To Love to Hate

I

When Chris Burden fired a pistol at an airliner taking off from LAX (Los Angeles International Airport) in 1973, he committed an artwork of terrific suggestiveness, one that helped win him a prominent place among his contemporaries. Perhaps most obviously, 747 (fig. 1) evoked the cliché of the hero going to any lengths for his art: the isolated individual doing battle with the world, attacking its materials (canvas, stone, plastered ceiling, even the infinite heavens) with a passion bordering on madness. Simultaneously, and maybe even more strongly—judgments will vary—he recalled the antiheroic image of the poète maudit: the reckless immoralist so devoted to aesthetic sensations, in both senses of the word, that he is heedless of the human consequences of his pursuits. (“Burden’s work is terrorism,” one critic has said, approvingly.)¹ We might be reminded of the surrealist dictum, carried over from the Dada gang, in which the random ring of a gun evokes us the image of their compelling power the iconic figure of a man shooting a gun. Or in yet another alternative, either outweighing or to some degree interrelated with all these contexts, 747 might be seen as offering us the image of the male artist heroically, diabolically, abjectly, and anachronistically—not to mention hysterically—trying to assert himself at a moment when the feminist movement was dramatically challenging the phallic brush and genius no less than the gun.² This context in turn would lead us to other contemporary contexts relevant to the appreciation of this artwork, including the state-sanctioned mass murders of the Vietnam War, which were still fresh in people’s minds at the time.³
There is yet more to this work, of course. For instance, it might be viewed as a reflection—both homage and send-up—of the muscular gesture in “action painting” of the 1940s and 1950s. It would then be an act comparable to Robert Rauschenberg’s famous erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning. The whiff of wimpiness in Rauschenberg’s Erased de Kooning (1953)—he obtained the Ab Ex master’s permission before he flourished his eraser—is also in keeping with Burden’s behavior in using a handgun rather than some more formidable weaponry of the sort accessible to terrorists and, one must presume, sufficiently motivated artists. Burden has never really been a terrorist, after all, even though he has deserved to be called “one of America’s few really scary artists.”

Burden’s 747 is an art object that existed as such only in a vanishing instant of
time now memorialized in its photographic and textual documentation. Consequently, his pistol points out two directions, into performance and the simulacrum, that beleaguered “high” art has taken from the 1960s to the present day. (The emphases in this work on art as a conceptual act, on the human body as integral to the work, and on the personal identity of the artist indicate three additional directions that have been pursued.) Yet we are also guided elsewhere, further into the past, into the tradition of landscape art and, more specifically, into the aesthetics of the sublime. The Burden of 747 then becomes a latter-day wanderer from the canvases of Caspar David Friedrich, posed against the melancholy horizon, seeking to penetrate its mysteries. The disproportions of scale between the puny human and the transcendent(al) airliner call to mind the Faust legend as it was understood by the Romantics, in which it tells of the danger of overreaching the bounds of one’s nature by desiring to know too much, and also in its more modern, historically specific understanding, in which scientific knowledge and its characteristic product, technology, are the most profound temptations to the human spirit. (If you want an image of Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*, Burden gives it to you.) In this regard, however, Burden’s performance still leads us into equivocation: for if his was in some sense an act reaffirming the divide between technology and spirit, science and art, impersonal knowledge and human vitality, and all the other oppositions appertaining to these, it was also an act that solicited our epistemophilia, and in the most basic empirical terms. Is the photo “real”?5 (This question becomes all the more pressing if one now thinks of the uncanny reversal of Burden’s work in a hoax that was widely distributed over the internet almost immediately after the September 11th attacks: a photograph of a man on the observation deck of the World Trade Center, oblivious to the plane bearing down upon him.) Did he “really” shoot the gun? Was the plane close enough to him at that moment so that it was within the realm of empirical possibility that he might have hit it and, if he hit it just right—just wrong—forced it to crash? We can learn, if we are so inclined, that Burden was visited by the FBI but dismissed from their consideration, evidently, because he was out of range when he fired his gun.6

Like truth, beauty might also be an issue here. As a young man Burden was not, by any ordinary measures, an extraordinarily attractive hunk of humanity, and in the snapshot of this event he looks small and scruffy as he stands in his undistinguished clothes in an equally undistinguished landscape. If we cannot call such a perfectly conceived act “beautiful,” however, then of what use can that word be outside of the inverted commas used to terrorize the taste of those who still believe in a regulative ideal of aesthetic judgment? Much the same question might be asked of all the other terms through which we are accustomed to evaluate art, including *morality* and *value*.

