# PURE PINTER: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SALLE

**ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN**

RPW: Do you feel that there are important areas of issues and perceptions of criticality to read into your work which are simply not being addressed in the discussion around your work? Are there areas that you feel have somehow been misapprehended or insufficiently discussed? It's too big a . . .

DS: Well, you can't expect commentary to keep pace with the work, but let's say that the lag, it's like a rubber band: the slack gets very great and we just take it out. The commentary advances, closes the gap, and the work advances, and there's a big gap. It's chess, or marching, maybe. Well, actually neither. Maybe the work is different in feeling, in tone than it was a couple of years ago.

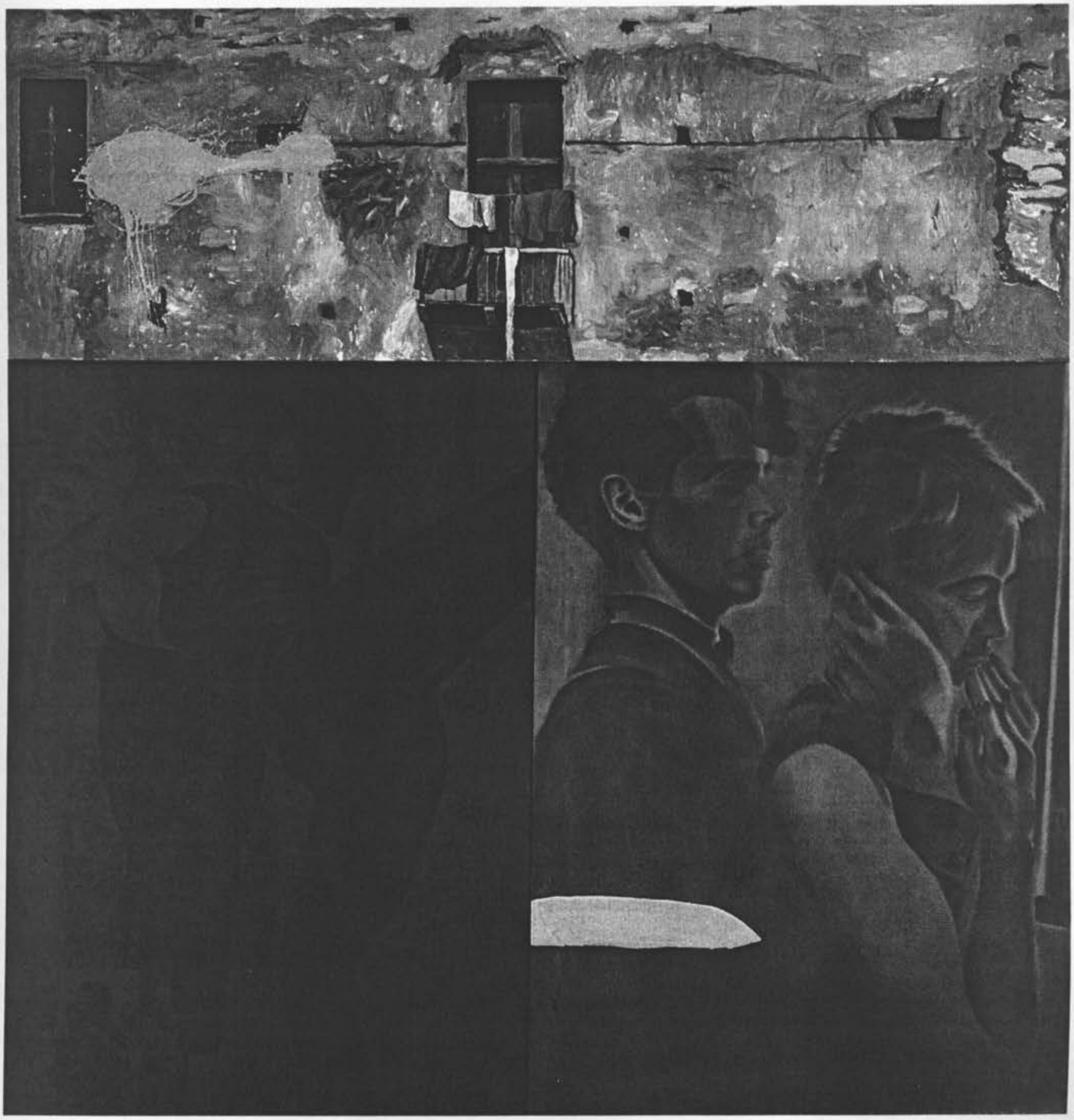
RPW: In what sense?

