

ROBERT GOBER

IN THE DANCEHALL OF THE DEAD

Dave Hickey

Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near,
the low, the common, was explored and poeticized.
That which had been negligently trodden under foot by
those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves
for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be
richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor,
the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street,
the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time.
It is a great stride. It is a sign—is it not?—of new
vigor when the extremities are made active,
when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet.

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON,
"The American Scholar"



1.

THE NEWS TODAY OH BOY

There might you see the gods in sundry shapes,
Committing heady riots, incests, rapes;
For know, that underneath this radiant floor
Was Danae's statue in a brazen tower;
Jove slyly stealing from his sister's bed
To dally with Idalian Ganymed,
And for his love Europa, bellowing loud,
And tumbling with the Rainbow in a cloud:
Blood-quaffing Mars heaving the iron net,
Which limping Vulcan and his Cyclops set:
Love kindling fire, to burn such towns as Troy,
Silvanus weeping for the lovely boy,
That now is turned into a Cypress tree,
Under whose shade the Wood-gods love to be.

—CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE,
Hero and Leander

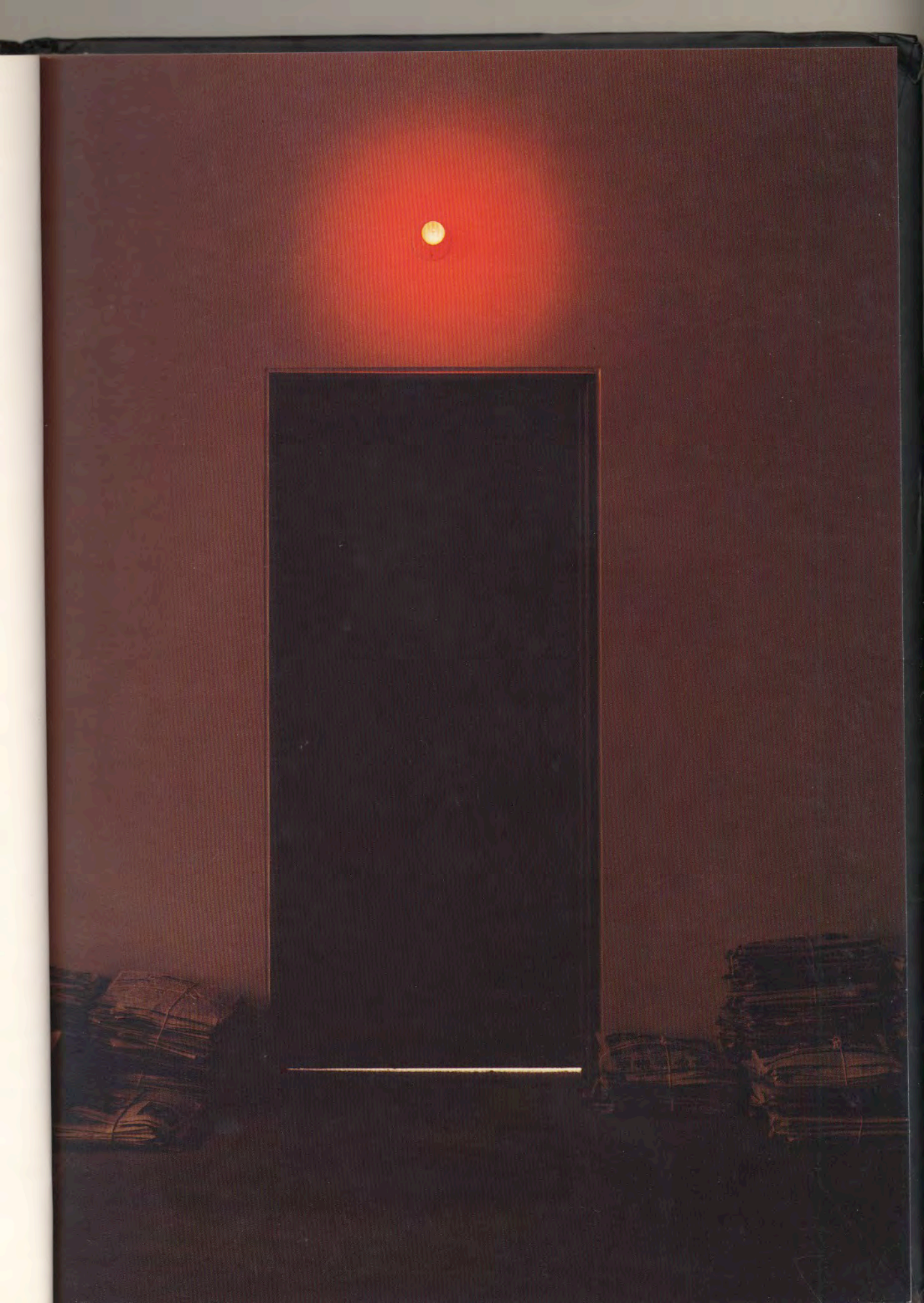
High thoughts in low places—my specialty. I was playing video poker in the Las Vegas airport at midnight, waiting for the red-eye to New Jersey and thinking about the virulent anti-Modernism of Robert Gober's objects—about the anomie they exude and the occluded disasters they seem to infer—when my speculations were interrupted by my most infamous and imposing neighbor, Don King, the boxing promoter. Don and his entourage came steaming across the lobby like a large multi-legged beast out of Dr. Seuss—all pastel leather, silk jogging pants, two-hundred-dollar sunglasses, shaved heads, cornrows and, of course, Mr. King's trademark vacuum-cleaner hairdo. One of his bodyguards flashed a handful of tickets at the boarding attendant and they swept down the passageway onto the flight I was about to board. I cashed out the poker machine, traded the silver dollars for paper ones, and joined a muttering line of gamblers leaving all the lights and color, heading back into the smoke.

As the thundering plane rose into the darkness above the desert, it occurred to me that if one wanted to get a true sense of the sheer bleeping, banging, roaring, muscular tumultuousness of American culture, this trip was a pretty good place to start. I drifted off to sleep, comfy in the midst of it, and was awakened by the rising sun blinking through the window as we banked into our descent. The sun just hung there, furry and red, in the mist over the Jersey flats, cool and irrevocably urban, like the red rubber ball in Paul Simon's song, and the sight of it made me feel good. We hit the ground with a thump and a screech and within minutes I was sprinting through the Newark airport to grab a cab and jump the traffic. More tumult, commuters this time, guys and gals in off-the-rack suits, striding purposefully. I finessed about ten of them in the taxi rank and placed myself in the care of an ebullient Jamaican in a colorful macramé cap. Soon we were hurtling down the stone artery toward the island, slipping into the tunnel roughly a

hundred yards in front of the tsunami of traffic and emerging into one of those breathtaking, glorious November mornings that make you wonder why you ever left Manhattan. The morning seemed so new, you know, so fucking right-now, and the city so old and disheveled as to almost seem habitable.

