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Jonathan Lasker's Dramatis Personae

After attending Queens College for less than a year in the late 1960s, Jonathan Lasker quit school to play bass guitar and blues harmonica with rock bands. At age twenty-two this quest took him to Europe for four years, first to England, where he worked with a couple of short-lived groups, and then to Germany, where he was employed intermittently as a longshoreman and a house painter. He then came to grips with what he calls his "lack of success as a musician" and decided to maximize his strengths, which included a long-term fascination with art, coupled with "excellent eye-hand coordination," by becoming a painter.¹ He returned to New York, where he became an assistant buyer for an organization that pre-bought items for discount chains and enrolled in night courses at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) from 1975 to 1977. Toward the end of his schooling there, Lasker took courses with Minimalist David Smythe and made collages inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's work. From other SVA students, he learned that the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (CalArts) had an excellent program in studio art. He applied and was accepted there, without realizing the enormous challenges that faced any painter venturing into this bastion of West Coast Conceptualism.

Well funded by Disney Studios in the 1960s, CalArts was able to bankroll a cutting-edge arts program that could boast such Happenings, Fluxus, and Conceptual

artists as Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, John Baldessari, Michael Asher, and Douglas Huebler. The school was also heir to a relatively recent California Neo-Dadaist tradition that curator Walter Hopps inaugurated in 1963 when he staged a full-scale, highly celebrated Marcel Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art. The primary conduits between this particular exhibition and the Institute's pedagogy were the Californians Baldessari and Asher. Lasker called the latter "the Grand Inquisitor against painting," since he assumed personal responsibility for eradicating the last vestiges of modernist sentiments in students' works. Less programmatic in his teaching, New Yorker Douglas Huebler was also more open to traditional painting, as certainly were such guest instructors as New Image painter Susan Rothenberg and Pop artist Richard Artschwager, who were both teaching during the spring and fall of 1977, when Lasker was a student at CalArts.

Even with their sympathetic approach, Lasker was still encouraged, during his brief time at the school, to put together a convincing response to Conceptual art's derogation of painting. This effort has led to a body of palmary work that represents a major contribution to the dialogue of late twentieth-century art at a time when painting was being assailed as irrelevant and overly precious. The urgency of this type of response became the

¹ Robert Hobbs, "Interview with Jonathan Lasker," New York City, February 12, 2003, unpublished interview. Other references to Lasker's early years and interests are from statements made by the artist during this interview.

subject of public discussion only a few years after Lasker had already surmounted a number of painting's most noted limitations. The periodical *October* published Craig Owens's "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" in 1980 and Douglas Crimp's "The End of Painting" the following year.² *Artforum* dedicated space to Thomas Lawson's highly topical "Last Exit: Painting" during this same time.³ The first article built a convincing case for the relevancy of photo-based art; the second presented Daniel Buren's painting as among the most advanced work because of its contextual orientation; and the third proposed that painting's continued viability had been won by a few individuals, including its author, as a result of a desperate need to combat vehement assaults from all sides. Lawson predicted that painting would succeed because it was the most subversive and ironic way of working after a decade of Conceptual art's hegemony. Although his overall remarks did not apply to Lasker, who had characterized direct pastiche and blatant irony as far too easy routes, the following statement in "Last Exit: Painting" could be considered a particularly apt retrospective insight into his modus operandi: "But by resorting to subterfuge, using an unsuspecting vehicle as camouflage, the radical artist can manipulate the viewer's faith to dislodge his or her certainty. The intention of that artist must therefore be to unsettle conventional thought from within, to cast doubt on the normalized perception of the 'natural,' by destabilizing the means used to represent it, even in the knowledge that this, too, must ultimately lead to certain defeat. ... More compelling, because more perverse, is the idea of tackling the problem with what appears to be the least suitable vehicle available, painting. It is perfect camouflage, and it must be remembered that Picasso considered Cubism and camouflage to be one and the same, a device of misrepresentation, a deconstructive tool designed to undermine the certainty of appearances. The appropriation of painting as a subversive method allows one to place critical

aesthetic activity at the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble. For, as too many conceptual artists discovered, art made on the peripheries of the market remains marginal."⁴

Although Lawson takes great liberties with time when he links Picasso's Cubism with Derrida's deconstruction, his point about the potential radicalness of painting is apropos, since it advocates fomenting a revolution from within the most normative and unsuspected realm of the art world, painting. And this is the tactic that Lasker in fact employed when he chose to rebut his teachers and peers at CalArts, using painting as both his chief weapon and rhetorical platform. This essay will look at the beginnings of this carefully considered rebuttal with the express intention of employing it to illuminate crucial aspects of Lasker's overall oeuvre.

