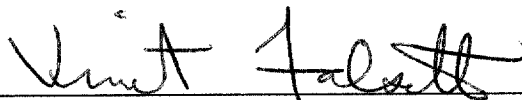



I QUIT BELIEVING

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When I quit believing the author (here author is to be understood in its broadest sense to include writers, painters, musicians, etc.) things became more apparent. Their marks (words, paint, notes, etc.) became understood as strategic moves.

Prior to this shift from belief to disbelief the author maintained a noble position. The sincere artist attempted to uncover hidden truths concerning nature and "self." Their every move was natural, something separated from day to day life. Art was like a nobility which maintains a social connection only to remind itself it is above the social.

Afterwards the artist was seen as a rhetorician, as a propagandist, as a deceiver. They used the contrivances of metaphor and metonymy to allude to ideas beyond the work proper. Art was very much a part of the social.

This shift to disbelief opened the possibility of alluding to politics, to economics, to meaning, and more. Furthermore, it allowed for comparisons to be made between artistic production and other social production which did not trivialize the social. Art was not only about inner

struggle, but also about real life. Art was no longer something which could be liked or disliked according to taste. It was exciting and confronting; it asked for agreement or disagreement, it asked for participation, and it challenged convictions. I began to understand that the elements (for me; paint, image, composition, color, etc.) were tools, or rather, weapons.

Here I would like to backtrack a bit and explain why this was a significant change of perception for me. My early art school experiences consisted of working hard to be like the masters. I believed that if I could accomplish step A well then step B would follow and once I became competent in B, C would occur and so on until I was a successful artist. It was a natural "linear" progression. So after becoming accomplished in an array of drawing techniques I ventured into painting. Following a formalist/modernist/expressionist model I worked on some large canvases. This could be considered step E or F perhaps, whichever, my program was linear. It followed art history. I believed that art was self expression and the act of painting this way was a direct representation of my feelings. To be more precise this act was not seen as a representation, but as an actual feeling. It was the feeling on canvas. Furthermore, I wanted to find a universal feeling which would make my paintings cross-cultural and meaningful to all.

A typical painting of this time was about 7' by 8' with an image of a generic house centrally placed in the painting (slides A). The style was expressive and the image seems to be shattering. Typically, I used a minimal color scheme of blacks and whites with a little color. I also used asphalt to refer to actual building materials as well as to provide different textures. In this work I was attempting to elicit the idea of the House/Home dichotomy. The house often representing the idea of home seemed incorrect. I felt the home was in the inner-self and that it was universal.

Two concerns became problematic. One, if I wanted to create a universal how would I know if and when I had achieved my goal? Second, this universal was contingent on the inner-self which excluded social influences. How could I create a universal image (something that means the same thing to everyone) if I considered the socialization of all the various cultures (not to mention each individual in a given culture)? This practice became too myopic, too impossible, too dogmatic. Dogmatic because what I realized was that I was not creating (or ever could) a universal, but imposing my wish of my universal on the viewer.

Following this initial period, which consisted of my sophomore and junior years of undergraduate school, I began to question why I wanted to paint. This was a difficult time for me. What I believed in was no longer important, so I had to figure out what to do and why. To work through

this dilemma I began doing things contradictory to my previous work. I began to work on small canvases and on many pieces simultaneously (slides B, C & D). I also allowed myself to make some arbitrary decisions. While in practice I was doing things differently, I still found myself on occasion wanting to produce "great" important works of art. This caused some anxiety. To fight these occasional bouts of anxiety I continued to work and I began to read more. I began reading books on literary theory, semiotics, philosophy, science, and of course, art.

By this time I had graduated with a B.F.A. and was living in New Haven, Connecticut. The proximity to New York City and the theft of classes from Yale University greatly influenced my ideas (I would literally "take" a class by finding out when and where it met and then I would "sit in" the entire semester).

It was here that I began to understand my current view of Art in general, and my art in particular. I lived there for approximately two years. The first year I continued to paint. Generally speaking, my concerns for painting were still active, however I started to tighten the reins, so to speak. Previously the paint was still applied in a somewhat expressive manner. Later on I produced some hard edge abstract paintings (slides E & F).

