

transported... **Reflecting on Movement**  
in Contemporary Art

by John Ewing

"To be moved by art" is a quaint way of saying we are profoundly affected by it. No one uses that expression anymore. To the contemporary mind it seems slack and sentimental. Yet, I relish the notion of being moved by art. It claims an intrinsic relationship with the viewer, affirming art's capacity to make connections and stimulate a response. I am moved by works of art that move me. I want to take the old-fashioned expression at face value and rehabilitate it. If that is possible, we should be able to ask the questions: What is moving? How does it move? And where? This is no school or distinct genre that I'm considering. Art produces movement in the viewer in myriad ways. First, movement implies action. At the Guggenheim Bilbao, Richard Serra's 180 ton *Snake* invites and rewards physical movement. The sculpture receives viewers into its ends then leads them blindly along two narrow paths between rusted walls of Cor-Ten steel. Though momentarily trapped, the free sounds of the museum (footfalls on cement, children shouting) echo in the tight space. Like the natural light above, sound is focused and altered by the varying slope of the high walls. The light pulls the eye up, the curving path compels the viewer forward, an effect repeated nearby in the narrow *calles* of Bilbao's Casco Viejo. Like those streets, Snake contains beginnings and endings, but it doesn't matter which end you start with. Moving through it is what counts, the trip from here to there and the sensory delights in between.

Movement can be a sensation, a proprioception, as well as an action. Over the last few years, Anne Wallace and Wayne Dow have explored these subtler aspects in their innovative sound installations. The San Antonio collaborators address their art to the listener rather than the viewer. Sound is their material, an invisible substance that is, nonetheless, full of energy and information. Engaging the ear as the primary organ of response makes unfamiliar demands on the spectator, but the effects are revelatory. *Clear Fork Soundscape* (presented in 1999 outside *The Old Jail Art Center*, in Albany, Texas) transports listeners to a remote site on the Brazos River. Night bugs, pumpjacks, the gobble of wild turkeys, and cows bawling in the distance are some of the specific notes that rise out of this organic, four channel recording. Sound builds on sound until the size, terrain and even temperature of that place begin to take shape in the mind of the listener. *Clear Fork Soundscape* relies on the ear's ability to gauge distances and volumes, not to mention the wealth of imagined images that rush to inhabit this rich tapestry of sound. The project appeals to primitive faculties, to instincts, and it's a pleasure to feel the body respond so quickly and knowingly.

Similarly, James Turrell's *Skyspaces* stimulate a perception of movement, in this case with an appeal to the eye. *Meeting*, a permanent *Skyspace* at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, crisply frames a portion of New York sky at twilight, when the work is open for public viewing. In a rectangular room, fifty or so visitors can sit on ledges along the walls or stretch out on the carpeted floor. Eighteen feet above, a rectangular opening half the size of the room lets the sky in. Clouds, flying objects and dramatic changes in the intensity and color of light are vividly enhanced in that opening. Like a camera lens pulling focus, this framing strategy alters perception, collapsing the distance between viewer and sky. In *Mapping Spaces* (New York: Peter Blum Editions, 1987) Turrell describes the effect:

This inhabiting of space by consciousness is the entry of self into space through the penetration of vision, which is not limited to just that received by the eyes but also has to do with the entry of self into that which is "seen." ... I am really interested in the qualities of one space sensing another.

The feeling of being moved by art has a conceptual dimension, too. This aspect is perhaps the most challenging for artists and viewers. For the artist, movement between ideas requires a rigorous scrutiny of concepts and materials. Likewise, the response of the viewer in this case is not so much physical or sensual, as it is intellectual,



Allan McCollum, *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982-84  
Enamel on Hydrostone  
Installation: Cash/Newhouse Gallery, New York, 1985  
Courtesy of Friedrich Petzel Gallery

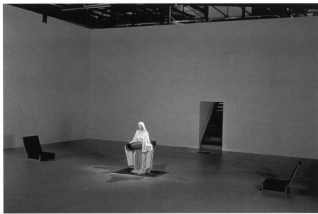
though leaps of the mind are certainly accompanied by physical sensations. Moving from point A to point B, then, can be a mental as well as physical trip. The result is the sense of arriving somewhere new—although this may be only a new plateau in the viewer's mind. Again, I'm not necessarily suggesting a specific type of art, though there are certain similarities between the examples I'll offer below. All share a dialectic of images that generate friction, insight, and, yes, movement.

