

SOMETIMES WE SAY DREAMS WHEN WE WANT TO SAY HOPES,
OR WISHES, OR ASPIRATIONS

Doug Ashford and Angelo Bellfatto

A lecture presented at the public forum, "Propositions," New Museum, April 25, 2011.



Doug Ashford and Angelo Bellfatto, New Museum, April 29, 2011.

DOUG ASHFORD: What Angelo and I are speaking about today and tomorrow is something quite simple—a set of notions on how art can make us more human, when it shows things beyond what contemporary life allows us to experience. How we can see beyond the horizon of learned expectations. For me, this talk is about an evolution. Most of the work I have made up to this point in my life has been based on existing art, collected and then reorganized to suggest possibilities for emancipation, but these days I'm trying to make things a little differently—discrete objects that are tangentially related to my previous concerns.

Angelo has been my friend for all of my creative life, and yet the two of us are very different. After working alongside each other for so many years, I have only lately begun to see some of the things he has been describing all along. We decided to devise our presentation as a call and response, with both of us reading our thoughts directly into each other's for the next hour or so. We're curious to see how a close personal relationship might produce new thoughts for each of us.

My part of the talk is organized around beliefs that I have long held regarding the relationship between abstract art and the feelings we call sympathy and empathy. I'm starting with a great student of emotions, the philosopher David Hume. In his *Treatise on Human Nature*, he wrote a lot about the way that perceptions of the world chart the close yet failing connection between morality and emotion, when perceived through our senses and embodied in our poetics. He said, and I am paraphrasing here, that the correspondence of human souls is so close and intimate that no sooner than any person approaches another, one influences the other in all his opinions and judgments to a greater or lesser degree. And though, on many occasions, one's sympathy with another goes not so far as to entirely change sentiments or ways of thinking, it seldom is so weak as not to disturb an easy course of thought. The nature of sympathy is so powerful and insinuating, it enters into most of our sentiments and passions and often takes place under the appearance of its contrary. It is remarkable that when a person opposes another and rouses up passions by contradiction, there is always an accompanying degree of sympathy. Hume is saying, I think, that we are always able to overcome our differences, as those differences can be interrupted by our commonality, and this commonality is discoverable in the mere fact that we all confront alienation in every meeting.

The reproductions of my own paintings here provide a kind of background energy to what I am talking toward but may not be able to fully address. Abstract energy is often thought to be opposed to the emotions related by stories or narratives. Nonspecific and removed, abstraction is often understood as a purposefully limited relation between humans, their ideas, and the objects of their world—reductions of things that make it possible to address or understand their complexity, spurning legibility to open up richer, multiple readings. It is as if an abstract imagination not only instigates loss but also allows us to envision something too big to see all at once. The strange thing



Angelo Bellfatto, *The Monkey's Abstraction* (detail), 2010.

is that when this happens successfully, we do more than see differently, we feel differently. This survival of loss is made understandable in mediation with objects, and in particular with objects we call artworks—things that present a world that before they arrived, seemed indifferent to emotion.

ANGELO BELLFATTO: These paintings were conceived as a series of dreams, the dreams of one long night, a night many days long, a night that stretches on for four or five years, a night that consumes a whole life, a night that may, in fact, be endless.

We sometimes say dreams when we want to say hopes, or wishes, or aspirations, but we do not want to say that here. Here the dream contains all, both the wish and the thwarting of the wish, and even the vengeance of the wish, as well as what lies beneath and beyond the wished for.

And the dream arises out of nowhere, out of the dark, and after many transformations and metamorphoses, after its obscure communication, it dissolves again to nothing, often to traceless oblivion.

There is nothing unfamiliar about any of that. Something equally easy to conceive is that, like dreams, these paintings assembled themselves spontaneously, out of the malleable substance of the psyche. They were found, seen, in the way we find and see things in a dream, with a dream's suddenness and a dream's sudden clarity. Only here, things move in slow motion, hindered by the obstacles and distractions of day.

To the lightning-quick dreaming mind, the atmosphere of day is a viscous, nearly solid mire, to be passed through with some difficulty. Imagine a bird slowly tunneling through the earth or a dolphin swimming through cement or stone. Dreams are a form of theater. They are absurdist dramas, Symbolist comedies, mystery plays, tragic farces, rituals of obsession.

In the role of the dreamer, we find ourselves in an unfolding shaggy-dog story, actors and audience both of scenes full of strangely significant nonsense. The sets, the spaces, the lights and atmospheres of the dream theater are perhaps even more important than the props and actors. It is the spaces that especially speak to us.

ASHFORD: When I think about how art is evidence of human survival, I am reminded of times I have spent sharing with others a desperate desire for political urgency and believing in the promise of collective dislocation—that is, believing that together we might find new places from which to look at our lives. This idea of dislocation can produce aesthetic epiphany. But how does this work? I'm wondering what it means these days for a participant in social and political organizing efforts to employ abstract images. For many years, I was a collaborator in Group Material, whose artistic process was determined by the idea that social liberation could take place through displacing art into the world and the world into the spaces of art. We saw our designed exhibitions as pictures of democracy, and we wanted our projects, which

were anchored in activism, to live both within and without the field of art. Today I like to see those exhibition rooms, the museum and even a single painting, as places for an inclusive stutter, where we can see this and that . . . and that . . . and that—a set of different voices, embodied visually in a condition that can represent multitudes.