As well as taking classes from Yale and frequenting New York City, I often attended the visiting artist

lecture/critiques at Yale. Every week or two an artist (i.e., D. Salle, R. Bleckner, V. Celmins, E. Fishle to name a few) would give a lecture and conduct a group critique. In these situations I would reflect on what I was working on. I was working in a similar vein as many of the graduate students there, so I listened carefully to what they would say and what the faculty would say.

After several months of listening and getting to know some of these people, it became evident that they maintained a vigilant bias for painting, not because they believed in the usefulness of painting as a medium to question beliefs and assumptions, but it represented the "greatest" form of art. Painting expressed the soul and therefore is the only endeavor available to serious artists. This belief was exemplified on several occasions when students attempted to have faculty members discuss work that was primarily photography, or sculpture and the typical faculty response was "you should rethink what you are doing," or "this is not painting!" In light of these responses and the general attitude prevailing at this institution it became evident that their unwillingness to acknowledge a different perspective on painting was to be read as a protective ploy to maintain "authority." Perhaps if things were more open, their position of authority would be undermined and seen as obsolete.

It was at this exact point I decided to "exit" painting (Lawson 1981). Previously, I questioned what I was painting and why I was painting, but I still believed in painting. I still wanted to be a painter. From this point on I questioned the efficacy of painting too.

Painting for the Yale faculty was a tool of repression. Painting for me was a weapon against such narrow thinking. I stopped referring to painting as such, but referred to all art as works or images attempting to act. To act on the viewer either confirming established ideas or questioning the efficacy of such an endeavor. Art was no longer mere self expression, but cultural commentary.

The work that followed this change of perception used painting as a co-equal element in a piece. I used mixed media to destabilize meaning associated with "painting" or "sculpture" or "pure" anything. For example, consider the multimedia piece I completed in 1989 titled Imitating the Goodwins (slides G, H & I). The viewer is immediately confronted with a pyramidal-shape construction protruding almost three feet from the wall. The structure is made of birch plywood. On one side a sentence is written questioning the sincerity of imitation. As you walk to the front of the piece you see there is a color transparency approximately 4" by 5" mounted in the center, or in the point of the shape. The transparency is an image of a family (the Goodwins) at the dinner table. On closer

inspection of the transparency you notice that you can look past it to a highly colorful abstract painting. This piece is representative of the inability to focus visually on the entirety of the work, and the inability to focus conceptually on a stabilized meaning. The accumulation of information never reveals a confined meaning.

To this day my work maintains a complexity which attempts to slip the straightjacket of "truth" or confined meaning. Confined notions of what "painting" is do little more than produce dogma.

Statement of the Problem

It has been almost four years since this change of perception from "belief" to "disbelief." Looking back I can say this shift can be characterized as "belief" standing for an idea of art which requires it to represent a singular closed reading, while "disbelief" stands for a realization of an art which corresponds more with the complexities of social interaction and produces work with an array of possible readings. Or more simply stated, "belief" requires the desire to stabilize meaning, while "disbelief" requires the desire to destabilize meaning. Or even more simply stated, "belief" equals "truth," while "disbelief" equals the absence of "truth."

Preferring the side of destabilization and the absence of a "truth" the following questions seem appropriate for this exercise:

- 1) How do the elements of
 - objectness
 - color
 - light (as in light bulbs)
 - titleas well as image, work together to create destabilized meaning?
- 2) At what point does attempting to create destabilized meaning slip into incomprehension (or what is too much)? Conversely, at what point is the desired destabilization not reached (or what is not enough)?
- 3) How have some other artists created destabilized meanings?

Methodology

With the aim of answering the above questions I have produced ten works of various size and complexity. Question number one has been addressed upon the completion of each piece. Question number two has been applied to two works, I Wish I Weren't Christian and The Christian 30 A.D. And for question number three a brief analysis of two works by Ed Ruscha and Guiseppe Arcimbaldo have been presented.

For this exercise I have maintained a record of my thoughts and of the research I have collected. This information has been collected in the form of a journal.

CHAPTER II

DISCUSSION OF WORK

The first piece I will discuss is a plaque entitled I Wish I could Fly (slide J). Measuring 6 1/4" by 14" by 3/4", the plaque has three insets that are horizontally centered rectangles that diminish in size from top to bottom. As well as getting smaller from top to bottom, the depth of the insets increases from top to bottom. In the back of each inset a piece of gold-painted paper, with a sentence on it, is adhered.

