




Philosophy is really homesickness
it is the urge to be at home everywhere — *Novalis*

B I L L H E N S O N

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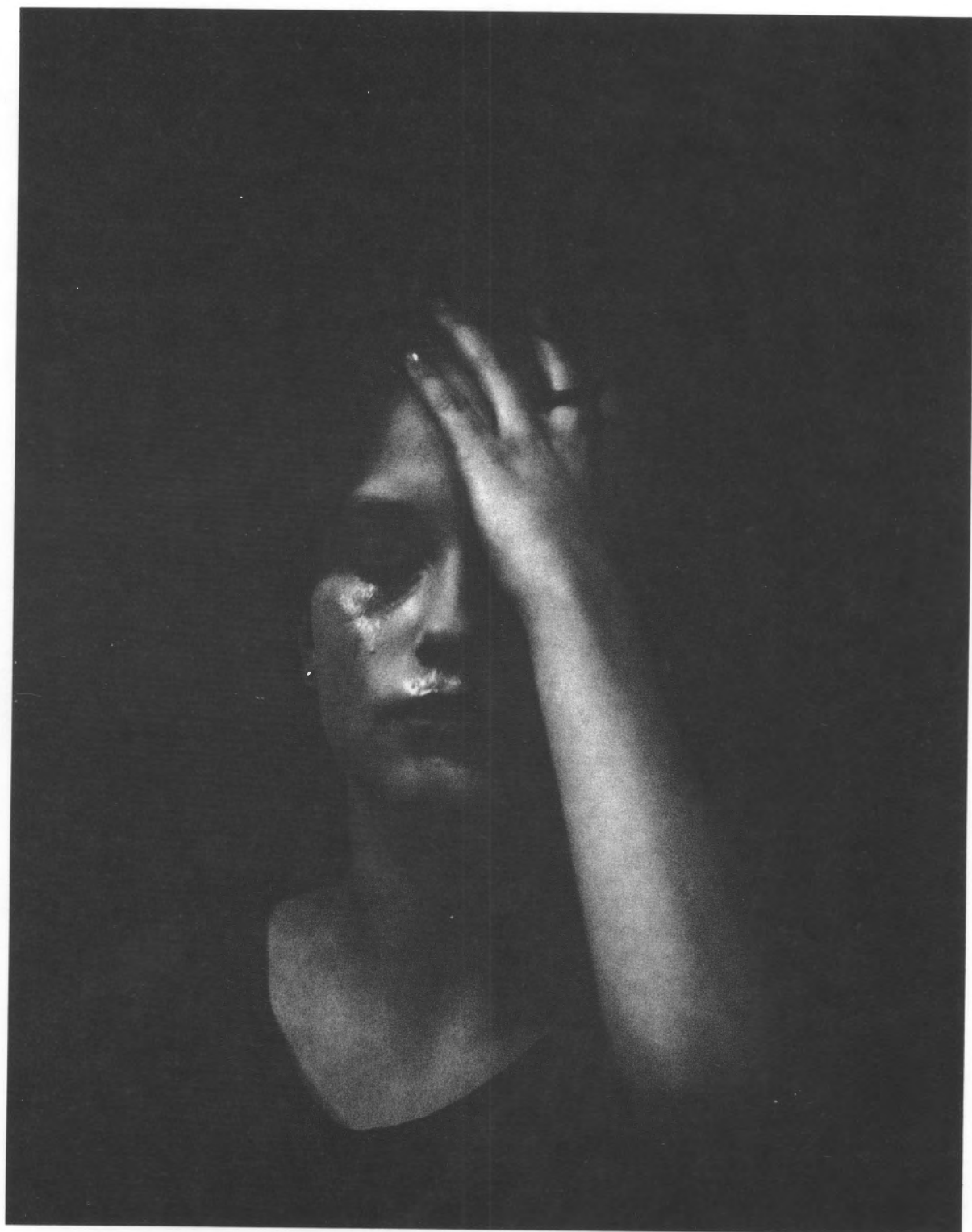


In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster incarnate.' (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*)