Through its erasure of the line commonly drawn between symbolic and real violence, as through the sorts of uncertainties, equivocations, contradictions, and overdeterminations I have briefly sketched here, Burden’s act drew forth the misan-

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thropy of art: its undoing of humanity, its drive to betray what Samuel Beckett called “anthropomorphic insolence,” or whatever may be thought of as properly human desires, intentions, and concerns.\(^7\) Using Beckett as one of his favored exemplars, Theodor Adorno directed attention to the aesthetic implications of this point (even as he struggled to give it a utopian spin) when he remarked upon the Baudelarian “spleen” of art, without which it cannot be and with which it maintains “a permanent protest against morality.”\(^8\) This is an ancient theme, of course, arguably the most ancient theme of Western aesthetics, and yet one that we continue to play down whenever we try to discipline art into spiritual health by working some sense of responsibility into our theories of what it is, does, and has been. “Pollyanaesthetics” was Dorothy Parker’s waspish term for this sort of thing; and for his part Burden has flatly stated, “Art is not about social betterment.”\(^9\)

Burden, I would suggest, was not sick but was unhuman when he made 747. He was like those uncanny things-in-the-act-of-becoming-art that are no longer objects, exactly, as they appear to their makers or audiences. At the most banal level, the teacher in the creative writing workshop says, “This poem wants to be a sonnet,” or the painter says, in trying to figure out what the canvas is doing, “It needs something right there.” A more extraordinary case would involve bystanders watching symbols being attacked and, as thousands die, imagining that they are watching a movie.

In accordance with the tradition that Socrates helped to establish in the *Phaedo*, it has been usual to think of misanthropy quite differently. Much as T. E. Hulme termed Romanticism “spilt religion,” both scholars and laypersons have tended to regard misanthropy as spoilt idealism: the flipside of generosity for Timon of Athens, sincerity for Molière’s Alceste, reason for Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver, innocence for Victor Frankenstein’s monster, romantic love for Dorothy Parker, and so on.\(^10\) As was pointed out by Sébastien-Roch-Nicolas Chamfort, a prominent misanthrope in his day despite his role as an enthusiastic “friend of humanity” during the French Revolution, misanthropy is then not really distinct from fellow-feeling: “To have a correct idea of things, it is necessary to take words in a sense opposite to that which they are given in the world. Misanthropist, for example, means philanthropist.”\(^11\) (This is the tradition that Thomas Love Peacock satirized in *Nightmare Abbey* [1818] through the words of a Kantian metaphysician, Mr. Flosky: “I do not take any interest in any person or thing on the face of the earth; which sentiment, if you analyse it, you will find to be the quintessence of the most refined philanthropy.”)\(^12\) Misanthropy thus construed is what one of Friedrich Schiller’s characters describes it to be: a condition that places one in a critical position between “humanity and humans.”\(^13\) Works that take misanthropy as an explicit topic always lend themselves to this kind of judgment at least to some extent, and criticism that accepts this invitation does have its pertinence as it traces out the fashions and histories of this attitude, as it may then be called. To stop there, however, is to stay comfortably with the terms of humanity and thus, like Hulme, finally not to experi-
ence these works as art at all. In contrast, Burden’s performance leads us to see the constitutive misanthropy at work in the very conception of art: its appeal to the realm of the unhuman, which includes not only the domains of brute material events and of cultural representations but also of identifications with things such as leaders, gods, consumer goods, planes, skyscrapers, and movies. *The Other Vietnam Memorial* (1991) is a more recent work of Burden’s that helps to establish this argument. Through this mock monument Burden drew out the fierce misanthropy in Maya Lin’s beloved wall—before which hundreds of thousands of Americans continue to lay down offerings as they rub it, embrace it, photograph it, kneel in front of it, shed tears near it—by reminding us of the names of the millions of Vietnamese that this wall symbolically and, in effect, violently erases. More recently, and perhaps even more controversially, the artist Dread Scott has followed Burden’s example in a work titled (and dramatizing the equivoque in the term) *Enduring Freedom* (2002), a shrine based on those created in New York City in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks but devoted to the Afghan casualties of the war the United States is conducting in response to them.

One need not necessarily be an artist, self-designated or otherwise, to appreciate the calling of this misanthropy. It is not only a question of art. Throughout his writings Beckett, for instance, would have it that this calling lies in wait for just about everyone. Thus, the protagonist of *Watt*, troubled over a potlike thing—“It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted”—finds his own humanity equally at issue because of “this indefinable thing that prevented him from saying, with conviction, and to his relief, of the object that was so like a pot, that it was a pot, and of the creature that still in spite of everything presented a large number of exclusively human characteristics, that it was a man.” Of interest in regard to this issue of classification is one of the most distinctive features of Burden’s LAX performance: that it was carried out in the almost complete absence of recognizable aesthetic frames. Although a witness took a snapshot, there was no audience or theater in the usual senses of these words, no curtains or stirring music or other signs to indicate the event’s beginning and end, and no formal conventions by which to judge its quality or success except, perhaps, the trope of paradox. (For if he had “succeeded,” he surely would have “failed”; his act would have been a horrific crime, not an amazingly canny artwork.) Moreover, although the event gave rise to various kinds of commentary and documentation, including Burden’s own testimony about it, it did not result in an object that could be displayed in a gallery or enshrined in a museum, and if someone were to attempt to reproduce it today, it is clear that the performance, which would certainly end in imprisonment for all concerned, would scarcely resemble the original. Furthermore, the artist’s touch played no part in that original event (any fool can fire a gun); and in fact it cannot even be taken for granted that in firing the gun, Burden acted as an artist (lots of people fire guns into the sky to celebrate an occasion, to express anger, to let off steam, or for other reasons that
seem appropriate at the time). Perhaps it resembles art, it is almost art, but it is not an art of which one can say, Art, art, and be comforted.