The top inset is 3" by 10 1/4" with a 1/16" recess (the largest and shallowest inset). Within the gold-lined rectangle the sentence "I wish I could fly like a bird," is written, with the aid of a template, in Old English type. Black ink was used to do the lettering.

The middle inset is 1 3/8" below the top one. In this 5/8" by 4 3/4" by 1/8" inset a typed sentence reads, "I wish I could fly like a bird. KENYA, 20,000 B.C." So far two wishes to fly have been represented, with the middle wish being more specific than the top one.

The bottom image is more specific than the previous two and offers a contrast to the contemplative desire to fly like a bird. In the smallest and deepest inset, which

measures 1/2" by 2 3/8" by 1/4", a typed sentence reads, "I wish I weren't Christian. THE COLISEUM, 30 A.D."

Previously the wishes were unattainable. This wish is attainable. By simply changing his mind the Christian's wish could be self-fulfilled, but does his faith waiver in the face of a gruesome death?

The first sentence refers to an image of a person, possibly from the past when Old English lettering was in popular use, or possibly a contemporary who has appropriated the font, who is wishing to fly like a bird. The next sentence elicits an image of a Kenyan almost 22,000 years ago with the same desire. Finally, there is the implied image of a Christian at the moment of truth about to face the proverbial lions.

These images are combined with gold paper, which alludes to a precious material, and with the objectness of a plaque (something that typically commemorates an act or a person, but in this case there is uncertainty as to what or who is being commemorated). Furthermore, the recession of the size and the depth of the insets are spacial devices that are conceptually associated with the temporal space suggested by the images.

The overlay of information initiates a variety of possible readings. The title and the first two wishes set up an expectation which is not extended by the final wish. Rather than perpetuating the idea of flight, it shatters its

contemplative nature into a sense of urgency. This piece looks like a plaque, yet it does not confirm this initial impression but rather it vacillates with doubt. With this doubt all attempts to fix a singular meaning on I Wish I Could Fly are destabilized, thus opening the way for a multitude of possible meanings.

I Wish I Weren't Christian (slide K) is 3 7/8" by 11 7/8". In the center of the plaque a 1" by 10" by 1/16" inset has been cut out. In the inset a piece of gold-painted paper has been adhered, like in I Wish I Could Fly. On the gold paper the sentence "I Wish I Weren't Christian" is written in an Old English type. The sentence was painted with light gold water-color. The light gold lettering on the darker gold background creates a subtle differentiation between sentence and background. The subtlety of the effect makes the sentence difficult to read from certain angles. Spotlights (the element of light) create changes in the readability of the sentence as well as emphasizing the reflective quality of the gold paint. At some angles the sentence seems to disappear, while at other angles it is readily apparent.

Like the previous piece, the elements of objectness, color, light, title and image are combined. I think of this as a compression of information in which each element effects the others. Layered together the elements intermingle. The ambiguity of their combination creates an

uncertain reading. Whose voice is it? What are the circumstances that perpetuate such a wish? Is this a plaque? If so, what is it commemorating? Many questions arise. I suggest that doubt has been commemorated. As I alluded to earlier, I believe that when there is doubt destabilization occurs.

At what point is there not enough to create destabilization? I Wish I Weren't Christian has the fewest parts of the works I created for this exercise. The parts can be listed as follows: the wood, the gold paper, the gold sentence, the inset, and the title. I created this piece in an attempt to see how little I could do and yet have a destabilized situation. I believe I have failed in my attempt at reductionism. I could have done less and still have produced destabilization. Imagine a simple piece of wood on the wall without the gold paper, the gold sentence, the inset and the titles. Hypothetically, it could be reasoned that this gesture stands for a cleansing of emotional or decorative signs seen in abstract expressionist painting, for example, or because it is wood it could be argued that it is a nature affirming gesture, perhaps a "zen-full" gesture suggesting that in this small piece of wood exists all of nature: past, present and future. A more politically correct reading would elicit the idea of natural destruction, with its presence signals the depletion of a natural resource. A more generic response

would be "what is it?" In this case it is quite obvious that it is a piece of wood, so the question then turns to why would someone do that? Here is the crux of the situation. These various arguments, although they are simplified, represent different motivations for placing a simple piece of wood on a wall in the name of art. The problem arises in the reading. Because it has been elevated to the stature of art more expectations are attached to it. The reader is asked to imagine various rationales behind such a display. Is it an absurd gesture or an ecologically conscious gesture? In the final analysis it is difficult to tell, thus I suggest there is not a point where the reduction of elements prevents destabilization to occur.