This is the famous — or perhaps notorious — comment with which Adorno and Horkheimer opened their account of the eclipse of reason in the modern world. The remark conveys a kind of melancholic desperation in a way that is paradigmatic for the book from which it is taken; the authors present an analysis of the modern world as one in which mass alienation is the necessary result of the Enlightenment project of subsuming all lived experience under the sign of an abstract reason. The subjection of nature goes along with the subjection of man, the techniques aimed at liberating human beings from need are also the techniques which produce weapons of mass annihilation and methods of mass subjugation. Barbarism is inseparable from 'enlightenment', is its necessary dialectical double. Modern society, child of the Enlightenment project, is speared inextricably upon the horns of this dilemma.

Why begin with this rather tangential excursion? Basically because it seems that there is a seductively easy possible reading of 'Untitled, 1983-84' which could regard this installation as being in a way the visual complement to that uncompromisingly bleak Adorno-Horkheimer account of the experience of modernity, almost as a celebration of that melancholic vision. Here we have the hopelessly damaged dwellers of our fragmented world and also portions of Baroque architecture (ironic references to the historical Enlightenment?); here we have ambiguous presences in decaying environments, and even occasional blank spaces that can only too readily be seen as symbols of the emptiness underlying these various manifestations. Here, in short, is Enlightenment and its barbarism incarnate. This having been decided, the only courses left are either to check for the social welfare content of the imagery or else relapse into formalist appreciation of the installation's aesthetic.

This is a reading I want to resist, the kneejerk 'interpretation' that automatically seeks to place every cultural phenomenon into a prefabricated discourse, either social or aesthetic. The reason for suggesting this reading — this seductively easy reading — in a position of prominence here is that I'm sure it's one that is at the back of many viewers' minds when they first walk around this installation. What I would like to do is to look again, and suggest other ways in which these images might be approached.



I l faut que la critique attaque la forme,
jamais le fond de vos idées' (Lautreamont, *Poesies*)

This injunction of Lautreamont's, that criticism must deal with the form, never the content, of ideas is not one that can be generally recommend; a good deal of nonsense has been spoken and written by those who have wholeheartedly pursued such a path and more or less excised content from the proper field of intellectual investigation. Nevertheless, it seems to be a useful notion to bear in mind when we're thinking about this particular installation. Nothing is easier than interpretation based on content, on the level of representation, of 'that which is depicted'. The problem is that such interpretations nearly always come down to taste and habit. They do not allow the work its own space of operation, but treat it as a more or less faithful mirror of the 'real world', a real world which is always elsewhere than here and which is always familiar because it is merely the reflection of prefabricated responses. Attending to the *form* in which Bill Henson's work is presented is one way of overcoming this Pavlovian response.

The first thing to say is that these pictures as installed have an undeniable power, and it is a power that is largely lost in reproduction. By this I don't intend to indicate what Walter Benjamin, in 'The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction', termed the 'aura' of art — a quasi-mystical effect which relies upon our being in the presence of the original, and knowing that this is the case. The power of this installation is a much more immediate effect, one which relies upon the organization of images itself, upon their presentation as a construction in space. There is an overriding sense of a strong organizational sensibility at work behind this presentation, but it is a sensibility of a rather unusual kind in the visual art context. We have here an installation that is clearly more than a collection of individual images, and yet there is no obvious narrative context implicit in their organization, they cannot be understood as a textual construction. It does not seem possible to read this installation as 'telling a story' in any accepted sense of the phrase. In fact the overwhelming impression is of a mode of organization based on *rhythm*: which is to say, of a visual presentation that is in some ways perhaps more like a piece of music than a photographic exhibition.

