinement of quotidian worship and spiritual survival has already been accomplished through millennia and across the planet. Consider, for example, the very forms of sacrifice and prayer, the temples and altars, the communal

singing, the prayer and worry beads, the institutions of monastic seclusion and mass pilgrimage, etc. Also consider the rocking and swaying, the rhythm, the repetition, the dancing, the language of curses and blessings, the masks and symbols... (Could reading and writing be added to this list?) This is not to say that ideological—as well as utopian, for that matter—"superstructure" is irrelevant, but merely secondary, or even derived, and undoubtedly comparatively unstable. This is furthermore not to say that we now need another scientific or professional discipline—a praxeology of religious life, or an architectural vocabulary of prototypical vehicles of faith—which would secularize and thus annihilate these apparently ignoble physical remnants of accumulated wisdom of the species. And finally, this is not to say that here lies buried another panacea. Far from it. My intention is primarily to shift the emphasis, and to point at heaven and hell as material facts of our childhood. (Could reading and writing possibly be construed as unreal or immaterial, that is, unproductive?) And our collective childhood is something we cannot choose *ad libitum*. Although we could accept, for the sake of the argument, the possibility of alternative histories, ours has been determined and it consequently surfaces as predetermined. The fact nevertheless remains that we have learned something or other, that we have established a correspondence with the unknown, or, at least, that we have stumbled upon the needs and ways of satisfying them that will not surrender to reason. For the "causes" are both too far and too many. The most precious lessons are perhaps already built into our very bodies—into our physical performances, including those associated with language—where they linger unattended. Again, my intention is primarily to shift the emphasis, and to point at these internal ruins inhabited by ghosts of our misunderstanding. The ruins themselves are sacred, as the species is sacred and unreplaceable.

#### ON CREATIVITY (December 26, 1982)

There once lived a well-respected liar whose art consisted of never telling a lie. His friends were puzzled: "How do you do it?" He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "I make up the truth as I go along," he said modestly. His friends perceived this as a divine lie. They were correct, too.

#### *Addendum I* (December 13, 2000)

When the liar eventually died—and he lived for many, many years—it was discovered that some remote rooms of his house were crammed with extraordinary objects of art. Most of the paintings, pieces of sculpture, and the like, appeared to be rather old, but none of them belonged to any school or movement or region or period anyone was familiar with. Even

some of the materials used were unfamiliar, if not odd. At once it was assumed by most that these were the liar's own works, but a few argued that some of them were so old that not even he could have made them. The mystery has never been resolved, but the suspicion that art is inextricably bound with lying has remained. Of course, this only exposes a very narrow and potentially pernicious conception of creativity.

*Addendum II* (August 19, 2001)

If evolutionary psychologists are correct that intelligence has evolved to help us cheat others while being able to tell when others are attempting to cheat us, then the connection between creativity and lying is perhaps too obvious to warrant further elaboration. And so is the connection between art and artifice in all its guises, including cunning, deceit, scheming, duplicity, trickery, and double-dealing. But what if the evolutionary psychologists are not telling the truth, or are at least exaggerating it? They would not be lying, of course. Or would they?

To Diane Pernet

*PAINTER'S DILEMMA* (July 19, 1993)

One learns with some nostalgia that the cult of icons had reached such proportions in Medieval Europe that icons frequently served as godparents at baptisms, which was one of the reasons why the Byzantine Emperor Leo III ordered in 726 the destruction of all icons and holy images throughout his dominions.<sup>1</sup> One learns with some longing that the early wonder-working icons of the Madonna are usually kept veiled in Italian churches, to be shown only on religious holidays.<sup>2</sup> In particular, one learns with a touch of envy about the miraculous fresco of the Annunciation in Santissima Annunziata in Florence, renowned throughout Italy for its curative powers, which is shut off by a silver screen and hidden by a heavy curtain that is raised once a year, on the Feast of the Annunciation, and which is housed in a Renaissance marble temple

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *A History of Venice* by John J. Norwich, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983 (first published in 1982), pp. 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Mary McCarthy's *The Stones of Florence and Venice Observed*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972 (first published in 1956), p. 85.

designed by Michelozzo.<sup>3</sup> For it may be that live paintings can be made only by anonymous painters?

*Addendum* (August 28, 2000)

I keep all of my boards in cardboard boxes piled up on top of each other in the attic in Reading. Only those on which I am working at any one time are not packed away. I have not seen my boards for close to two years now. Although I do miss them, I do not mind our long separation. The longer they are out of sight, the less I feel that they owe anything to me. My boards will be miraculous to behold when they eventually burst out into the light.

IN PRAISE OF ILLNESS (August 1, 1993)

Intense physical strain or pain, prolonged hunger or thirst, lack of rest or sleep, extreme fear or anger, or a combination of these conditions, can induce special mental states, as many "primitive" peoples well knew and well deployed in the education of their youth. Physical hardship brings us closer to the animal—to the vast knowledge of the world given to the animal before it can start learning. Layers upon layers of civilization have barred our access to that primordial knowledge, but on occasion we catch a glimpse of it against our will. Nowadays, in the "civilized" world, such occasions are provided mainly by illness. A couple of nights ago I tasted of that knowledge. The next time violent pain strikes I will be ready for my next lesson in things my body has always known.

*Addendum* (March 23, 1997)

Like the sick man, the religious man is projected onto a vital plane that shows him the fundamental data of human existence—that is, solitude, danger, hostility of the surrounding world. But the primitive magician, the medicine man, or the shaman is not only a sick man; he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself.

From Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Arkana, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1989 (first published in 1964), p. 27.

MY BOARDS (September 26, 1993)

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<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

Since two years ago or so, I have been using smallish pine boards for most of my paintings. The standard dimension is thirty by forty-three centimeters, but some are much smaller. The boards are about one centimeter and a half thick, which gives them a nice weight. The size of the boards allows me to paint them practically anywhere, as well as to move the finished boards at will. I sometimes take the smallest boards on my trips abroad to domesticate the barren hotel surroundings and to give my paintings a bit of experience of other places. The wood grain shows through the paint, and in places the sap penetrates to the surface, as well. The sap makes me especially happy. I first paint the boards white, and then I use only black and red paint for my rigid little compositions. Black and red never touch, though. I paint on both sides of the boards. When a piece is finished and the paint dry, I strip down the paint with steel wool. Much of the paint is thus removed, to show the grain of the wood. The last thing I do is varnish the boards with blood. The blood congeals very quickly and produces a warm sheen. Although the smell of dried blood is disconcerting the first few days, it soon becomes almost appealing. It is a pleasure to touch a finished board, which fully dries and thus loses a bit of its original weight in a week or two. As a board dries, it also bends slightly, giving it two very different sides. The convex side I take to be the front. I stack the boards in rows on shallow shelves mounted on the wall or on free-standing racks I have designed for this purpose. Two or three boards are stacked one behind the other. I often change the order and position of my boards, my silent companions. The woody sound of reshuffling gives me immense pleasure. The boards are sturdy and robust. Dents and scratches improve them. Every time I revarnish them with fresh blood they become a bit darker and a bit more mysterious in mood. My boards, my enigmatic friends.

*Addendum I (April 26, 1994)*

According to William Gates,<sup>4</sup> in the Yucatec Maya language *nab* means "to anoint or varnish," and *nabzah ti kik* means "to cover (flow over) with blood," where *kik* is "blood." By the way, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller<sup>5</sup> concur with this meaning of *nab*—"to daub" as with paint, "to varnish," "to anoint"—but they also provide another and apparently unrelated meaning, "water-lily." Now, the expression *nabzah ti kik* corresponds exactly to what I am doing with my boards.

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<sup>4</sup> *An Outline Dictionary of Maya Glyphs*, New York: Dover, 1978 (first published in 1931), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1992 (first published in 1986), pp. 141-142.

*Addendum II* (August 4, 1994)

The first set of my boards was made in the Winter of 1990-91. They were envisaged as props for my first and only play, written in December 1990 upon reading several short plays by Samuel Beckett. His "Breath" influenced me most because of its simplicity and brevity.<sup>6</sup> All of a sudden I felt an urge to write a play of my own and to explore the theater as a vehicle for my symbols. One of my symbols served as the title of the play.

There are six motionless characters on a dingy stage—four of them sitting on stools on a rickety shoulder-high platform in the middle of the stage, and the remaining two sitting on stools by the curtain on each side of the stage. They are dressed in dirty and greasy white, including skull-caps tied under their chins. Their hands and feet are wrapped in white cloth. They are all older men, preferably in their sixties. They are unshaven. They chant in deep and raspy voices while displaying white boards with my symbols, painted in black. Each character holds on his lap a stack of boards. Their size—thirty by forty-three centimeters—stems from the need to manipulate them on one's lap. A faint chime times the lowering and raising of boards, which are handled with consummate skill and care. The woody shuffling is the only other background sound in the play. The light is dim, apparently sourceless, but the four boards held up by the characters on the platform are lit by as many spotlights. The play lasts about ten minutes.

To demonstrate how the boards would look like, I produced sixteen of them—one for each of my symbols. When it became clear that no-one would be interested in my play, and that became clear in a few short weeks, the residual boards needed to be put someplace. I designed a two-tier rack, had it made by a cabinet-maker, and placed all the boards on it in several layers. Something resembling an object of art was thus born. But it all started with Beckett, Lauren's favorite playwright. At the time, she was working on a stage-set for four or five of his short plays, directed by John Winter, our friend and neighbor, at the Progress Theater in Reading. Her stage-set turned out to be quite wonderful.

*Addendum III* (July 21, 1996)

One part of my artistic process which I have failed to elucidate so far is its very end. I usually "varnish" my boards when it is sunny, which is rarely

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., S. Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984, pp. 209-11.

the case in England except in the dead of summer. On account of the foul smell, I leave the boards to dry outdoors. The odor of blood presently attracts innumerable flies and a few wasps. As the frenzied insects crawl about my boards, sucking the rapidly drying blood, they make apparently random traces with their nozzles. When the varnish dries up, they all vanish as miraculously as they had appeared. My little helpers enjoy art only at its freshest.

*THANG-KA* (October 24, 1993)

This is a Tibetan term for religious images painted on fine cloth. *Thang-ka* themes include mandalas, images of the Buddha and assorted Hindu deities, etc. Ordinary *thang-ka* are painted with gouache. Fancy *thang-ka* paintings are done with oil paints, sewn onto silk backgrounds, and "mounted" on a horizontal rod like Chinese paintings, so that they can be hung on the wall. Gold is also used on fancy *thang-ka*. A sheet of very thin material is sewn on the top edge of the *thang-ka*, so that it can be unveiled only on appropriate religious occasions. The whole assemblage is designed to be rolled up, tied with two strips of material that hang in the back, and stored away or taken on the road. Different *thang-ka* are perhaps used on different holidays. I learned much of this from Nepalese merchants along Temple Street in the Yau Ma Tei Night Bazaar in Kowloon, also known as Men's Market, who sold me a few *thang-ka* this weekend. These merchants come in the evening with a few bags and display all they have on a piece of black cloth the size of a bed-sheet, which they lay out on the sticky pavement over a sheet of tarpaulin. Much of the merchandise is of religious character and comes from Tibet. They sit cross-legged amidst their wares and appear to be the most easy-going and content of people. The Nepalese trade has to do with the Gurkha detachment of the British forces in Hong Kong. When the British army leaves on July 1, 1997, this form of trade may dry up, especially if the Chinese authorities wish to stifle the Tibet connection.

THE ANIMAL IN US (November 4, 1993)

The animal in us knows much more about the world than we do because it has been on this planet so much longer than the human species. For the same reason, we can never understand the animal in us. Simply put, there is too much there for the human mind to understand. The task is to access that knowledge directly, without understanding, which can be accomplished only by embracing the animal in us.

*Addendum* (May 28, 1994)

The assumption that anyone of worth can explain himself fully and lucidly in the time allotted him by those who want to learn what he knows is either a joke or a stupidity.

From Idries Shah's *Wisdom of the Idiots*, London: The Octagon Press, 1970 (first published in 1969), p. 165.

MY SYMBOLS (November 7, 1993)

About ten years ago I saw a retrospective of Kandinsky's work at the Guggenheim in New York and was transfixed by a rather unassuming print with flag-like symbols. One of these symbols struck me as especially potent, and I came back to the exhibition to see it again. Immediately upon my return to Cambridge from New York I started working on a series of symbols of my own. The retrospective induced a significant shift toward the abstract in my drawing, which had tended to be figurative for several years. In a few days I had a vocabulary of symbols which has remained unchanged ever since. The symbols quickly arrayed themselves in rigid order on the page and would not budge again from their rows and columns. Soon I started producing books with pages upon pages of text composed of my symbols. The whole experience was closer to magic than to anything I would associate with art.

Looking back at the early days of life with my symbols, I can think about them in three different ways. These different understandings strike me as meaningful at different times, but they rarely come to me at the same time. The first concerns the origin of the symbols, or, better, other things I associate them with in terms of their appearance. The second is about my own needs and my understanding of the connection between these needs and my symbols. The third is difficult to define, but it concerns my rôle in the life of my symbols. In this last case my own history is rather irrelevant.

The first and obvious source of my symbols is Kandinsky himself. My first symbol was his little flag. But this exhausts his influence on my work. It was as though I had recognized one of my symbols in his work, not the other way around. His other flag-like objects on the same print have remained uninteresting to me. The influence which I consider much deeper and much more personal is that of the Maya hieroglyphics, which have exercised me since childhood. The rigid order of my symbols and the connection of my work with book-making is clearly related to the Maya culture as a whole, not just their writing system. The third and last influence I can detect is that of Walt Disney. I generally despise his work, but several of my symbols are definitely connected in my mind with some of his characters. Thus I have a Mickey Mouse and a Donald Duck

symbol, but the connections seems to be obvious only to me, as no-one else can understand my association when I point it out and when I try to explain what I see. And this is all I can say about my own understanding of the origin of my symbols in terms of their esthetic qualities, as it were.

Concerning my understanding of how the symbols relate to my own needs, I still feel comfortable with the explanation I offered to Lauren several years ago: my symbols and my books of symbols allow me to communicate with others without having to worry about the content of what I have to say. Put differently, I feel that my need to communicate needs to be channeled in such a way that my message ultimately has no effect whatsoever. I do not want to change anything, improve anything, reach anything. Thus, my symbols are about the residual need to communicate in spite of my reluctance to communicate anything in particular. By implication, the symbols and books of symbols have no meaning. They are nothing but empty forms—my own contribution to onanistic mode of communication and existence in general. An unwilling member of my own species, I have found a way to symbolically copulate with my fellow humans without fear of insemination and consequent propagation of my own need.

On occasion I feel rather differently about my symbols: I feel their power and I feel my innocence in relation to that power, which strikes me as foreign and invasive and all-encompassing. In other words, I feel like a medium for something I do not understand. When I arrange my symbols on a page, or when I arrange my boards with symbols on a rack, I do not follow any particular plan, just as I did not follow any particular plan when I was developing my symbols. I let things fall into place by themselves. The resulting arrangements feel soothing and appropriate and meaningful. As a good medium, I do not interfere with the force that acts through me. At times I feel that I am acting on behalf of something very, very far away, something truly distant, something very extraterrestrial. Although I refrain from naming my symbols, the term "extraterrestrial" is the only thing that makes sense to me. Put simply, I would not be surprised to learn one day that everything I have "written" or "painted" with my symbols has a clear meaning and that this meaning goes to the heart of things. I cannot reconcile my other beliefs with this sort of experience, but that is how things actually stand.

Given the latter two understandings, it is not surprising that I have been anonymously distributing my several printed books of symbols and various printed postcards with my symbols. Several art bookstores in international capitals regularly exhibit my works, which gives me great pleasure especially because of my anonymity and the fact that the sale of these artefacts brings me no personal gain. In this context, it is also not surprising that I have been quiet about my symbols in the pages of my

*Residua*. Not even Lauren has yet learned about my understanding that I may be a mere instrument and that my symbols may have a meaning which I do not understand precisely because of my instrumental role.

The interesting question that remains is why do I feel that all this should be committed to paper at this particular moment? The last few days I have felt that this had to be done, and I have been eager to catch a moment to do it. But, is this a warning? Am I in some kind of danger? If so, is there anything I can do about it?

*Addendum I* (March 24, 1997)

According to Lawson, who outlines several plausible interpretations of cave paintings, “some of the symbols of paleolithic art might be a record of the geometric patterns seen as the human mind passes into subconscious (so-called entoptic forms).”<sup>7</sup> This could happen to a shaman in trance who might pass into the spirit-world in the guise of a revered animal. The paintings could be illustrations of these ecstatic experiences, including also the entoptic forms, which can be experienced when a person is confined to darkness, as the shaman and his audience would have been.

Now, one of the symbols shown by Lawson is none other than Kandinsky’s little flag.<sup>8</sup> Although it is set in a narrow frame, the main part of the symbol is identical to the flag. The other symbols that appear in the same place are formally related to Mondrian’s neo-plastic work and to a number of my own symbols. This also holds for other paleolithic, mesolithic, and neolithic symbols I have seen elsewhere. Assorted tattoos found on the body of the so-called Iceman—who had died some 5,300 years ago and was found frozen in the Alps in 1991—are the case in point.<sup>9</sup> Some of his tattoos are cruciform, but most are flag-like and are composed of bundles of full or broken lines. Such bundles appear on many of my boards.

One cannot but feel elated upon discovery of connections so primordial. However, the possibility of intrinsic “realism” of abstract art at its best is even more enticing. The great masters of Modern Art—Kandinsky,

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<sup>7</sup> Lawson, A.J., *Cave Art*, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire: Shire Archeology, 1991, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., K. Spindler, *The Man in the Ice*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994 (first published in 1993), pp. 167-173 and color plates.

Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka—have all insisted upon their work’s underlying realism. Cave paintings offer a clue as to why. Perhaps more important, they offer a clue as to how these works can be brought to reality again.

*Addendum II* (August 4, 1997)

It goes without saying that entoptic forms cannot be explained by the structure of the human brain. Whence this structure? How can something as “artificial” as geometric constructs of abstract art be lodged so deep in the meandering folds of organic matter at its most complex? The designer’s signature suggests itself readily enough, but it is conceivable that this signature contains instructions of some kind. The extraterrestrial connection thus remains far from irrelevant, no matter how much we learn about human neuropsychology and neurophysiology.

*Addendum III* (March 30, 1998)

At the opening of my second show at the Hereford Salon on November 4, 1996, I read a selection of relevant pieces from my *Residua*, but this piece demanded too much even from friends. It was not only too long, but it was also too involved and embarrassing in places. I thus skipped it, but in the discussion following my reading I did mention that I occasionally felt my symbols were in some sense imposed upon me from without, which is why I thought of them as extraterrestrial in origin. As books with my symbols were among my offerings in connection with the show, I also mentioned that the folder with all the computer files which contain my symbols goes under the name of “ET.” Not surprisingly, several people at the opening wanted to know more about the extraterrestrial connection, outlandish as it might be. At some point they were all cut short by Lutz Becker: “This is a red herring and we should not fall for it.” He led the discussion in some other direction, which looked even wise at the time.

MYSTICISM REVEALED (April 19, 1994)

In the last pages of the *Masnavi*, called by the Iranians the “Koran in Persian,” Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) instructs the reader that words are pointless beyond that point in the story.<sup>10</sup> He says that one can travel on saddle and horse up to the sea-coast, whence one should travel by boat, a “horse of wood.” That boat is silence, says Rumi. But then he adds that a

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *Masnavi i Ma'navi: Spiritual Couplets*, translated and abridged by E.H. Whinfield, London: The Octagon Press, 1979, p. 326.

perfect man of spirit smashes his boat, too, and plunges into the sea like a fish. Indeed, all mysticism begins with the inescapable envy of animals.

*Addendum I* (January 3, 1995)

I pasted a copy of this piece on a blank page in the back of a library copy of Rumi's *Masnavi*, which I got from Misa Papic. I printed it in a handsome type and put a nice black frame around it, so it looked vaguely "official." Several months later Misa took the book from the library once again. I asked him to show it to me. The blank page in the back was torn off in anger, as testified by the ragged remnants of the page. The execution looked vaguely "official," again. An unenlightened disciple of Rumi must have chanced upon it.

*Addendum II* (November 13, 1999)

*Il maestro Tokusan era seduto in meditazione sulla riva di un fiume. Sopraggiunse un discepolo che, avvicinandosi all'argine, gli gridò da lontano: "Buongiorno, maestro! Come stai?" Tokusan interrompe la meditazione e con il ventaglio fece segno al discepolo: "Vieni, vieni..." E si alzò, si volse e prese a costeggiare il fiume, seguendo il corso dell'acqua. Il discepolo, in quell'istante, raggiunse l'illuminazione.*

From *La tazza e il bastone: Storie Zen*, Milano: SE, 1993  
(first published in 1983), p. 92.

HIGH IS LOW (April 20, 1994)

I am still not sure what meditation is, that is, whether I have ever experienced it, but I know what it is to have an empty mind, to be totally free from thought. Although I cannot reach this blessed state at will, I experience it almost every time I make love to a woman. This is thus the greatest joy of love-making, much more important to me than either the reflected pleasure of my partner or my own pleasure. In my spiritual moments I equate my blank mind with the unity of the universe, and in my romantic states I equate it with love. When I am making love with Lauren, I occasionally feel both love for her and our union with the universe.

But I now realize that these ecstatic experiences may have a rather mundane root in, say, natural history. Whenever I rid myself from all thought, I also experience my entire body as one, as indivisible. In such states, I feel that a part of my body can represent me without remainder. When I make love to a woman, I feel my entire body through my penis, which becomes the focal point of my life and my probe into the world. I

can imagine that animals experience their muzzles, paws, and sexual organs in a similar fashion when they probe into their environment. The unity of the body, as well as the union of the body and its environment, may be lurking behind the oft-reported "oceanic" sensations that subsequently lead to the feeling of ecstasy.

Although all this is somewhat naive and perhaps even trite, it is new to me in terms of my understanding of my own experience. I am especially attracted by the notion that our most sublime experiences may be least human, that is, most animal and ancient in terms of our natural history. Put differently, the experiences we often associate with things on high may, in fact, be rooted in the stinky mud below. What we associate with a species of departure from the body may be nothing but a species of return. Longing for the super-natural may be a mere reflection of our revulsion from our increasingly extra-natural existence, and our subterranean dream of returning to the Garden of Eden minus the Tree of Knowledge.

#### THE MAKING OF THE FIRST ICON (April 25, 1994)

Tradition has it that Agbar, King of Edessa, who was afflicted with leprosy, heard tell that Christ could restore him to health. He accordingly sent one Ananias as an ambassador to Palestine with instructions to find Our Lord and return with him to Edessa. When Ananias finally caught up with him, Christ was addressing a great throng of people. Being unable to approach nearer, Ananias began to sketch the face of Christ, although needless to say, with very little success. But Christ was aware of what Ananias was doing. When he had dismissed the crowds, he took a piece of linen; soaking it in water, he pressed it firmly to his face and then handed it to Ananias. When Ananias had taken the towel into his hands, he saw that Christ's features were clearly imprinted upon it. Christ declined to go to Edessa but promised to send a disciple after his death. Ananias was instructed to take the towel to King Agbar, as a substitute for Christ's presence.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Ouskensky (Uspensky), *Essai sur la Théologie de l'icône dans l'Eglise Orthodoxe*, Paris, 1960, p. 60. According to John Stuart (*Ikon*, London: Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 31), "[t]he ikon is deeply immersed in the Christian consciousness and, indeed, tradition associates the making of the first ikon with Christ himself." He continues (*loc. cit.*):

[...] the ikon consists of a synthesis of art and idea, and [its] form is derived from a spiritual vision or understanding of the universe. But the ikon is also a synthesis of matter transformed by spirit—a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual energy. This is graphically suggested by the

From John Stuart's *Ikons*, London: Faber and Faber, 1975,  
p. 31.

*Addendum* (June 9, 2001)

In *The Forbidden Image: The Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*,<sup>12</sup> Alain Besançon sheds a bit more light on this story and the origin of the so-called icons of the Holy Face. According to Saint John of Damascus, Ananias, a skilled painter, failed to capture the portrait of Christ "because his face glowed with an unsustainable brilliance."<sup>13</sup> In other words, even if Christ were to have sat for Ananias, as a patron would for a portrait painter, he would have failed because the divine face could not be properly seen by mortal eyes, let alone rendered. Thus Christ pressed the cloth to his face. The Orthodox church celebrates that translation of the "acheiropoetic" image (that is, the image that is not made by human hands) on August 16. Put differently, the church celebrates the very impossibility of capturing the face of Christ by means of drawing or painting. To wit, the first icon is also the last.

WHAT DO LÉGER AND MONDRIAN HAVE IN COMMON?  
(July 18, 1995)

The first time Lauren's grandfather saw my boards, he winked at me confidentially: "Léger!" That was three years ago, in Reading. The

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legend [...] of Christ's image "not made with hands." Brought to King Abgar as a proxy for Christ's divine presence, the image was created by direct contact with Our Lord, and thereby became infused with his spiritual aura. The image presupposes the imaged just as a shadow denotes the presence of the figure that casts it. The ikon not only represents the shape (*morphé*) and the idea (*idea*) but it also participates in the nature of the imaged.

The icon is thus not only live, as all living creatures are live, but it is live spiritually—that is, it is life-giving, healing. The association between healing and this particular art form goes to its very origin, as demonstrated by this story about the first icon.

<sup>12</sup> Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000 (first published in 1994), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> *Loc. cit.*, quoting from John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, 4.16.

second time he saw them, a few days ago in London, he winked at me again: "Mondrian!" So far, so good.