Four hours later, I emerged from Robert Gober's malign Arcadia at the Dia Center for the Arts in a less confident state of mind. *Trees!* I thought, shaking my head, *arboreal New England!* Clearly, if Gober's installation was as much about puritan nature as I thought it was, I was in trouble. The last time I had been out in nature, I was thrown from a car. All I had going for me was my quadruple-great-grandfather and family demigod, Jonathan Edwards, the notorious Puritan divine, the author of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. On account of his patrimony I had known what I was seeing when I saw it (better a fallen puritan, I thought, than no puritan at all)—and I had read Emerson and Thoreau—and had memorized in school that cautionary injunction from the conclusion of *Walden*, "As if nature could support but one order of understandings, could not sustain birds as well as quadrupeds, flying as well as creeping things."¹

Still, it was a crowning irony: that the fulcrum of difference that would distinguish Robert Gober's sensibility from my own should not turn out to be sexual preference, as I had rather suspected it would, but the rift that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari chart so eloquently in *A Thousand Plateaus*: that prehistoric dissonance between the sedentary inhabitants of the planet's arboreal Edens and the nomadic creatures who restlessly traverse its deserts and treeless plains—between those whose lives are rooted in the soil and those whose travels wend like my own with the twisting weather. This dissonance, however, proved in no way a limitation. Artists and those who write about them tend generally to live by the "code of the Repo Man": they seek out anxiety and equate it with vertiginous consciousness.





So step off the elevator with me now into this large, twilight commercial space. Its atmosphere, like that of the city surrounding it, is one of postindustrial despair. Over to the left, a red light bulb glows above a closed door. Bundles of old newspapers are stacked on either side of it—as if in preparation for being taken out—but if we were to try this door, we would find its promise of escape to be no more than that. But we do not. We are drawn toward the dry white light and shushing pink noise that spills into the hallway off to our right, and, following it, we find ourselves standing in a tall portal, gazing the length of a large, bright, rectangular room. Its walls have been theatrically muraled from top to bottom with a 360-degree evocation of an idyllic woodland scene that, judging by the flora, is set somewhere in the northeastern United States. The size of the room, however, and the crisp, decorative illusionism of the painting conspire to evoke an ancien régime ballroom—albeit one that has undergone considerable postrevolutionary renovation—rather as if my quadruple-great Puritan grandmama Edwards had given Versailles a good, sturdy New England “redo”—an astringent Protestant repudiation of Meissonnier and all those aristo frogs who stank like pigs, fucked like bunnies and cohabited with rats.

A matching portal has been cut into the arboreal vista on the wall opposite, opening the space out into the darkness; and along each of the long walls extending away from us, four white tenement sinks have been mounted at regular intervals onto the muraled surface. All sixteen taps are open and the water pours out of them into partially filled basins, never completely draining out, nor ever quite flowing over, obviously cycling. In a shrewd, Pop-obvious way, the water noise approximates the babbling brooks we might expect to hear in such a sylvan glade.

On each long wall, however, high above the sinks, two small, barred windows have been cut symmetrically through the illusion. They deny us escape once again, while affording us glimpses of a glowing, theatrical "light beyond." Stepping into the room, then, we enter an unfolding nest of generalization, a visual explication of the semiotics of transcendence. We stand "inside" a room that puts us "outside," where we are "inside" Nature through which we gaze at an "outside" beyond that. At every stage, the mind is invited to go where the body cannot follow—and we are relentlessly reminded that it cannot, with the implication that the mind should probably stay at home.

Thus, the space repudiates the sublime even as it insinuates a more bodily idiom of sublimity, and in this evocation of nontranscendental Transcendentalism, Guber provides us with a neat American contrapositive to the nonmaterialist Marxism of the Frankfurt school: a local equivalent of their attenuated longing for authenticity. For, in the final accounting and after all these Platonic gymnastics, we are left irrevocably body-bound, with the water running, in a hissing, glowing room with bundles of old newspapers stacked here and there against the walls and supporting pillars—barred from transcendence and hygienically distanced from nature by the little red boxes of rat bait that stand unobtrusively against the walls beneath the sinks.

Someone, obviously, has turned on the taps, poisoned the local fauna, bundled the newspapers and departed, leaving us feeling somehow responsible and bereft in this glamorous atmosphere of noise, poison, lies and the detritus of yesterday's news—betrayed and abandoned—and made to feel more so by our gradual realization that we are not witnessing a "critique of material culture" in which we might participate, but another daydream altogether. Readymades would do for a "critique of material culture," but *nothing* in this room is "real." Everything, on close inspection—the sinks and the rat bait, even the newspapers—turns out to be fiction, re-presented, fabricated, distanced from us and still warm with suppressed memory, all standing at the same remove from some implied reality, evoking lost narratives





that, however opaque, reinforce our certainty that somewhere—out there in the artist's history—there is a *real* sink that corresponds to these simulations of it; that there are *real* boxes of rat bait and specific newspapers, too, out there in the drift; and that, finally, there must be an actual sylvan glade—a “real” nature somewhere, however lost and barricaded.

The cumulative effect of this unfolding is genuinely extraordinary and, in a crisp, acerbic way, heartbreaking as well. The atmosphere of suppressed narrativity gradually drowns the symmetrical artifice; the room becomes more private, and we become more alien within it. Its formal



strategies dissolve into intimations of subliminal memory, and our strategies, as beholders, do so as well. We are told insistently that there is a story here, but we are not told what it is; and so we proceed—rather as we must with the shrouded narratives of Watteau—by the associative logic of our own reverie. As a consequence, this beholder, having only hours before stepped off the red-eye from Las Vegas, found it difficult not to recognize in Gober's complex artifice the permissive visual language of the casino: the radical shifts of tone, the interpenetration of illusions, the whimsical juxtapositions of high and low, nature and culture, the sublime and the banal.





But here the casino is turned upside down and against itself—because casinos are lovely places, redoubts from society at the dark heart of culture where we may, for a moment, take our fate by the hand and become children of fortune or mathematicians of desire. They are full of joy and hope, foolish courage and suicidal obsession. Their insouciant subversion of the accepted visual order overrides “good taste” with the promise of forbidden flavors. Still, except for those of us who live next door, casinos are temporary redoubts, safety valves that ultimately serve to maintain that which they repudiate.

Robert Gober, on the other hand, has constructed the casino’s evil twin, an unnatural conflation of oppressive ideologies and illusions from which there is no escape: a mirror at the end of the hall, a rhetorical graveyard where metaphors go to die, redolent with the flesh of those they have carried with them into oblivion, a ballroom for the *danse macabre*, a temple of alienation—as Othello might reconstitute Venice, full of lost courage, desiccated nerve, memory and dread—a terminal, uncomfortable place, like the decayed setting of Miss Havisham’s wedding breakfast or that courtyard passageway in the hospital at Chapultapec, where, walled in by dirty glass, the soaring revolutionary mural looks down upon the chaos of mortality: the stranded gurneys and I.V. racks, the bloody sheets and waste paper, the stacks of dirty trays. . . .

