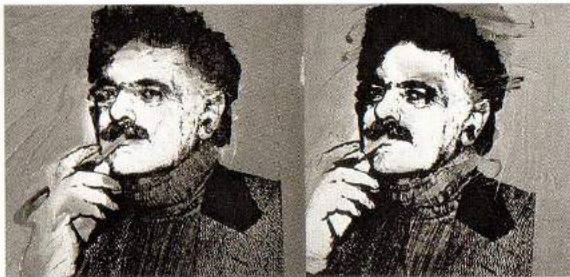# THE LIFE OF FORMS:
FRAGMENTATION AND MONTAGE

Jean-François Chevrier

John Coplans is a duality: the formalist and the other. Yet each of the two is also multiple, overlapping and intersecting to the point where they can no longer be clearly distinguished. This is why Coplans's work offers an exemplary solution to the artistic dilemmas of the 1960s and to his own hesitations before the difficulties of self-definition, stemming from the cultural divisions to which he has been exposed.

Viewed from the outside, this duality corresponds more or less to the distinction between Donald Judd and Andy Warhol, two artists whom Coplans has exhibited and written about. On one side, there is Judd's hyperformalism of geometric abstraction, stripped of its last organic residues; on the other, Warhol's figurative art, tied directly into the commercial imagery of the media and stripped of the hedonist refinements of painterly facture. Judd detested Warhol. Responding in advance to the minimalist cube (whose most rigorous practitioner, it is true, was not Judd), Warhol piled up boxes of Brillo pads. Following Clement Greenberg, Judd reproached Warhol for reorienting art along the lines of the kitsch spectacle of mass culture. Warhol feigned ignorance of Judd, or considered him a pure product of the academy. The two artists have this in common: they have aged poorly, and their mutual disdain for each other seems justified

Andy Warhol, *Portrait of John Coplans*, 1984

when one considers their final productions. Warhol had sought to be amoral, replacing quality with quantity; but his powerful decision, flouting the norms of high art, ultimately degenerated into cynicism. Judd, on the other hand, continually had the word "quality" on his lips: he never stopped judging, drawing up hierarchical lists. Not without cause, he denounced the corruption and venality of his contemporaries, but he further inflated the commercializing trend with his own products. Between Judd and Warhol it is therefore quite difficult to choose. And Coplans did not. He preferred a middle course, renouncing his own past as an abstract painter and keeping his distance from media-oriented art.

When he arrived in America from England in 1960, Coplans was doing abstract painting inspired by the postwar New York school. He settled in San Francisco because it reminded him of Cape Town, South Africa, where he had passed half his childhood, and also because he had not seen the most interesting new art (such as that of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns) that was being made in New York.

San Francisco was the cultural center of the West Coast. Los Angeles may have been the city of cinema, but San Francisco had literary circles and a cultural concentration like the European capitals, with flexible life-styles, an openness toward popular culture, a site of natural beauty, and the continuity of vernacular models. The city held another attraction for Coplans. He had spent his childhood between London and South Africa without establishing deep roots, and his service in the British army during World War II, in Ethiopia, Ceylon, and Burma, had taken him far from Western civilization. The principal city of northern California, with its large Chinese community, was the most Oriental of New World cities.

Somewhat later, he discovered that in the nineteenth century (in the time of Carleton Watkins) San Francisco had been a very active center of American photography, both related to, and independent from, the European figurative tradition. In 1960, Coplans's primary concern was the search for new pictorial references, beyond the European debates over abstraction (geometric, lyrical, or informal), and outside the early accomplishments of the New York school in the 1950s, whose reinterpretation he had seen in the work of artists such as Morris Louis, who had exhibited in London at the end of the decade.

Following the example of Clyfford Still, an important group of painters had gathered in San Francisco. Among the Abstract Expressionists, Still was the most violently opposed to the European norms of fine pictorial craftsmanship and logical construction. His vehemence sprang from his conviction of independence. Still was a paragon of individual fulfillment, of "being one's own man." Coplans saw this self-reliance as the specific trait defining the American ideal of freedom.

Although he had devoted himself to painting after leaving the army in 1946, Coplans had not definitively fixed on being an artist. He came to the United States to find something that would stimulate his activity as a painter, but it was not his exclusive goal. His interests were simultaneously much wider and more personal. In his eyes, the uncompromising attitude of a man like Still took on an existential or even political meaning, which no doubt could be accessed through painting but was finally outside of it. It was not long before he discovered a diversity of artistic practices and cultures in northern and southern California which were, in fact, outside the traditional categories of the fine arts. He stopped painting.