*L'ART, C'EST MOI* (September 21, 1995)

The only meaningful object of art is the artist oneself. Works of art are only traces of the process of self-realization. They are but remnants discarded on the way. In this sense, paintings and pieces of sculpture are conventional material traces of the artists' progress. By the same token, my book is a written trace of my own progress toward myself as an object of art. It, too, is an object of art only in this, reflected sense. As a book, it is an object of art only insofar as it is a reflection of my intention as an artist, which is true of paintings and pieces of sculpture, as well. Just like books, most paintings and pieces of sculpture have nothing to do with art, because the objects underlying their creation were not the artists themselves. Whether or not an object is an object of art depends on the artist's intention, not on intrinsic qualities of the object itself. The sincerity of that intention cannot be tested directly, but it can be gleaned from the would-be-artist's life as a whole. Parenthetically, my book, which contains nothing but text, is the first book to be recognized as an object of art, rather than a conventional book, by myself as an artist, rather than a writer. A new art form is born out of this recognition. The sincerity of my intention can be gleaned from the book itself, which is seldom the case with conventional objects of art.

*Addendum I* (December 4, 1995)

If the artist be priest of beauty, nevertheless this beauty is to be sought only according to the principle of the inner need, and can be measured only according to the size and intensity of that need. That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul.

From Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*,  
New York: Dover, 1977 (first published in 1911), p. 55.

“YES, SYMMETRY” (April 14, 1996)

Lauren's brother Charles is so close to Deepak Chopra that the medicine man has invited him to join him on his tour of Europe. They started in Amsterdam and are ending the tour in Hamburg. Two days ago they came to London, where Deepak has a three-day workshop. When Charles came over to see us, he was interested in the five *thang-ka* I bought in Hong Kong because his friend had told him a lot about this art form. Having heard about the paintings from Charles, Deepak wanted to see them, too. I

took him to our bedroom, where the *thang-ka* had been displayed since we moved to Hereford Road. When he saw my boards on their ledge on the opposite wall, Deepak asked me what they were. “These are my own *thang-ka*,” I smiled. He nodded seriously: “Yes, symmetry.”

*Addendum I* (October 29, 1996)

In Lutz Becker’s collection of stills from Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished film, *Que viva Mexico*, which Lutz longs to finish, many are as carefully arrayed as *fin-de-siècle tableaux vivants*, and some are rigidly symmetrical. Several of the latter are extraordinary. In the first scene two men are standing on each side of an open coffin with the remains of their fallen comrade. In the second two pairs of priests standing in front of four peasant boys holding a cross are standing behind a rack of skulls. In the third scene two priests are kneeling in front of a pillar bristling with ecclesiastic symbols flanked by painted statues of the Madonna and a bearded saint. In the last a pre-Columbian pyramid is resting pristine under a huge sky crawling with luminous clouds. Indeed, all the symmetrical *tableaux* I have seen are about the strict equilibrium between life and death.

*Addendum II* (January 21, 2001)

Years ago at MIT—between 1972 and 1973, I guess—I conducted a series of simple experiments on what people considered beautiful. This was a part of an attempt to endow computers with an esthetic understanding of the world. A few people close to Marvin Minsky, one of the forerunners of artificial intelligence, were interested in my experiments. Patrick Winston, whose course in artificial intelligence I was taking at the time, was among them. And so was Rudolph Arnheim, an authority in the psychology of art, whom I met at Harvard a bit earlier. It was actually Arnheim who had suggested that I conduct a few simple experiments before conceptualizing the problem and committing it to computer code. I remember one of these experiments quite well. I asked a number of people—mostly my fellow students and a few sympathetic teachers—to arrange a bunch of cubes in an esthetically pleasing way on a “chessboard” with ten rows and columns. The cubes themselves came from an earlier experiment in Nicholas Negroponte’s laboratory, the Architecture Machine, where I had worked as a research assistant for a semester or maybe two. I recorded the sequence in which my subjects placed the cubes onto the grid, and I taped their comments as they were moving along. For some reason, which escapes me now, I never completed these experiments, but I still remember a couple of my surprises. First, a good proportion of my subjects produced symmetrical arrangements of cubes, some of which were symmetrical with respect to two axes rather than one. In their minds, beauty and symmetry were

directly related. Second, the more culturally "sophisticated" my subjects tended to be, the more aware they were that there was something funny about symmetry, and the more they avoided it. In some cases, they would "spoil" it as soon as they would discover it in their own arrangements. For some reason, symmetry was out of fashion with those aware of art and culture in general. I remember feeling that symmetry was still there, in the background, even with the sophisticates, but that it was something to be avoided at all costs. Returning to Deepak Chopra and Sergei Eisenstein, perhaps my subjects instinctively felt that symmetry was one of the last vestiges of the religious.

#### HOMAGE TO FLORENSKY (May 7, 1996)

If it is indeed true that artists since the Renaissance have been assumed to be the sole authors of their works even when their workshops have been engaged entire in producing them, whereas the anonymous medieval masters were assumed to be members of workshops, and thus collective witnesses of the sublime truth, even when they had been the sole producers of their works of art, then it is conceivable that the only road to the sublime truth is to assume that one is already, but not necessarily to one's full knowledge or understanding, a member of a collective, which only needs to be identified, tracked down, and embraced. It is conceivable that anonymity is but a small reward for finding one's own collective.

#### GERTRUDE STEIN VS. ALFRED BARR, JR. (May 21, 1996)

In the concluding paragraphs of her biography of Alfred Barr, Jr., the man behind the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alice Goldfarb Marquis writes that "[t]he contradiction raised by Gertrude Stein—how can a museum be modern—continues and is unlikely to be resolved."<sup>14</sup> The wordsmith was wrong, of course. The contradiction has been resolved decades ago by a linguistic slight of hand. What once stood for much more than contemporary art—as the term "modern" stood for everything fashionable, progressive, avantgarde—became circumscribed in time, dated, outdated even. Perhaps more important, the very idea of the museum has shifted, bifurcated, split and split again, thanks to the efforts of Barr and his brainchild. What once stood for solidity, objectivity, truth, has become partisan, steeped in strategy and gossip, open to interpretation and doubt and suspicion. Gertrude's contradiction thus collapses not

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<sup>14</sup> *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.: Missionary for the Modern*, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989, p. 361.

once, but twice. By way of a professional deformation, it is precisely the wordsmiths who fail to appreciate the plasticity of language.

*DER BLAUE REITER* (July 28, 1996)

*Der Blaue Reiter Almanac* (Munich, 1912) was the first “textbook” on twentieth-century art. Serving as an author and as coeditor with his friend Franz Marc (1880-1916), Wassily Kandinsky anthologized the works and ideas of many of the founders of the new art, together with illustrations from the ancient, tribal, and folk arts from which they drew inspiration. The message of *Almanac*, parts of it delivered most attractively by Franz Marc, was consistent with that of *On the Spiritual in Art*: humanity was entering upon a new spiritual adventure to which artists had much to contribute. The new art, far from capitulating to the forces of materialism and academic convention, would renew the spiritual in grand, partially unforeseeable ways. “Already,” wrote Marc about certain artists featured in the anthology,

their thinking has a different aim: to create out of their work symbols for their own time, symbols that belong on the altars of a future spiritual religion.<sup>15</sup>

He enlarged on this striking thought in his introduction to the second edition of *Almanac*, published in 1914, two years before he lost his life in the war:

We know that everything could be destroyed if the beginnings of a spiritual discipline are not protected from the greed and dishonesty of the masses. We are struggling for pure ideas, for a world in which pure ideas can be thought and proclaimed without becoming impure. Only then will we or others who are more talented be able to show the other face of the Janus head, which today is still hidden and turns its gaze away from the times.

We admire the disciples of early Christianity who found the strength for inner stillness amid the roaring noise of their time. For this stillness we pray and strive every hour.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kandinsky, W., and F. Marc, eds. and authors, *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, documentary edition, ed., K. Lankheit, New York, 1974, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 259.

“The other face of the Janus head” remains a powerful image, implying a reserve of love, sensibility, and artistry. Franz Marc himself embodied his feeling for life in visionary paintings of horses and other creatures that stand apart from human violence. He was, one might say, a Nature mystic—in any case a man of great sweetness and intellectual capacity who recognized in animals an innocence something like his own.

From Roger Lipsey's *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, Boston & Shaftesbury: Shambhala, 1989, pp. 46-47.

ANOTHER ILLUSION (October 13, 1996)

Art is one of the more devious mechanisms of control of the many by the few. The character and rôle of art in totalitarian societies is not its degradation; on the contrary, that is its true face, which in other socio-economic conditions is more-or-less successfully hidden. Art is first and foremost an illusion about freedom, and not an activity which in any sense contributes to freedom. The problem is not how art ought to be, but how to transcend it as a form of consciousness and of human activity.

From Goran Djordjevic's segment in Lutz Becker's *Film Notes No. 1*, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, 1975 (in Serbo-Croatian).

*Addendum I* (June 24, 1997)

I just mailed this piece, pasted onto postcards of my own design, to all the London critics listed in the current issue of the *Flash Art Diary*. There are exactly 107 of them, one short of a lucky number popular in India. The postcards will reach the critics in time for the First Hereford Salon Symposium, "Illusion of Freedom," focusing on this piece. It will start on Friday, June 27, with cocktails and dinner, and end the next day with another dinner. The speakers will be Goran Djordjevic, Lutz Becker, Giuseppe Mastruzzo, Judith Schoneveld, and myself. I will open the proceedings on Saturday morning with my second lecture on the history and future of the salon. The discussion will be taped with another Hereford Salon publication in mind. There will be some fifteen people present, most of them artists. The critics were not invited, of course.

*Addendum II* (June 29, 1997)

When he arrived in London a few days ago, just in time to witness the mailing of my postcards, Goran explained to me that his thoughts back then were based on his personal experiences at the Student Cultural Center

in Belgrade, rather than on general considerations. When our symposium came to its close yesterday evening, I, too, realized that the theme was directly bound with my own experiences at the Hereford Salon.

*Addendum III* (March 24, 1998)

The world of art is the last stronghold of authoritarian and totalitarian practices in modern societies. These practices pervade every nook and cranny of all art institutions, associations, groupings, down to individual artists and their vociferous coteries. Every form of obfuscation, deception, resentment, dissimulation, rivalry, posturing, and treachery—characteristic of authoritarian and totalitarian societies—can be found in this rarefied realm of supposed freedom and enlightenment. The salon has always provided an ideal environment for control of the many by the few at the lowest level of social organization, precisely because it has paraded as a safe heaven from the world of art at large. Re-emerging after a hiatus of nearly a century, the salon offers not just another illusion about freedom, but an illusion which is safely hidden from view of both the many and the few.

*Addendum IV* (July 16, 2001)

The first and only Hereford Salon Symposium in June 1997 led to the gradual demise of the Hereford Salon itself. There were many reasons for this, mainly to do with rather different conceptions of art that Lauren and I espoused, which were reflected in the internal divisions of salon members. However, the direct cause of the punch-up that took place at the symposium was simple enough: I insisted that, no matter whether one condoned them or not, Alexander Brener's actions were important and needed to be discussed, but Lutz Becker, supported by Lauren, insisted that Brener's actions were execrable and did not merit any discussion whatsoever. He went as far as to refuse giving his talk. This essentially anti-intellectual position was and still remains incomprehensible to me. Nevertheless, the petty squabbles characteristic of the art world, which Goran and I have experienced roughly a quarter of a century apart in Belgrade and London, are now clear to me. They are but examples of the illusion of freedom the art world represents.

*OPPOSITES* (December 3, 1996)

Steven and Ann Ames took visible pleasure from visiting my show at the Hereford Salon. They had many questions for me. Among other things, I told them in some detail how I made my boards, and they were quite intrigued by some aspects of my work, including my use of blood as varnish. When we met the next day to walk together through the pre-

auction shows at Christie's and Sotheby's, where there were a few pieces they were considering, Ann reminded Steven to talk to me about my work, which they had discussed earlier that morning. She prefaced his remarks by reiterating how much they had appreciated my show. Collecting his thoughts with some difficulty because of his jet-lag, Stephen said that it was not to my advantage to focus on the fact that I smeared my boards with blood only because that prevented them from sticking together. I should come up with something a bit more challenging intellectually. He explained that art critics and dealers nowadays preferred to talk about works of art in terms of opposites or polarities. Steven then proceeded to give me a few examples of opposites concerning my work which could capture the imagination of the art world. For instance, contrary to my story about non-stickiness, he suggested that blood provided a link or glue between the purity and exactness of my geometric compositions and the physicality of the real world. I thanked him for his thoughts and promised to follow his advice when talking to art critics and dealers.

#### KHLEBNIKOV'S ADMONISHMENT (February 22, 1997)

They asked Velimir Khlebnikov: "Do you know that Alexander Brener is in jail for attempting to improve a painting by Malevich hanging in a museum?" He did not. They asked: "Do you know he may get eighteen months in jail for this attempt to breathe life into Russian art?" He did not. They asked: "Do you know that he has embarked on a hunger strike in protest and that his health is now in question?" He did not. Then they told Khlebnikov that he was the young poet's hero, and they asked: "What would you say to Brener to stop the hunger strike?" Khlebnikov shrugged his shoulders: "Well, what of it? He must have given up the dream of breathing life into Russian art."

#### *Addendum* (January 4, 1998)

When I heard of Brener's hunger-strike, I sent him this peace pasted onto a postcard. He took to eating again soon afterwards. He has never thanked me for my intervention, though. Did he fail to understand it, or did he understand it too well?

#### ON LANGUAGE AND RELIGION (March 8, 1997)

If language is viewed as a universal innate facility (Chomsky), why not view the religious concepts and practices associated with so-called shamanism (Eliade) in the same way? How else can we explain the ubiquity of shamanism? What but a universal innate facility can explain

the survival of these concepts and practices through the entire history of religion?

COYOTE (March 23, 1997)

Much of what has been written about the week in 1974 which Joseph Beuys spent with a coyote at the Rene Block Gallery in New York focuses on Beuys' intentions and experiences behind the thick folds of his felt shroud, but it is clear from the images of this fascinating encounter that the animal was not a passive participant. Far from it. In fact, it played the active part. The animated eyes and the nimble manoeuvres of the inquisitive beast amaze me anew whenever I stumble upon these stark images. It is therefore surprising that the great shaman had so little to tell us about the coyote's own intentions and experiences after an entire week they spent together. It is even more surprising that this has so far passed unnoticed.

“ANIMAL LANGUAGE” (March 24, 1997)

In numerous traditions friendship with animals and understanding their language represent paradisaic syndromes. In the beginning—that is, in mythical times—man lived at peace with the animals and understood their speech. It was not until after a primordial catastrophe, comparable to the “fall” of Biblical tradition, that man became what he is today—mortal, sexed, obliged to work to feed himself, and at enmity with the animals. While preparing for his ecstasy and during it, the shaman abolishes the present human condition and, for the time being, recovers the situation as it was at the beginning. Friendship with animals, knowledge of their language, transformation into an animal are so many signs that the shaman has re-established the “paradisaic” situation lost at the dawn of time.

From Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Arkana, Penguin Books, 1989 (first published in 1964), p. 99.

SOME THOUGHTS ON INTRINSIC RELIGIOSITY  
(March 28, 1997)

That wild animals agitate the mind is apparent from the fantasized qualities attributed to them in myths and symbols. However, to deduce the origins of this discomfiture one must reckon scientifically with *intrinsic* religiosity. I define the latter as a state of mind incited by belief in forces perceived as supernatural and numinous that must be appeased.

It is an innate urge embedded in fear. Because elementary fear has an adaptive function in all higher vertebrates, and also rudimentary homologues in the environmentally induced behavioral responses of animals with much simpler sensory systems, it is in man a primordial and universal, protocultural emotion. Therefore, explanations rooted in biochemical genetics, organic evolution, and the neurophysiology of subconscious (and sometimes conscious) behavioral tendencies take priority, but acquire meaning only against a background of interpretations derived from sociocultural anthropology, archeology, and the history of religions. Many factors affect the behavioral psychology of individuals and groups of the higher species of non-human primates, which have much in common with our own species. This leaves little room for an understanding of intrinsic religiosity except *via* an exploration of the biological conditions that—mechanically, universally, and fairly predictably—determine human emotionality. By the same token, religion—the quintessence of sociocultural activity—is merely an end-product whose exceedingly protean manifestations thwart rigorous biological enquiry just as much as they prompt conventionally anthropocentric speculation.

From Balaji Mundkur's "Human Animality, the Mental Imagery of Fear, and Religiosity" in Tim Ingold, ed., *What is an Animal?* London and New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 178.

A PHYSICAL CONTACT (March 30, 1997)

Charbonnier: What do you hope for?

Miró: I hope for a physical contact with people, with ordinary people, with all people.

Charbonnier: To the point of a collective art?

Miró: To the point of a collective and anonymous art, as in the great periods of the past.

From Joan Miró's interview with Georges Charbonnier for the French National Radio taped on January 19, 1951, in *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews*, Margit Rowell, ed., London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986, p. 217.

THE ROOTS OF MODERN ART (April 13, 1997)

At its best, abstract art is real. Abstract images can be induced today in the same way they were induced thirty-thousand years ago, when they first appeared on cave walls and ceilings together with images of animals and shamans, their ecstatic authors. There is a fundamental difference between the two sets of images, though: the abstract ones come from within the shaman's eye, as it were, and the "real" ones come from the environment by way of the shaman's brain, the ultimate enigma of the human species. In their search for the spiritual in art, Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich rediscovered the images hidden for millennia in their own bodies. By the standards of cave painting, Mondrian's abstraction is most real—that is, closest to the primordial model—although it is a tad stylish and effete by comparison. The roots of Modern Art, and especially of its abstract branch, which emerged but a century ago, are thus at least as old as culture itself, which took hold, miraculously, everywhere at once. And that is the only way these roots can be pulled out and destroyed—miraculously and everywhere at once.

*Addendum* (June 29, 1997)

At my best, I am an abstract realist.

APPROPRIATION (April 20, 1997)

"Yours?" asked my father, pointing at an appropriation of Malevich on our wall. I was surprised: "No!" My father did not miss a beat: "Who stole it from you?"

ENTOPTIC FORMS (April 22, 1997)

Having discovered that "some of the symbols of paleolithic art might be a record of the geometric patterns seen as the human mind passes into subconscious,"<sup>17</sup> which would happen to a shaman falling in trance, as well as that these patterns, known as *entoptic forms*, "can also be experienced when a person is confined in darkness,"<sup>18</sup> I have attempted to explore the matter experimentally and thus offer some clues as to the origins of so-called abstraction around the turn of the century. While my family was away on vacation in late March and early April, I spent several

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<sup>17</sup> Lawson, A.J., *Cave Art*, Cromwell House, Church Street, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications, 1991, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Loc. cit.*

nights sitting in complete darkness for as long as I could without falling asleep. On each occasion I “saw” the entoptic forms just as I was about to doze off, and each time I managed to record what I had witnessed on a pad I had left by the bedside with this purpose in mind. All the patterns I have recorded are either identical or similar to the symbols actually found in paleolithic caves, which I have discovered so far in about a dozen books on cave art. Connections with Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich—in that order—are obvious, as well. To celebrate my discovery, I decided to dedicate the next series of my boards to both the patterns I have experienced myself and those I have found in the literature. Barring new discoveries, the series is complete. The gulf of some thirty-thousand years is now closed.

*Addendum I* (April 22, 1998)

I need to be a bit more precise about the entoptic forms I have witnessed. At any one time I saw only one image in the center of my field of vision. They were the size of a postcard held with outstretched arms, and they were roughly the same proportions as postcards. There was no feeling of depth to my field of vision. The rectangular forms I saw were standing upright. On one occasion I saw only one image, and on two subsequent occasions I saw short series of them, one after another, in quick succession. All together, I saw nine entoptic forms, all of the same size and shape. Those I witnessed were completely static. When I saw a series, I did not have a sense that one image was transforming into another, but that they were all separate and distinct, albeit from the same family of images. The images were composed of silvery-white luminescent lines and dots on a uniform background of dark gray. The background within an image was the same shade of gray as the background outside the image. The lines were sharp and straight, and the images were completely regular. The lines appeared to be slightly raised in relation to the background. Both the images and the background appeared to sparkle a bit, like a cathode-ray tube—a television screen, for instance. I saw these entoptic forms without the help of any substance. I simply sat in the dark and gently rocked my upper body until I was about to fall asleep, but I kept focusing on my field of vision. My mind was otherwise completely blank. Before the appearance of the entoptic forms, all I saw in front of me was a uniform background of dark gray. On occasion I would see fleeting patches of gray or white light, but no color.

*Addendum II* (April 4, 1999)

... One more word. Those who go in for unified explanations may be tempted to judge all my writings as the work of a drug addict from now on. Sorry. I’m more the water-drinking type. Never alcohol. No stimulants, and for years no coffee, no tobacco, no tea. From time to time

wine, and very little of that. All my life, very little of everything people take. Take and abstain. Abstain, above all. Fatigue is my drug, as a mater of fact.

From Henri Michaux's Afterword to "Miserable Miracle,"  
in *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology, 1927-1984*, edited and translated by David Ball, Berkeley:  
University of California Press, 1994, p. 207.

#### *Addendum III (May 2, 1999)*

At the exhibition of Kandinsky's works on paper at the Royal Academy of Arts I saw a piece that could serve as an illustration of a broad range of entoptic phenomena. Entitled *Grids* (1935), it is a collage of white patterns on black and dark-blue surface. The patterns are executed with a ruler in thin and precise lines. It certainly comes closest to my own experiences, except that the entoptic forms I have witnessed do not contain any diagonals. Anyway, I kept coming back to this piece, hoping to fathom whether or not Kandinsky has had the same experience as me.

#### THE HISTORIC MEETING OF POST-HISTORICAL AND PRE-HISTORICAL ART (April 25, 1997)

My aim is to show that we have entered a period of post-historical art, where the need for constant self-revolutionization of art is now past. There can and should never again be anything like the astonishing sequence of convulsions that have defined the art history of our century. Of course there will always be external causes for making it appear as though such a history must go on and on, preeminently the externalities of the art market itself, which thrives on the illusion of unending novelty. In a sense, the post-historical atmosphere of art will return art to human ends. The fermentation of the twentieth century will prove to have been terminal, but exciting as it has been to live through it, we are entering a more stable, more happy period of artistic endeavor where the basic needs to which art has always been responsive may again be met.

From Arthur C. Danto's *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. xv.

#### THE ART OF COPYING (May 31, 1997)

Collective art, or the art of copying, has its origin in the tracing of the savage's first primitive image.

From Kazimir Malevich's "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting" (1916) in Troels Andersen, ed., *Malevich: Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, Vol. 1, London: Rapp & Whiting, and Chester Springs, Pennsylvania: Dufour Editions, 1968, p. 20.

"THE SIGNS OF ALL TIMES" (August 3, 1997)

Thus the title of an anthropological paper on entoptic phenomena in paleolithic art, written by two anthropologists of renown, which I received recently from a friend, himself an anthropologist of merit, who was amused by my interest in this esoteric subject. I went through it feverishly in search of references to Modern Art, but I was very much disappointed. Not a trace of this obvious connection! Although the paper spans thousands upon thousands of years by linking the intractable paleolithic art and the well-researched Bushman art, for example, it fails to make the crucial step into the twentieth century, thus invalidating its very title. Perhaps "the signs of all times" will include those of our own only after its eventual close.

*Addendum* (June 15, 2001)

I was referring here to a paper by Lewis-Williams and Dawson that appeared in *Current Anthropology* in 1988.<sup>19</sup> I am aware of two more of their papers that appeared soon afterwards, but they, too, do not stray into Modern Art.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the entire debate the 1988 paper has engendered eschews this subject. In retrospect, I am not sure why I was so disappointed about this "omission," though. Scientists proceed slowly and cautiously. They are not given to speculation, no matter how useful it may appear to be. The abstract work of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich is not in the domain of science, either. Not yet. Speculating about the connections between the geometric patterns in cave art and abstract art that is still vibrant and potent would be anathema to a scientist. Well, it

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis-Williams, J.D., and T.A. Dowson, "The Signs of All Times," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1988, pp. 201-245.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis-Williams, J.D., and T.A. Dowson, "Wrestling with Analogy: A Methodological Dilemma in Upper Palaeolithic Art Research," *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 1991, pp. 149-63; and Lewis-Williams, J.D., and T.A. Dowson, "On Vision and Power in the Neolithic: Evidence from the Decorated Monuments," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1993, pp. 57-65.

would be anathema to anyone else. Only an artist can undertake to show that the continuity of human artistic experience includes the present. In fact, the best way to show that connection is through one's own work. And the good scientists will come to it sooner or later. They must.

WINDOWS (August 10, 1997)

Although Rosalind Krauss does not provide a single clue on the true origin of grids in art, her piece on grids does offer a range of examples of their manifestations in Modern Art.<sup>21</sup> However, the most fascinating examples she offers predate this century: Caspar David Friedrich's "View from the Painter's Window" (c. 1818), and Odilon Redon's "The Day" (1891).<sup>22</sup> These are not isolated examples, though. As Krauss argues,

[t]he grid appears in symbolist art in the form of windows, the material presence of their panes expressed by the geometrical intervention of the window's mullions. The symbolist interest in windows clearly reaches back into the early nineteenth century and romanticism.<sup>23</sup> But in the hands of the symbolist painters and poets, this image is turned in an explicitly modernist direction. For the window is experienced as simultaneously transparent and opaque.<sup>24</sup>

Transparent and opaque, indeed. Both windows in Krauss' piece are entoptic forms found in paleolithic caves. Ironically, she fails to recognize this superb example of the Modernist myth of originality, which is at the core of her entire project, as witnessed by her book's very title.

*Addendum* (March 9, 1998)

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<sup>21</sup> Krauss, R.E., "Grids," pp. 9-22 in Krauss' *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1986.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 16 and 17, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> See Lorenz Eitner, "The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism," *Art Bulletin*, XXXVII, December 1955, pp. 281-290.

<sup>24</sup> Krauss, *op. cit.* p. 16.

Among Anselm Kiefer's books there is one from 1975 entitled "Piet Mondrian—Operation 'Sea Lion'."<sup>25</sup> It contains a few photographs of Kiefer's toy Bismarck in a tub, but the reference to Mondrian in the book's title has to do with several stark photographs of frosted windows in Kiefer's studio. And the pattern of mullions against the frozen sky goes well beyond Mondrian.