As I exited Gober’s ballroom, turning left into its crepuscular aftercourt, I found myself thinking that at least Gober’s abattoir is clean . . . but its cleanliness is just as full of death . . . clearly no environment for children . . . those dissonant little red boxes of rat bait . . . although some puritan mom might think it so. . . . The aftercourt turns out to be a cul-de-sac; so now, like Christ, we have been denied three times. In the far corner a red box of rat bait glows ominously in the semi-darkness and, tucked into a notch in the wall so we cannot see them until we are into the room, four stacks of bundled newspapers are bathed in the dim ambience of a baby spot.



Hanging out of one stack of bundles is a *New York Post* cover, headlined: NOT GUILTY! The top sheet of every stack is page nine from the *New York Times, International Edition*, Sunday, 19 July 1992. Its headline reads: "Vatican Condones Discrimination Against Homosexuals"; its subhead: "Concern that gay rights threaten marriage." The story is tagged in column five with a squib, reading SUMMER IS FOR CHILDREN: GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND. Column six, in the corner, is occupied by a two-inch filler headlined "Youth Worker Held In Death of Son, 9"—recounting in not much detail the arrest of a state youth worker accused of beating her adopted son to death with a ten-inch piece of broomstick.

"Family values" are reasserted on the lower section of the page, in a large Saks Fifth Avenue advertisement for bridal wear—or, rather, they *would* be reasserted, were it not for Robert Gober, in full wedding drag, impudently impersonating that most sublime totem of heterosexual domesticity: *The Bride in White!* From this point on, if we have not already done so, we are clearly encouraged to retrace our steps through the rooms, paying less attention to the spectacle of illusion than to its degraded and discarded residue—bundled for "recycling."

In this world, the visual aspect of nature survives only in its painted representation; nature itself, its body, has been sawed and pulped into Euclidian symmetries and imprinted with cultural values. They speak to us from the walls and ceilings and are inscribed on the discarded newspapers, which also (almost as an afterthought) bear faint witness to human lives, to other living bodies ruthlessly transmuted and existing now only in grotesque representation. And even these vague, distorted memories are slated to dissolve. The newspapers, along with Gober's installation itself, will be chewed up, recycled, purified and imprinted with cultural values yet again, along with demeaning evidence of other marginal lives. So, to rescue memory, Gober translates this transient news onto archival paper, preserving, as well, our rage

at the documented "riots, incests, rapes" carried out with the wild abandon and heartless authority of Marlowe's Ovidian gods.

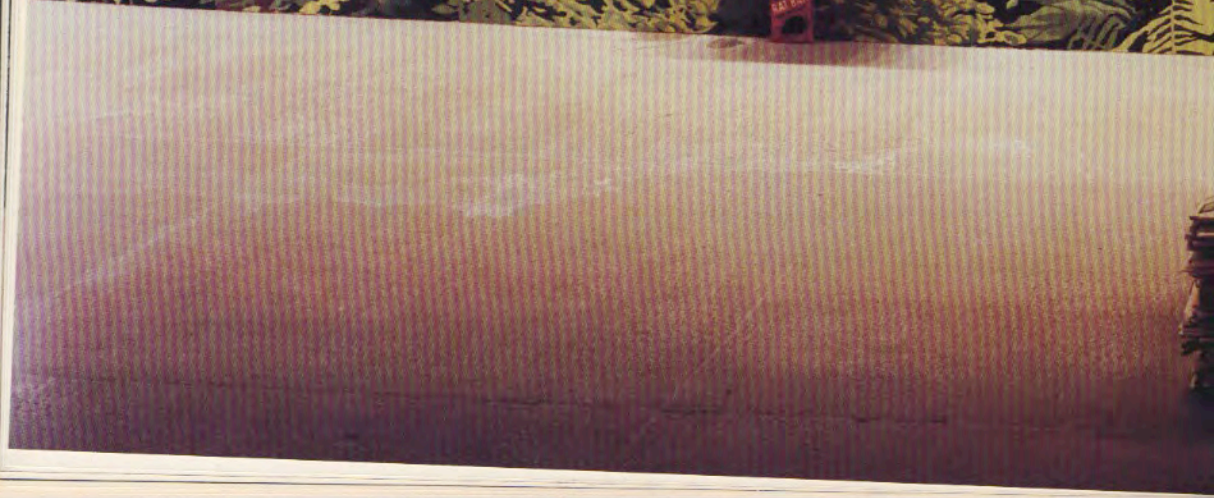
Walking back through the space, we find the leitmotiv of Gober's prettified male bride scattered here and there across the pages, politicizing the news surrounding it, theatricalizing its onslaught of propaganda for a white, heterosexual, Christian America where white male politicians proliferate and happy heterosexual couples abound. Count the pictures: George and Barbara smile and wave. Dan and Marilyn smile and wave. George, Barbara, Dan and Marilyn smile and wave together. Rachel Turk and Benjamin Tolub, soon to be wed, make their cameo appearance. Matthew Broderick and Heidi Kling perch upon an extravagantly phallic tree limb in aid of some movie while, in steady counterpoint, like a Tom Wesselmann retrospective, the complete repertoire of *vanitas* imagery associated with heterosexual domesticity rolls past: ads for wedding rings, promising "Eternal Bliss"—for lingerie, housewares, clocks, soaps, meats and toys.

Within these gridded rectangles, then, humane priorities shrink and the culture explodes. The culture lives in giant images; human beings die in agate type, in page-nine news stories, in squibs that corner pages and square up the advertising space. Here we read the litany of institutional and parental disregard; of hate crimes against gays and people of color; of drug lords in palatial custody; of children abused and murdered by priests and parents; of old people abused and exploited by bureaucrats; and, of course, it is here that we read the AIDS obituaries, always those. But even so, sparks of life crackle up—little bubbles of dark whimsy reach the surface: Gober's impudent bride preens in a Saks ad labeled "Having It All"; Gregory Hines in *déshabille* vaults into our consciousness; a Goberesque faucet on a tabloid cover warns of lead in the water supply—and macho artist David Salle, having undergone a change of heart, shows his ass.

Thus, gradually, these bundles of paper take on personae. They are *not* just passively imprinted by the culture. They prioritize the news that

concerns them and occasionally revise it in fantasies of wish-fulfillment—and insofar as they do, I would suggest that we regard them as simulacra of human creatures. Like Gober's ominous cat-litter bags or his hermaphroditic bagged torsos, they are evocative of creatures imprisoned within their bodies, imprinted by uncaring ideologies—the word and the flesh in unnatural embrace—the limbs of trees and the limbs of humans, bundled up and ready for recycling amidst the spectacle of false nature, imprisoned in this dancehall of the dead—with the implication that they might otherwise have danced in actual sylvan splendor.









2.

