

BLOCK



NUMBER 7 1982

£2

REPRESENTATION AND PLEASURE

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Telephone 01-440 7432 ext 224.

Bookshop Distribution Full Time
Distribution, Building K, Albion Yard,
17a Balse Street, London N1 9ED,
telephone 01-837 1460.

Overseas Distribution
USA Lee Manning, Delhi Distributors,
1181 Amsterdam Avenue, New York
NY10027.
Australia Roy Garner, Alternative Media
Services, PO Box 55, Gleve NSW 2037.
Belgium Patrick Florizoone, Copyright
Contemporary Art Bookshop, Gewad
23,000 Gent.

This issue of Block has been compiled by
Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Michael Evans,
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Design Kathryn Tattersall,
Peter Hammarling

Typesetting Expression Typesetters

Printed and published by Middlesex
Polytechnic

The views expressed herein are not
necessarily those of the editors or the
Polytechnic.

Block does not assume any responsibility
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The Editors would like to thank
Peter Green, Hugh Anderson and the
Print Unit Staff.

SUBSIDISED BY THE
Arts Council
OF GREAT BRITAIN

2 TONY GODFREY **SEX, TEXT, POLITICS** **AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR BURGIN**

Victor Burgin has for some years been developing a practice that grows out of discourses on Marxism, linguistics and psychoanalysis. More than most other practitioners in the visual arts, he has indicated the relevance of textual analysis to the still image and the possibilities for a genuinely subversive art practice. Problems of gallery space and the lack of serious critical interest have led Burgin, like a number of other British artists, to exhibit primarily in Europe and America. Consequently, this interview, recorded by Tony Godfrey in 1979 and originally intended for *Artlog* magazine, is of particular interest and relevance, besides providing the opportunity to illustrate works that are not well known in this country.

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'Unpacking the Typewriter' is an example of the work on design history that has developed out of the concerns and applications of Cultural Studies. Tony Fry establishes the design object in the contexts of production, dissemination and use, and examines the ideological implications of 'progress' in technology and design, particularly the ways in which the design process extends to position the consumer/user in relation to the product.

48 KATHY MYERS **TU: A COSMETIC CASE STUDY**

Kathy Myers article examines an advertising campaign from a position afforded by research into the complex imperatives and assumptions involved in producing product images. We believe that it represents the kind of research that functions to supplement theoretical analyses of the image as 'text'.

59 NICHOLAS GREEN & FRANK MORT **VISUAL REPRESENTATION & CULTURAL POLITICS**

Nicholas Green and Frank Mort see the discourse of art history as a site for intervention into aesthetics and the politics of pleasure. Emphasising the fundamental importance of the historically specific instance, they examine two areas of representation – French nineteenth century landscape and the visual construction of sexual normality and deviancy in England around the same period, in order to raise questions about current work on cultural pleasure and class hegemonies.

Finally we would like to thank Judith Rugg for allowing us to reproduce, with an explanatory statement, a print from her series *Cultural Package* for our back cover.

JOAN COPJEC

IN LIEU OF ESSENCE

AN EXPOSITION OF
A PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK
BY SILVIA KOLBOWSKI

Many of us are now familiar with this diagram and the direction of semiotic studies which it charts.

Saussure

Lacan

SignifiedSignifier

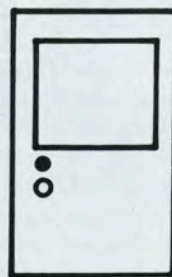
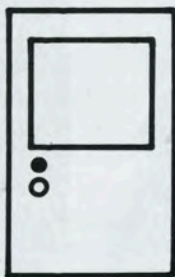
Signifier