DIGGING (December 10, 1997)

I have been corresponding with Steve Mithen from the Archeology Department at the University of Reading for a month or so, but today we met for the first time in our Senior Common Room, where we had lunch. We share a passion for cave art and a fascination with the mind of its protagonists. Last year he published a book on the prehistory of the mind, which is already out of print. I learned today that he came to archeology from the arts. In the Seventies he was at the Slade, where he was especially interested in earthworks—Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and others. As it turns out, Stuart Brisley was one of his teachers. Steve ended up in archeology because of his enchantment with digging. Digging! To wit, there are paths through life even stranger than mine. I only ended up in economics because of my craving for mathematics.

HONORABLE MENTION (December 20, 1997)

This year I participated in an international postcard competition organized in conjunction with the "Brain and Self" conference, which took place in Copenhagen this August. I took a piece of cardboard of the prescribed size, which was five-by-eight inches, spraypainted it yellow, placed my hand on the wet paint, and sprayed red paint over it. The resulting "signature" from many a cave around the world got an honorable mention and was exhibited in Copenhagen during the conference. There were only three prizes and eight honorable mentions for two-hundred competition entries. Not bad for a piece of cave art that goes back at least thirty-thousand years!

*Addendum* (October 18, 2002)

As David Lewis-Williams argues in *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*,<sup>26</sup> both positive and negative prints of hands in

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<sup>25</sup> Adriani, G., ed., *The Books of Anselm Kiefer, 1969-1990*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991 (first published in 1990), pp. 180-189.

<sup>26</sup> London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, pp. 216-220.

Upper Paleolithic caves had little to do with signatures, no matter how defined. He shows that the cave wall must have had a special place in prehistoric shamanistic rituals. In particular, the wall was most likely perceived as a membrane between this world and the spirit world. Moreover, the paint that was either applied to the hand for a positive print or sprayed over the hand for a negative one was not mere paint. It was as active or "live" as the cave wall itself. Therefore, touching of the cave wall must have been an important part of the rituals, and hand-prints must have played a part in this context. Of course, the very concept of signature, which stems from that of authorship and originality, was most likely inconceivable in prehistoric times. Which is probably why I used the scare quotes when I wrote this piece almost five years ago.

#### WITNESSING (January 20, 1998)

Imagine witnessing the very moment when a bison or a mammoth is taking shape on a paleolithic cave wall. Can you hear the fire crackling and hissing someplace behind you? Can you smell the wood smouldering, burning? Can you see the shadow of the stooped, twitching figure by the cave wall? Can you see his hand darting as the animal emerges from the gloom? Can you feel the cold hand of fear creep up your spine? Can you smell that fear? Can you hear the rhythmic rumble of several voices? Can you hear the monotone drumming against the cave floor? Can you feel your body swaying back and forth, back and forth? Can you hear the wind howling out there? Can you see that majestic animal prop itself up on its legs amid shouts of wonder and horror? Now imagine yourself muttering under your breath: "What an artist!"

#### STATEMENT FOR THE 1998 EAST INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION (February 7, 1998)

I am interested in the links between geometric patterns that appeared in Paleolithic cave paintings about thirty-thousand years ago and the roots of modern painting, and especially its pure or abstract wing. According to the recent research into altered states of consciousness, geometric patterns found in caves appear in the inner eye in first stages of trance. They are known as entoptic forms and are most likely related to shamanistic practices. As the brain of *Homo sapiens sapiens* has not changed for about hundred-thousand years, these forms can be experienced today by inducing trance. Virtually identical forms appear first in the work of the Symbolists, and then in the work of Mondrian, Malevich, and Kandinsky. My boards are based on cave art, my own experiments with trance, and the

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work of my modernist precursors. I am concerned with continuity rather than originality.

*TESTAMENTUM CXIV* (February 22, 1998)

My boards can form arrays of all sizes and shapes, but they are meant to cover not only entire walls, like icons in iconostases, but also rooms and interiors of entire buildings. The ideal space for my boards is windowless and doorless, and is accessed through a trap-door in the floor or ceiling, in which case the boards represent a complete iconostasis, a three-dimensional membrane between this world and the other. A single flame is the ideal source of light in this space, regardless of its size and shape. Except for the boards on their shelves, the lamp, and a sitting mat, the space must be empty. The best way to experience the boards is by sitting alone among them for an extended period of time. Complete silence is an essential ingredient of this experience.

THE FUTURE OF CAVE ART (April 20, 1998)

I usually decide on the title of my pieces last, but this time the title suggested itself first. It took me a long time and many a detour to the proverbial wastebasket to realize that the title of this piece is the piece itself. It would have sounded ludicrous only yesterday.

FROM A LETTER TO STEVEN MITHEN (April 23, 1998)

In the literature on entoptic forms one often finds attempts at their classification: arrays of dots, parallel lines, cross-hatched lines or grids, parallel zigzags, etc. Concentric circles and spirals sometimes appear in such classifications. These patterns are typically shown as open-ended, unbounded, and they thus imply that entoptic forms spread across the entire field of vision. However, that is decidedly not the case. Most examples of entoptic forms in cave art are different in two important respects: first, they are confined to well-defined rectangular areas; second, they are enclosed by complete or partial frames. Related to the above, the actual examples of entoptic forms are so small that not even the person painting them on the cave wall would perceive them as open-ended even when they are frame-less. If the entoptic forms were simple field phenomena, they could easily be explained in terms of elementary physiological processes. Although there can be little doubt that they arise from neurological processes in the brain, the actual patterns observed in cave art suggest something much more complex and puzzling. Whence the rectangular shapes? Whence the frames? Whence the small size of

these patterns, rarely larger than the human torso? I have a strong feeling something important is being swept under the proverbial rug by the cavalier neglect of these and related questions.

#### AFTER DANTO (April 27, 1998)

If the word “art” is to stand for the mad rush for verisimilitude and personal recognition ushered by the Renaissance and rendered obsolete some seven centuries later first by the camera and then by Duchamp and his followers, which word is to stand for that great and silent tradition which has persisted unabated since the appearance of first decorated artefacts, long before the beginning of art, and which will vanish with the human species itself, long after the end of art? Whatever it is, that word cannot be “art.” Not after Danto. If the word “artist” is to stand for all those whose names crowd our histories, starting with Cimabue or Giotto and ending with Damien Hirst, which word is to stand for those whose names we have not even forgotten and will never even attempt to commit to memory? Whatever it is, that word cannot be “artist.” Not after Danto, for whom both “art” and “artist” are notions strictly delimited in time and space. After Danto, we are banished from that wee Garden of Eden, but in return we have been offered the rest of the universe.

#### A MISTAKE (May 25, 1998)

Many of the world’s artworks (cave paintings, fetishes, altar pieces) were made in times and places when people had no concept of art to speak of, since they interpreted art in terms of their other beliefs. It is true that today our relationship to these objects is primarily contemplative, since the interests they embody are not our own, and the beliefs in the light of which they were regarded as effective can no longer be widely held, least of all among those who admire them. It would be a mistake to suppose that contemplation belongs to their essence as artworks, for it is almost certain that the people who made them had little interest in their contemplation.

From Arthur Danto’s *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 95.

#### LOWER BELLY (June 16, 1998)

I have been aware since childhood of the importance of the lower belly to many an eastern religion and martial art, but I have discovered this vital

nexus of the body myself only last year while climbing in the Julian Alps. This was the first time I was climbing with slightly adapted skiing poles, which effectively transform the climber into a nimble quadruped. As is often the case with things spiritual, the focus on the lower belly, which ties together the four limbs, is yet another aspect of the pervasive fear and envy of animals, our divine ancestors.

#### COINCIDENCE? (July 18, 1998)

Yesterday I learned from the Norwich Gallery that Pat and Victor Skipp, local art collectors, were interested in my EAST International installation, but that they were a bit puzzled by its price—one million pounds. I called them today and was delighted to learn that they not only liked the way my boards looked, but were enthralled by my statement on connections between cave art and the roots of Modern Art. Victor is a writer. In fact, he was reading Steven Mithen's *The Prehistory of the Mind* when I called this morning. He bought it a few years ago and decided to read it after reading my statement. Coincidence?

#### THE STATE OF THE ART (August 10, 1998)

Art must now, whatever else it does, come to terms with its own nature. It must discover what that nature really is. In Hegelian terms, it has reached a kind of consciousness of itself as a problem. Up to now, art had a set of problems, but it was not a problem in itself. Perhaps it had been a problem for philosophers. But now, in becoming a problem for itself, it has begun to attain a certain philosophical dimension.

From Arthur Danto's *The State of the Art*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1987, pp. 213-214.

#### NO-BULLSHIT MONDRIANS (August 19, 1998)

Yesterday I made two black-and-white Mondrians. One is a copy of Composition No. 2 from 1930, which is identical to a geometric pattern found in a prehistoric cave except that it is rotated by forty-five degrees in counter-clockwise direction, and the other is a simplification—or, rather, rendering in black and white—of a painting of his in which one panel is yellow and another blue. The latter painting I christened Composition No. 3, and I placed it in 1930, as well. It is the missing link, as it were, between cave art and Mondrian at his best. His later work is too decorative for my taste. At any rate, my no-bullshit Mondrians are exquisite. I attributed them to Goran Djordjevic. This weekend I plan to

make two more paintings of the same ilk and thus complete the series. It will be a joy to have them around, as is the case with other Goran's paintings.

*Addendum* (August 23, 1998)

Compositions No. 6 and 9 from 1930 are now finished, as well. Both are based on cave art. By Mondrian's standards, they are a tad awkward, but that is one of the reasons why they needed to be painted. At any rate, another and more plausible version of art history is now available. The standard interpretation of Mondrian's geometric paintings, linking them to his "cubist" experiments with horizontal and vertical segments of the line, is preposterous. Simply put, there is no path from his tangled trees to the entoptic forms he started exploring in 1930. Miraculously, Goran and I are of the same mind on this point.

HERE I AM (September 7, 1998)

Sometimes I feel sorry for myself. Here I am: the guy who has discovered the link between cave art and abstraction. The guy who has offered a new interpretation of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. The guy who has himself experienced abstract art as real. No-one cares, though. The grandees of the art world, most of whom have heard from me already, are quiet. Even they could not care less about Modern art, let alone about fresh attempts at understanding it. Yes, sometimes I feel sorry for myself. Here I am: the guy who has argued that cave art has a future. But the trick is to turn things around. Now as ever, the trick is to turn everything around. For is it not true that discoveries, new interpretations, and all manner of arguments about the future are among the sure signs of the ignoble end?

BIOAESTHETICS (September 11, 1998)

In a pioneering study of "bioaesthetics" published in 1973, the Belgian psychologist Gerda Smets asked subjects to view abstract designs of varying degrees of complexity while she recorded changes in their wave patterns. To register arousal she used the desynchronization of alpha waves, a standard neurobiological measure. In general, the more the alpha waves are desynchronized, the greater the psychological arousal subjectively reported by subjects. She found a sharp peak of brain response when the redundancy—repetitiveness of elements—in the designs was about 20 percent. This is the equivalent amount of order found variously in a simple maze, in two complete turns of a logarithmic spiral, or in a cross with asymmetrical arms. The 20 percent redundancy

effect appears to be innate. Newborn infants gaze longest at drawings with about the same amount of order.

What does this epigenetic rule have to do with aesthetics and art? The connection is closer than may be immediately apparent. Smets' high-arousal figures, even though generated by a computer, have an intriguing resemblance to abstract designs used worldwide in friezes, grillwork, logos, colophons, and flag designs. They are also close in order and complexity to the pictographs of written Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Tamil, Bengali, and other Asian languages of diverse origin, as well as the glyphs of the ancient Egyptians and Mayans. Finally, it seems likely that some of the most esteemed products of modern abstract art fall near the same optimal level of order, as illustrated in Mondrian's *oeuvre*. Although this connection of neurobiology to the arts is tenuous, it offers a promising cue to the aesthetic instinct, one that has not to my knowledge been explored systematically by either scientists or interpreters of the arts.

From Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience: The Unity of Science*, New York: Alfred A. Knopff, 1998, pp. 229-230.

PLAUSIBLE (September 15, 1998)

The first house Lauren rented in the vicinity of Boston was in Carlisle, Massachusetts. The owner, Nicholas Van der Merwe, who teaches archeology at Harvard, was away for the summer. I met him a few days ago, when Lauren went to his house to collect some mail. We immediately started chatting about his work, having to do with chemical analysis of prehistoric findings. Among other things he does, he studies the proportion of meat in the diet of early hominids. He claims that this proportion was as high as eighty percent in some special cases, suggesting the importance of meat for the development of our species. He had also analyzed the age of some cave paintings from the charcoal in the paint, and mentioned that he would love to study Lascaux paintings, but that the French authorities had so far failed to respond to offers he had been making together with a colleague of his. In this connection, I told him about my interests in cave art and its connections with Modern art. When I asked him about his knowledge of the literature concerning the so-called entoptic forms, he simply said that David Lewis-Williams, who had written one of the seminal papers on the topic, was a friend of his. I told him I was a bit disappointed because David had failed to make the connection with contemporary art in a paper purportedly dealing with signs of all times. That would be something I would love to discuss with David, I concluded. Nicholas smiled: "David does not take disagreement lightly." Then he told me that their friendship had been strained for a few years because, when David asked him how he liked one of David's

theories, Nicholas responded that it seemed plausible to him. David was livid: “Plausible?!”

#### FROM A LETTER TO EDWARD O. WILSON (September 20, 1998)

I have enjoyed your *Consilience* (New York: Alfred Knopff, 1998), and especially your discussion of art, that is, the connection between neurobiology and the arts. Many of the themes you explore resonate with me, as you will see from the enclosed book of mine, *Salon: Whence and Whither? - Second Lecture* (London: The Hereford Salon, 1997). If you look at Appendix B, “Some Entoptic Forms from Paleolithic Cave Art,” on pp. 25-26, you will immediately notice the connection with Gerda Smets’ study of “bioaesthetics,” which you discuss on pp. 229-230. In the two short pieces on p. 7, “The Roots of Modern Art” and “Entoptic Forms,” you will find several references to Mondrian, whom you discuss on pp. 221, 230, and 314. More to the point, you will see that it is not true that the connection between neurobiology and art has not been systematically explored by either scientists or interpreters of the arts, as you argue on p. 230. To the best of my knowledge, however, no-one has made the connection between entoptic phenomena and Modern Art; the little book I am enclosing closes that gap.

#### WHAT DOES THIS TELL YOU? (September 20, 1998)

Think of the fact that every religious system in existence is cleft in two: on the one hand, the rational, the discursive, the scholarly, on the other, the mystical, the experiential, the direct. Hinayana and Mahayana strands of Buddhism offer a well-known example. What does this tell you? What does this tell you about the spiritual in art and the artistic yearnings for religious purity, unity?

From Arthur Danto’s interview with Alice Jardine, in Russell Ferguson *et alii*, eds., *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990 (reprinted from *Copyright*, No. 1, Fall 1987), p. 84.

#### BLACK, WHITE, AND RED (September 27, 1998)

According to Edward O. Wilson, who summarizes the research on color and language conducted by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, languages with only two basic color terms use them to distinguish black and white; those

with only three terms have words for black, white, and red; those with only four terms have words for black, white, red, and either green or yellow; those with only five terms have words for black, white, red, green, and yellow; those with only six terms have words for black, white, red, green, yellow, and blue; and those with only seven terms wave words for black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, and brown.<sup>27</sup> I must originate from a people speaking a language from either the first or second group.

*Addendum I* (December 27, 2002)

Languages are organized a bit like the Crayola product line, the fancier ones adding color to the more basic ones. If a language has only two words for color, they are for black and white—usually encompassing dark and light, respectively. If it has three, they are for black, white, and red; if four, black, white, red, and either yellow or green. Five adds both yellow and green; six, blue; seven, brown; more than seven, purple, pink, orange, or gray. But the clinching experiment was carried out in the New Guinea highlands with the Grand Valley Dani, a people speaking one of the black-and-white languages. The psychologist Eleanor Rosch found that the Dani were quicker at learning a new color category that was based on fire-engine red than a category based on an off-red. The way we see colors determines how we learn words for them, not *vice versa*.

From Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1995 (first published in 1994), pp. 62-63.

*Addendum II* (January 12, 2003)

Come to think of it, in my paintings I do use the fire-engine red. So far, I thought of it as red pure and simple. Thank you, Steven Pinker!

DRUMMING AND PAINTING (October 19, 1998)

It is not surprising that I am crazy about drumming, music in black and white, when I am crazy about these very colors in painting.

*Addendum I* (October 23, 1998)

When I wrote this piece, I thought about Claire Haigh, who was quite taken by my new boards and the no-bullshit Mondrian series the first time

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<sup>27</sup> *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998, p. 162.

she came to Hereford Road. I thus sent it to her and a couple of others. She responded immediately: “There is much to be said about black and white.” Then she added parenthetically: “I, too, am crazy.” On the other side of her card she pasted a black-and-white piece of her own, which I found much to my liking.

NOTWITHSTANDING (November 18, 1998)

Of all the heroes on Star Trek crew, it is Commander Data, an ideal robot, who sports a painting by Mondrian—and a fine painting, too—in his suite on board of Starship Enterprise. An art form the roots of which stretch some thirty-thousand years backward is projected a few centuries forward and outward. The underlying ignorance on both sides of the television screen notwithstanding, perhaps this is where Mondrian really belongs.

JUST KIDDING! (December 27, 1998)

Could it be that human beings have actually evolved specialized neural circuitry for the sole purpose of mediating religious experience? The human belief in the supernatural is so widespread in all societies all over the world that it is tempting to ask whether the propensity for such beliefs might have a biological basis. If so, we would have to answer a key question: What sorts of Darwinian selection pressures could lead to such a mechanism? And, if there is such a mechanism, is there a gene or set of genes concerned mainly with religiosity and spiritual leanings—a gene that atheists might lack or have learned to circumvent (just kidding!)?

From V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee’s *Phantoms in the Brain: Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind*, London: Fourth Estate, 1998, p. 183.

IN PRAISE OF SENSORY DEPRIVATION (February 7, 1999)

“The Vertical Line” by John Berger and Simon McBurney—commissioned by Artangel and staged in the disused Aldwych Tube Station on the Strand—is conceived as an underground journey to the Chauvet cave in France, painted some twenty-five millennia ago. According to the advertisements for the event, Berger and McBurney will guide you there using lights, sounds, drawings, animals, words, and darkness. Disregarding the exuberant boast, they will still lead you to a magical place in the tangled entrails of London, where silence and darkness do conspire to a true stage for prehistoric art. Standing but a few

paces from our thundering guides, last night I prayed that the deep darkness into which we were finally plunged would last and last. More, I prayed that they would let the audience strung along a narrow tunnel experience the thick, oozing silence of that forsaken place. This was not to be—not this time, at least—but I am still grateful to Berger and McBurney for whetting my appetite for sensory deprivation in its purest, least compromising form.

#### HENRI MICHAUX AT WHITECHAPEL GALLERY (February 20, 1999)

In a snippet from “*En pensant au phénomène de la peinture*” (1946), which is reproduced helter-skelter in the Whitechapel catalogue celebrating his first solo show in a public gallery in the United Kingdom,<sup>28</sup> Henri Michaux writes:

Most often, most naturally, I use red. What is spilt more easily than blood?

In fact, the color he uses most often is black, followed by white—the color of virgin paper. Either he did not think of these as colors, or he considered them so ubiquitous, so primordial, that they did not merit mention. Indeed, red is the first color that enters human consciousness and culture in the wake of darkness and light—black and white. And what could be more poignant as the source of color than the juice of life?

#### WONDERING (February 24, 1999)

The Whitechapel has organized several talks about Michaux while his show is up. The one I witnessed last weekend was given by an art historian. Predictably enough, she was engaging and even cute when she loosened up a little, but she had nothing whatsoever to say about the subject. A couple of examples of her professional incompetence will suffice. Where I saw definite entoptic phenomena in Michaux’s mescaline drawings, the art historian saw street patterns of American cities. That was all she could make out of grids! Where I saw explicit links with shamanism in Michaux’s references to the tree of life, which is often rendered as a stout trunk with slender treads connecting the worlds above and below, the art historian saw only fissures or bisections of the visual

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<sup>28</sup> *Henri Michaux (1899-1984)*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1999, no page, quoting from *Passages*, translated by Michael Fineberg, Paris: Gallimard, 1963, no page cited.

field. True, Michaux refers to the latter in his writings, too, but the former connection—which relates to ladders and stairs, as well—is so much more powerful and fruitful! In short, she was about formal analysis, whereas an anthropologist or a psychiatrist would see Michaux’s references as stretching all the way to the roots of all art. I left half-way through the talk, wondering about the future of art history as a whole. How much longer will we have to suffer these fools?

#### ALEXANDER BRENER AS ART CRITIC (March 10, 1999)

Many of Alexander Brener’s actions are very much to my liking, but the one I like best is when he posted himself by the lectern where some art heavy was spouting, and then called out from time to time either, “This is true,” or, “This is not true.” Rings the old bell.

#### HYPERACUITY (April 5, 1999)

One term from Michaux’s writings that resonates strongly with me is that of “hyperacuity.” I know what he means, I am almost certain. I often suffer from it in swarming buildings or streets, as well as in crammed buses, trains, or airplanes. That is when I can see every hair, every wrinkle, every smirk, every flicker of the roving eye. There is nothing as grating, as jarring, as harrowing, as the human face suspended in the milling crowd.

#### WASSILY KANDINSKY AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS (April 21, 1999)

In today’s issue of *The Daily Telegraph*, Richard Dorment opines about Wassily Kandinsky’s works on paper showing at the Royal Academy of Arts. “Where’s the meat?” he asks in the title, disgruntled with what he considers the visual equivalent of vegetarianism. Dorment concedes that Kandinsky had one, if only one, great idea—that forms and colors could be used to express emotions and ideas, not just to represent tangible things—but he considers the great master’s contribution lacking in range. Those he lists as examples of commendable range include such giants as Braque, Pollock, and Warhol. So, where’s the meat? Is Dorment irked by Kandinsky himself or by his single idea? Close to the end of the article we learn that it is the latter: “The problem with abstraction is that even when the painter intends to represent ‘nothing,’ the viewer instinctively makes associations with forms and shapes in the natural world.” In short, abstraction is impossible. It is puzzling that Dorment’s list of painters exhibiting range commensurate with their lofty status includes Malevich

and Mondrian, the other two progenitors of abstract art, but his initial concession to Kandinsky is even more puzzling in view of the presumed instinctive propensity of the viewer. Once again, where's the meat? At the end of the century, abstract art is at such low ebb that anyone can take sloppy potshots at it.

#### FROM A LETTER TO JULIAN BELL (May 4, 1999)

I enjoyed your book.<sup>29</sup> Immensely. Which is why I feel especially disappointed by an omission—if that is the correct word, given the omission's weight—in your account of the history of painting. With the exception of the Makapansgat pebble from Transvaal, going back some three-million years into the murk of hominid strivings, you do not pay any attention to prehistory. In fact, both figurative painting and abstraction appear concurrently—born entire, as it were—in cave paintings some thirty-thousand years ago. This bifurcation is thus unlikely to be superceded. It is fundamental. It is built into our very brains. The best of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich are not about reality “boiled down” to geometry, as you suggest,<sup>30</sup> but are separate and distinct from that reality. And they are primordial. This much we know from archeology, anthropology, psychiatry, and cognitive science. Your omission is thus likely to haunt you and your delightful book.

#### ON WRITING AND PAINTING (June 20, 1999)

Talking today with Dan Crowe, the editor of *Butterfly*, a London literary and art magazine of recent vintage, I mentioned that I had often thought of fragmentary writing as a literary version of cubism: one attempts to capture more of reality by shedding light at it from many different sides. As I was saying this, I also realized I had never written it down. To tell the truth, I had often had similar thoughts about fragmentary writing, but this was the first time I had used cubism as a metaphor for it. For better or worse, I rarely bring up writing and painting in the same breath.

#### TOWARD A KEY TO CAVE ART (July 22, 1999)

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<sup>29</sup> *What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> *E.g., op. cit.*, p. 192.

What I am suggesting here is not only to use the past for the understanding of the present, of our unconscious, but also to use our unconscious as a key to the understanding of prehistory. This requires the practice of self-knowledge in the psychoanalytical sense: the removal of a major part of our resistance against the awareness of our unconscious, thus reducing the difficulty of penetrating from our conscious mind to the depth of our core.

From Erich Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977 (first published in 1973), p. 307.

#### ON THE ORIGINAL AND COPY (November 14, 1999)

When Alexander Brener spray-painted the dollar sign on a painting by Malevich, I resisted all arguments about the intrinsic value of the painting on account of the brushwork and other traces of craft. Malevich is not about brushwork, I argued. His paintings live in my mind, not on canvass. They cannot be disfigured, let alone destroyed, I argued. But I conceded that a painting by an old maser would be different. I conceded that brushwork makes a difference in some, admittedly special, cases. Now I feel that I had perhaps conceded too much. Nothing that does not live in my mind already is worth preserving. By extension, nothing that does not live in my mind is worth painting, either. Painting is akin to collective recollection.

#### ON THE PSYCHOLOGIES OF ESTHETICS AND STATUS (December 19, 1999)

The function of the arts is almost defiantly obscure, and I think there are several reasons why. One is that the arts engage not only the psychology of esthetics but also the psychology of status. The very uselessness of art that makes it so incomprehensible to evolutionary biology makes it all too comprehensible to economics and social psychology. What better proof that you have money to spare than your being able to spend it on doodads and stunts that don't fill the belly or keep the rain out but that require precious materials, years of practice, a command of obscure texts, or intimacy with the elite? Thortsein Veblen's and Quentin Bell's analyses of taste and fashion, in which the elite's conspicuous displays of consumption, leisure, and outrage are emulated by the rabble, sending the elite off in search of new inimitable displays, nicely explain the otherwise inexplicable oddities of the arts.

From Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1998 (first published in 1997), p. 522.