THE GHOST OF GAY NATURE

In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization. . . .

As the elemental room is multiplied into a house of rooms and the house into a city of houses, the body is carried forward into each successive intensification of civilization. . . . It is, though, back in the inward and enclosing space of the single room and its domestic content that the outward unfolding (so appropriately called "the flowering") of civilization originates. . . .

In torture, the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms. Called "guest rooms" in Greece and "safe houses" in the Philippines, the torture rooms are often given names that acknowledge and call attention to the generous, civilizing impulse normally present in the human shelter, . . . [but] only as prelude to announcing its annihilation. The torture room is not just the setting in which the torture occurs; it is not just the space that happens to house the various instruments used for beating and burning and producing electric shock. It is itself literally converted into another weapon, into an agent of pain. All aspects of the basic structure—walls, ceiling, windows, doors—undergo this conversion. . . .

Just as all aspects of the concrete structure are inevitably assimilated into the process of torture, so too the contents of the room, its furnishings, are converted into weapons: the most common instance of this is the bathtub that figures prominently in the reports from numerous countries, but it is only one among many. Men and women tortured during the period of martial law in the Philippines, for example, described being tied or handcuffed in a constricted position for hours, days, and in some cases months to a chair, to a cot, to a filing cabinet, to a bed; they describe being beaten with "family-sized soft drink bottles" or having a hand crushed with a chair, of having their heads "repeatedly banged on the edges of a refrigerator door" or "repeatedly pounded against the edges of a filing cabinet." The room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed.

—ELAINE SCARRY

The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World

Many years ago, when I was still writing fiction—or, rather, when I was still calling it that—I remember listening to a radio interview with E. M. Forster during which the novelist declared that he had stopped reading fiction for the same reason that he stopped writing it, because he preferred the people in his life to the characters in novels. When asked why, Forster replied that he liked the *opacity* of the people in his life. I remember being put off by this remark at first—partly by the insouciance with which the old man dismissed his novels—but also because I instinctively associated opacity with willful obfuscation rather than associating it, as Forster certainly did, with organic integrity and with his mature preference for creatures through whom he could not see.

Forster's lifelong fascination with human behavior led him to despise the fictional pretense of articulating its causes. He didn't think it could be done. "Suppose a young woman smiles at you at the greengrocers?" he asked. (I am paraphrasing here from deep memory.) "Is she glad to see you? Or is she just flattered that you have noticed her? Or is she, perhaps, thinking of something else? In a novel, eventually, you would know. In real experience you *never* would. Even if you struck up a conversation with the young woman, took her out to dinner that night and eventually married her, you never would. Nor, in fact, would she. So what good are novels, beyond giving us the dangerous illusion of understanding human behavior? The world always means more. Its opacity is more interesting."

It is exactly in this sense, I think, that Robert Gober's work is opaque; for, even though it certainly qualifies as artifact, its artifice is so seductively cloaked in surface clarity that, at its best, it approaches the elusiveness and mystery of everyday experience, and very few works of art venture far into this haunted realm. The defining qualities of Gober's work, for instance, are as easily enumerated as those of our closest friends, who are equally opaque. You can isolate the work's penchant for metonymy and metamorphic transformation, allude to its meticulous facture and its pristine presentation, cite the cold banality of its iconography, and enumerate its exploitation of outré domestic genres. But the more you learn, the less you understand. Should you try tracking any one of these proclivities back to its source, you would find a confusing surfeit of them. You would unearth pivotal artifacts in Robert Gober's early life, crucial issues in the politics of the day and resonant precedents in the history of art—any one of which might provide a convincing rationale; all of which, considered together, more or less define the kind of contingent opacity that claimed Forster's admiration.

Such is the "solidity" of Gober's work that you will *never* know. As meaning proliferates, its sources diffuse, leaving you with nuance—with a quality of remoteness that hovers between scorn and disdain—with an atmosphere of sotto voce righteousness that approaches accusation; and the more closely you examine the work, the more rapidly even these boundaries recede, until gradually it dawns on you that the scope of Gober's indictment really acknowledges no exceptions; that the intensity of his scorn really knows no bounds; that it neither countenances compromise nor privileges transient sentiment, but speaks to us as from a great distance, out of a grief that precludes expression with a pre-emptive, puritan assurance. "The wave of evil washes all our institutions alike!" Emerson says, and Gober would certainly go him one better by adding into this indictment Emerson's own construction of a transcendent "nature."²

So, it is impossible to prioritize the anger. We recognize, of course, the progress of the AIDS epidemic running like a persistent, subharmonic obbligato through Gober's installation at Dia. There is no denying that its miasma infects the atmosphere of Gober's theatrical forest as insidiously as the atmosphere of *Walden* is infected with the shame of the Mexican War. ("I have sometimes had a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon."³) But we would be foolish, I think, to characterize the surrounding iconography of nature in either case as a simple occasion, or as a passive receptacle of immediate political anger.

Just as in Thoreau, there is a more profound disaffection that flows beneath the surface of Robert Gober's work—a darker music—and for its sources I think we must look back to the child that Gober describes himself as having been: the homosexual son of Catholic working people, the infant blessed and damned in earliest memory with an awareness that his "nature" is at odds with the "nature" of the culture in which he lives. In order to consider this child, however, without swooning into psycho-biography, I would like to digress for a moment and sketch in the cultural dynamic that Elaine Scarry describes in her heroic meditation on the relationship between suffering and human creativity—and then site that child within it.⁴

Scarry finds her argument on a simple premise: that pain destroys the world—or, more specifically, that the inexpressible, interior violence of bodily pain demolishes the self by destroying its extensions into the networks of human civilization. A fluid, decentered idea of the self evolves out of this premise, a self conceived in terms of its limits, situated neither wholly within nor completely without its bodily confluence—a state of extended consciousness, dissolving at its inner extreme into the inarticulate nullity of bodily pain and vanishing at its outer limit into the totally articulated, external product of human imagination. Between these two extremes, then, in the most benign construction, the bodily self and civilization are merely endpoints in a fluid continuum of extended human consciousness.



In its more common construction, however, the state intervenes between the self and civilization, intent upon destroying culture as an extension of the self and recreating it as an embodiment of state power. The radical agency of this agenda, in Scarry's discussion, is the institution of political torture, under whose auspices domestic refuge is abolished and the most banal and intimate accoutrements of the private self are reconstituted as emblems of its vulnerability. The enclosures that embrace and express the self become the prisons that isolate and annihilate it. The handle of the tool that extends the self is reversed; it becomes a weapon in the hand of the state. The *world* becomes a weapon in the hand of the state.

That such things take place, of course, we know; and the simple knowledge that they do is, admittedly, both horrific and heartrending. But it would be a mistake, I think, to attribute our contemporary fascination with political torture to our sympathy for its victims, or even to our libidinous morbidity. The simple fact that Scarry, among others, would expend so much eloquence in its explication should suggest to us, if nothing else does, that our real and totally justified concern with torture derives from our understanding that the actual governmental practice of torture is only the extreme instance, the limiting condition, of a pervasive heartlessness.

