



margaret morgan
mr. clean

amelia jones

*There is no truer sign of civilization and culture than
good sanitation. (1946)*

Where there's dirt there's danger. (1930)¹

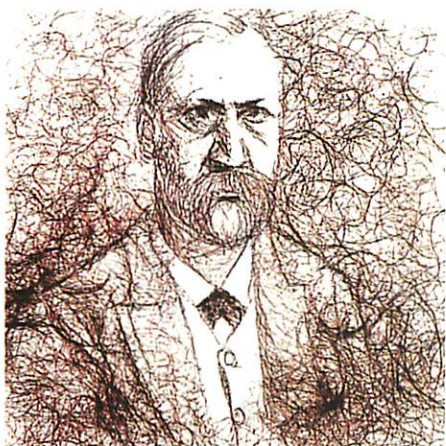
A ring on the floor reminiscent of Richard Long's stone circles surrounds a shapeless object. On closer inspection, it is a ring of plastic bottles, standing upright, and a wad of what looks to be alien hair. Look closer still: these are containers of "Mr. Clean" (the friendly giant's face replaced by portraits of male modernists hovering incongruously over his stacked pecs), encircling a pile of lint disgorged from a vacuum cleaner. Here, then, a tainted blob of dirt circumscribed by antiseptics; or, Margaret Morgan's *Cleaning Agents* (1993).

Australian-born Morgan, who currently teaches at Cal Arts, is preoccupied with the cleansing effects of a particular strain of modernist discourse. An artistic obsessive-compulsive, her work performs while it critiques the aesthetic equivalent of repetitive hand-washing. Each engagingly choreographed installation and precisely crafted object disinfects the messy surfaces and histrionic attitudes of abstract painting, stripping away its germs of pretension and intervening in its—as well as modernism's—desire to regulate disorder.

In particular, Morgan's spick-and-span surfaces and neatly conceived installations comment on the gendered dimensions of such regulation. From Nietzsche's anxiety about the feminizing effects of theater (where "one becomes ... herd, female, ... idiot"), to Adolf Loos's excoriation of ornament as a "crime" against the virility of pure form, to Clement Greenberg's fear of the debasements of kitsch; and from Kasimir Malevich's white squares to the geometric structures of Piet Mondrian, Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt,

modernism's impulse toward systematization has worked to eradicate the "messy," "irrational," "emotional," unpredictable and otherwise disruptive aspects of human creativity. In this modernism, feminine ostentation and decoration are dirt; refinement and clarity of design virility. Art, historically, has always needed a cleaning agent to purge it of "womanly" excesses.

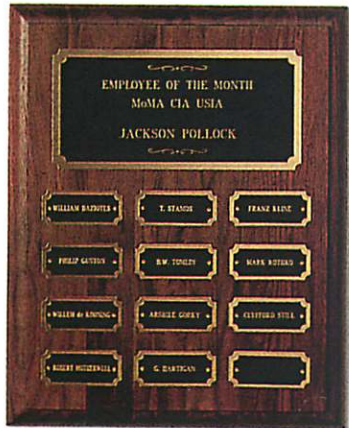
In a 1993 series of oil portraits, Morgan deliberately pollutes the sanctity of modernism's geniuses by reconfiguring their heroic visages. *Portrait of Sigmund Freud as Feminine Sexuality* forms the instantly recognizable glowering features of the "father" of psychoanalysis out of (one assumes, women's) pubic hair. *Portrait of Clement Greenberg as a Ghost for Every Day of the Week* stages the formalist sage in a miniature likeness framed with a wide border of repulsive (for Greenberg) lace patterns, along with various styrofoam food containers stating "Have a Happy Day." *Portrait of Jackson Pollock as Employee of the Month*, a small picture of the artist in lurid colors resting above a plaque commemorating various winners of the award parceled out by "MOMA, CIA, USIA,"² constructs the existentialist "hero" as a minor, class-bound character in a vast corporate drama, ensnared in institutional loyalties rather than creatively autonomous. *The Portrait of Adolf Loos as Pure in its Rationality as a House of His Design* includes a tiny painting, its pristine geometry swallowed up in a disproportionately large white frame, situated next to a portrait of Loos on velvet with an organic abstraction teetering precariously on its upper edge.