#### ON VISUAL LAICISM (March 5, 2000)

Bernard Berenson's World War II diary, *Rumor and Reflection*,<sup>31</sup> enraptures me for an entire day, but then I stumble upon a sentence in which he confounds abstract art and "visual atheism."<sup>32</sup> I am stunned that an art critic of his fame and experience, for he was eighty when this was written, could be so blind to the burning mysticism inherent in abstract art. Worse, he was a contemporary of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. Perhaps it takes an entire generation or maybe two for art critics to catch up with their fellow artists.

#### IN PRAISE OF DARK AND INACCESSIBLE PLACES (April 22, 2000)

The idea that paleolithic men were artists simply because they appreciated beautiful things, and that therefore their artistic work had no special functional aim, was rejected very early on, mainly on the basis of one simple argument. As pointed out by Reinach,<sup>33</sup> the context of paleolithic art precluded any art for art's sake interpretation, for no-one would go deep down into caves which were not used as living places in order to decorate walls which would not often be looked at, unless they had a very special reason for so doing. The important reason could not be simply that they were "artistic," for they would then have carried out their artistic works in places where they could at least see the results.

From Peter J. Ucko and Andrée Rosenfeld's *Paleolithic Cave Art*, New York and Toronto: World University Library, 1967, pp. 165-166.

#### FROM THE OUTSET (May 19, 2000)

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<sup>31</sup> London: Icon Books, 1963 (first published in 1952).

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> "L'art et la magie," *L'Antropologie*, Vol. 14, 1903.

In the introductory chapter to his seminal book on evolutionary psychology, *How the Mind Works*,<sup>34</sup> Steven Pinker writes that the mind is organized into "modules or mental organs, each with a specialized design that makes it an expert in one arena of interaction with the world"; that "the modules' basic logic is specified by our genetic program"; and that "their operation was shaped by natural selection to solve problems of the hunting and gathering life led by our ancestors in most of our evolutionary history."<sup>35</sup> Plausible, indeed. "Why do we take pleasure in abstract art: zigzags, plaids, tweeds, polka dots, parallels, circles, squares, stars, and spirals?" he asks in the concluding chapter.<sup>36</sup> According to Pinker, "it cannot be a coincidence that exactly these kinds of motifs have been posited by vision researchers as the features of the world that our perceptual analyzers lock onto as they try to make sense of the surfaces and objects out there."<sup>37</sup> In other words, the modules or mental organs concerned with vision detect in abstract art the very geometric templates that have taken shape in them over the last hundred-thousand years. By extension, the better the fit between the art and the template, the more pleasing the art. Plausible, again. But how do we explain the fact that—from the outset, starting with cave paintings some thirty-thousand years ago—the motifs associated with abstract art rarely spill out of small, neat rectangular frames? That is, why is the pleasure so localized and so geometrically circumscribed? More important, how do we explain the fact that—from the outset, again—abstract art could not but disappoint and frustrate the posited perceptual analyzers in search of the meaningful surfaces and objects out there? In other words, how could the mind be so misguided as to seek pleasure in its own organs' devices rather than in their interaction with the world?

#### CONSPICUOUS OUTRAGE (June 1, 2000)

Whenever Steven Pinker comes upon the subject of art in his masterpiece on evolutionary psychology, *How the Mind Works*,<sup>38</sup> he returns to Thorstein Veblen and Quentin Bell's contributions to the psychology of status, which purports to explain the dynamics of fashion. To Veblen's

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<sup>34</sup> Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1998 (first published in 1997).

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 526.

<sup>37</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1998 (first published in 1997).

three "pecuniary canons of taste," namely conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and conspicuous waste, Bell has added the fourth canon—conspicuous outrage. It says: "I'm so talented, wealthy, popular, and well-connected that I can afford to offend you."<sup>39</sup> It runs in the face of all the dependencies that regulate our lives. According to Pinker, the last canon now dominates the other three in the worlds of art and culture.<sup>40</sup> Rereading these words for the third or fourth time since last November, when I bought the book, I could not avoid concluding that my postcards, which are addressed to the best and the brightest in the world of art, fit perfectly into Pinker's framework. Art they undoubtedly are, for they are conspicuous in terms of the four canons of taste, and especially the last one.

OH, DEATH! (July 9, 2000)

Remember what Duchamp said: The life of an artwork is short—it amounts to ten to twenty years! And that is the maximum! And then comes death! Death! Oh, death! But death wears two different masks: that of deterioration and decay, or that of freezing and zombification! These are the alternatives! Between zombification and decay! Between a malicious vampire and simple vanishing! What do you want to be, ladies and gentlemen? A vampire-like monster or colorful slime? The ladies and gentlemen of course cry out: "Monsters, monsters ... just not slime! Monsters!" "And why?" we ask. Why this fear of disintegration, becoming earth, soil, manure? Why this fear of naked transformation? Because all of the surrounding culture only gives us examples of this monstrosity, of freezing over! Even rotting is put into a frame!!! Decay in a frame! Decay in the museum! We say: the frame itself must rot! Disappear!

From Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz's *Demolish Serious Culture!!!*, Vienna: Edition Selene, 2000, pp. 109-110.

THE FUNDAMENTAL DIVIDE (October 12, 2000)

The fundamental divide in the Twentieth Century art concerns the artist's intentions and their determinants. One camp, led by Duchamp, maintains that intentions are irrelevant; the other, led by Mondrian, Kandinsky, and

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<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 501.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 502.

Malevich, maintains that they are central. These two positions are fundamental in the sense that they are irreconcilable, that is, irreducible to a common base. Artists themselves must discover or decide to which camp they wish to go. As for myself, I am squarely with Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich.

TWO ROADS (November 5, 2000)

In the end, there are two roads. One is of hate and despair and fear and mockery. The other is of love and hope and courage and affirmation of the world around you. The fork in the road has always been right in front of you. And the choice has always been yours and yours alone.

*Addendum I* (November 22, 2000)

As art is inseparable from our lives, and ever more so, the choice facing us holds for art, as well. Why is art ever less separable from life? Because it is all that remains to us after the collapse of religion and even philosophy, the last stages in the development of the spirit, as Hegel would have put it. The long-neglected edifice has begun crumbling around us before reaching its pinnacle, and art has temporarily found itself on the top floor, as it were. One way is up, toward light, the other is down, into darkness. The choice is in front of us—artists. The choice is ours and ours alone.

*Addendum II* (November 23, 2000)

Giuseppe Mastruzzo responded yesterday morning within an hour of my sending this piece to the "Let's Make Art!" electronic-mail list. I was so busy the whole day yesterday that this is my first opportunity to return to his message. Here it is in its entirety:

As you know, "in the end" I agree to the fork-in-the-road issue. And, as you know, I often associate hate with fear and mockery with despair. It is difficult to have courage, because courage (love and hope, and the affirmation of the world around you) is about the renunciation of the present self. Hence the question: How to make art an instrument of renunciation of the present self, as it has been true, some times, of religion?

As Giuseppe knows, I am very much in agreement with him. He has introduced the theme broached here in his talk at the First Hereford Salon Symposium in the summer of 1997, which was subsequently published as

a book with a revealing title: *Who is Art?*<sup>41</sup> In it, Giuseppe is calling for "an art which does not look for its author's glory."<sup>42</sup>

I should add here that the 1997 Symposium explored the proposition that art as we know it is primarily an illusion of freedom, rather than an activity which in any sense contributes to freedom. As Goran Djordjevic argued a couple of decades ago, "the problem is not how art ought to be, but how to transcend it as a form of consciousness and of human activity."<sup>43</sup> But how is art to be transcended? How is this illusion about freedom to be dispelled? These questions are still open, but Giuseppe's is the first step in the right direction.

#### HERRING BONES (December 15, 2000)

Some weeks ago a London university performed an experiment in telepathy involving a large number of subjects. The experiment attracted the media, of course. To the best of my understanding, the whole thing was a sham. Still, something interesting came out of it. The experiment focused on the notion that telepathic messages sent by many people simultaneously were more likely to be picked up by isolated people receiving them. The group sending the messages sat in a big room and concentrated on randomly selected images, while the subjects receiving them were in a different building and were completely cut off from the world. All their senses were incapacitated, leading to something approximating total sensory deprivation. One of the subjects, a young woman, told the television interviewer that she had seen something like herring bones while the image transmitted to her contained a couple of racoons. "Close enough?" she chuckled. Unbeknownst to the people running the telepathy experiment, herring-bone patterns are among the standard entoptic forms, which would regularly come up in conditions of sensory deprivation. If the experiment was reversed, and there were many isolated subjects receiving telepathic messages, at least a few of them would report seeing abstract paintings—say, Mondrians.

#### LOOKING AT ABSOLUTES: A LETTER TO *THE ECONOMIST* (January 6, 2001)

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<sup>41</sup> London: Hereford Salon, 1997.

<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> From Lutz Becker's Film Notes No. 1, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, 1975 (in Serbo-Croatian).

Sorry to sound a bit cranky, but I really am annoyed by John Golding and your article about him ("Looking at Absolutes," January 6, 2001). To set the scene, I must say that I share his fascination with the pioneers of abstraction in Modern Art: Mondrian, Malevich, and Kandinsky. Together with him, I believe in abstraction's imminent comeback. Perhaps more important, I agree with him that one does not need to choose between abstraction and figuration, for both are fundamental. But this is where we part company. I despise his consolidators of abstraction: Pollock, Newman, Still, and Rothko. Most of them are CIA's inventions. I cringe at Golding's notion that abstraction is ultimately about sublimated figuration. "The body," you quote him, "is always there in my work." The reason why abstraction will come back, as well as why one does not need to choose between it and figuration is that both are fundamental. Not to the eye, but the human brain. As witnessed by cave paintings made thirty-thousand years ago, the two have been with us from the very beginning. In fact, the best of Mondrian's *oeuvre* can be found on cave walls. Looking at absolutes, indeed. Having talked and written about this for years, it is not surprising I am a bit cranky when it comes to absolutes.

#### CAVE ART NOW (January 30, 2001)

Last week I submitted an exhibition proposal to the Reading Town Hall, which now has two splendid gallery spaces, either of which would be perfect for a large selection of my boards, if not all of them. I was invited to submit the proposal on an official form on the basis of my letter of introduction the previous week, in which I expressed my interest and presented myself. Together with the letter, I enclosed the 1998 EAST International catalogue. My proposal was received well. Yesterday I met Javier Pes, who is responsible for exhibitions at Town Hall, and it now appears that only a few details need to be considered before the ultimate decision is made. These include the space, the schedule, the budget, and the like. We are also considering a small catalogue. Javier will let me know about all this in about six weeks, after the committee that considers such matters has had a chance to meet. The show will most likely take place in the second half of next year, and it will stay up for at least two months. During this period I will give a few lectures about the links between my work, abstract art from the turn of the last century, and cave art from some thirty-thousand years ago. The title of the show will be "Cave Art Now." I love that title! Oh, to hell with it, I am *crazy* about that title!!!

#### THE GRADUAL APPEARANCE OF RED COLOR (March 12, 2001)

I sleep with my curtains drawn because there are strong lights along the public footpath in the back of our house. The moon often shines through my window, as well. The curtains are thus essential. Whenever I wake up in the middle of the night, I can see only the dark outlines of a few familiar things: a low table with my computer on top, carpets on the walls, and a few of my boards resting on the floor and leaning against the walls. At dawn, I can already see the geometric patterns on my paintings. I enjoy looking at them in almost complete darkness. For some reason, I take it as axiomatic that a painting must require as little light as possible. A single candle is sufficient to light my boards. Anyhow, two of them I can see as soon as I open my eyes. They have black borders, white surfaces, and bear identical geometric patterns, but one is black and the other is red. At dawn the two boards appear identical because the red appears as black. No matter how much I strain, I cannot tell them apart. About half-an-hour later the red appears as brown, which gradually turns into red. When I can see the red clearly, I know it is about time to get up. In early spring, this happens around six-thirty, but it also depends on whether the sky is clear or overcast. The gradual appearance of red color in my paintings is something I relish almost every day. So many things that happen as darkness gives way to natural light are unfortunately lost in the public places where art is exhibited today, and where it is always subjected to too much light. Excessive illumination is but another affliction of our silly age.

#### CHROMOPHOBIA (April 4, 2001)

As I was boarding the plane from Auckland to Wellington, New Zealand, I noticed the current issue of *Time* in a rack with many other magazines. "What Scares You?" blares the front cover. Attracted by the topic, and especially by the fear of animals, I picked up a copy. As many as ten pages are dedicated to the lead article. Some two-hundred and fifty phobias out of about five-hundred named ones are listed alphabetically in the margins of the article. In the hope of spotting a few fears I share with others, I went through the list. Several among them indeed attracted my attention: athazagoraphobia, the fear of being forgotten or ignored; chromophobia, the fear of colors; and plutophobia, the fear of wealth. But I was especially attracted by the fear of colors. Although I love colors and use the brightest among them quite happily in my less important work, I am very much unable to use them in my abstract painting. Although I have never experienced anything like fear of colors when painting my boards, I have certainly felt a very strong discomfort. The few boards I painted in the primary colors were almost painful to make. Having finished them, I could not look at them, either. In fact, a day or two afterwards I gave them to Maya and Stuart Brisley as a gift, and they were quite pleased with the boards. As of late, I am uncomfortable even when I

use red color. A significant proportion of my new boards are black and white only. I am not sure whether I am indeed suffering from chromophobia as such, but it is certainly a pleasure to think so.

#### WORD, IMAGE (June 17, 2001)

I have long noticed that painting and writing do not go well together. Different parts of the brain must be involved in the two activities. More important, when one part is active, the other tends to shut down. The last couple of weeks I have dedicated to painting, and my writing has suffered. By and by, it has become dry, wooden, hollow. Given the superior spiritual status of writing as compared to painting, on account of its association with the word, the font of thought, this is yet another argument for iconoclasm: the image, the font of sight, occludes the word. Here, it is the painter's own soul that is at stake, as witnessed by this facile dichotomy.

#### THE DIVINE IMAGE (June 19, 2001)

In his study of iconoclasm, Alain Besançon wisely eschews the history of art.<sup>44</sup> The field has little to offer on any subject, let alone something as important as the divine image. However, philosophy and a sprinkling of theology are not equal to the task, either. A full treatment of the subject is unimaginable without a range of social sciences, from psychology, and especially its developmental branch, to anthropology and even cognitive archeology. Some natural sciences, like psychiatry and neurophysiology, would also be invaluable here. Put simply, Besançon's analysis needs sturdier foundations. His treatment of figuration and abstraction is a case in point. He is unaware either that the two coexist since the Paleolithic, when they simultaneously emerge in cave art, most likely in the context of religious rituals, or that the roots of abstraction are in the human brain, which needs geometric aids to process complex images forwarded by the eye, and which projects the patterns employed by these aids onto the world under special circumstances, some of which would have applied to the production of cave art. Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich were unaware of these connections, but so is Besançon a century later. In the meanwhile, the divine image has migrated inward, into the skull, as Malevich prophetically observes over and over again.

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<sup>44</sup> *The Forbidden Image: The Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, Chicago University Press, 2000, first published in 1994.

## ENTOPTIC FORMS, AGAIN (June 20, 2001)

I woke up around two-thirty in the morning and realized that I was not likely to have an easy time falling asleep again. I thus decided to make another attempt at seeing entoptic forms, which I have seen on several nights several years ago, in March and April 1997, but never again since then. I covered myself over my head, focused on my visual field, and emptied my mind. All this went rather smoothly. Then I waited for something to happen.

All I could see most of the time is a uniform gray field, but on occasion it would light up in the middle and I would see fleeting and indistinct lights. After roughly half-an-hour, or maybe a bit longer, I did see something of interest, but nothing as clear and definite as the first time around. Namely, I saw a number of rectangular grids overlaid over each other. There were perhaps four or five of them. Each grid had about four or five rows and three or four columns. The image was sharp in detail, but it appeared unresolved in composition. The rectangles differed in size, but they were all wider than they were tall. In fact, they were about twice as wide as they were tall. They were transparent, too, so that overlapping arrays were not occluding each other.

I must have fallen asleep immediately afterwards, but when I woke up again, I saw something rather different. To my surprise, I saw the upper left corner of a "black-and-white" chessboard. Below the corner field I saw some four fields, and to the right of it I saw about six fields. The edges of the board were very clear. Everything below this triangular area was occluded. I had a feeling I could not see the rest because of the way my head was positioned on the pillow. At any rate, I was sure I was not looking at a triangle, but at one corner of a larger chessboard field. Again, the image was very sharp.

As was the case several years ago, all the images I saw were light-gray on dark-gray background. They thus looked a bit like photographic negatives. The images were perfectly formed and very sharp in every detail. They appeared in the middle of my field of vision rather than across it. The images appeared to be embedded in the field. In other words, I was not looking at them from some distance, but seeing them directly, as it were. In fact, I could not tell their distance at all. All in all, this can be called a partial success, but nothing worth celebrating.

### *Addendum* (June 21, 2001)

As soon as I finished writing this piece yesterday morning, I sent it to the "Let's Make Art!" list. Only an hour earlier I sent around the previous piece, which relates to the entoptic phenomena, as well. At the end of the

second message I added a note to the effect that my *Residua* website could be searched with "entoptic" as keyword. This morning I followed my own advice. Fourteen pieces were produced by the search, which was miraculously quick: "Entoptic Forms" (April 22, 1997), "The Signs of All Times" (August 3, 1997), "Windows" (August 10, 1997), "The Window" (October 4, 1997), "Statement for the 1998 EAST International Competition" (February 7, 1998), "A Twentieth-Century Woman" (March 24, 1998), "Cardguide" (April 21, 1998), "From a Letter to Stephen Mithen" (April 23, 1998), "Plausible" (September 15, 1998), "From a Letter to Edward Wilson" (September 20, 1998), "Wondering" (February 24, 1999), "Glagolithic Alphabet" (August 12, 2000), and "Herring Bones" (December 15, 2000). I read all the pieces in their order of appearance, and I was quite pleased. Although a systematic presentation of this topic would take less time to get through, this particular series of texts mentioning entoptic forms was certainly more fun to read. I especially enjoyed my unabashed swipes at art historians, whom I similarly dismissed in the last piece about iconoclasm. And they undoubtedly deserve to be ridiculed whenever an opportunity arises.

*HOLY RECTANGLE* (July 9, 2001)

Science fiction is littered with crap, but one can find real gems in it also. Many writers have speculated about the most plausible manifestation of the designer—divine or otherwise. Relatively recent examples include Arthur C. Clark's monolith and Carl Sagan's decimals of *pi*. But a really subtle designer would leave a trace deep in the brain and let the mind catch up with the message. A simple image would do, provided it is utterly artificial—that is, unnatural. No regular shape is of any use here, for nature would have stumbled upon it already. Circles, squares, triangles, crosses, stars, and the like are all out. As Clark intuits in *2001*, only rectangles fit the bill. The golden section is an excellent example of such a shape. Here I am referring to the shape only, rather than the mathematical relationship between the two sides. Now, I was interested in looking for signs of extraterrestrial intelligence inside the human mind. Lo and behold, the entoptic forms, as they are called in science, include plenty of evidence of the designer's signature. Rectangles everywhere! My book is about the origin of these improbable—nay, impossible—rectangles in the inner eye.

From Donald W. Peck's Postscript to his *Holy Rectangle*,  
New York: Doubleday, 2001, pp. 337-338.

TOWARD AN EVOLUTIONARY THEORY OF ART (July 14, 2001)

Human biology, along with that of many other species of mammal, forces a higher investment in offspring from females. This makes females the limiting resource and results in males competing and displaying for the attention and favors of females while the females choose between males. Humans are moderately dimorphic—that is, there are significant differences between males and females—and this difference is indicative of the existence of sexual selection in humans. It has to be considered at least as a possibility, then, that some of the behavior of young men, like driving cars too fast or playing dangerous games, is a manifestation of sexual selection. Like the peacock's tail, display and competition between human males indicate that reproduction is the key to evolution, not survival, and this may lead to traits that increase fitness as measured by offspring but might decrease survival fitness. In other words, in at least some instances the apparent opposition between culture and biology may actually be a manifestation of an opposition between natural and sexual selection, and have little at all to do with cultural forces.

From Henry Plotkin's *Evolution in Mind: An Introduction to Evolutionary Psychology*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1998 (first published in 1997), p. 237.

#### ISLANDS OF ASTONISHING TALENT (July 28, 2001)

I have been fascinated with autism for quite some time. More correctly, I have been fascinated with the match between the standard descriptions of autistic behavior and that of my own. Henry Plotkin's introduction to evolutionary psychology,<sup>45</sup> which I finished today, offers a few interesting words on the subject. According to Plotkin, Leo Kanner, who discovered autism in 1943, described it as involving extreme aloneness, an obsessive desire for sameness and routine, and occasional islands of astonishing talent that sometimes coexist with general retardation.<sup>46</sup> If one takes "extreme" from "aloneness," "obsessive" from "desire for sameness and routine," and "astonishing" from "islands of talent," and if one takes away general retardation as a whole, one ends up with a reasonable description of myself. An imperfect autistic, in short. But why am I so eager to find such matching descriptions? Is this a joy of recognition? Or an attempt of exculpation? Or perhaps a lament in view of those beguiling islands of talent?

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<sup>45</sup> *Evolution in Mind*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1998 (first published in 1997).

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 212.

SPOT ON (August 6, 2001)

In response to my many missives about cave art, Elise sent me a cartoon from a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, to which she is subscribed. It shows a cave with six bearded guys wearing animal skins. An active volcano can be seen from the entrance of the cave. Prehistory, in short. One guy is sleeping in the foreground; three of them are sitting around a fire and devouring an animal; and two guys are standing by the cave wall in the background—one is painting a herd of animals, and the other is holding a torch. The painter says: "Maybe someday we could set aside a cave just for art." Spot on, except that there is not a single geometric image anyplace on the cave wall.

THE ONLY SOLID FOUNDATION (August 8, 2001)

Evolutionary psychology has preoccupied me ever since 1998, when I read Steven Mithen's *The Prehistory of the Mind* (1996), where he builds a bridge between this school of psychology and his own field, cognitive archeology. In the meanwhile I read Richard Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997), Henry Plotkin's *Evolution in Mind* (1997), and Edward Wilson's *Consilience* (1998). I am now reading Marc Hauser's *Wild Minds* (2000), which I bought a couple of weeks ago in Ljubljana together with Dawkins' *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996), and Craig Stanford's *The Hunting Apes* (1999). Today I bought in Reading Daniel Dennett's *Kinds of Minds* (1996), Matt Ridley's *The Origins of Virtue* (1996), which Dawkins considers a suitable sequel to his *The Selfish Gene* (1976), and Pinker's *Words and Rules* (1999). I am still looking for a few other classics of evolutionary psychology, such as Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994), Plotkin's *Darwin Machines and the Nature of Knowledge* (1995), Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1997), and Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species* (1997), but the bulk of the literature, at least in terms of popular science books, is already in my hands. The co-development of mind and language dominates the field, leading up to the unity of knowledge and the central place of culture—that is, art, religion, and science—in human development. This strikes me as the only solid foundation for understanding of art. More important, it strikes me as the only solid foundation for the development of art itself. The past, present, and future cannot but be on the same path.

KATRINE, HELENA (August 10, 2001)

In early June I bought *The Seven Daughters of Eve* by Bryan Sykes,<sup>47</sup> read it in a few days, and then responded to his offer for a discount on a genetic test to determine exactly which of these seven women was my ancestor along the maternal line. To deal with such request, the Oxford professor set up a company, Oxford Ancestors. From the outset, I was rooting for Katrine, who lived in the region of Venice some fifteen-thousand years ago. The results of the test arrived today. As it turns out, I am a descendent of Helena, who lived some twenty-thousand years ago someplace between the Mediterranean coast around Perpignan and the Dordogne valley. Disappointingly, some forty-seven percent of modern Europeans come from the same clan, whereas the clan of Katrine boasts only about six percent of Europeans today. But the connection with the Dordogne is still a welcome twist to the story. According to Sykes' attempt to endow Helena with life,<sup>48</sup> she might have witnessed the cave paintings characteristic of the region and the period, such as those of Lascaux. Whence my fascination with cave art, no doubt. Anyhow, I am still waiting for the results of the genetic test to determine my ancestor along the paternal line. According to Oxford Ancestors, there are ten sons of Adam, as it were. The prehistoric connection with Venice is still in the balance.

#### BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE (October 3, 2001)

In response to one of my pieces about evolutionary psychology and art, Arnd Schneider suggested that I should also consult the literature in his own field, social anthropology. In particular, he suggested *The Evolution of Culture*,<sup>49</sup> edited by Robin Dunbar, Chris Knight, and Camilla Power. Failing to find it in bookstores, I ordered the book, and got it a month ago. Today I began reading it. As art is central to my investigation, I immediately looked into the subject index and discovered as many as ten related keywords. To my delight, the first of these happened to be "abstract art," and I immediately checked the reference, which fell into a paper on sexual selection and culture by Geoffrey Miller. I was already familiar with some of his work. He has published a great deal about the uses of language, music, and art in courtship displays, the investment in which can be explained in terms of sexual rather than natural selection. Miller argues that these displays are highly ritualized so as to facilitate comparisons between potential mates in the context of sexual competition.

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<sup>47</sup> London: Bantam, 2001.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chap. 17, pp. 221-233.

<sup>49</sup> Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

According to Miller, "[t]his is why most people dislike abstract art, atonal music, and modernist architecture: these styles avoid just those recognizable, ritualized elements that indicate whether their creators are any good at the basics of their craft."<sup>50</sup> After so many years of pursuing abstract art, both theoretically and practically, I learn that I have been barking up the wrong tree!

*Addendum* (October 4, 2001)

Billy Childish—a musician, poet, and artist in equal measure—responds that most musicians are quite plain about playing to get laid. "Honest poets would tell you the same," he continues, "as would artists, only there are hardly any honest artists." Most of them are prudish, he says. "A strange state of affairs when the whole of nature speaks in sexual terms," Billy concludes. It is nice to have such a clear confirmation of Miller's argument. Which, by the way, I did not question, either. I was only bemoaning my poor choice of style, to use Miller's own term.