DS: It seems to be classical.

RPW: Too big a term.

DS: I don't really know what that means; it's just the way it comes to mind.

David Salle, The Farewell Painting, 1985. *Oil and acrylic on canvas, 125 x 120". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.*

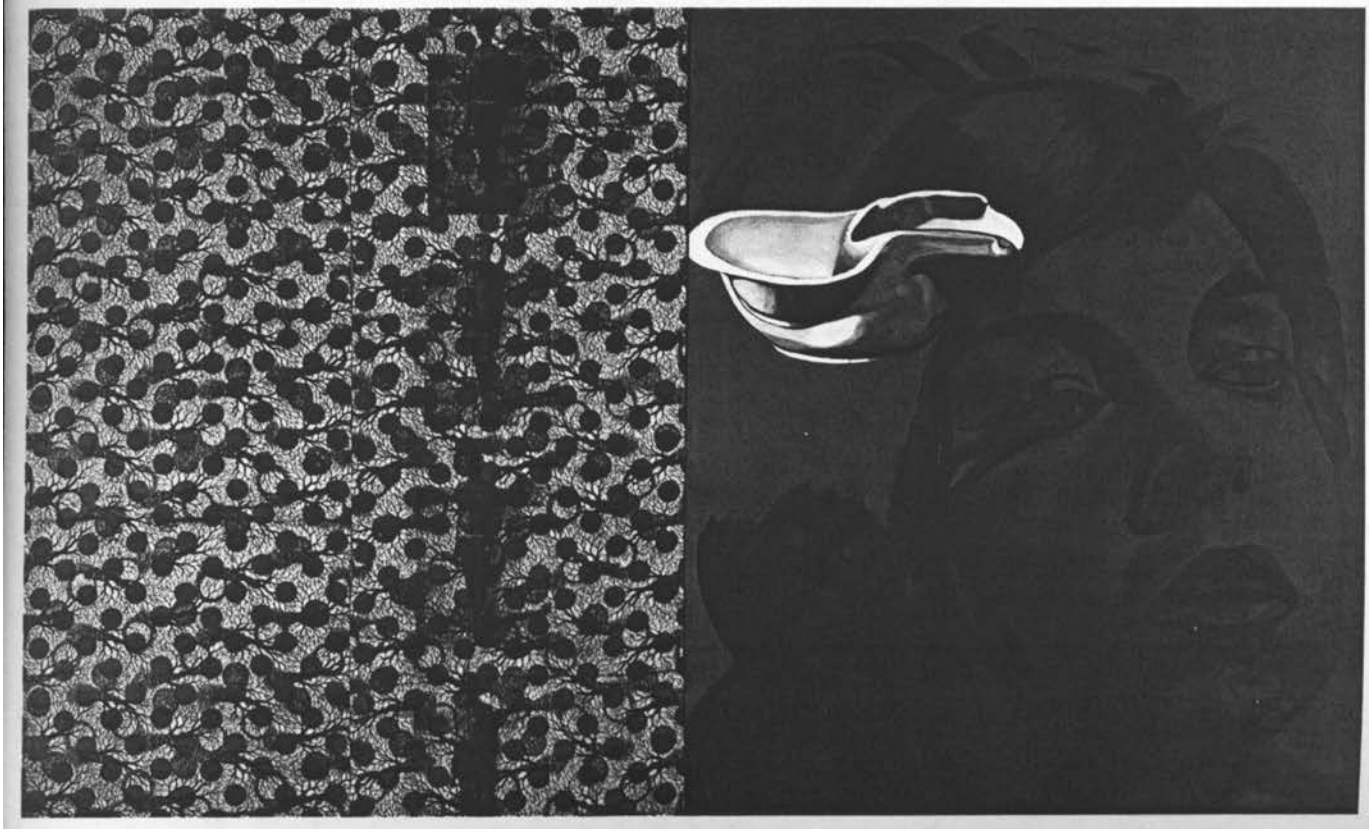




Pincus-Witten, Robert. "Pure Pinter: An Interview with David Salle." *Arts Magazine* Nov. 1985: 78-81.