I want to push this musical analogy a little further, because it is meant not as some vague arty notion but as a quite precise comparison of effect. Henson's images are organized as sets, often in the configuration of a triptych, and these sets are placed in careful spatial patterns, arrangements which establish a kind of rhythm of looking. There is no clear narrative succession within which these images are determined, but the rhythmic spacing of the sets offers a firm linear impetus to our viewing. This impetus is, however, by no means uniform, smooth. Positioning and spacing function as means of adding point, indicating pauses or areas of particular emphasis and this rhythmic pointing is backed up by the repetitions and near-echoes of imagery which occur throughout the installation. Themes are taken up again, perhaps slightly altered and developed in another way, always calling up their earlier forms, demanding a response which is not to this image, or this, but to the entire context, the exhibition as a whole. We are well aware

that a piece of music cannot be fully appreciated, or reasonably understood, until we have heard it out to the end; I would make the same claim for this installation. It functions as a complex structure within which the individual images operate; if we ignore this and seize only on isolated moments we are, I think, falsifying the work entirely.

The analogy with musical composition seems clear enough, and might at any rate function as a potential corrective to various 'symptomatic readings' that would like to ignore the broader context of the images entirely. Of course we can't push the analogy too far, because there are crucial differences between the aural and the visual forms — a notable instance being the way they exist in time. More to the point, there is an enormous difference in terms of content. Schopenhauer (in *Parerga and Paralipomena*) remarked that music was the only truly universal language. Taken at face value this is absurd, for music is just as culturally encoded a phenomenon as any other kind of cultural activity, but I think the idea he was getting at was that music is the only language in which form is not prescribed by content — in other words, it is a language of *suggestion* rather than of description. Photography, in sharp contradistinction, cannot avoid being descriptive (at least, not if it is to be photography and not some kind of 'painting with light'). And so, having 'attacked the form' in an effort to examine how these images as a whole seem to be operating, it necessary to discuss their content, in an effort to suggest — and I stress the word 'suggest' — what it might be that they are operating with, what their field of function might be.

The difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.' (T S Eliot. '*Tradition and the Individual Talent*')

Many of the images presented here seem almost to beg for some kind of symptomatic reading. How can we read the image of a man injecting himself as being other than the depiction of a drug-user, with all the moral and social overtones that that notion calls up? How can we read these naked bodies floating in baths or grovelling about in dirt but as the results of this process? Where else are we to fit the vacant, expressionless faces of many of the portrait images?

The argument from content is a particularly dangerous one because it is so seductively easy to pick out a handfull of images — the most patently excessive, probably — and elaborate some kind of interpretation of the installation based purely on them. The tyranny of the image is such that we tend to start interpreting 'the content' almost before we've started thinking about it. If, however, we try to look at the content as a whole rather than an a collection of fragments a more interesting way of approaching the work begins to open up.

Perhaps we can begin by trying to sort these disparate images out into thematic correlates. If you think about the content structurally, as a set of thematics binding together an elaborate composition, it becomes apparent that they basically fall into two broad categories: there are images of contemporary existence and images referring to the art and architecture of a certain epoch of the past. If for the moment we ignore the nature of those images of contemporary life, we can firstly concentrate on that strongly stressed thematic duality, of people in the here and now and artefacts from a particular moment of the past. It wouldn't be going too far to argue that this installation as a whole is founded loosely upon the juxtaposition of two historical epochs. Here, then, is an organizational principle going beyond overt depiction, which would bear consideration.

There is, in these two thematic lines, an obvious contrast. We look at the decorative motifs, at the elaborate mouldings, lights, ornamentation: and at these people, often naked, smeared with filth, existing in decaying environments ... the contrast is blatant, wealth and poverty. Taken to a deeper level than the simply economic, a contrast of power and powerlessness.