Jonathan Lasker was not the only remarkable painter to come out of the CalArts program. Eric Fischl and David Salle preceded him by a few years, and the sometime painter Mike Kelley was a classmate. But among his generation, he is the only one to formulate in abstract painterly terms a clear response to Conceptual art's provocations. In fact, outside Great Britain's Art & Language members, who later found painting to be a way to extend their special brand of Conceptual art, Lasker is one of the few late twentieth-century artists to discover a feasible way to maintain a viable painterly position without affiliating it with either modernism or Conceptualism.

In the 1960s and 1970s painting had served New York Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth as a convenient straw figure in his ongoing campaign to legitimize his new way of working. This new mode replaced the inherited assumption of art's long-heralded presence, i.e., its ontology, with a keen interest in its epistemology. Partially inherited from Duchamp, this attitude was applied even more concertedly against art's residual materiality than this Dadaist figure had anticipated, so that its status as an object was held suspect even though it was never entirely un-

² Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, no. 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 67–86, and no. 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 59–80; rpt. in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, in association with David R. Godine, Boston, 1984), pp. 203–35. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 69–86.

³ Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981), pp. 40–47; rpt. in Wallis, *Art After Modernism*.

⁴ Lawson in Wallis, pp. 162–63.

dermined. Kosuth argued that painters were condemned to be mere artisans because at the outset they had accepted this medium as a given category without questioning its means and limits. Instead of making “art investigations”—Kosuth’s term for his own work—painters were content with its “presentation” and became decorators of “naïve art forms” rather than philosophers.⁵ Kosuth elaborates on the rigors of Conceptual art, which is able to stratify boundaries by working both within as well as outside the limits of such established media as painting: “Rather than presenting an inward-turning world, as painting had, I saw this new work doing quite the opposite: it began the process of looking *outward*, making the *context* important. I began to realize that the issue for art was to examine its context, and in the process one would be investigating meaning, and ultimately, reality. An important point then, about so-called ‘minimal art,’ was that it was neither painting nor sculpture, but simply art.”⁶

Crucial to Kosuth’s overarching program was the need for artists to look specifically and categorically, so the persuasive rhetoric and sheer sensuousness of a given medium would not seduce them into becoming its mere adjuncts. The point was to avoid becoming accustomed to a given material so that it would not lull one, like a drug, with its comforting and predictable results. According to Kosuth, artists needed to handle their chosen media analytically, rationally, and distantly so that the resultant work would be about art’s means, as well as its limits for expressing ideas, and not a surrogate for the artist’s unique and altogether bourgeois individuality.

Kosuth’s writings and those of contemporaries like Sol LeWitt assumed the force of orthodoxy by the mid-1970s. For such artists as Asher and Baldessari this reasoning that enhanced artistic thought to the detriment of the attendant skills needed to realize it formed the centerpiece of CalArts pedagogy. The son of Betty Asher, a renowned Los Angeles County Museum curator and collector, Michael Asher made the museum’s context his

special purview by showing how it affects the way that art is perceived. In the fall of 1977, for example, he persuaded the staff of three neighboring institutions—the Fort Worth Art Museum, the Amon Carter, and the Kimbell—to use for a three-week period the same parking lot for all their service and staff vehicles. His tactic resulted in new acquaintances and meaningful daily interactions between the staff of the three museums. In addition, he noted: “Some of the staff members informed me that they had changed their habit of entering or leaving the building ... and that by using the main entrance they found they were paying more attention to the presence of the collection in the museum. One curator, for example, told me that she normally entered the exhibition area only on those occasions when she had curated the exhibition herself, whereas now she passed through the exhibition area regularly before entering her office. Some of the staff members also said that they had hardly ever taken the time to notice what the main entrance of the museum looked like.”⁷

If art is involved with changing perception, Asher’s work can be called art, even though the art object per se is pared down to photographed aerial views of the three museums and their parking facilities, together with the artist’s description of the project. In consideration of the radical nature of this work, one can see how such an artist as Asher would find the entire category of painting *retardataire* and would be more prone to proselytizing the merits of his position than working with aspirant painters like Lasker to discover a new and unproblematic way to query their mode of working.

