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Some Ideas about Viewer Re-Mobilization from a Practice-in-Progress
Quelques idées sur la re-mobilisation du spectateur recueillies d'une pratique en cours

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article fait état d'un regard pratique posé par un artiste composant avec les aspects sociaux et politiques du concert, à travers un certain nombre d'oeuvres réalisées entre 1999 et 2006. Le travail de Couroux se concentre sur la réintégration de l'auditeur-spectateur dans un événement social, plus spécifiquement le cadre du concert, qu'il utilise comme groupe témoin lui permettant de mettre à l'épreuve ses idées sur la mobilisation du spectateur. Explorant le potentiel de l'art en tant que moteur d'investigation sociale, il exploite les préjugés à la fois perceptuels et culturels qu'entretient le spectateur, dans le but de créer un environnement de recherche productif et créateur. L'article débute par un bref historique de l'anti-virtuosité (avec des références à Xenakis, Barrett, Ferneyhough et Gould, chacun ayant remis en question, de diverses façons, la figure de l'interprète), introduisant les processus de *feedback* de son oeuvre *American Dreaming* et les statégies anti-absorptives qui sous-tendent *le contrepoint académique (sic)*. Enfin, la position de l'auditeur est problématisée dans deux oeuvres : *Blowback at Breakfast*, dans lequel l'auditeur est relié à l'interprète par un voyeurisme quasi panoptique, et *Watergating*, dans lequel les nombreux changements de modes d'oralité obligent à la déconstruction du processus d'écoute.

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Some Ideas about Viewer Re-Mobilization from a Practice-in-Progress

Marc Couroux

> Art is a perspective; all perspectives are lies about the total truth; so art is a lie that, if it is strategically chosen, wakes people up. Art is a lever to affect the mind. The truth of art is in the audience's, the individual's, awakened perceptions. It is not in the work of art.
>
> Richard Foreman, 1992

The aim of this article is not to provide any permanent normative solutions to the many conundrums surrounding the concert ritual today, but rather to present a practical view of one artist's dealings with the social and political aspects of the concert, seen through a variety of works realized between 1999 and 2006. While the earlier works discussed operate fully within the concert format, later works demultiply and problematize the ritual by including video and installation elements. Pure video works realized during this same period have absorbed this dialectic within the fabric of the work itself.

My work as a whole has been centered around the reintegration of the listener-viewer into the social event, specifically the concert format, and as such has generated a variety of situations in which this transformation could potentially take place. While the reason I have chosen to work—and continue to work—within the boundaries of the proscenium-audience dialectic has much to do with my training as a performer, it has also functioned as a control group, enabling me to test some ideas about viewer mobilization. I have (thus

far) avoided the use in these works of "interactive" technologies, in order to highlight the inherent interactivity present when a viewer engages with an ongoing ritual-process.

Specifically, I am interested in the potential of art as a motor for social investigation, in which the properties of the work itself, employing the perceptual and cultural prejudices of the viewer as prime material, enables the creation of a productive, creative zone of inquiry. My work is designed to empower the viewer to think critically about what he/she is witnessing, leading the latter to make imaginative and metaphorical links between art and social issues. Indeed, the artwork should function as a generator of ideas, a mirror of the viewer's own relationship to the world around him/her, a stimulus for further inquiry. As such, both the media employed in achieving this goal, as well as the stylistic approaches adopted, will vary radically, according to the needs of the work. Fundamentally, as the Foreman quote above indicates, I am shifting the weight of the communicative interchange to the viewer, and away from the artist-performer: it is the former who has the ultimate responsibility. The concert experience as I envision it is not a sleepover — it is an intense, demanding physical and psychological environment where choices are made and where questions never cease to arise.

To understand where the preoccupation with dismantling and rebuilding the concert ritual came from, some backtracking through what I might call *performative science* is called for.

Excess, Transcendence and Aura

Theatre of Entropy/American Dreaming (1998-1999)

In my formative years, I deliberately avoided studying the performances of classical pianists because of a general mistrust of an oral tradition light-years removed from the inflexible sanctity of the written score. Attempting to reinvent the music directly from musical notation leads one into areas of interface which might have otherwise been glossed over or simply rejected in an attempt to insert oneself as surreptitiously as possible into the classical performative canon. The whole notion of 'what sounds good,' merely a collection of culturally received attitudes, always seemed to me ripe for questioning. Moreover, much of what the performance of classical music has meant for the past 150 years or so has been inextricably fueled by the Olympian ego present in every performer, a ritual based in outward 'demonstrations,' a self-definition always attained by an external affirmation of ability: the performer-as-hero.