Group Material's notion of an ongoing public design meant that we could place our audiences into new positions of social assembly that continue through the space of art, suggesting a struggle that never ends. The art show could become a template for the forum, the parliament, the agora: repeated examples of extended dialogue. This kind of endurance rejects the false consensus of pluralism and replaces it with a sense of temporal dynamism, showing how artworks subject to changing contexts can change one another in juxtaposition.

Today I'm thinking about how our exhibition designs assigned democracy's unpredictability and inclusivity to an imaginable shape, a shape you could feel, a shape that is always irregular and fluctuating: an abstraction. This was and still is a proposal for the politics of real life, an aesthetic invention that stages life's practical dilemmas as a dream to be worked through.

But what is the nature of this irregular shape? And if it is abstract—a term suggesting withdrawal—what is being removed? What is it showing outside of depiction? In examining the social practice of my past, one thing that became clear to me is that abstract imaginings of social experience enable the consequences and contingencies of political imagination to open up to fantasy. This shift allows for both artistic and social reinvention.

Perhaps if an abstract fantasy can deny direct references to actual life, it can offer another kind of solace, another chance for action. As the objects of actual life filter through the idealistic projections of abstraction, life can be repositioned, that is, we can move our concepts and our bodies into self-designed contexts. This suggests the possibility for distinguishing between the emotions that are designed for us by the world of power and domination, and new feelings that can be built independently. After all, we are overflowing with the obscurities of memory, the stunning misrecognitions they produce, our exchanges with one another, the use of ourselves by others, the use of ourselves by our selves, our dreams of our helplessness recognized together. One thing we can do is put these autonomous senses together into new things, things we can look at and talk about.

BELLFATTO: Let us pause here a moment to say something about spaces: the space of art is the interior, the internal space. It is the space that we abstract from lived experience, the luminous atmosphere of the theater of dream and memory, the realm of stories that we take away within us from life, the portion we remove and carry off in order to shape and reshape our inner condition, lending it vision and voice in resonances of thought, feeling, motion, sound, color, light, the light of our own eyes seen through the eyes of another in a moment of intimacy shared inside the space of art.

And the light we see in these paintings? Just as in the theater of dreams, it is never the light of day, no matter how bright. Here is the phosphorescence of night, the glow of night's fishes and fungi, the stellar and lunar, and flashing neon light, the fiery dawning and twilight of the mind. And what is painting, or rather, what are these paintings? Silent theater, handmade theater, condensed for reasons of economy, compressed onto a flat sheet where all will sit still, until . . . there is someone to see it, someone whose gaze will bring its actors to life, turn on its intricate machinery, set into motion the drama or the farce.

Then spaces open up, things move within enclosed vistas, entryways appear before the eye . . . the eye that now may experience the exhilaration of vastness, or the tension of claustrophobia . . . the eye that is released to travel at will across subterranean skies, or along paths and branching corridors through chambers underground . . . the eye that may encounter, that must encounter, its own reflection if anything at all is to happen here.

And what of the actors? The players who perform in these elaborate productions? Do we know who they are? Sometimes we feel that we do, but their appearance may be a mask that misleads us, a trickery, a secretive disguise, especially to ourselves. And their actions? All we can say is, yes, they act, they are their actions, they perform them endlessly . . .

poised to hurl a stone . . .

pulling at a red thread . . .

staring upward . . . staring outward . . . staring with eyes closed . . .

Or running . . . running away . . . running in circles . . . dodging and weaving out of the way of falling rocks . . .

Or rising into the air . . . stepping into the air . . . off a cliff . . . for a walk in the sky . . . or to fall down . . . or to fall up.

ASHFORD: I might be confusing here an art that is abstract in its excessive inclusion with an art that reveals something previously unknown through its exclusion of references to the real. But maybe there is a way to get from one to the other. My experiences with exhibition design presented collections of art as places where social mutuality and personal antagonism could both simultaneously transpire. And that occurrence signaled the possibility of turning away from some things while turning toward other things, other people.

This provided an opportunity equivalent to viewing oneself through a variety of positions, or bodies, looking through another's eyes across vistas, toward this or that place or event, or even inward. The Renaissance notion that one can inhabit the eyes of another by way of a perspective delineated in an artwork assumes that through this transference we can encounter something beyond the possible. The shock that accompanies this comes from the occupation of the formal and physical position of a stranger. It is difficult to discuss this rationally, since immersion into another person is so much more than the strict diagramming of corporeal perspective, the agreement



Angelo Bellfatto, *Red Step*, 2006.

I. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1967), 128.

or disagreement with a position. Instead, we are faced with the rearrangement of all our sensibilities into something outside of us, finding the self in another. Once achieved, such identification can be invested in finding even further things, feeling difference across even larger boundaries.

This is certainly an old idea, one alluded to in Hume's writings that I referred to earlier and one beautifully described by the art historian Wilhelm Worringer who wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century. He insisted that identification outside of the self and with another is pivotal to all aesthetic experience. In fact, such power exists only because of its representation in art. Without art, we flounder in oceanic solitude, unable to look away from ourselves.

He said, quoting Goethe, "The Classical feeling for art has its basis in the same fusion of man and world, the same consciousness of unity, which is expressed in humanity's attribution of a soul to all created things. Here too the presupposition is that human nature 'knows itself one with the world and therefore does not experience the objective external world as something alien, that comes toward the inner world of man from without, but recognizes in it the answering counterpart to its own sensations.'"¹

BELLFATTO: Actions and questions.