Two personalities played a decisive role in his decision, aside from the artists he met. The first was Walter Hopps, who in 1957 had founded the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles with Edward Kienholz. Hopps had exhibited the artists who refused to heed the formalist rallying cries in the East. Wallace Berman, for example, had his first and only show at Ferus in 1957. Hopps went on to direct the Pasadena Museum,

where he presented the first group exhibition of Pop artists, "New Painting of Common Objects," in 1962; a Marcel Duchamp retrospective followed one year later. Coplans took over Hopps's position from 1967 to 1970. The other important figure was Philip Leider, who created *Artforum* magazine in 1962 with Coplans's assistance. Conceived as a vehicle of artistic information on, and primarily for, the West Coast, *Artforum* had already gained a national audience by the time it shifted its base to New York in 1967. Coplans successively occupied practically all the slots on the editorial board, finally taking over the management of the magazine as editor-publisher from 1972 to 1977.

Defending the most diverse West Coast artists with an extraordinary intensity, especially those who were working in a literary, surrealist, assemblage style (Berman, Bruce Conner, Kienholz), Coplans nonetheless concentrated on two distinct poles. One was occupied by a group of artists that included Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and Craig Kauffman, gathered under the heading of "Formal Art," an expression coined by Coplans in a 1964 article in *Artforum*. The other was the Pop current, which at that time included East Coast artists such as Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein (Coplans devoted an exhibition and a book to Lichtenstein) as well as Californians Edward Ruscha, Wayne Thiebaud, and Joe Goode, all interested in the "common object." Coplans never paid much attention to established painters such as Richard Diebenkorn and Sam Francis; but neither did he perceive the importance of the young Bruce Nauman.

One important point must be made: Coplans never directly intervened in the theoretical debates over formalism which marked the criticism—and to a certain degree the art—of the 1960s. In his work as a critic, he always preferred to deal with artists as singular figures, in their specificity. Only when it was necessary, when a group of artists displayed a particularly close connection, did he adopt a thematic approach. The classifications he established fall into two opposing categories: the "formal" art of those who were identified, wrongly, as the representatives of minimal art in California; and Pop art, which Coplans related to its few historical precedents in an exhibition he organized at the Oakland Museum in 1963, one year after Hopps's show in Pasadena.

It was not a question for Coplans of opposing formalism to an art based on social or sociological content. In 1970-73 he was very close to Robert Smithson, who at that time was the artist most deeply involved in a critique of the dogma upheld by Greenberg and his disciples. But form had always been a decisive parameter for Coplans, and this allegiance kept him from taking a strictly conceptual or speculative tack. He saw form as the trait that specifically distinguishes an artistic event from the other experiences of knowledge, by according a radical privilege to perception, over and above verbal identifica-

tion and syntactic articulation. Like Robert Irwin, Coplans had ceased to view formalism as a constructive syntax permitting the fabrication of objects, specific as they might be; formalism was the experience of perceptual situations which heighten or even exalt formal uncertainties.

This was the state of mind with which Coplans approached East Coast minimal art and Smithson's unorthodox ideas: the reflective objects (*Mirror Displacements*), the geometric fictions (*Pointless Vanishing Point*), the displacements of specific materials (*Nonsites*), and the scientific and cultural paradoxes (entropic progression, the accumulation of antimatter, instant monuments). The abstraction of the 1950s was redefined as a negative energy inscribed in the contemporary environment (the suburbs, the deserted fringe areas). The empty white cube of the gallery was treated as a conversion zone between suburban space and natural desert landscapes, charged with archaic resonances. Thus, in Smithson's work, Coplans found a powerful synthesis between the experiments in formal perception carried out by the West Coast artists and the ambiguously common imagery of Pop, at once literal and parodic.

When he began to take a serious interest in photography in the late 1970s, Coplans rediscovered everything that had been distilled from his contact with contemporary art since 1960. Two photographers immediately stood out: Carleton Watkins, the landscape photographer of the American West in the 1860s and 1870s, and Weegee (Arthur Fellig), the photojournalist of the 1940s, who collected images of crime and suffering in the streets of New York. Watkins had crystallized the type of landscape to which Smithson's monumental in situ constructions referred. Weegee had coolly assembled a sensationalist imagery that anticipated Warhol's indifferent shock iconography. Coplans was also interested in the photography of Brancusi, who had been the decisive example for Carl Andre; he was intrigued by the sculptor's desire for a visual multiplication of his plastic creations. Brancusi's photographic experiments foreshadowed the perceptual situations elaborated by 1960s artists in their effort to go beyond the model of the self-contained object.