The attitude which consists in presenting the 'perfect performer' as a transcendental demigod, a pure product of the 19th century, still persists in concert

halls across Europe and North America today. The ritual of interface between performer and instrument but also, by extension, that between performer and audience, has been transmitted uncritically in the bland, essentialized practices of today. One only has to remember that this current concert ritual has only been in place for roughly 150 years, ever since Franz Liszt began performing other composers' music as well as his own. The composer-performer as *total* musician soon became a rarity. Nowadays in the serious-music world, there is an exaggerated emphasis on the flash of virtuosity, though it curiously backfired in the case of the notorious David Helfgott, whose virtuosity, as exemplified in the movie *Shine* (1996), was later (and quite interestingly) dismantled through his idiosyncratic public performances. Nevertheless, this demonstrative patina of proficiency always seems to lurk near the surface in equal measure in commercially produced work as well as recent art music.

Prior to Iannis Xenakis' monumental *Evryali* (1973), despite the growing difficulty of piano literature (due to significant advances in *performative science*, i.e., more efficiently trained performers), it was nevertheless possible for any trained virtuoso to attain an optimal physical realization of any work (leaving aside the question of musical values). This heretofore certain goal was unceremoniously laid by the wayside with *Evryali*, which contains passages that can never — and *will* never — be realized perfectly by any human performer. As such, it constituted a major turning point, in which the well-oiled (and hardened) paradigms of piano performance practice finally fell apart, to be replaced by provisional and open-ended values. This spurred composers to explore the notion of *critical virtuosity* in their music, by deliberately writing *against* conventional physical paradigms, in order to trigger new relationships between body and matter.

We live with the antiquated notion that the performer is a totalized whole who must confidently project the music he plays in order for the message to be transmitted. What might conceivably happen if the performer were deliberately *ineffective*? What would be the sonic result of such explorations? Moreover, it has seemed to me that the one central issue preventing a more widespread communication between the performer and the listener (the key crisis of contemporary music this past century) has been the refusal on the performer's part to let his performative persona disintegrate on stage. Why couldn't the performer's entire nervous system be put on the line in front of everyone? The example of Helfgott is unwittingly appropriate: the audience at times seems more interested in the possibility of collapse rather than success. Wouldn't that be a more human form of communication? It would undoubtedly derail the composer's creative monopoly and position of authority (especially over the performer). Though we never hesitate to qualify music as radical or avant-garde we almost

always fail to question the structures in which this music is presented. I think this is the one crucial leap that both composer and performer have to make in order to finally leave the 19th century behind. The separation of composer and performer as two distinct professions has effectively reinforced the status quo: the performer, removed from his creative position, seeks to nevertheless demonstrate his virtuosity, his heroism, his superiority to the audience; the composer, increasingly sheltered and disconnected from the necessity of ritual-making (which he had to deal with as performer), becomes overly concerned with purely musical content, to the detriment of context and surrounding ritual.

Glenn Gould, sensing the aforementioned *performer-as-hero* syndrome as no longer necessary or even relevant, abandoned the concert stage back in 1964, stating that there was no need "to climb Everest just because it is there [...] It makes no sense to do things that are difficult just to prove they can be done" (1990, p. 452). Gould's solution was draconian: end the concert altogether and replace it with the increasingly capable medium of recording. Gould replaces communal ritual with one entirely individualized, occurring between the listener and the recording, contemplated in a private environment. For Gould, technology "has the capability of replacing those awful and degrading and humanly damaging uncertainties which the concert brings with it; it takes the specific personal performance information out of the musical experience" (Gould, 1990, p. 452). Gould keenly sensed the intense dislocation between the prevalent concert ritual and modern technological reality, but his solution nevertheless rules out even the remotest possibility of creating a new performance ritual which would reengage the lost listener on a level in step (or consciously out-of-step) with modern society. Still, a few listeners were undoubtedly shaken when Leonard Bernstein addressed the audience before conducting a version of Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 in 1962, a version which Gould had mandated and Bernstein vehemently disagreed with. His speech effectively disclaimed any responsibility for the subsequent interpretation.[1] Frequently cited as a decisive step on the road to Gould's retirement, this moment in history also stands as one in which the authority of the onstage performers has been challenged, and the listener suddenly dislocated from a position of pure receptivity to one of provisional uncertainty.