Answers? No answers? What does it mean? A question! Answer with a question. How does it feel? What are its qualities? Does it seem to tell a story? Does it draw us in, daring us to read it? Does it feel full and elaborate, even compulsively so? Does it move, or sit still? Is it clear or ambiguous, or both? Is it elusive and impenetrable or can we go inside? Are we invited in to follow, to chase the elusive thing? Is it, after all, transparent, or is it always opaque? Maybe yes to everything. Does it strike us? Is it sudden, suddenly there, with that suddenness that seeks us? We were going to say, with that suddenness we seek, but no, it finds us first.

And if it is sudden, is it also slow, rhythmic? Does it reveal itself gradually? Does it change as we look around when we're inside? Does it seem to seduce us? Can we be seduced?

ASHFORD: Is abstract painting another instantiation of the irregular shape I experienced with Group Material's modeling of democracy? One thing that has recently become clear is that this irregularity in its "abstractness" might be capable of presenting to a viewer or reader an alternative proposal of time—shifting attention away from the specific time of social and political issues of a period and onto other senses of duration, other understandings outside of linear time. Abstraction's lack of legibility could offer solace and support in its exclusion of the effects of our daily lives, demonstrating our capacity to survive within the dictates of official history.

This suggests the possibility of breaking down the dividing line between subjective emotion and objective response. The crippling effect of this division is contingent on our support and acquiescence;

it is dependent on us recognizing and accepting the way it names us, as it seeks to control our future. If this world is built with our tacit agreement, then empathy for those here and not here, vibrant diagrams of possibility, might break the dependence we have on what is already known, already given.

BELLFATTO: What were we talking about? Oh, yes, painting, these paintings and their purported kinship to a theater of . . . of what? Of Images with a capital I (a letter we have scrupulously avoided until now). We should say something about images here. We are, and our world is, composed of images, and only of images; and when we say that we know something, know ourselves, or know our world, we are really saying that we imagine these things, ourselves, our world.

This is not news. We heard it long ago, we said it long ago, we told it to ourselves and say it again and again. (Because we are forgetful . . . and because we are always brand new. Or so we imagine.) While we are awake and our bodies walk around in daylight, or bump along in the dark, we recognize each being, each thing by its image or as we imagine it to be. The image, and the faculty of imagination, identify for us, or misidentify that which the senses report, those palpable aspects of that alien and possibly unknowable world that we awaken to each day.

Our imaginations supply our world, supply us with a sense of familiarity that, though often quite false, we require if we are to cope here at all.

O, but at night, while we sleep, we inhabit the images' own realm. There they reveal themselves to us, display their true colors. Unleashed in dreams, free of the external senses, they become dangerous, slippery, vexing, luminous, powerful, limitlessly changeable, endlessly inventive, more than alive, less than dead. They are entities, fragmentary or composite personae, unknown friends, mere masks, or gods. And real knowledge belongs to them alone. It is theirs to withhold or to impart. Only they truly know, and they know more about us and our condition than we may wish to know when we awaken.

But to return to painting . . . painting, that age-old means of projecting images back into the world from where they reside invisibly in the imagination . . . painting, that archaic art . . . yes, painting and the power of images. We journey into their realm at our own peril. We only go there because we are driven . . . into sleep by sheer exhaustion, into art by the allure of the images . . . by the attraction to an ancient beauty . . . by a love for myths and stories . . . by a need first to escape the world and then to enter it again by a stranger door, a door of our own choosing.

In these paintings are the Images, as we have found them, their forms as we have seen them, the spaces for their actions, for their questions, for their obscure communication . . . places for them to suddenly emerge, to play their elusive parts.

They are a region, a country, a world for them to haunt, to inhabit, where they can be as we have found them, or as they have found us,

beckoning to us from any time, from any place, or from no time, from no place.