THE PRIMACY OF ABSTRACT ART (January 12, 2002)

*The Daily Telegraph* reported yesterday that two pieces of engraved ochre found at Blombos in South Africa were recently dated to more than seventy-thousand years. The surfaces of the red ochre pieces, measuring two and three inches, were scraped and ground smooth before they were engraved with geometric patterns. The piece depicted in the only photograph accompanying the article shows parallel lines forming a triangular grid. There is no doubt that the engraving is intentional. According to the archeologists and anthropologists involved, these finds point to Africa as the cradle of both human anatomical and behavioral modernity. It was previously believed that modern behavior arose forty to fifty-thousand years ago. Deliberate depictions, be they abstract or figurative, signify modern cognitive abilities. The scientists quoted in the article repeatedly mention both abstract and figurative images in this context. It took me an entire day to realize that there is something wrong in this formulation. In fact, it is the abstract images that signify the rise of cognitive abilities of modern humans. Figurative images came much later. Put differently, the Blombos finds demonstrate the primacy of abstract over figurative art.

*Addendum I* (January 24, 2002)

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<sup>50</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

I left the newspaper page with the article about Blombos on my kitchen table. I like the big and stark black-and-white photograph of one of the pieces of engraved ochre. Also, I like the article's title in big lettering: "Cave Art Dates Dawn of Creativity." But it took me a long while to realize the article was written by the Science Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, a certain Roger Highfield, rather than the Art Editor, whoever that is. Cave art is too important to be entrusted to the likes of art critics or art historians.

*Addendum II* (June 29, 2002)

Half a year after much of the international press, *The Economist* came out today with a piece about the Blombos ochres. To the newspaper's credit, the article appears in the Science and Technology Section rather than Books and Arts Section. The ochre with the triangular grid is reproduced in full color, as well. "Picasso," the caption mocks all the figurative artists, "eat your heart out." Funny, as well as poignant, but way too late. I rarely feel sorry for *The Economist*, but this is exactly my sentiment today.

ON SUFISM AND SHAMANISM (January 31, 2002)

While re-reading *The Sufis* by Idries Shah,<sup>51</sup> and especially the chapter entitled "Strange Rites,"<sup>52</sup> I suddenly realized the Sufi traditions were best understood as remnants of shamanistic practices in Asia. Just like the marriage of Bön and Buddhist traditions in Tibet, for instance, the marriage of Sufism and Islam ensures the survival of older traditions going back to the stone age. Witchcraft, dancing, hallucinogenic drugs, visions, and flying are all examples of such practices that a student of shamanism, like Mircea Eliade, would immediately recognize. However, it took me about a decade to understand my attraction to Sufism. It is plausible that all mystic traditions, all attempts to commune with divine directly, draw roots from the stone age.

HOMAGE TO ABE LINCOLN (February 13, 2002)

Arnd Schneider sent me an article about the engraved ochre from the Blombos Cave in South Africa that recently appeared in the *New*

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<sup>51</sup> London: Jonathan Cape, 1969 (first published in 1964).

<sup>52</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 206-216.

*Scientist*.<sup>53</sup> The article is based on the work of Arnd's colleagues Chris Knight, Leslie Aiello, Camilla Power, and Ian Watts—all London-based anthropologists. The basic idea is that women started using red ochre at least seventy-thousand years ago, the age of the Blombos find, to fool the hunting men into believing they were all menstruating and thus fertile, so as to get meat in return for sexual favors. Ochre is still used in some parts of Africa for body-painting purposes. On Arnd's advice, I have already read a good deal about these anthropologists' work, but the short article helped me frame a simple rebuttal. It comes straight from Abe Lincoln: "You can fool some of the men all of the time and all of the men some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the men all of the time." That is, the argument about so-called sham menstruation is begging the question. To wit, why did hunting men let themselves be fooled by red ochre for thousands upon thousands of years?

#### ANTHROPOLOGY AND ART (March 27, 2002)

Arnd Schneider took me to a wonderful Indian restaurant close to his home in Old Castle Street in East London. It was a mom-and-pop kind of place, but minus mom. He told me about a book he is now finishing for Thames and Hudson together with another anthropologist. The book is about the links between anthropology and art. It will usher a number of shows and conferences. Arnd hopes to get into Documenta and Tate Modern. I was quite fascinated by the project. Then I ventured that artists can learn a lot from anthropologists by exploring the artefacts and practices of peoples on the way out, but that anthropologists can also learn a lot from artists by exploring their artefacts made under conditions that simulate the practices of peoples long forgotten. As an example, I talked about the exploration of the roots of yoga that seem to lead to shamanism. I mentioned my own recent experiments of this ilk. Arnd agreed in general, but suggested that anthropologists would rather study extant shamanistic practices in places like Siberia and the Amazon. I actually had cave art in mind, but did not mention it. I wonder why. Am I embarrassed to talk about my own experiments with a "professional" anthropologist?

#### WHAT ART IS NOT: A LETTER TO *THE JACKDAW* (March 29, 2002)

In the letters to the editor that appeared in *The Jackdaw* of December 2001 and January 2002, Philip Smith invited artists to define art, and the editor,

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<sup>53</sup> Kate Douglas, "Painted Ladies," October 12, 2001, pp. 42-45.

David Lee, endorsed the project by promising to publish all responses. In the February 2002 issue I argued that definitions of art, which are not difficult to concoct, are of no great value to artists. Moreover, I argued that we were fortunate that no-one had the power to define art. In the April 2002 issue of *The Jackdaw*, Mr. Smith not only disagrees with me, but also bravely ventures the following definition: "Art is a selective recreation of reality according to an artist's fundamental world-view, which includes his (sic) deepest positive values." He even calls upon Robert Browning as his witness. Disregarding conundrums like "fundamental world-views" and "deepest positive values," this statement clarifies little about art as I see it, let alone defines it. I am an abstract realist. I search for geometric images projected by my brain onto my inner eye, and I search for evidence of such images in the work of others, from cave art at least seventy-thousand years ago to Modern Art masters like Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. These so-called entoptic images are universal and may be used by the brain to interpret visual signals coming from the eyes. I am interested in entoptic images as such. I render them all in my paintings as faithfully as I can. In short, anything like "selective recreation of reality" is foreign to me. Well, Mr. Smith's "definition" of art has quickly crumbled in my hands. Except if he wishes to define abstract realism as something other than art!

#### A GOOD INVESTMENT (April 10, 2002)

This morning I ordered yet another batch of one-thousand postcards from Abacus Color Printers Limited in Cumbria, who have made all my cards to date. According to my records, so far I have had seven of them made. The eighth batch of postcards will perhaps be the last I will order. The front will show about fifty of my paintings in the southeast corner of my livingroom. The reverse side will show my name, which will appear for the first time on a postcard of mine as that of an artist; the name of the show, "Cave Art Now"; the name of the venue, namely Abbot's Walk Gallery, which will end up having just one show in its history; the gallery's postal address in Reading; my electronic mail address; and the address of my *Residua* website, which contains a host of pieces about my paintings and their connection with cave art. The picture was taken by Mary Lemley, an American artist living in London, who took many shots of my livingroom last October. I think her picture captures my work very well. I hope the card will help me start selling my paintings in earnest. That is the main reason for ordering this batch, which will cost me about hundred-fifty pounds. At one-thousand pounds per painting, the price at which I have already sold a few, this is a good investment.

#### *Addendum* (May 28, 2002)

The package from Abacus arrived by courier this morning. It is late afternoon, but I have already sent out more than one-hundred and seventy postcards. About a half of them have gone to gallerists, art critics, and artists in Istria and the neighboring countries—Slovenia and Italy. Another forty or so cards will follow in the next few days. My fingers are sore from all the pasting, which took some four hours, but I am glad everything is going according to plan. Although I know that only a few people will respond to this avalanche of postcards, that is how things are in the world of art. Perhaps this is how things ought to be, too. Were it even slightly easier for artists to make ends meet, the world would be crawling with them. An unpleasant prospect, to say the least.

#### TAKING STOCK (May 7, 2002)

Her fifth book in the Earth's Children series just out, Jean Auel is in the spotlights. An Oregon housewife turned writer of blockbuster novels at forty, she has already sold thirty-eight million books in twenty-eight languages. And this does not include the fifth book, copies of which are already selling like hotcakes. All the reviews and interviews I have seen in the newspapers the last few days focus on the author and her unassuming background. They all miss the truly surprising bit in her success: her books are about human prehistory some twenty-thousand years ago. The last book is set in the Dordogne. Cave art, which flourished at the time, figures prominently in the book. But why do cave people attract so much interest today? Because people are beginning to suspect that the human mind is quite old and well entrenched, not to say intractable. It needs to be understood and appreciated rather than manipulated to no avail. And taking stock precedes every new beginning.

#### THRICE OVER (May 11, 2002)

I sit among my paintings and I wonder. If I came to this place for the first time, having never heard of these paintings, I would be stunned by them. If I heard about them and their connection with cave art, having never heard about the deepest roots of abstract art, I would be stunned twice over. But how come so many people who come here do not appear to be stunned at all? As for me, I am stunned thrice over.

#### PUZZLED, BEWILDERED (May 16, 2002)

The door of my office has a little gadget that can hold messages of all kinds. These are typically addressed to students. All my colleagues have the same gadget on their doors. Since the advent of electronic mail, they

are used rarely, if ever. Will Hughes, my colleague and friend, has been using the message holders for drawings based on my paintings. Some are the same as my paintings, but many are not. He enjoys making the drawings, which he produces with some computer-graphics software, and which he prints out in black, white, and red on his color printer. They are now arrayed on the walls of his office, as well. Our colleagues are puzzled. What do these geometric patterns represent? Why is Will making them? As of late, he gives me batches of his drawings, which I put into the message holder on my door. What are we doing? Who is behind this? Our colleagues are becoming bewildered. Will usually sends them to me, and I send them to him. The confusion is growing. The funny thing is that Will and I believe we know what we are doing.

*Addendum* (June 25, 2002)

Will's children delight in his drawings. They take them to school, as well. For that purpose, he has been printing them on small cards, and children enjoy playing with them. Will told me today that he had made a drawing using green and yellow in place of the customary red. When he showed it to his ten-year-old daughter, Vicky, she burst into laughter. "I was proud of her," he said. And I am proud of Will. Indeed, only red would do beside black and white.

CAVE ART FOREVER (May 28, 2002)

Not so long ago I introduced this painter as a writer in these very pages. Actually, I introduced him twice. The first time I wrote about his *Residua* when the 1996 edition appeared in print. It was designed in Venice and printed in Ferrara. And the second time in 2000, when *Residua* appeared on the World Wide Web. It keeps unfolding there, too. But the search for "cave art" in the book on line will yield the links between the writer and the painter. He is after the roots of abstract art—that is, Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich—in the very structure of the human mind. Cave art is full of abstract images, as well. The so-called entoptic or "inner eye" forms are "wired in" just like language, according to Chomsky. They can be elicited by a variety of means leading to trance: fatigue, sensory deprivation, hyperventilation, drugs. The title of his ongoing show, Cave Art Now, is thus ever-so-slightly misleading. "Forever" is the word.

From Dario Dandolo's "Cave Art Now," *De natura verbalis*, Vol. XX, No. 2, Summer 2002, pp. 223-224, in Italian.

THE UNDERGROUND CITY (June 25, 2002)

Dean Zahtila from Labin Art Express visited me in Reading together with his son Viktor. He showed me many images of art projects with his LAE partner, Kresimir Farkas. The one I find the most enchanting is the Underground City, a project to revitalize the abandoned coal mine under Labin, which is at the hub of three shafts that stretch all the way to Rabac, Plomin, and Rasa, small towns several kilometers away. Claiming that they were the descendants of the miners who had formed the Labin Republic in the Twenties, LAE got a concession of the mine for twenty-five years. All kinds of attractions are envisaged for the mine, including a variety of art spaces. As soon as I learned about this project from the Public Relations Officer of Labin County, Loredana Ruzic Brezac, I saw the link with cave art. I have been sending postcards to both Dean and Kresimir to their LAE address, but Kresimir has never responded to my missives. When I asked about him, it turned out he had died of overdose a couple of years ago. As he first got drunk and then took some heroin, Dean fears this was not an accident. Whatever the case, I cannot but think of Kresimir as the first Labin shaman. Perhaps he is now hanging around the Underground City.

#### ON THE EMERGENCE OF FIGURATIVE ART FROM ABSTRACT ART (July 1, 2002)

The standard story about abstract art, espoused most fervently by art historians on purely formal grounds, is that it is derived from figurative art. According to this view, geometric patterns are the product of simplification of reality—that is, abstraction from it. As the primacy of abstract art cannot be disputed after the Blombos finds, the question is how figurative art has emerged. My answer, illustrated by several paintings I have just completed, is that zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images were gradually discovered while manipulating geometric patterns, such as grids, lines, and dots. This could be achieved most easily through activities such as weaving, especially basket-weaving, braiding, and the like. Here, small departures from the regular pattern can have surprising effects. Early textiles, including mats and rugs, are replete with such simple representations. The hypothesis of gradual emergence of figurative art from abstract art is testable, as well. Careful examination of the archeological record, beginning with the Blombos ochres, will in time settle this question.

*Addendum* (October 13, 2002)

The new book by David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), provides ample support for my hypothesis that figuration follows in the footsteps of abstraction. His model of human

consciousness, which is at the center of his theory about the emergence of image-making, moves from waking, problem-oriented thought *via* daydreaming to the bifurcation between normal autistic states and those associated with altered states of consciousness. The latter are crucial for image-making, according to Lewis-Williams. The normal path goes from hypnagogic states to dreaming and the unconscious, whereas the path of altered states goes from the entoptic phenomena to construal and hallucination (p. 125). In the first of these stages, which is universal, people experience geometric images that include arrays of dots, parallel lines, grids, zigzags and the like (p. 126). In the next or construal stage, which is culture-specific, people try to make sense of the entoptic phenomena by elaborating them into iconic forms of object they are familiar with from daily life (p. 127). Here, geometric images are shaped into faces, bodies, objects, symbols. The third stage does not concern us here. According to Lewis-Williams, image-making appeared as people experimented with altered states of consciousness. It is associated with the development of shamanism. It thus stands to reason that this path was explored and mastered in stages, as well, as the higher stages on the path could not be reached directly. In terms of human development, thousands of years might have separated the mastery of these stages at different geographic locations. However, the geometric images associated with the first stage of altered states of consciousness were experienced and rendered in cave art much earlier than all others.

#### ON THE PROHIBITION OF IMAGES (July 3, 2002)

The prohibition of images of people, animals, plants, and so on, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam cannot but have deeper roots. The unease with images can be found in most "primitive" cultures, and it is likely that it has followed *Homo sapiens sapiens* for a good part of the species' development. Why would this be the case? Religious prohibitions are unlikely to hold the key to the puzzle for two reasons. First, they are relatively new. A few thousand years account for little in terms of the human mind. Second, they tell us more about the time the prohibition was introduced than about the underlying cause of unease with images. The simplest explanation is that the ability to both produce and properly perceive images of people, animals, plants, and so on, is relatively novel in the development of the species, and that the new skills are thus both mistrusted and found fascinating in an almost frightening sort of way. Even now, many people say with a bit of pride that they cannot draw. The long quest for ever-closer likeness between the image and reality acquires a new meaning in the context. It ran counter to an inhibition rooted in the human mind, which was later upheld and reinforced by religious authority as outright prohibition. It is interesting that abstraction "reasserted" itself precisely at the moment that figuration had finally triumphed. This was

about a century ago. It is even more interesting that abstraction is associated with mysticism—that is, direct communion with the world around us, rather than its mediation through representation and interpretation. Having been "domesticated," images are rendered powerless. The old quest thus turns to deeper structures in the human mind, which gave rise to abstraction at the outset.

ABSTRACT REALISM EXPLAINED: A LETTER TO *THE JACKDAW*  
(August 30, 2002)

My debate with Philip Smith in the letters to the editor of *The Jackdaw* is unfolding at a leisurely pace reminiscent of the Victorian era. It all began in the double issue of December 2001 and January 2002, where he invited artists to define art. In the February issue I argued against it, for to define is to divide, and his response appeared in the April issue. There, he attempted his own definition of art. I argued in the June issue that his definition does not encompass my own work, for instance. I declared myself an abstract realist, and offered a few words of explanation. In the September issue he wonders whether this is not a contradiction in terms. I feel that I ought to explain what I mean by abstract realism. Only then will I return to the gist of our debate.

Entoptic phenomena are many and varied. I was not referring to things one sees when one closes one's eyes and presses against them, as Philip Smith surmizes. Rather, I was referring to things one can see in altered states of consciousness that can be reached by various means, from fatigue and hunger, darkness, sensory deprivation, fear, hyperventilation, to hallucinogenic drugs. Abstract images in cave art are now believed to originate in shamanistic practices leading to trance. In early stages of trance one can see regular geometric patterns, which shamans quickly rendered on cave walls. Prepared for such events, the audience experienced similar entoptic phenomena. These are ideas coming from cognitive archeology, which attempts to understand cognitive structures behind human artefacts, like cave paintings.

By sitting in a dark and quiet place for a long time, I have experienced early stages of trance on a number of occasions. Each and every time I have seen in my inner eye regular geometric images. They were always silvery-white on a sparkling-black surface. The quality of the image is reminiscent of that on a television screen. One image appears at a time. Images are rectangular, and most of them are enclosed from all sides. The simplest images would be very like windows divided into panes. A two-by-three pattern is very common. Many, but not all, images are symmetrical. Once I would see three or four such images, I would quickly draw them, and I would subsequently paint them on wooden boards. I

paint the boards from both sides and place them on wooden battens that can cover walls of all shapes, rooms, entire buildings. My paintings include entoptic images I have experienced myself, those I have found in prehistoric caves, and a variety of images that I believe originated from similar experiences. One of my favorite paintings can be found in a French cave and in Mondrian's *Composition No. 2* from 1931.

Now, Philip Smith and I certainly agree about one thing: artists ought to think about their work and share these thoughts with others. That is, they ought to talk and write about their work. Perhaps more important in this context, they ought to debate their positions. Perhaps I took his original invitation to artists too narrowly when I objected to defining art. Although I still believe that definitions of art are of little use to artists, I accept that his invitation can be construed in a bit wider sense, to include more than definition as such. My own attempt to explain abstract realism may be understood as an attempt to define it broadly speaking. In this sense, but in this sense only, I very much agree with Philip Smith. And I feel grateful that *The Jackdaw* provides a platform for debate between artists.

#### ON DISCOVERY (September 29, 2002)

Discovery is most commonly associated with intelligence and knowledge, as well as hard work. However, one of its most important ingredients is courage. The courage to seek, to find, to tell about it, and to live with the consequences. This takes nearly a lifetime to discover, too. Which only goes to show that courage is the least desirable ingredient of discovery—a dangerous pursuit by any reckoning.

#### DRUMMING, CHANTING, PAINTING (October 8, 2002)

Working on the altogether reasonable hypothesis that some sort of musical or rhythmic activity probably took place in Upper Paleolithic caves, researchers have investigated the acoustic properties of various chambers and passages. Findings suggest that resonant areas are more likely to have images than non-resonating ones. The implication is that people performed rituals involving drumming and chanting in the acoustically best areas and then followed up these activities by making images.

From David Lewis-Williams' *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p. 225.

CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT: FROM AN ELECTRONIC-MAIL  
MESSAGE TO DAVID LEWIS-WILLIAMS (October 9, 2002)

As you will see from the title of my ongoing show at Abbot's Walk Gallery in Reading, "Cave Art Now," I am interested in "the signs of all times," to quote the title of your paper with T.A. Dawson that appeared in *Current Anthropology* in 1988. By the way, I got the paper in 1997 from Ed Wilmsen, whom you know well. I have written a good deal about cave art, as well as about your work on the subject, in my book on line, *Residua* ([www.residua.org](http://www.residua.org)). Your last book, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), is thus a delight to read, just like your seminal paper.

By way of further introduction, let me say that beside painting and writing I also teach at the University of Reading. It will not surprise you that I know Steven Mithen, whose book, *The Prehistory of the Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion, and Science* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), you discuss at length. Not so long ago I briefly considered taking another doctoral degree, this time in cognitive archeology. Steven would have been my dissertation supervisor of choice. However, I decided to take an early retirement instead, and dedicate myself entirely to writing and painting.

I am especially interested in the entoptic phenomena, about which you have written extensively, and the roots of Modern Art, as exemplified by Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. Parenthetically, this link was to be my dissertation topic. And here I come to my comment on your work, including your last book. Namely, contemporary art is conspicuously absent from your discussion of "the signs of all times." I wonder why this is so. The work of the masters of abstract art I just mentioned is replete with entoptic images that can be found in caves. Each and every one of them was interested in the so-called spiritual world. Besides, many contemporary artists would be interested in experimenting with altered states of consciousness leading to the making of such images. They would also be able to provide experimental evidence concerning the origins of art.

I would appreciate it very much if you would share with me your thoughts on contemporary art. Even off-the-record comments would be most valuable to me as an artist. And I am convinced that you must have ruminated on the subject, as well.

THE WONDER OF IT ALL (October 15, 2002)

Modern visitors to Lascaux are overwhelmed by the beauty, size, and startling preservation of so many of the images thronging the walls that "scientific" appraisal is apt to be silenced. A prominent American archeologist, who was granted twenty minutes in the cave, told me that the first half of his allotted time was rather wasted because, overcome by the wonder of it all, he viewed the art through a curtain of tears. Such is the impact of Lascaux.

From David Lewis-Williams' *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p. 237.

#### THE GATE TO THE WORLD OF SHAMANS (October 20, 2002)

David Lewis-Williams' neuropsychological model of human consciousness, first put forward in 1988,<sup>54</sup> is at the center of his last book about cave art, *The Mind in the Cave*.<sup>55</sup> I will call it the Y model, as this is how it is graphically depicted in the book.<sup>56</sup> The alert side of the consciousness spectrum is singular. It is at the foot of the Y. This is where we find waking, problem-oriented thought, and daydreaming. The spectrum bifurcates into two spectra on its autistic side. One is labelled "normal consciousness," and it goes from hypnagogic states to dreaming and the unconscious. The other spectrum is labelled "intensified trajectory," and it goes from entoptic phenomena to construal and hallucinations. All the states along the three prongs of the spectrum are understood to be fluid and partially overlapping. Now, the very point of bifurcation is at the center of the Y model. This is where hypnagogic states and entoptic phenomena intersect, as it were. And this is where the entoptic images beckon to the "spirit world" of hallucinations. How did prehistoric people discover this gate? As it stands, the model offers little guidance on this point. Were the hypnagogic states not at such proximity to the entry into the "intensified trajectory," the *sui generis* cave in the mind, it would not have been discovered by so many cultures across the globe, leading to the ubiquity of shamanistic practices. Even more important, were this gate not so clearly marked, as it were, by a wide range of stupendous entoptic phenomena, it would not be enticing enough for those who accidentally discovered it. In other words, the intersection

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<sup>54</sup> Lewis-Williams, J.D., and T.A. Dawson, "The Signs of All Times," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1988, pp. 201-245.

<sup>55</sup> London: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 125.

of the Y model is structured in a rather surprising way. It stands to reason that people—both pre-historic and modern—differ considerably in terms of their ability to discover the gate and go through it. This would depend on a range of possible interactions between hypnagogic states and entoptic phenomena in each person's case. And this is the first step toward understanding the differentiation of experience of the "intensified trajectory" built into the world of shamans. There are shamans, and then there are shamans.

#### IN NEW LIGHT (October 21, 2002)

On my way to London, where I am to meet David Lewis-Williams for a chat about cave art, through the train window I spot a number of horses in a field. Suddenly, I see them in new light: powerful, dignified, resourceful, cunning, free...

#### AN EARLY ANNOUNCEMENT (October 21, 2002)

Just met with David Lewis-Williams at his hotel in London. A man to my liking. An hour into our conversation, he proposed a gathering of anthropologists, painters, cognitive archeologists, writers, performance artists, art historians, musicians, brain scientists, and others to look into the connection between cave art and contemporary art. I jumped in at once. The place: Motovun, Istria. He pressed on. Possible funding: European Union. I moved along, or perhaps it was he again. Sponsor: Thames and Hudson, publisher of a number of books in cave art, including David's just-published book, *The Mind in the Cave*. We kept going. Possible participants: Steven Mithen, Jean Auel, James Turrell, Edward Wilson, John Berger, Jean Clottes, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, Simon McBurney, David Whitley, David Wilson, Steven Pinker... The time: October 2004 at the latest. My mind is still reeling. The aim: to let the scientists soar and to help the artists find the ground under their feet. The name of the event: Cave Art Now. The outcome: papers, exhibitions, research projects, installations, performances, readings, concerts, experiments... We parted with fireworks in our eyes. A man to my liking, David Lewis-Williams.

#### HAVING SENSE OR BEING INTELLIGENT (October 25, 2002)

The sexual symbolism of rock art and the supernatural world has been alluded to numerous times. It is important here to focus on two concepts. First, supernatural power was equated with sexual potency; thus, the shaman was believed unusually virile and, sometimes, sexually rapacious.

Second, rock art sites were symbolic vaginas or wombs; entry into the supernatural world, which occurred when the shaman "entered" a rock art site, was then a kind of ritualized symbolic intercourse. The association between the shaman, supernatural power, and sexual potency rested on several facts. At a fundamental level, supernatural power was the basis for all talents, abilities, and success. Since the sexual drive is a basic human instinct, it necessarily followed that those imbued with great power should also maintain unusual virility. Whether this principle is empirically true is uncertain, yet the ethnographic literature is filled with tales of the sexual appetites and achievements of shamans. Indeed, the perceived importance of sexual potency—and especially male sexual potency—was well expressed by the Numic people. One of their terms for having sense or being intelligent, a trait strongly associated with the shaman, translates literally as "having semen."

From David S. Whitley's *The Art of the Shaman: Rock Art of California*, Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000, p. 116.

