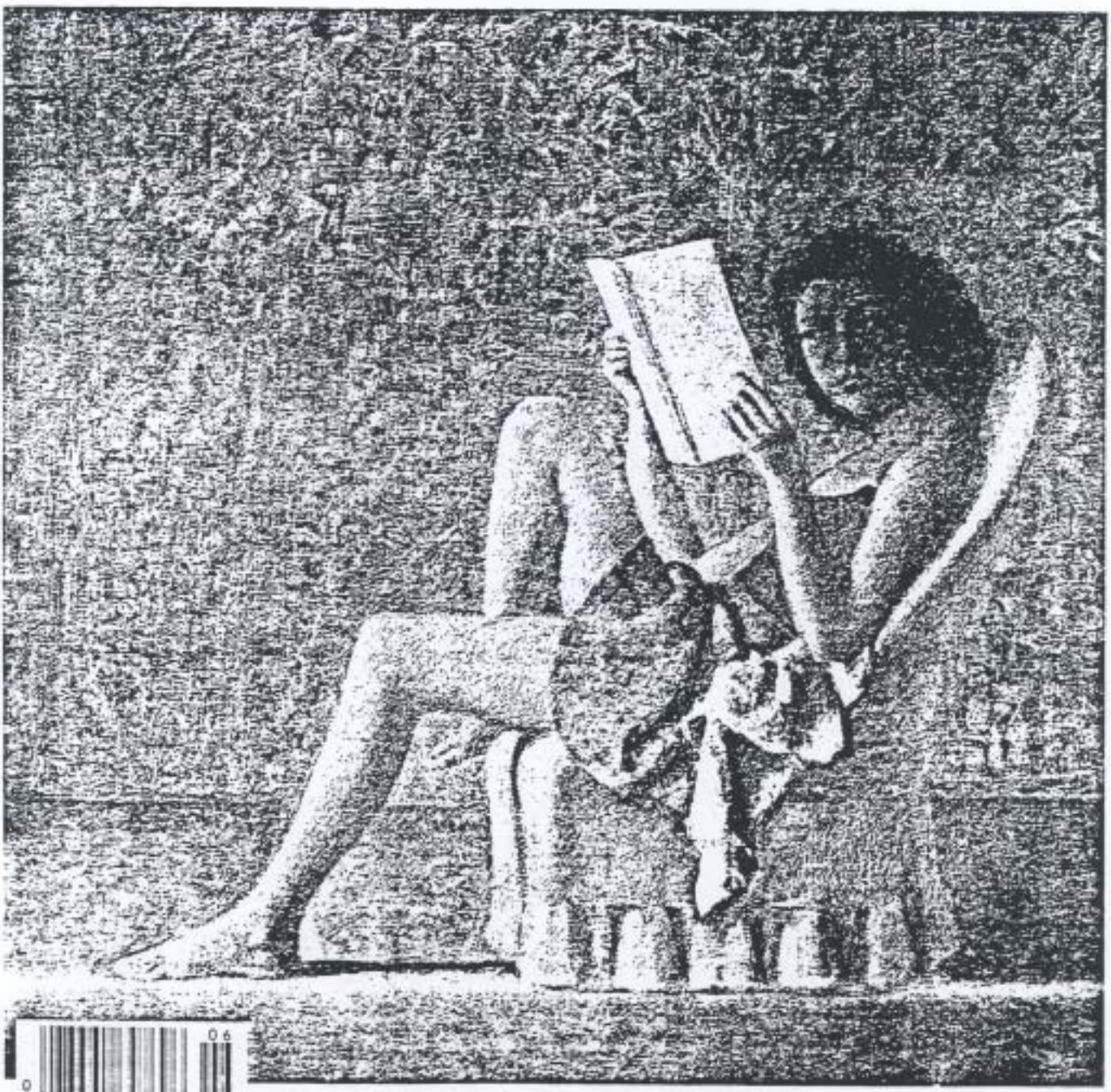
Art in America

SUMMER 1981/$3.50
Outside North America: $5.00

Cover: Balthus's "Katia Reading" (detail)
International Painting Show in London/John Bernard Myers's Journals
"Sex & Language" in New York/Ellsworth Kelly/Jasper Johns/Kuspit on Criticism
Photography/Review of Books/Review of Exhibitions



Sects and Language

In the unlikely setting of the Plaza Hotel's ornate second-floor ballrooms, an international contingent of "intellectuals and artists" recently convened to consider the topic "Sex and Language."