The paradigm shift ushered in by *Evryali* was taken up only a few years later in Brian Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II* (1973-1976), which as its title indicates, literally enacts a study of performance efficiency. As British composer Richard Barrett describes it:

> The cellist has a succession of complex and often obscure "tasks" to execute, involving not just instrumentalism but also the simultaneous operation of two independent

1. Disclaimer available at <http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-68-320-1766/arts_entertainment/glenn_gould/clip3>:

"A curious situation has arisen which merits I think a word or two. You are about to hear a rather shall we say unorthodox performance of the Brahms D Minor Concerto, a performance distinctly different from any I've ever heard, or even dreamt of for that matter, in its remarkably broad tempi, and its frequent departures from Brahms' dynamic indications. I cannot say I am in total agreement with Mr. Gould's conception. [...] But the age-old question still remains : In a concerto, who is the boss? The soloist, or the conductor? The answer is of course, sometimes one, sometimes the other, depending on the people involved. But almost always the two manage to get together by persuasion or charm—or even threats—to achieve a unified performance. I have only once before in my life had to submit to a soloist's totally new and incompatible concept and that was the last time I accompanied Mr. Gould. But this time, the discrepancies between our views are so great that I feel I must make this small disclaimer...."

> volume pedals and eventually also his/her voice, while being surrounded by a formidable apparatus of multiple microphones (one attached to the player's throat), tape-delay systems and a ring modulator, and two or more "assistants" behind the mixing desk who constantly monitor, amplify, record, deform, play back and eventually "erase" the cello's "transcendent" monologue (Barrett, 1998, p. 3).

As the cellist is increasingly forced into a tight corner, overloaded with contradictory and mutually annihilating tasks, an exploded "drama" takes place, occurring within the confines of the performer-instrument conflict rather than situated in any extra-musical or theatrical project. This train of thought has been pursued more recently by Barrett himself, albeit in quite a different manner. In a work such as *Tract* (1988-1996) for solo piano, the last 200 years of Western classical performance practice suddenly collapse; only shards of a past relationship are brought back for iconic value. The conceit of projecting a traditionally confident, totalized vision is no longer in the foreground. Rather, in the way Barrett transparently lays out physical conundrums, an X-ray of the performer's own physical relationship with his instrument begins to emerge. No longer are performer and instrument perceived as one single entity, merged in a state of complete identification, but two separate entities. The *drama* is now played out in the existential conflict between performer and instrument, which might eventually lead to a new paradigm of listener-performer interaction. The listener's energies are now effectively marshaled in the deconstruction of the performative self through a transparent dissection of the performer's relationship with his instrument. (Not surprisingly, Barrett has been criticized as "oppressive" for daring to question this last sacrosanct area of the classical performance tradition...Gould would most certainly have appreciated the dissective qualities of Barrett's work (being a fanatical dissector of his own performances), but not the degree to which the performer is consequently stripped of his self-assurance in the process!). A new identification is created between the listener and this tangibly frail, no longer over-confident person on stage, coming to terms with him/herself through the medium of the concert. Much more than a simply voyeuristic, titillating relationship, the audience member is asked to question his/her active role in the social fabric of the concert.

In Xenakis' *Evryali*, the notion of failure doesn't come into play inasmuch as the performer is always required to engage the larger sonic picture adequately enough so that he gives the impression that he/she is playing everything. *Evryali* becomes a largely personal conflict, a struggle with oneself to project a successful image to an audience (the Olympian bravura is still omnipresent), despite the overwhelming odds. The roots of a new performative paradigm lie there for the taking, though few have ventured there in recent years. *Evryali* deliberately

oversteps the body, transgresses it, by projecting an austere *outside-time* phenomenon into the abyss between the performer and the instrument, revealing an endless stream of possibilities of action between these two solitudes. (Xenakis' arborescent graph—the outside-time generator—enacts, when faithfully translated, eventual performative impossibilities). A courageous and deliberate act of faith is required from the performer; the composer sets this in motion and can only hope that the performer will use it to transcend the body (and one's self-imposed, often unconscious, set of limitations) and to open up new realms of perception and physicality.