The Christian 30 A.D. (slide L) is a box construction measuring 8" by 12" by 4 1/4". It is made with wood, photographic paper, ink, paint, fiberglass resin, and a low wattage light bulb. This piece came about when I found an exposed piece of photographic paper in the trash. I was attracted to it because of its golden brown color. I then made a stretcher like support from 1" by 4" pine, which the paper was adhered to. Following this I placed a light inside it which created a glow. On the back of each side (not the top and bottom) a strip of fiberglass resin was attached. This creates a similar glow from the back of the box. The black cord from the light fixture extends out the bottom through a gap left

by not using the fiberglass resin there. The pine wood support was then painted with silver enamel. On the inside of the paper a geometric pattern was drawn which is a reference to the type of geometry used in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteen centuries by painters to organize their compositions. In addition to the pattern there is a sentence that reads "I wish I weren't Christian. The Coliseum 30 A.D." It is the same sentence that is in the smallest niche in the piece I Wish I Could Fly. Here the sentence is written so it recedes into space. The letters of "I wish I weren't Christian" get smaller towards the end of the sentence. "The Coliseum 30 A.D." part of the phrase comes forward, with the largest letter being the "D" of ". . . A.D." The sentence appears to flow onto and out of the geometric pattern, with the first "I" beginning on the left front exterior surface and the "0 A.D." extending onto the front and around to the right side of the box.

Because The Christian 30 A.D. has the most variables of the works I will discuss in this exercise. This is an appropriate time to address the part of question number two that asks, at what point in attempting to create destabilized meaning does a work slip into incomprehension? Or put in another way, what is too much? The hypothetical addition of another variable to The Christian 30 A.D. would certainly change the piece. Let us add, say, a picture of President George Bush to the scenario. The question would

arise how does his picture fit into the equation of the piece? Focusing on the picture's relationship to the sentence, a liberal viewing this piece might suggest President Bush supports the death, metaphorically speaking of course, of individuals who do not agree with his beliefs. Thus, comparing President Bush to the individual who is sponsoring the death of the Christian. A conservative viewing this piece, on the other hand, might say President Bush is analogous to the Christian arguing that President Bush has been thrown to the lions of the Legislature. Again the problem arises in the reading. Responses to combinations of information are largely subjective and cannot be universally determined to have a single meaning, at least in the arena of art. Therefore, I suggest that while adding more parts changes a piece it does not necessarily cause it to be incomprehensible.

A major difference in The Christian 30 A.D. and the plaques is how light is used. Previously a spotlight was directed onto the surface creating a heightened awareness of the surface qualities of the wood and the gold paint. In The Christian 30 A.D. the light comes from the inside. Two distinct pieces are possible (compare slides L and M). One piece is with the light on and the other piece is with the light off. With the light off, the image is an abstraction. However, the title and the colors, which refer to precious

materials, insinuate that there is more than what is apparent to the eye.

With the light on, the previously mentioned image of a Christian questioning his faith in the face of lions appears. The fiberglass resin and the golden brown paper illuminate to suggest a religious glow. It is as if this box offers enlightenment.

The way the objectness, color, light, and title work together suggests a harmony which is undermined by the doubt conveyed by the circumstances of the sentence. It is at this point destabilization occurs.

A similar tactic is employed in Leukemia Ward (slide M). In this piece the low wattage light, the small scale, the silver painted paper, the beautifully finished Japanese cherry wood and the childlike blue/green and red/orange letters are inviting elements. These understated subtleties give way to the phrase "Leukemia Ward."

Leukemia Ward is a rectangular box measuring 3 1/2" by 9" by 4". It is divided into two parts. The left part is five inches across. It is a balsa wood superstructure covered with paper. The paper has been painted with silver paint leaving various size dots of paper unpainted. Inside the dots are childlike block letters which culminate to read "Leukemia War." Inside this part a low wattage light fixture is attached. The right part is a 4" by 4" block of Japanese cherry wood. On the front of this part a white

dot, similar to the other dots, is painted. In this dot the "d" of Ward" is painted completing the phrase "Leukemia Ward."

