

SPECIALIZATION WRITTEN RESEARCH PAPER

LOOKING AT DOKOUPIL AND SAMARAS

Submitted by

Un-mi Kim

Art Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 1988

M.F.A. CANDIDATES CLEARANCE FOR SPECIALIZATION WRITTEN RESEARCH PAPER

I have completed and filed the original written research project for AR 695- independent study or AR699 - Thesis, taken FALL 1988 (semester and year) in the Art Department office. I have given two copies to the chairman of my graduate committee or area, one of which will be filed with the thesis (this paper must be completed and filed before the final oral exam of the candidate).

Student *mm miki*
(Signature)

Instructor DAVE YUST
(Signature)

Adviser DAVE YUST
(Signature)

Date OCTOBER 26, 1988

Grade on Paper (A)

The development in art being considered in this paper could variously be called the "Multi-style Stance,"¹ "Eclecticism," or "Individual Pluralism," since each of these terms incorporates some aspects of the development yet also leave something to be desired. Stated briefly, some contemporary artists have come to work in several styles* or approaches simultaneously, or at any rate contemporaneously. If one calls this the "Multi-style Stance," one risks assuming that this way of working is merely a matter of style. If one terms it "eclecticism," one is liable to imply that the artists who work in this way only select from previously existing styles or approaches. Since those who work this way do not merely use multiple styles or select from various previously existing styles, but do so in such a way that the sum is more than just the total of its parts, I would rather call it "Individual Pluralism," that is, pluralism within the work of individuals. Because this term is less precise, it allows for the variations in practice among different artists.

The work of Lucas Samaras and Jiri Georg Dokoupil will be discussed in order to show that "Individual Pluralism" is a logical outcome of developments in art over the last eighty or so years, and to consider, through the examples of Samaras and Dokoupil, some differences and similarities among those who work in this way.

In the early twentieth century, style, as an identifier of artists' work and as a vehicle for meaning in their work, had already begun to lose significance. As Rainer Crone notes in his article about Dokoupil, Franz Marc observed in 1912 that:

Since then [the mid-nineteenth century] there has been no

style any more; all over the world it has ceased to exist, as if struck down by an epidemic.... Serious art has consisted of the work of individuals (in France, for example, from Marees and Hodler to Kandinsky...); none of them have anything to do with "style", since there is no link of any kind with the style and the needs of the majority of people...²

Crone goes on to say that although Marc may mean something different in his use of the word style than we might, it is interesting to see that the loss of style was already being felt and considered at this early point in the history of modern art.³

In addition to the implications of Marc's statement, Marcel Duchamp, within a few years of this statement, began his rejection--as marked by his stopping painting, making the Large Glass, inventing Readymades, inveighing against la patte--of style as a valid component of art.

Even though we, from our perspective in history, can perceive most of the painters Marc mentioned as fitting into stylistic categories, or as, at any rate, having had individual styles, and even though we, looking at the body of Duchamp's work, may feel we would not mistake it for anyone else's, the fact remains that the deterioration had set in; style was being viewed as less than essential to the making of art.

Following those early steps moving toward Pluralism, a whole series of changes gradually occurred. Some of these contributed in an active way, as anti-style statements, and some contributed in a more passive way, by extending the range of art's possible involvements, to the evolution toward a climate in which a pluralistic approach to

making art, whether among artists at large or within the body of work of a single artist, became possible.

In the Dada movement, much that was done was actively anti-style. The fragmentation of images and the use of fragments to create images, and the use of words with images tended to erode traditional notions of style-- as in the work of Picabia, Schwitters, and Ernst, in particular. And of course during the time following his first anti-style ruminations and inventions in the teens, Duchamp intermittently contributed to this notion, with his infrequent but continuing designations of new Ready-mades, or his production of articles which at least outwardly had very little to do with one another (Fresh Widow, Why not sneeze, etc.)

The Surrealists, while not concerned with the repudiation of style per se, nevertheless made contributions toward a climate favorable to pluralism in that many previously taboo or mutually exclusive areas of subject matter and many new combinations of materials were used, even used simultaneously by some of these artists.