In 1998, still ensconced in the contemporary music scene as 'star performer', having increasingly difficult, nigh impossible works written for me, with the increasing expectation that failure would inevitably ensue, I began developing a series of approaches to the piano which had implications far beyond the development of a purely musical language. These techniques, which I named the 'Theatre of Entropy' (referring to the diminishing returns of impossible notated works), mainly dealt with the moment of interface between performer and instrument, not only including physical conceptions but also—crucially—psychological constructs. The physical dimension was articulated mainly by a decoupling of sound-producing gestures from the resultant sound, a series of involuntary, quasi-spastic gestures producing half-baked, imprecise, broken attacks, the aporias of conventional keyboard technique. Eschewing all peripheral, modern sound-producing techniques (plucking, strumming), I focused exclusively on the simple, but mechanically complex moment of interface between the pianist and the surface of the keyboard, as such returning the onus of experiment on the musician. I often employed *slow transitions of bodily comportments*, in which the basic textural material remains static while the filters/sieves through which the material passes undergo transformation, i.e., the degree of bodily receptivity/flexibility. This creates a sonic result which is ill-defined, mysterious. The listener is constantly aware of significant changes, but is unable to put his finger on exactly what those changes are.

The nature of what constitutes an idea is also repeatedly put into question in my music. I am mainly interested in ideas that have not yet reached a *full-fledged* stage of development. This is manifested a) on a pragmatic, surface level, by creating half-sounds, 'slurring' on the surface of the keys, never making a great effort to articulate an idea proper, not encouraging any strong structural delimitations; and b) on an ideational level: the sounds are all well-executed, well-played, traditionally articulated, but the idea at the source is at an unformed, *pre-concert* stage. The question remains: what makes an idea an idea and can one negociate the continuum between an idea and a non- or pre-idea?

One of the ways in which one can effectively test this notion is through the deliberate prolongation of ideas beyond their standard lifespan, even way beyond. (The idea that a particular idea could have a predetermined lifespan is a notion assessed and maintained through the standard Western classical canon.) This is achieved by setting a fixed, mandatory duration within which the improvisation takes place. The duration is unusually long and forces the idea to either develop or to allow its un-formedness to become the centre of the discourse, never settling into a totalizable reality. I am interested in endless digression which does not ever intend to resolve itself into intelligibility of a teleological kind. Rather, the digression is the main topic. The idea of *process* becomes frozen, imitates itself, feeds off its own febrility, veers off constantly, but never as a prelude to hierarchization. Also, the emphasis that is placed onto this digression *in extremis* leads at times to a deliberate confusion of intent, where one parameter stays fixed while the others keep slipping, eroding. One is forced to question the apparent banality of the process at hand, without ever being able to ascertain it as fact or fiction.

The constant, convulsive utilization of such denaturing techniques eventually led to a self-generating feedback loop in *American Dreaming* (1999), in which unintentional sounds, produced involuntarily, are then consciously channeled, refined and directed, balanced-out, or thrown out of whack. The circular nature of this process eventually begins radiating outwards in the form of increasingly psychological energies from the performer caught up in the throes of experimentation. The site of investigation now became enlarged to include a psychological component to this increasingly de-differentiated, variegated interaction.

The medium is at least half of the message

le contrepoint académique (sic) (2000)

> Human beings are to a great extent unknowable to themselves. Passing through each of us is a continual flow of motor and emotional impulses we are taught to give conventional names—'hunger', 'lust', 'aversion', 'attraction'. But these labels are neither truthful nor accurate; condensing our wide field of impulses into a few nameable categories suppresses our awareness of the infinity of tones and feeling gradations that are part of the original impulse. As each impulse is shaped in accordance with the limited number of labels available in a society, the sense of contact with their original ambiguous flavor is lost. [...] We all tend to forget that our monolithic self is the product of a learned perceptual system, in which the constraints of convention and habit pile up to deaden our ability to scan those freedom-giving contradictions of our impulsive life. These contradictions are really doors; doors to understanding that the monoliths you perceive as blocking your path to happiness are, in fact, clouds of language and impulse in continual circulation. (Foreman, 1992, p. 3 and 29)

My early works were intended as X-rays of the proscenium-audience dialectic — the basic social format of the concert — by subverting the basic power-structure enacted between the onstage hero (the performer) bearing the *ultimate truth* and the captive *disciple* (the listener-viewer). In challenging the authority of the performer on stage, I sought to undermine the existing hierarchical and political structures within which concert music is presented and open them up to progressive conceptions.

In order to bring about substantive change in the listener-viewer's position with regard to the performer, I began to look outside of music to unearth possible catalysts for further investigation.