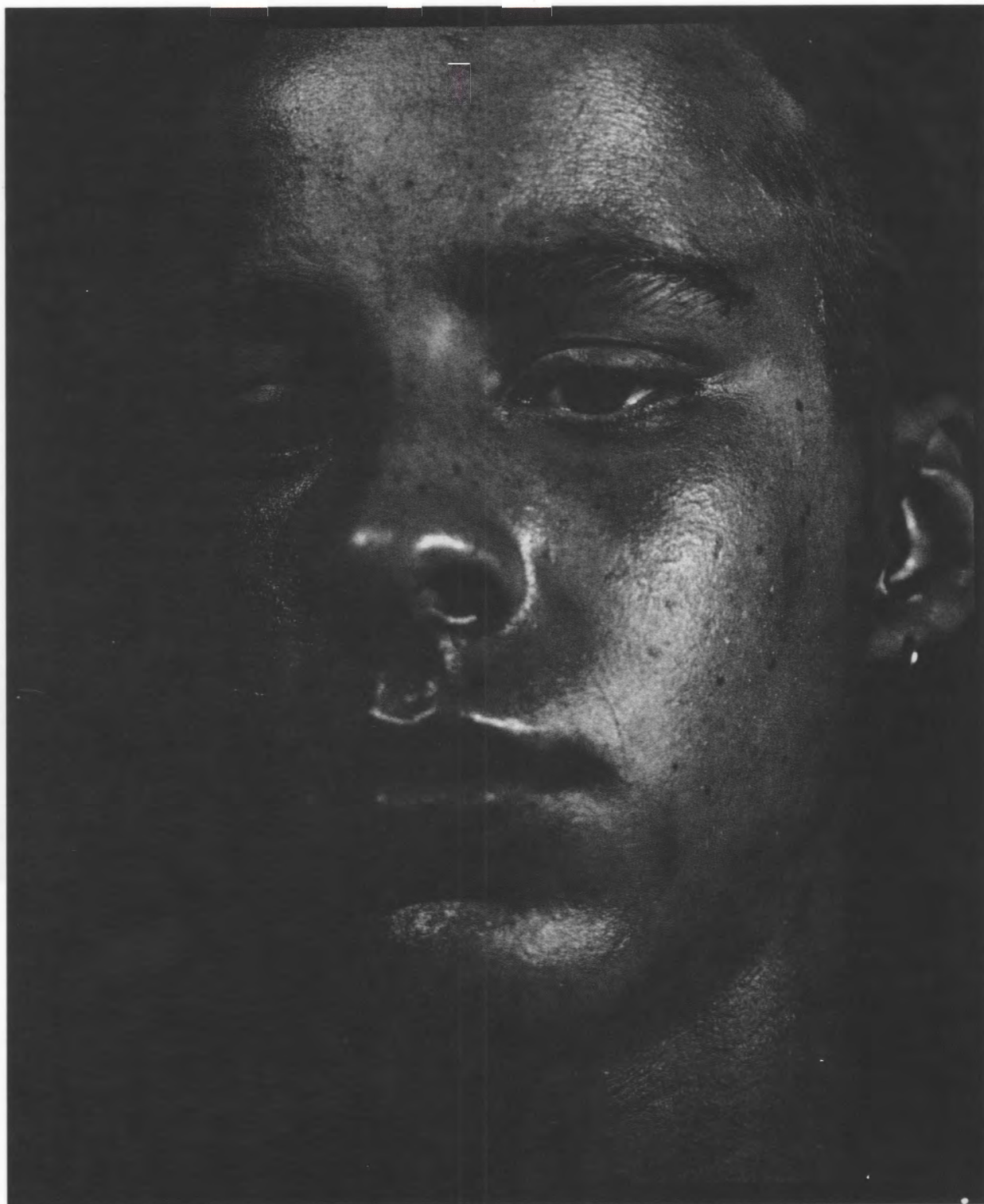
This is one story we could glean from that juxtaposition. It is also, at least in that form, a fairly uninteresting story; and it is one that takes no account of the specific milieux being indicated. If we look at these areas of concern as being not ahistorical offerings of arbitrary images but as being, precisely, historical moments, then it strikes me that at a rather deeper level than that of the obvious contrasts a more suggestive possibility is being opened up, the possibility of a constructive historical comparison. The historical references are derived from the period of interregnum between the breakdown of the High Renaissance and the dawn of the Enlightenment — basically, the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries: the era of Mannerism and Baroque. More generally, an age of deep structural crisis throughout the western world:

'... An age of general climatic, demographic, social, religious and political crisis which embraced the whole world throughout the seventeenth century, reaching a peak in the decades 1640-60.' (Trevor Ashton, *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660*)

More than that, it was a time of intellectual and moral turmoil; 'New philosophy', wrote John Donne, 'calls all in doubt'. That 'all' is more than poetic hyperbole. From Montaigne's 'Que scay je?' to Descartes' 'Cogito ergo sum' generations of thinkers struggled with the problem of meaning in a world where the old certainties of the Renaissance seemed to have broken down completely. And it was more than the breakdown of certain forms and conventions, but the dissolution of a whole structure of conceptual organization. Out of this dissolution, this crisis of meaning, that 'Enlightenment project' indicated earlier developed.