In 1978, Coplans published a long essay about Watkins in *Art in America*, in which he compared the photographer's work to the paradigmatic figure of Clyfford Still. Although Watkins's pictures deal with the objective givens of the visible world, they also convey another sensation: "a sense of mythical revelation that somehow manages to impart an allegory of American space very similar to the large abstract paintings of Clyfford Still, who also came out of the West." Coplans examined the stereoscopic views of Yosemite Valley, characterized by a marked accentuation of the three-dimensional illusion:
Though stereos are small in size, they cannot be thought of as small photographs. Paradoxically, when

viewed in a stereo holder, the stereo image seems larger than the image viewed with the naked eye because of the way in which it consumes the total field of vision. It provokes a sensation similar to that of looking through a pair of binoculars, where peripheral vision is cut off, and sight intensely magnified.[1]

This interpretation echoes certain observations Coplans made exactly ten years before, about Douglas Wheeler, on the occasion of Wheeler's show at the Pasadena Museum. Coplans describes the kinesthetic nature of the perceptual situations created by the Californian artist. The spectator's field of vision is occupied by the light-paintings' emanation into the three-dimensional space of the gallery. When the form confronting him overflows the strict limits of its geometric definition, the viewer becomes a visitor who is physically implicated in a perceptual situation. In Watkins's work, the extreme simplicity of the natural motif is rendered exorbitant by stereoscopic reproduction, which intensifies the illusion, producing a simulacrum that transforms the miniature image to full scale before the viewer's eyes.

Warhol and Lichtenstein subjected their enlarged reproductions of images and objects to a similar anti-compositional process of simplification, resulting in the same adjustment to the scale of the human body. In Ellsworth Kelly's work, Coplans had recognized this bias toward anticompositional simplicity, founded on Kelly's attentive study of formal motifs isolated by their photographic framing. Thus, his 1978 essay on Watkins brought together a wide range of previous interests. He left *Artforum* that same year, to direct the Akron Art Museum, Ohio, far from New York. It was there that he made his first photographic self-portraits, the germ of the project undertaken more systematically in 1984.

The decision to give up all institutional and critical activity, reached in late 1979 after two years in Akron, away from the center of events, had the effect of restoring something akin to an artistic virginity. Its emblematic model could be Watkins. But Coplans's virginity was that of a man who was finally "civilized," who through a long process of assimilation had slowly adapted to the Western culture of post-industrial capitalism, without finding a satisfactory definition of himself. He had, in effect, been unable to identify comfortably with any of the functions he had performed. In the same way, his enthusiasm and support for artists had always been intensified by a critical reticence, which he now attributes to his Jewish upbringing, a background that had little meaning for him until he came to America.

Coplans had not been caught up in the transcendentalism of the West Coast light artists, whom he had admired for their experimental and formal inventiveness. Still (and then Watkins) seemed to him to be

on a better track. He had never completely subscribed to the literalism of postexpressionist geometric art (Frank Stella, Judd), which he sought to resituate in the history of seriality that begins with Monet and was developed during the interwar period, long before the sixties, by European artists as diverse as Alexei von Jawlensky, Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, and Josef Albers (all included in "Serial Imagery," an exhibition curated by Coplans at the Pasadena Museum in 1968). The dogma of formalist abstraction (founded on the notion that European models had been irrevocably surpassed) was quite foreign to Coplans, although he avoided any discussion of it, leaving the critical task to others. He clearly preferred the primitivist (and Jungian) model of Abstract Expressionism, cut with a strong dose of humor and parody. For exactly these reasons, Smithson was probably the only artist with whom he felt genuinely in tune; their relationship ended abruptly with Smithson's tragic accident in 1973. That year, Coplans published a book on Lichtenstein, whose development he had followed closely since the early sixties; but Lichtenstein was the most traditional and the most ambiguous of all the Pop artists, the one whose literal recording of the commercial media environment had always been countered by aspirations to high art. By the end of the seventies, it was clear to Coplans that the American art of the previous decade, which he equated with his most positive idea of America, had become a gigantic commercial farce.
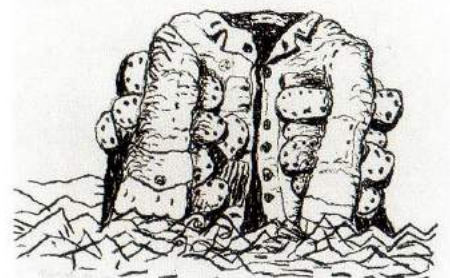
Philip Guston, *Coat*, 1980-81
81x108cm., courtesy Gemini G.E.L.

In 1980, he wrote his last critical text, devoted to Philip Guston; it was published as a brochure by Gemini G.E.L. two months before the artist's death. Since the mid-sixties, Guston had abandoned the lyrical abstraction which characterized his contribution to Abstract Expressionism, developing a grotesque figurative vein instead; it was a satirical reaction to the demand for purity in abstract art, which had become too detached from the social and political context of the period. Harold Rosenberg spoke of Guston's "liberation from detachment."[2] Writing at the moment when he recommenced his own artistic career, interrupted twenty years earlier by his rejection of his abstract paintings, Coplans made no comment on this figurative turn in Guston's art. He situated the work beyond the moment of shock it produced for an audience which still clung to the style of the 1950s:

The mood of Guston's new work is one of pervasive silence. His imagery is languid and sleep-charged, private, personal and arcane. The time frame is non-linear, mixed, zigzagging elusively between the present and the past. Nor are we certain at any given moment as to whether Guston is awake or asleep or, implausibly, both. His imagery is at once zany and sinister, part dream-world, part real. Guston's art is autobiographical, distilled from ruminations. The brushwork and drawing imparts a feeling of his persona. It is as if Guston had abstracted aspects of his own craggy features and his slow-moving, bulky

figure, transforming them into elements of line and shape. He parodies himself and his subject mat-
ter, menacingly, plays the clown at the same time that he ironically solicits our sense of pity.