Through the invocation of an "academic, dusty, textbook, archaic, idealized counterpoint, essentially impossible and unrealizable", *le contrepoint académique (sic)* (2000) was the first attempt at creating a work, which in its ritual could not be absorbed according to conventional paradigms. At the time, I had been impressed by Language poet Charles Bernstein's article "Artifice of Absorption" (1992, pp. 9-89), especially in its dissection of ideas of *essentialization* or *monolithization* — reductions to fictional, but easily graspable essences that, though easy to describe, suffer from a critically diminished capacity for diversity. At times, even the concept of actively projecting one's performative fruits to the audience — standard practice for any performer-as-conduit — was deliberately transgressed.

In the early video works of Bruce Nauman, the artist performs simple, repetitive activities in his studio, the nature of which are described in the various titles: *Stamping in the Studio, Slow Angle Walk, Bouncing in the Corner* (all from 1968). These works, each lasting 60 minutes (the length of a videotape), though destined to be observed after the fact, are not performed for the viewer, but are private experiments, destined to unlock bodily comportments and usher in bodily failure (appropriately, *Beckett Walk* is the subtitle for the second work). To transfer these private comportments to a public arena, as was attempted in *le contrepoint académique (sic)*, was a clearly alienating strategy, destined to provoke an unorthodox type of response from the Victoriaville Festival viewer, who has been conditioned to accept death-defying outward demonstrations of instrumental prowess as a matter of course. (I have often thought that, regarding concert ritual, it was easier to confound a new music spectator than one attending the most conservative musical event).

By providing the listener-viewer with a continuously shifting, ambiguous, conflicting set of relationships between the performer-protagonist and his public, I wanted to create a situation which resisted easy absorption into dominant ideologies. By constantly sending out contradictory messages to the viewer, I wanted

to gain his/her active mobilization in the concert ritual. It was my intent to provide the viewer with *anti-absorptive* strategies — contradictions and confrontations between various physical-musical impulses — requiring him/her to formulate an active, critical, analytical response, effectively ensuring the artwork remains electrically charged with potential meaning and permeable to interpretation, yet irreducibly complex and stubbornly resistant to summarization.

The goal of *contrepoint académique (sic)*, as with the rest of my work, is not to offer clarifying solutions, which would simplify and in effect render the work impotent, but to raise questions, contradictions, insinuations, leaving to the listener the responsibility to think and to ask his/her own questions.

The internalization of responsible viewing

Blowback at Breakfast (2003)

English Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham outlined the design in 1787 of a model prison, the *panopticon*, a round-the-clock surveillance machine. A circular structure, the panopticon allows an observer to ostensibly observe all the inmates without them being able to tell whether they are being observed. This "invisible omniscience" eventually has the effect of leading the prisoner to internalize the external gaze, to police himself. In *Blowback at Breakfast: A Dr. Kissinger Mystery* (2003), the listener-viewer is surrounded by stimuli, placed in an environment which compel a response effectively breaking down the power structure separating him/her from the performer.

The tables have been turned: the *truth* no longer emanates from the protagonist on stage, a Henry Kissinger-like figure dryly reciting official congressional testimony, but from the 17 mini-speakers scattered throughout the hall, *leaking* secret conversations between President Richard Nixon and Kissinger directly to the viewer (the number of speakers refers to the 17 White House officials wiretapped by the FBI under orders from Kissinger). Official *lies* trigger dissimulated truth. The listener is placed in a unique position, where he/she will be able to interpret the ongoing onstage ritual under a more subversive, critical light. However, the protagonist is still able to control (to a degree) the content and frequency of the *covert disclosures* via a speech-triggered noise gate, functioning unpredictably (altered circuitry). Both protagonist and viewer are therefore caught in a perverse double-bind relationship, in which the latter, placed in a uniquely critical position, will attempt to separate truth from *spin*, while the former, paranoid and over-aware of his projected image, will increasingly seek to control the aspects of his persona which can be revealed. The protective membrane surrounding him now in tatters, a speculative space between his spun stage image and his true nature is pried wide open.

In my work, contradictions unfolding over (usually) long durations never settle into a coherent larger picture which, once understood, can then be consigned to the memory hole. Raymond Carney, authority on the films of John Cassavetes, expresses it perfectly:

> Cassavetes offers us *concatenated knowing* in place of *consolidating knowing*. Rather than rushing to a portable meaning, the viewer is forced to live through a changing course of events. In this view of it, meaning is always in transition: it lives in endless, energic substitutions of one interest and focus for another, in continuous shifts of tone, in fluxional slides of relationship. [...] In Cassavetes's work, rather than cumulating, succeeding meanings are orchestrated so as to erase or war with preceding ones. [...] Meaning is proliferated away from all static or unifying centres of significance... (Carney, 1994, p. 254)

The Position of the Listener

Watergating (2005-2006)

Created over a two year period, *Watergating (*subtitled *Selected Hearings)* (2005-2006) uses historically charged material as a pretext for investigating potentially transformative perceptual phenomena.