OPPOSITE: *CLEANING AGENTS*, 1993, ALTERED CLEANING PRODUCTS, VACUUM CLEANER DIRT, 72 x 12 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

ABOVE LEFT: *PORTRAIT OF SIGMUND FREUD AS FEMININE SEXUALITY*, 1993, PUBIC HAIR ON LINEN, 8 x 8 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

ABOVE RIGHT: *PORTRAIT OF CLEMENT GREENBERG AS A GHOST FOR EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK (DETAIL)*, 1993, OIL ON LINEN, STYROFOAM FOOD CONTAINERS, 8 x 84 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.



The latter work most directly addresses the cleansing impulse of, especially, early-twentieth-century aesthetic discourses in the fields of architecture, design, and painting. Reacting vehemently against the steamy, and nostalgic excesses of design movements such as Arts and Crafts and, slightly later, Art Nouveau, theorists, artists, and architects such as Loos and Le Corbusier called for the eradication from creative forms of all adornment and other signs of decadence in bourgeois life. For Loos and the practitioners of movements extending from Purism to De Stijl to Productivism, pure form was to deliver a new humanity, purged of the ladylike stench of bourgeois taste and consonant with the virile rationalizations of the Machine Age. In 1920, Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, developers of Purism, wrote: “[machines] are true extensions of human limbs ... [and] there is no art worth having without [the] excitement of an intellectual order ...”;³ for Loos himself, writing in 1908, “*cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use.*”⁴ The Enlightenment attempt to reveal a rationalized human consciousness, itself cleansed of the messy vicissitudes of

corporeality, ultimately inspired this particular modernism’s desire for a stripped-down visual and architectural practice that would mirror a purified, masculinized version of modern Man.

As with her image of Pollock as a subordinated, “herd”-like “employee” of MOMA and the CIA, Morgan’s rendition of Loos in her gallery of modernist masters, themselves posed as cleaners of sorts, forms an implicit class critique. Loos’s reduction to kitsch artifact, his image trapped in the sickly-sweet texture of red velvet seems, on the one hand, consonant with the Viennese architect’s own attempt to purge aesthetic decadence by introducing the alternative of working-class labor.⁵ In his 1898 essay “Plumbers,” Loos privileges the master of modern plumbing over Germany’s “imitators of French culture,” who seek refinement over aesthetic complexity; if it is cultural dominance that is sought by Germany and the closely allied Austria, the frivolities of French culture must be rejected, and the plumber, being “the pioneer of cleanliness,” must be celebrated as the “quartermaster of culture.”⁶

On the other hand, Morgan’s deployment of velvet painting associated with the working class’s lowbrow striving for “high” culture (painting on velvet equals Woolworth’s clientele) contradicts the gender implications of Loos’s parodic intervention in aesthetic discourse. Loos counters the corruption of cultural imitation with a specifically virile working-class trope: the plumber as the “pillar of the Germanic idea of culture.”⁷ Loos’s at least partially facetious veneration of the plumber as avatar of industrialist efficiency proposes to eliminate the vulgarity and effusiveness of kitsch to ensure a rationalized Germanic culture. Through tracing Loos’s lineaments on velvet, Morgan proposes that his anxieties have to do with his own implication in bourgeois taste. Even as high modernism (Loos through Greenberg and beyond) obsessively speaks of ornamental otherness as degraded, of purity or abstract beauty as an inherent aesthetic value, it still remains embedded in the morass of lint, pubic hair, and feminine excess that is supposedly outside it.⁸

BERTOLT BRECHT once wrote, “The raging stream is called violent/ But the riverbed that hems it in/ No one calls violent.”⁹ We may indeed wonder at the violence responsible for the neatly plumbed modernist edifice, as well as the intricate system of locks and dams that controls the flow of excrement, that purges it of its “waste.” For the latter threat-