But this project, which is the project of modernity, has resulted in its own structural crisis, a new crisis of meaning in a world where Reason seems to have engendered only mass confusion, and to have produced greater barbarism than has ever been seen.

'To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and, at the same







time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.' (Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*)

Berman's book sets out much the same notion of a crisis of modernity as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, though admittedly in rather less despondent terms. (There seems as many limitations to Berman's 'leap of faith' in modernity as to Adorno's and Horkheimer's pessimistic fatalism, but this is not the point at issue). One can see distinct correspondences between the crises of meaning that followed the breakdown of the Renaissance world-picture and the breakdown of the Enlightenment project. Perhaps Bill Henson's historical structuration of this installation can be understood as seeking in some ways to point to this comparison.

To have said this much is to have placed these images outside one of the prevalent debates within contemporary art practice, that which is politely known as 'appropriation' but which some people have been known to call rather less flattering names. 'Appropriation', as generally practiced, where motifs and images from other times and places are indiscriminately taken up and reproduced in contemporary productions, is a technique I feel rather suspicious of, at least when it is presented as a strategy *in itself*. As a mainstay of visual practice such a process seems to be both attempting to reintroduce, through the back door, authorial intention as the sole guarantee of a work's meaning, while at the same time making some peculiar virtue of the bald admission that most visual art can no longer find anything to say that is worth saying.

Bill Henson's historical references do not belong with this tendency. They perform a number of thematic functions, one of which is that of indicating by historical parallel a certain area of crisis — of social and cultural crisis — which constitutes the overall context of the images. A problematic is pointed up, one within which the work as a whole can be seen as operating. This problematic is, I think, not just a broad crisis of the modern world but a quite specific 'crisis of modernism', of the ability of contemporary art to engage itself with any larger social discourse. The 'crisis of modernism' has been on the agenda for twenty years or more but remains in a state of general confusion. It is necessary at this point to discuss what appears to be the central feature of this crisis, and to indicate how this particular body of work is situated within it.

Formerly we used to represent things visible on earth, things we either liked to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things.' (Paul Klee, *'Creative Credo'*)

In this section I intend to outline one major feature of 'modernism' in the visual arts, and try to relate it to the state of play of the arts as they relate (or fail to relate) to contemporary society. This will be somewhat sketchy and idiosyncratic, but, I think, feasible.

If there was a crisis of meaning in the social sphere — a crisis attendant upon the breakdown of established modes of action and thought in a rapidly changing world where ‘all that is solid melts into air’ — there was correspondingly a crisis of meaning within the sphere of the visual arts. There, too, the world of appearances became suspect, subject to dissolution. Klee’s remark, cited above, can in a sense stand as a paradigm for the kinds of practice the various modernist movements within the visual arts were pursuing. In their different ways these movements can be seen as having tried to go beyond the realm of appearances, to reveal the Truth behind the kaleidoscopically shifting facade: the truth of form, the truth of nature, the truth of spiritual values, the truth of the experience of modernity itself. Visual art was to become a kind of X-ray scanner, peering behind the visible moment, making transparent the reality that lies behind appearances.

In other words, the development of high modernism can be seen as one which progressively made it possible, at least theoretically, for art to *tell everything*, even to expose its own operations, its own mysteries. And I think the crisis of meaning within modernism itself (and that is after all what the ‘realist debates’ of the 1930s were about) arose because as art sought increasingly to go ‘beyond’ appearances it correspondingly estranged itself from any general social audience; in a quest to tell everything modernism lost its ability to be *engaged* (which is not simply to ‘tell everything’ but to say particular things in particular ways).