A later step in the evolution was made in the "Combines and Assemblages" of Robert Rauschenberg. Although there was no particular stylistic disparity amongst these works, Rauschenberg used many different materials and differing formal approaches, especially in the years immediately preceding this work which were during the height of abstract expressionism. Also around this time, Jasper Johns made his Target constructions and his large painting/assemblage, According to What, which also juxtaposed previously separate elements

of art making.⁴ Roughly contemporaneous to these ventures of Rauschenberg and Johns was the work of the Fluxus group, one of whose main exponents was George Brecht, who worked conceptually with words, assemblage, and photomontage.⁵

In the late fifties and early sixties came what seems to this writer an outpouring of work, by Allen Kaprow, George Segal, Claes Oldenburg and others, which in the aggregate involved: the merging of art categories (painting with sculpture, etc.); the invention of new categories (environments, happenings) the adoption of new areas of subject matter; and the juxtaposition of materials not customarily used together.

Each, according to his purposes, chose almost at will from a wide range of materials, categories, and applications of same. From the point of view of breaking down taboos, breaking down of barriers between established categories, and multiplication of possibilities, the climate was present in which pluralism could develop.

During this fermenting time, Lucas Samaras was an art student at Rutgers University. Since Kaprow and Segal were among the art faculty there at the time, Samaras could hardly escape what was happening in contemporary art, or the outcome of some of its implications.⁶

Within five years of graduating from Rutgers in 1959, Samaras had produced several series of work, more or less concurrently-- Breakfasts and Dinners; Books; Boxes: a group of work composed of feathers, and hard, sharp objects such as miscellaneous hardware, tacks, and razor blades; and paintings with sharp objects such as razor blades protruding from them. These constitute a virtual flood of

simultaneously hostile/aggressive and attractive objects. "The risk of physical destruction and the threat of psychic danger permeate Samaras' work, inspiring a kind of tragicomic fear, terror and pity.... His work insists on the psychological connection between destruction and creation, between love and hate. If art is love sublimated, it is equally hostility rechanneled."⁷

During this time, the early 1960s, Samaras also began his pastels, "exquisite and enchanted, with intrusions of bizarre fantasy and tinges of nightmare horror. The colors are dense, tapestried, jewel-like."⁸ Apart from representing his major involvement with color at that time,⁹ the pastels also "Function as a storehouse of ideas....containing the germs of future involvements."¹⁰ In addition, I feel they constitute a more immediate, if less physically obvious way of expressing himself, for as both Kim Levin and Peter Schjeldahl point out, pastel is tactile, intimate, direct. According to Schjeldahl's account of a conversation with Samaras, he also undertook the pastels as a kind of reverse career strategy, reasoning that if he could not, for reasons of difference in temperament, make his mark in the art world through machismo, "He would do by shrewd, subversive means what they [my emphasis]...did by bravado, i.e., succeed in the high-stakes art world,..."¹¹ So, while absorbed in various three-dimensional types of work, or "constructed work"¹², Samaras was also doing these pastels, something completely different in medium, style and aim.

Later in his career, Samaras did other series of works, which although not contemporaneous with the ones already mentioned, are nevertheless pluralistic, in that they do not follow a linear

development stylistically or thematically from his earlier work, and do connect with many obsessions and themes made evident in the earlier work, some of which are stylistic, and some not. A few of these series are the Autopolaroids, the Reconstructions, and the Portraits.

In the Autopolaroids, which are, as the name suggests, polaroid camera shots of himself (in fact, of himself naked), Samaras "compiles a family album of himself that includes all the essential secrets that family albums omit. Alternating between absurdity and obsession, balancing attraction and repulsion, they reveal everything and nothing."¹³

In the Reconstructions, using piecework of cloth squares and strips, Samaras made a series of flat, two-dimensional works which embody opposite qualities. They bring together aspects of high art and low art (associations of pure painting versus quiltmaking); extreme pictorial depth and flat decoration (the cloth works both ways in the pieces); and non-objectivity and very specific reference to the human body (they are abstractions and simultaneously have associations to clothing, slipcovers, etc.).¹⁴ Their strongest formal connections to the earlier work are the linear patterning, the emphasis on concentricity, a certain optical dazzle.