The light illuminates the dots of paper creating a soft, inviting glow. The objectness, the color and the light combine to create inviting expectations, but the image implied by the phrase "Leukemia Ward" is far from inviting.

Here destabilization is created through the combination of elements which counteract each other. An indeterminacy develops between the gravity of the image and the beautifully crafted object.

Sears Tower (slide N) is also made up of two parts. One part is a 3/4" by 8" by 7" cherry wood shelf. By using dowel rods extending from the back of the shelf the manner in which the shelf is mounted has been concealed. It appears to be floating on the wall. The other part of Sears Tower is a 9" by 3 1/2" by 6 1/2" balsa wood construction with a photocopy image adhered to the front with cherry wood backing. Inside the balsa wood structure a light fixture is mounted to the backing. The sides, top and bottom of the structure are left exposed allowing the fixture as well as the method of construction to be visible. On the front of the structure a black and white photocopy image of the Sears Tower is glued. Actually, the image is comprised of three photocopy images of the Sears Tower that were adhered to each other one on top of the other. The buildings do not

line up with each other. When the light is turned off the misalignment of the buildings is undetectable, but when the light is on the misalignment becomes apparent creating the effect that the Sears Tower is vibrating (literally destabilized). The structure sits on the thin shelf with the face of it extending past the front edge of the shelf.

In this piece the shelf and the image seem to mock their stability. The light exposes and is exposed, the color is that of the materials used, and the title simply identifies the building on the front of the structure.

The allusions to floating and falling insinuate a suspense or mystery. Unresolved, this mystery asks the viewer to resolve the situation that is neither confirmed nor denied.

This destabilization is accomplished by relating the elements of objectness, color, light, title and image in such a way that their combination cannot satisfy a single conclusion, but rather perpetuates the possibility of many different meanings.

The final piece I will discuss is titled Thanks Mom (slide 0). It is comprised of two boxes, one 9" by 6" by 3" and the other is 9" by 5" by 2". The larger box is connected to the smaller box in an off-centered manner creating a stair step or staggered arrangement. The structure is positioned vertically. On the front of this piece is a color photocopy image of a woman (my mother)

canoeing towards a mountain. The actual setting is a Canadian mountain lake. The photocopy was produced with too much blue which gives the image a feeling of impending gloom. The rest of the surface is painted with silver paint which echoes the predominant tone of the image. Inside the piece a light bulb illuminates the image, but the remainder of the structure is light tight, so nothing new is exposed when the light is on.

There is more to the image. The viewpoint is from the back seat of the canoe looking over my mother's shoulder. On the back of my mother's life jacket the word "small" is written, and between the two seats a shopping bag from Neiman Marcus is full of goods. The image leads the eye into the visual space, while the object extends out into the viewer's space.

The readings of this piece, as with the others, are varied. Is this a pursuit or an escape? Am I thanking my mother for leaving or for looking? What does the shape have to do with the image? And what about the color; is it an indication of what is to be found in the distant mountains? Or is it related to the shape in a different way, recalling minimalism perhaps? Here, as in previous pieces the elements of objectness, color, light, title and image combine to offer a variety of possible interpretations that destabilize any attempt to affix one particular reading on this piece.

Question number three in the problem asked, "How have some other artists created destabilized meaning?" For this question two artists will be considered, one from the past and one from the present. From the present I will consider two works by Ed Ruscha and from the past I will consider two works by the fifteenth century artist, Guiseppe Arcimbaldo.

Edward Joseph Ruscha IV was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1937. In 1942, he and his family moved to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma where at the age of eleven Ed took his first painting class. In 1956, with a high school diploma and with the ambition of becoming an advertising artist, he moved to Los Angeles, California. Once in Los Angeles he entered the Chouinard Art Institute where he became interested in Abstract Expressionist painting. By the late 1950's his taste had changed and he began to prefer the more conceptually based artwork of Kurt Switters, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenburg. In 1960, he left the Chouinard Art Institute for a full-time job at an advertising agency. He worked there for a year, after which he went to Europe, where between April and October of 1961 he traveled extensively (Ambinder, 1982).