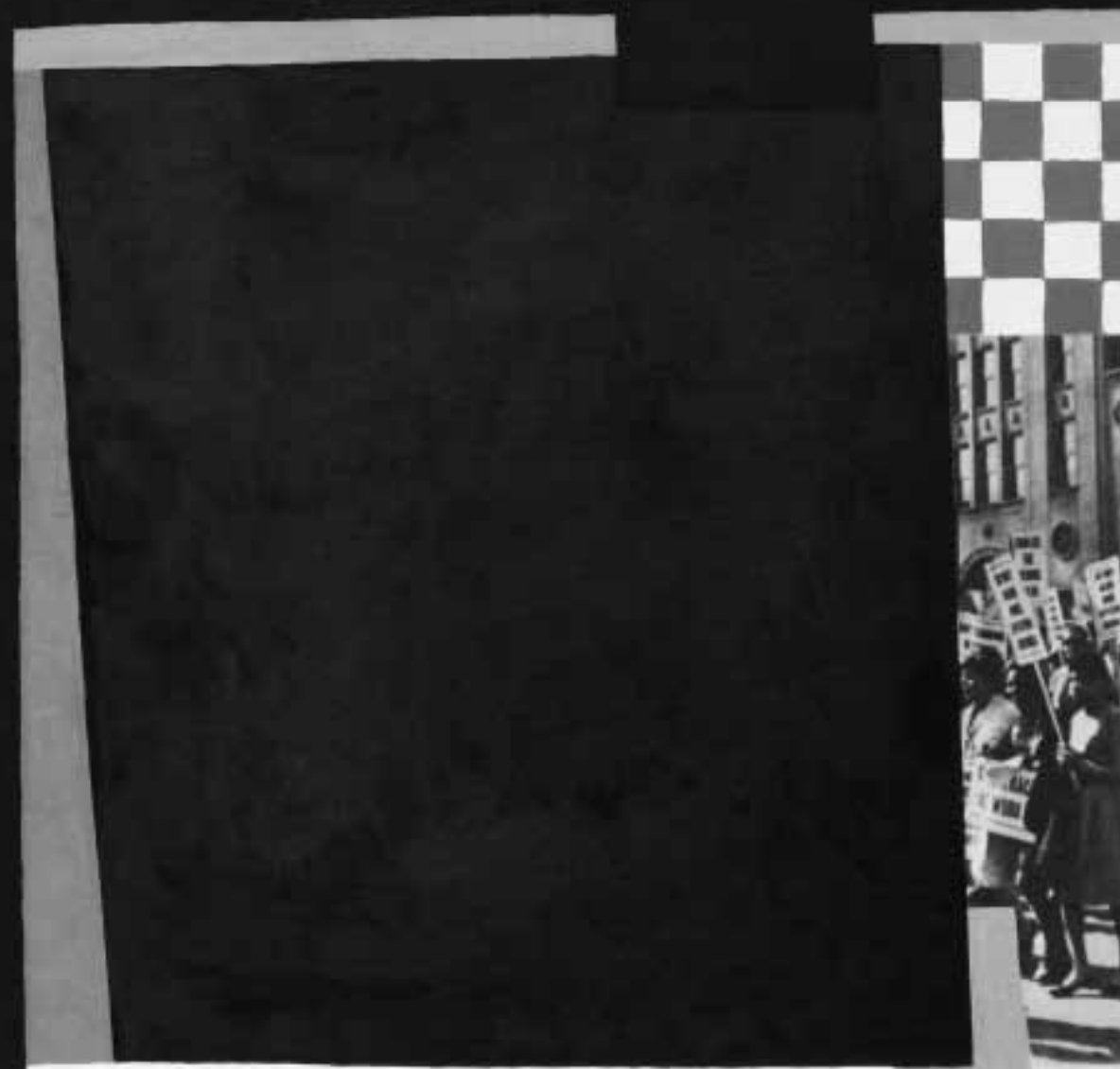
And the paintings, the Images, what are they for? They are for us, for all, or any one of us who might find them of use, who might accept their invitation to enter and to see, to enjoy their dangerous play . . . quietly . . . from a safe distance, where they will not splash us, or yell in our ears, or force us in any way, but just to look, to look.

ASHFORD: Worringer said that we must see the world as a "counterpart to our own sensations." Coming from philosophy, he ended up in a world of psychological mysticism, as he tried to figure out what it means to lose and refind the self in sensual experiences. One important document of his journey is the essay "Abstraction and Empathy," from which I have already quoted. Here is another: "The need for empathy can be looked upon as a presupposition of artistic volition only where this artistic volition inclines toward the truths of organic life, that is toward naturalism in the higher sense. The sensation of happiness that is released in us by the reproduction of organically beautiful vitality, what modern man designates beauty, is a gratification of that inner need for self-activation. . . . Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. The value of a line, of a form consists for us in the value of the life that it holds for us. It holds its beauty only through our own vital feeling, which in some mysterious manner, we project into it."²

This sensibility that Worringer is naming is a reassessment of experiences with what his predecessors called the beautiful, experiences of the world that can overwhelm. And he compared this to feelings of identification with other people, which Hume outlined for us—that is, to sympathy. Why do we gain sympathy in the presence of complex objects? How do they move us? Worringer believed we change ourselves in two ways when faced with the world: through alienation from it and through identification with it. He believed the success of art, its complexity, derives from its ability to negotiate between these two points. He described the difference between an old and a modern art, the first is limited and the latter expansive. Both function as projections, he says, of our "organically beautiful vitality." What is unique in this dualistic thought, I think, is that the value of artistic experience is in the mutual projection that occurs—from object (a work of art) to subject and then from subject back to object.

Worringer set out to distinguish empathy in art by opposing it to another type of visual organization: abstraction. Where empathic experiences of art are volumetric and absorptive, or accepting, abstractive experiences of art are flat and thereby they insist we project other models onto them. Where empathy is a solitary position, abstraction is collective. Empathy is equated to naturalism, while abstraction espouses style. It is important to say here that the English term empathy as I use it now, is an inadequate translation of Worringer's German word *Einfühlung*: "feeling into." Worringer attached this word specifically to imagery associated with classicism

2. *Ibid.*, 14.



Detail from
sculpture for
United Auto
Workers for Soc

and naturalism, forms of art we can “feel into.” By recognizing ourselves in images of each other, we change in some fundamental way—and we are consequently able to feel the structure of humanness.

It is important to understand that abstraction is positioned here in opposition to “feeling into”; abstraction is antinaturalistic and capable of creating experiences in which empathy falls short. Abstraction, while not against representation per se, is a form of art Worringer considered newly generous, capable of presenting humanity outside identification, beyond the other we find in ourselves. This is a place he thought we should enter at times in order to see the external world as changeable. He says: “While the tendency of empathy has as its condition a happy pantheistic relation of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the tendency to abstraction is the result of a great inner conflict between man and his surroundings, and corresponds in religion to a strongly transcendental coloring of all ideas. This state we might call a prodigious mental fear of space.”³ So perhaps abstraction can still be emotive, but the feelings it produces can reconcile our apprehensive expectations with the outside world.