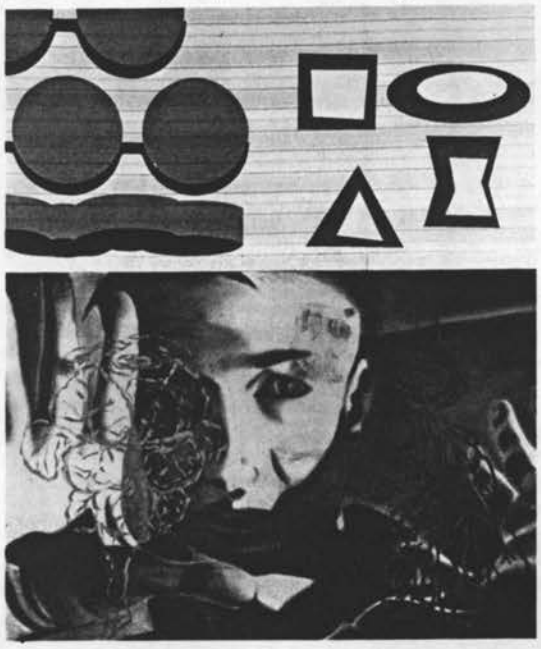
RPW: Could I, may I suggest something?
DS: Yes, of course.
RPW: I don't know that I would use the word classical. Do you mean something like the work is less immediately perceived in its connection to its conceptual origins?
DS: Its so-called origins have always been an area of great mystification. I would say that the work is less immediately perceived in connection to anything else around it.
RPW: You mean, there's nobody working like you.
DS: Right. No one's making work similar to mine, but everyone says that, or thinks it, and it's probable that it's the way this will be misread.
RPW: But there are devices, pictorial, small, single ...
DS: Oh, sure, devices.
RPW: ... devices out there in the world which, in fact, people are making a good deal of ...
DS: Dozens.
RPW: They're making rather doubtful claims even. In a certain sense aspects of P&D [pattern and decoration] are now being legitimized through the critical issues embodied in your work as a way of giving muscle tone to ...
DS: Sure. Sure.
RPW: ... aspects of P&D ... at the Whitney.
DS ... an accident ... overlap things, images ...
RPW: Yes, it's that sort of thing.
DS: But there is a murky, misunderstood area—the notion of popular culture. It's assumed my work is a commentary on popular culture, you know. For years I have been saying the opposite. At least in my mind, my work has absolutely nothing to do with popular culture. Not only does it have nothing to do with popular culture in any kind of didactic, deliberate way, it simply doesn't have popular culture on its mind.
RPW: Is it because what is presented is not a reconstruction of popular iconography, but in fact is an aesthetic and autonomous abstract experience, which is, which has always been available to "an elite," but never been available to popular culture?
DS: Something like that. But who it is available to is less interesting, although connected, to what is being made available.
RPW: It's a kind of false signal, but what you're really getting is some kind of eternal, formal ...
DS: Yes.
RPW: I'm beginning to see what you mean. One can look at your paintings and isolate out recognizable references to popular culture, while, in fact, one is dealing in the creation of an authentic and isolated aesthetic world.
DS: Okay.
RPW: Something like that.
DS: Something like that. The other thing is that, within that idea, there are very few real references in the work; and the references are not to popular culture or to art, but perhaps to art-like things. I think there's confusion between an image that comes from somewhere and a reference. I don't think of things as references unless they're really something referring to something else. I can think of a few references in my work, but they seem to be rampant for others. That discrepancy itself should tell us something.
RPW: You're not speaking of the indexicality of the work in terms of some sort of popular deconstruction?
DS: I think that the way to look at my work is some other way.
RPW: Can I suggest ...
DS: Yes.
RPW: The information that one picks up, the references to art and references to the movies, what-have-you, are emblematic relationships; and an emblematic relationship to the movies as distinct from a lived relationship to them. Let's say that they are false clues as distinct from specific clues. If they were specific clues one might be able to construct a narrative layering in your paintings, whereas the lack of specificity in the clue means that one really cannot make a narrative out of your pictures.
DS: Right. There's no narrative. There really is none; there isn't one.
RPW: There's no story.
DS: Right. None at all.
RPW: You see, my way of thinking keys into your notion of the autonomy of the work—its abstractness.