During Lasker’s year at CalArts, John Baldessari, one of the other reigning Conceptual artists, who was renowned for his “post-studio” class, was on the verge of creating a series of works that would become emblematic for late seventies and eighties Neo-Conceptual artists like Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Barbara Kruger, among others, whose art was predicated on the creation

⁵ Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 37 and 91. The first statement is from “Introductory Note to *Art–Language* by the American Editor,” 1970, and the second is from an unpublished lecture delivered to art students in 1971 at the University at Chile, Santiago; Cleveland Art Institute; and Coventry College of Art, Coventry, England. Although this lecture was not published, it presents in a concise form Kosuth’s ideas that were widely available elsewhere. It is cited here because of its precision.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷ Michael Asher, “October 9–November 20, 1977, Fort Worth Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas,” in Michael Asher and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (Halifax and Los Angeles: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1983), p. 187.

of elaborate theoretical programs as cogent frames through which their work would accrue meaning. Consisting of photographs made every ten minutes of whatever image happened to appear on the screen of his TV, which he then connected with the first word to come to mind, Baldessari's *Blasted Allegories* were made the year after Lasker's departure from CalArts. The title was inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1854 statement in which the author decried his own memory lapses regarding some of the morals for which his narratives had become celebrated: "Upon my honor, I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories; but I remember that I always had a meaning—or, at least, thought I had."

The assertion served Baldessari's goals well since it established a precedent for divorcing artists from the outcome of their statements and transferred responsibility for creating meaning to viewers, who were encouraged to weave together, in this particular case, sets of visual and verbal non sequiturs into their own syntagmatic chains. Comprising an allegory by virtue of being a two-tiered arrangement of images and words in which one type of information appears to offer an interpretation of the other, this series of linked representations is almost belligerently conceptual and postmodern, since it emphasizes art's categorical nature and compels viewers to participate. The work became a leitmotif for the entire era when Owens's "The Allegorical Impulse" was published two years later. Subsequently, Baldessari's epithet became the title for a 1989 anthology of contemporary artists' writings that Brian Wallis edited for the New Museum.⁸

Although Lasker was framing his painterly response to Conceptual art's proscriptions prior to Baldessari's series and, in fact, had met with the artist only once during his time at CalArts, he was working within some of the same intellectual parameters as Baldessari. These ideas comprised the school's overall conceptual universe, even though Lasker was approaching them from the dia-

metrically opposite point of view of painting. As he later said to critic and curator Francesco Bonami, "CalArts at that time was extremely hostile to painting. This adversity strengthened me as a painter."⁹ In retrospect, one can say this adversity was constituted by an irascible and disaffected audience of professors and students who would have to be won over to painting in a distinctly new way if Lasker were to succeed. By internalizing this audience and responding to its reservations about painting, Lasker opened the medium to new opportunities. He took modernism's shopworn verities—particularly its twofold emphases on the mechanics of seeing as part of its subject matter—and redirected them to become a distinctly new means of thinking about painting palpably and pictorially in ways reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. As Lasker wrote: "Painting on the one hand brings you back to physical reality, the actual space we all inhabit. The thick oil paint, the bidimensionality of the surface constantly brings you back to where you are physically. They are real things in the real world and they are happening in front of you. But at the same time the imagery refers to other things, gives you pictures, triggers the imagination, the memory of something, and creates a fantasy. ... They do deal with physical reality and illusion simultaneously ... whereas painting gives you the body as well. Your own body."¹⁰

The first challenge facing Lasker was the need to find a way to paint without being seduced by this art form, thus becoming its critic rather than its promoter. This formidable task depended on maintaining a distance from the material so that his work would constitute a categorical assessment of it rather than a mere enumeration of its delights. This does not mean that he was either antagonistic or hostile to painting, since he has never attempted to break it down and has been more concerned with expanding its conditions. It also does not mean that his philosophic orientation to painting prevented him from enjoying it. Considered in retrospect by using the works

⁸ Brian Wallis, *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists* (New York and Cambridge: New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1989).

⁹ Francesco Bonami, "Jonathan Lasker: Meaning Can Happen," *Flash Art* 27, no. 176 (May–June 1994), p. 95.