In 1962, Ruscha was included in an exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum that featured works by Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine and Andy Warhol to name a few. In 1963, Ruscha had his first one-man exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. By the early 1970's Ed Ruscha had become a well-

known figure in the art world (Ambinder, 1982). With work like Standard Station (fig. 1) and his stain series, an example of which is Murder (fig. 2), Ed Ruscha has become an influential figure in contemporary art.

In Strong, Healthy (fig. 3) Ed Ruscha presents us with a painting of two two-story homes silhouetted against a night sky. The upstairs windows are illuminated. A white rectangle is placed below each house which appears to be a space for a label to be inserted, presumably one is "Strong," and the other is "Healthy."

Have I assumed too much? This format suggests that if we insert the words into their appropriate place the relationship between these elements would then become clear. However, this never seems to happen. It does not matter which rectangle receives which word. In either case the relationship between these elements is unclear. Ruscha has placed these elements in a format that suggests a logical conclusion can be reached, however, the unrelatedness of these elements makes this formula unable to fulfill this function. This strategy makes any conclusion contingent on assumptions made by the viewer.

Ruscha uses this strategy again in Man, Wife (fig. 4), a painting in which two silhouetted multiple-mast ships lean precariously to the viewer's right. Above and to the right of each ship a vacant white rectangle hovers. Here, again, the viewer must decide how to relate the title with the