These lines cannot be directly applied to the photographic self-portraits produced by Coplans since 1984. But the essential idea is there: the turn back upon the self, the enormous personal and autobiographical charge, the ambiguity between present and past, between objective description and dream vision, the self-parody and provocation, the call to empathy. In short, an alliance of contrary impulses conjugated in humor and plastic abstraction, applied to a subject matter that remains essentially figurative and free of all decorative hedonism. This alliance (not to say synthesis) is formulated at the end of the text: "With his humorous and droll invention, Guston maintains a precarious balance between contradictions. This balance is the stuff of fairy tales, both grotesque and charmed."

The meeting of the grotesque and the marvelous under the auspices of humor is reminiscent of a long tradition, common to the visual arts and to literature. For Guston, its primary representative in the twentieth century was Kafka. This tradition is connected to Surrealism, and also to romanticism, especially in Germany. In his theoretical essay on the essentials of caricature, entitled "On the Essence of Laughter," Baudelaire holds Hoffmann's fairy tales to be the fulfillment of the modern grotesque as the "absolute comic," reflecting the essentially divided nature of the human being, yet carried away, in Hoffmann's case, by a mood of gaiety in which the fantastic continually verges on the marvelous. This is the line followed by Guston, then by Coplans. But the distinction between Romantic or post-Romantic literature and the modern realism of the visual arts determines the limits within which both artists remain. Baudelaire refers to the "satanic laugh" as the exalted expression of a fallen state. The laugh, in its physiological nature, is described as a "symptom." It indicates first of all the feeling of superiority that humans have over other living creatures, and particularly over animals; but this feeling is fragile, because its impossible pretension reveals its glaring contradiction, fallen man. In Western civilization, marked for Baudelaire by the fatality of sin, the comic is "absolute"; it becomes grotesque when it expresses the satanic condition of internal rupture. However, its essential gravity can be given a lighter touch by more subtle minds, such as Hoffmann's. In the history of caricature and particularly in Daumier, whom Baudelaire cites as the best caricaturist of his time, the satanic laugh is checked by an awareness of social circumstances, a concern for morality, a sense of measure, and finally a certain "good-naturedness," all of which restrain the comic, holding it back from the absolute. One can add that justice, as incarnate in Daumier's caricature-types, is the disgrace of bourgeois society rather than a faraway ideal.

In the works of Guston and Coplans, both of them Jewish, humor and a taste for the grotesque go hand in hand with self-derision, used as a parodic response to the severity of an internalized law, as in Kafka. Combined with the good-naturedness of modern realism, this attitude is quite different from the prophetic ravings (or "vaticinations") of a Christian conscience swinging back and forth between rebellion and the hope of grace, between the audacity of transgression and the relief of willing self-sacrifice. As misshapen and strange as they may be, human appearances are less the sign of a fallen state than the exuberance of a common reality, trivial and prosaic, restrained by force of humor from all mystifying or mystificatory idealizations. But this reality does not become the object of systematic depreciation, which can never be more than self-punitive abjection. What must be recognized above all is the realist logic that Mikhail Bakhtin isolates in the abolition of distances produced by parodic laughter. "It is precisely laughter," Bakhtin notes, "that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity."[3]

For a time, while disengaging itself from the heroic language of Abstract Expressionism, Pop art had been a contemporary form of the comic described by Bakhtin. By 1980, it was neatly tucked away in the history of art, or completely absorbed into the mythologies of advertising and the mass media. It was at this point that Coplans began leaning toward Daumier. He exhibited John Heartfield's photomontages in Akron in 1979. Through Guston, he had begun to understand that at the price of a few figurative distortions, the Abstract Expressionist model could help him return to his true artistic departure point (before his arrival in the United States and his involvement in a variety of peripheral activities). Yet it was by no means a question of reaching back to a "pure," nonrepresentational form of painting. He needed more trivial imagery to transform his own heroic temptations, which had already led him so far afield, and

Self-Portrait, Hands, 1978

to abolish the distance that separated him from himself. He also needed a narrative thread to articulate his own life history, after having explored the creative lives of so many other artists.