And it was ever thus, or so I take Burden to have suggested. If ever such a thing as art should be, it cannot be radically distinguished from ordinary perceptions, acts, and deeds, even though it cannot be entirely coincident with them. What marks it out is the misanthropic appeal that goes to work on us in any experience that somehow takes us out of “it”: the world, the self, living matter, whatever is assumed for the moment to figure as the commonality of humanity. In this regard, another of Burden’s early works, in which he had himself crucified on the back of a Volkswagen Beetle (Trans-Fixed, 1974), may be usefully juxtaposed with his assault on the airliner. The sadomasochistic extremes he marked out with these two works, in which the artist is variably killer and sacrifice, terrorist and victim, evil and redemption—all in the context of mundane modernity—evoke the immemorial religious traditions, themes, functions, and contexts of art in all their horror, sublimity, and banality. One thinks of the elegant misanthropy of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Babylon Lottery,” which echoes passages from Thomas De Quincey’s opium nightmares and from Charles Baudelaire’s Flowers of Evil: “Like all men in Babylon, I have been a proconsul; like all, a slave; I have also known omnipotence, opprobrium, jail.”

Like other early works by Burden, such as the one in which he confined himself for several days in a small UC Irvine locker with nothing but a five-gallon jug of water available to him from the locker above and a five-gallon jug for his urine in the one below (Five Day Locker Piece, 1971), the embodied pun in Trans-Fixed—it is an “auto”-crucifixion—calls to mind the misanthropy in ascetic spiritual practices like those performed by early church fathers such as St. Simeon Stylites, whose legend is capable of creeping out even the most devout commentators. We did not need a cutting-edge artist to tell us that there is an irony built into the act of turning away from humankind, away from “the world,” in the attempt to fulfill one’s humanity; the young Simeon’s fellow monks are said to have been so appalled by the creative extremes of his self-mortification, which included tying a rope around his loins so that it ate into his flesh and opened a ghastly wound festering with worms, that they cast him out from their brotherhood. What Burden has offered us, though, complete with allusions to the historical realities of mass murder (it was a Volkswagen hood, after all), is a vision of misanthropy as the very stuff of art, to be accepted and explored and worked on as such, lest art and non-art alike should offer us the dismal “comfort” of the real thing.

II

A familiar view would have it that Franz Kafka’s hunger artist represents the last term in a series of asceticisms. The legacy of stoic soldiers and athletes, Christian anchorites, and Romantic artists peters off into this performer who allows
an entrepreneur to make a spectacle out of the sight of his askēsis—that is, until the market for such things fails and he is led to contemplate the futility of his discipline. From this sort of viewpoint, the hunger artist participates in various allegories, which tell of the death of a traditional ideal of art in the commodified circumstances of modern life; the meaninglessness of art divorced from the social institutions of polis and church; the incoherence of the self in the absence of sustaining relations with others; and the problem posed by art to a particular writer, ascetic, and Jew. In Sander L. Gilman’s felicitous phrase, “Kafka’s geek turns out in the end to have been a freak.” Therefore, he can also be associated with the rethinking of cultural history represented by the revered freaks of the Symbolist and aestheticist movements, such as Joris-Karl Huysmans’s Des Esseintes; with the general perception of cultural and physical degeneration that played itself out in all aspects of modernism, including not only literature and art but also fields such as history, anthropology, and criminology; and with an aesthetics of high art that was consolidated in this era in marked opposition to (but also through complicity with) femininity, mass culture, popular culture, and middle-class business in general.²⁰

The text does support these sorts of readings, and they have their importance. Similarly, it is important to recognize, as Breon Mitchell has pointed out, that in the late nineteenth century hunger artists were an actual social phenomenon whose practices and subsequent decline in popularity are tracked with an almost journalistic fidelity in Kafka’s tale.²¹ With at least as much textual warrant, though, one might see Kafka’s hunger artist as neither historical outsider nor historicist exemplification. Instead he may be taken to embody the untimeliness of the misanthropy from which no art can deliver itself.