BELLFATTO: O Images, what did we want from you? We wanted to see you, to know your forms, your light, your appearance, to make you visible to us. We wanted to be like you, as elaborate, as strange as you. . . . You . . . we have not dared to call you that until now. For we live here with our heads in your realm, calling on you to stay with us, to speak to us. But you’re silent, you fade away, you wait for a night when you will pull us, each one, wholly out of this world and into your invisible realm. . . . There we fade away ourselves, with you.

ASHFORD: Things outside us, Worringer implied, need to be redrawn for us to overcome our anxiety in their presence—rediscovered in collective experience and individual perception. To make an abstract image of the world, he said, is not to admit incompetence at depiction or mimesis but rather to embrace a psychological need to show humanity’s imperfections and distortions. This means that it is necessary to remove something and thereby withdraw from the normal organization of the self in anticipation of an invented place: a terrain where decisions can be made askew of empirical analysis and practical constraint.

This reminds me of how in social organizing it is sometimes necessary to withdraw in order to define a position, to separate from the larger conversation in order to discover what it is that defines a group’s purpose and agency. But is there violence in this? Or at least a struggle? For abstraction is always negotiating its own supposed departure, repeating its incapacity to fully separate from the real. Indeed, every abstraction points to a need for yet another abstraction, for an additional dislocation: yet another new form that is needed to hold us while we look for the real.

Maybe abstract art can be seen as something in opposition to the crystalline forms of regulation and management, allowing for a more

3. Ibid., 15.

Previous spread: (L) Angelo Bellfatto, *The School of Snakes* (detail), 2010. (R) Doug Ashford, *Six Months in 1967*, 2010.

generous figuring of the self in the face of the limits of the real world. Here again is Worringer:

Let us recapitulate: The original artistic impulse has nothing to do with imitation of nature. This impulse is in search of pure abstraction as the sole possibility of finding rest amidst the confusion and obscurity of the image of the world, and it creates a geometric abstraction starting with itself, in a purely instinctive manner. It is the realized expression, and the sole expression conceivable for man, of the emancipation from any arbitrariness and any temporality of the image of the world. But soon this impulse tends to rip out the individual thing from the exterior world, which retains as its main interest its obscure and disconcerting connection with this outside world, and so tries to get closer to it through artistic restitution of its materials individuality, to purify this individual thing of everything that is life and temporality in it, to make it as much as possible independent both from the surrounding world and from the subject of contemplation, which does not want to enjoy in it the vitality that is common to both, but the necessity and the legitimacy where this impulse can find refuge from its connection with ordinary life, in the only abstraction to which it can aspire and which it can attain.⁴

So perhaps this means that abstraction and empathy are opposite positions that absolutely must be held onto simultaneously. Maybe we can see them as two ends of the same magic wand. Abstraction known alongside empathy might deliver the outside world to us as both fluctuating other and absolute difference.

BELLFATTO: Now comes a night when a dream becomes a story, a saga, projected for us like a movie, full of significant scenes, acts performed especially for us, demanding interpretations even as they unfold. Or are they myths, vivid with characters, color, and catastrophe, luminous puzzles proffering endless solutions but not one satisfactory? Yes, or no, or maybe.

And out of the dream, out of many dreams a character emerges, a monkey. But who is this monkey? Is he the mischievous imp, the sly, dirty beast, or the magical animal, simian avatar, furry blue god, divine baboon? Or is he only a toy, a mere cartoon? Is he a bumbler or a hero, a savage or a saint? And is there only one of him, or are there a multitude? Yes, no, perhaps. Look, he shits diamonds, he pulls down the sky, he ponders all creation, his creation. He glides and plummets. He wars with the stars, the stars transfix him, they trip him up. He is transfigured. He meets himself, there are two of him, he is twins, one immortal, the other doomed. He is many, so many to make just one.

Now tell us a story. OK, we’ll tell you our story. One day there is a snake with us, right there, inside of itself, with us inside, too. And all at once it hits us, this snake knows something, and we are inside of it. It can talk to us, teach us. Maybe it can love us, too. Can we make it love

4. Worringer, quoted in Jean-Louis Ferrier and Yann le Pichon, *Art of Our Century: The Chronicle of Western Art, 1900 to the Present*, trans. Walter D. Glanze (New York: Prentice-Hall Editions, 1988), 94.

us? Anyway, here is a school for us, just for us, a snake's school. We are in the School of Snakes. There's a lot to learn here. There are a lot of snakes and we do learn from them. But never enough, or at least not so much that we can leave, not yet. We've been here, we'll be here, forever; it's a painting, after all, an abstract eternity.

ASHFORD: How can I argue then that abstraction is a process of rearrangement in which each of us "happens" in another person? How can we have both the love that accompanies empathy, and the distance and comfort that abstraction delimits? How about a rupture with the things that stabilize me? Breaking me as a rational participant of the world as it is already organized—and pushing me toward a world that has not yet existed. Without experiencing this rupture perhaps we would never see anything at all. But even more wildly, maybe things would not see us. Worringer suggests that the world itself is adjusted or modified through our understandings and expressions of it. If empathy is the stabilizing embrace of oneself in another, abstraction is a resolution to experience ourselves in concert with the instability of the world, unstable, experimental, provisional.

