

JACK GOLDSTEIN

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Jack Goldstein; Distance Equals Control

by David Salle

This essay is offered as a compliment to the exhibition rather than an explication of specific works. The language used in this text is somewhat more general and anecdotal, and more given to metaphoric comparisons than what we have come to expect from art writing. I don't in this essay attempt to dissect a single exemplar work, nor do I spend much time detailing the visual attributes of the works. This essay attempts instead to give a brief description of an ongoing process: the play of private fantasy, which itself grows out of the intersection of psychic necessity (desire) with the culturally available forms in which to voice that necessity (automaticity) becoming linked in a work of art to everyday, public images which then re-enter and submerge themselves, via the appropriative nature of our attention, into a clouded pool of personal symbols. This three part process yields a two part result; a sense of control over what one has effected distance from, which is ironically expressed in a sense of anxiety embedded in the *image* used in a given work, and also a sense of sadness because of the loss one feels for the thing distanced. The result of this process is nostalgia for the present, which is the name given to a complex texture of imagizing in which mediation between extremes (differentiation) leads to a liberated use of symbol rather than more limited narrative notion of emblem. To consider this work at all involves thinking about a way to stand in relation to the use of images both rooted in and somewhat distanced from cultural seeing. What this thinking should lead to is an outline of what constitutes a *sensibility*, and the use of sensibility as a concept in discussing work requires that its elements be larger and more pervasive than the mechanics of a single piece, or even the work of a single artist.

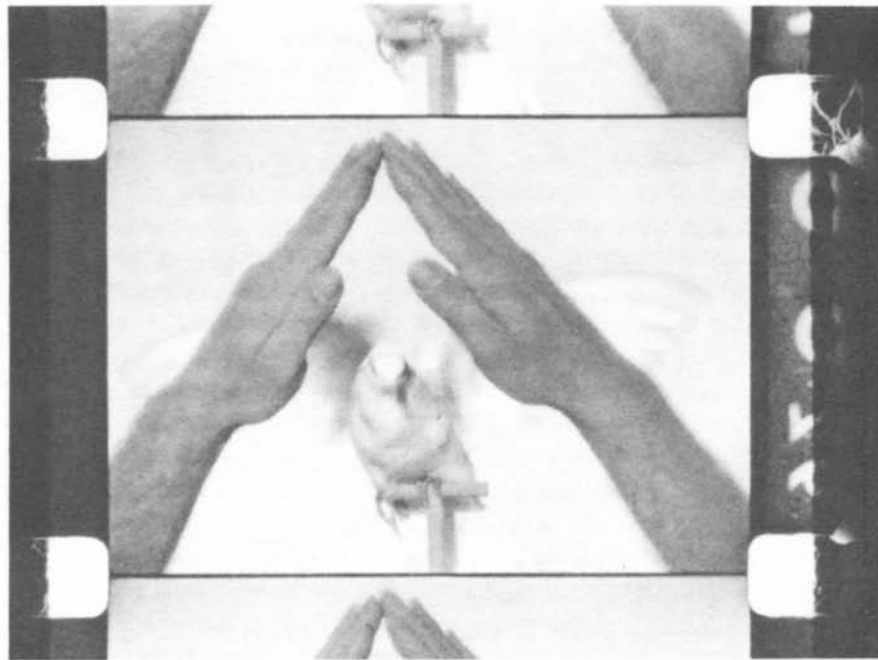
The catalog is intended to work with the exhibition, not to stand outside it. The essay informs the viewing by pointing to concerns that seem to matter for art making at this time; it does not instruct the viewing.

Inserted into the text are sentences of a disjointed, aphoristic quality. These were written by the artist and were selected from his notebooks by me. They appear in bold type.

More than most post-conceptual artists who come to mind, Jack Goldstein's work seems directly related to fears and anxieties about living in the world, and yet, significantly, the look of the work is almost antiseptically divorced from any cliché notion of the language of Angst. There are no smudge marks or erasures; there is no hesitancy of execution. On confronting the work for the first time, most viewers will be struck by how closely it mimics the slick presentation of commercial art. The images Goldstein uses are presented in a way which links them to *media* with a much greater sense of complicity than one finds in the work of the Pop artists. Unlike Pop painting, transformation of the meaning of the image is not linked to simple change of form. What the films and records take from public media is not so much a catalog of ironic images, but the modes of presentation themselves. There is in Goldstein's work almost a sense of allegiance to the conventions of commercial presentation, which becomes ironic because of his intention to locate a source of control over his imagistic environment. The obvious paradox lies in aligning one's art with the presentational modes which are used culturally to control and limit our sense of self, when one's goal is to distance or liberate oneself from that control and to establish a greater level of control. What one desires "control" over in one's life is the corrosive effect arbitrariness has on spontaneity.

She Dreams Of Her Favorite Movie Star.