We can know that the hunger artist is not simply an anachronism because all the supposedly contemporary features of his environment—the impure motivations in the world of performing art, the corruptions of commercialism, the vulgar and uncomprehending spectators—were already established as being “contemporary” at least as far back as the fourth century. When church fathers took to the wastelands of the Middle East and there lived on pillars, within caves, or even, like St. Theodore Sykeon, in cages, they already had to deal with the question of when ambition might corrupt, rather than help to perfect, the imitatio involved in one’s body art.²² Similarly, just as prospective monks would have to be warned, in medieval works such as Piers Plowman and the Myrour of Recluses, against the temptation to adopt the life of a hermit in order to cash in on it, so, too, did the “athletes of God” in the deserts of the fourth and fifth centuries, such as Antony, have to give up money due to them and resist Satan’s offers to replace it with even more.²³ Moreover, in addition to dealing with the faithful who flocked to see them in their spectacular isolation, they had to fend off tourists who had no proper understanding of their discipline.²⁴ Accordingly, a standard trope in saints’ lives has their followers, and sometimes they themselves, initially being rejected from monkish fellowship before they prove they are deserving of its suffering. Similarly, we learn of those
who had to masquerade as the real thing in order to be accepted, such as women who disguised themselves as men so that they might be able to participate in their discipline.

In fact, part of the pleasure in reading saints’ lives comes from “naïve” details that suggest just how disturbing the image of misanthropy was bound to appear, no matter how pious it was supposed to be. For instance, when his former brethren, admonished by God, decide they want Simeon back among them, they have to get him back by force, so glad is he to have been cast out into the wilderness. Similarly, in Athanasius’s famous life of St. Antony, we are told how Antony’s twenty years of isolation came to an end when his admirers broke into his enclosure and forcibly dragged him out—even as Kafka’s artist had to be reluctantly taken out of his cage at the end of each performance. Bede told a similar story of how a tearful St. Cuthbert had to be compelled to leave his eremitic isolation in order to assume the duties of the bishopric to which he had been elected, and in the “great refusal” of the figure in the Inferno commonly identified as Pope Celestine V, who abdicated the papacy after only a few months to return to his life as a hermit, Dante famously made an example of this sort of danger. Indeed, all the features of the hunger artist’s story that might identify him as an anachronistic figure, because they are supposed to indicate the inappropriately modern context in which his art cannot flourish—the features that establish a context of multiple, ambiguous, corrupt, and futile or grotesque motivations—were already woven into the understanding of the lives of solitaries from the time this type was recognized as such. And just as we can see that he is not an anachronism, from this viewpoint, we can also see that Kafka’s artist is not simply an exemplification; for the features that would seem to cage him into a particular cultural, social, or historical context also drag him out into others, with the original “event” being aesthetically irretrievable except as an ongoing disturbance in our capacities for aesthetic judgment.

To see how fully the suicidal masochism of the hunger artist is also sadistic aggression, not only against any conceivable audience and the nourishment of the species but also in terms of a misanthropic effect constitutive of art, one might compare his story to what is perhaps Thomas De Quincey’s most famous essay, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.” Like Chamfort, De Quincey argues (in the guise of a speaker before the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder) that the conventional opposition between philanthropy and misanthropy is all wrong, but he develops this argument rather differently. The terms of philanthropy and misanthropy, he maintains, simply refer to works that are less or more artistic: “The world in general, gentleman, are very bloody-minded; and all they want in a murder is a copious effusion of blood; gaudy display in this point is enough for them.” (Here one might think of the gaudy health of the leopard that so comforts the circus audience at the end of “A Hunger Artist.”) This is also, one might say, the lesson of Timon: that philanthropy simply awaits the occasion to reveal itself as misanthropy, much as (to compare traditional things with topical) leaders now urge charity upon
us in the very same lines and images with which they look forward to bloodshed. “To hear people talk,” says De Quincey, “you would suppose that all the disadvantages and inconveniences were on the side of being murdered, and that there were none at all in not being murdered. But considerate men think otherwise.”

Like Burden and Kafka, he makes a performance out of taking pleasure in drawing out as unsparingly as possible his recognition of the misanthropy in art. Still writing of murder, he remarks,

A philosophic friend, well known for his philanthropy and general benignity, suggests that the subject chosen ought also to have a family of young children wholly dependent on his exertions, by way of deepening the pathos. And, undoubtedly, this is a judicious caution. Yet I would not insist too keenly on such a condition. Severe good taste unquestionably suggests it; but still, where the man was otherwise unobjectionable in point of morals and health, I would not look with too curious a jealousy to a restriction which might have the effect of narrowing the artist’s sphere.

Through what one critic has defensively called his “blandly brazen misappropriations of common aesthetic dicta,” De Quincey thus proposed a conception of aesthetics that was heretically upsetting, yes, but also completely faithful to tradition.