And this is obvious perhaps: that an unstable identification outside of the accepted norms of human experience could be inclusive and enfolding. What else can we do when we don't really know how things really are? Or whether there are "things" at all? In many abstract presentations there is potential for a wide breadth of meanings in multiplicity or relatedness. This is an implication that is very important today—meaning that is off center, that can't easily contain a declared position, or that can be delivered from a distance; gaining the possibility of more space for the maneuvering or the naming of our selves, our collective work.

I want to advocate for an art that disorders the world's restrictions, that demands a reversal or a turning away from the rationalization of everyday life, away from desire's contemporary expression in commodity and violence. This may seem like a turning away from the future, but it is not without hope; it just turns away from the false certainty of progress. Orpheus turned back; Walter Benjamin's angel of history turned back. This turning proposes that our conditions of subjection can be extended into things we love instead of the things we obey, and the responsiveness of loved things signal opportunities for changes within ourselves: stylizations, perversions. This may be why love is so in need of reclamation and revitalization—love can be a path to clearing the wreckage upon wreckage that has built the present. An abstract love could map the world that we are secretly, individually familiar with in facing the world alone. What does it mean to look toward another? What does it mean to look back to those who are beyond us? Like empathy made absolute, or nature made complete in abstraction, love is a condition from which we can always be forgiven and at the same time can forgive others.

We say, "I couldn't help it, I was in love," and "How could I not? He is my friend," and "Where else would I go? My daughter is there!"

Top: Group Material, "Democracy: AIDS and Democracy, A Case Study," Dia Art Foundation, October 15–November 12, 1988. Bottom: Group Material, "Democracy: Politics and Election," Dia Art Foundation, December 19, 1988–January 14, 1989.



In short, love is something that can't be helped. We are helpless in it and around it. Worried by it—to the point of abandoning the real. Love is the state from which we can accept unstable and changeable boundaries. It is an abstract condition that when embodied can allow us to see things together.

BELLFATTO: Here's an abstraction, a monkey's abstraction. He's abstracted from a snake. Or is he a snake abstracted from a monkey? Here is an abstraction, is it a snake, or a circle? The monkey paints it. He is an artist, a creator. Now he's blue. We see him lazing on his bed of snakes, abstracted as he dreams a universe, a world of snakes and monkeys. Next he plays an abstract game, a game with snakes, a game with death. Death is his abstraction. So this is another story about snakes, another abstraction, another space for them, and for us, a vast landscape, but still inside, inside of a painting, inside of a monkey, inside of a snake, inside of us.

Thoth is the god of novelists. James Joyce said that, or something like that. But we're not scholars, getting a quote right for us would be a matter of luck. Still, we think we remember that a white baboon is scribe of the gods, the Hermes of Egypt, messenger, magician, trickster, thief, the god of boundaries who recognizes none, as he crosses freely past borders of heaven and earth, waking and sleep, life and death.

And wasn't it Malatesta, warlord of Rimini whose motto was *Nec Spe, Nec Metu*, without hope, without fear? He must have been a lot of fun. Here are Hope and Fear together, because we can't imagine a day or a night without them right there, crouching down beside us. They also flank the white baboon, who turns away, already weary, from the very beginning of the world, and its newly created peoples, its primordial landscape, its waters of life and river of death . . . from all of that he turns, to regard us, to look us in the eye.

Tell us another story now. It is night, a starry night. The monkeys are asleep, all but one. He is a bad sleeper, an insomniac. Anything can wake him, even his own dreams can expel him from sleep. One night he awakes to see the stars. Were they calling to him, did they make a sound? They are too bright and too close. Were they ever this close before? He can't remember having ever even seen them like this. It fills him with worry, and a cosmic dread. It is his first memory.

At some point later on, the monkeys assemble. Together they set forth in a frenzy of enthusiasm to make war with the stars. Armed with sticks, with boughs and saplings, they climb into the sky to do battle with a crystalline, cold, indifferent foe. Monkeys cannot defeat stars. But no monkey can accept this fact, or at least no monkey can resist the call to arms—the intoxication, the swarming up on ladders to the heights of heaven—or the call to run in the air across a glittering waste, only to fall to earth, to death, or to sleep, among fallen stars.

One monkey, his weapon lost, is cut off from the throng, separated in all the confusion from his companions. Stars like fiery wheels trip him up, and the ground, welling blood, splits, and shifts beneath

his feet. He is lost. In an instant, star-cast spears transfix him. He is transfigured.

Here is another story. There was a monkey . . . or were there two? Were they twins? Yes, they were twin monkeys, one immortal, the other doomed. One observed with detachment, the other's trial and terror casting a distracted eye on the unreal gravity of his twin's remote, painful circumstance, on his fate.

And what does he see? If he looks at all, he sees the whirlpool, he sees the frantic face; he sees the straining for purchase on an uprooted hope, on a straying center, on an anchor of air.

What does he feel, or what do they feel? They feel the tension and the poise of eternal orbit, the sustained instant of radiance at the horizon of events, and feel nothing, feel everything, but distantly, lightly.

And now the scene shifts in a sudden lifting of curtains and the lowering of scrim upon scrim, lights shining everywhere. This is the theater. We are here for a play. A passion play, a romance, a moral tale, a farce. Our program reads: *An Ape's Progress*. And so it is. We see his life of labors, of taking leave and setting out, the things he carries with him, his risings up, his fallings down.