Jack Goldstein makes movies, records, and photographs. The movies are in color primarily because that's the way we are accustomed to seeing movies. Color photography attempts to reproduce the look of the natural world; it is thought to be more real than black and white photography. But the objects in Goldstein's films are not simply "in color"; they are subjected to extreme and sometimes bizarre colorations. His films are not just color movies, they are representatives from the world of images which are forced into being colored. What is in the cinema a naturalistic convention becomes in Goldstein's work an expression of control. This reveals a basic feature of both Goldstein's work and his motivation for doing it; one has to lie, in life and in art, in order to gain some measure of control over one's place in the environment which, even with the lie, is always slipping.



"A White Dove," 16 mm Color Film, Sound 1975.

Similarly, the phonograph records are contorted into a congruence with what we feel to be a legitimate representation of the world or some point of experience in it not by their verisimilitude, but by their titles, labels, colors, and their enforced conformity with the way we know, culturally, a record is supposed to appear. It is this "supposed to" quality which is the source of the anxiety, even longing, one feels in the work. The work is all a bit overbearing. But it is the overbearingness of someone intensely concerned not so much with appearing to come off right, contrary to what the rigid adherence to some notion of correct use of form would imply, as with placing himself in a relationship to a field of images (drawn from the mediation between dreams and the language of their retelling) which might be of some use to himself as someone in the world. What we're asked to consider in these films and records and photo pieces is that Goldstein needs to make a phony record of a drowning man in order to avoid becoming a real one. Only by objectifying the terror through the distancing effect of media is he able to master the very real fears that these images emblemize. This process of control is also linked to the modernist esthetic problem of what can be known of a work of art, and by extension, what can be known of our experiences in general. Knowledge of a visual event in painting is knowledge of limits; control is derived from this awareness of limits; and limits stem originally from fear of being overwhelmed by all that cannot be known.

He Thought He Was Bleeding.

Goldstein related an interesting story from his youth. As a teenager in Southern California, he was attracted to an older girl who had a wild reputation on the boardwalk of Venice Beach. They became lovers, but there was something about the

way she made love that made Jack suspect his girlfriend might be a transexual. He never knew the whole time they were together if the object of his desire was a natural woman or a surgical one. Of course he never asked (how could one ask?), and the relationship was marked by the anxiety of not knowing whether the girl he was sleeping with was even real. One might tend to sense oneself disappearing over such an uncertainty, especially because you can't know more than you do in your fantasies, and there's no way (outside of art) to control your fantasies.

A Brief Interview

Q: Who are the role models for the persona projected by the work?

A: All of us.

Q: If you could live in any time, what would it be?

A: The future, the far future so I wouldn't have to worry about spontaneity.

Goldstein's films, records, and photo pieces focus an intense concentration on their image-subjects. Objects are placed under the absurd, undifferentiating eye of the camera. It is ironic then that one feels in the films and records that he's not really saying anything about lions, doves, knives, divers; certainly not about burning forests or drowning men. The work isn't saying much really about the things it employs. More important is the idea of choosing something to focus attention on in the first place. This is an anti-formalist attitude played out within an extremely rigid formal-appearing sense of how to present a picture. The sense of pictorial presentation Goldstein uses in his work is in fact partly acquired from training in a formal, minimalist esthetic. But equally instructive is the way television directs and structures

our attention to something in order to render that thing unreal exemplary and possessable in fantasy. The new formalist look of imagistic work seems more connected to the esthetics of television than to the logic of an art historical strategy.

I think this represents a major shift in the way images are used in works of art. The objects or entities used in Goldstein's work have only the emotion read into them, but what's interesting is that this emotion is what we expect them to have in the first place; what happens in the work is congruent with our expectations of how the images would function in our symbolic life if they were allowed to, if they were not restrained by being placed in works of art (culture). Goldstein's work presents these congruencies, these *automaticities*, as being linked to an undercurrent of sadness because they make us worry about something which is supposedly a positive force in life • spontaneity. A relationship that I will only mention here, but which is important to the cultural meaning of Goldstein's methodology, is the



"The Pull," 1976 (detail) Photo Series.



"The Lost Ocean Liner," "The Dying Wind" Sound Effect Series, 45 RPM Records, 1976

one that exists between automaticity (the slip side of the coin of spontaneity) and Fascism. Jack has often said, not completely unseriously, that he considers his work to be Fascistic.

She Wears The Italian Dress With The French Shoes.

A friend related a story of seeing how fruit cocktail was made. All the fruit was bleached and drained of its original taste and color and then the pieces of fruit fiber, all cut to uniform shape were reconstituted with chemicals to look and taste like the fruits they had once been. This is analogous to the methodology of Hollywood, of the entertainment industry: to drain away any real significance and replace it with the representation of the idea of the thing as significant. Goldstein's work is not entertainment; it is art, and as such is poignant because he chooses to work so closely to the edge of the process of reconstitution.