In contrast to De Quincey’s connoisseur, popular imagination would hold misanthropy to be an extreme and desolate condition: self-lacerating, miserable, and repulsive where it is not pathetic. This is a tale we tell to bind ourselves to the species: hence the dismay of journalists reporting on the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks when they were forced to deal with the fact that the terrorists did not fit the typical profile of an impoverished, desperate youth brainwashed into a jihad frenzy but instead seemed to be middle-class, educated, and well traveled—at least one even possessed of a wife and children, according to early reports. The terrorists seemed to compound their horrific crime even further, after the fact, by suffering it to be revealed that they had enjoyed an occasional drink, gone to the gym, fit in. The media would have been much more comfortable with the stereotypical fanaticism of a Baudelaire: “When I have inspired universal disgust and horror, I will have conquered solitude.”

III

It is entirely fitting that prior to the early twentieth century, the Misanthrope (c. 1568; fig. 2) of Pieter Brueghel the Elder was cataloged under the title Heresy. For misanthropy can be construed as the ultimate and unsurpassable heresy in the souls, societies, and histories of humankind—as Byron recognized, for instance, in making his Giaour, or infidel, yet another type of Cain in his parade of alienated protagonists. With deadening predictability, victims will see terrorists as heretics, even to their own professions of faith, who are driven by an inhuman hatred of humanity, while the terrorists will believe these others are the real source
of hatred and heresy. To remark upon this dreary cliché (“one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”) is by no means to suggest an equivalence between, for instance, the fanatics responsible for the plane hijackings of 11 September 2001 and those who were murdered or otherwise devastated by their actions. On the contrary, this observation is necessary in order to maintain crucial distinctions among persons and among deeds. For the purposes of moral and political judgment, as the constitutive misanthropy of art can teach us, the language of heresy will get us nowhere. In adopting it, we simply undo ourselves, subjecting ourselves to the art of misanthropy as if suddenly placing ourselves as actors on the set of a disaster movie and thus barring ourselves from any chance of communication, aesthetic or otherwise.

Even those who seek to domesticate misanthropy as a redemptive withdrawal from the world, from “society” in the popular sense, are compelled to distinguish...
their visions from heretical forms and thus to make war on their own professions. In the case of Johann Georg Zimmermann’s Rousseauian treatise On Solitude, for instance, the heresy involves, among others, Roman Catholic monastics: “In the solitude of the cloister, through fasting and freezing, midnight choir shrieking, and a thousand loathsome and exasperating feelings, one learns to hate humanity.” Zimmermann’s treatise is a virtual prescription for Friedrich’s paintings, with their scenes of sublime and ennobling solitude, and so we might presume that he would have admired works such as Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise (1817; fig. 3), but we must also presume that The Monk by the Sea (c. 1809; fig. 4) would have proven as unsettling to him as it did to Heinrich von Kleist. Rather than suggesting the “sweet melancholy” of which Zimmermann was so fond, this work would have been more apt to call up Robert Burton’s description of that “destructive solitariness” in which “sociable creatures become beasts, monsters, inhumane, ugly to behold, Misanthropi.” So Kleist’s 1810 commentary told of the confusion he felt before this painting, which he described as being at once an occasion of heartwrenching feeling and of damage to the self.

This example can serve to remind us that, like Zimmermann’s work, the history of Christian ascetism is associated with accusations and counteraccusations of heresy, and not only in dramatically anti-Catholic works of misanthropy such as Charles Robert Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer. (Flannery O’Connor, for one, freely acknowledged as much when she suffered 1 Corinthians 15:31, “I die daily,” to be translated into the idiom of the murderous Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”: “She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”) Just as art cannot be described without raising the issue of misanthropy, there is no way that misanthropy can be described, no matter how “aesthetic,” that will triumph over the question of heresy. The fact that art teaches us that we live in the company of misanthropes, that we must actually love misanthropy because without it we would have no identities, does not resolve any questions, certainly. However, recognizing that humanity, in Byron’s words, is “enamour’d of distress” does furnish us, as it furnished him, with the only rational starting point we have for deciding how to proceed in the face of evil that drives us to war.

In her surrealist anatomy, The War of Dreams, Angela Carter explored this issue of misanthropy in a time of war through dramatic allusions to Kafka, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Marquis de Sade, Bram Stoker, Arthur Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry, the Comte de Lautréamont, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others. The penultimate chapter in her rendering of this issue, which she portrays as deeply implicated in but irreducible to the workings of misogyny, takes on the case of Swift. In place of the classical motto befitting her well-known story “The Company of Wolves”— homo homini lupus—we are given the image of the horse-man, or centaur. Her protagonist, Desiderio, and his beloved, Albertina, come upon a tribe of centaurs and
find that these creatures are “not Houyhnhnms,” exactly, because they do have “many words to describe conditions of deceit.” Nonetheless, they bring us to a Swiftian, or super-Swiftian, lesson, one that draws out the surrealism in the ancient formula that defines humankind as the *animal implume bipes latis unguibus*: “If I was a man, what was a man? The bay offered me a logical definition: a horse in a state of ultimate, biped, maneless, tailless decadence.” The centaurs, then, are at once men and unmen because they are men in a state of virtual perfection, intensely religious beings whose mastery over Desiderio he cannot help but accept, whom he in fact must believe are the creation of his own desires. “I was somehow, all unknowing, the instigator of this horror,” he thinks as they gang-rape Albertina. “While as for me,” he says, “they forced on me the caresses of all their females for they had no notion of humanity in spite of their extraordinary nobility of spirit. Because they were far more magnificent than man, they did not know what a man was. They did not have a word for shame and nothing human was alien to them because they were alien to everything human.” Human, all too unhuman, produced “according
to the self-determined laws of a group of synthetically authentic phenomena,” veritable masterpieces of classical aesthetics, the centaurs terrorize the distinction between philanthropy and misanthropy.