Signified

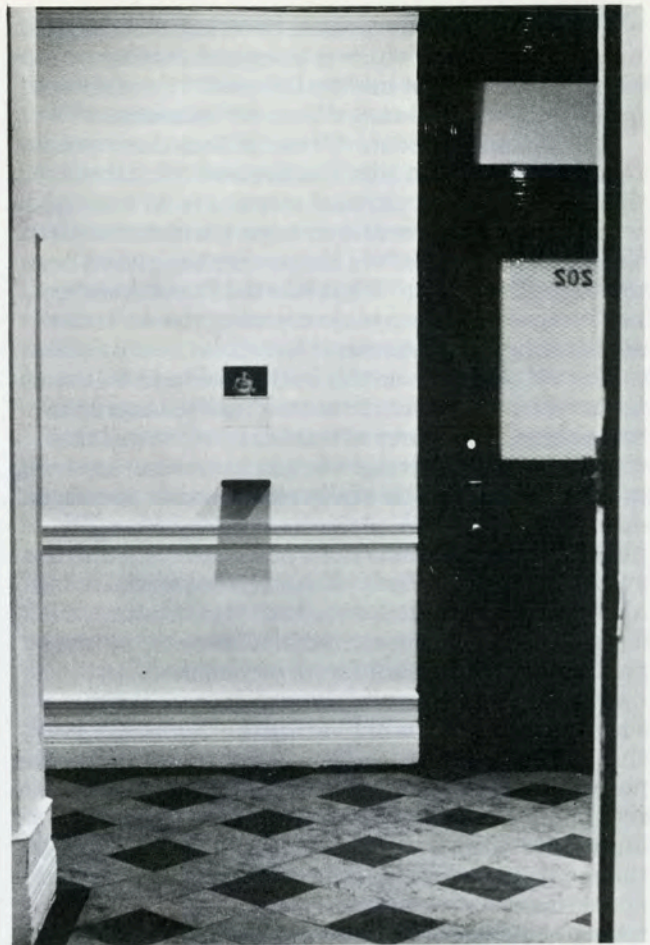
Tree

Ladies

Gentlemen



What Lacan has done is to perform a flip-flop on Saussure's algorithm and transplant his illustration



from the natural to the societal dimension. By this he has drawn out a more radical concept of the sign which pays attention to the primacy of the signifier and the bar which separates it from the signified. Lacan's illustration makes clear that the signifier is not an identifiable unit which adequates a signified directly to itself. The signifier, "Ladies," for example, has meaning not in itself, but only as it is an articulation in a chain of signifiers, in its differential relationship, for example, to "Gentlemen." Lacan then defines the signified "neutrally", as "the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his needs away from home, the imperative. . . by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation."¹ *Western Man!* As though society operated only this urinary segregation! Against this, Lacan must be reminded that the subject position from which the signifier is read, is itself an articulation of difference, a *sexed* position, and that depending on whether "one" is male or female, "Gentlemen" means either "enter" or "keep out".

With this in mind, "one" is confounded and bemused by the sign on the door of the "Ladies" at Artists Space,² for "ladies" is inscribed beneath the still visible "Men" under erasure. Once "one" has decided that it is all right to go in, she is confronted

¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud," *Ecrits*, p.151.