The works take on poignant overtones not because he calls all this to mind, but because he contains it in himself as an artist, somewhat like the miner who almost looks forward to the first signs of black lung. He hastens the connection in the work to some sense of the *end*, and looks for confirmation of the worst in order to escape by means of identification, its inevitability. This reference to catastrophe of dread (The Burning Window, The Burning Forest, A Longer Run, The Jump, Three Felled Trees, A German Shepherd are a few titles of films and records) gives the work a way to be felt. What is interesting about this reference to catastrophe is that it does not deal with the question of accuracy. Images are easier to consume if they are slightly off the mark, that is, less real. It is the way a sense of dread is extracted from the interesection of the adherence to conventions of presentation and the basic inaccuracy of the representations themselves that makes Goldstein's use of images interesting during this time of widespread "return to the image." The works are beautifully made, but Goldstein didn't make them. They are well crafted, but his craft is manipulation. The work establishes the bridge not between the image and the hand of the artist, but between the surface of the record (media) and the heart of the barking dog (feeling).

She Appears To Be Very Beautiful From A Distance.

It is a familiar occurrence in recent art to see an image taken out of context, to see an object isolated on a field of paint which has come to stand for a field of recognition. When something is isolated, it means something else. Take a table out of the kitchen and put it on a canvas painted a solid color and it no longer is a table, it *means* table • it is table pictured. But in Goldstein's work, and I think in the most interesting imagistic work being made, a table isolated on a field is really given to mean: *no meaning for table*, because looking at the picture of the thing as a representation of the meaning of the thing pictured is simply

wishful thinking. Instead we see the image as the thing emptied of meaning; brought about, importantly, by its center stage treatment (spotlight as metaphor for attention). What this implies is that the thing becomes not archetypical, as is often claimed, but theatrical, which is a much more interesting relationship to everyday consciousness. The so-called archetypical images of artists like Jennifer Bartlett, Joel Shapiro, or Denise Green actually prevent, both because of their didacticism and their connection to art history, further immersion in the nature of the relationship we have to the objects depicted. But Goldstein's use of images (and he is not alone in this) allows the image to more fully participate in a metaphorical realm, through the circular process of meaning divorcement, theatricalization (needing only the sketchiest lines for the actors to speak), and meaning re-investment that can come legitimately only through a process of identification of the object with its real use in the life of the mind, that is, with fantasy and emotion. This is primarily a social and critical process, and it echoes a Brechtian methodology. We may actually be approaching in this work the first stages of a new kind of social art derived from a dialectic with culture that is plausibly available to everyone.

This circuitous process is possible because, as a culture, we make objects that are extensions of ourselves, and we look at objects in order to see ourselves extended. By adopting this methodology, Goldstein's work, and that of certain members of his esthetic generation, does much to advance the movement beyond a Johnsian or purely structural concept of meaning in art. In literal modern art, we at best experience the linguistic convention of tableness, but we seldom penetrate the meaning of the decision to make use of the convention - we perceive simply that our perceptions are governed by such conventions. The insight is limited and demonstrative, and as such, impersonal. What the best of the new work accomplishes is to promote identification with an image in a theatrical mode which becomes metaphorical for the way we theatricalize our actions in the world. The shift in sensibility in the newer work is from the merely metonymical to the metaphorical.

She Is Very Beautiful From The Waist Up.

The extreme use of artifice in Goldstein's work and the work of others parallels what literary criticism has dubbed "the rise of the emblematic use of personality"; as if what we seek (identity) is what the configuration of signs in the work suggest. But instead of using the configuration of signs to build a narrative, which would obviate critical integration on the viewer's part, they are crystallized into formations which suggest other, similar signs which have a peculiar character of seeming to signify something but actually refraining to do so. The work, seen in this way, echoes the feeling that we experience life as a series of half-truths. This is the ironic way that art links up with life, through its capacity for meaning removal, and it is also the



"The Jump," 16 mm Animated Color Film, Silent, 1978

basis for art's usefulness. When something has no set meaning, one can more freely use it for the containment of fantasies which extend the sense of self into the world. Re-involvement, derived from partial meaning withdrawal, is in itself a product of paying closer, more natural attention (paradoxically, because it seems so forced) to the *situational* meaning of events. The mentality I'm describing somewhat resembles being in a foreign country and not speaking the language. The culture is all available for your use; you don't have to get involved with whether you're doing things correctly or not. What are for native speakers matters of necessity become for the stranger points of self-invention. If this could be called the sensibility of a new humanism in art, it is a humanism which views the world as essentially unchangeable except through a theatricalization of the terms of our interaction with things and events. It is now possible to be "humanistic," and not necessarily like people.

This work uses as a starting point the conventions of structural or linguistic analysis of the sign systems of daily life, and takes the further step of providing exemplary use, via its participation in the theatrical mode of presentation/attention, for the world of images. One might ask what "use" means in this framework. To be freed, or given the permission to let an estheticized image mingle with the ones that constitute a fantasy is to gain a sense of control over the meaning of one's situation. Meaning in life is linked to esthetic meaning; control is seen as a product of esthetic transformation. That one person's fantasies coincide with those of millions of people is what insures the visibility of the work as art. I said earlier that the catalog of catastrophe in Goldstein's work provides a common psychological access. The strength of the work lies in the faith of its symbols rather than in clearly decipherable propositions. What makes Goldstein's work personal is the distinct sense of discomfort and anxiety with which he moves his images toward that faith, as though it might be overwhelming, or unreal, making his work all the more complex because of his seemingly embracing stance in relation to it.

Biography

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