TOWARD A PROPOSAL FOR A BOOK ABOUT THE LINKS  
BETWEEN CAVE ART AND MODERN ART: FROM AN  
ELECTRONIC-MAIL MESSAGE TO DAN CROWE (October 26, 2002)

Much of the book is already there. It only needs to be shaped. Back in 1997 the Hereford Salon published a little book of mine entitled *Salon: Whence and Whither? Second Lecture*. This is a proper book with ISBN code and the like, but we made only some 100 copies. It has long been out of print. The best way to get a feeling about the book is to go to the Salon website ([www.herefordsalon.org](http://www.herefordsalon.org)), click "Publications," and then click the book itself. There is a blurb there saying a few words about my views of abstract art, and especially Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich.

The very same web page has information about my *Residua*, another Salon publication that appeared in print in 1996. The blurb about the book also contains a nice picture of the hefty tome. The book is now available on the Web, as well ([www.residua.org](http://www.residua.org)). The site contains about one-million words, but it has a wonderful search engine that makes it easy to navigate. The best way to get a picture of my writings about cave art and the links with modern art is to search for phrases or words like these: "cave art," "entoptic" for entoptic phenomena, "shaman" for references to shamanism and shamanistic practices. These searches will overlap to some extent, but they will yield at least sixty relevant texts. With a bit of additional tweaking, this would add up to about thirty to forty thousand words. In short, a small book.

The book could contain photos of entoptic phenomena from Upper Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic caves, diagrams I have prepared for the Salon book above, my paintings, and the like. The text could appear in a number of forms, including actual postcards, screen shots, color printouts of electronic postcards, which I send regularly to some two-hundred people from the art world, and color printouts of *Residua* on the Web. The whole thing could look quite interesting.

I think this is enough at this stage. A book that would boldly claim that geometric images in caves and an artist like Mondrian have much in common because of the structure of the human brain ought to have significant readership. I would love to put such a book on the map. Please pass this message to the book agent you think would be interested.

*Addendum* (December 10, 2002)

I was meeting a friend in Notting Hill, as I often do because I know the area well, and so I called Dan Crowe, who had recently moved to Lauren's house on Artesian Road, where he would be staying for a year or so. I told him I had a few minutes only, but that I wanted to meet his lady, an American woman also called Lauren. They were on the way out, but a few minutes they could always spare me.

Waiting for Dan's Lauren to come down, he told me about a book agent he had just met, who he thought would be interested in my writings. In particular, Dan thought the fellow would be interested in my writings about cave art. They already exchanged a few words on this topic. Of course, I was eager to meet the man. Thus my letter, written and sent the next morning. In fact, I was positively excited by the prospect.

It took Dan a while to contact the book agent, however. And it took the agent a while to contact me. Before another meeting of mine, we met in Notting Hill three weeks ago. Ivan Mulcahy is his name. I was startled at first by his pin-striped suit, but we quickly got through all the barriers. Personable, intelligent, imaginative, and well read, Ivan was a joy to talk to. But he was a bit less sanguine about my book about cave art than I had hoped. Still, we have been in touch ever since. When I let him know about my lecture about cave art at the University of East London, he replied at once that he had put the date into his calendar.

My lecture and the book are connected in my mind. In fact, yesterday I set out to produce a rough draft of the book before drafting the lecture. Both will be selections from my *Residua*, it goes without saying, but the latter will be a subset of the former. I think of the pieces I will read at the lecture as a selection from the book about cave art and its relevance today. In my mind, the book should count some thirty-thousand words plus

pictures. The lecture, which should run for some forty minutes, should not be longer than five-thousand words. The same pictures, most of which I already have, should appear in both.

Today I lit upon another idea: I should ask a few of my friends from the "Let's Make Art!" list to help me shape the book. The lecture is a couple of months off, and Christmas is approaching. Chances are I will get a number of comments worth my trouble. Once the book is shaped, the lecture will be child's play. And so will be my quest for the publisher of my dreams, I dare say.

*PSILOCYBE SEMILANCEATA* (November 4, 2002)

It is known as Liberty Cap in England. Or, more affectionately, Magic Mushroom. The cap is 0.5 to 1.5 centimeters across. It is conical with a distinct sharply pointed knob on top and it is puckered at margin. Yellowish-brown, it dries ochre-buff. The stem is one to two millimeters wide and 2.5 to 7.5 centimeters high. It is white to cream, sometimes with a bluish tinge at the stem base. The flesh is cream to pallid. The gills are pale-clay at first and then dark purple-brown. It inhabits lawns, pastures, and roadsides, and is quite frequent. It has strong hallucinogenic properties, too, as suggested by its worldly name. And whence all this? My dear friends and neighbors in Reading, Cat and Nigel, helped me find a score of these mushrooms yesterday afternoon. We went to a pasture in the hills half way between Reading and Oxford. According to Nigel, about five of them will be enough to get me going in my experiments with the world of the shaman. So far, I have become familiar with entoptic phenomena, at the very root of the shaman's path. Beyond this stage there are two more, according to David Lewis-Williams: the so-called construal stage and that of full-blown hallucinations. Time to try. With science by my side.

*Addendum I* (November 5, 2002)

Nigel lent me a wonderful book about mushrooms, which he got from Cat. It is Roger Phillips' *Mushrooms and Other Fungi of Great Britain and Europe*.<sup>57</sup> The book contains more than nine-hundred illustrated species and about a thousand listed ones. They are classified as follows: edible, not edible, edibility suspect, edibility unknown, slightly poisonous, poisonous, deadly poisonous, and hallucinogenic. Of all the species, only three are hallucinogenic, and they all appear on one page.<sup>58</sup> They are

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<sup>57</sup> London: Macmillan, 1994 (first published in 1981).

<sup>58</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

*Psilocybe cyanescens*, *Psilocybe crobulus*, and *Psilocybe semilanceata*. The first is rare, the second occasional, and the third frequent. However, hallucinogenic mushrooms as a whole are pretty rare.

In his book, Phillips treats hallucinogenic mushrooms like all the others. He does not give them any special treatment. And yet, in the introduction, which is very short, we find the following regarding the traditional fear of dangerous mushrooms:

In his revised introduction to *The Greek Myths*, Robert Graves discussed the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms in religious ceremony. Is the British attitude of deeply ingrained tradition from Druidic times that mushrooms contain magical properties and may only be eaten under the control of the Druids themselves?<sup>59</sup>

The Druids, the Neolithic shamans of the British isles, undoubtedly controlled the consumption of these magical mushrooms. It is fascinating that nowadays one can experiment with shamanism aided only by an abundant literature. Teachers and guides, who were essential in prehistory, can be dispensed with nowadays. Well, not entirely. For where would I be without Cat and Nigel?

*Addendum II* (November 6, 2002)

Yesterday afternoon I had my first experience with a drug beyond alcohol and tobacco. So far, I have touched not even marijuana, let alone anything more fanciful. Having had a light lunch at noon, including mushroom soup and a glass of wine, I had nothing else the entire afternoon. At 16:25 I started boiling the mushrooms. Although Nigel suggested only five of them, I went for seven because a few were rather small. At 16:45 the "tea" was finished. I poured it into a cup together with the mushrooms and added a bit of cold water to cool it. A minute later I ate the mushrooms and washed them down with the water in which they were boiled. The taste and smell were very faint but definitely mushroomy.

I went to my livingroom and put on a compact disk with Nubian oud music. I sat on a cushion between the two large windows, so that I could see all my paintings in front of me. To my right rested a notebook and a ball-point pen. I took careful notes of my experiences. By 17:00 there was no discernible effect, but I felt a great calm descend on me, as well as an intense pleasure to be surrounded by my paintings. A few minutes

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<sup>59</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

later, I found myself staring at them ever more intently. They appeared to me to be somewhat more three-dimensional than usually. Their physicality appeared exaggerated. The battens supporting the wooden boards were especially dominant. By 17:15 I felt a bit sleepy, but I realized that might be due to intense staring.

Around 17:25 I began to be annoyed by the sounds of the street behind me. The daycare center next door was closing, and parents were coming to pick up their children. Car doors were slamming. Children were crying. Parents were yapping with each other. All this was increasingly jarring. I realized I should have been far away. Far from people, traffic, civilization... At 17:30 the first compact disk was over, but I did not wish to listen to music any longer. I left several disks within easy reach, but I quickly decided against them. Instead, I picked up my variable-pitch drum and started tapping on it with my eyes closed.

I was tapping a very simple rhythm: toom-ta-ta, toom-ta-ta... The first tap was of higher pitch, and the second two of lower pitch, sounding quite flat. This pattern was very soothing. The drumming occasionally sounded as though it was coming from somewhere else. A few times I opened my eyes to check if I was still alone. I stopped drumming at 17:50 although the rhythm was most calming. While drumming, I felt it would continue even if I stopped. Of course, it did not. However, all other sounds became even more annoying. As luck would have it, this was Guy Fawkes Night, and I could hear all kinds of loud noises out there. I thus returned to drumming at 18:00. Because my eyes were closed most of the time, the room felt ever brighter and the paintings ever more vivid. Tapping on the drum helped block out the jarring sounds of the world behind my back, but I was ever more convinced that the right sort of place for this sort of quest would be far, far from everything. Indeed, a silent cave would be just perfect.

I occasionally checked whether I was drumming too loudly, for I did not wish to annoy my neighbors, but I always discovered that I was tapping on the drum with the lightest possible touch. I realized all the sounds had become intensified. Feeling hungry, I got up at 18:20 and went to the icebox in search of something to eat. I had some of my spicy sauce with rice, which I cooked the previous day. It was as delicious as ever, but I was surprised by the crunch of my jaws. My chewing produced all kinds of sounds I have heard never before. Back in the livingroom at 18:25, I realized that seven mushrooms was not enough for my experiment. The next time, most likely two days hence, I would take the remaining thirteen mushrooms all at once.

As I kept tapping on the drum, never varying my simple rhythm, I started hearing a high-pitched echo. Once again, the drumming sounded as

though it was coming from someplace else. At 18:50, some two hours into my experiment, I decided to quit. I felt the effect of mushrooms was wearing off. Although I was still hyper-sensitive to sounds of all kinds, I had experienced no visual effects to boast about. Most of what I saw with my eyes closed were after-images of my own paintings, and especially entire arrays of them. However, the drumming was divine. The color and intensity of sound were truly wonderful. At 18:55 I uncorked a bottle of Côtes du Rhône and tucked into rice with my sauce.

When I returned to my drum at 19:10, I found that the simple rhythm I was enjoying so much a short while ago was no longer enough. Toom-ta-ta, toom-ta-ta, was still soothing, but I would soon depart from it and relish more complicated rhythmic patterns. Also, my drumming became louder. I went at the drum with force. By 19:30 I was sure the experiment was over, but I felt quite eager to resume it within a few days. So far, so good.

#### *Addendum III (November 8, 2002)*

Just like a few days ago, yesterday I had a light lunch, but this time I had onion soup. This was around noon, and I had nothing else hence. Having boiled the remaining thirteen mushrooms for twenty minutes, at 14:55 I ate them and drank the "tea." This time I went to my bedroom, drew the curtains, closed the door, and sat on the floor. The floor and the walls are covered with oriental carpets, thus muffling all the sounds from the outside. A small reading lamp lit one of the Tibetan *thang-ka* in the corner. A notebook and pen were to my right, and my drum to my left. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

By 15:10 I could feel no effect of the mushrooms. I felt very clam, though. I picked up the drum and gave it a few gentle taps, but it sounded as usual. Thus I put it down and closed my eyes again. When I opened my eyes at 15:15, I found myself staring. Whenever I would close my eyes, the after-images would linger longer than usual. This stayed with me for a few hours. The hyper-sensitivity to sound returned by 15:20. Noticing more pronounced sounds from the outside, I picked up the drum again. The sound was different, indeed. Deep, resonant, it filled the room. Gentle tapping was very soothing once again: toom-ta-ta, toom-ta-ta... By 15:25 I felt a bit sleepy, but I continued drumming with my eyes closed. The drum sounded ever louder. Once again, I found myself repeatedly checking whether I was using too much force, and repeatedly established that my tapping was very gentle. I tried different rhythms, but they were still quite simple: too-ta-toom, too-ta-toom... At 15:30 I stopped drumming for a while. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

When I looked around at 15:40, the *thang-ka* looked so much brighter and vivid than before. Even though I was sitting quite far from it, I could see every detail, too. The painting's color seemed to pervade the entire room. Everything was bathing in a pink-orange light, which seemed to emanate from it. I started experimenting with more complex rhythms at 15:50, and they came to me more easily than the first time I had experimented with mushrooms. The sounds of the drum were improbably deep and resonant. Looking around at 16:00, I was amazed by the *thang-ka*. Even though I could clearly see the lamp in front of it, it appeared that the light radiated from the painting itself. The pink-orange glow was quite intense. Although I knew the light in the room was muted, if not outright dim, At 16:10 I could see very well the patterns on the Khazak carpet on which I was sitting. They were sharp and strong. I enjoyed staring at them. Looking around the carpet I picked out various patterns in the sequence in which they present themselves to me: animals, birds, people with raised arms, trees, flowers, sundry geometric figures...

By 16:15 I became rather sleepy and it became pleasing to slump forward as I sat cross-legged with my eyes shut. From time to time, I saw parallel lines arranged in a horizontal rectangle, but the image was not sharp. It was fleeting, too. My stomach seemed to be quite active, but I would not say it was also upset. I was yawning a lot, I noticed at 16:30. Nothing special seemed to be happening, but I kept being amazed at the intensity of light coming from the *thang-ka*. The sound of a car starting up and driving away from the parking lot in the back of the house annoyed me no end. In fact, it broke my concentration. All sounds from the outside were jarring in the extreme. Thus I picked up my drum once again, so as to block out all the sounds. However, I dropped the drum at 16:45 one more time. I repeatedly picked it up and dropped it... I noticed that my belly was unusually warm. Actually, it was burning, whereas the rest of my body was not. By this time my stomach did feel slightly upset.

I got up at 16:55 and walked to the window. Peering through the curtain, I saw it was dusk already. By this time I began to realize that my second experiment was going nowhere. The experience of sound and light was intensified. Light appeared to come out of the painting itself, and the sound appeared to pervade the entire room. But that was all. Although my stomach felt a bit funny, at 17:00 I decided to go down to the kitchen and cook some rice, which I would eat with my fabulous sauce. I decided to uncork another bottle of Côtes du Rhône, as well.

Having eaten my fill, I was back in my bedroom at 17:45. I brought a glass of wine with me as a matter of course. The light in the room was still intense, and so was the sound of the drum, but my drumming was different than before. It was faster, louder, and more intricate than an hour earlier. At 17:55 I lighted a candle in front of the other *thang-ka* in my

room to celebrate another failure on the shaman's path. Perhaps Cat and Nigel will be kind enough to take me to another mushroom hunt before the season of *Psilocybe semilanceata* is over.

#### *Addendum IV* (December 9, 2002)

I did not manage to hook up with Nigel and Cat, but they went mushroom-hunting by themselves a couple of weeks ago. They were quite successful this time, and they brought me some fifty mushrooms of all sizes. When I got them, they were already dried. However, yesterday was the first time I could return to my experiment in peace. It was Sunday, too. I decided to go for the whole lot at once. This was to be my last attempt, and I did not wish to blow it. However, I decided to prepare the "tea" a bit differently than before. This time I put the mushrooms in cold water, brought it to a boil, and let the concoction cool down. I figured that I might have boiled them for too long on the two previous occasions.

I ate the mushrooms and drank the tea at 16:35. Earlier in the day I had a light lunch and a few glasses of wine. Then I retired to my bedroom. It was dark already. Once again, I drew the curtains and closed the door to keep noises down, and I lit only the small lamp shedding light on one of the *thang-ka*. Then I sat on the floor and waited. I picked up my drum at 16:45, but I put it down soon afterwards. I could feel no effect of the mushrooms yet. However, I noticed by 16:50 that I was beginning to stare, as well as that my vision appeared to improve considerably. Like before, after-images became much more intense. I was aware of the fact that I was also becoming used to relative darkness, but the improvement in vision was noticeable nevertheless. I also felt calm. I returned to the drum at 16:55, and the sound was now richer, deeper. Still, I put it down after a few minutes.

By 17:00 the light began changing intensity. It became unsteady. It would wax and wane rather than flicker. All colors and patterns began intensifying by 17:10. I felt there was a lot of light around me. I also felt that my facial muscles were tightening, rigidifying. I started yawning, like last time. My stomach started feeling a bit funny, too. It felt bloated. I returned to the drum at 17:15. It felt soothing, but I gave it up after five minutes because I felt that I should focus on other, new things. The light attracted me. It was pink-orange and very intense, just like the last time. Writing into my notebook was not a problem even in the shade of my right leg.

Less than an hour into the experiment, at 17:25, I realized that this time it was for real. But the question was what to do with it. I am not a passive observer only. I could play an active part, as well. But what part? That question followed me through the entire experience. I noticed at 17:30

that everything in my room was so bright that I had to squint when looking at the *thang-ka*, which appeared to bring all the light to the room. The Khazak carpet on which I was sitting appeared to ripple every once in a while. And so did the other carpets on the floor and on the walls. I was staring around like a drunk, I noticed at 17:40. The carpets around me occasionally crawled and bulged. But the rôle of the mere observer felt increasingly unpalatable. I felt like stopping writing and dedicating myself to my experience. I felt like plunging into it. But I also knew this was not a good idea, for I was alone.

More and more often I would catch myself staring at the *thang-ka*, the source of all light. I noticed at 17:50 that it occasionally looked three-dimensional. Certain figures would gain depth, but only for a brief while. At times, some of the figures would appear to move. This delighted me, but I felt quite odd. I knew I was in the grips of the mushrooms, but I still felt odd. I was not sure whether my stomach was upset. I was yawning all the time. Most important, I felt that my entire body was tense, rigid. My stomach muscles were especially tense. I noticed at 18:00 that my visual field was quite active whenever I closed my eyes. I could see swirling forms, like animated carpets. I could also see a great deal of vertical parallel lines, but they were on the move all the time. From time to time the parallel lines would fold to form swastikas, which would fold onto themselves and float by. I realized at 18:50 that I could let myself sink into these patterns if only I had someone else with me. In that case I could stop being the observer myself. I could float away.

I was fully aware of the fact that the light in the room was steady, but by 18:10 it appeared to me to be like that of a bright candle. The light was swaying, twisting, but never flickering. Everything around me, and especially in the peripheral field of vision, was moving, bulging, folding, breathing. I was becoming aware by 18:15 that I was making grimaces all the time. From the facial muscles that were very tense, I felt I must have looked angry or belligerent, but this was not how I felt. When I would stare very intently, I noticed at 18:20, I would also stop breathing. I would become all eyes. I would go still. By 18:30 I started feeling tired because of the muscular tension. My stomach was in a knot, and so was my face. Whenever I would become aware of the tension, I would consciously relax, but the tension would return as soon as I focused on something else.

I went to pee at 18:35. I was a bit unsteady on my feet, but I managed the whole thing quite well. That was comforting. I could move around at will, I realized. At 18:40, two hours into the experiment, I felt like curling up on the carpet and letting go, but I did not dare do that. I did not dare turn off the light, either. Alone, I felt a bit exposed. With a mate, someone I could really trust, I would feel safe to take off. I noticed at

18:45 that I was tensing my stomach muscles so much and for so long that it could not but be good for my looks. The thought made me laugh. By 18:50 I realized I could best describe the muscular tension as a fever of sorts. I was feverish, indeed. On occasion I would tremble a bit. If I did not tense my muscles, I would feel nauseous. My stomach was hot from all the muscular activity. The tension also made me fart, and farts made me laugh.

The right way to take mushrooms, I jotted into my notebook around 19:00, is to have a trusted mate by one's side and then let oneself go. Really let go. What if I vomited or beshat myself? Like dying, taking mushrooms should be an act of reaching for freedom. Come to think of it, is this where Liberty Cap's name comes from? But there was no-one with me. Without this kind of support, I felt stranded. Yawning a lot, still very much under the influence, I went down to the kitchen at 19:05. I wanted to see how it felt. And I was fine. I could manage. I returned to my room at 19:15 feeling a bit shaky on my feet. My stomach was still in a clinch, but I felt that I was past the peak of the experience. To wit, I managed to stay in control, but that was precisely where the problem was. To get anywhere, I must let go. Again, that means not being alone. Or, I realized, this might be something that comes from experience—to let go and to stay on top of it at the same time. Only experience could get you there. At any rate, I remained far from the right combination of the two. I was too good at control and too poor at letting go.

At 19:30 I felt safe enough to turn the light off. Ten minutes later I turned the light on again. There was not much to report, except intense annoyance at all external sounds—cars manoeuvring near the house, doors slamming, people talking. I also felt a bit chilled from all the muscle contractions. Three hours into the experiment, I could tell that the mushrooms would be with me for another hour or so. I decided to go back to the kitchen at 19:45 and to call it a day. I drank a cup of camomile tea before going to bed. My last hope was that I would have interesting dreams.

This was not to be, though. This morning I do not remember any dreams, for that matter. However, I had hard time going to sleep because of the patterns that kept twirling and twisting before my eyes. Everything I saw was like on a screen. I was unable to get into that shifting world, as it were, but I could watch it from the outside. I saw mostly grids of very fine grain that moved and folded all the time. Some of the grids felt scaly as they slithered past. The others were thin, web-like. The colors were delicate and subdued. It all looked like computer graphics, I realized at the time. Even when nothing was "on" in front of me, I could see that my field of vision was bulging, rippling, folding all the time.

This morning I can only say that *Psylocybe semilanceata* has taught me a few good lessons, but that the most important one is about the fine balance between control and letting go. This is where apprenticeship must have been essential to the shaman. Learning about the shaman's world by oneself is not impossible, but it is certainly difficult. Perhaps too difficult, but I will persist. Who knows, one day I may find an apprentice?

VERY MUCH INTERESTED (November 5, 2002)

David Lewis-Williams gave me David Whitley's electronic-mail address. Having read his recent book, *The Art of the Shaman: Rock Art of California* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000), I sent him an electronic-mail message inviting him to the Cave Art Now gathering in October 2004. I found his response this morning. "First," he wrote, "I would be very much interested in participating in your proposed meeting." But then he continued:

Second, and related to its topic, I have been very intrigued by Wasily Kandinsky, his work with Siberian shamans and the effects of this on his art and art theory, and of course his own influence on the course of "modern" art and design. (And even before his work with shamans, which precipitated his move into non-figurative painting, he wrote a paper for a German psychology journal on the entoptic phenomena associated with migraine headaches.) In my view this suggests that art has finally come full-circle, from its initial internal inspiration back to that same place, after a journey of some 33,000 years. (Somewhere I have written on Kandinsky and his relationship to cave art but, at the moment, I can't remember where or when.)

I wrote back at once and with enthusiasm. I pointed out the connections between both Kandinsky and Mondrian and Helena Blawatsky, a spiritualist of note around the turn of the last century. I added that Malevich, as well, was very much interested in spiritualism of his time. And I mentioned that I recently considered undertaking another Ph.D. to explore the links between the masters of abstract art and cave art. I concluded my message by saying that it now appears that the gathering will take off, as a number of good people are interested, but that we will have to be very careful about the dates. In fact, this is what Steven Pinker wrote to me a few days ago.

MEDICINE MEN AND PAINTERS (November 7, 2002)

An understanding of the activities of Bushman medicine men is essential to an interpretation of the art, because some of the medicine men were probably also painters. One early writer was told of a highly respected man who was both a painter and "a great rain doctor," and I do not believe he was the only one. Some depictions indeed show supernatural entities and events which are said to be seen only by medicine men; these include the potency which the medicine men harness, the evil which they expel from their bodies and the capture of the "rain animal." The details in such paintings suggest very strongly that they were painted by those who actually experienced the hallucinations of trance rather than by others to whom medicine men described their experiences. Of course, this evidence does not mean that every medicine man was a painter or that every painter was a medicine man.

From David Lewis-Williams' *The Rock art of Southern Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 21.

#### ON PATTERN EXAGGERATION (November 25, 2002)

Organisms get pleasure from things that promoted the fitness of their ancestors, such as the taste of food, the experience of sex, the presence of their offspring, and the attainment of know-how. Some forms of visual pleasure in natural environments may promote fitness, too. As people explore an environment, they seek patterns that help them negotiate it and take advantage of its content. The patterns include well-delineated regions, improbable but informative features like parallel and perpendicular lines, and axes of symmetry and elongation. All are used by the brain to carve the visual field into surfaces, group the surfaces into objects, and organize the objects so people can recognize the next time they see them. Vision researchers such as David Marr, Roger Shepard, and V.S. Ramachandran have suggested that the pleasing visual motifs used in art and decoration exaggerate these patterns, which tell the brain that the visual system is functioning properly and analyzing the world accurately. By the same logic, tonal and rhythmic patterns in music may tap into mechanisms used by the auditory system to organize the world of sound.

From Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, London: Allen Lane, 2002, p. 405.

#### *Addendum* (January 22, 2003)

Tibetan lamas, in chanting their rituals, employ seven or eight sorts of musical instruments: big drums, cymbals (commonly of brass), conch

shells, bells (like the hand-bells used in the Christian Mass Service), timbrels, small clarinets (sounding like Highland bagpipes), big trumpets, and human thigh bone trumpets. Although the combined sounds of these instruments is far from melodious, the lamas maintain that they psychically produce in the devotee an attitude of deep veneration and faith, because they are counterparts of the natural sounds which one's own body is heard producing when the fingers are put in the ears to shut out external sounds. Stopping the ears thus, there are heard a thudding sound, like that of a big drum being beaten; a clashing sound, as of cymbals; a southing sound as of a wind moving through a forest or as when a conch shell is being blown; a ringing as of bells; and a sharp tapping sound, as of a thigh-bone trumpet.

From *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Book I, Part II, compiled and edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 (first published in 1927), p. 128 (fn).