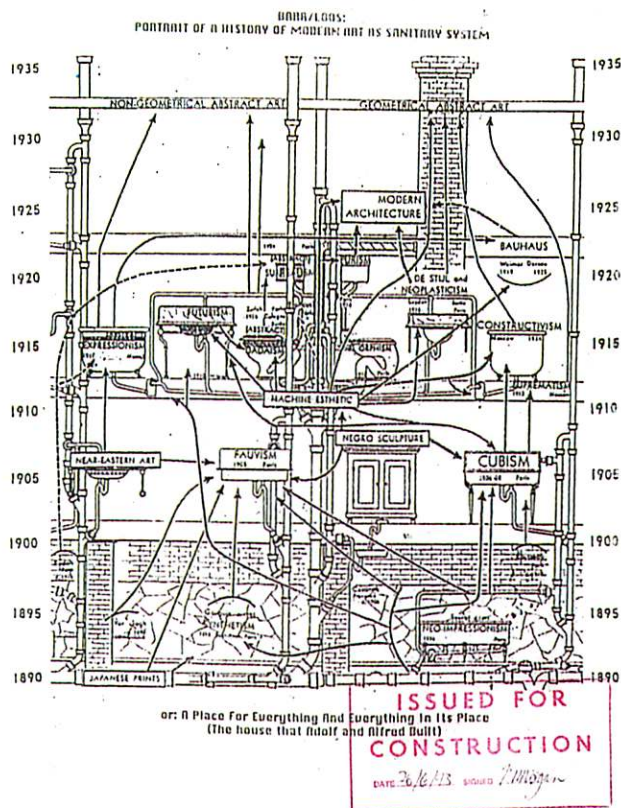
PORTRAIT OF JACKSON POLLOCK AS EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH, 1993, OIL ON LINEN, METAL AND OAK WALL PLAQUE, 24 x 12 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

ens to wreak the regulatory mechanisms of modern urban life, of discrimination itself: "one is powerless and hypnotized in the face of those floods.... All that's solid becomes hot and fluid (all that's masculine [becomes] feminine?)."¹⁰

Morgan's strategic attention, via Loos, to plumbing as a metaphor for aesthetic as well as bureaucratic control mechanisms links her work closely to two key moments in Dada's institutional critique of modernism: Duchamp's *Fountain*, and the plumbing fixture labeled *God* by Morton Schamberg and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (both from 1917). Duchamp's urinal, shifted out of the realm of utility into the aesthetic by placing it on its back on a pedestal, comments ironically on the hypocrisy of the Independents' jury who pretended to be open-minded but could only comprehend the most conventional art forms; *God* extends Nietzsche's skepticism to imply that constipation is the inevitable outcome of any attempt by industrial-age aesthetics to systematize production. A looping tube of metal, *God* shows such a system to be blocked, the phallic thrust of modernist expansion become a pretzel of indirection, solipsistically turned back on itself.

In several interrelated projects spanning 1992 to 1996, Morgan further expands upon her interrogation of Loos's seemingly bizarre link between plumbing and modernism. In *Portrait of Modern Art as Sanitary System* (1992-93), Morgan revises Alfred Barr's infamous "Chart of Modern Art," published on the dust jacket of his 1936 Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalogue, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, by merging it with a 1900 plumbing diagram for a house (used to illustrate the recent reprint of Loos's "Plumbing" essay). Barr's chart stages modern art as a series of one-way influences flowing in an orderly system of cultural "advancements" from, for example, "Negro sculpture" to Cubism. As Morgan's revised diagram suggests, Barr's attempt to engineer modernist movements parallels the way that plumbing directs embarrassing bodily excesses (as other kinds of "movements" altogether) away from consciousness.

