

not new. Not long after Darwin's *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871, Herbert Spencer was attempting to create a science(?) known as Social Darwinism. This, together with the Eugenics of Francis Galton (Darwin's cousin), has left sociobiology, or evolutionary psychology, as it is now called, with a negative stigma. Much of this criticism resulted from the ethical pronouncements of Spencer. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy" or the impossibility of deriving "ought" from "is" demolished Spencer's specific notion of an ethics based on evolutionary theory. Even E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* met with extreme criticism, and in some cases disgust, from many sections of the academic world.

Plotkin is a professor (of psychobiology) at University College, London. As one would expect, his arguments throughout the book are presented in a scholarly way and backed by extensive and sound research. Given the importance of the ethical aspects of the Social Darwinian legacy, I would have thought he would give more attention to this aspect of the history of his project. This ethical dilemma, as well as the more scientific details, needs to be overcome before a true synthesis is achieved. This minor criticism aside, Plotkin's *The Imagined World Made Real: Towards a Natural Science of Culture* will go a long way toward dispelling much of the unwarranted and in some cases almost "phobic" criticism of attempts to create a bona fide natural science of culture, and it is not before time.

POTENTIAL IMAGES: AMBIGUITY AND INDETERMINACY IN MODERN ART

by Dario Gamboni. Reaktion Books, London, U.K., 2002. 243 pp., illus. ISBN: 1-86189-113.

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Chapter VII of *Potential Images* opens with a satirical cartoon from 1907 showing a viewer at the Salon d'Automne standing on his head in order to make sense of an indeterminate modernist painting. The caption reads: "The difficult thing is not to paint a picture . . . but to know how to look at it" (p. 131). This viewer's predicament serves to illustrate the central theme of this book: the extent to which responsi-

bility for generating meaning lies with the viewer or the creator of a work of art.

It is a problem that has engaged artists for centuries, as Gamboni demonstrates in the first part of the book with a historical overview of hidden, suggestive and amorphous images, from early human history to the beginnings of modernism. What Gamboni calls "potential images" are characterized by the extra perceptual and conceptual demands they place that "make the beholder aware—either painfully or enjoyably—of the active, subjective nature of seeing" (p. 18). What is surprising in this regard is the number of pre-modern artists, from Leonardo to Delacroix, who were fascinated by, and indeed exploited, the polysemic richness of inchoate and accidental forms.

But while examples of ambiguity and indeterminacy can be found in artworks and decorative works from across cultural history, it is their concentration and elevation in modern art that Gamboni addresses in most detail. In the mid-19th century, a confluence of emerging aesthetic and intellectual forces—including Symbolism, Romanticism and occultism—produced a milieu that emphasized the imaginative contribution of the viewer. In 1846 Baudelaire wrote that "the poetry in a picture must be created by the spectator . . . because it lies in the spectator's soul, and genius consists in awakening it there" (quoted on p. 59). By the end of the century the most important French artists, from Monet and Cézanne to Gauguin and Moreau, were producing works that demand ever more imaginative participation as they deliberately resist precise identification.

These late-19th-century tendencies are part of much more than a simple drift away from representational art towards abstraction, as conventional histories might recount. Instead they signify a shift away from deterministic picture making towards images that are unresolved, open and fugitive. Gamboni cites James Trilling's claim that in modern art "the opposition between representation and non-representation is less important than that between determinacy and indeterminacy, which he defines as 'the lack of fixed boundaries or demarcations'" (p. 131). This extends even to the work of iconic abstractionists such as Mondrian, in whose checkerboard grids "the colours are distributed in such a way that they can be put into numerous different combinations and encourage the eye to

run constantly over the canvas forming new constellations" (p. 212). These ideas not only bind figurative and non-figurative art together in a way that seems novel and genuine, but also point to the essentially interpretative "user-determined" nature of all visual perception—a point that resonates strongly with current theories of visual perception.

Gamboni concludes by pondering the wider social and political implications of ambiguous and indeterminate art, pointing out that previous critics have noted a correlation between the closed unity of authoritarian art and the essentially progressive social attitudes associated with art that leaves meaning open to the viewer. Examples of official Nazi art on the one hand and the work the Nazis labeled as "degenerate" on the other serve to illustrate the point. Citing Umberto Eco's caution about losing the distinction between plurality of possibility and undifferentiated chaos (p. 242), Gamboni closes by asserting the parallel between the Utopian ideals of an open art and that of social progress: "By aiming at equality, symmetry or even interchangeability in the positions of artist and spectator, the practice and theory of potential images correspond to the democratic ideal in the political order" (p. 243).

The only criticism I can raise against *Potential Images* ironically serves to confirm the depth and importance of its central thesis. Given what one would expect from the subtitle, I was slightly disappointed by the relatively brief consideration given to Cubism, especially compared with that given to Odilon Redon (on whom the author has previously written extensively). There was little mention either of Arshile Gorky or Willem de Kooning, whose work seems particularly germane to the topic of ambiguity and indeterminacy. But these omissions only point up the scale of Gamboni's thesis: there is hardly any period of art, let alone modern art, that does not exploit the opportunities for seduction offered by the unfixing image. One gets the sense that this work could easily have run to three or four volumes, and still have had a lot left to say. It may be that the book's legacy is to stimulate a whole new area of art criticism, and indeed art history, which builds upon the solid, imaginative scholarship Gamboni presents here.