A comparison of Brueghel to Carter on this point must seem terribly or even surrealistically anachronistic. Nonetheless, it is apt, and by the logic of Brueghel’s painting no less than that of Carter’s novel. Despite the apparent simplicity of its subject, misanthropy appears in Brueghel’s painting in a temporally and spatially disorienting way. It heretically undoes itself, one might say, even as it divides the world depicted by Brueghel’s design. While a shepherd in the background looks after his flock, thus giving the presumed commonality of the species a pastoral register, the misanthrope, in a blue hooded cloak, walks away from the world, which is symbolized by a lout crouched within a globe topped with a cross. The world is in the act of cutting the misanthrope’s purse, thus presumably representing the kind of shenanigans that have determined this figure to become what he is; as we are told by the legend at the bottom of the painting (which may have been added at

**Figure 4.** Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, c.1809. Oil on canvas. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Photo: Courtesy of Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz.
some point after its initial composition), “Because the world is so unfaithful / That is why I go in mourning.”

All well and good; but as art historians have long noted, there is some cause for confusion here. For instance, if the misanthrope is truly leaving the world, why is he bringing his money with him? Does the fact that his purse is red and heart-shaped indicate a sneaking love of the very world whose unfaithfulness he supposedly abhors and flees? One might also ask about the contrast between the thorns (or thornlike calthrops, as they may be) in front of him, in the lower left corner of the painting, and the shepherd with his flock at the upper right. If the former are a symbol of the thorny fate of Christ, so, too, is the latter a conventional image of pastoral care in the Christian sense; and in going toward the one, the misanthrope must walk away from the other. Are we then to see in this moment a suggestion of inhuman selfishness in the misanthrope’s monkish self-abnegation—a hint that his stealing away from the world is a kind of heartless theft? The fact that there is no resolution to art historians’ questions about Brueghel’s affiliations in this era of violent religious conflicts is very much to the point here. And this is not even to mention the obvious paradox that in figuring a separation from the world, this image of a cloaked man is itself a conventional form; aesthetically speaking, Brueghel’s misanthrope is as much of a worldly as is his “world” itself.

Very much of the world, too, is Byron’s Giaour, whose “looks are not of earth nor heaven,” who appalls even the monks among whom he comes to dwell, who is seen by his Muslim adversaries as an “Apostate to his own vile faith,” and whose tale is broken into confusing fragments. This misanthrope is revealed to be, among other things, an arachnid-man. Making literal the etymology of “remorse,” Byron pictures the mind of his protagonist as a scorpion “girt by fire” that cuts it off from the world:

\[
\text{Till inly search’d by thousand throes,} \\
\text{And maddening in her ire,} \\
\text{One sad and sole relief she knows,} \\
\text{The sting she nourish’d for her foes,} \\
\text{Whose venom never yet was vain,} \\
\text{Gives but one pang, and cures all pain,} \\
\text{And darts into her desperate brain.}\]

As with the agenbite of inwit that so tortures Stephen Daedalus in \textit{Ulysses}, this experience limns misanthropy as being the greatest challenge to aesthetics precisely because it is the unsurpassable motivation and boundary of art.

Ingmar Bergman, arguably the twentieth century’s greatest exponent of misanthropy, inevitably comes to mind here. For instance, early in \textit{The Passion of Anna} (1969) one character, Andreas, feels compelled to deny what another has asserted of him, that he is a hermit. The remainder of the film is ruthlessly designed to make a liar of him, and indeed of anyone who would claim not to be essentially solitary;
near the end, Andreas tells Anna, the woman with whom he has now been living for several years, “I want my solitude back.” The prehistory to his misanthropy is wrought through all the events recalled or played out in the film—a miscarriage, an affair, a car accident, a marital separation—and it is also given a global context. In much the same way that Bergman used TV footage of a self-immolating Buddhist monk and a photo of a Nazi roundup of Jews in Persona (1963), in this movie the Vietnam War is referred to when Andreas and Anna sit before a TV and watch, unwillingly fascinated, the then-famous film of the South Vietnamese National Police Chief, Nguyen Ngoc Loan, using his pistol to execute a Viet Cong prisoner on a Saigon street. On the island where this movie takes place, meanwhile, we are told of the community’s search for a terrorist who has been murdering animals—a search that comes to focus on a hermit with a history of psychological problems, Johann Andersson, whom the locals decide to assault. Although he is innocent, he is so humiliated by the assault, in which one man pisses in his face, that he commits suicide. As if all this were not more than enough, Bergman even symbolically humiliates his own film by intercutting its dramatic footage with documentary scenes of its actors discussing their roles with a quite notable lack of eloquence. In short, misanthropy is suggested here to pervade every conceivable means of representation; even less subtle than the Vietnam reference is the irony that a soulless architect, Elis, has won an important commission for a “cultural center.” The last shot of the film—which needs to be viewed in the context of the Romantic landscapes that preceded it and of Burden’s 747, which followed—has Andreas alone, fallen upon his hands and knees like an unhuman, unworshipful thing, in a place on the island that appears as a desert wasteland even though it has water and bears signs of cultivation and inhabitation. He is not in a desert, exactly, but in a site of utter disaster.