Photography was the perfect tool. It allowed Coplans to take the artistic image directly from the contemporary environment, with a minimum of intermediary steps and in a very brief span of time (or in practically no time at all, when Polaroid film was used). He needed four years (1980-84) to experiment

with the tool's possibilities, to make mistakes, to stray, before coming back to the path he had identified from the very start (as a game, to pass the time, when he made his first self-portraits in 1978). During this intervening period, he met Lee Friedlander, for whom he arranged the commission that led to Friedlander's book *Factory Valley*. Like an attentive student, he explored all the established genres of straight photography. He took snapshots in the street; he did portraits using a tripod. Impressed by Jan Groover, he even tried the still life. Nothing agreed with him. He was satisfied with neither collecting chance snapshots nor even with assembling a gallery of portraits, as he did for a while. However effective it was, the practice of photography as an exercise in vision, a "way of seeing," remained too centered on the snap of the shutter, neglecting both the conceptual aspects of the project and the plastic parameters of the form-object. Yet Coplans's difficulties were above all of a moral order. Despite his interest in Weegee, he could not accept the voyeuristic element behind the activity of compulsive recording, which defines—and limits—the entire tradition whose reference points are André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Walker Evans.

When he had completed his trial runs, Coplans knew, though perhaps confusedly, what he needed. He confronted the personal stakes of his new situation unblinkingly. As he recognized somewhat later, it was a matter of forging an "artistic identity" by assembling the disjointed fragments of his past on the incontestable foundation of present experience. When he resolutely turned the camera back on himself, the image of a disjointed body, a body in parts, emerged as a necessity. But just as Guston had felt the need to reject pure painting and to tell stories, Coplans required a narrative thread. He had to find a guiding idea, something to orient his self-investigation. His idea came from the primitivist background of Abstract Expressionism. It can be summed up in one word: the springing from a post-Darwinian vitalism with Jungian overtones, this idea would flow through his work like an underground current, distancing yet also linking together the discrete facts produced in realism's "zone of maximum proximity."

This functional idea is a model and a serious joke. It allows the artist to affirm the existence of a genetic memory which aligns ontogenesis on phylogenesis, by regrouping within a present form all the morphological precedents from which that form emerged. The articulations of phylogenetic evolution are inscribed in the present constitution of the human body (any human body): the relation between the upright position and the prehensile mobility of the hands, freed from the function of locomotion, is a distinctive trait common to all individuals of the human species, a trait which continues to link them, across their specific physiological difference, to their ancestors in the animal kingdom. This genealogical structure refers the singularity of the historical individual to a prehistoric process of individuation

The parental figures inscribed in the memory of the individual, John Coplans, transform the roles of genetic evolution. Thus, they can reappear along with reminiscences of the prehistoric body. A male figure is at once his mother, his father, a monkey, a worm, and everything else, all the way back to the "primordial soup." Double, multiple, without fixed identity, protean, this figure is thrust anew into what the paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan called "the dense thicket of terrestrial genealogy."

With the construction of this model, or this parascientific fiction, Coplans projected himself as far as possible from the geometric order of antiorganic literalism which had tempted him in his paintings twenty years before. All he retained of literalism was the imperative of simplicity—noncomposition—corresponding to the evident visual immediacy produced by photographic recording, but also evoking an original nakedness, opposed to the complexities of history. He associated the first photographs of his hands, in 1988, with the richly suggestive principle of one-shot imagery that he had discovered in the work of Ellsworth Kelly. But the primitivist model closes off any possible return to literal simplicity, freeing up a network of analogies that is no longer reducible to the limits of a constituted identity, be it singular or systematic, characteristic or serial.

When we speak of analogies, Surrealism immediately comes to mind. Coplans never appeals to such a precedent, always refusing the model of literary illustration. He plays around with exotic formal quotation, drawing on his intimate knowledge of African, Asiatic, and Oceanian art; at times he even feigns a wish to cast his net over the big game of Jung's collective unconscious. Gathered in an artist's book, *A Body of Work* (1987), his first images are an imaginary museum where the grotesque figures of antiquity meet Cycladic goddesses, Olympian heroes, and Christian martyrs, all in a joyously profane melee that would warm the heart of Marshall McLuhan. Symbols of fertility and of warrior strength follow one upon the other in the synoptic table of a universal body in perpetual metamorphosis. The acuity of photographic description evokes the brutal cuts and delicate curves of traditional archaic sculpture.

At this time, Coplans could still be classed among the artists, so numerous since the nineteenth century, who have used photography to stage themselves in varying roles and to fictively multiply their identities. This strategy actually did suit him, to a degree. Indeed, he participated in the exhibition, "Staging the Self," at London's National Portrait Gallery in 1987. But that reading was already a misunderstanding. A year later, when he took part in the first version of "Another Objectivity" (also in London, at the Institute of Contemporary Art), it became very clear that his intentions were far removed from any strategy of idiosyncratic staging. The imaginary museum tightened its focus, and though the

sculptural metaphor did not disappear, it evolved into a model of greater complexity. It is here, paradoxically, that the principle of formal simplicity and a certain model of seriality both play an effective role, sharpening the definition of the project and lending new energy to its plastic realization, beyond the imaginary exuberance of the initial forms.