BY CRAIG OWENS

"Woman does not exist." "My sex is French." "There is no sexuality without parricide." These pronouncements—by Bernard-Henri Lévy, Philippe Sollers and Armando Verdiglione respectively—are only a sample of the rhetorical rodomontade that was "Sex and Language," a three-day, three-ring conference staged last month in the unlikely setting of the Plaza Hotel's ornate second-floor ballrooms. Under the auspices of something called the International Freudian Movement, over 130 "intellectuals and artists" convened to consider such topics as "Psychoanalysis of the Sword," "Word of Woman and Word of Man in Kibbutz," "Cancer, Sex and Language," "The Disappearance of the Body," and "Frigid Enjoyment." Pierre Daix interpreted the "Sexual Symbolism in Picasso's Figurative Language"; Achille Bonito Oliva introduced us yet again to the work of the painters of the Italian "Trans-avantgarde"; Alain Kirili exposed "The Wanton Truth of Sculpture." Trisha Brown, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke performed; Iannis Xenakis and Lukas Foss played tapes of their music; William Burroughs, John Giorno, Kenward Elmslie and Walter Abish read texts and poems. At night, films by Robert Altman, Anatole Daumont and Alain Robbe-Grillet were screened.

This was the fifth such conference that the International Freudian Movement has sponsored, and it was reportedly the most elaborate. Since 1975, the Movement has

The Movement Meets the Press: left to right, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers, Armando Verdiglione, William Niederland, Ferruccio di Cori, Gabriel de la Vega. Photo Johan Elbers.

Art in America
SUMMER 1981

been rehearsing in Milan, perfecting its version of the intellectual conference as theatrical event. The participation of artists and art critics, as well as a substantial art-world contingent in the audience, contributed to the conference's distinctly carnivalesque profile. Yet in the end theater proved no substitute for ideas; as one observer remarked publicly at the conclusion, "Trop de confetti, peu de substance" (Too much confetti, too little substance).

The one clear theme to emerge from the sessions was that sex, understood as a biological function, is to be distinguished from sexuality, understood as a symbolic activity. Separated from procreation, sex becomes a form of sacrifice, of waste, an expenditure without return, a squandering of resources. This view is less dependent on Freud's hypothesis of the sexual origin of the neuroses than on Georges Bataille's notion of *la dépense*—discharge, prodigality, useless expenditure—derived from the American Indian potlatch ritual. While the distinction between sex and sexuality is both valid and important, here it was often presented in such rhetorically inflated propositions as "Sexuality is ungenital" and "Procreation is nothing but an hysterical fantasy." Such overstatements were neither challenged nor defended. As *New York Times* reporter Ed Rothstein observed during the ostensible debate with which the conference concluded, most of the talk focused on the conference itself, rather than its subject.

But in fact the conference *was* its own subject, and in this respect more questions were raised than answered. Why, for example, did more than half of the announced speakers fail to materialize? (The majority of the scheduled "heavies"—John Ashbery, Harold Bloom, John Searle and Emmanuel le Roi Ladurie among them—were conspicuous in their absence.) Why, given the Movement's "international" orientation, were there only a handful of French analysts, and endless Italians? Why were several important contributors to the study of the relation of sex and language—Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault and Leo Bersani, for example—never associated with the conference? Why, when an open exchange among practitioners of various disciplines was promised, were the contributions of artists, composers and filmmakers treated as diverting interludes and never discussed formally by any of the participants? Why were round-table discussions of such topics as "The Terrorism against Sexuality" and "The Intellectual and Sex" conducted as a series of monologues, with debate or exchange among speakers discouraged, and questions from the floor proscribed until the conference's conclusion? And why, when questions were finally permitted, were they without exception left unanswered?

