

This is note of a catalogue published by the School of Image Arts on an exhibition of work by Christian Châtel. I am presenting it here in the hope that some people might find the commentary on the role of the mirror-image in art.

On The Role of the Mirror Image

The gallery is dark, filled with loud, and mostly mechanical noises; the overall effect is primordially mysterious and, perhaps, a bit intimidating. On the walls, on the ceiling and on screens in front of the walls are a number of images, projected so as to repeat, over and over. Some of the images have a rectangular format, some trapezoidal, and others are irregular quadrilaterals. The sources of the images are not immediately evident – not until one's eyes become accustomed to the dark. But one does notice two things about the images in Christian Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*: first, they are all portraits – and not only that, but the figures in the portraits are frozen and stare out at you with a fixed stare; and, second, the portraits are interrupted by abstract forms that recurrently block access to it.

The question that I want to ask about the piece is a question of sort that artists usually avoid asking – and that is probably for the best, for such questions must not be allowed to intervene in the creative process. The question concerns what gives the work its power to affect us, and it is a legitimate question for anyone who wishes to deliberate on the mysterious power of images.

To begin to answer it, let us note this about our response to the work: the bodies of the spectators, standing in the dark, amidst the roar and clamour of the mechanical sounds mixed with what seems to the sound of surf, staring at the images, are as invisible in the dark as the real people upon whose images they look. Nonetheless, the spectators may well feel as strongly that they are caught in the gaze of the image as that they are looking at the image. That feeling is a key to identifying the affective processes through which the piece works. For one thing, it highlights a mode of being with the body in which the body is felt, but not seen. The importance of mode of being with the body we shall pursue later. Our being displaced from our usual observer condition – a displacement we feel strong as we first enter into the space of the work and before our eyes have become accustomed to the darkness – and into a condition in which proprioceptive experience of a body in space is paramount is a key to a transformation in visuality that is just now being recognized as requiring a rewriting of the history of modernism and modernity. That transformation is certainly an aspect of the thematic Châtel treats in *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*. But it is not the historic implications of the work upon which I wish to reflect.

For the feeling of belonging to the space of the work also indicates something characteristic of installation art – a characteristic theatricality of the sort that Michael Fried has painstakingly analyzed and critiqued. In that critique he staked a claim that nearly two entire generations of artists would subsequently challenge, *viz.*, that “all of the arts degenerate as they approach the conditions of theatre.” Whatever merit one may or may not find in Fried's condemnation of theatricality, one does have to acknowledge that Fried's contrast between pictoriality and theatricality draw attention to a crucial distinction of modes, between, on the one hand, those works that strive to be independent of their surroundings and of the vicissitudes of the conditions under which they are seen and, on the other hand, those works which make the viewer aware of the space in which the work is situated and of his or her presence in that space. Further, while artworks that strive to be autonomous, transcendental objects seek to engender a heightened perception that opens one to an experience whose temporal character is that of an expansive “Now,” theatrical works, on the contrary concern themselves with the importance of

duration. The mode of temporal experience that the autonomous modernist object generates, then, is that of an eternal present, a temporality of detachment and transcendence. In contrast with that, the mode of temporal experience that theatrical works generate is characterized by immediacy, as theatrical experience (in Fried's sense of the term "theatrical") is occasioned by an exchange between the viewer and the work that occurs in a particular here-and-now and so acknowledges the circumstances in which the work is encountered. Viewing a theatrical work, one is often induced to thematize the experience of time-as-duration, for it is duration that gives shape to the experience. All in all, while the autonomous modernist object invited the viewers to put aside the contingencies of their spatio-temporal location, theatrical works make viewers aware of their being embedded in a particular space and time, and of being situated in relation to particular objects.

Theatrical works that make viewers aware of the actual space in which they, and the artworks, are situated and the actual time in which the exchange between the viewer and work takes place. Such works of course need not be without internal relations, nor is Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*: the young woman on one side of the room enters into a dialogue with the young in the opposite corner, and the police officer and the older, heavy-set man nearby, on the ceiling also converse with one another. But the elements of *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* form few such relationships, and what relations they do form are not very strongly marked – we could imagine even that the work would not be fundamentally changed if these relationships were altered in some measure. The lack of stress on internal relations is characteristic of that exhibit theatricality. Indeed, it is almost the condition of a work's taking on a theatrical character, inasmuch as the paucity of internal relations leads the viewers to establish relations between the installation and themselves. In Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*, viewers belong to the site of the work insofar as they are comprehended in the "sight" of the image; they become actors in the work, their status is similar, in most respects, to that of the figures we see in the images. Furthermore, the dearth of internal relations invites viewers to experience the space to which the work belong as a stage set; accordingly viewers walking through the work and exploring its space, are on-stage, just the actors in the films they look at are.