Figure 1. Ed Ruscha, Standard Station, 1964



Figure 2. Ed Ruscha, Murder, 1974

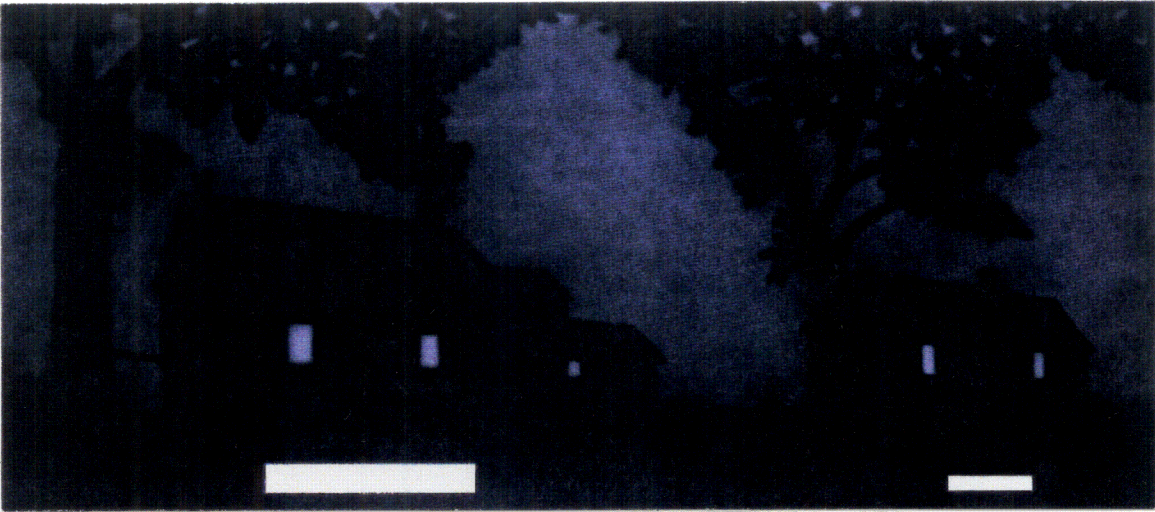


Figure 3. Ed Ruscha, Strong Healthy, 1987

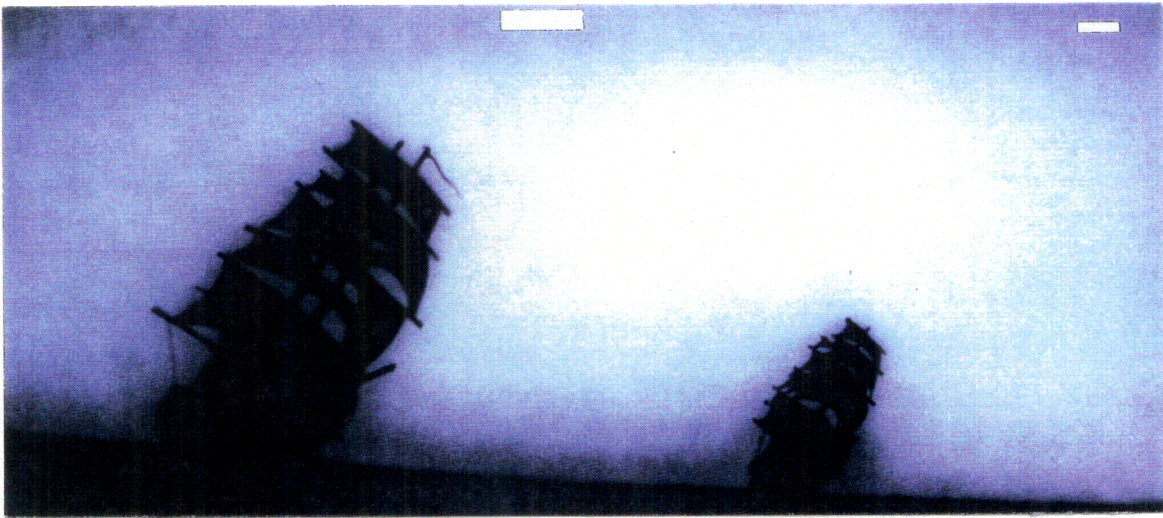


Figure 4. Ed Ruscha, Man Wife, 1987

image. Ultimately the viewer is left to answer any questions. A recent catalogue entry describes Ruscha's arrangement as, "Neither forcing the relationship of the elements nor leaving it completely self-evident." The entry goes on to say "he prefers that the viewer grasp the words and images as being simultaneously both related and discrete, therefore emphasizing the gaps in ordinary signification where closure in meaning does not occur" (Cameron, 1990, 14). In other words, Ed Ruscha creates destabilized meaning.

Guiseppe Arcimbaldo also created destabilized meaning. His approach reveals a situation that can turn plant life into people (or is it people into plant life?).

Guiseppe Arcimbaldo was born in Milan, Italy around 1530. His first recorded commission was the repainting of the Milan Cathedral's facade in 1557 (Praeger, 1971). Beginning in 1562, after completing his work for the Milan Cathedral, Arcimbaldo was employed by three consecutive Hapsburg emperors: Ferdinand I, Maximilian II and Rudolf II (Hulten, 1987). His many duties included serving as court designer, master of ceremonies and stage manager (Evans, 1987). He resigned his post in 1589 and returned to Milan, where he died in 1593 (Praeger, 1971).

Today Guiseppe Arcimbaldo is best known for his bizarre paintings of fruits, vegetables, animals and flowers that transform into humans (Praeger, 1971). Two examples of such

paintings are Flora (fig. 5) and The Vegetable Gardener (fig. 6).

In Flora Arcimbaldo presents a portrait of a lady comprised of flowers. Her shoulders are covered by a dress of dense leaves lined with a collar of tightly knit blossoms. Her skin is a plush layer of petals and her hair is a garden of flowers.

The Vegetable Gardener is a painting of a bowl filled with various vegetables: lettuce, onions, carrots, potatoes, turnips, etc. However, there is more than what meets the eye. By a slight of hand Arcimbaldo's bowl of vegetables, once turned upside-down, become the gardener. He has a beard of carrots, cheeks of onions, eyes of brussel sprouts, and lettuce hair all topped by a hat, formerly a bowl.

Guiseppe did not simply paint a bowl of vegetables or a seated woman, but rather a metamorphosis of genres. These two paintings are both "Still-life" and "Portraits." Whether in these paintings the people are becoming plants or the plants are becoming people is debatable, but in either case this combination confounds the normal expectations of each genre if it were viewed separately. In his alchemical experimentation Guiseppe has created an indeterminate situation open to multiple interpretations. Guiseppe Arcimbaldo has, in these two paintings, created destabilized meaning.



Figure 5. Giuseppe Arcimbaldo, Flora, c. 1589



Figure 6. Giuseppe Arcimbaldo, The Vegetable Gardener,
c. 1590

CHAPER III

CONCLUSION

Ed Ruscha and Guiseppe Arcimbaldo illustrate the history of creating art for the purpose of challenging the viewer. Witness Ruscha's play with words and images, and Arcimbaldo's bizarre mix of genres. We can understand the mastery of their craft and the intellect behind it, but we cannot isolate a simple singular conclusion. It is as if the work of art can only point us in a direction. However, this pointing is not conclusive.