At the end of three grueling days of polemics, tirades and much Biblical exegesis, in French, Italian, Russian and English, an audience of roughly 1,000 assembled in the Plaza's Baroque room for a promised "debate" on the congress; they appeared neither stimulated nor enlightened, but suspicious and openly hostile. Released at last from silence, a mutinous crew hurled angry questions at an ad hoc panel, convened presumably to respond to the many rumors that by then were circulating—rumors concerning the conference's funding, its organizers' political affiliations, as well as their ulterior motives. "By what criteria," one troubled observer asked, "would you judge the success of the conference? If it's to perplex people, there are cheaper ways."

From the very beginning, the purpose of the conference had been obscure. What *was* clear was that its organizers were spending an enormous sum on it; estimates range from a conservative $140,000 to over a quarter of a million paid to the Plaza alone. What was the source of their funds, and what did they hope to receive in return? (The participation of the Banco de Roma, listed as an official sponsor, fueled rumors that the conference was a front for mysterious financial transactions.) Not only had the Movement rented one of New York's most costly venues, it also engaged the services of the high-powered P-R firm Ruder and Finn. A heavy advertising campaign began in February with an ad in the Sunday *New York Times* entertainment section, inviting the "general public" to rush their $40 subscription fees to Milan in the morning mail.

During a pre-conference press briefing, which concluded with the uncorking of endless bottles of Moët, a handful of intellectual celebrities, including Sollers and Robbe-Grillet, were trotted out to provide the hors d'oeuvres. They delivered enticing tidbits of their presentations to film crews, photographers and correspondents from four continents. According to the *New York Times*, the Movement itself was covering the expenses of 60 European journalists. The conference was apparently being staged for the media: what the Movement laid out in *lire* it obviously hopes to recoup in publicity. But to what purpose will that publicity be used?

Stuart Schneiderman, a student of the prominent French analyst Jacques Lacan and the only practicing Lacanian analyst in the United States, was the lone participant publicly to raise the crucial question: "What do European intellectuals think they're doing when they come to America? What do they hope to achieve?" Schneiderman spoke on a panel devoted to "The Plague in New York," based on Freud's offhand remark to Jung as they arrived in New York in 1909: "They don't know that we're bringing them the plague" (referring presumably to his concept of the unconscious, which has indeed spread like an epidemic through the human sciences). We heard a great deal

about the plague during the conference; it was, in fact, a leitmotif.

The main carriers were Lévy, Sollers and Verdiglione, three imperious figures who dominated the conference. Any analysis of its purpose is inseparable from an analysis of their motives. We must therefore examine the doctor rather than the patient, the diagnosis rather than the disease, as Thomas Szasz proposed in his paper "Sexuality and Rhetoric"—a genuinely amusing yet barbed account of the passage of masturbation from pathogenic condition (in 19th- and 20th-century medicine in general, and Freud in particular) to therapeutic instrument (in contemporary therapy in general, and Masters and Johnson in particular).

Sollers and Verdiglione were the first to speak at the press conference, at the first morning's session, as well as at the final "debate"; they have, it seems, become inseparable. Lévy did not arrive until the conference's final day, but he was obviously its star attraction. At 33, he is the most prominent of that group of young French pop heroes who call themselves the *nouveaux philosophes*, and claim to be seeking an ethical alternative outside of politics. Having risen to public attention by playing to the media rather than passing through the customary academic channels, Lévy has maneuvered his way onto *Lire* magazine's list of the ten "most influential" living French writers. His best-selling books advocate a wholesale rejection of politics and a return to monotheism as the only effective weapon against neo-Fascism. This position is not peculiar to Lévy, and it is rapidly gaining ground throughout Europe.

The purpose of the congress was obscure; but it is clear that an enormous sum was spent on it—estimates range from $140,000 to over a quarter of a million.

For "Sex and Language" Lévy delivered a (literally) talmudic exegesis of the first chapter of Genesis, constructed according to his favorite rhetorical strategy—which is to claim that something "does not exist." Since, in Levy's reading, Genesis tells us that *woman* does not exist, then "there can be no relation between the sexes" (which is also a Lacanian postulate), and "the only love that exists is love of the Father"—which sounds like a defense *of*, rather than *against*, fascism.