As a consequence, we have recovered our visceral Elizabethan wariness. Once again we know in our bones that the headsman's axe awaits us on a whim, that the threat of the world turning on us is never truly absent from our everyday experience, that the omnipresent possibility of radical cultural inversion more or less defines the conduct of life in our times. We know, further, that the extent to which we perceive this threat without suffering its consequences is, finally, a measure of our complicity with the culture. It means that we have hostages to fortune; that we, at least, have "a world in extension" that we despair of losing. The child, aware from the dawn of awareness of his alien "nature," does not.

Such a child simply *has* no world in extension, in the sense that Scarry describes it. Beyond his skin there is no nurturing enclosure, no confirming artifact, no memory of domestic accord to be deconstructed by violence, or rendered ironic by growing understanding and then embodied as loss. The rooms in which this child's awareness grows can never be extensions of the self, nor magnifications of his dissenting body. They are "miniaturizations of the world," to be sure, but of a world not his own—of a civilization whose domestic components from the outset take on the construction of malevolence.

Even the situation of the adult torture victim is epistemologically preferable. That victim, like most of us, has a world to lose, and even though his or her physical pain may be more catastrophic, the situation of the "alien" child is more extreme. In his primal "unworldliness," he is trapped within the confines of his flesh. His body is his house and, lacking even the materials out of which he might fashion a world, he lives by friction. The stain of what, for him, would be the "real nature" of things—the "nature" in accord with his own—must almost of necessity flicker like a ghost behind the elaborate, pervasive and ultimately perverse "nature" of the world in which he finds himself.

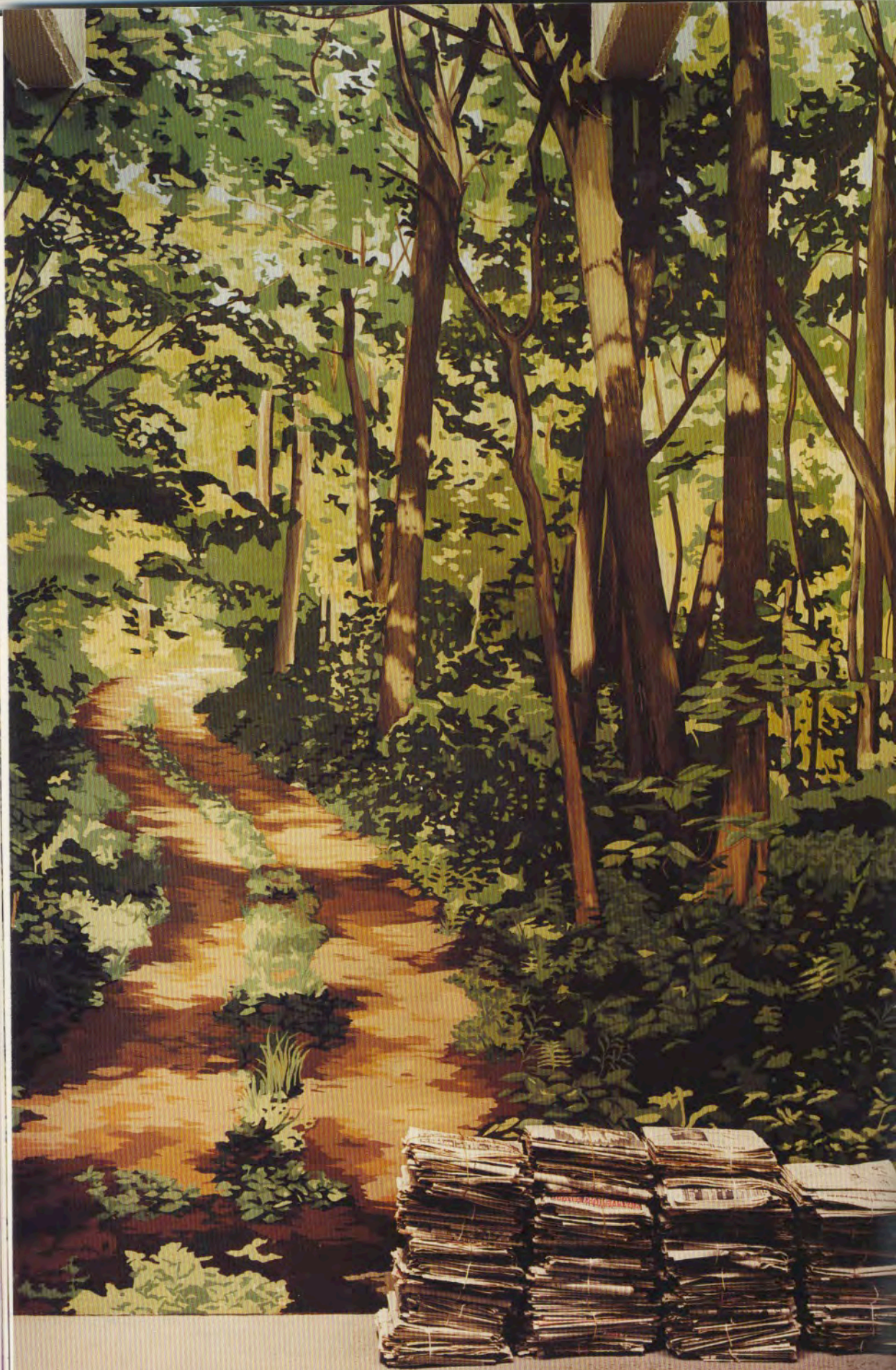
So, finally, in the absence of a language to embody his "true nature," the child in his extremity renders his prison—the cathedral of "false nature"—*visibly* false. He theatricalizes the cultural construction of that "nature" which repudiates his own. In one way or another, this act of rebellion has been the traditional recourse of the homosexual artist since the Enlightenment—more regularly since Oscar Wilde inscribed its rationale in "The Decay of Lying" at the beginning of this century. Having rendered "false nature" false, however, the homosexual artist confronts a juncture at which Robert Gober, almost alone among his contemporaries, has taken the road less traveled.

The traditional next step, having rendered "false nature" false, has been to embrace that false falsity, to take that double negation as a

positive and, presuming that there is no real confirming "nature" behind the scrim, to opt for "culture" and celebrate its artificiality. This strategy is more or less defined by what used to be called the "camp sensibility"—a condition of presumed total irony, the possession of which was generally taken as a sign of "sophistication," which itself invariably functioned as a "brave" (read, transparent) mask for a sentimental and theatrical melancholia.