Subtitled *The House that Adolf and Alfred Built*, Morgan's *Portrait of Modern Art* (actually a photocopy on vellum, made official with an architect's stamp) dramatizes the absurdity of Barr's Diderot-like classification; it also unveils the uncomfortable confluence of terms usually kept apart via the structures of aesthetic judgment proposed by modernist discourse. In a related work (exhibited recently at LACE in 1996), *Too Much Leverage is Dangerous—An Excerpt*, Morgan realized this "portrait" on a fifteen-foot-

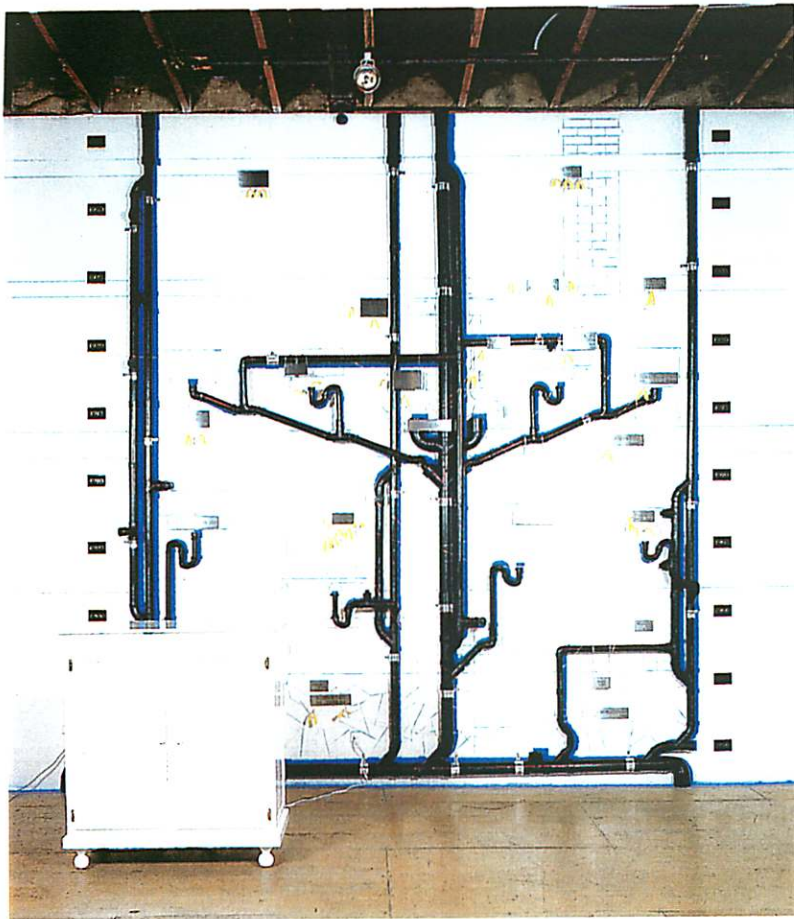


high wall, constructing its timelines out of PVC plumbing with blue chalk drawings filling in the art historical interstices. Small metal plaques noted Barr's categorizations, while dainty strings traced their interconnections. Mimicking a plumbing closet in the Loos illustration, a white cabinet stood before the wall, sounds of peeing and a toilet flushing emanating from it. Installed so that the white gallery space accommodates the clean lines of this Rube Goldberg-like contraption, *Too Much Leverage* actively proclaims the pathos of obsessive orderliness.

While demonstrating the fragility of Barr's classificatory endeavor, Morgan also calls attention here to those who are excluded from his tidy map of modernist influences and developments. It is not surprising that the names attached to each movement are all white males, revealing the fact that, as Griselda Pollock argues, "what modernist art history celebrates is a selective tradition which normalizes, as the only modernism, a particular and gendered set of practices."¹¹

Morgan's large-scale staging of these concerns, *Plumb: Tools for Modern Living* (exhibited at Artspace, Sydney, in

PORTRAIT OF MODERN ART AS SANITARY SYSTEM (THE HOUSE THAT ADOLF AND ALFRED BUILT), 1993, PHOTOCOPY ON VELLUM, ARCHITECT'S STAMP, UNLIMITED EDITION, 18 x 12 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.