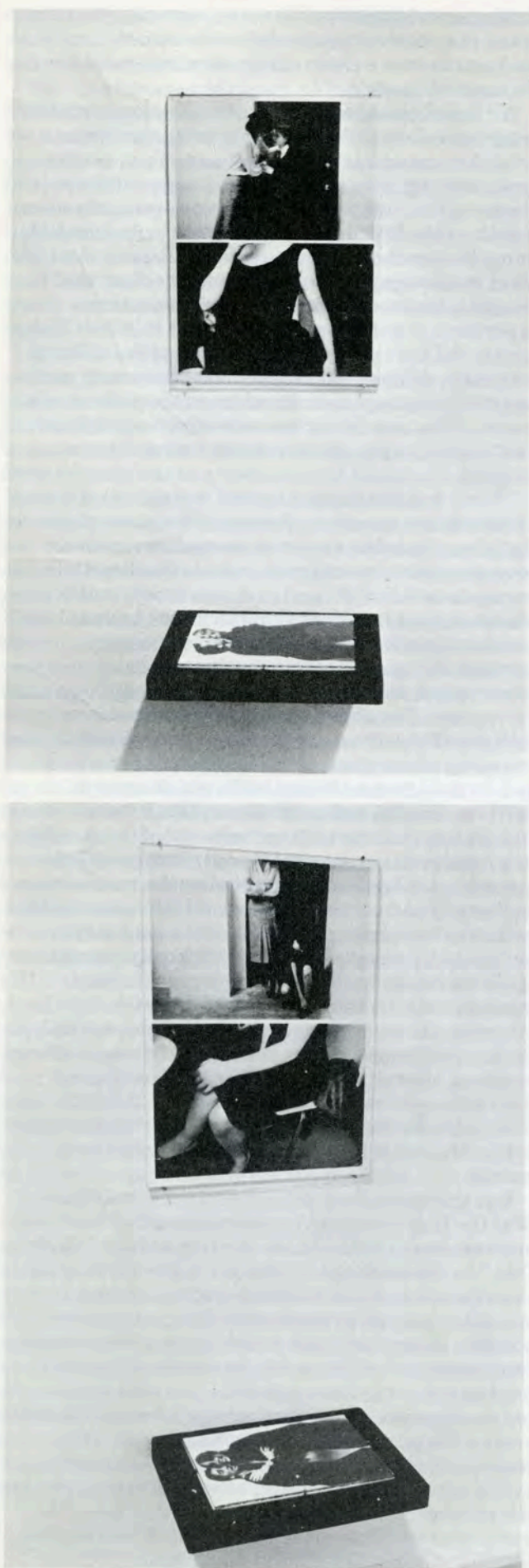
² Artists Space is an "alternative" publicly funded exhibition space in New York City. "What was the Right Answer" was exhibited in February/March of 1980.

with a row of curious-looking porcelain structures, unenclosed, above which is inscribed another imperative, "Do not use the urinals!" The insistent question: "With what, goddamn it, with what?"

It is within this context, that is, both the theoretical work on signification and sexual difference, and the physical corridor in Artists Space which contains several doorways, besides the one to the "Ladies", that Silvia Kolbowksi has placed her photographic work, "What was the Right Answer," her images of doorways syncopating the walls and actual doorways between.

The title appears on the wall as part of a weave of texts which intersect the sequence of photographs at two points. The source of this text, "what was the right answer. Was it right to kiss his mother or wrong to kiss his mother," is easily recognizable: it is from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The novel narrates the entry of a precocious boy into the symbolic world not only of a public boys' school, but also a nation, religion, and, most significantly, a language. The passage cited in Kolbowksi's piece is particularly important for its psychoanalytic implications. Stephen's successful insertion into society hinges on his delivering the "right answer," the right answer being in a word, his coming into the possession of language. Yet this language operates in resistance to the notion that the right answer is to be found in a word, in the sound/image "kiss." Neither the mental image of his mother's wet lips on his cheek nor the sound which those lips make will tell him how to stop the older boys from laughing at him. What he





must first understand is the periodicity of "kiss," its differential spacing in a chain of signifiers. In the pre-Oedipal chain, mother-kiss-nurture, it is all right to kiss one's mother, in the post-Oedipal, mother-kiss-sexuality, it is not. What it is important to remember, however, is that the attribution of rightness or wrongness is a function of the symbolic position; they are not categories which belong to the pre-Oedipal phase as such. For it is only as a result of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, that is, as a result of the prohibition of the incestuous mother/child relationship, that the mother becomes constituted as lost object (forever beyond the reach of a kiss) and her lack becomes, precisely, significant. "Right" and "wrong" become orientation signals on the road to her recovery. It is the father who comes to represent the societal prohibition because, according to the patriarchal family structure, it is he who provides. And what he provides is the means of representing lack, the self-insufficiency which the child feels, for it is the Symbolic father who is in possession of symbolic structures – language and the phallus. The phallus, then is the bar of resistance between the signifier and the signified. Meaning is precipitated only after submitting to its force. The subject, constructed out of the battle, is thus a position of privation, of desire, barred forever from being the phallus, from obtaining the object of his/her desire. The price of meaning is the loss of the object, but to remain with the object is meaningless.