The pseudo-syncretism of the imaginary museum, necessarily parodic and profane, was replaced by a far more homogenous and common imagery centered at first on the single motif of the hand. In an unpublished postscript to his second artist's book, *Hand* (1988), Coplans notes:

In these images the hand is transformed by isolation from the rest of the body and re-presented at a vastly larger size. The viewer is not aware of the rest of the body to which the hand is attached, the hand in its isolation releasing the specifics of association. The images are accentuated by isolation, magnification, and framing much in the same manner as one-shot imagery, a convention of modern abstract art. . . . The hand in this kind of imagistic isolation becomes like a body part Rorschach, a free-floating signifier that allows each viewer individual interpretative reading, particularly as narrative in the form of known or recognizable sign language is suppressed or avoided. The hand hereby becomes a text capable of many and complex interpretations, an agent of evocation, and a malleable instrument of performance with an ever-expanding level of impossible meanings.

The hands talk. One of them even smiles. In any event, the interpretation is left to the viewer-reader: this is where the imaginary exuberance now lies. The dense "thicket of terrestrial genealogy" is a mental skein, a free network of associations generated by the variations of an expressive morphology. Numerous photocopy "studies" date from this period, and constitute a mechanical and graphic relay or supplement to the photographic images. In their singularity, these studies resist syntactic articulation, just as a hand, isolated and given over to its own mobility, can detach itself from the organism. But gestures, when they are frozen into figures by the stop-action effect of photography, are an opening to speech, just as the evolution of the hand, leaving behind its function of locomotion and specializing in nutritive prehension, freed the mouth to form words. Better yet, the gesture, isolated and gratuitous, itself becomes speech: speech which is visualized, encoded, opened in its turn to rebounding interpretations. Writing.

Writing—and drawing. Indeed, writing for a visual artist is easily transformed into drawing, just as drawing is a form of writing. Writing is a concretization of speech, a formal materialization of signs in letters. The medieval illuminators transformed the design of initial letters into figured ornaments. The sense of fantasy and delicacy of the ornamental line that characterizes calligraphic images is also found in

Coplans's photographic figures. Indeed, he often begins by drawing the composition of the figure to which he then conforms, in a gesture or posture struck before the lens. He also plays on another relation between drawing or writing, one that is well known to nonfigurative painters and calligraphers: the manner whereby the line, common to both drawing and handwriting, occupies and activates the space of the page. For Coplans, adopting photography as an artistic tool meant taking up the possibilities of a pictorial tradition extending back further than easel painting; in this tradition the picture is a graphic inscription before being a composition; it is writing rather than painting, the graphic occupation of a page rather than the composition of a tableau and the fabrication of an image-object. The page of writing and the graphic page are each a leaf of paper (folio), distinct from the planar surface of the painted image in its frame, just as a photographic print on a manipulable sheet is distinct from the tableau in its materiality as a frontal object. But the page, the paper leaf, can also be treated as a picture plane conceived as a tableau. Since the Hand series, Coplans has clearly accentuated the pictorial dimension of his imagery, but without forgetting the graphic and calligraphic dimension of the photographic image. For him, the photographic figure is the planar transposition and pictorial interpretation of a line on a page.

His next sequence of images was just as logical. It was necessary for the multiplicity of figured gestures, like the earlier postures, to merge into the very structure of the image, unfolding formally within it. Already at the end of the 1988 book *Hand,* a triptych opens up as a fold-out, extending outside the volume. In the 1989 collection *Foot,* the majority of the works reproduced are composite panels. The double principle of cutting out and enlarging led necessarily to the technique of mural montage, transforming the autonomous frontality of the tableau into a sequential composition of fragments. The serial model began to appear as insufficient as the singular image; its rigidity could only contradict the multidirectional diversity of interpretation, as well as the tangle of genetic relations.

After his passage from the single, self-contained image to the mural montage, Coplans understood that all forms of publication were incapable of summing up his work, for the linear order of page-bound plates and the miniaturization of printed reproduction necessarily fall short of the perceptual experience offered by the works in an exhibition context. After *Foot,* he ceased producing artist's books. He went back, however, to the motif of the hand, which had revealed the possibilities of montage; and then at last he was able to return to complete figures of the body (still without the head). The knowledge gleaned from the treatment of the fragmentary motifs could be applied to the full body. In 1990, the reclining figure appeared, a male odalisque: this figure, in the company of the large panels of hands from 1988-

90, constituted the key motif of one of the best individual exhibitions Coplans has presented to date, at the Galerie Lelong in New York in 1991.