Sollers is not a new philosopher—or any kind of philosopher—but in recent years he appears to have aligned himself with the *nouveaux philosophes*. Principal editor of the influential journal *Tel Quel*, he is perhaps the most accurate barometer of European intellectual fashion. Having flirted with the French Communist party, then with Maoism, and then having publicly supported Giscard in the 1978 legislative elections, Sollers—who, until the recent turn of events, could be seen dining at the Elysée Palace—represents the gradual depoliticization of the French intelligentsia and their alliance with existing structures of power. As Sollers has lamented, "We lost a great deal of time raising problems about world revolution . . . and with interminable debates on socialism"—which he now defines as "unsuccessful capitalism."

Sollers has been affiliated with the International Freudian Movement from its inception, which brings us to the impresario himself, the 36-year-old psychoanalyst responsible for "Sex and Language"—Armando Verdiglione. Like Lévy and Sollers, Verdiglione is fascinated by power; since, in our society, power is institutional and not individual, in 1973 he founded the Movement, from which he is virtually indistinguishable. Armando Verdiglione *is* the International Freudian Movement.

Based in Milan, the Movement is curiously reminiscent of Sun Yung Moon's Unification church, with *seminarios*—yes, seminaries—in ten Italian towns. Like Moon, Verdiglione has set out to "unify" ideologically diverse groups about a central body of dogma—in this case, Freudian theory. He has attracted a surprisingly large number of young Italian followers, whom he instructs in the principles of psychoanalysis. Many of these "born-again" Freudians were highly visible during the New York conference, chairing panels, accosting journalists, wandering the hotel's hallways—which caused several members of the audience to refer to them as Verdiglione's "spies." The Verdiglionies were also selling the Movement's publications; in addition to several series of books, the Movement publishes a monthly "international journal of culture," *Spirali*—which resembles an intellectual *Readers' Digest*—and the more specialized journals *Vel* (psychoanalysis), *Clinica* (psychiatry), *Nominazione* (logic) and *Cause of Truth* (law)—all of which list Verdiglione as editor-in-chief. (Many of Verdiglione's employees are also currently his analysands; can psychoanalysis be used as an effective instrument of indoctrination?)

Until recently, the Movement had remained a primarily local, i.e. Italian, phenomenon. But now Verdiglione has embarked on a campaign to fulfill the international destiny promised by its title. The conquest of France has already begun. Earlier this year, *Spirali* began to appear in a French- as well as an Italian-language edition; Verdiglione has staged conferences at Paris's Beaubourg Center and appeared on French television to promote his book, *The Plague* (what else?), which appeared simultaneously in French and Italian. "Sex and Language" represents the opening of Verdiglione's American campaign. Later this

year. *Spirali* is to appear in an American edition as well; plans have already been announced for a second New York conference, four years hence.

Claiming that "Western culture has misunderstood Freud," Verdiglione has cast himself in the role of principal defender of something he calls the "culture of Freud." In this, he is clearly out to displace Lacan as the world's preeminent psychoanalytic theoretician. (The time could not be more propitious, for last year Lacan dissolved his *Ecole Freudienne de Paris* and has apparently ceased his theoretical activity; as the French put it, "Lacan se tait.")

Verdiglione, whose own writings betray an obsession with the Freudian theme of parricide, explicitly denies any debt to Lacan: in Verdiglionese, "Lacan never was and is not today a point of reference. . . . If I read him it happens along this experience I consider as a reading of Freud." Yet the topic of the New York conference would have been inconceivable without Lacan's emphasis on the linguistic aspects of Freud's thought; Lacan's most lucid and most often quoted formulation is that "The unconscious is structured like a language." Verdiglione has also subtly altered Lacan's plea for a "return to Freud," speaking instead of the "return *of* Freud," as if he were promising a full-scale resurrection.

Yet Verdiglione's various publishing ventures, as well as the conferences he stages more and more frequently, testify to broader ambitions: specifically, to manipulate the apparatus through which the intellectual is threaded in our society. In a paper on "The New York Rendezvous," which appeared in the May *Spirali*, he observes that "in Italy, the gap is growing deeper between politicians and cultured man," and that "the last forty years have been determinant in the European establishment of a distinction between power, privilege of the Right, and culture, prerogative of the Left." Verdiglione has set out to redress this imbalance; the first step is to dissociate himself from politics: "It therefore seems necessary for Europe to abandon the ideological-focused debates and polemics of the sixties, to emphasize the effectuality of a discourse Intellectual is the style [sic]."