¹⁰ Ann Hindry, "Interview with Jonathan Lasker: Painting, Impersonality, Critique," *Art Press*, no. 23 (December 1997), p. 22.

themselves as key evidence, it is clear that Lasker rethought the ontological/epistemological polarity of Conceptual art. In his art, epistemology becomes less a separate and alternative category, as it does with the Conceptual artists, and more a means for assessing the type of ontology art is capable of affirming. In the following statement by Lasker, epistemology is equated with discourse:

“For me, abstract painting finished with the black paintings of Frank Stella. The goal of a modern painting, which represented nothing but its own pure form, had been attained. When I began working, my objective was to find a way to make a painting discursive, rather than monotopical. I also wanted it to be discursive on its own terms, rather than in literary terms. ... To me, this existential objecthood was now ready to be depicted as subject matter ... a poetics of painting. A poetics which could also embrace broad topics, such a memory and presence, materiality and transcendence, and the flattening of high and low culture.”¹¹

In other words, an analysis of art’s mode of indirect communication, its “poetics,” according to Lasker, continues to leave space for its constituting a special type of being without undermining it, particularly for viewers who are accustomed to regarding painting as an elevated form of discourse with transcendent effects and who often provide this motivation themselves.¹²

Lasker began this process by taking advantage of the last vestiges of modernism still on the horizon. Known variously as Pattern and Decoration, New Decoration, and, more simply, P&D, this predominantly seventies movement, which began in 1970 in San Diego before being transplanted to New York the following year, was primarily the brainchild of feminist painter Miriam Schapiro, who subsequently worked with Robert Zakanitch, a one-time Minimalist. Bolstered by feminist strategies and Third World (craft) agendas, P&D attempted to revive the Matissean decorative origins of modern art, albeit

with ersatz patterned fabrics, women’s work, and wallpaper designs. Its strength resided in its quest to reconfigure popular culture as the subject of high art; its weakness circulated around its wholehearted campaign for a kitsch sensibility. P&D had the distinct advantage of distancing Lasker from his art: its subscription to kitsch represented a viable subject matter for him because of its ubiquity, not its eccentricity, thus emphasizing his populist leanings rather than any idiosyncratic preferences in which he might be indulging. Once Lasker viewed art in terms of overlapping patterns, he in effect had conventionalized it. At the same time, his use of patterns partially deflected his painterly notations away from being mere Abstract Expressionist seismographs of his own feelings so that they might become more straightforward and noncommittal registrations of art’s effects.

In this way his patterned works assumed some of the rigor of Minimalist art, since they declared at the outset their physicality as painted designs and sets of discrete and repeated signs, troweled, brushed, and scumbled on the surface of his paintings. But differing from such Minimalist artists as Robert Ryman, Lasker makes images that are intended to be both literal and figurative. In addition, the differential between received ideas in popular culture and the artist’s effort to reproduce them by hand has produced in Lasker’s work a discernible gap between concept and result that is inherently allegorical, i.e., metaphorical in terms of a broader ideational scheme. In this situation, one artistic mode critiques the other, and neither his allusions to popular culture nor the hand-wrought facture used to render them can boast having the upper hand when presented in tandem.

Moreover, these paintings look like physical objects and mediated depictions, so that modern art’s two-fold presentational and representational scheme to self-reflexively depict its medium while delineating its contents is bifurcated, and modernism’s synthesis devolves into two competing views. These alternatives resemble more the

¹¹ Jonathan Lasker, “After Abstraction,” in Wilfried Dickhoff, *What It Is* (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1986), n. p.

¹² Yoko Ono’s work, in fact, is predicated on the need for viewers to activate the work. Her 1963 *Fly* is both a noun and a verb, a title and an imperative for the viewer to provide whatever transcendental feelings occur in the work.

old visual conundrum of seeing the same schematic drawing as either a rabbit or a duck but never the two simultaneously than it does a modernist integrated scheme. In this respect it differs markedly from the overlapping strategies of realism and abstraction that can be perceived simultaneously in the work of David Reed, one of his contemporaries.