Faced with the composite panels carried out in the last four years, the viewer can no longer grasp the entire image at a single glance, except by withdrawing to a distance that eliminates the violence of the formal interruptions and reestablishes the figure's continuity. This double reading is one of the major gains of the montage technique. With the movement from near to far, the image wavers between the irregular cut of the fragmentary forms and the coherency of the motif as a whole. As clear as it may be from a distance, despite the interruptions, the identity of the unitary motif (a hand, a foot, a body) never recovers the simplicity of a univocal designation. The visual object, with its morphological complexity, slips free from the unifying grip of its name, conforming instead to disjunctions which feign the uncertainties of perception. Since these disjunctions proceed, fictively at least, from the recurrent profusion of genetic articulations, the formal diversity of a figure as a whole (the male odalisque, for example) can be considered the detailed, faithful exhibition of a state of individuation.

The idea of individuation clearly partakes of the vocabulary of science rather than the lexicon of art history. Yet it accounts almost perfectly for the morphogenetic model: the idea of an inner invention of forms in a self-productive process, which underlies the vitalistic definition of realism in the twentieth-century tradition of "concrete art" and inscribes this tradition, along with its call for anonymous invention, in the continuum of romantic poetics. In addition to Ellsworth Kelly, one may recall Hans Arp and everything he owed to the idea of "genetic imitation" used by Novalis, the late eighteenth-century German Romantic poet, to designate an artistic production that imitates nature in its formative process and not in its constituted forms.[4]

For a contemporary artist to actualize this model, it suffices to disbelieve in it, or to feign disbelief—as Coplans does himself, when he presents his invocation of "the primordial" as a serious joke, a suspended belief. In effect, humor must retain its ascendancy over the history of art and the edifying principles of aesthetics. Between the ideal of concrete art and Coplans's images, there will always be the parodies of Arp by Claes Oldenburg, as well as the unavoidable triviality of photographic naturalism. But one can also speak of a synthesis, a melding of the poetics of modern realism with a premodern rhetoric, in their shared rejection of naturalistic imitation. Coplans's duality is resolved in this difficult blend that allies a production of autonomous and legitimate forces (legitimated by their place in natural history) with the invention of fictions that are historical, unable to claim any other justification.

This is the meeting place of two conceptions of the fragment. One is strong; the other is somewhat weaker, but complementary. The first is exemplified by the figure of the torso, which remains the heroic emblem of the individual's resistance, even to the extremes of physical destruction. When the fragile, articulated members of the body have been eliminated, the central part still remains in a single, solid piece. Thus, Michelangelo prized and glorified the famous *Belvedere Torso* and carried out fragmentary or incomplete works along the lines of this paradigm. Coplans's single images refer back to this plastic model, even when they do not literally represent a torso. In their autonomous singularity, they effectively symbolize the definition of the individual by a vital minimum, that which cannot be further divided without disappearing. Indeed, this is also the most common definition of the individual, since all physiognomic characterization is systematically avoided. With the composite panels, it is the other (weaker) definition of the fragment that comes into play. Here, the interruption of a continuous or unitary form proceeds from a cut that calls for a complement, and for a montage. The fragment in itself cannot claim an autonomous existence, it necessarily evokes the idea of "cropping." The figure as a whole is recomposed in the end, but it remains divided into as many disjointed parts as there are fragments. While the first of these two conceptions belongs to the history of sculpture, the second comes closer to cinema, and also partakes of cinematic representation.

Neither of these two solutions, neither of these two models, is entirely satisfying. The two definitions of the fragment correspond to the process of individuation, worked out in an artistic form. But as autonomous and objective as that form may be, it only allows for a provisional fulfillment of the process. As indicated by the intervals of the montage in the composite panels, the form remains open. Montage is infinite; in any case, its possibilities are far richer than those offered by a technique of fragmentation applied to the production of a single image. Montage also corresponds much better to the uncertainties of perception, which it transforms into rhythmic modulations. However, it tends to encourage an excessive distance from the object being figured and to efface the symbolic significance of the fragment as individual; the process of individuation, therefore, never reaches a positive conclusion. In other words, entropic evolution is more certain than an integration of genetic diversity: indifferentiation hovers on the horizon of the successive distinctions. This difficulty has no resolution.
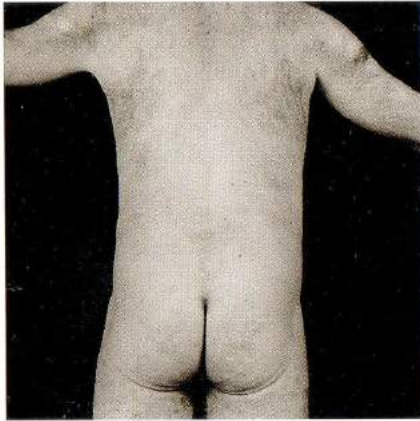
It is sometimes said that the only definitive form of a human being is his cadaver, that is, his material form, from which he will ultimately retreat, shuffling off this "mortal coil," this burden which alone is perfectly similar to itself, since it is nothing but resemblance. Yet even this form, to which the photographic image has so often been compared, does not cease to evolve according to a common tendency

which is specific in each case: the tendency to disintegration. Life, including the life of forms, constantly deforms, even after death, on its way to ultimate formlessness. Coplans seeks to take this transformation into account, and so he must turn away from it, turning it back upon itself. Nothing is more significant in this respect than the series simply entitled *Back*.