1995), deals with this exclusionary logic. In the center of the gallery, a huge cage made of PVC plumbing dramatized containment as the goal of modernist production and display, the grid being the most insistent trope of modernism's "modernity."¹² Leaning against the gallery walls, surrounding this penetrable void of incarcerated absence, were four huge drawings made out of blue builder's chalk on plasterboard (based on found photographs of, respectively, boys, girls, a mother figure, and a nineteenth-century artist's model), each accompanied by a relatively lengthy text detailing a personal narrative along with panes of glass etched with plumbing images (the diagram in Loos's essay, Barr's schema, Duchamp's *Fountain*, and a 1924 poster celebrating the plumber as protecting "the Health of the Nation"). The transparent, thus dematerialized, glass plumbing etchings leaned precariously against blue chairs sitting in front of each drawing with text.

These drawings plus texts are charged with memories of cultural engendering, from the personal to the institutional. One particularly striking pair couples a drawing of Edouard Manet's *Portrait of Victorine Meurent*, her quiet and quizzical face calmly returning any proprietary gaze, with an etched glass panel of Barr's chart threatening to slip away from the chair and shatter into a million shards at the slightest touch. The text set alongside the left side of the drawing recalls a student's erotic experience in a darkened art history classroom, severed from working-class life: "You desired the *Fife Player*, little boy and woman as he was.... You returned the stare of Manet's model.... Your gaze scanned these surfaces, looking for your reflection...." Here, "Victorine" represents the eruption of desire within modernist art history, disturbing its closely woven fabric of pedantry and moralizing poses.

By contrast, because it too is etched on glass, Barr's schema becomes transparent, ephemeral. Thus "Victorine," become visible as a corporeal exclusion (moreover rendered like a whisper in blue chalk), asserts her uncontrollable otherness. In it, the unconscious bursts onto the scene, staring us in the face. The carefully positioned chair that orchestrates our movement around this quiet but ultimately provocative image remains empty and blocked off as we prowl the room, hedged in by the empty cage of pipes. Barr's chart, like the "bachelors" at the bottom of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, pumps its fluids endlessly, vainly attempting to engage our now diverted attention.

In the end, Morgan's project adopts the paradox it seeks to interrogate. The slick presentation propels her fixtures far from the filth and disorder of everyday life, just as her choice to reference relatively esoteric figures necessarily narrows her audience. Yet the greatest strength of these pristine works is, not incidentally, their moments of calculated failure when, so to speak, all their antiseptic functions are suddenly undone by an explosion of bacteria. Such infestation is akin to what Roland Barthes called the *punctum*, or

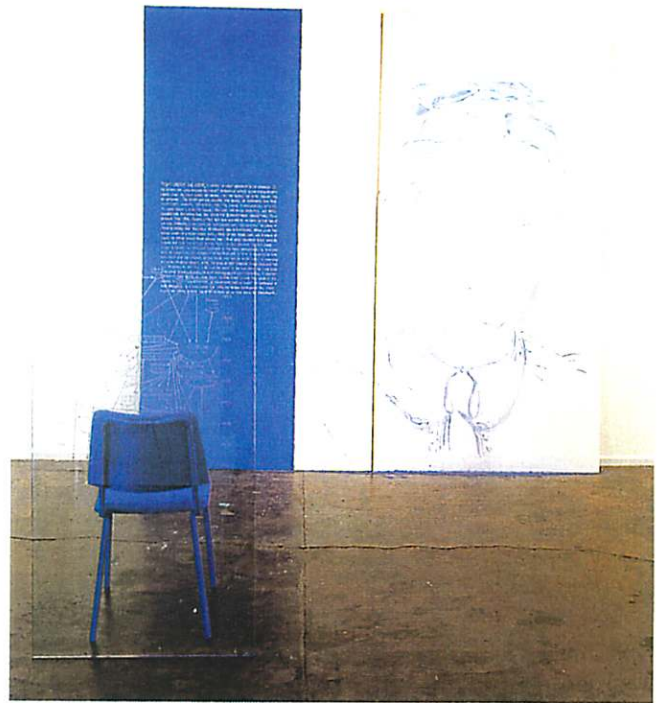
ABOVE: *TOO MUCH LEVERAGE IS DANGEROUS—AN EXCERPT*, 1993-96, INSTALLATION VIEW, LACE, HOLLYWOOD. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