Differentiating Lasker's conceptual alternatives from modernism's integrated view is an important point that needs to be made if his truly innovative critique of modernism is to be understood. It requires a slight diversion from the topic at hand in order to underscore the enormous qualitative difference that his work enacts. This difference can be readily demonstrated by recalling a particularly stirring instance of criticism that re-enacts modernism's double-voiced emphasis on depicting both its means and subject matter. Early in the twentieth century, German critic Julius Meier-Graefe analogized Monet's Impressionist paint strokes as flower petals, with the metaphoric goal of associating their natural beauty as well as their pungent scent with the scene they picture. He writes: "Monet's painting resembles a kind of flower which we can hardly imagine to have existed before our times: the chrysanthemum. He paints forms akin to their clusters of sinuous, slender-tongued petals, yellow without, red within; to their huge, snow-white ruffles, fit wear for a Pierrot; to their ragged golden heads, with thread-like reflexed plumes. We recall this flower-like quality when we talk of his colour, or pronounce him a landscape painter or a naturalist. In reality he is a great decorator, who is not afraid to show the means by which he gets his effects."¹³

One can imagine that in his effort to discover an empathetic metaphor capable of transcending the limits of the black-and-white illustrations illuminating his text, Meier-Graefe created verbal equivalences for the integral syntheses constituting Monet's work. This self-enclosed whole differs significantly from the postmodern and phenomenological alternatives of Lasker's art that present

painting, depending on one's view of it, as either a physical object or abstracted elements depicted on a shallow stage. In doing so, Lasker breaks down modernist unity: no longer is one solely a captive of art's magical and transcendent spell, for the work changes with the viewer, and escape routes are provided for viewers to jump over boundaries by looking at painting as both a mental construct and a decorative conceit.

This dialectic between seeing painting as either an object or a depiction, which he has termed "the dichotomy between actual and depicted space in painting," comprises Lasker's concerted response to the Conceptual injunction to make art a self-critical proposition about itself instead of simply luxuriating in painting's ability to become a decorative confection.¹⁴ In the 1990s Lasker invests the obverse of this reasoning with cool aplomb when he dramatizes the perversity of paint as the icing on art's metaphoric cake. He achieves an epistemological understanding of its highly artificial nature when he exaggerates the materiality of his paint to the point that it constitutes a high relief. But to return to 1977, when he was beginning to formulate the basic terms of his painterly style, Lasker hit on the idea of a series of positive/negative spatial interplays. These interlocking polarities are particularly congenial to his nature, since he tends to think dialectically, preferring to see the same elements from reverse perspectives. In such works as *Moody Room*, 1977 (ill. p. 71), and *Halloween*, 1981, we can see that foreground and background have switched places. As Lasker later noted: "The early pictures were pretty flat. They had a pattern background and I would overlay a figure on top of that ground. At first, these figures were like painterly white shapes with black lines painted off register against them, on top of a pattern background. It was going from positive to negative. The background, normally negative, was the most active element whereas the figure was negative because it was in black and white. I would thus neutralize the figure and the ground, make them equivalent.

¹³ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, trans. Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, vol. I (New York: Arno Press, 1968, rpt.), p. 306.

¹⁴ Elaine King, "Interview with Jonathan Lasker," in *Abstraction Abstraction* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery, 1986), p. 30.

Later on, I realized that that was not so essential. What was essential was the fact that the background, the pattern, was about one type of visual language and then the foreground, the figure, was about a different type of visual language. It created an interesting dialogue. You were given a physical process that you could easily read and at the same time you were also dealing with an image. So you were confronted with something both literal and metaphorical. For me, that was the way to re-engage imagery: retain literality while being also metaphorical.”¹⁵

In such pieces, backgrounds become foregrounds, and the slightly abstract yet still figurative images that emerge from them seem to be poetic and painterly animations of the canvas’s original pristine surface. Reborn as victorious dramatis personae, they take possession of the painting at its conclusion. In this way its beginning is metaphorically re-inscribed in its conclusion, and the cyclical nature of creation is thematized. On another occasion Lasker analogized his analytic approach as an “image kit”: “I often think of my paintings as a form of image kit or perhaps as jigsaw puzzles, which offer components of paintings as clues pointing the viewer, not to a finished narrative (as when the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle completes a picture of Notre Dame), but rather to a self-awareness of how one construes a painting.”¹⁶

These enigmatic glyphs that often resemble pieces of puzzles, as Lasker reminds his readers, and thus are reifications of the works’ essential ambiguity, have a source in one of his early encounters with vanguard literature. As a teenager, he read widely and intensely. Among his favorites were the Beat poets and the plays of Eugene O’Neill, George Bernard Shaw, and August Strindberg. He remembers Shaw stating that drama depends on conflict, and he later recalled this statement when he began to think about painting’s potential as abstract drama enacted by his ambiguous shapes. Because Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata*, 1907, made such an early impact on him and provides a rationale for the allegorical type of

painting that he initiated in 1977, which is clearly distinct from Baldessari’s conceptually oriented *Blasted Allegories*, this important work merits consideration.