David Salle, Salt Banners, 1985. *Oil and acrylic on canvas and fabric, 98 x 162". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.*



DS: I think about a couple of different things which appear, which have lived out their lives in the arena of popular culture, but I don't think of them as popular. One is a comedy, the other is pornography. Those are two things that are important to me . . . for themselves. Not as a comment on the society that produces them, but in their own mechanistic ways, you know, how they operate.
RPW: In a detached mechanistic way, I think that's what I was saying when I was saying emblematic . . .
DS: Yes?
RPW: But emblematic suggests that it's an index, that it is an emblem of something.
DS: I would say mechanistic.
RPW: Mechanistic is better than emblematic. So, you know you have, say, the mechanism of comedy, the mechanism of eroticism, even pornography . . .
DS: Yes.
RPW: The art references are largely, it seems to me, references to ironic detachment. The movies would be another mechanism.
DS: But the art mechanisms are always about one thing. About how an image is simultaneously some molecules in paint that congeal in certain patterns which at a certain distance appear recognizable as a painting. Are recognized as a painting.
RPW: That's an argument for pure painting somehow.
DS: No, it's an image of reciprocity. There is no such thing as pure painting—or, rather, it's just uninteresting painting; you know, the French avant-garde.
RPW: Which French avant-garde—the early modernists, like Picasso, Matisse?
DS: Do I strike you as a Picasso cultist? No, like Manet.
RPW: Oh, like the 1860s, the 1870s.
DS: Yes, early.
RPW: The Manet-Monet.
DS: The Manet-Monet. The wavering. You know, the just-barely-held-together nature of Manet's paint. Even the linguistic convention is interesting: "his paint." The fact that the paintings were always—I mean not necessarily to our standards but according to the standards by which they were painted—in danger of falling apart.
RPW: You mean, falling apart as an image that coheres?
DS: Yes. The ambiguity in how the image is contextualized . . .
RPW: Contextualized not socially, contextualized on the canvas, you mean.
DS: On the canvas, but also through the canvas to reach its social dislocation. I think that's art, I mean that *is* art, isn't it?

DS: Basically, there is the reciprocity between the thing and how the thing's represented, but more specifically, the slippery, the congealing into something readable at the same time that it's slipping away or draining away. This is timeless. It's the poignancy at the heart of what I mean by classicism: the draining away of recognition or of meaning, even as you look at it, and even as you are using your eyes to focus the marks into an image. It's like an alternating current. It happens very fast. You have a very fast rhythm.
RPW: Can I just follow that through and try to isolate out the conversation to a slightly absurd simplification . . .
DS: Well, let me just add something else. One thing which was on my mind from before is the mechanism of pornography. Pornography is about representing—problems of representation—and very exciting because it takes place on a two-dimensional surface, I mean, photographic pornography, or . . . drawn pornography as opposed to literary pornography.
RPW: I think it's virtually to equate visual pornography as equal to verbal pornography . . .
DS: Yes.
RPW: It's virtually impossible for me to imagine pornography in a state other than photographic.
DS: Yes, I think that . . .
RPW: There is, there's something about . . .
DS: . . . isn't that perhaps why photography was invented?
RPW: . . . that's what Nicephore Niepce was about. He wanted to get the barn *and* the pussy . . .
DS: I mean, why else would they have invented it?
RPW: . . . from Daguerre on, anyway.
DS: Can you think of a better use of it, of photography?
RPW: Well, no. I think that the problem—if there is such a condition, if there is such a class of meaning, or a class of objects, that embodies a meaning that was recognized as pornographic—is that class of objects in modern culture seems to be a class of objects occupied by things which are photographs.
DS: The great thing about pornography is that something was photographed. This thing you're seeing is not just what you're seeing; it's that what you're seeing was photographed. That's the compelling . . .
RPW: Yes, and we know how photography works and we know that somebody did it and another person . . .
DS: Yes, of course, and drawing, you know, is absolutely . . . that's why drawing is just nowhere. There is Egon Schiele, for example, but in the particular non-sentimental eroticism of pornography that we're talking about, the "givenness" of it is so much more confounding than any erotic image drawn . . . but to make a painting that has about it that feeling that you get from pornography The knowledge that this was, this was actually, seen—by someone.
RPW: Clearly your works must be liberated from the false charge of pornography. If not by virtue of the image, then by virtue of the way that image is realized. What I'm trying to say is: the very fact that the image is painted means that it cannot be charged with the condition of pornography.
DS: Why do you say that?
RPW: Because we just had agreed that pornography, if it exists, exists in a class which is photographic.
DS: We made an aphorism, not a syllogism. Or, rather, the syllogism is meant to be defeated by my painting. I don't think people are necessarily wildly hysterical or prejudiced or blue-noses or Baptists who take my works to be the real thing.
RPW: People will say that the work is pornographic, but in fact they're trying to locate it in the realm of moral indictment.
DS: Well, what they're saying is that those images have a peculiar relation to the world, because they don't have the same neutrality as they believe other painted images have.
RPW: Yes, but I think that they have also . . . either classicism, or autonomy, or whatever that stuff is.
DS: Exactly. Those are the two poles.
RPW: What are?
DS: Classicism and pornography.
RPW: If those are the two poles . . . your polarity argument, pornography and classicism, is part of this stuff you were talking about in the Manet/Monet, when the molecules sort of congeal, but then they slip away, decompose somehow.