We see him see himself seeing himself, see him peer inside and enter his own terrible head, and the terrible headache that grips him when he returns to the light. It beats down too harsh, too bright on his fitful, drunken sleep, on his looming hangover. He has bumped his head, feels the rising of a towering lump. Concussed now, into what, enlightenment? Idiocy? Maybe some combination of the two.

There are forbidden places, places he must not look into, places that he must look into, doubtful undertakings, ill-fated pursuits, and punishments, even persecutions that he metes upon himself.

And there he is again and again, now solitary, now a crew. Together they strain to lift a butterfly. Alone, he plunges his hands into the jaws of monsters, and later on, with his companions, he reaches the magical island, the paradise of monkeys, hanging upside down upon the sea.

What else is there on this elaborate stage besides the monkey and his swarm of selves, their consequent actions, their consecutive occupations, their ordered disarray? What else? The exhilaration of the whole shimmering web, the sudden encounter with everything that is, that has been, that might be in one eternally sustained instant, the tapestry, the comedy.

Here is a painting we never talk about, *The Glider*. Why not? It seems very simple, after all, he glides, he is in flight. Yes, he flies, or rather he is fleeing. Climbing for an aerial view, like an eagle or a spy plane, but he is also making his escape. Or rather, trying to escape. Something has snared him, tripped him up, torn his wing. Now he loses altitude, he's falling, he plummets, desperate to steer his ruined machine back to earth. But there is no earth, it's gone. In its place are only ominous, shimmering spaces. This is certainly a dream, one from which he hopes to wake but cannot, as he spirals down and down.

ASHFORD: Art becomes a portal into helplessness by allowing us the chance to admit we are helpless together—proving that love can become a political concept. Abstraction can position this love inside visual forms that we invent outside of existing power structures, outside laws and languages already built. What can we command if we remain statically centered in a rational acceptance of the “terms of the debate”? Our compromises with the assurances of law, and its supposed progress, lead us away from actually seeing each other.

By linking the feelings of love embedded in artistic experience to larger forms of knowledge acquisition, by asking audiences to remake themselves without the strictures of reality in their connection to others living, imagined, or dead, we can show that art might overcome the humiliation that the present organization of daily life has become.

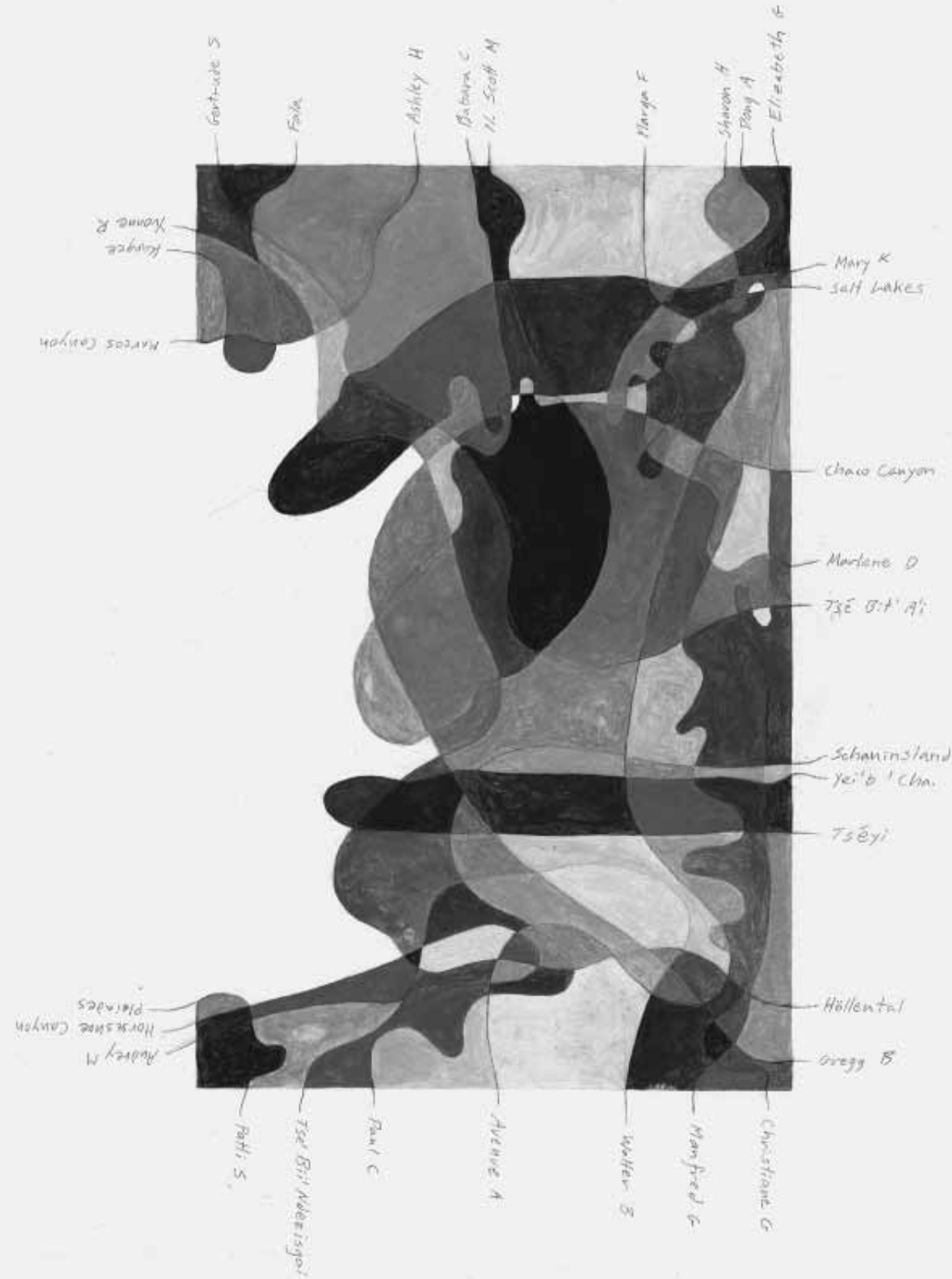
Simply being in the sight of someone previously unknown and expressing one’s helplessness can trigger shock. Helplessness is not a state of being that we are encouraged to maintain in the modern condition of rationalized, cognitive labor. When all our thoughts are structured by work, when do we get to rest? How can we provoke a break in the ceaselessness of managed time and controlled desire? The spoken admission of helplessness can be strangely both erotic and sacred, provoking a succession of further encounters outside of time, filled with images. The magic wand of abstraction deployed to kindle empathy provides a release and an opportunity for the production of ever-new frames for love. Together they create a third position, structured in abstract images that we make from multiple encounters with each other, from each other.