#### IN PRAISE OF THE MURUNG (November 25, 2002)

Listening to an orchestra of ritual mouth-organs of the Murung from western Bangladesh.<sup>60</sup> The Murung have not succumbed to Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity. Semi-nomadic farmers descending from hunter-gatherers, they worship spirits. The eleven mouth-organs or *plung* in the orchestra are tuned on a pentatonic scale. The polyphonic music alternates between free and regular rhythms. It is repetitive. It is monotonous. It goes on for ever. But it is far from boring. The pulsating waves of warbling sounds are mesmerising. The Murung have not succumbed to harmony, melody, or development, either. Their musicians do not dilly-dally—they take you straight to the world of spirits.

#### SENSORY DEPRIVATION GOES COMMERCIAL (November 28, 2002)

Google is a wonderful plaything. If you search for "sensory deprivation" on the World Wide Web, you quickly find all kinds of things. Among them, you will find an Australian company that makes float tanks, aptly named Float Tank Australia or FTA ([www.floattank.com](http://www.floattank.com)). Their pride is the Apollo Float System, which is described as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> Paris: Inedit, Maison des Cultures du Monde, 1998, W 260084.

The Apollo float tank is a light-proof, sound-insulated capsule which contains a shallow pool of thirty centimeters of twenty-five percent saturated Epsom Salts solution, which is five times denser and more buoyant than sea water. Lying back, you float effortlessly on the surface with all parts of your body firmly supported. Your muscles no longer have to fight against the constant downward push of gravity, the single greatest cause of wear and tear to bones, joints and body tissue. As muscle tension melts away, you find yourself floating weightless and free, like an astronaut in zero gravity conditions.

The pleasures and perks of the modern float tank are based on a revolutionary scientific approach to deep relaxation called Restricted Environmental Stimulation Technique or REST for short, first developed back in 1954 by researchers at the NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health) in Washington, DC.

During the past twenty years the remarkable effects of the float tank have been systematically studied and applied in such areas as health care, medicine, fitness training, sports science. and education. Meanwhile, floating has caught on in America, Australia and, more recently, Europe and Asia as a powerfully productive and creative form of recreation in its own right.

And how does this work? Here is the explanation provided by the FTA's excellent website:

Scientists estimate that up to ninety percent of the brain's normal workload is caused by the effects of routine environmental stimulation the combined effects of gravity, temperature, touch, light and sound on the muscles, nervous system and sense organs of the body. The float tank screens out these external physical stimuli, creating a pure state of "sensory" relaxation. Under these unique conditions your body has a chance to restore its natural powers of self-regulation, while you simply lie back and rediscover the latent abilities of a deeply relaxed mind.

While you are floating, your ears are below the surface of the solution, cutting out external sounds. Many people, however, find that gentle ambient music accelerates and intensifies the relaxation process. The Apollo's powerful underwater speaker system creates the feeling that you are

floating in a sea of music, enhancing the rich dream-like quality of the experience.

The temperature inside the capsule is kept at a constant 34.5 degrees Celsius, or relaxed skin temperature. As a result, the nerve endings that cover the surface of the skin no longer perceive any sense of separation between the skin and the silky mineral solution surrounding it. In the dark, weightless tranquillity of the Apollo float tank, the boundaries of your body seem to dissolve and vanish. As you enter progressively deeper levels of relaxation, even your body seems to "disappear" from conscious awareness because of the sharp reduction in signals being transmitted through the nervous system to the brain. Free from all external stimulation, your body can achieve a state of relaxation that is deeper, purer and more beneficial than sleep. With no body to look after, your mind can attend to other business.

This is what floating is all about, after all. And here is what we can learn about the floating mind on the website itself:

Although your body enters a level of physical relaxation that is even deeper than sleep, in the tank your mind remains awake and dreamily alert, just above the threshold of sleep. Large areas of the brain are suddenly liberated from their normal workload of processing signals from the nervous system and sense organs. There is a sharp drop in the level of electrical activity of the brain (measured on an EEG) from the usual 20-25 Hz down to 4-8 Hz. EEG readings show a slow, rhythmic wave pattern known as the "theta state."

This is a twilight zone of creative, inspirational thought processes, where your learning abilities are at their highest and powers of visualisation and auto-suggestion are greatly enhanced. Measurements of the brain waves produced by experienced Zen meditators in deep *satori* show large amounts of theta activity across the cortex. For most people, however, the theta state is almost impossible to enter without falling asleep. In the tank you enter this elusive state effortlessly and enjoyably, and stay in it for most of the float session. Time seems to vanish.

EEG measurements on floaters show that the level of activity in the two hemispheres of the brain also becomes

more balanced and synchronised. This can produce a subtle shift in awareness away from the normally dominant "left-brain" thought patterns (logical, linear, analytical, detailed) towards the more intuitive, synthetic and large-scale thought modes of the "right-brain". The tank does not inhibit the left hemisphere, but simply changes its role from one of dominance to one of partnership with the other hemisphere, enabling floaters to use all their mental powers.

Not once are hallucinogenic effects of flotation mentioned in this anodyne account of sensory deprivation, but that is what the whole thing is really about. The above text ends with a short paragraph to the effect that Apollo float tanks are easy to install and operate, and that they are a valuable asset for resorts, fitness centers, sports clubs, hotels, beauty salons, massage practices, natural healing centers, hospitals, medical practices, universities, recreational complexes, and private homes. The price of the system is about thirty-thousand Australian dollars. So, go for it. Most important, it is legal!

*"MEHR LICHT"* (December 2, 2002)

Thus Goethe with his last breath. Light is good, darkness is bad. Just like life and death. Light is God's province, darkness is the Satan's. Or is it? If light reveals what is around you, darkness reveals what is within you. You yourself. And your demons. But I will compromise, out of respect for the dying man: "Less light." A single torch, lamp, candle, lantern. And a flickering, tenuous, wily one. One rich with darting shadows. And bursting fears. One promising eventual extinction. *Pace* Goethe, but less is more, as we have learned in the meanwhile.

*Addendum* (December 3, 2002)

I wrote these words only last night, just before going to sleep, but this morning, soon upon waking, I already feel like explaining the background of my petulant dispute with one of the giants of the Enlightenment. I was thinking of a shaman's apprentice on a quest—a rite of passage. A brave but jittery soul descending alone into a cave. Plunging alone into the teeming depths of another world. I was thinking of the stone-hewn oil-lamp sputtering in his or her hand. And the untold wonders of the apprentice's throbbing mind to be encountered on the way.

THE SIGNS OF ALL TIMES, INCLUDING OURS (December 5, 2002)

Arnd Schneider called today. He invited me to give a talk about cave art and its relevance today at a research seminar in anthropology, which he runs at the University of East London. Among other things, the seminar explores the intersection of anthropology and art. We quickly agreed on the date: February 5, 2003. I will have an hour, of which some forty minutes will go to the talk itself and twenty minutes to discussion. And we quickly agreed on the title of my talk: "The Signs of All Times, Including Ours." Then I sent an electronic-mail message to David Lewis-Williams to tell him about the talk and its felicitous title. "The Signs of All Times" was the title of his seminal paper with T.A. Dawson, published in *Current Anthropology* in 1988, which focused on entoptic phenomena since prehistoric times. All that paper needs is a finishing touch—the inclusion of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. I just received his response. As I expected, he very much agrees with me.

*Addendum* (December 6, 2002)

Many people on my "Let's Make Art!" list have perked up since I circulated this piece yesterday morning. For better or worse, the topic of cave art is now well received among the people from the world of art. But Billy Childish is not amused by my boast. "Smug git!" he wrote back. "Yup!" I responded this morning. And smug is the word. As I always say, Billy has a way with words.

JUST AS I SAW IT (December 7, 2002)

Before I got up this morning I had two or three dreams. Each was quite short, or so it appeared to me. I must have been in and out of them in quick succession. I still remember only one of these dreams. I got a call on my mobile phone from a fellow who said that we had known each other in highschool in Belgrade. I could not remember his name, though. When I came out of that dream, I realized that I saw his last name—something like Vojic or Kojic—on the screen of my phone, which would be impossible if I did not have his phone number in my address book already. The last such dream I do not remember at all, but something interesting happened as I was waking up. It was as though the center of a film screen suddenly went blank and a simple geometric figure appeared in the middle of the white field. For a brief while I could see the edges of the "screen," which was in color. The figure was rendered in thin, straight, black lines, as though carefully drawn in ink with a ruler. It was a rectangle lying on its longer side. A horizontal line divided it into two fields of equal size, and the top field was again divided in two by a vertical line. A two-by-three grid lying on its longer side was suspended in the middle of the lower field. "I do not like this," I thought as the entoptic form faded in front of me, "but I will still paint it on one of my boards just as I saw it."

Then I realized this was a first, for all the other geometric figures I had seen were always in the negative—white on black. And then I jotted what I saw into a notebook that is always ready by the side of my bed.

KANDINSKY *VERSUS* KLEE (January 13, 2003)

Why does Kandinsky at his most popular look like Klee at his least?

LOGICALLY (January 15, 2003)

Adults and children sometimes have boards in their bedrooms or livingrooms on which they pin pieces of paper: letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards. On such boards all the images belong to the same language and all are more-or-less equal within it, because they have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the room's inhabitant. Logically, these boards should replace museums.

From John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p. 30.

*Addendum* (January 16, 2003)

By extension, such boards should also replace television shows, exhibitions, novels, public lectures...

ORIGINAL, COPY (January 22, 2003)

I sent a draft of my new book, *Cave Art Now*, to about a dozen friends in the world of art and asked them for comments. Many have obliged me, and the book is now better for it. One of them is Goran Djordjevic, director of Salon de Fleurus in New York. He begins by wondering whether cave art is art at all, but he closes his comments with a poignant question: "Is a copy of an abstract painting—by, say, Mondrian—an abstract painting, as well?" As soon as I read his message, I recalled one of his early projects. This must have been in the late 1970s. He went to the National Museum in Belgrade, where they have a fine Mondrian from the early 1930s, planted an easel in front of it, and got himself photographed while meticulously copying the painting. I do not think he wore a beret at the time, but it would not have been out of character. A realist to boot, Goran.

TOWARD AN APOLOGY IN ADVANCE (February 2, 2003)

For my lecture at the University of East London about the ties between cave art and contemporary art, I made a selection of texts from a new book, *Cave Art Now*, itself a selection from my *Residua*. In addition, I made a selection of slides that had been prepared for my previous lectures on the subject. I have been reading the text aloud and viewing the slides for a few days. Every now and then I add or subtract a piece of writing or a slide, but such changes are becoming quite rare. And I am enjoying myself ever more. However, the closer I get to a lecture to my liking, the more I lose track of my audience. God only knows what the good people will make of it. Alas, one always ends up by talking to oneself!

*Addendum* (February 23, 2003)

*Ditto* for the book, of course.

# Sundry Afterthoughts

FRAGMENTS UPON FRAGMENTS (May 20, 2003)

Using his computer, Will Hughes has been playing for a year or so with patterns he first saw on my boards. My friend and colleague from the University of Reading with whom I share most lunches, he has become fascinated with entoptic images and their rôle in art, beginning with cave art, which I could not stop telling him about. His early compositions borrowed as heavily from my work as I have borrowed from the work of others, as well as from ornaments and characters from many an alphabet, but he has long been doing his own thing. Most important, he finds tremendous joy in his exploration. That joy is visible in his compositions. Early on, he printed his black-white-and-red patterns on A4 paper, but then he started experimenting with smaller formats. The size of business cards, his batches of cards are a marvel to flip through, arrange in rows and columns, compare and contrast, and divide into groups. Will's children have taken them to school, and other children have enjoyed playing with them, also. At first he printed the cards on his own color printer, but now he is going for the real thing. The first batch of thirty-two cards is about to be produced by a printing shop, and other batches are likely to follow. At the moment, he is going for one thousand batches. He will use them as calling cards of sorts. But the last step he has taken is the most exciting. His new website ([www.efragments.com](http://www.efragments.com)), which will eventually contain both his compositions and his writings, has just come on line. Quite a site it is, too. Will's compositions can be seen either arrayed in rows and columns, or one by one, each one projected on the entire screen. Strong and cheerful, they bring Will to a well-travelled path. Simple and clean, they betray little of the toil that goes into their making with the help of computer software. Inscrutable and powerful, they point to the beginning of time. Fragments upon fragments, breaking apart and recombining ever anew...

## IN PRAISE OF DECORATIVE ART (August 10, 2003)

When I talk about my painting, and when I make a particular emphasis on the continuity of entoptic forms that underlie it, people sometimes ask me for evidence of this continuity. Even when they grant me the link between cave art and abstract art that has surfaced a century ago, they are at a loss with the intervening period. At this point I remind them of the so-called primitive art across the globe, as well as the decorative art in our own culture. The rub is that decorative art is not recognized as “real” art any longer. In fact, since about a century ago all ornament has been devalued to the point of ridicule. My argument thus falls on deaf ears or blind eyes. Therefore, the task is to bring decorative patterns back to the world of art, and thus make them “visible” once again. Indeed, this is precisely what many of my paintings strive to accomplish.

## MIT'S NEW LOGO (September 15, 2003)

MIT has a new logo, which is very much to my liking. It is bold, and it vaguely suggests the world of science and engineering, the Institute's proud domain. Still, it is not bold enough. It does not go deep enough into the human mind, either. To wit, it is an entoptic form, albeit a flawed one. The connection with my paintings came to me at first glance. The logo fits into a four-by-six grid, so typical of my compositions. It could fit into such a grid, that is. Yet, the actual logo is too squat for its width. The vertical dimension is someplace between three and four. It is neither here nor there. This is the logo's fatal flaw. Were it inscribed into a well-formed grid, it would allow for all kinds of interpretations. It would allow for much play. And it would stretch all the way down to cave art. Chances are its designers were innocent of entoptic forms. And my paintings, of course.

## *Addendum I* (January 3, 2004)

I found the new logo in the *Technology Review* of September 2003, and I sent this piece to the editor. By way of explanation, I attached a couple of images of my paintings. A few days later, I also sent the “corrected” version of the logo, rendered beautifully by Ivan Pesic, my old friend from Belgrade who now lives in Los Angeles. The piece appeared in the Alumni Letters Section of the December 2003/January 2004 issue of MIT's magazine of innovation, but minus my pictures or the four-by-six logo. Still, I got a kick out of the attribution following the letter: “Ranko Bon, Ph.D. '75, Motovun, Croatia.” I got a kick out of seeing Motovun in print, that is.

## *Addendum II* (October 10, 2007)

More than four years ago, when I wrote the original piece, I had no idea I would paint MIT's logo one day. In fact, such a painting would be inconceivable to me back then. The idea came to me only a few weeks ago, in a playful sort of way. And today I actually painted my version of the logo. On the other side of the painting I put something that looks very like the Millennium Bug. It just happened this way, though, without any connection to my *alma mater* of choice. Anyhow, the logo feels at home on my wall. It is time to take a few pictures of the new painting and send them to the *Technology Review* once again. The editor will be quite delighted, I am sure. This time around, my version of MIT's logo may well appear in the Alumni Letters Section.

BIN ENDS (October 27, 2003)

In the Bin Ends section of the last issue of *The Jackdaw* (No. 33, November 2003), which arrived this morning, I immediately spot a single-line item saying that the ancient Aboriginal cave art at Ayer's Rock or Uluru in Central Australia is being damaged by graffiti sprayed by tourists. Blood surges through my brain. The fuckers should be eaten alive! But I calm down at once without succumbing to despair. Nothing of essence can ever be lost. It is safely lodged between our ears and reproduced from generation to generation. It will be there if and when it is needed.

DIRECT ACCESS (November 19, 2003)

When you lie down on large cushions on the wooden floor of my livingroom, which doubles as the main attraction of Ca' Bon Gallery, you realize it is most appropriate for the exhibition of my abstract paintings. Its ceiling is an entoptic form, that is. Roughly eight meters in length and four in breadth, it has twelve wooden beams running parallel to the shorter side of the ceiling. Like all the other wooden surfaces in the house, the roughly-hewn beams are painted gray. The ceiling itself is white, as are the walls. Various patterns composed of parallel lines are everywhere on my paintings. The ceiling that cave artists of old could only dream about. And direct access to the sky!

“MY” ARTISTS *VERSUS* “YOUR” SCIENTISTS: FROM AN  
ELECTRONIC-MAIL MESSAGE TO DAVID LEWIS-WILLIAMS  
(December 6, 2004)

Two years after my first and rather frantic reading of *The Mind in the Cave*, which just appeared in the London bookstores, I am reading your book again. The main reason for writing to you now is to tell you how much I enjoy rereading it. It is wonderfully written and true to the evidence, as well as courageous in showing the way forward and replete with useful pointers for further research. It is a joy to read it again. I wish to congratulate you one more time.

As you can imagine, I am very disappointed that I have been unable to organize the gathering of scientists and artists on the subject of cave art, which you originally suggested. It would help us explore the links between prehistoric and contemporary art in the most straightforward way. If you remember, the gathering was to take place late this year in Motovun, where I moved in the summer of 2003. In retrospect, I must be the main culprit. My retirement and my move from England to Istria must have sapped my energies. However, it is sad to remember how much less willing were “my” artists than “your” scientists regarding the proposed gathering. It was like pulling teeth with the artists, while the scientists of the stature of Jean Clottes, Steven Mithen, Steven Pinker, Vilayanur Ramachandran, David Whitley, and yourself all responded with interest and even zeal.

I hope you are well. I also hope your research is going well. It would be a pleasure to hear from you about the response to your book since the last time we were in touch; about the possibility that Thames and Hudson will come up with another edition; about your current research; and about other research projects that impinge on your life’s work. Any pointers would be most welcome. I am eager to keep abreast of it all.

Although I am not as optimistic now as I used to be about a gathering of scientists and artists to discuss the links between prehistoric and contemporary art, I have not lost all hope. With a little bit of luck, and a couple of friends in the right places, I still hope to bring this gathering to life. Any ideas on this score would be most welcome, too. It goes without saying that such a gathering would not make much sense without you.

My life in Motovun, a small town of several hundred people, is predictably and pleasingly dull. In fact, it is quite wonderful. So far, I have managed to exhibit my paintings here, and I have had a two-page interview about my painting with the leading Istrian newspaper. The interview also touched prehistoric art, shamanism, and the key ideas set forth in *The Mind in the Cave*. However, I do not spend that much time painting. Most of the time I am writing about everything under the sun, including my painting.

*Addendum* (December 8, 2004)

David Lewis-Williams responded with a few lines only. “Thank you for your kind words,” he started. “I have now completed a sequel,” he continued, “*The Mind in the Tomb: Neolithic...*” The ellipsis is his. The title has not yet solidified, it seems. I assume Thames and Hudson will publish this book, as well. And he concluded with the following words: “Your life sounds enviable to me!” Which is exactly what he told me the second time we met in London a bit more than two years ago. He listened to my plans of early retirement without a word, and he shook his head when I finished: “Sounds enviable to me!” Living and working in South Africa, he cannot even imagine retiring, although he is in his early seventies already.

#### THE SPECTRUM OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PRIMACY OF ABSTRACT ART (December 12, 2004)

David Lewis-Williams offers his model of the spectrum of human consciousness, as well as shows how it can be used in the interpretation of cave art, in the final sections of Chapter 4 of *The Mind in The Cave*.<sup>61</sup> In his model, the “normal” spectrum of consciousness that moves from alert to autistic states in five stages—waking, daydreaming, hypnagogic states (falling asleep), dreaming, and unconscious—is bifurcated in the middle, leading to the three stages of the “intensified” part of the spectrum—entoptic phenomena (grids, arrays of dots, parallel lines, zigzags, etc.), construal (rendering various geometric patterns culturally “recognizable”), and hallucinations (visions of animals, people, and combinations of the two). These are also known as altered states of consciousness. He argues that the peoples of the Upper Paleolithic, being fully modern anatomically, must have experienced the full spectrum of consciousness,<sup>62</sup> and he therefore employs all the three stages of the intensified trajectory in explaining the full range of images that can be found in the European caves of the period, such as Altamira, Lascaux, and Chauvet, as well as others. In the last section of Chapter 4, Lewis-Williams introduces shamanism in connection with the “domestication” of altered states of consciousness. Here, he briefly discusses shamanism among various hunter-gatherer peoples that have been studied first hand. Among some of them, the first stage of the intensified trajectory is valued greatly, while other peoples virtually ignore this stage.<sup>63</sup> It can therefore be hypothesized that the intensified trajectory was not mastered all at once,

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<sup>61</sup> London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, pp. 101-135.

<sup>62</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>63</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

but only gradually. More to the point, it can be hypothesized that the early stages of the intensified trajectory were domesticated earlier than the later stages. In other words, abstract art must have predated figurative art, perhaps by tens of thousands of years of the Middle Paleolithic.

*Addendum I* (December 15, 2004)

It has just crossed my mind that my argument can be generalized in a promising way, thus leading to its further elaboration and possible testing. All I am saying, in fact, is that ontogeny follows phylogeny, to borrow a biological metaphor of some vintage. Which is to say, the development of an individual organism follows the development of a group or a species to which the organism belongs. It should be noted here that the biological metaphor is entirely appropriate in this connection as consciousness perforce has a neurological basis. In terms of painting, the development of a single piece of Upper Paleolithic art, as portrayed by David Lewis-Williams in his model of consciousness, follows the development of painting from the Middle Paleolithic to the Upper Paleolithic. That is, it begins with representations of entoptic phenomena, moves on to construal in all its culturally-dependent forms, and it ends in full-blown hallucinations. This is the path of “domestication” of different stages of altered states of consciousness. Put this way, my hypothesis is both clearer and more easily available to scrutiny. Which is exactly as it should be, if the hypothesis is to be properly tested by empirical research.

*Addendum II* (March 4, 2005)

I sent this piece and the *addendum* to David Lewis-Williams. I was interested in his reaction. At first I sent everything to him *via* electronic mail, but then I sent him a letter by mail, as well. Only today I received his answer by electronic mail, as his original message had bounced:

Thanks for your thoughts on the primacy of abstract art. I have thought much about it. And you have the recent (well, comparatively) Blombos finds of ochre engraved with patterns of crosses and encompassing lines (nearly 80,000 years old). Yet, all in all, I have to say that I am not persuaded. But, as you rightly say, we shall have to see what the evidence says.

In short, he is sceptical, but he does not dismiss the idea. For the time being, that is good enough. With Blombos behind the hypothesis, everything is fine and dandy. More such finds in Africa would only lend credence to the idea of primacy of abstract art.

### THE VORTEX (February 16, 2005)

Looking at my paintings refracted in a large wine glass filled with water, I can see the connection with cave art even better than usual. Turned upside down and around, the array of geometric paintings twists and vanishes toward the bottom of the tall glass, just as it would in a full-blown hallucination of a prehistoric shaman. The vortex would fit into a dark, narrow, and winding cave so much better than it does in my bright, ample, and square house *cum* art gallery. In fact, the vortex and the cave would become one and the same.

### YUSUF (May 11, 2005)

Orlando Mohorovic came to see me today. He lives in Rabac near Labin. A while ago he read about me in the local newspapers, where he also saw a couple of pictures of my paintings, and so he wanted to meet me. We got on famously. As it turned out, he was Joseph Beuys' student in Düsseldorf in the mid-Seventies. We talked a lot about his teacher, and especially about his well-publicized brush with shamanism. Before he left, Orlando told me a little secret of the inner circle of Beuys' students: between themselves, but not to the approval of their stern teacher, they called him Yusuf. Even now, thirty years later, Orlando dropped his voice whenever he uttered the secret name.

### *Addendum* (January 31, 2007)

When Orlando came to see me, we agreed to look for an opportunity to exhibit together. We also agreed to look for a third artist, someone who would fit our mould and round off our vision of art. Today Armano Jericevic came to see me. We met a short while ago quite by chance, and we got on famously, too. His paintings are raw, powerful, direct. I told him about Orlando, and we agreed to look for a common goal. When I proposed that we go for the transcendence of the individual in art, he agreed at once. The signature be damned. Now I must return to Orlando and see how he feels about such an endeavor, which reaches far beyond originality, authorship, creativity. With some luck, there will be three of us. One fine day, circumstances permitting, there may be thousands upon thousands of us troglodytes. And old Yusuf, the shaman of collective art from the Sixties, may be among us once again.

### ICONS, ICONOSTASES (September 19, 2005)

As I read in *The Economist* about Russia's most famous paintings on show at the Guggenheim in New York ("The Big Haul," September 17, 2005), I

am startled by the following bit of wisdom about one of my favorite Russian painters: “The western eye understands Kasimir Malevich’s ‘Black Square’ primarily as a work of minimalism, for example. The Russian eye places it within the tradition of the icon.” Minimalism, for example? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Much of Malevich’s work comes from the world of icons, as is well known to anyone who cares about Modern Art. But then I think of my own work and swiftly panic. Another example of minimalism? For crying out loud, arrays of my paintings on their battens are nothing less than iconostases!

#### POSITIVE, NEGATIVE (October 19, 2005)

Grids can be quite fascinating in spite of their stark simplicity. They have thus fascinated many a careful observer since time immemorial. Take any square grid constructed with straight lines of a certain thickness. Any two colors will do, as will any two sufficiently different shades of the same color. If the lines are thin, the faces of the grid will appear empty or “negative” and the grid full or “positive.” Increase the thickness of the lines until the faces of the grid appear to form a square array of dots. The grid itself will appear negative and the dots positive. As the thickness of the lines continues to increase, the dots will shrink, and ultimately vanish. At this point, the grid will turn into a surface, which will appear positive once again. But there is an intermediate thickness of grid lines and size of its faces that will confound the eye. The brain, that is. The grid will appear positive for a while, and then the dots will appear positive for a while. The composition will seesaw indefinitely between the two. It will appear to be pulsating. Nay, alive. No wonder shamans of old found grids fascinating.