With a rather endearing myopia the post-second-world-war modernist movements (or are they already ‘post-modernist’?) came to believe that ‘telling the truth’ about art was equivalent to ‘telling the truth’ about everything. ‘Serious’ visual art, unable to escape its self-imposed exile from engagement, turned increasingly to a repetitious exposure of its own condition, its own professional mysteries; and by that same token became ever more tightly locked in that self-perpetuating circuit, speaking to a smaller and smaller community of people about progressively less and less.

The professional ghettoisation of visual practice reached a culmination of self-referral in the minimalist and formalist movements of the 1960s, where colours and shapes on a plane surface were considered sufficient for painting to be ‘about’, geometric forms sufficient for sculpture. We might see this as a kind of art-historical mirror of the way in which the mannerist and baroque artists became increasingly preoccupied with pure visual effect, with pictorial distortion and extravagant ornamentation as ends in themselves. Henson’s historical juxtaposition, to my mind, places this parallel at the centre of attention, and seeks to position his own work within a problematic attendant upon the realisation that, in these terms, visual practice has hit a dead end, a one-way street which nobody seems quite sure how to get out of although many practitioners of the arts are on the look-out.

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.' (Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*)

In the classical Greek world, 'barbarism' signified an inability to communicate; non-Greek speakers were barbarians. It has, it seems, become increasingly difficult for visual art to communicate in the modern world, difficult for it to comment on, or even seem relevant to, the broader social world — the world in which the vast majority of people live and have their being. At the same time the general, and generally felt, crisis of the modern world has made it imperative that a commentary should be attempted, that channels of communication and criticism be set up. A simple 're-introduction' of content won't do it because this takes no account of the unspecific nature of the image, its multitude of potential readings; nor, needless to add, will a continuing involvement with the professional mysteries of art's own processes, which speaks only to its own initiates and affects no-one else.

I think Bill Henson's work is, at least in one important facet, attempting to indicate a possible strategy. The work seeks to provoke reactions, moral, intellectual, emotional; and by that provocation to set up a dialogue which will involve the viewer in a search for meaning. It raises reactions (and they are social reactions) because it seeks to be engaged, engaged on a plane beyond single-minded discussions of aesthetic qualities or overt content. These reactions are raised within a structural context which should at least provoke us to more serious considerations than kneejerk moralistic responses. There is a studied ambiguity in play here, an attempt to postulate a kind of visual practice that can suggest lines of argument and areas of interest without prescribing any single reading. It thus throws the whole complex of issues back into focus, as an area for dialogue and imaginative involvement, imaginative reconstruction. As a suggestion for a methodology, and an exemplification of a strategy, Henson's work is immensely interesting, deserving at the least our most careful attention.

Postscript

I would like to thank Julie Ewington, Mandy Martin and Lynne Otter for discussing various points with me; also Bill Henson for suggesting several interesting lines of research. It should go without saying, but I'd better say it anyway, that this essay is meant to present one possible reading of Henson's work; it does not pretend to be either definitive or authoritative. And in the end its main purpose will have been achieved if it prompts viewers to respond in a considered and constructive manner to the work as a whole.

Rob Horne, March, 1987.