Called a “sonata” and also referred to as a chamber play, *The Ghost Sonata* is structured in three movements like a piece of music and was intended, according to its author, to be a dramatization of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in D minor, opus 31, no. 2. It is classic Symbolist theater. In accord with one of the overriding goals of Symbolist art, Strindberg recognizes the need to emphasize the mechanics of expression rather than to rely on feeling being communicated directly. Therefore his drama is cadenced to correlate with the different sets that enunciate each act and accrues meaning through these increasingly rarified settings, concluding with the Hyacinth room, which is supposed to be abundantly filled with these heavily perfumed flowers, representing death. At one point Strindberg considered titling his play *Kama Loka*, using the theosophical term describing the halfway house for the human spirit before it attains death’s ultimate repose. Representing a type of purgatory for reassessing life, the different settings of Strindberg’s drama present his characters with irreconcilable conflicts between reality and illusion. Replete with inversions, Strindberg’s *Ghost Sonata* opposes youth with old age, innocence with guilt, horror with beauty, redemption with sin, and death with love. A dreamlike atmosphere created by some of the fluid, shapeshifter characters in the play enables its author to relinquish most of the remaining ballast from his earlier, naturalist work so that ambiguity prevails. Without the familiar stanchions of a recognizable world, viewers of Strindberg’s productions are forced to confront a dramatic crisis in which the community of conventions constituting naturalistic theater is broken apart: they are then thrown back on the drama, its schematic form, and self-consciously presented arcane symbols.

Similarly, in Lasker’s early works lavishly painted, white ghostly forms, only vaguely reminiscent of Strind-

¹⁵ Jonathan Lasker in Hindry, p. 22.

¹⁶ Jonathan Lasker, “Image Kit,” 1986, *Jonathan Lasker Complete Essays 1984–1998* (New York, Paris, Turin: Edgewise Press, 1998), p. 19, also in this catalogue, p. 40.

berg's, interlock with the abstract shallow stages he depicts to create tensions between foreground and background elements. However, differing from Strindberg's residual naturalism, Lasker transposes New Image figures into abstract dramatis personae. He also stages a metaphysical void in the center of his work by refusing to provide viewers with a narrative, even though he sets the stage for one. On a number of occasions he has alluded to this break and to the consequent openness of his work. He told critic Raphaël Rubinstein, "There is no resolution in my paintings,"¹⁷ and he described his work to curator/critic Francesco Bonami as "Not quite a narrative but an incipient image, a possible picture. Also a dialogue. ... The separate elements challenge the unity of the picture."¹⁸ He agreed with curator Hans-Michael Herzog, saying "Yes. My painting is both spontaneous and highly conscious. There is this split between the conscious and the unconscious. My painting is very flexible, it goes back and forth between the two"; and he told critic Steven Madoff, "I want to present the viewer with an image that he has to recompose for himself."¹⁹

As participants in Lasker's work, we must supplement these forms with our own interpretations. Lasker wrote, "I'm seeking subject matter, not abstraction."²⁰ But he also noted at the same time, "I want a painting that's operative."²¹ Consequently, our supplement must be twofold and multitiered, since it looks horizontally at the characters before us as potential characters and vertically at the conditions that determine painting's continued viability as art. Looking vertically, we begin to think how painting hovers between nonobjectivity and recognizability. The works are both concerned with the particular core elements of an abstract drama and the distinct intellectual and cultural category of painting. *The Ghost Sonata's* emphasis on the ghostly vampirism of old Director Hummel, who counters the perfection of young and idealistic Arkenhoz, looks like a source for basic constituents in Lasker's painting, which in turn literalizes and

abstracts the types of element that are assertively transcendent in Strindberg's play. Considered this way, Lasker's postmodernist pirating of the modernist vocabulary can be construed as a vampiric act in which naïve revelations of direct feeling are replaced with the masks that any understanding of art's mediating mechanisms necessitates. Instead of cohering residual naturalist components and full-fledged symbolist ones into the same work as Strindberg does, Lasker plays off reciprocities and differences between abstraction and nonobjectivity in his paintings.