#### THE ICEMAN’S TATTOOS (December 1, 2005)

Some friends recently lent me a book about tribal tattoos, and I just spent an hour or so leafing through it. Some of the tattoos in the book were taken from Neolithic finds, as well. To my disappointment, there is nothing in it about the so-called Iceman, who was buried in ice in the Alps more than five-thousand years ago. His body, still in excellent condition, was found in the early Nineties. It was studied quite extensively by a large team of scientists from many countries. The Iceman had a score of tattoos all over his body, but most of them clustered around his leg joints and his lower back. As it was determined that the man had suffered from arthritis and rheumatism, it was inferred that the tattoos most likely served a therapeutic purpose. Be that as it may, all the tattoos are distinct entoptic forms. Most of them are sets of parallel lines, but a couple of them consist of single crossed lines. Most of the parallel lines come in

sets of three, but there are also several tattoos with sets of four and six lines. Flag-like and bold, they are wonderful to behold. Why were they not included in the book of tribal tattoos then? The reason is not difficult to surmise. Even if the people who compiled it were aware of the Iceman's tattoos, they would probably strike them as a bit too simple. A bit too plain, and maybe even boring. At this day and age, tattoos by Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich would probably suffer the very same fate.

GREAT LEAPS FORWARD: A LETTER TO *THE ECONOMIST*  
(January 4, 2006)

The so-called Great Leap Forward of around forty-thousand years ago, which you suggest is going out of fashion in your survey of human evolution ("The Proper Study of Mankind," December 24, 2005), is associated with the mastery of the entire autistic spectrum of human consciousness, culminating with hallucination. This was the proper domain of the shaman, and it is reflected in the Upper Paleolithic art in France and Spain. But the gradual "domestication" of autistic states of consciousness most likely began much earlier, as witnessed by recent finds from South Africa. Dated to close to eighty-thousand years ago, these finds bear abstract patterns, which are associated with the first step along the path toward full hallucination. According to David Lewis-Williams, a leading student of prehistoric art, there are three stages along the autistic path. The first is associated with abstract patterns projected onto the inner eye; the second with construal of people or animals out of these patterns; and the third with hallucinations of animals and people, or combinations of the two. This would suggest not one leap forward, but three. The shamanistic "revolution" itself was the result of an evolutionary process.

WHILE I WAS NOT LOOKING (January 20, 2006)

Whenever my paintings are fooled around with, like turned around or switched about on their battens, I spot it immediately. Today I was visited by a merry bunch of Motovun Film Festival people, who unexpectedly appeared in town, and I showed them my house. One of them had playfully turned around a number of my paintings while I was not looking. And I spotted the change as soon as my visitors had left, as I always do. Although both sides of each of my paintings are painted at the same time, each side makes sense to me in the context of other paintings on display in their vicinity. Each painting relates to several others in the array. They form compositions of sorts, of which there could be several interrelated ones in a large array of paintings. For some reason, no-one seems to see

these compositions in the same way as I do. And thus no-one can fool around with them unnoticed.

#### ETCHED AGAINST THE SKY (February 7, 2006)

I was standing by the low parapet of my terrace and measuring segments of the horizon with my outstretched arms. My thumbs were touching, and my little fingers were pointed upward. The sun was still high in the sky. “Neighbor,” called Nada Tarandek from the vegetable garden under Istra Toner’s house, “what in the world are you doing?” She and her sons often come to the garden, but I forgot to look. “Oh,” I cleared my throat, “I am figuring out where the sun will set this evening.” Nada just wagged her index finger at me. Had I seen her beforehand, I would have been much more careful. Many people in these parts are worried about witches and sorcerers of all kinds. And I must have looked quite funny etched against the sky in my black fleece with my outstretched arms pointing toward the horizon. Add my interview about shamanism and art in *Glas Istre* or *The Voice of Istria* two years ago, and my spooky reputation is as good as made—the shaman of Motovun.

#### PACE MONDRIAN, KANDINSKY, AND MALEVICH (February 19, 2006)

Above the hot tip of my cigar, my squares, lines, and dots shimmer. The only dynamism that will ever benefit my paintings. *Pace* Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich.

#### HOMAGE TO JULIUS KNIFER (August 4, 2006)

In Croatia, my paintings are often associated with paintings and drawings of Julius Knifer, an abstract Croatian artist who died not long ago. More often than not, I am annoyed by this connection. Although I do appreciate his drawing method, which involved months of meticulous application of graphite to paper, I do not see much in his compositions. Meanders all. They are a bit too pretty for my taste, as well. For some reason, there are no meanders in my compositions, either. Which is why I recently decided to make a painting of a simple meander. This afternoon I started it, and I will finish it tomorrow morning. The meander will be white on black surface, and it will fit perfectly into my standard four-by-six grid. This homage will be a bit of a joke, too. At least in part, I should add. Here I go, sinking into the Croatian soil, as it were. But there is nothing wrong with meanders, I must admit, and I am sure to enjoy my new painting once

it finds its proper place on one of the walls in my livingroom. My very own Knifer.

*Addendum I* (August 6, 2006)

The painting on the other side of the wooden board ended up being a simple meander, as well. In fact, it is even simpler than the one I have started with. Again, the meander is white on black. But it is quite dynamic due to the background-foreground ambiguity in the composition. The two black rectangles extending from the black border of the painting compete with the ostensible subject of the composition, which looks like a fat, white “S” lying on its back. The background and foreground alternately compete for attention. Parenthetically, this is only appropriate for a painting in the tradition of shamans. In addition, the black rectangles attached to the black border are reminiscent of Malevich’s bold sketches illustrating his theoretical arguments about the development of painting. In short, my homage to Knifer turned out much better than I had originally expected. If there were any joke to it, it is quite gone by now. And it is a real joy to see either of the new paintings among so many others gracing my walls.

*Addendum II* (December 13, 2006)

After a brief respite, I returned to meanders. Minus Knifer, though. This time the inspiration came from a new solar cell that can be installed in windows. I found a picture of one of those, recently produced somewhere in the States, in the last issue of *Technology Review*, a magazine I regularly receive as an MIT alumnus. “Power windows,” the title of the article blared. The pattern of interlocking combs is striking, but the meanders in it are not immediately visible. They have to be, as it were, discovered. Today I painted one of those on one side of a board, and two parallel ones on the other side. Both sides are quite arresting, but the meanders take a little time to come into focus, especially with parallel meanders. As do the interlocking combs, once the meanders become dominant. At some point the two patterns start going back and forth. That is just how I like it, too. Returning to Knifer, it is fair to say that I would never have been moved by the solar cell had I not painted the board eulogized in this piece. So be it. Painting is about painting, after all.

SO VERY ABSTRACT (September 26, 2006)

What annoys me most about abstraction is its very name. Abstraction from reality, that is. True abstraction is as real as reality, I have been claiming for a long time. More, true abstraction has nothing to do with abstraction, either. But, I am in a playful mood as of late. Today I

finished a painting dedicated to the Plumed Serpent, the Aztec Quetzalcóatl, from the divinity's temple in Teotihuacán north of Mexico City. I painted the tip of its nose. Its nostrils, to be more precise. Hewn in reddish stone, the monster greets the visitor to the temple, its teeth bared. The head is closest to that of a jaguar, while the massive serpent body is covered with plumage. The huge nostrils are rendered in a few simple strokes. I could not but push it a few steps further. At any rate, the abstraction is so complete that the nose tip on my painting is unrecognizable as such. All one can see are two opposing spirals. To help the innocent spectator, I put bared teeth on the other side of the painting. Very abstract, too. So very abstract, in fact, this little bit of writing is needed to poke fun at the abstraction.

*Addendum* (October 2, 2006)

In Christian Orthodox iconography, the iconostasis is conceived of as a membrane between this world and the other one. Each icon in the array both connects and separates the two. The same is believed to apply to prehistoric cave paintings, where the cave wall could have been conceived of as a membrane between this one and the spirit world. As I sit and stare at my many paintings on their battens in my livingroom, I like to think of the last one as linking me with ancient Mexico. Quite directly, too. The tip of Quetzalcóatl's nose is right here on my wall, his curly body wriggles over untold mountains and oceans, and the tip of his tail stretches all the way to his temple in Teotihuacán. By way of a humble offering, I am puffing at a long cigar.

YET ANOTHER MEME (October 18, 2006)

A couple of weeks ago, as I was reading Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*,<sup>64</sup> I came upon his brief review of the growing literature on "memes"—short for "mimemes" or cultural replicators reminiscent of genes that evolve by imitation. Examples of memes are memorable phrases, images, and tunes. Some of these are mulled over obsessively, suggesting that they have lives of their own. According to Dawkins, it is Susan Blackmore, in *The Meme Machine*,<sup>65</sup> "who has pushed mimetic theory further than anyone."<sup>66</sup> Without much ado, I ordered her book, too. As soon as it arrived a few days ago, I scribbled the following note on the back of the front cover: "I ordered this book on a vague idea that memes

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<sup>64</sup> London: Bantam, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>66</sup> Dawkins, *op. cit.* P. 196.

would be useful in theorizing about my paintings—that is, the geometric patterns that underlie them since the stone age. That is about all I had in mind, but now we will see where the reading takes me.” The very same day I jotted the following note at the bottom of the page at the end of the first chapter: “Concerning my original reason for ordering this book, here is a simple proposition regarding so-called abstract painting: entoptic forms underlying all geometric patterns, which were first experienced in shamanic trance in stone-age caves, evolved by replication and recombination into increasingly complex ornamental designs to the point of becoming ubiquitous and thus unrecognizable as products of primordial visions. Think about testability, though.” And now I am reading Blackmore’s book with growing agitation in search of ideas concerning testability of my hasty proposition. As I go along, I humor myself with the thought that the obsessive character of my search suggests the birth of yet another meme.

#### FOLDING PARALLEL LINES (November 18, 2006)

My last painting, which has already found its place of honor on my livingroom wall, is the best representation so far of folding parallel lines forming orthogonal spirals with swastikas at their center that I have witnessed while experimenting with *Psilocybe semilanceata* in October and November 2002. The painting is still but an arrested image of what I have witnessed, though. It is dying for animation, a dynamic representation of the recurrent folding process. Showing one large swastika in the center and two smaller ones to its sides, the painting only suggests the actual visual experience. In this regard, it is a sharp departure from all the entoptic phenomena I have managed to capture so far. And it leads me to the revaluation of animation, which I now see in a new light. The only thing that spoils my enthusiasm for moving images is a sketch I have found in one of my notebooks, which shows the pattern I have just painted. In fact, I decided to make the painting upon discovering the sketch while leafing through the collection of my old notebooks two days ago. I just checked it again so as to place it in time. To my surprise, the sketch was made in July 2002, many months before my experiments with the mushroom.

#### A DECORATIVE FLOURISH (January 16, 2007)

Before I moved to Motovun, I had shipped from Reading thirty pine boards prepared for painting. Now there are twenty of them left in the attic. At this pace, I will go through them in seven years. Way too soon, I fear. Even if I paint no more than two boards a year, there are only ten years to go. And so I cannot but be aware of the end of my Cave Art Now

project. Painfully aware, I must add. No matter how much I curtail my urge to cover the boards with paint, the end is nigh. Predictably enough, I am starting to think about the last board. The end of the line. A short while ago I sketched one side of that last board. It is a pattern that I found on a decorative panel in a Chinese restaurant in Zagreb. A joke, to be sure, but a fitting one. A decorative flourish only points at the fate of all entoptic forms—they are so deeply embedded in the human mind as to become innocuous. Indeed, domesticated. But my boards are two-sided, which means that I am in search of yet another pattern of the same ilk. Luckily, I have at least seven years to find it.

THE DAMNED SIGNATURE: A LETTER TO *THE JACKDAW*  
(January 23, 2007)

In art, the past is better, as you claim in your editorial (“The Past is Better,” No. 65, February 2007). No quarrels here. But the past was better even in the past, for at least a thousand years. Just as you are not thrilled by much of the Twentieth Century, most of the Nineteenth leaves me cold, in spite of the palpable prowess of its main protagonists. The Eighteenth Century fares only slightly better in this regard. And so on down the line, all the way to the early Renaissance. A few leading protagonists of that debauched age do thrill me, I must admit, but real thrills are still deeper in the past—in the Middle Ages. In my mind, the reason for this is quite simple: beyond the Renaissance, artists deferred to art, rather than the other way around. That is, they deferred to the community of which they were part. Thus they went nameless, as was only appropriate for those who served others without ulterior motives of any kind. If this is correct, the future might again be good, or at least better than the present, but at the cost of renunciation of the Renaissance spirit of individualism that is still among us. It is the damned signature that ruins all art.

THE CRITERION (March 3, 2007)

I am talking to Jozo Brandic about African art and music. I tell him there are none better. I tell him I am in love with both. And then I return home. I select the most potent African music I can find among my recordings. Still reeling from our talk, I look at my paintings. I look at them hard. Pulled along by the music, I can only hope that my paintings would be to the musician’s taste. That they would make them play even better. And harder. The criterion.

THE AWAKENING (April 6, 2007)

I suggest that not only art but the entire switch to behavioral modernity came when those in any Stone Age society who lacked the genetic capacity to trance spontaneously were able to do so by the discovery and subsequent systematic exploitation of plant hallucinogens or one of the physical methods of trance induction. The hypothesis is that it was this “democratization” of altered states of consciousness, the possibility for the entire community to share in the life-changing visions and encounters that had previously been limited to a very few, that brought new, more open, more creative, more innovative, more flexible, more intuitive, and, frankly, more intelligent ways of thinking to a point of “critical mass” in society after society and ushered in the single most decisive shift ever to have occurred in human evolution. We need not be surprised that the archeological record shows this moment being reached at different times in different places, sometimes with intervals of thousands of years between the awakening of one group and another. If the trigger factor in every case was the discovery of reliable means to enter altered states of consciousness, and if this first discovery was often accidental, then we would not expect to find modern human behavior emerging everywhere all at once, but rather in stages and somewhat randomly—which is in fact what we see in the archeological record. Once the process had started, however, it could not be stopped, as people who did not know how to use altered states of consciousness would sooner or later have encountered people who did and would have learned from them.

From Graham Hancock’s *Supernatural: Meetings with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind*, London: Arrow Books, 2006 (first published in 2005), pp. 505-506.

ADIEU LASCAUX (July 3, 2007)

Today I painted another board. At the moment, there are eighteen plain boards to go in my attic. On one side of the new board there is a simple geometric composition from Lascaux, which I recently found in the literature on cave art. It looks like a simple two-by-three window with a slight complication—one windowpane is further divided into two halves. The other side, which I take to be the front, looks like a face with black crosses for eyes and a long red line for a mouth. It can be construed as the face of a clown, but it also looks like a kid drawing of someone in a coma. Or someone utterly lost—a drunk or a drug addict. Adieu Lascaux, that is. Although I never give titles to my paintings, this board kind of has it. My first, as it were. And quite likely my last.

THE MOTOVUN STAR (July 6, 2007)

Even though I am loath of rushing with my painting, I have just finished another board. And this is only days after the last one! If I continue at this pace, I will exhaust my stash of plain boards in the attic in four or five years rather than nine or ten, as planned. Be that as it may, on one side there is a simple geometric pattern that spells “or” in Croatian, or *ili*. A while ago I spotted it in the headlines of local newspapers, and it immediately struck me as one of my paintings. Ever since, I have been seeing it in the newspapers quite regularly, and so I eventually decided to paint it in black and white. It is a joke of sorts, but, admittedly, not a very funny one. On the other side of the board, which strikes me as the main one, there is a red orthogonal symbol on white background that can be construed as a pentagonal star bungled by a small kid—say, a toddler. It looks like a Greek letter Pi with another leg stuck in the middle on top. Awkward, heavy, stunted, silly, inelegant, the symbol gives me a great deal of joy. In my excitement, I could not but call it the Motovun star.

*Addendum* (October 11, 2007)

I have nothing to add to the above except further laments. And, yes, I have just finished another board, only a day after the previous one. Surprise, surprise, it is yet another Motovun star. This time it is white on a black background. It is magnificent, too. On the other side of the board I put the star’s geometric structure in black on a white surface. As if it were needed. At any rate, here it goes. Take a golden-section rectangle and place it so that it sits on its longer side. Divide it in half lengthwise. And then divide the upper half in two and the lower part in three breadthwise. That is the structure of the Motovun star. It is magnificent, indeed. But the joy it gives me is difficult to put in words.

NURSING (October 27, 2007)

As I often do, I am sitting and staring at my paintings. There are about forty of them in my field of vision, but my gaze rests on the most recent ones more often than on any others. Out of the blue, my eyes light upon a painting from the winter of 2000-2001. My mother was still alive, I remember vividly. She quite liked it, too. When my eyes shift to a painting next to it, I remember that it comes from the winter of 1990-1991. It is from the first batch of paintings in this long-drawn project. Only at this point my chest swells with something akin to pride: at least I nurse my projects for a long time. In this particular case, for decades. And then I reward myself with a proverbial cigar. For nursing, it goes without saying. Only for nursing.

SOOTHING, GREEN (April 14, 2008)

I have been in touch with Damir Stojnic for the last few months, but over electronic mail only. He teaches at the Fine Arts Department at the University of Rijeka. When he came to see me in Motovun together with his wife, Tanja, he said two surprising things about my paintings. First, he found them soothing in spite of their stark geometry. Second, they looked to him green even though they are black, white, and red. "When I look at all of them together," he said as he looked around my livingroom and gallery, "they strike me as green." He paused as he looked around the room one more time. "Yup," he nodded, "soothing and green." And I envied him a bit concerning the color.

BLACK ON BOTH SIDES (July 6, 2008)

Thirteen plain boards are still idling in the attic. Still chaste. Still patiently waiting for next whim of mine. The thirteenth board is too important for any old composition, though. It demands special attention in this silly world of ours. Special care, as it were. Thus I long decided not to rush it. Not to push my luck, which has served me so well for so many years. But the problem is now resolved in my mind: it will be black on both sides. Simple, and yet demanding. Painful. Even excruciating, given the dwindling number of boards yet to be brought to life. The only problem still to be resolved is when to walk up and carry the faithful board down. When to bring together my many trusted tools... Or when to execute it, if I may be allowed such a menacing word. Black on both sides for all times. An eternity.

*Addendum I* (August 15, 2008)

The thirteenth board is now finished. Could there be a more auspicious day for its execution than the Feast of the Assumption?! After all, Virgin Mary has been guarding my garden from the neighborhood witches for a while now ("The Mother of God," August 3, 2008). A board that is black on both sides is thus most fitting at this particular moment. What better way to counter the dark forces that surround me?!

*Addendum II* (August 16, 2008)

To my surprise, my last painting is giving me unprecedented joy. I loved making it. And I love looking at it among all the other paintings on the main wall in my livingroom. It is impenetrable. Inscrutable. Indecipherable. And mysterious beyond compare. Although a few of my boards are black on one side, this is the first one that is black on both sides. Unfathomable to boot. The only problem I face at this moment is

exceedingly simple: why not paint the remaining twelve boards exactly the same way?! Black on both sides, they would only require clever timing, which would be spread over many years. The Feast of the Assumption for the next twelve years, say. Completely indistinguishable, they would be differentiated by mere dates. Aaargh!

#### THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PREHISTORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY (November 26, 2008)

Several weeks ago I sent an electronic-mail message to David Lewis-Williams, whom I consider the foremost authority on cave art today, and with whom I have corresponded about the subject ever since we met in London in 2002. He has persuasively argued that understanding the art of hunter-gatherers from recent times can help us understand the art of prehistoric people. Here is my message in its entirety:

My son, who lives in New York, just sent me a printout of Judith Thurman's article about cave art in *The New Yorker*. Entitled "First Impressions," it came out on June 23 of this year. I was quite stunned by her account, for she does not even mention your seminal book, published in 2002.<sup>67</sup>

Although Thurman has talked with Jean Clottes, and although she mentions your 1996 book with him,<sup>68</sup> as well as your 1988 paper with Dawson,<sup>69</sup> it is clear that she has fallen victim to the French School's abhorrence of any connection between prehistory and ethnography (ah, Annette Laming-Emperaire!). She mentions that Clottes has had huge problems in the academic community because of his book with you, but she leaves it at that.

I am writing to you because I sense that the French academic establishment is being successful in marginalizing your work. The connection between prehistory and ethnography is banned with some success, or so I fear. Am I correct? Or is this only another instance

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<sup>67</sup> Lewis-Williams, J.D., *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Clottes, J., and J.D. Lewis-Williams, *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999 (first published in 1996).

<sup>69</sup> Lewis-Williams, J.D., and T.A. Dawson, "The Signs of All Times," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1988, pp. 201-245.

of ignorance and innocence on Thurman's part? In my mind, your 2002 book is absolutely crucial for understanding of cave art, and I sincerely hope my fears of academic shenanigans are all wrong.

To my surprise, I got no response for quite some time. A few days ago there finally came a message from Lewis-Williams. "Just back from three weeks in Britain," he starts. And then he turns to my question: "You are right in all that you say. The French are determined that my 2002 book does not exist." It has taken me a few days to realize that this exchange should be made public. The connection between prehistory and ethnography lives!

#### THE MOTOVUN CYCLE (September 1, 2009)

This morning I painted my twentieth Motovun board. This one simply demanded to be made. And I could not resist its calls any longer. On one side there is the simplest rendering so far of Kandinsky's "symbol" that started me on this journey more than twenty years ago. As it turned out, it was also painted in several caves many thousands of years ago. In this case, there are only two white line segments on a black surface. The painting is so sparse, so bare, that not even the great master would recognize himself in it. On the other side there is an array of white dots on a black surface. Based on my four-by-six grid, which has dominated my compositions for quite a while, the array has five rows and seven columns of little squares. It is splendid. It fits perfectly into the rest of the Motovun cycle on the same wall. Anyhow, the new board gives me an enormous pleasure. I cannot stop staring at it and congratulating myself on this morning's effort. Ten more to go, though.

#### SORT OF FUNNY (April 16, 2010)

One of my relatively recent paintings is very like the American flag. Or that is how many visitors to my house interpret it regardless of their nationality. Actually, I am quite enthralled by the flag, minus the white stars and the blue background, but my painting is not about America. Far from it. The pattern itself is an entoptic form, and that is all there is to it. Looking at the painting today, I realized to my surprise that it is surrounded by other paintings that are sort of funny. Above it is a dead face. To its left are two intertwined swastikas. And the painting to its right is entirely and ominously black. This arrangement is haphazard, though. I put my paintings up as they come. But it just crossed my mind that some of my American friends might take the whole thing amiss.

What am I trying to say? I, too, wonder about it for the very first time. Am I trying to say something unbeknownst to myself?

*Addendum* (April 17, 2010)

As the cycle of my paintings harking back to cave art draws to its close, which I expect in about five years at the latest, I write a few words in my *Residua* about every single board I paint. Or so I thought. I tried to find any reference to the American flag in connection with the painting bearing its likeness, but without any success. I can see from my writings about the paintings immediately before and after it that it hails from 2008, but that is all. And that tells me clearly enough that I am ever-so-slightly embarrassed by the striking likeness. As well as that it may very well be that I am surrounding the American flag with funny stuff for this very reason. Having arrived at this conclusion, which I did not even suspect at the onset of this humble exercise, I turned the board with the flag's likeness around to see what was on the other side. Alas, it was yet another pair of intertwined swastikas!

ABSTRACT ABSTRACTION (May 20, 2010)

I just completed another painting. I worked on it feverishly, and maybe even anxiously, as though a vicious ghost was after me. On one side of the board I put another pair of mating swastikas, which have been pursuing me for a while. On the other I put another Kandinsky simplified to the bone, which I also put on my last painting, but I added to it a Bon "pimple" of sorts. Now, Kandinsky would never recognize himself in my rendering, nor would the pimple strike anyone as my own. And the mating swastikas are nigh impossible to recognize as such. They are rather bland, too. Feverish or not, my painting is entering the stage of, as it were, abstract abstraction. Only I can see what I am hallucinating about. Hooray!

"THE OLDEST DRAWING IN CROATIA" (June 24, 2010)

Thus the title of an article in one of the leading Croatian newspapers yesterday. The pictures that come with the article show a bone fragment with a simple geometric pattern: a rectangular field divided roughly in half, one half of which is covered with parallel lines perpendicular to the bone itself. Perhaps a part of the composition is missing, but it looks like any old entoptic form. The artefact was found in a cave on one of the Adriatic islands. It is believed to be about fifteen-thousand years old. And I had to paint it. At once, too. On the other side of the board I put two square eyes and a straight mouth. The oldest artist in Croatia, I guess.

## TOMORROW'S GODS (December 21, 2010)

Judging by many images of devils, they are representations of animals. Or gods of yesteryear. The way things are shaping, these may well become tomorrow's gods.

### *Addendum* (January 10, 2011)

This is one of my most important discoveries ever. I remember being quite astonished by the thought when it occurred to me out of the blue. My beloved was sitting next to me at the time, but she could not understand my excitement. Or my "discovery," for that matter. But it came in the wake of a television show about a medieval bible of world fame, which I saw intermittently and only in part while sitting in the Bulldog Bar the previous day. A number of images of the devil from that bible had strong animal features, but that is the case with many other old images of the devil. All this goes back to my writings focusing on cave art from more than a decade ago ("Some Thoughts on Intrinsic Religiosity," March 28, 1997, and "Releasing Fear Revisited," November 24, 1999). The question is what to do with this discovery, though? That is, how to present it in the most palpable form? The few words of this "haiku" are just a reminder for myself of the task ahead.

## THE STARKNESS (March 24, 2011)

This morning I made another painting. In fact, I could not wait to get to my paints, brushes, and one of the remaining plain wooden boards that still languish in the attic. Both sides of the board ended up rather stark. On one side I put a slightly streamlined rendering of the glass screen from my favorite doorway in central Zagreb ("Mondrian in Zagreb," July 7, 2010). This is another joke on abstraction, as the painting is realistic to boot. There is no abstraction whatsoever in it. On the other side I put an entoptic form that consists of two letters "H" standing next to each other. As this letter is pronounced "ha" in Croatian, the composition spells "ha, ha." Far from subtle, but hopefully more effective for that very reason. Perhaps the last silly joke on abstraction, too. Returning to the glass screen from the doorway, this painting definitely falls in the category of no-bullshit Mondrians I introduced in the Nineties ("No-Bullshit Mondrians," August 19, 1998). I can imagine him frowning at the starkness. And making a few involuntary steps backwards.