Which may be translated: replace Marx with Freud, politics with psychoanalysis. Scorning Marcuse's attempt to synthesize the two, Verdiglione would erect psychoanalysis as *the* master discipline of cultural analysis. It is no longer the operative science of the unconscious, as in Freud, but of culture at large, and all aspects of human endeavor—political, economic, social, esthetic—are to be reinterpreted as functions of the unconscious. Verdiglione claims to have relocated the Freudian unconscious "within culture." Some view this as his central theoretical contribution; yet

Inseparable Companions: Sollers and Verdiglione. Photo J. Elbers.

Mourning and Melancholia: Robbe-Grillet. Photo Nancy Campbell.

Jouissance?: Lisa Wertmuller. Photo Nancy Campbell.

Prophet of the Apocalypse: William Burroughs. Photo Nancy Campbell.

Art in America

both the unconscious and psychoanalysis have thereby lost their specificity.

This massive rejection of politics and retreat into the psyche is not specific to the Lévy-Sollers-Verdiglione triumvirate: they have, however, been banking on it as "the wave of the future." (It was indeed ironic, then, that the conference was held exactly one week before the recent Socialist victory in France; determined to maintain their distance from popular opinion, European intellectuals have steadily gravitated to the right as the electorate has moved to the left.) Conservatism manifests itself today throughout European intellectual life, nowhere more conspicuously than in the rhetoric which proclaims a supposed renaissance of artistic practice in Europe. Thus, it was entirely appropriate that the art critic Achille Bonito Oliva—the principal advocate of the Italian neo-Expressionists Chia, Cucchi, Clemente, Paladino and Nicola De Maria—should have participated in "Sex and Language," although he had little to say about either subject. In his texts on these painters, recently issued in a trilingual edition, *The Italian Trans-avantgarde*, Oliva praises them precisely for having abandoned what he considers to be the hopeless political engagement of '60s artists and for having rediscovered art's true essence, which he defines as "the continuous digging inside the substance of painting." (This is not the place for an extended analysis of the politics of current Italian—and German—art practice and theory, which I reserve for a subsequent article.)

One of the most disturbing corollaries of Verdiglione's position—and it provided the subtext of "Sex and Language"—is a belief that politics can be reduced to sexuality and explained in exclusively sexual terms. During the conference I learned that the Movement plans to hold a similar meeting in Warsaw in the near future; the recent crisis in Poland must delight Verdiglione, who will doubtless exploit it as signifying the failure of Marxism. The subject of the Warsaw congress? Sexuality, of course. When I asked one member of the Movement whether focusing on sexuality wasn't sidestepping the economic questions that haunt Polish politics, he responded with astonishment: "But the question of politics *is* the question of sexuality." This is one of the Movement's articles of faith.

What links Verdiglione, Sollers and Lévy, then, is their preoccupation with power, which manifests itself in their rejection of the Left and the centrist impulse that motivates their thought. Power is the central theme of Lévy's books; in *Barbarism with a Human Face* (1977; English translation 1979, Harper & Row; Italian translation, 1977, edited by Armando Verdiglione) he proposes the recentering of all philosophy about the queston of power. Significantly, the only discipline that escapes Lévy's sweeping rejection of the last 100 years of Western thought is psychoanalysis;

Godfather, too? Armando Verdiglione's official press photograph.

Conservatism is manifest today throughout European intellectual life, nowhere more conspicuously than in the rhetoric proclaiming a rebirth of artistic practice.

"Freudianism," he writes, "can be seen as a political recourse, a means of escaping from the appearances of 'leftist' thought." Thus, he rejects Marx and Engels's account of the economic basis of power, accounting for it instead by an appeal to Freud's topology of mental functions: Power, he claims, comes into being like the super-ego.