The dialectics that activate these early works are extended in Lasker's subsequent pieces, which achieve maturity in his 1986 exhibition at Michael Werner's gallery in Cologne. As the artist told critic David Ryan in 2001, "In my mind I'm still making the painting from 1977–80. ... The three elements ... [of] figure, ground, line ... have remained my basic formal vocabulary."²² The figure/ground relationship, as mentioned earlier, establishes the parameters of an ongoing dialectic around which Lasker's art continues to revolve. "In earlier paintings," Lasker stated, "I was very given to ... establishing a very defined order and then violating it with something that seemed its antithesis. However, those paintings are, I think, very clearly about signs, about knowing one thing by its opposite, its other."²³ To this pair a great number of others can be added. In addition to the painted objects and depicted illusions that have already been discussed, as well as the abstract/figurative and kitsch/high art pairings that have also been suggested, dialectics in Lasker's work catalyze the following substantial number of polarities: dumb and smart, universal and specific, emotional and rational, firsthand and secondhand [experience], physical and metaphysical, distant and proximate, present and absent, textual and contextual, decorative and transcendent, immanent and virtual, artificial and real, awkward and refined, unique and conventional, spontaneous and reflective, expressionistic and calculated, uncon-

¹⁷ Raphaël Rubinstein, "Counter-Resolution," *Art in America* 83, no. 4 (April 1995), p. 88.

¹⁸ Bonami, p. 95.

¹⁹ Hans-Michael Herzog, "Hans-Michael Herzog Interviews Jonathan Lasker," trans. David Galloway, in Hans-Michael Herzog, ed., exhibition catalogue *Jonathan Lasker Gemälde/ Paintings 1977–1997* (Bielefeld: Kunsthalle, 1998), p. 31. Steven Henry Madoff, "New Lost Generation," *Art News* 91, no. 4 (April 1992), p. 76.

²⁰ Lasker, "After Abstraction," n. p.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² David Ryan, "Visible Thoughts: An Interview with Jonathan Lasker," *Art Papers* 25, no. 5 (September–October 2001), p. 30.

²³ Lasker in Herzog, p. 32.

scious and self-aware, drawn and painted, flat and stage-like, geometric and biomorphic, evanescent and lugubrious, and generic and specific. Even without the benefit of individual explications, viewers of Lasker's work can readily appreciate the applicability of these opposing qualitative categories and recognize that his dialectics go far beyond a simple bridging of opposites. The sheer number that are operative in his art suggests a rigorous assault on painting's stability and art's presumed stasis, so that the comfortable decorative perspective, for example, that Matisse fantasized about offering viewers through his work is no longer possible. In fact, it is far removed from the many aesthetic and phenomenological quandaries with which Lasker assails viewers.

Instead of being content with only one replication/creation as were most modernists who prized spontaneity as a sign of directness and authenticity, Lasker makes successive ones, beginning with sketches with ballpoint and felt-tip pens on pieces of paper about four by five inches that are then translated into oil studies on similar-sized formats. These initial pieces are almost like scores that Lasker, the one-time musician, subsequently plays in different keys. The process is not just labor intensive—it also distances the artist from his initial conception, so that creation is as much a statement of replication as invention, and autographic touches are neutralized, becoming, in the artist's words, "automatic and reproduced all at once."²⁴ Some signs in Lasker's art reference, without replicating, biomorphic, Constructivist, and Abstract Expressionist motifs, assuming the role of abstract signifiers for now hackneyed ways of working so that modern art's history is reduced to a litany of gestures in his work. Lasker has noted that he "warehouse[s] various signature elements, which are used in recombination" in his art.²⁵ I suggest that he derives a new syntax from clichéd forms.

Lasker has acknowledged "that Johns and Rauschenberg were important ... particularly in regard to how

they treated gesture. Treating it, that is, in an analytical manner." He added in particular "Johns' method of codifying touch on a certain level."²⁶ This reference to Johns deserves a brief explication, since his work with encaustic reprises, in my opinion, both the famous Fayyum funerary portraits made in this medium and refers as well to a literalization of the pun used as the title for Duchamp's last painting, *Tu m'*, which becomes this medium's tomb. It is not generally understood that in his encaustic works Johns simultaneously creates actual brushstrokes and wax impressions of them. This modernist and incipiently postmodernist acknowledgment of art's oscillation between present and past tenses is reenacted in a somewhat different way in Lasker's pre-1987 paintings. In them, he notes, "the facture was always cool. The brushstroke's always looked like it's constructed. It's indeed almost like the cartoon of a brushstroke, but it's real at the same time."²⁷ He has also pointed to the precedent set by Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II* as "doing the gesture once, then doing it again. Being involved with the gesture and using it as a thing."²⁸