The philosopher whose name is most often evoked by those who wish to deliberate on theatricality is Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In works such as the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) Merleau-Ponty demonstrated the ineluctably perspectival condition of perception – the fact that vision (indeed all sensation) is necessarily sited, that nothing is knowable apart from the contingencies of where it set and the conditions under which it is seen (including the vagaries of the viewer's history and condition). If works that strive to be autonomous, transcendental objects assume a positionless, and therefore disembodied viewer, artworks whose character is fundamentally theatrical assume a different viewer – an embodied viewer, with a particular history and particular location in space and time.

Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* thematizes the process that makes the viewer aware of the contingencies of his or her spatio-temporal location; that is, it puts under scrutiny the processes that makes viewers aware of the space in which the work is situated and the time in which they experience it and, what is more important, of their being in that space and time. *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* does this through the gaze that the images on the walls and ceiling direct towards us: they look at us, just as we look at them. The dynamic is that of the mirror process that was so much discussed – perhaps overdiscussed – two decades and more ago. The most frequently cited analysis of deep psychological role of mirror operations is that which Jacques Lacan offered in his famous text, "Le stade de miroir comme formateur de la fonction de 'je'." The particular formulation of the role of the mirror stage that Lacan offers derives from hypotheses about what experience might be like before the infant had succumbed

to the fiction of the unifying ego.

Lacan had proposed that young child experiences himself or herself in as being in bits and pieces; but when, somewhere between six months and two years of age, the baby catches a glimpse of his or her image in the mirror, the baby experiences himself or herself as collected into a unified form. A crucial point in the Lacanian commentary on the experience is the insistence that there is a disparity between what the baby feels and what he or she sees in the mirror; the disparity results from the lure of an illusory unity that the baby longs to assume, a spurious image of completeness that remains forever a lure, and will forever elude the individual.

The merits of Lacan's analysis of mirror operations are many, but his is not the only analysis; others, indeed, are more germane to issue with which we are dealing. The English paediatrician/psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott traced mirroring operations to a stage earlier than that which Lacan discussed – he treated the mother's face as the precursor to the actual mirror in individual development. For Winnicott, what the baby sees at Lacan's *stade de miroir* described is determined by an even earlier mirroring phenomenon.

Now, at some point, the baby takes a look round. Perhaps a baby at the breast does not look at the breast. Looking at the face is more likely. What does the baby see there? To get to the answer we must draw on our experience with psychoanalytic patients who reach back to very early phenomena and yet who can verbalize (when they feel they can do so) without insulting the delicacy of what is preverbal, un verbalized except perhaps in poetry.

What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself and what she looks like is related to what she sees there. All this is too easily taken for granted. I am asking that this which is naturally done well by mothers who are caring for their babies shall not be taken for granted.

If the mother is sufficiently responsive, then what the baby sees in the mother's face reflects the state the baby is in: if the baby is content, then what the baby sees in the mother's face is the contentment the baby feels.

The baby's opportunity to see what he or she feels reflected in the mother's face depends upon the mother's capacity to respond to the condition in which the baby finds himself or herself. But being seen is basis for creative seeing, Winnicott insisted. He pointed out, then, that perception arises through apperception; he pointed out, that is, that the capacity to see things depends upon the capacity to experience oneself, a capacity that comes through the other. The mother's capacity to mirror her baby's mood (to be concerned at the baby's troubles, to experience delight when the baby does) is a crucial factor in the development of a sense of the self. The images in Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* can be seen as objective portraits, but they can also be seen as self-reflective images, like images in a mirror. The difference between seeing the portraits in Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* as mirror-images and seeing them as representations of others is exactly the distance that separates apperception (the mode of experience characteristic of participating consciousness) and perception (the mode of experience characteristic of ego that has crystallized out of an undifferentiated matrix).

But the faces in Châtel's screens are immobile – troublingly immobile. Winnicott helps us to understand the affect results of this immobility:

Many babies . . . have a long experience of not getting back what they are

giving. They look and do not see themselves. There are consequences
[T]he baby gets settled in to the idea that when the he or she looks, what is seen is the mother's face. The mother's face is not then a mirror. So perception takes the place of apperception, perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning of a significant exchange with the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things.

Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc* reawakens our sense the potential associated with the with the face's mirror role; but the immobility of the projected faces also invites to see the people shown not as mirrors of the self, but as distinct, isolated individuals separate from oneself, to see the faces as simply objects in the world. The tension between the two ways of seeing the faces makes us feel, acutely, the gap the separates self and other, a gap that, as we shall see, has just about the measure as the gap that separates the self-observing self from the proprioceptive self.

Winnicott framed his theory about the mirror-role of mother and family to account, *inter alia*, for the development of the integration of psyche and soma, for a psycho-somatic collaboration. He explains this psycho-somatic collaboration through the fact that the development of the sense that we have our selves, of our interiority, goes hand-in-hand with the development of a body image. The development of a body image and the development of a sense of interiority are really different modes of the same underlying process – “The ego is first and foremost a body ego,” Freud asserted in *The Ego and the Id*. The experience of self-recognition, and consequently of apperception, is a bodily experience and, accordingly, is dependent upon the development of a secure body image.

But the development of the body image also demands separating ‘the Me’ out from ‘the Not-me.’ Thus, the development of the body image transforms the young child's experience, as cosmic anonymity, the “oceanic experience” that Freud commented on, cedes its dominance to focussed awareness. Participating consciousness wanes, as the child begins more and more to himself or herself as a separate, individuated person. The child's experience becomes elaborated in such a fashion as to be able to take a standpoint on the body, to “see” it as though from the outside. Though experience is still tied to the body, a distance opens up that allows experience to look in on the body. The individual develops a capacity for self-reflection, a capacity that Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* thematizes as feel ourselves being looked at by the faces onscreen and become, to a degree, self-conscious.

The process by which the child separates out from the environment involves a transformation of experience, from a mode of experience that is primarily kinesthetic to mode of experience that is primarily visual (from a mode of experience in which the body participates in what experiences to one which involves looking in on what one observes). This change from kinesthetic to visual experience is highlighted by the contrast between two types experiences that Châtel's installation engenders. On one hand, the variations that we hear and see as we move above the space of the installation make us proprioceptively (kinesthetically) aware that our bodies belong to the space of the installation; on the other, the self-consciousness engendered by having the portraits look at us makes us feel acutely that “we” are “here” looking at “that” which is “there.”

The process of separating out from the environment has another effect: what eventually happens as a result of this process is that the fit between the self and the realm of the other goes off a little, and the relations between our selves and the world becomes disturbed. These effects can be grasped most readily by considering other ways of describing the shift from kinesthetic to visual awareness: we could it a change from an inward to an exterior mode of awareness; or as a transition from the experience of the true self to that of a false self. All these

descriptions point to a central fact: an abyss opens up and, as Lacan and the Surrealists never failed to remind us, by virtue of this split, the ontological structure of human being acquires a potential for paranoia, a potential for the self to be invaded by the other. The shift from kinesthetic to visual awareness produces an insuperable and irrevocable fragmentation of the body, a gap which the ego is constructed to conceal. That gap is what is highlighted by the contrast between the that Châtel's *Le Cinéma Blanc: Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* provokes, between the proprioceptive experience of belonging to the space of the work (an experience that is heightened by being caught in the gaze of the other), and the visual experience of staring at images that belong to another place. These faces serve a dual role, to be sure: first, a mirror-role, through which the observer becomes aware of his own being, and secondly, as images of the alienated self, the fictitious self of the *stade de miroir*; or, to express this duality in different terms, they serve on the one hand to make one aware that the other is inmixed with the self and, on the other, to heighten the fiction of the self is a separate and distinct entity. That paradoxical function is one principal sources of *Discards/Rebut's* affectivity. Caught in the tension between these two modes of experience, we become acutely aware of a lack of being, as we realize that there is no self-present beholder to whom the world is transparently obvious.

This opacity is reinforced by another feature of the projections. For the portraits are not all that is projected on the walls and ceiling of the gallery: superimposed over each portrait is a loop that repeats the same abstract forms, over and over again. These abstract forms often obscure the face over which they are superimposed. Winnicott's ideas help explain this aspect of the installation as well. We have already seen that our sense being comes to depend our relation to the mirror image, or to the mirror-role of the face. The eclipsing of the faces by the abstract form re-enacts the disappearance of the face of mother and, accordingly, repeatedly reactivates the affects associated an event that resulted in a disturbance in the sense of the self. The interruptions provoke a primal experience of rupture in the personal continuity of experience, and so a threat of break-up that we can characterize as madness. The grating sounds in *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* suggests something of that.