I, too, prefer making art that is open to conjecture. This is not to say that this art means "everything" or "anything," but rather that it avoids constructing an easily delineated meaning.

The elements of objectness, color, light (as in light bulbs), title and image have provided a framework for my investigation of destabilized meaning. Two arrangements have been particularly successful: one is seen in the pieces I Wish I Weren't Christian, Sears Tower and Thanks Mom; the other can be seen in the pieces I Wish I Could Fly, The Christian 30 A.D. and Leukemia Ward. In the former arrangement destabilized meaning is established by organizing the elements so their relationships are not self-

evident. In the latter, the relationship of the elements present inviting circumstances that are subsequently subverted, thus creating destabilized meaning.

Are there boundaries to destabilized meaning? Is there a point where there is not enough information to create destabilized meaning? In my example of the block of wood on the wall I presented the argument that because the block of wood is on the wall in the name of Art that it has multiple meanings. It requires the viewer to provide a rationale (or rationales) for its production. However, it does not matter what the rationale is, because ultimately there is not a defining characteristic that isolates a singular meaning. It can be concluded from this example, there is not a point of reduction where destabilization ceases to exist.

Is there a point where there is too much information to create destabilized meaning? Is there a point where the piece becomes incomprehensible? Recall the hypothetical addition of President Bush to The Christian 30 A.D. One position saw President Bush as a murderer (metaphorically speaking) and another position saw him as a martyr. Again proof to the validity of one argument over the other is not given. This example suggests that adding an element to a piece instigates a re-evaluation of its meaning. In this case destabilization does occur. Extending this argument further suggests that subsequent additions require the same process. Whether this means destabilization will

continually occur is unclear. I contend that while adding more elements to a work of art creates change, it does not necessarily cause it to be incomprehensible.

These conclusions do not come as a surprise. Recent discourse has been inundated with theories like Simulacra (Jean Baudrillard), Differance (Jacques Derrida), The Other (Craig Owens) and many more which to varying degrees expound the importance of personal, social and linguistic pressures when interpreting works of art. Particularly influential to my understanding of destabilized meaning have been Roland Barthes's writings concerning the "Text."

In "From Work to Text" Roland Barthes articulates the Text to be that which is not an object, but rather a "methodological field." The Text exists in language; its presence can be uncovered in the workings of a discourse; however, it is not limited to literature, and it cannot be contained in a hierarchy (i.e. genres). The Text is paradoxical, always practicing "the infinite deferment of the signified." Like language the Text is structured yet decentered, without closure it is a system with neither end nor center. The Text is plural; it achieves the ultimate plural of meaning: an "irreducible plural." This plurality is dependent on a network of signifiers which is not to be understood as a coexistence of meanings, but rather as a "passage" or a "traversal." Accordingly, the Text does not answer to a single interpretation, but to an "explosion" of

meaning. Furthermore, metonymic associations perpetuate the Text, liberating its symbolic power. Barthes says the Text is "radically symbolic: a work conceived, perceived, and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a Text."

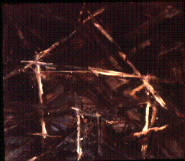
A Text does not depend on its "Author;" the "Author" is merely a guest, so to speak. Text requires that one, at the very least, attempt to lessen the gap between art and interpretation without intensifying the projection of the reader into the work, but by joining them in a "simple signifying practice." The reader "plays" the Text, becoming a collaborator in its production, which raises the question; Who "executes" the work? (Barthes, pp. 169-74).

What Barthes has described is something that cannot be isolated to a singular conclusion. It is obvious that I am greatly indebted to Roland Barthes's theory of the Text.

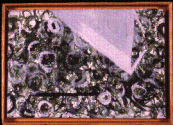
It was when I said,
"There is no such thing as the truth,"
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.

--Wallace Stevens

APPENDIX

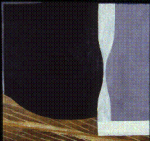


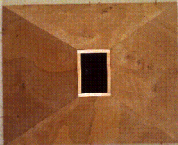
















A Witch A Could Fly
Like A Bird

WITCHES

WITCHES