But this painter also makes marks that are intended to be self-declarative without the encumbrances of historical precedents. This process has become increasingly important to him over the past decade. As he told Herzog in 1998: "When we use a sign we are referencing a known meaning. On the other hand there is an ambiguity in marks which cannot be clearly resolved. A mark is something about which the only thing you know is that it is a mark. It is neutral. ... I think there is a range between signs and marks in my work, a certain frontier where you exit the realm of the sign and enter that of the mark. ... A mark comes prior to utterance, prior to language, the point at which you are trying to find significance and meaning."²⁹

The dream of creating a work of art that is so wedded to life that it seems to have created itself and is so natural that it seems to come before the semiotic—an

²⁴ Jonathan Lasker in Ryan, p. 31.

²⁵ Demetrio Paparoni, "Conversation with Jonathan Lasker," *Tema Celeste*, no. 32–33 (Autumn 1991), p. 88.

²⁶ Jonathan Lasker in Ryan, p. 30.

²⁷ Jonathan Lasker in Hindry, p. 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Jonathan Lasker in Herzog, p. 31.

impossible goal yet an admirable quest—was the proclaimed aim of Lasker's early hero, Rauschenberg. This mid-century master of combines regularly depended on the detritus left on New York streets during the peak period of America's orchestrated obsolescence in the 1950s in order to bring the feel of everyday life into his work.

Moving from the streets to the vernacular of particularly unremarkable doodles that one makes while talking on the phone or otherwise preoccupied, Lasker works to neutralize his marks. Evidently his goal is for them to become as self-referential as possible so that they might represent a *sine qua non* for the creative process: the act of simply making notations on a surface. The resultant phenomenological emphasis on viewers, whose perspectives affect what they perceive in art, is a crucial concomitant to this type of marking and can be considered one of Lasker's anticipated results. As he pointed out: "The mark is neutral and yet you somewhat know that it's a tool for understanding. Indeed, people can't quite get at my paintings so they stay in a phenomenological condition. ... I think that painting at its best is this phenomenological impact when you look at it, experience the confrontation and then, only later can start towards meaning. It is a visual event that strikes you in a way that is not linguistically definable."³⁰

We might conjecture that artistically encoded signs over time have become too constraining for Lasker and therefore he has made the decision to rely on less committed notations. Like prose, signs are too easily read through for distilled meanings and not replete enough with the types of purposeful and necessary ambiguities that keep Lasker a dedicated reader of verse. Similar to some of the best modern and postmodern poetry that is partially divorced from its maker's point of view, Lasker's seemingly noncommittal marks demand that viewers contribute to a given work's meaning. And their conclusions more often than not resemble glimmers of themselves

caught in the interpretative mirror intending to reveal the work of art's true face.

In conclusion, we might ask how Lasker's painting is similar to or dissimilar from the Conceptual art that helped to initiate the crisis to which his overall *œuvre* can now be construed a considered response. If the Conceptual art once touted as the new norm at CalArts was the catalyst, does it make Lasker, *ipso facto*, one of its unwilling adherents? Most likely not, since his art is not just the painterly equivalent of Conceptual art, as is the late work of Art & Language; instead, it is a new response to painting in its own terms, so that an irreconcilable gap between representation and objecthood is maintained. What benefit, one might ask, is achieved by this breach? In our era of rampant criticism, where investigative reporting has been replaced with opinion polls and politicians often react to the perceived realities of these statistics rather than the issues themselves, Lasker's painting refuses to comfort people with an easily ascertained content and instead plays off countering definitions of perception. It forces them to consider the essentials of a problematic and shifting world and to make up their own minds as they follow the many qualitative dialectic shifts that his paintings set in motion. Differing opinions are thus schematized in these works as dialectics. And these dialectics vary from the basic conditions that differentiate between the act of looking into a painting and looking at an object, causing one either to conspire with the rudiments of the abstract drama placed before one or to take comfort in the fact that painting has been reified into a physical object. At the same time that Lasker reenacts abstractly the problematics of contemporary life in his work, he seriously reconsiders painting's poetics and viewers' phenomenological positions.

³⁰ Jonathan Lasker in Hindry, p. 24.