Once one's eyes have become accustomed to the darkness that enfolds the spectators, one can make out the source of the images and sounds. They come from eight moviolas – old-fashioned film editing machines – that are placed here and there through the gallery space. The moviolas themselves are conspicuously old-fashioned machines, and the overall appearance of the installation is reminiscent of old industrial site – a garment factory, let's say. On the back of each moviola is bag, containing pieces of film. Ordinarily such bags are used simply as receptacles for pieces of film that are excised as the editor assembles the finished film; and here the bags are full of film, so we presume that the bit of film we see on the walls or ceiling might even have been taken from the film in the bag. The suggestion is clear: the film is assembled from discards – from what filmmakers call the “outtakes” of films, pieces of film that are put aside, and don't make it into the film that is exhibited. The implication that the film is composed of rejects explains the subtitle of exhibition.

A question immediately imposes itself: what is the connection between this idea of discards, of obsolescence (consider the moviolas), and the portraits on the wall? We have already commented on how disturbing it is for the baby when he or she experiences a hiatus in the flow of attention the mother directs towards the baby to assure the baby of his or her being. The baby can experience a loss of self, a rupture in being. In “Fear of Breakdown,” Winnicott compared the fear that analysts express, of experiencing a break-down in the course of their analysis and the fear of death they sometimes convey. Winnicott proposed, first, that the fear of break-down, the fear of a psychotic episode and the return to very early stages in development, has its roots in the time of absolute dependence, when the mother supplies the baby with

auxiliary ego-function. The facilitating environment, if it existed, enabled the baby to undergo a maturational process marked by integration (by developing a sense of coherent, continuous self), psycho-somatic collusion that engenders a sense of indwelling (the sense of a self within that meets an outside world), and the development of the capacity for object-relating. The primitive agonies that are encapsulated in the fear of break-down is the fear of returning to an unintegrated state, of falling forever, and of the loss of psycho-somatic collusion, and the failure of indwelling.

Winnicott's second proposal on the fear of breakdown, that emerged from the foregoing ideas, was shockingly original:

I contend that clinical fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced. It is a fear of the original agony which caused the defence organisation which the patient displays as an illness syndrome. . . .

There are moments, according to my experience, when a patient needs to be told that the breakdown, a fear of which destroys his or her life, *has already been*. It is a fact that is carried round hidden in the unconscious.

Winnicott extends this keen observation to comprehend the fear of death sometimes encountered analysis.

Little alteration is needed to transfer the general thesis of fear of breakdown to a specific fear of death. This is perhaps a more common fear, and one that is absorbed in the religious teachings about an after-life, as if to deny the fact of death.

When fear of death is a significant symptom the promise of an after-life fails to give relief, and the reason is that the patient has a compulsion to look for death. Again, it is the death that happened but was not experienced that is sought. . . .

Death, looked at in this way as something that happened to the patient but which the patient was not mature enough to experience, has the meaning of annihilation. It is like this, that a pattern developed in which the continuity of being was interrupted by the patient's infantile reactions to impingement, these being environmental factors that were allowed to impinge by failures of the facilitating environment.

The obsolete equipment in *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* and the repeated projection of the "discards" on the screens in association with the repetitive concealing of parts of the faces by the abstract (and so unidentifiable) forms that, when they are visible, serve a mirror-role replays the loss of being that primarily signifies a death that has not been experienced. But, as Winnicott pointed out, the death that has not been experienced provokes a longing to "remember" having died, which requires experiencing death in the present. Small wonder, then, that installation provokes feelings of mystery and terror.

The piece's concern with death helps explain too the effect of the contrast between the images on the walls and objects on the floor. The images that surround the viewer are nothing more than phantasmagoric. Of course, the real film strips are there, in the moviolas, in the same space as we are, so we acknowledge that the film images correspond to something real. But we can hardly see the strips in the projector, and anyway that correspondence only serves highlight the contrast the phantasmal images and the real objects (the moviolas) that project them. The contrast makes evident that images possess only the reality of a revenant.

Repetition is a key feature of work: the sound loops repeat, and so do the abstract forms the recurrently block out the images. What is the affective meaning of this repetition? Freud was so struck by the fact that the repetition compulsion is relatively uninfluenced by the pleasure principle that he entitled his first major study of the compulsion the title “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” The repetition compulsion revealed mental operations that are more primitive (in an evolutionary sense) than the pleasure principle. Freud considered that repetition compulsion served to promote the dominating function of the mind and, thus, to bind, and thereby reduce, tension. In striving to minimize excitation, it seeks to return the organism to state of quiescence. Freud ventured to suggest (though only with the greatest hesitancy) that the repetition compulsion manifested a drive directed towards a “nirvanic” state, an inorganic, non-vital state of non-animation – that is, towards death. The compulsion to repeat unpleasant experience is the product of an aggressive drive, Freud suggested.