IV

It resembled a movie, it was almost a movie, but it was not a movie of which one could say, Movie, movie, and be comforted.

It is completely understandable, of course, that the event should have appeared in aesthetic terms so immediately, to so many, so dismayingly. Even though it was not a movie, after all, it had been filmed; and even though real people were dying, from the first it was clear that the deaths were less strategic, for those responsible for them, than symbolic. Accordingly, it did not take long for someone to call the terrorists “artists,” and Jonathan Franzen was not wrong in doing so, exactly (though he was as deliberately tasteless as Burden’s art has often sought to be). Unlike Karlheinz Stockhausen, whose infamous comments appeared to suggest that he gloried in this mass murder, Franzen was simply recognizing (with the help of an allusion to Kafka’s “Hunger Artist”) that one could not go through the experience of viewing images of it without feeling compelled to think that these images
had something to teach us about the experience of art, even if that teaching must first appear in the form of denial.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, commenting on his own first reaction—“Oh my God, it’s like my book!”—the author of \textit{All That Is Solid Melts into Air} has reported, “Soon afterward, on the screen and then in the street, I heard people talking, and they were doing just what I’d done: making enormous mythical constructions that would cause the whole horrific event to revolve around \textit{them}. We were like needy sculptors rushing to produce instant replacements for the giant stabiles that had stood on World Trade Plaza. We threw up anything we could hide behind to conceal our panic, our helplessness, and our instant, boundless sense of guilt.”\textsuperscript{45} And, of course, the dust had scarcely begun to settle before hats and t-shirts with images of the burning buildings were on sale, before books about and exhibitions of photos of the event were being planned, before impromptu shrines were being erected, and before more deliberate works in all sorts of genres, including comic books, videos, and architectural maquettes, were being developed. In a meditation on the aesthetics of trauma, Marianne Hirsch tells of getting together with friends to compare and exchange snapshots of the event, and almost immediately people came to think that parts of the damaged buildings should be preserved, as a kind of art object, for posterity.\textsuperscript{46} Herbert Muschamp commented in the \textit{New York Times}, “If you believe that beauty begins in terror, then it is not sacrilege to speak of the beauty of the remaining walls.”\textsuperscript{47}

Like Franzen and Berman and Muschamp and countless others across the United States and the entire world, I was transfixed by the films of the events of September 11. Like all these millions, I watched them again and again, unwillingly fascinated, even though, if all this had simply been a matter of reality, one viewing of the horror ought to have been more than enough. In fact, as I compulsively watched the film being compulsively rerun on that day, I found myself especially fixated on one of the shots: the amateur video of the plane streaking in from the left side of the frame and hitting the South Tower of the World Trade Center to the accompaniment of a woman’s blasphemous scream—later edited out by the networks—“Jesus Fucking Christ!” And I thought of Burden’s art, and of what art still tries to teach us of misanthropy.

Those who thought it awful that the events of September 11th should have reminded people of the movies, those who thought it a condemnation of our taste and irrefutable proof that we should reform our popular entertainment, were undoubtedly as well meaning as they were entirely wrong. Like it or not, politics will be aestheticized; we cannot even begin to conceive of justice without working through art, through the subject of misanthropy, and so through what Susan Buck-Morss has described, in writing of Walter Benjamin, as the agonizing “enjoyment taken in viewing our own destruction.”\textsuperscript{48} For all its unique and almost unbearable pathos, the denial of humanity in the widespread defensive reaction to September 11—\textit{I can’t believe my eyes. . . This can’t be real. . . This must be a movie}—was another version of the aggression against humanity, the unhuman motivation, that we find
in art, that unreal stuff. It is this effect of the unhuman that accounts for the notorious disjunction between our desire and our ability to draw a clear distinction between art and everyday life. That is why it is not human, exactly, but it is not terrible, either, that people should have felt compelled to imagine, momentarily, that all this was art rather than yet another experience of its death in life.