BILL HENSON

Selected Group Exhibitions

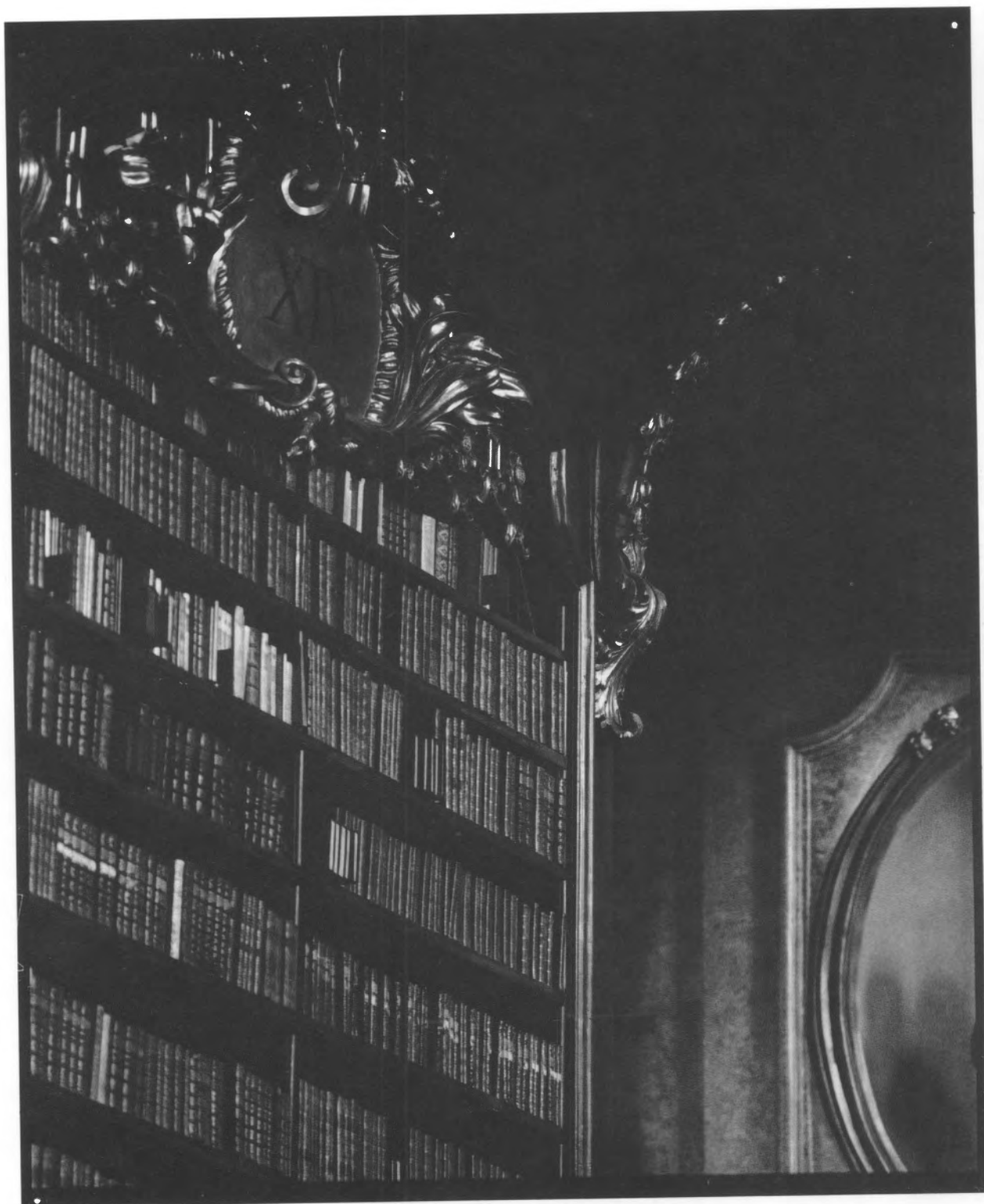
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Glenville Gallery, Perth; Susan Gillespie Gallery, Canberra; Church Street Photographic Centre, Melbourne, *The Nude*, 1978.
The Photographers' Gallery, Melbourne, *New Australian Work*, September, 1978.
Australian Embassy, Paris; then regional centres in Australia.
Aspects of the Philip Morris Collection: Four Australian Photographers, September, 1980.
Australian National Gallery, shown at the Australian National University, Canberra, *Photography — The Last Ten Years*, July–October, 1980.
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *Australian Perspecta 1981: A Biennial Survey of Contemporary Australian Art*, May–June, 1981.
Nantes Regional Gallery, France, *Scene, Sequence, Series* (co-organised by Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes) October–November, 1981.
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *Biennale of Sydney: Vision in Disbelief*, April–May, 1982.
James Harvey Gallery, Sydney, *Male*, July, 1982.
Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart, *Sexual Imagery in Art*, September, 1982.
ARC 2: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, *D'un autre continent: l'Australie. Le rêve et le réel*, October–December, 1983.
Galerie Jurka in association with Galerie Wetering and Galerie Biederberg-Muller, Amsterdam, *Australian Artists in Amsterdam*, October, 1983.
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *CSR Photography Project*, October, 1983.
Australian National Gallery, Canberra, *A Decade of Australian Photography, 1972–1982*, October 1983–January 1984.
Sydney Opera House Exhibition Hall, Sydney, *CSR Photography Project Selected Works*, March–April, 1984.
Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York City, *Australian Visions: 1984, Exxon International Exhibition*, September–November, 1984.
Pavillon Des Arts, Paris, *La Photographie Creative*, November–January, 1984–85.
Queensland Art Gallery 10 January–10 February, Art Gallery of New South Wales 8 March–7 April, Art Gallery of Western Australia 20 April–26 May, 1985. *Australian*