BELLFATTO: Here is a vision, a divine communication, a hierophany, delivered to a monkey at the verge of day, between his dreaming and his waking. What did the hairy one see? The cosmic design, nothing less. But what did he see? Hard to say, it looked like a pattern on old wallpaper. Appearing in a sudden blaze that later died, you know, in the conscious mind but buried deeper, there it was, still luminous, an ember afloat in the fog, a nonsensical but portentous diagram. Diagramming what? The shape of enigma.

It is enigma that we have to speak about now. Not a problem to be solved or even a puzzle, for a puzzle, too, has a solution. To an enigma there can be only the enigmatic reply or a gross misunderstanding. We are shaped, after all, by our misunderstandings, but we are even more deeply shaped by our encounter with enigma.

And what is enigma? It is that question that awakens us, shakes us from our sleep to pay it heed. It rises out of the night, night that may settle upon us even in the bright light of day, under the stupefying sun, eternal night that we carry inside ourselves as a birthright. Death, love, the stars, our waking life, and our dreaming sleep, our very selves . . . are enigmas. The snake as we first saw it in our childhood is an enigma. We are the children of enigma, enigma who wakes us from our sleep with the jolt of a nightmare, a sudden vision, or the sound of divine speech. Enigma is our mother.

Doug Ashford, *Portrait of Andreea Greyer*, 2006.



Now, monkey, that hairy hierophant, dreams of the cosmic design. He sees a diagram of the meaning and mechanism of the cosmos, of the divine and natural order. It sprouts from a seed planted in his left ear to grow high above his head. It flourishes and waves all around him like a field of unknown grass or flowers. Feminine hands gently clasp his fingered feet. They touch his calves, fondle his furry head. They are in charge of this enigma.

Beyond him his dream unfolds, a teeming mystery or, no, rather a kind of history.

There are five beautiful witches or lovely nymphs who playfully hold up the design like a picnic blanket, a tapestry, or a net.

Five little monkeys are held captive inside. Do they see the witches or only the enigmatic pattern on the cloth that surrounds them?

A little further on, two feminine beings, sisters, drape themselves alluringly in the cosmic design, while a third gradually shears it away from them in long, fluttering strips that she, in turn, hands to a fourth sister, who delivers these shreds of divine fabric to the monkeys. And what do the monkeys do, what do they feel? They are grateful for these scraps. They hold them to their eyes to read them, hold them high in the air to venerate them, hold them to their ears to listen. They study them, they lick them, they eat them, they cover their eyes with them.

They even use them as measuring tape. With it they measure everything, they measure themselves, in a search for the perfect monkey, that excess, that sacred monkey who they will decorate, adorning him with ribbons of the cosmic design, betasseling him from throat to ankle, to prepare him for sacrifice. His executioner, pulling taut a cosmic shred, testing it for strength, crouches nearby.

Now the monkeys all dance, waving their scraps in the air. Later on, they will use them to strangle each other in a circle. But what is this? What are these other monkeys creating, scrap by scrap? Dare we hope? No, it is enough if we dare to see, dare to see and to create . . . with them.

ASHFORD: In the 1980s, I believed that moving away from a fixed artistic practice not only would liberate the self but also would undermine the commoditized false solidity of all things. And it did and it does. I am speculating now but I think somehow love does this all the time, exposing values that are outside those inscribed on our consciousness by power.

I began to make abstract paintings simply because I liked how they looked. They looked like the failures of my life lit up with possibility. Through them, I began to ask a series of questions: What face is this looking into mine—what hands are these on my lips and eyes? Are you my sibling? How is it that you are taken so far away from me when I know you are in me and I am in you? What world have we made that suffering and sleepless nights and the burdens of this world's blows continue unabated? How do you see me? How do we know the love in all of us and still turn away? How is it that I turn away from you? What

demands on me are there that allow me to break through the hell that you have built to protect what little you have been able to save in the world? What map were you following that allowed you to yell from such a distance? Where is our vitality now? How can your hands hold my face at the same time they hold your own? As they hold the faces of your lovers and children, my strangers, my sister? My friends? •