The subject, it seems, is seduced and duped by language, victim of a kind of primal deceit – placed, finally, in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situation. Similar to Stephen's, in fact. Or to hysterics' – the position which is the very beginning of psychoanalytic theory. Freud, grown incredulous because the number of hysterics who reported a seduction by their fathers was disproportionately high, decided at some point that hysterics lie. It was his subsequent correction of this too easy dismissal which was to advance the theory of human sexuality and of meaning. If the trauma or seduction theory had eventually to be given up, it was in order to be replaced not by a theory of the coincidence of hysteria and lying, but of the diphasic onset of human sexuality. The reminiscences which hysterics related, from which they suffered, were not experiences suffered *as such*, but produced from at least two different scenes, neither of which contained the meaning ascribed by their combination. The primal scene, that is, is never one, never seen, but a combination of scenes from two different stages of sexuality – the precocious/infantile stage and puberty or adulthood. Memories of scenes not understood as sexual in the infantile stage excite sexual meanings from scenes experienced in puberty. Something which was not experienced as traumatic becomes traumatic, secondarily, as an effect of meaning defined from the vantage of a later period. Again I cite a citation within Kolbowski's piece; a fragment of text: "human mothers exhibit a characteristic behaviour pattern – a sequence of visual contact, touching and stroking remarkably parallel to what happens when a man and a woman make love." Inscribed within experience a



She refused to put up with only part. Which was a tragic, normal, and radical refusal to the text spoke several voices. There was the authoritative voice which did not seem to have a specific source. There was the poetic he who posed the question. But who was he? There was the she who was the question. There was in the photograph across was the she spoken by someone else. Who was sympathetic but also bound by certain rules, which minimally she could break but not make. A piece. Each one received and then she was forever blamed for not even here, another she is named. Acknowledged. Assimilated. Posed.



fundamental duplicity. Meaning, sexuality is not given in a moment, but is deferred, defined backwards over a chain of signifiers separated by hiatuses of latency.

All the above as a preliminary, an approach to the entry to Kolbowski's work. This entry marked as a primal scene, the image of a woman's face, mouth open, smiling, eyes uplifted. The image of female pleasure. "... just as with St. Teresa - you only have to look at the Bernini statue in Rome to understand immediately she's coming, no doubt about it. And what is she enjoying, coming from? It's clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they experience it but know nothing about it."³ This from Lacan. All the theory, then, analysis of the difficult, deferring, differential production of the young man as artist/language user founders on the portrait of a woman. The non-linear concepts of periodicity and hiatus give way to the continuist notion of pure coming.

"What was the Right Answer" is a refusal of this answer to the question of women. The piece, placed significantly *below* eye level, an eyeline mismatch between spectator and gaze, refuses the direct engagement of object and gaze, the dyadic and plenitudinous Imaginary to which "you have only to look" assigns women. The spectator's passage through the piece is continuously impeded - interrupted, delayed - from the continual of movement. The photographs are placed not in a stations-of-the-cross continuum, a tracing and retracing of the space of the corridor, but in a back and forth between the two walls which arrives her/him, finally, not in the same place from which she/ he began, but at the opposite end of the corridor, in a fixed position, on a third wall. The spectator's movement is further interrupted by the intersecting horizontal and vertical demands which cross her/his path. For the photographs can not be read only horizontally, must also be read vertically (one image is placed below another) which vertical is itself interrupted by a third photograph placed below the other two, at a horizontal on a shelf. This physical shifting of the spectator's position which the reading requires, literalizes, puns on the epistemological disposition of the work. Positionality is actively brought to the fore to demonstrate how this opens up rather than fills in, the gaps of our knowledge of women.