Over the past hundred years, this sensibility evolved erratically from the romance of connoisseurship into the erotics of transgression, but it began, most likely, in the argot of Walter Pater and the "Aesthetic Movement." In this idiom, homosexual life was characterized as a voluntary option, as an "artistic" choice—a kind of "Mauve Decade" bohemian defection—as an embrace, along the lines of Dorian Gray, of a lifestyle at once tragic and heroic by virtue of its being "unnaturally refined." Later in the century, this "artistic" choice would be reconstituted by existential poetics into the *noire* aesthetic of the sexual outlaw; and there is no denying the real romance in all of this, nor the revolutionary courage required to traffic in the erotics of transgression. This rhetoric of the artist as sexual outlaw informed life at The Factory, and certainly Bob Mapplethorpe (to cite the limiting case) touched its true limits to great effect in his life and work.

But looking back on it now, it is easy to see that the political liabilities of camp derive, ultimately, from its embrace of "abnormality," and from its idea of "conversion." Its adherents seemed to have purchased the fantasy of volition, of choice, at the price of denial. Because, built into the idea that the "aesthetic" homosexual willfully abandons "normality," there is an element of betrayal that bears with it a burden of loss, nostalgia and guilt that is irrevocably sentimental. The "convert" is always being invited by the culture to gaze back across that moment of fateful decision, to experience the loss of some imaginary theater of domestic tenderness and oneness with the culture—and then, plagued by guilt, to remarginalize himself.



Thus, the presumed gaiety of the camp sensibility was always suffused by mourning; it abandoned the hope of a "real homosexual nature" without abandoning the longing for it; and, as a consequence, its divagations into the territory of actual, factual, secular sexuality rarely strayed much beyond false-ironic longing tarted up in the self-deprecating iconography of popular culture and pornography. In these constructions, the idea of "real homosexual nature" was inevitably transformed into a cut-rate, pop version of "idealized homosexual nature" (the boy on the bike, the brawny bimbo with the power drill), or into a sentimental travesty of it—The Village People.

It required an artist like Robert Gober, whose primal alienation is informed by a puritanical New England rigor, to confront the falsity of "false nature" and *indict* it, rather than embracing its artificiality, and then to indict it again, and then to repudiate it—and then continue to rend and distort its tenuous membrane of reality—articulating the torture chamber of his childhood, theatricalizing its icy normality, validating his worldlessness by displacing his dread onto the domestic weaponry that threatened his annihilation—recasting from memory its arsenal of walls and doors, of sinks and drains, of playpens and beds, of windows and wallpaper to reveal its iconography of power for what it is, and will be ever.

In the process of doing so, Gober appropriates neither norms nor forms from the straight world, but *replaces* them, literally constructs them *all*—the sinks, the plywood sheets, the newspapers—bringing nothing "readymade" across the abyss of difference. Reincarnating these artifacts as extensions of his own true nature, he colonizes the straight world with them—so that, finally, if nothing else in the world of false facture confirms Gober's presence in it, these objects do. This, of course, is interior decorating with a vengeance—a cold-blooded turning of that classically camp celebration back onto itself—with all of the energy and strategy and ambition that go into this project depending absolutely from Gober's unshakable, primal certainty (confirmed in his own body forever) that a "real homosexual nature"

exists, that there is latent in the world at large a whole Other construction of "nature" and what is "natural"—an Other reality coextensive with the Euclidian hegemony of heterosexual culture but *prior* to it, and eternally out of phase with it.

Beyond the hard-boiled banality of Gober's own metamorphic strategies, of course, it's difficult to extrapolate the particulars of this Other reality. It is presumed to be invisible within the dominant culture, and confirmed physically by those who live within it, but one does, occasionally, come upon its citizens—or, rather, parts of them—in Gober's work: limbs, like fallen trees, a torso here, a leg there, usually extending from the wall of some institutional juggernaut that seems to have dropped, suddenly and unannounced, from outer space, carelessly guillotining the indigenous population below. In some instances, the minions of these stone-and-glass monoliths have apparently taken notice of these mutilated ghosts of gay nature and efficiently, by the judicious application of drains and candles, converted them into appliances and furniture, imposing the imagery of heterosexual *vanitas* upon the bodies of its objectified victims—the room, the candle, the music, the furniture.

In these works Gober explicitly turns the traditional binary of "straight nature" and "gay culture" on its head. He spins the metaphor of *The Wizard of Oz* and reconstitutes this tale, in which that most benign icon of domestic nurture, the farmhouse, is transformed into artillery on behalf of its beloved young occupant, falling as if by providence upon the pre-existent "wicked" witch. In Gober's revisionist parable of "gay nature" versus "straight culture," the rigid Euclidian cultural institution drops unceremoniously out of the sky, not upon a wicked witch but upon a pre-existing polyvalent natural order. Thus, by associating Euclidian order, "geometry" and "symmetry" with the binary male-female proclivities of heterosexual culture, Gober engages the issue of nature and culture at exactly the point where Thoreau's conception of their interface collapses into irony.

As Stanley Cavell notes in his long essay, "The Senses of Walden," Thoreau finally allows his contradictory feelings about organic nature and ordered culture to confront one another in *Walden's* chapter entitled "The Bean Field."⁵ Here, Thoreau dramatizes his own post-Enlightenment determination to *know* beans as an allegory for the quest for scientific knowledge generally. With his perfect honesty, Thoreau acknowledges the willing enthusiasm with which, in pursuit of that knowledge—like some agrarian Mondrian—he imposes the Euclidian order of puritan agriculture on Walden's polymorphous nature. Yet, he seems almost surprised and a little embarrassed with himself as he does it, and he responds to this moment of self-knowledge with self-deprecating irony, narrating his weeding of the bean field in an elevated, warlike, mock-heroic diction that betrays his real distress—not at the simple act of cultivating a bean field but at the more generalized violence inferred by its analogy with the Mexican War.

So, finally, even though he cannot resist doing it, Thoreau seems as well aware as Guber that it is no small thing to edit the tumultuous complexity of nature into the binary language of Euclidian order, in the name of genetic exclusivity and formal efficiency. Thoreau's heroic diction in this passage, then, functions in a way that is roughly equivalent to the banal symmetries that Robert Guber deploys in his installation at Dia—as a negative signifier, a means of imposing a structure while simultaneously denying its efficacy:

I was determined to know beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five o'clock in the morning till noon. . . . Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds . . . disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions . . . leveling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another. That's Roman wormwood,—that's pigweed, —that's sorrel, —that's piper grass, —have at him,

chop him up, turn his roots upward to the sun,
don't let him have a fibre in the shade, if you do
he'll turn himself t'other side up and be as green
as a leek in two days. A long war, not with cranes,
but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and
rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me
come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin
the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches
with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest-waving Hector,
that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades,
fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust.⁶



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3.

PIP'S RECOGNITION

As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me. Their influence on my own character, I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very well that it was not all good. I lived in a state of chronic uneasiness respecting my behavior. . . . Now, concerning the influence of my position on others, I was in no such difficulty, and so I perceived—though dimly enough perhaps—that it was not beneficial to anybody. . . .