David Salle, Low Cost Color Numbers, 1985. *Oil on canvas, 102 x 84". Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.*

DS: Yes, the gravitational attraction to each other diminishes and they ...
RPW: ... they're somehow loosened in a non-magnetic environment.
DS: Right. Somebody pulls the plug on the magnet.
RPW: You know, there are millions, I say there are millions, in the degree that you have a repertoire of images that you constantly appeal to, as a way perhaps just to paint. I mean, that may be just to keep the painting going, so you don't have to constantly rely on the literal sensation of the motif deeply observed; so that you have a repertoire that you, that this is what you paint. You paint and the repertoire enlarges or diminishes, depending upon the year or the month or the day. The point I was trying to make was that this repertoire doesn't only include images which are conventionally assigned to pornography. There are very highly neutral ones, too.
DS: Oh, yes, highly neutral. But it's really the point that there is a repertoire of images that I can pick from, some of which happen to be offensive to some people. All of the images—the way they are realized and the way they are combined—is all part of knowing what kind of pictures I want to make and that it has nothing to do, really, with *taking anything from anywhere.*
RPW: What you're saying means that we're beginning to speak about the work actually possessing an aesthetic condition. We're commodifying the object and we're mythifying the maker. Those two myths are anathema to broad sectors of the intellectual public.
DS: Oh, well.
RPW: Well, that's how it is. I mean I've certainly participated in that mechanism because I believe in the mechanism.