The Portraits are paintings (his first paintings in many years) in acrylic of heads which are virtually skulls encrusted with paint, in the spirit of the encrustations of tacks, jewels, yarn, etc. of his earlier work, and also in many instances reminiscent of the built up surfaces of dots and lines in his pastels. While the luscious quality of the paint is engaging, at the same time it emphasizes the macabre, skull-like

quality of the heads, this contradiction resulting in a much more intense statement than in his earlier paintings with skulls or other parts of the skeleton. The heads are assigned the categories of Spectator, Critic, Dealer, etc. constituting a comment by Samaras on those who have so much to do with determining his fate in the art world.¹⁵

"The importance of his work is also in its cryptic attitude toward style. It is at once formalist, illusionist, expressionist, but in its stylistic excesses are allusions to the absurdity of style."¹⁶ This is one of the few comments on style this writer encountered in Levin's comprehensive book on Samaras. Of style in the pastels, Schjeldahl remarks that Samaras' "draftmanship is remarkable in being so nondescript."¹⁷ These comments taken together indicate how difficult it is to get a handle on Samaras' work in terms of style, even to describe in what way he is pluralistic. The style seems to exhibit itself or to efface itself according to the dictates of his current obsession, to change, to loop back on itself, to explore earlier and current formal or stylistic developments in art, sometimes for non-formal purposes,¹⁸ to take a back seat in the guise of "nondescript"-ness. As though on an infinitely complicated Moebius strip, his style is the surface facing you at any given moment, but as soon as you follow the strip further, the style becomes indistinguishable from the other aspects of his art.

Samaras probably is not an ideal exponent of anti-style, especially if one compares those such as Duchamp, who approached the abandonment or destruction of style with their intellectual faculties.

In contradistinction to Duchamp's ideas, the making of a thing by hand is very important for Samaras--he needs to personally make.¹⁹ (However, in his constructed work, it does not seem important to him that the mark of his hand be evident in the finished piece.) But in his pastels, the presence of his touch is important, nondescriptness notwithstanding: touch and its erotic implications are essential to his work in pastel. In fact, as Levin remarks in a different context, "...he wants his work to contain the most of himself...."²⁰ This insistent presence of self can be seen as one aspect of the Moebius strip which is always revealing a seemingly different side of itself, or as a center which governs the artist's changes, and thus as responsible for his pluralism. Thus the presence of self contradicts the Duchampian notion of eliminating the personal from art.

In contrast to Samaras' pluralism, one can look at the work of Jiri Georg Dokoupil, the Czechoslovakian-born, German-naturalized artist, whose work, mostly painting, is pluralistic (as well as eclectic) in the extreme. This writer has not been able to see enough or find enough to read of, or on, Dukoupil's work to gain a deep understanding of how frequently and exactly under what circumstances he changes his approach or style. However, available data indicates that he does a series of several paintings in one "style -complex." These several paintings, though they may be pulled together from many different style sources, all look relatively similar stylistically. Then in the next series he is ready to employ a different "style-complex" or approach to say what he wants to say next. "In many cases I quote from art history in response to a momentary need. I use it as if it were conventional

found language. In this respect my interests are very volatile. I slip into another role and that's what I am."²¹

An early example which shows something about Dokoupil's use of style is a pair of paintings titled Naive Surrealism. The paintings show human-like figures painted in what might very loosely be described as a naive style: clumsy rendering; little reference to the structure of anatomy; limbs, facial features and body markings given more importance than they would receive in a naturalistic painting. At the same time, the way the figures are painted also suggests a self-consciousness and compositional intent which are not present in naive art. Certain images in the paintings make reference to Surrealism: one head has two pairs of eyes, one pair of which turns out on second glance to be a pair of snout-like nostrils; this figure and one other each have one arm which is unusually long. One feels that Dokoupil is implying that these aspects of the figure are dictated by a subconscious psychological necessity, or rather, that is what these distortions of the figures would indicate if this were really a Surrealist painting. However, the naive aspects work with the surrealist aspects to cancel out the sincerity which either approach by itself would imply, and the viewer is left with a work which is perceived as humorous and possibly mocking.