When Coplans began to chisel himself more systematically into pieces—following the first "mixed" self-portraits—it was the animal impetuosity of the foot that revealed to him the terrible truth of the irreversibility of time. Presenting his 1989 exhibition "Self-Portrait: Foot," he commented with humor:
If, as Kierkegaard once remarked, history looks backward and life is lived forward, we then realize that feet have a dramatic role of their own: they always move forward in time. This inescapable fact is a given. Whether standing, walking, or running, resting or asleep, the feet always move from the present to the future. And, even when the feet are ordered by the mind to reverse themselves, to go backwards, as for example soldiers in retreat, who go past their own past, they nonetheless journey forward toward an uncertain and unpredictable future.

Self-Portrait, Back, 1978

Hands are more intelligent and supple, and happily so: they can look in all directions, throwing their words to every wind. The back, on the other hand, is an insistent, static figure; it led Coplans to his first self-portraits in 1978. Belonging to the same family as the torso, the back is a still more unified mass, a solider block, which can be chipped away and reduced but which always retains its coherency. It is an important figure in statuary (Maillol, Matisse). It is also the most inert, least differentiated aspect of the human frame, and the most resistant to physiognomic contagion, since it is turned completely away from the face. Coplans exploited all these givens, drawing from them a new rhetorical figure and transforming the back into the typical example of a paradoxical confrontation. In other words, he found a way of retreating with dignity, head held high: a way of turning one's back on the enemy while still giving the impression of staring him full in the face.

The principle of seriality plays its guiding role here, along with all the gains of montage. Each image is doubled by a horizontal division that contradicts the hieratic verticality of the figures. Like a rhythmic sequence, a subtle play of differences animates the regular juxtaposition of the uncovered panels: surfaces stripped bare, without glass protection. But the chain of analogies does not stop here. This alignment of backs should have another, more constructive effect, one that goes beyond the models of stat-

uary and cinema. The montage develops into an installation and an architectural fiction: the alignment of a wall constructed by an assemblage of nonstandardized elements, rather than an army frozen in its retreat. Coplans proposes an image of the studio as a place of retreat, a retreat which is at last exposed.

This extension of montage also characterizes the sequence *Self-Portrait Frieze*, where the division of each vertical panel into three parts is doubled by the multiplication of the figure through a juxtaposition of panels. The frieze is a horizontal multiplication that amplifies the fragmentary animation of each posture of the upright and divided body. The figure of the self-portrait is multiplied by reprises and variations, and fractioned by interruptions. The rhythm and balance of the whole result from a mix of junctions and disjunctions, of intervals and ruptures. This rhythm corresponds to an image of the body fractioned into a play of elements which unfolds along the two axes of the plane surface, horizontal and vertical. The orthogonality, dominated by the vertical, is strict, like the frame that bounds each fragment. But the frame, tightened around a full-bodied element like the bust, gradually loosens around the legs, which are a more mobile element; and similarly, the combination of the vertical and horizontal axes at the bottom of the panels is animated by the infinite nuances of the form transforming from one framed plane to the next. The experience of the life of forms is a play on the image of the body, hieratic and mobile, complete and fragmentary, one and multiple, stable and in constant disequilibrium.

Coplans has ceaselessly explored the possible variations generated by an ensemble of parameters associating the variables of perception (the near, the far, peripheral vision) with the principles of montage (interval, disjunction). But this experience of the life of forms is indissociable from an autobiographical experience, summed up in the insistent idea of the self-portrait. It is as though undoing and redoing the image of the body were the ultimate mode of access, after such long biographical wandering, to a knowledge of the self outside the self, in fiction: a knowledge which is above all an accord with oneself, with all the differences irreducible to the complete and integral identity summed up by the image of the upright body, outside time, withdrawn from animality and death. The image of an overturned body, *Upside Down*, is no doubt the most violent projection that the refusal of this idea has inspired in Coplans. But in this violence the sacred, too, rejoins humor.

[1] John Coplans, "C. E. Watkins and Yosemite," *Art in America* (Nov.-Dec. 1978), pp. 101-8.
[2] Harold Rosenberg, "Philip Guston: Liberation from Detachment," in *The De-Definition of Art* (New York: Horizon Press, 1972), pp. 113-40.
[3] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 23.
[4] For this point see my previous text on John Coplans, "L'archaïsme au temps de la reproduction," in *John Coplans, Self-Portrait: Hand/Foot*, catalogue (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1990-91), pp. 4-11, 46-48.

Installation, *Upside Down*,
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1984