DS: I have a feeling that there's something that can be said that's more objective, that is, would be parallel to, although completely different from in substance and tone ... the discussion of work from the '60s and '70s. I found it intellectually dishonest that certain kinds of work could be discussed in a, you know, rational way; but that, for some reason, that kind of relationship to culture is denied my work which only shows the arbitrariness of that construct to begin with. That sounded kind of shrill. How did we get started on ...
RPW: Don't get paranoid. I feel very secure in recognizing you as a fine painter and that your paintings maintain attitudes inherited from the '60s and '70s. Minimalism and conceptualism were perceived as tools, for example. That said simply acknowledges developmental origins, but does not keep you locked into a style, does not academize you. What you are saying now is that you are feeling more congenial to the image of the painting, not as maintaining the criticality that was germane to minimalism, but as an object which enjoys the perks.
DS: No, I didn't say that. I said that there is a claim to objectivity (as if that is even the desired state) that this other kind of work makes, which includes, which has implicit in it, a notion of quality. That self-conferred status is not extended to other work, which is a bias. An artist may have to do something very different-seeming to establish a relationship to his time parallel to one ratified for an earlier generation by time. There was an assumption, all through the '60s and '70s, that certain artists, and certain people who supported certain artists, were *good.* You get it in the tone of voice that's used even by dealers. (Of course, dealers are like method actors—they fall into the emotive tone of the art they're dealing; it's their object memory.) The tone is one of moral superiority.
RPW: You found it oppressive.
DS: Yes, but I also found it extremely interesting.
RPW: I can remember terrible experiences; with your sense of integrity, you're sort of describing a gross process of reactive history of certain moments of your life. I remember how oppressed I used to be—and I'm a critic—when I would look at works that I knew were empty, boldly empty work, I mean, empty art, and I woud be told that Clem liked it. I remember that it steeled me against it.
DS: So, what are we saying?
RPW: Maybe everything is significant in your work now, and it may be a stupendous effort to resist your work being made conventional; you're going to deny, more and more, the information and sources that were available to you before, or early on.
DS: Oh, you're saying I'm interested in a certain period because it's so out?
RPW: Yes, not just that. Like it's one thing to talk about Picabia's transparencies, as everybody does, but now let's look at Picabia.
DS: I feel like a man explaining what he was doing at the scene of a crime. Well, yes, actually we were a tiny bit interested in the ghastly murder. I never really talked about Picabia except as a kind of passive-aggressive oddball. The way in which I related to Picabia has not been understood at all, because no one has described the peculiar character, I would say doomed character, of his late realist paintings. It's really about night becoming day; it's about something being the opposite of what it appears to be, but looking exactly like what it appears to be. It could have been anybody. I mean, it just happened that he did something that was parallel or interesting or similarly hard to place in terms of structure of intent. My work never had anything to do with Picabia stylistically. It should be so obvious. It would be like using a double negative. If I were interested in getting to Picabia-*feeling*, I couldn't use Picabia-means *now.*
RPW: And what about the fact that he painted overlapped paintings?
DS: The cross-examination. They never interested me. They look like old paintings to me. It's the late kitsch paintings that cast a spell. What I think is interesting about late Picabia is simply subject matter.
RPW: But the transparencies have subject matter, too.
DS: But not interesting subject matter as choices of subject matter. No, nudes and bulls, you know, nudes and statues and Greek; I mean just really kinky ... emblematic.
RPW: Emblematic?
DS: Along the path from kitsch to emblematic lies beauty of a liberating sort.
RPW: What else is kinky and emblematic?
DS: There are, there were, many examples to be found in student art, and the point is that art like that usually doesn't survive. That's what's interesting about it. I don't see it any longer.
RPW: I see lots of it, all over the country, you know, all of the time.
DS: I don't see it any more.
RPW: You mean you think that everybody's no longer making student art?
DS: No, people are making student art, but I don't see the student art participating in this kind of self-destructive, self-righteous kind of cry-baby, bad-person sensibility. Why am I talking about this?
RPW: I see it all over! One of the central features of student art is that it is identified as significant through its virtually immediate appropriation of last year's avant-garde, which is a very important achievement for a student.
DS: Well, that's not the student I'm talking about. The central dadaists, the kamikaze self-haters, do-anything-for-art types. When I was in school ... [there] was a friend of mine who made films, Chris Langdon.
RPW: I don't know him.
DS: Of course you don't. He transformed himself into a Cajun squeezebox player. But back then his films were hilariously funny, they were outrageously funny, but some people didn't think so. Some people thought they were offensive. He made a film called "The Last Interview with Pasolini" and it was shown at the old Artists Space. Naturally with that title they sold out the house. The image was a man seen from behind; you couldn't see his face, actually, you just saw his arm and shadows of his head. This guy, a friend of ours who was also very funny, played the interviewer; he asked these incredibly obnoxious questions in a flat nasal voice, like: "Mr. Pasolini, it has been said that your audience is the young. Do you feel that you are addressing the youth of today?" etc. A very complicatedly accented kind of voice answered in fake Italian—Italian doubletalk, just to talk—and the interviewer would nod his head as if in rapturous communication. This goes on for about 45 minutes and then words would be inserted in the text such as 'cowboys' and 'pussy' and things like that; the interviewer would just smile and go on asking absurd questions.

People were so offended by this that they got up and walked out, which in the New York underground is *never done.* People will sit through the most atrocious *dreck* for hours on end and take it straight; but in this instance, people got up and stormed out and slammed the door and threw their chairs. He had blasphemed. He really was a very bad child. Bad children don't survive as artists, but when they do, they're interesting to me. Or were. ...