The question of power, especially in its relation to sexuality, is not, however, specific to these three men; it is also addressed by the recent writings of Michel Foucault. Foucault's analysis of power has nothing to do with Lévy's; whereas Lévy is fascinated by power, Foucault attempts to unmask it. In the first volume of his projected six-volume series on "The History of Sexuality," he focuses on sexuality as a specifically discursive apparatus, engendered and regulated by power; thus, the New York conference occupied territory already marked off by Foucault. How significant, then, that among the many names dropped during the sessions, Foucault's was never mentioned.

This neglect was not surprising, however, for by locating Freud *and* psychoanalysis in terms of a broader historical development,

Foucault represents the adversary position. This is how he describes his thesis, in an interview about *The Will to Know*:

> In the nineteenth century, an absolutely fundamental phenomenon made its appearance: the inter-weaving, the intrication of two great technologies of power: one which fabricated sexuality and the other which segregated madness. . . . There came into being a vast technology of the psyche, which became a characteristic feature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it at once turned sex into the reality hidden behind rational consciousness and the sense to be decoded from madness, their common content, and hence that which made it possible to adopt the same modalities for dealing with both.

Thus, Foucault traces the genealogy of the concept of sexuality, specifically of its identification as the origin and end of all human activity. He does this in order to prepare the way for something else; in the same interview, he remarks, "[We] believe that we are 'liberating' ourselves when we 'decode' all pleasure in terms of sex shorn at last of disguise, whereas one should aim instead at a desexualization, at a general economy of pleasure not based on sexual norms."

Similar positions did, in fact, emerge during the conference, although they were never explicitly linked with Foucault. Thus, Philippe Némo, a Lacanian analyst associated with the *nouveaux philosophes* but clearly ideologically distinct from them, spoke, in his "Two Readings of the *Song of Songs*," of "le devoir de jouir"—roughly, the obligation to come. He called for a deconstruction of the "emprise du sexe"—the ascendancy of sex—and its tendency to displace other values. Stuart Schneiderman also touched on this question in his paper on "Love," remarking that "one of mankind's greatest accomplishments is to have turned sex into a problem," and identifying language as a *barrier* to instinctual fulfillment. But it was Thomas Szasz, ridiculing the new "disease" invented by Masters and Johnson, "masturbatory sexual inadequacy"—the inability to achieve orgasm by masturbation—who did the most damage to the proceedings. Sexual behavior is sexual behavior, he asserted, and to assign clinically therapeutic or culturally liberating values to it is "unworthy of the human intellect."

There were a number of other noteworthy presentations which stood outside the overall polemical tone of the conference: Alan Bass's elucidation of the printing metaphor in Freud's presentation of his theory of transference; Alain Cohen's revelation of the strategic importance of "The Secret" in Freud's texts; Robert Ricard's positing of "The Counter-Subject." (Since papers were presented simultaneously in three rooms, it was impossible to hear them all; however, it was reported that Jean Ellenstein's "State and Sexuality" and Jean-Toussaint Desanti's "The Body of Ideal Objects" were also provocative and worthwhile.) However, these contributions tended to get lost in the shuffle.

The participation of these speakers raises the crucial question of collaboration. When I asked one participant why he and so many others had accepted Verdiglione's invitation, he responded, "We're perfectly willing to be exploited by him, as long as we can exploit him in return." Certainly the conference provided many speakers with an otherwise unavailable audience and unprecedented degree of public attention. (It also provided European participants with round-trip tickets to New York—no small enticement.) Yet their appearances, while they may not signify approval, nevertheless lent credibility to an otherwise suspicious operation—a credibility Verdiglione can only borrow, since his own writings possess none.

The question of complicity is especially crucial in the case of artists, whose works are frequently exploited for purposes diametrically opposed to those for which they were made. While painters, sculptors and photographers may have difficulty in controlling the expropriation of their works, performance artists do not. Although Trisha Brown's solo *Accumulation plus Water Motor and Furthermore*—in which she performs three dances while reciting two texts—remains a tour de force, even when presented as a lunchtime divertissement at the Plaza, one wonders whether Brown is aware of the ultimate purpose of the event to which she lent prestige. Verdiglione knows that his conquest of America depends upon the participation of American artists and intellectuals, who do not, however, need Verdiglione. □

Art in America