Notes

1. C. Carr, “This Is Only a Test: Chris Burden,” *Artforum* 28 (Sept. 1989): 121. See also Max Kozloff’s reference to what he calls the “lumpen terrorism” of body art (for which Burden is one of his main exemplars) in “Pygmalion Reversed,” *Artforum* 14 (Nov. 1975): 32; and the comparison of Burden to a terrorist (the work specifically addressed here is his ski-masked appearance in *You’ll Never See My Face in Kansas* [1971]) in Chris Burden (Paris, 1995), 9.

2. On this point see the argument of Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1998), 130–32.


5. Although he gives no source for his claim, which is at odds with what Burden has said in the public records of his performances, Herbert Blau reports that the photo is a kind of illusion because, according to Burden, he had not seen the airplane when he fired the gun; see Blau, “Les rhétoriques du corps et la guerre des nerfs,” *Cahiers du musée national d’art moderne* 51 (Spring 1995): 24.


8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 64, 80. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. See also, e. g., his argument (293) that art “keeps faith with mankind only through inhumanity.”


conception of misanthropy today and its conception in the Phaedo or in older works such as Auguste Widal’s Des divers caractères du misanthrope chez les écrivains anciens et modernes (Paris, 1851); for an example of a contemporary literary study that explicitly proceeds from this premise, see Bernhard Sorg, Der Künstler als Misanthrop: zur Genealogie einer Vorstellung (Tubingen, 1989).


14. It is for this reason, I assume, that Burden has sometimes insisted on asserting a clear distinction between art and life, as when he said, “You know I set them apart: this is art and this is life,” and “people confuse what I do with me” (quoted in Loeffler and Tong, Performance Anthology, 349). As I trust is evident, I don’t find these self-characterizations of his work entirely adequate.

15. Beckett, Watt, 81, 82–83. This question of the unhuman in humanity is perhaps most amusingly raised in this novel through Beckett’s famous footnote (102) in reference to his description of one who is “a fine girl but a bleeder”: “Haemophilia is, like enlargement [sic] of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work.”

16. In terms of his work from this period, Burden is best known for the pieces, such as Shoot, that might be broadly characterized as masochistic, but 747 is by no means the only piece that dramatized some kind of aggression toward others. For example, in TV Hijack (1972) he held a knife at the throat of a local TV host who was interviewing him so as to “demonstrate” a TV hijack. Of interest in relation to this point, though differing from my approach here, is the Deleuzian analysis of two of Franz Kafka’s stories (one of which is discussed below) in Margot Norris, “Sadism and Masochism in ‘In the Penal Colony’ and ‘A Hunger Artist,’” in Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics, and the Fin de Siècle, ed. Mark Anderson (New York, 1989), 170–86.


18. See, e. g., the comments of Helen Waddell on “that tormented and preposterous figure” who “belongs to the decadence” and whose “more revolting practices, the very reading of which demands a strong and insensitive stomach, are the more insane extravagances of Eastern asceticism, and peculiar to no age and no creed. Incidentally, they made him extremely offensive to his more fastidious brethren”; Helen Waddell, The Desert Fathers (New York, 1936), 14.

19. That is, until God sent a dream to terrify them into bringing him back. I take this account from Antonius, La vie et les miracles de Saint Syméon Styliste l’ancien, ed. and trans. M. Chaîne (Cairo, 1948).

20. Sander L. Gilman, Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient (New York, 1995), 237. It may be worth mentioning that the Faustian allusion in Burden’s work is even more explicitly present in “A Hunger Artist”; as Heinz Politzer pointed out, this tale echoes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s work at one point (Kafka’s “Wer es nicht fühlt, dem kann man es nicht begreiflich machen” citing Goethe’s “Wenn ihr’s nicht fühlt, ihr werdet’s nicht erjagen”); see Heinz Politzer, Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox (Ithaca, 1962), 304 n.


26. Thomas De Quincey, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,” in *Collected Writings*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh, 1889–1890), 13:9–51. In addition to the original 1827 essay, De Quincey published supplementary articles in 1839 and 1854; I concern myself here only with the first piece.


28. Ibid., 42.

29. Ibid., 48.


32. This work has also been referred to under other titles, including *The Perfidy of the World*. For more information on this and other points, see Sally Elizabeth Mansfield’s master’s thesis, “*The Misanthrope* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder” (University of Virginia, 1978).


38. On the relations among misogyny, aesthetics, and misanthropy, see *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Frances Ferguson (Berkeley, 1989).
41. A calthrop was a military implement, a kind of spike used to disrupt the advance of enemy soldiers; some scholars have identified the objects in the picture as such implements.
44. In a press conference on 17 September, Karlheinz Stockhausen was quoted as calling the attack “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos” and as saying, “You have people who are so concentrated on one performance, and then 5,000 people are dispatched into eternity, in a single moment. I couldn’t do that. In comparison with that, we’re nothing as composers”; quoted in Anthony Tommasini, “The Devil Made Him Do It,” *New York Times*, 30 September 2001, sec. 2, 28.