Robert Gober's 1997 untitled installation at L.A. MOCA's Geffen Contemporary is a signal work in this regard. The inexorable pull between images and material effects offers an epic journey of ideas to the viewer. The installation's central element is a cast-concrete statue of the Virgin Mary, her midsection punctured by a sewer pipe. The Virgin stands on top of a metal drainage grate through which one views a fantastical seabed of barnacled rocks, mollusks, seaweeds and shiny coins. This alarming juxtaposition of images is encircled by others. Behind the statue, a wooden staircase gushes water into a drain. Flanking the statue, two silk-lined suitcases hold sewer grates that reveal additional ocean dioramas, one showing a man's bare legs and feet and those of an infant held aloft.



Robert Gober, *Untitled* (detail), 1995-1997  
Photo: Russell Kaye  
Courtesy of the artist

This collection of disparate images is jarring, enigmatic and finally poetic. Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that "the poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche." Surely, the power of Gober's art lies in the immediate specificity of his carefully chosen images, choices that detonate a wave of aftershocks. Much can be made of each image, so intensely are they invested with symbolism: the wounded mother of Christianity, the sewer, the suitcase, the ocean. But the action that links all



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1995-1997  
Photo: Joshua White  
Courtesy of the artist

of these is the continuous rushing of water and the draining away that takes this primal resource downward and out of sight. Ultimately, that movement carries the unsettling images to a mysteriously fecund place, an alien world sparkling with lucky pennies. To my mind, the installation toys with the largest question imaginable: Is the universe a container or a rushing void? Gober's installation, however, is not intent on concluding anything. The movement between ideas is sufficiently compelling.

Allan McCollum may be asking the same question, but in his voice it sounds like a joke. McCollum's ongoing series of objects are a cosmic ping-pong match between specificity and generality. The *Surrogate Paintings*, begun in 1978, contain groups of objects that, from a distance, resemble conventionally framed paintings. Actually, they are wood and museum board, glued and pressed together. The *Plaster Surrogates*, begun in 1982, evolved from the previous series. Cast in gypsum from select examples, these objects have uniform black centers and varying colored borders. When exhibited, the *Plaster Surrogates* have been hung in large numbers, filling the walls, or in a single row around the gallery space. The *Perfect Vehicles*, begun in 1985, contain two sizes of objects, the smaller cast in gypsum and the larger in reinforced concrete. The objects are identically shaped to resemble a decorative urn. As repeatedly noted on McCollum's web site, all of the objects in the three series are "painted all over with many coats of paint."

McCollum's series present a thorny, philosophical dilemma for viewers. What is the value of an original work of art in the company of so many copies? Yet, these are not copies; the sizes of the *Surrogates* and the *Perfect Vehicles*' colors are never repeated. Not quite mollified, viewers may still wonder why the objects all look alike. The potency of McCollum's art is contained in the tension of these polar-

ties. In McCollum's practice, the art object is an idea, or rather, a stand-in for the idea of an art object. The unique set of one contains the universal set of all. In the midst of the *Surrogates* or the *Perfect Vehicles*, one's mind races between these existential points, which seem to have a similar energizing effect on the objects. Poker-faced, they hum with contradictions.

Kara Walker's cut-paper tableaux are also contradictory. Employing the genteel, nineteenth century craft of the silhouette, Walker evokes the Deep South in the era of slavery. The clothing, props, Spanish moss, and deep perspective of these flat *mise-en-scène*s instantly transport us someplace else. But where? Is it the Dixie of history or David O. Selznick's *Tara*? Art may move the viewer, but movement need not be pleasurable. The kind induced by Walker's art is more aptly described as squirming. The scenes' human figures are subjected to violence, degradation and criminal mischief, as well as orgies of food and sexual ecstasy. But despite the silhouettes' precise depiction, the figures seem in the thrall of some unidentifiable force. They arch their backs, kick up their heels, and fly through the air with daemonic glee. If we are not in direct



Chris Sauter, *Factory: Mauna Loa Loveseat*, 2000  
Loveseat, upholstery and foam  
Courtesy of Lester Marks, Houston  
*Factory: Kilauea Coffee Table*, 2000  
Coffee table, wood  
Courtesy of the artist and James Gallery, Houston



Kara Walker, *Camptown Ladies* (detail), 1998  
Cut paper and adhesive on wall  
Overall size 9 x 67'  
Courtesy of Brent Sikkema, New York

contact with the traumas of the past, then their shape and texture will be lost to us on a conscious level. Walker's art invites viewers into a world of imaginative fantasy, since that is where the unfinished business of trauma lodges itself.