—CHARLES DICKENS,
Great Expectations

About a quarter of the way through *Great Expectations*, the young hero of the novel, Pip, an orphan of the moors, is informed by an attorney that an anonymous benefactor has “taken an interest in him”—that he, Pip, has in effect acquired a background, and henceforth is to be removed from the tutelage of Joe the blacksmith, his adoptive father, and educated as a gentleman—on account of his now being in possession of the “great expectations” alluded to in the title of the narrative. Henceforth, the novel is taken up with charting the not-altogether-salutary effects of this blind benefaction upon the young Pip, and concerned as well with Pip’s own inquiries into, speculations upon and fantasies about the status and identity of his unknown benefactor.

Gradually and wishfully, Pip settles to his own satisfaction upon the person of the elderly Miss Havisham—the pale, final flower of local “Quality,” and the benefactress of Pip’s true love, Estella. Miss Havisham, of course, is one of Dickens’ great grotesques: an unappetizing and pathetic virago made more so by the frustration of her own “great expectations.” Abandoned at the altar in her youth, she now presides over the archaeological remains of her wedding breakfast in the heavily curtained, candle-lit hall of her ancestral mansion. Clad in the tattered sublimity of her unactivated wedding gown, she nurtures her loathing and concocts out of it grand strategies of vicarious revenge to be enacted in the person of her ward, Estella.

Dickens goes to great and subtle length in deploying the complex network of cultural and class assumptions that support Pip’s vain delusion that Miss Havisham is his benefactress—assumptions that blind him to Miss Havisham’s malice, and render him blind as well (as we are not) to the ineluctable unfolding of the plot. And, in truth, Dickens portrays these hierarchical imperatives and romantic illusions so powerfully that we are able to forgive Pip’s vulnerability to them, and to

Vatican Condones Discrimination Against Homosexuals

By PETER STEINFELS

A Vatican office has urged Roman Catholic bishops in the United States to scrutinize laws intended to protect homosexuals and to oppose them if they promise public acceptance of homosexual conduct.

"There are areas in which it is not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account," the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which advises matters of doctrine for the church, said in a statement sent last month by American bishops. It specified adoptions, placement of children in foster care, military

service and employment of teachers and substitute teachers.

The statement was given to news organizations this week by New Ways Ministry, a Catholic gay-rights group with headquarters in Mount Rainier, Md., and was first reported by The Washington Post yesterday. The ministry called the statement an "unjustification" and "evidence of a growing and serious gap between the Vatican and Catholics."

Sexually Detailed

But the statement's focus on specific legislation was unusual.

Concern that gay rights threaten marriage.

The American bishops have taken a variety of stances toward statutes barring discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation.

The Vatican statement repeated the Vatican office's 1988 description of homosexuality as "not a sin" but "a more or less strong tendency" and "an inclination" that "must be seen as an objective disorder."

Archbishop Humbert G. Winkler of Milwaukee, "but this is the first time I have seen anything so detailed."

Vatican statements normally perceive general moral principles and leave their legal applications to the local bishops.

In its own statement, New Ways Ministry said that the Vatican's defense of discrimination in areas like adoption, foster care, military service and employment of teachers and coaches rested on " blatant stereotypes."

The group also cited a May 1992 Gallup poll showing that 74 percent of American Catholics support equal rights in employment for homosexual people.

SUMMER IS FOR CHILDREN: GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND

Youth Worker Held In Death of Son, 9

WOODRUFF, N.J., May 18 (AP) — A state youth worker has been charged with murder in the death of her 9-year-old adopted son, the authorities said. She was accused of leaving him with a 18-inch piece of

herometic.

The woman, who has been held in Gloucester County jail since she took the child, early Thursday morning, Mrs. Prince, of Moore Township, said the authorities that she was punishing the boy, who was adopted when he was 3.

The boy was admitted to Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, where he died.

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understand that, for Pip, it is a comfortable delusion. Under its aegis he is able to see himself as one of nature's noblemen, self-evidently deserving of elevation from his orphanhood into the ranks of the *petit* aristocracy—to see himself as the new blood that will reinvigorate the social privileges and responsibilities that derive from living off the interest of invested capital.

As a consequence of all this preparation, the elegantly framed and exquisitely delayed recognition scene in *Great Expectations* is probably the most accomplished and resonant in nineteenth-century literature. When, under extreme circumstances, Pip discovers that his benefactor is not, and was never, Miss Havisham, but is instead the transported convict Magwitch who has “done well” in Australia, Pip must not only reconstruct the mechanisms of his own fate, he must restructure his vision of the entire social order as well. His life, which he had comfortably assumed to have been redeemed from above, has in fact been enriched and destabilized from below. He can no longer credit the patriarchal vigilance of the “Quality,” but must, rather, credit the stunted aspirations of the underclass. Specifically, Pip must credit a largely involuntary act of kindness that he rendered as a child to an unkempt fugitive on the moors.

In terms of its propulsion, rendering and sheer rhetorical *crunch*, this moment when Pip's world turns upside down compares favorably with the recognition scene in *Oedipus the King*, and its deepest resonance, I would suggest, derives, in Dickens as in Sophocles, from the fact that the *content* of this recognition supplies not only the fulcrum of the narrative, but the keystone of its aesthetic as well. In other words, Dickens wishes that *our* world be turned upside down, as well, with regard to his own narrative—wishes that we, his readers, should experience a similar jolt of recognition as we read his books—that our “great expectations” should be overturned as profoundly as Pip's, so we might *recognize* on an experiential level that the pleasures of Dickens' texts derive not from the haute “Miss Havisham” tradition of English literature, but from the experience of the child, Charles Dickens,

abandoned in London, denied an education, living in fear, working in a blacking factory at the age of eight and trudging the violent streets every night, stunned with amazement and shame, to visit his hapless father, imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea. For Dickens this recognition is a matter of political necessity—the cornerstone of an aesthetic that denies the priority of aesthetics and locates the wellsprings of cultural production in the terror of the child and in the beleaguered impudence of the disenfranchised.

And, of course, as we read Dickens, we always do recognize the priority of the child—this triumph of personal memory over cultural history. It is, as they say, the *odd* thing about Dickens: that all of his dazzling technical acuity should count so little against this gorgeous investment of memory; and it is the *odd* thing about Goyer as well: that all of *his* dazzling formal accomplishment should ultimately matter so little. In our every experience of Goyer's work, I would suggest, we undergo some version of Pip's recognition and must, as a consequence, translate our "great expectations" of thundering historical resonance into something more personal and political; there is always, in our perception of it, this destabilizing *moment* when it "goes all strange" and our refined connoisseurship dissolves into a subtler and more intimate awareness of what art can do.