Another painting, from 1982, Birthday of the Imprisoned Expert, is one of many works from 1982 which show "...the extent to which the artist feels himself committed to the discourse of a repudiation of style."²² The work is a diptych in the form of one large broad panel and one very tall narrow panel. The larger of the two shows a brain,

painted representationally (it is painted against a rather glowing blue, and the brushwork is a bit heavy-handed for it to be described as naturalistic, (Crone's description of it notwithstanding²³), anchored down with multiple strands of barbed wire. The brain is huge and the horizon is low, so that one feels in the presence of something monumental. The narrow panel shows a vase containing the expert's birthday bouquet, with a miniature skull rather than a flower in the bouquet. This panel is painted in the same heavy-handed representational style, with the same blue background. The word expert--Fachmann in German-- in the untranslated title adds a twist of meaning not present in the English. Fachmann (Fach=compartment; mann=man) connotes specialist in German, someone whose field of expertise is circumscribed: someone whose brain is imprisoned by its narrowness.

According to Crone, Dokoupil's changing of styles can be likened to and understood by relating it to nature. To explain this, he takes the reader on a "brief theoretical digression"²⁴ explaining that Dokoupil's approach is that of "Bricolage" (literally, puttering about and making do), which was raised to the level of a symbol for a particular kind of discourse by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.²⁵ This discourse is a metaphor for the opposition Nature/Culture. Levi-Strauss writes: "...[E]verything universal in man relates to the natural order, and is characterized by spontaneity, and ...everything subject to a norm is cultural and is both relative and particular."²⁶ By analogy, Crone implies Dokoupil functions as nature does; his process of selecting style and approach is natural like that of "Bricolage".

I certainly agree that one can see Dokoupil's working process as analogous to nature in that he does not work according to stylistic norms. However, if one tends for a moment to the part of Levi-Strauss's concept which emphasizes spontaneity, Dokoupil's work looks a lot more like culture and less like nature. This writer feels that his stylistic changes are far from spontaneous, if one understands spontaneous as meaning unpremeditated, arising from impulse, etc. this writer supposes the changes can be understood as spontaneous in the sense that they are changed as the need arises, so possibly this writer's argument here is a matter of semantics and not substance--Dokoupil does speak of his "volatility." On the other hand, if one looks at spontaneity from the first point of view just mentioned, Samaras' work seems more spontaneous, more natural in its way of coming into being than Dokoupil's. Samaras' obsessiveness, his propensity for returning to styles or themes in a vaguely cyclic fashion, bespeak of spontaneity, whereas Dokoupil verges on the doctrinaire, the planned--"... I am interested in working with disruptions and contradictions..."²⁷ This kind of statement, seen from one angle, indicates a programmatic rather than spontaneous approach to his work (consider the commitment to the discourse of a repudiation of style mentioned by Crone.).

However, in another connection, that of the moral basis of their ways of working, Dokoupil and Samaras have very definite similarities. Dokoupil, in an interview, responded to a questioning of his thematic or ideological identity as follows:

"I think I'm more consistent than many others. Consistency

often becomes confused with the "pathos of a thing" in artists' work, with being tormented by a problem.... After all, consistency is only a continuity between the circumstances which are at the origin of a painting, and the realized image".²⁸

Samaras, in response to the comment that his work is not immediately recognizable (and therefore by implication inconsistent), replied:

"...I think I have a little spring in my brain that reacts once I do a number of works, that, for me, seem to define an aesthetic experience. Once I've made a statement about something, this spring tightens or loosens....when I try to do the next one in the same series, I go defunct. In other words, I've developed a kind of organism that doesn't allow me to stay too long at a given thing".²⁹