Can something be despicable and desirable at the same time? Of course! Walker's "beautiful grotesques" confirm

it. Equal to the complexities of American race relations, her tableaux entangle viewers with their own unconscious shadows.

Lastly, Chris Sauter's clever art sums up this admittedly impressionistic survey. Producing hardworking installations that are generous in scope, the San Antonio artist offers humor, material pleasures, insightful dialectic, and ample movement for the mind. Sauter's major tool is an absurd shift in scale. In one example, a coffee table and loveseat host miniature models of the Kilauea and Mauna Loa volcanoes. Other projects have topped a breakfast table with a Gulf Coast refinery and an ironing board with a lumber mill. *ArtPace* director Kathryn Kanjo describes this strategy as "overlaying scientific references onto domestic furnishings": the artist seems to concur. "I'm interested in collapsing dichotomies," says Sauter. Within this operation, his bizarre inverted hierarchies have the opposite effect. They open an expanded space in the mind of the viewer, big enough to hold the vast physical world and our proportionately grandiose response to it. Like all of the work mentioned above, Sauter's proclaims, "I have you for a moment and want to show you something, take you somewhere."

It's a splendid way to travel.

*Writer and critic John Ewing studied at the University of Texas at Austin and has contributed to various publications including Tema Celeste, New Art Examiner and the San Antonio Current. He lives in New York City.*

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It was the second time this year that a "general" issue (with no unifying theme) was conceived, predicated this time upon the idea that most writers have a topic in mind on which they never had a chance to write. It seemed like a "liberating" non-thematic invitation; in some cases, however, it proved more difficult than expected which shows that topical issues have indisputably commendable virtues.

Nevertheless, we got many spontaneous, enthusiastic, well documented responses.

¶ Here was Lawrence Jennings (unsolicited feature that perfectly fitted the mold), enamored with skateboarding, to the point of not only studying it theoretically in an MFA thesis, but also making art out of it.... The feature turned out to parallel a recent *New York Times* article on "surfing-as-art", a fresh reminder of extant, other-than-conventional art-forms. ¶ There was a joke by Clint Willour, Director of the Galveston Arts Center, which proved to possess unplumbed reverberations of its own. Reflecting on what he, as a curator, was doing quite frequently in the last years, he discovered a plethora of artists working in an *obsessive-compulsive* manner which consists of the intense and irrepensible desire to multiply similar gestures, to pile up modules upon similar modules, to experiment with endless repetition as a device for creating stunning novelty. Many thought that compulsion/obsession is in the nature of any art making; Clint and I will probably disagree; because this is not everybody's elective method, procedure; there are other modes, radically different in tempo, rhythm and texture. ¶ Here is Janet S. Tyson whose pledge is to almost create a *canon for eclectic art-criticism*, taking it out of the hands of the pundits, and pointedly inviting viewers' participation in the process. ¶ We got a heart-felt, passionate, well-illustrated feature by John Ewing on what turns on a critic in an art-work: *being moved, transported by it*, phenomenon so often lost in the present day's cold, calculative relationship of viewer to artifact or vice-versa. ¶ Kelly Klaasmeyer, well-known for her acidic wit and wider cultural perspectives, deals with an *urban landscape* phenomenon: the "disfiguring" of our city by mindless, greedy, exploitative builders who have filled the Houston streets with nondescript, depressing townhouses, forfeiting both functionality and aesthetics. ¶ I have tried, but far from succeeded, to say that there is plenty of bad taste around us but that some of it might be validated in the future as true innovation, while some other will forever remain in the realm of the *unbearably gaudy*. ¶ Fernando Castro in a six-piece photographic essay named for Elián Gonzales intends to symbolize the fate of all children from Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, at risk of perishing in the waters of the Caribbean or the Rio Grande, with their parents trying to reach the United States. ¶ George Alexander, a promoter of unofficial *Soviet* art, discovered a link between the Russian Evgheny Rukhin whose work incidentally ended up in Texas collections, and, James Rosenquist who appreciated both Rukhin's art and friendship. ¶ In an insightful interview with Sara Kellner, Janaki Lennie brings up difficult questions about the present and future of so-called alternative spaces: Sara suggests an ecological *coexistence* of all type spaces that *naturally* arose in recent years out of economic, social and artistic needs. ¶ Along the lines of a similar set of questions, Laurence Miller goes a radical step further and, based on extant or in-print books on the subject, espouses the view that the present generation must create its own venues, with their own forms of support, attract its own critics, challenge their peers and themselves—fight the enemy within.

Ileana Marcoulesco