As a literary production, *Potential Images* excels in all respects. The use of images is generous and informative,

the notes and references are concise and comprehensive, and the clarity and precision of the author's style radiates authority. This is a hugely important book.

DVD

SEEING/HEARING/SPEAKING

Takahiko Iimura. Takahiko Iimura Media Art Institute, 2002. Distributed by Heure Exquise! ISBN: 4-901181-06-8.

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This DVD is basically a presentation of the idea, structure and different realizations of Takahiko Iimura's video-and-performance piece *Talking to Myself*. The title *Seeing/Hearing/Speaking* refers to the two general sections of the DVD. In the one section, called *Hearing/Speaking*, a 2001 revision of the original piece is presented and performed. The other section, *Seeing*, is a shorter piece in which the act of talking to oneself is replaced by the act of seeing oneself. The visual system used in *Seeing*, including two video cameras and two monitors, is taken from Iimura's earlier *Observer/Observed* pieces. The DVD also contains the video recording of the original talking piece from 1978, and a documentation of how a section of the piece was conceived as a video installation in 1985. This material sheds some light on Iimura's method of reworking ideas over long spans of time. One more video of an earlier date is included, namely *Talking in New York*. This is a dreamlike documentary in which Iimura repeatedly, in both English and Japanese, utters the circular phrase "I hear myself at the same time that I speak to myself at the same time that . . ." This performance was done at various locations in New York. There are also some short texts on the DVD. Simplicity and clarity characterize this excellent presentation, and it surely reveals some of the most essential ideas of Iimura's work.

If I were to write a monograph on Iimura, I could well use as a heading a quote from his film-script *Talking Picture* (1981): "I have nothing to show." Still, this nothingness is, to borrow a metaphor from another of Iimura's

texts, comparable to the stillness of a wave, or to a film strip showing immobile objects. Even if nothing seems to move in that kind of film, there is of course a constant movement—24 frames per second! Iimura's dryly rigorous investigations of the space/time of film and video *viewing* give the patient spectator and listener a rewarding experience of losing ground. What is at stake here is the ontological status of seeing, hearing and speaking. The talking piece is an instructive example of this. When it was first realized in the late 1970s, Iimura had read David B. Allison's English translation of Derrida's *La Voix et le phénomène* (misleadingly titled *Speech and Phenomena*). Despite the limitations of any translation of French into English, Iimura must quite immediately have recognized a close affinity between his own work and one major theme of Derrida's critique. That very theme is contained in the following sentence taken from Allison's translation: "When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I hear myself at the same time that I speak."

By simply isolating the phrase "I hear myself at the same time that I speak" and adding the words "to myself," Iimura had the basic material for his talking piece. In order to create what he terms a "phenomenological operation," he turned the phrase into the loop mentioned above. An inversion of the original statement then appeared: "I speak to myself at the same time that I hear." By exhausting the logical alternatives of interchanging singular pronouns within the original phrase and its inversion, he ended up with a number of variations such as: "I hear myself at the same time that you speak . . ."; "He speaks to himself at the same time that I hear . . ."; etc. This minimal poetry opens up a vista of unresolved questions already present in Derrida's text.

What if the hearing and speaking is all in my head? What if I hear my thinking and think my hearing (to turn it all around in Iimura's own manner). Can I hear myself, or any person, if I do not hear myself think what I hear? Is the other really another? Is the same time really the same? Without getting too much into detail here, the following observations could be made (and I think they are essential): the image of Iimura's ear in the talking piece has nothing to do with the validity of the statement "I hear." All we see is an ear. We cannot see the hearing. In this

context, which also involves Iimura's bilingual sensitivity, it is interesting that "I hear" rhymes with "I ear" or "my ear." How do we know, then, that what we see is really Iimura's own ear? When dismembered, the parts of a body or of an image lose the identity given by the whole.

MATERIALS RECEIVED

Audio Compact Discs

Arcane Device: Engines of Myth
David Lee Myers. ReR Megacorp, London, U.K., 2003.

In the Garden

Yusef Lateef, Adam Rudolph and Go: Organic Orchestra. Meta Records, Venice, CA, U.S.A., and YAL Records, Amherst, MA, U.S.A., 2003.

A New York Minute

Alan Licht. XI Records, New York, NY, U.S.A., 2003.

The People's Music

Jon Rose. ReR Megacorp, London, U.K., 2003.

You Can Hear Me

Ehmes. Ivoctam Records, New York, NY, U.S.A., 2003.

Books

Applied Quantum Mechanics

Anthony Levi. Cambridge Univ. Press, New York, NY, U.S.A., 2003. 523 pp., illus. Trade, paper. ISBN: 0-521-81765-X; 0-521-52086-X.

Biocosm: The New Scientific Theory of Evolution: Intelligent Life Is the Architect of the Universe

James N. Gardner. Inner Ocean Publishing, Makawao, HI, U.S.A., 2003. 336 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 1-930722-26-5.

Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1968

Stephen Prince. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A., 2003. 320 pp., illus. Trade, paper. ISBN: 0-8135-3280-9; 0-8135-3281-7.

The Cold Wars: A History of Superconductivity

Jean Matricon and Georges Waysand. Charles Glashauser, trans. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A.,