But the work itself, someone might ask, "What Was the Right Answer," where is it in all of this? The answer: in all of this. In the dilatory of/from "all of this." In the work *against* its own hasty reading - in the attempt to problematize a reading which a spectator may generate from it. For, just as it was possible for an American to coin the term "stream of consciousness" which would be so inappropriately used as a description, a gloss of Joyce's *Portrait*, so too, in America, where the goal of psychoanalysis is to ensure the analysand's successful adaptation to reality, might this work be read according to an evolutionist model of "socialization." The daughter in the photographs, a sociologist might say, takes the mother as her "role model," grows up to be a woman, like her mother. Which is to read linearly,

continually, across the top layer of images – only. To read *against* the work's stratification, its own interruption of this narration.

The final images do depict a kind of conformity – the horizontal image lined up this time on the vertical, the daughter's gaze, for once, directed at the camera, in line with the gazes of the figures in the horizontal images, towards the camera, the gesture, hand on hip, repeated by all (except the mother who has become the ancilla of the action). There is neither delay nor denial here – meaning is fixed at/by this end. Girl has become woman, set in place, posed, in short, sexualized. The narrative closed, the sentence ended. Period.

And yet – though there is no attempt to deny this ending, this need for ending, the periodicity of the piece insists in and against the absolute closure of the period. For the "right answer" to the question of women is not to be found in an evolution of forms, from a biological to a well-adapted biological, form, a "member of society." Nurturing, a biological function, is related to sexuality, a societal function, but not in any linear sense. An entire metaphorical and metonymic displacement, a massive deviation, separates the one from the other. "What Was the Right Answer," with its three levels of images, three essays on sexuality, aligns itself with what is most valuable for feminists in Freudian/Lacanian theory, the mapping of this deviation, picturing the dehiscence of the origin of sexuality and meaning, their dependence on deferred action. This different scenario must, then, be read from its layers of images: the child experiences a biological need which it cannot satisfy on its own. It therefore demands satisfaction from the mother. The mother's attempts to satisfy these needs are filled with the sexuality of her socialized adulthood. As a result, the body of the child is eroticized. The sensual stimulation she/he receives becomes a new source of pleasure. Henceforth the seeking of this pleasure, the sexual quest, will leave her/him ever desirous. For, whatever object is found to satisfy her/him will never be the same as the original satisfying object, for the quest, the aim, object, and source, have all been displaced from the original biological need, the hunger. In the three levels of photographs, the mother as partial object, source of satisfaction is displaced onto the body, the autoerotic second level, and finally refinds an object in the "opposite sex" in the third.

Sexuality/meaning, according to this reading, is not *limited* by the resisting bar of society, but produced. It is the positive nature of this process which is stressed and especially, in this work, in relation to women. In the break from the continuum which relates woman to her body, in the emphasis on the thresholds through which meaning passes, a door is opened for a progressive politics. If the finding of an object is the refinding of it, then woman never has to be the lost object of her mythology – her image man's answer. To accept the positivity of meaning's woman's production is to discover where, in this primal deceit, the answer lies.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire livre XX* (Paris, 1975), as quoted in Steven Heath's 'Sexual Difference and Representation,' *Screen* vol.19 no.3 (Autumn 1978).

to each other. Like mothers of other animal species, human mothers exhibit a characteristic behavior pattern—a sequence of visual contact, touching, and stroking remarkably parallel to what happens when a man and a woman make love. This intimate contact he still tried to think what was the right answer. Was it right to kiss his mother or wrong to kiss his mother? What did that mean, to kiss? You put your face up like that to say goodnight and then his mother put her lips on his cheek, her lips were soft and they wetted his cheek, and they made a tiny little noise: kiss followed by the impossibility of another economy of sexuality. In order to seek her love she had to become him. She still tried to