To summarize, there is this difference in approach between Samaras and Dokoupil. Samaras is a romantic in the way he uses the freedom of pluralism. He in fact is "tormented by a problem" (as Dokoupil describes in the quote above). Consequently, his motivation finds its source in that which Dokoupil repudiates. Dokoupil could be called more typically post-modern in his approach, in that he consciously has "...an aversion toward a normative stylistic integration."³⁰ His decision about how to deal with style is part of his intention in making art, whereas with Samaras one has the sense that he makes his art and it happens to be, to a certain degree, in consonance with this post-modern concept, but not because of any conscious decision on his part that this is the way he should work. Their moral premises are much more similar, each feeling that to do anything other than to follow the inherent logic he feels in his way of working would be a self-betrayal.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Mentioned in: Jeanne Siegel, "Annette Lemieux: It's a Wonderful life, or Is it?", Arts, January, 1987, p.81.
- 2 Rainer Crone, "Jiri Grog Dokoupil, The Imprisoned Brain," Artforum, March, 1983, p.50.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Anne d'Harnoncourt and Walter Hopps, Etant Donnes: 1@ la chute d'eau, 2@ le gaz d'eclairage: Reflections on a New York by Marcel Duchamp: (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1969), p.48.
- 5 Jan van der Marck, "George Brecht: An Art of Multiple Implications," Art in America, July/August, 1974, p.49.
- 6 Kim Levin, Lucas Samaras (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975), p.19.
- 7 Ibid., p.35.
- 8-10 Ibid., p.41.
- 11 Peter Schjeldahl, "Lucas Samaras: The Pastels." in Samaras Pastels (Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum, 1981), p.14.
- 12 Levin, Op. cit., p.41.
- 13 Ibid., pp.92,93.
- 14 Carter Ratcliff, "Modernism Turned Inside Out," Arts, November, 1979, p. 94.
- 15 Arnold Glimcher, "Lucas Samaras," Flash Art, October/November, 1985, p.41.
- 16 Levin, Op. cit., p. 97.
- 17 Schjeldahl, Op. cit., p.15.
- 18 Levin, Op. cit., p42.; Schjeldahl, Op. cit., p.14.

19 Levin, Op. cit. (I am unable to locate the source of this idea, though I feel fairly sure I got it from Levin.)

20 Ibid., p.89.

21 Crone, Op. cit., p.54.

22-23 Ibid., p.52.

24 Ibid., p. 51.

25 Ibid., p.52.

26 Ibid., p. 51.

27 Ibid., p.52.

28 "Conversation Between Dokoupil and Maenz," Flash Art, April/May, 1984, p.45.

29 Glimcher, Op. cit., p.40.

30 Crone, Op. cit., p.51.

* I would define style as a way of using materials and formal elements in one's work which is identifiable as belonging to the individual; which in and of itself is a major vehicle for meaning in one's work; and which evolves generally in a linear fashion over time...

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Conversation Between Dokoupil and Maenz," flash Art, April/ May, 1984.
- Crone, Rainer. "Jiri Grog Dokoupil, The Imprisoned Brain," Artforum, March, 1983.
- D'Harnoncourt, Anne; and Hopps Walter. Etant Donnes: 1@ la chute d'eau, 2@ le gaz D'eclairage: Reflections on a New York by Marcel Duchamp, Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1969.
- Glimcher, Arnold. "Lucas Samaras," Flash Art, October/November, 1985.
- Levin, Kim. Lucas Samaras, New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975.
- Marck, Jan van der. "George Brecht: An Art of Multiple Implications," Art in America, July/ August, 1974.
- Ratcliff, Carter. "Modernism Turned Inside Out," Arts, November, 1979.
- Schjeldahl, Peter. "Lucas Samaras: The Pastels." in Samaras Pastels, Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum, 1981.
- Siegel, Jeanne. "Annette Lemieux: It's a Wonderful Life, or Is It?" Arts, January, 1987.