That was not all that Freud had to say on the topic of repetition, however. In a paper on technique from 1912, “Remembering, repeating and working-through,” Freud offered slightly different views. He suggested that repetition in action is a form of remembering – that repetition substitutes actual behavior for words in remembering. It is here Lacan’s ideas are relevant. Lacan’s ideas on repetition derive from this view, though they revise it radically. The form of repetition that Lacan terms *remémoration*, belongs to the *moi* (the illusory unity of the self), an identity that one assumes as a way of triumphing over fragmentation – or rather, a form of fragmentation that can just as easily be understood as death. The drive towards constancy that arises at the mirror stage becomes the dynamic force that impels repetition. This drive towards unity is made strong with the subject’s entry into the Symbolic realm, for by being inaugurated into the Symbolic, the subject is split between, on the one hand, the “I” of cultural and linguistic meaning, the “I” seeks itself in social discourse (the “I” of the images on the walls and ceiling in *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*) and, on the other, the repressed “I” (the “I” that is non-thetically disclosed to the viewer as the Other regards the viewer from the pictures. This division is reflected in the split between the observing “I” and the “I” observed on the screens in Châtel’s *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* (the latter “I” stipulated through identification). Identity, Lacan suggests, stands in constant need of reformulation, and thus repeats itself endlessly in the tension between the inner ideal (disclosed through the Other’s regard) and outer realities. This is the origin of desire, for desire arises from a gap in being – in response to this gap in being the finite *moi* attempts to fix being through repetition. The *moi* continually reconstitutes itself in the Real. Repetition expresses the constant effort to thwart whatever intimates the *moi*’s Imaginary nature, to formulate something unified, something familiar that it might place against that void, that gap in being that characterizes the Real. Repetition, thus, is the continuous insistence of the unconscious in the quotidian present. Unconsciousness messages circulate, and recirculate continually (as do the do the undecodable repetitions of abstract forms in Châtel’s *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*). Indeed, the appropriate model for the dynamic of desire is the repetitious turning of a machine, that relentless, repetitious turning that *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* highlights. Repetition is not understood in Lacan’s system as it is in Freud’s, as vital adaption; rather it is a dynamic driven by disturbing intimations of the primal lack in being. That insight goes a long way towards explaining the disturbing quality of *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*.

But of course, despite the exact repetition of the individual loops, there is variety in the piece, especially auditory variety. The moviolas run at slightly different rates, so the loops playing on the different machines do not move in lock-step with one another – one loop will run slightly faster than another, and, accordingly, the relation between the sound events on the two will constantly shift. Furthermore, by positioning oneself differently in space, one hears the relation between the various sounds differently, and observes (creates?) different connections

between the sounds and the images. Deliberating on this variety, one notices a peculiar fact: that this sort of variety is not a determinate construction the precise details of which are exactly predictable. There is an aleatory dimension to relations between one sounds and another (and between a sound and the various images, though these variations are hardly noticeable, if at all). This aleatoriness is a sign of the work's being beyond (point-to-point) shaping by the maker – of the separation of the work from the maker, for the maker does not have control over the precise relationships the sounds assume. Thus this aleatoriness is a sign that the process that the work unleashes has disengaged from the maker; that it is other than the maker – and that alienated quality affects the viewer. Given its contexts (and especially the grindingly mechanical qualities of the sounds), the way that this alienation affects viewer relates to that psychic process I referred to earlier, through which the fit between the self and other goes off a little and the relations between our selves and the world becomes disturbed. The world no longer seems a product of the creative self – there is no longer any sense of the inmixing of the self in the world – to the contrary, the process of separating out has gone to the extreme.

It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaption. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living.

This comment, I suggest, encapsulates the core dynamic that imbues *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts* with its antique, mysterious, and terribly troubled qualities.

On the other hand, the emphasis on how the viewer positions himself or herself in space bring us back to somatic at-oneness with the world. This tension, between a world without any inmixture of the self (a world felt to be obsolete and alien) and world perceived as continuous with the self is basic to the affective means of *Le Cinéma Blanc: Discards/Rebuts*.