The point here, however, is not the obvious one, that Goyer's work prioritizes the child and the disenfranchised, but, rather, that this priority is something that we *come into the knowledge of*—that it prioritizes the child *specifically* over the great tradition of Christian heterosexual culture—by overthrowing that culture in our experience of the work. Thus, on first encounter, the perceived situation of Goyer's work is always ablaze with signifiers of high Modernism: the pristine rooms, the privative objects, the exquisite craft and refined sense of placement, the subtle evocations of Duchamp and Magritte, Artschwager and Judd. Ultimately, however, all of this nuance and evocation takes on the coppery taste of bitter irony, as Goyer (after generations of artists exploiting the stuff of their lives in service of this tradition) exploits the

stuff of this tradition in service of his life; further, I think, we might consider Gober's project as evocative of his *own* generation, exploiting in a radical way, the apparently reduced options left open to it.

To put it straightforwardly, Robert Gober, born in 1954, belongs to a generation of artists who do not care what works of art are not doing—who, in fact, in their earliest experiences, could hardly have been expected to notice what works of art were not doing in any instinctive way, having come of age in the wake of that moment in the late 1960s when art's patrilineal history died—when the combined, reductive agendas of American-style abstraction, Pop art and Minimalism, were presumed to have purified the work of art into a simple positive position in the continuous present of context, process and materials—so that art was *all there, always, right now*.

For a generation inheriting this ideology, abstract art no longer bore with it the memory of paintings dating back to the Renaissance. So abstract paintings no longer asserted their "absence" of images; they simply acknowledged the hegemony of paint. They did not "deny" their latent pictorial space; they asserted their flatness—and rather than "violating" our formal compositional expectations, they simply confirmed the ideology of happenstance. Minimal sculptures, as well, were no longer available as "reductive," "handleless" artifacts; they were simply "added" objects, to the accumulating pile. There was nothing, then, in the glossy museums of imperial American art, that was viscerally *not there* for this generation: no "absence," no "denial" or "violation," no "handlelessness" or "reduction." For these children the museums were full of *stuff*—empty, flat, stupid stuff—the same old normal America, minus the memory, but in designer colors.

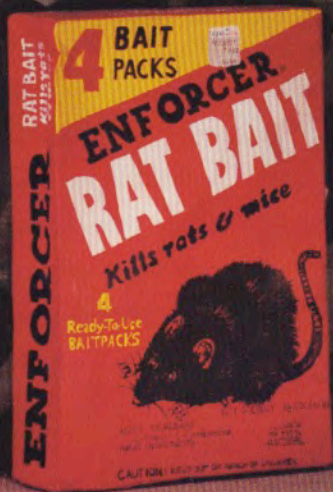
So it is not surprising that Robert Gober, as a member of this generation, would hinge his work upon the "negative signifier": a sign to say what you are *not* doing—or, rather, to designate which of the *millions* of things that you are not doing, that you *mean* not to do—and to designate, moreover, which of the *zillions* of available cultural signifiers

you intend *not* to signify. Thus Gober's art is characteristic of his generation, in that it is *additive*, and distinct from it insofar as it is additive of *negative signifiers* that Gober activates by subtly narratizing the reductive strategies of Minimal sculpture.

The imperative would seem to be: Survive, but do not forget. Thus, in Gober's work, procedures that were once employed to privilege cultural amnesia now redeem memory at a point just short of forgetfulness. Thus common objects that might easily have been brought into the eternal cultural present by the use of readymades, are meticulously handcrafted and thus privileged by this temporal investment with the memory of their historical occasion—with the implication of their fictive provenance. Thus memory, which might easily have been erased, is only suppressed—its invisible absence replaced with signifiers of loss. And anomie, which might easily have been denied, is only attenuated into an ambience of redeemed dread.

As a critique of Minimal sculpture, then, Gober's works might be taken to affirm the traumatic nature of reductive Modernism, characterizing its urge toward reduction and pure physicality as analogous with the physiological response to proximate violence—that adrenaline rush that simply blows away the extended social atmosphere of consciousness and allows the physical world to bloom up, ravishing, in its absence.⁷ Thus, the products of the Minimalist agenda might be characterized as artifacts of hypostasized, therapeutic amnesia, and we may easily regard Gober's sinks and doors as unexpurgated critiques of this forgetfulness, evoking not only their own ominous fictive sources, but implying as well an ominous fictive provenance for all those late-Modern Minimal *objets* whose denial of the past is optimistically cloaked in glamorous surface-strategies.

However, we must be careful to characterize this reflexive investment of Minimalism with memory as a *consequence* of Gober's endeavor rather than the occasion for it. Otherwise, we poison Gober's project



with a false aristocratic inheritance—dishonor its true genesis and corrupt it, as Pip was nearly corrupted, with the delusional “great expectations” of a dead tradition—a tradition that is symbolized in Goyer, as it is in Dickens, by that transcendental receptacle of the patriarchal seed: the wedding gown. Because we must, I think, take the inference that is rather neurotically suppressed in Harold Bloom’s *Map of Misreading* and consider Robert Goyer, the unconverted homosexual, as both alien to and excluded from the “primal scene of instruction” through which the patrilineal heritage of Western culture is, supposedly, passed down.⁸ I doubt if Robert Goyer would have it any other way. Certainly, having “inherited” nothing but his own body, Goyer is free to take what he needs where it finds it, like a serious pirate—to consult the history of art as if it were a shopping list, rather as Christopher Marlowe must have consulted Puttenham’s catalogue of rhetorical figures—to appropriate materials to his need on the authority of his own experience and rewrite art history in the reflection of that experience.

When Jean Cocteau announces that he thinks of “genius” as an “at present undiscovered form of memory,” I would hope that this is what he has in mind—this triumph of personal memory over cultural history that has enabled Robert Goyer to use the language of culture to his own ends so powerfully and so idiosyncratically that, in the end, he has bestowed more meaning upon his captured sources than they have invested in his endeavor. A Robert Goyer urinal, for instance, only needs Duchamp as a grace note, whereas Duchamp’s privy, in the aftermath of Goyer’s evocation, is invested with a new vocabulary of somatic ambivalence that seems genuinely to reconstitute its status as an object. If, as T. S. Eliot suggests, Dante is a better poet for having influenced Milton, then a great deal of twentieth-century art is better for having influenced Robert Goyer—even though this remade past is only the by-product of Goyer’s political imagination of a better present.

We are, after all, finally considering an artist here who is willing to indict an entire civilization on the authority of his own bodily certainty, to reconstitute the issue of gay identity within the specific domestic iconography of his own childhood and out of that iconography to challenge a culture's most treasured product—its construction of nature—by demonstrating, with little apparent effort, that the power of art does not come rolling down through centuries of an embodied tradition, but comes springing up, confident and alien, through the cracks of our Euclidian empire, from the earth beneath our feet.

NOTES

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 372.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "New England Reformers," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 596.
3. Thoreau, *Walden*, 205.
4. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27-59.
5. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 176-178.
6. Thoreau, *Walden*, 206-207.
7. Dave Hickey, "Proof Through the Night: An Essay on Morals," in *Prior Conviction* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1989), 176-178.
8. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford, 1975), 41-52.

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