Visions.

Galleria Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice, *Isola Australia*, May–June, 1985.
Union Street Gallery, Sydney, *Rushes*, June–July, 1985.
Galerija Studentskog Kulturnog Centra, Belgrade, *Australiana*, September, 1985
Zagreb, October, 1985.
Australian National Gallery, Canberra, *Recent Australian Photography from the Kodak Fund*, October 1985–February 1986.
Queensland Art Gallery *CSR Photography Project* November 6, 1985–January 19, 1986 & Regional Tour.
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, *Australian Art Now*, November 1985–January 1986.
Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Ten Years On*, February–March, 1986.
Australian National Gallery at the Australian National University, Canberra, *Big Pictures*, March–May, 1986.
Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Sixth Biennale of Sydney*, May–July, 1986.
Frankfurter Kunstverein, *Prospect 86*, September–November, 1986.
Griffith University, *The Repeated Image*, September–October, 1986.

Individual Exhibitions

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, *Of Tender Years*, July–August, 1975.
Church Street Photographic Centre, Melbourne, August, 1978.
Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, October, 1979.
Church Street Photographic Centre, Melbourne, February, 1980.
Photographers' Gallery, London, *Bill Henson Photographs*, November, 1981.
The Developed Image Gallery, Adelaide, *Bill Henson: Untitled Series 1977*, February–March, 1982.
North Hobart Photographic Gallery, Hobart, July, 1982.
Cockatoo Gallery, Launceston. *Bill Henson Photographs*. May, 1984.
Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne, July, 1985.
Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney, September–October, 1985.
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Checklist

All photographs are from the collection of the artist. All works are type C photographs, each measuring approximately 101.6 x 89.0 cm. The photographs are listed in their respective singular, diptych and triptych groupings.

LAT 1, 2, 3	LAT 59, 100
LAT 4, 5	LAT 60, 61, 62
LAT 6	LAT 63, 64, 65
LAT 7, 8	LAT 66, 112, 112
LAT 9, 10, 11	LAT 67
LAT 12, 13, 14	LAT 70, 71
LAT 15, 16, 17	LAT 72, 73, 74
LAT 18, 19, 20	LAT 75, 76, 77
LAT 21, 22, 23	LAT 79, 106
LAT 24, 25, 26	LAT 80, 81, 82
LAT 27, 68	LAT 83, 84, 94
LAT 28, 29, 30	LAT 85, 86
LAT 31	LAT 87, 88, 89
LAT 32, 33, 34	LAT 90, 91, 92
LAT 35, 36	LAT 94, 98
LAT 37, 38, 39	LAT 95, 96, 97
LAT 38, 78	LAT 99, 112
LAT 40, 41, 42	LAT 101, 105
LAT 43, 44, 45	LAT 102, 103, 104
LAT 46, 47	LAT 107, 108
LAT 48, 49, 50	LAT 109, 110, 111
LAT 51, 52, 53	LAT 113
LAT 54, 93	LAT 114, 115, 116
LAT 55	LAT 117, 118, 119
LAT 56, 69	LAT 120, 121
LAT 57, 58	

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