OPPOSITE: *PLUMB: TOOLS FOR MODERN LIVING*, 1995, INSTALLATION DETAIL, ARTSPACE, SYDNEY, PVC PLUMBING, PLASTERBOARD, BUILDER'S CHALK, LATEX PAINT, ETCHED GLASS, CHAIR, DIM. VAR. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

“third meaning,” in relation to photographs: that inexpressible moment of raw, emotive meaning that ruptures the neat structures of representation. Obstinate and erratic, the third meaning is supplementary, *obtuse* (as opposed to obvious): it opens up meaning to desire.¹³

While Morgan admits that she is herself inexorably implicated in the plumbing of modernism (“I was born in this house. I live here. I work here ...”), the most effective moments in her work would appear to be those when the pipes get blocked and the basement floods with unwanted fluids. Only with such a breakdown do we become aware of plumbing’s crucial role in making the system work. Faced with that dangerous prospect of the artist as “Victorine,” the modernist edifice is turned inside out: the eruption of a meaning “which slips away from the inside,” one that “pricks me, ... but also bruises me.”¹⁴ Here we’re no longer purely inside (Barr’s modernist masters, Loos as Mr. Clean), nor purely outside (as “Victorine” tells us, there is no pure outside). Given such dysfunctional plumbing, it becomes clear that the modernist home has only ever been a well-maintained illusion. ■

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NOTES

1. Abel Wolman, “The Sanitary Engineer Looks Forward,” *Water and Sewage Works* 93: 11 (November 1946), cited by Morgan in *Plumb: Tools for Modern Living*, catalogue (Sydney: Artspace, 1995), n.p.; and the slogan of the Health and Cleanliness Council, London, cited in W. A. Muir, George H. Green, *Health and Cleanliness: A Handbook for Teachers* (London: Health and Cleanliness Council, 1930), 56. I am very grateful to Margaret Morgan for her research suggestions and support.
2. This conjunction of institutions traces the links, during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, between the Museum of Modern Art and U.S. foreign policy (via the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Information Agency) researched by art historians such as Eva Cockcroft and Serge Guilbaut; see their essays in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).
3. Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, “Purism” (1920), reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 237-8.
4. Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 226-7 (author’s italics).
5. Throughout his essays on culture, Loos consistently poses aesthetic decadence (feminine fashion, Art Nouveau, and other bourgeois “fads”) as the negative “other” to a bracing, masculine artisanal/industrial mode of cultural production. On velvet as a signifier of feminine value in a lost era of aristocratic gender-relations, see Loos, “Ladies’ Fashions” (1898), in *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays, 1897-1900*, tr. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith (Cambridge: MIT Books, 1982), 103.
6. Loos, “Plumbers” (1898), *Spoken into the Void*, 45, 49.
7. *Ibid.*, 45.
8. See, as an example of the ambiguous politics of recuperating “beauty” as a radical concept, Dave Hickey’s *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art issues.Press, 1993).
9. Brecht, “Über die Gewalt,” cited by Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies. Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, tr. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 229.
10. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 231, 238; the racist and nationalist dimensions of the call to order and cleanliness are heavily marked in the proto-Nazi culture Theweleit studies here. On these dimensions, see also Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially the advertisements arguing for the cleansing of dirty immigrants, illustrated in the unpaginated centerfold.
11. Pollock critiques Barr’s schema in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 50.
12. See Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1985), 9-10.
13. Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” *Image-Music-Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 59. On the *punctum*, see Barthes’s *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.
14. Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” 64.