At the centre of this work are the concepts of hearing (acoustical phenomena) and listening (socially or politically mediated hearing), glimpsed through a visuality derived from early 1970s video art. Indeed, the period of 1973-1974 is seen as a crucial turning point, both historically speaking, where modes of aurality and language are increasingly scrutinized (especially through the ubiquitous, televised Watergate hearings) and artistically, where the television increasingly becomes the site of visual experimentation. The Watergate scandal of 1973-1974 is therefore intended as a door through which these concepts can be critically investigated, providing as they do a rich array of modes of hearing and listening.

Listening is considered here as an inherently political action, constituting nothing less than an X-ray of the listener's own political alignment and self-positioning within the social structure. The work is intended to bring out these alignments into the open, prying open a Pandora's Box of assumptions and underlying perceptions enabling (and sometimes urging) repositionings and reformulations. Rather than a direct transmission of political-informational content (indicting or exonerating the main players), the politics of this work are situated on a *pre-activist* level, working with the conditions prior to political mobilization, inherently indivisible from the socially bent act of listening and the physical nature of hearing. In other words, the artwork aims to substantially challenge (through a variety of conceptual means, usually circuitous and rife with contradictions) the modus operandi through which political information is channeled to us; in the absence of any attack on the roots of political apathy,

the message, however earnest, can only slide off the recipient without the slightest dent.

Each of the four sections of the work places the listener in a discrete environment in which the 'rules of engagement' resist conventional categorization. Though *Watergating* is ostensibly a concert work, in which the viewer is seated, observing the fundamental precepts of the proscenium, his position is continuously de- and re-centered. I conclude this text by pointing the reader towards an online, detailed description of *Watergating* (Couroux, 2005), as it accurately outlines the conceptual underpinning of my work and the essentially semiotic slipperiness which I believe must be at the root of any attempt to reclaim the listener as a probing, active, critical thinker.

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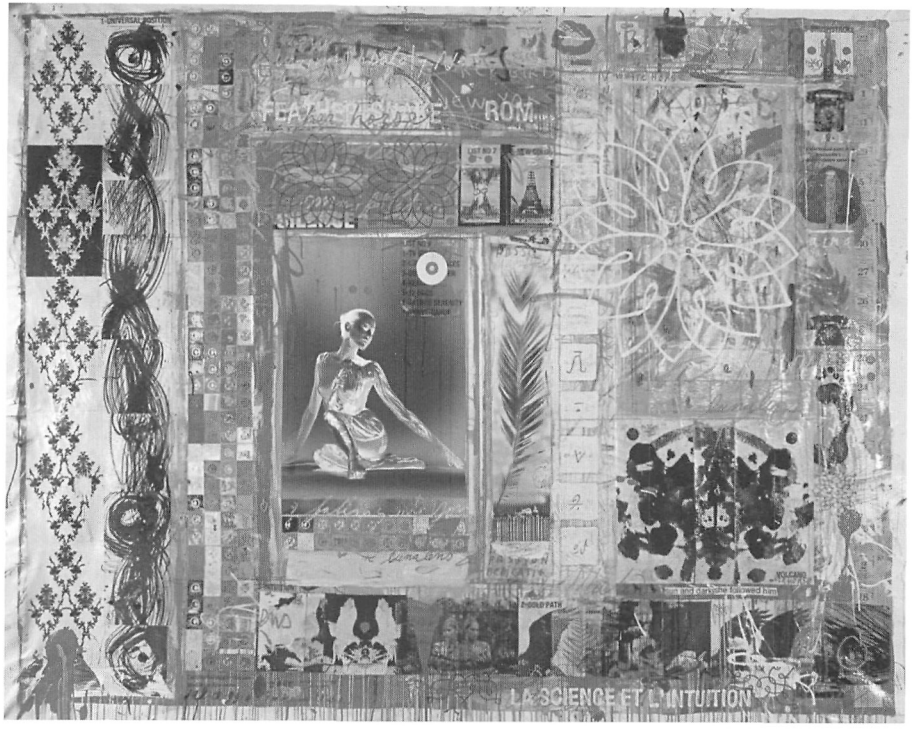

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