

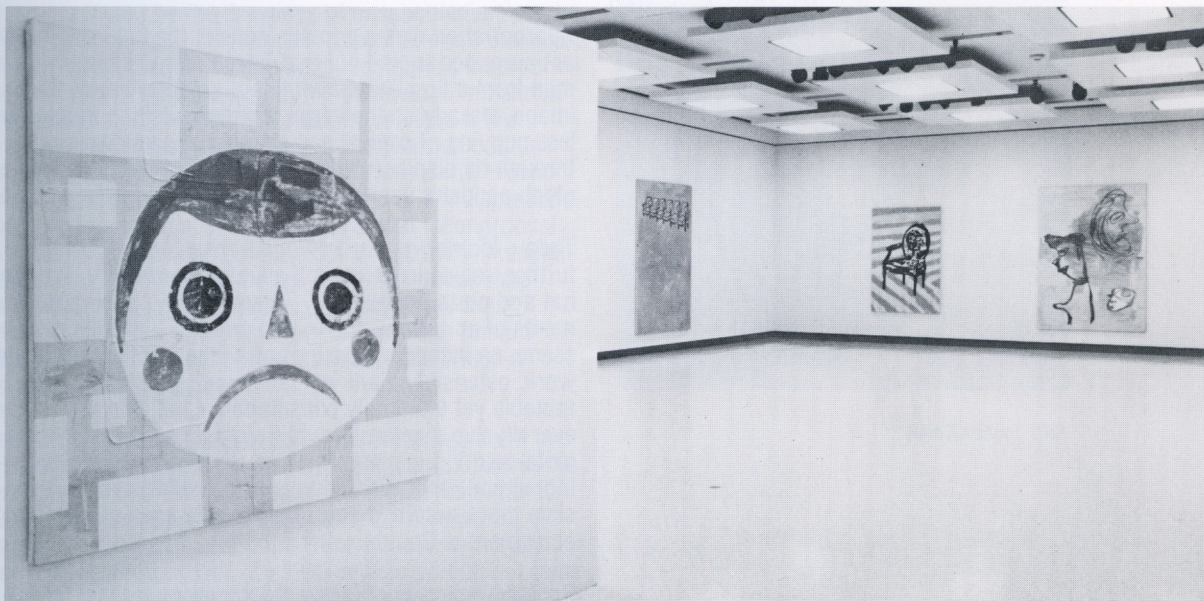
D O N A L D B A E C H L E R



P A I N T I N G S : 1 9 8 1 - 1 9 8 7

Donald Baechler

Paintings: 1981-1987



University Galleries
Illinois State University
April 26 - June 4, 1988

Anderson Gallery
Virginia Commonwealth University
June 22 - July 29, 1988

From the Bay of Naples to Coney Island (and back again)

It is in the nature of original contemporary art to present itself as a bad risk.¹

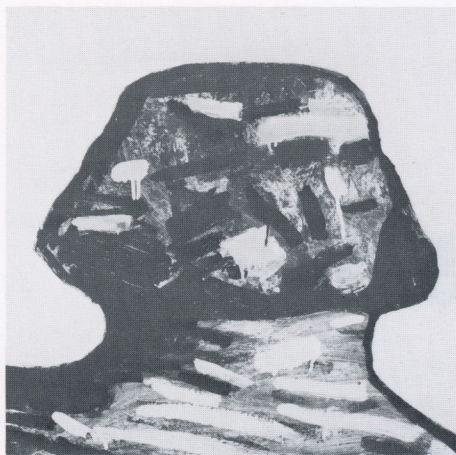
— Leo Steinberg, 1962

It was in 1981 at an exhibition in New York entitled “Episodes” that I first encountered a painting by a young artist named Donald Baechler. I can clearly recall my initial response to *Bay of Naples*, a large canvas with a single, illustration-style image of a pizza chef presenting his freshly baked creation. Titanically scaled, the black-outlined figure floated dead center in an unmodulated expanse of decorator ivory white enamel. The painting’s title was a double-entendre citing a Cy Twombly work of 1961 and the name of any number of pizza parlors. While its commercial subject and deadpan handling brought to mind early Warhol and Lichtenstein, its surface elegance, monochromatic and mysterious, pointed to Jasper Johns and Robert Ryman. Despite these reassuring references to art of the past three decades, there was something profoundly unsettling and original about the work. I felt challenged, if not mocked, by this inscrutable image.

Appropriation was a popular issue at the time, and I was not surprised to find out that Baechler had lifted the pizza man from a tiny line drawing in the Yellow Pages. This image, already on the verge of decomposition through endless copying of copies, had acquired a poetic longing through its displacement onto canvas. It was like a hieroglyph amidst a vast emptiness, waiting to be deciphered.

Today, looking at *Bay of Naples* anew, I am struck by further ironies in its deceptively simple imagery. The chef’s hat and pizza undoubtedly resemble the clichéd accoutrements of an artist — beret and palette — and the painting seems an ingenuous portrait of a creator offering his latest work: ostensibly blank yet laden with possibility, transmutable yet ultimately consumable. Chef d’oeuvre . . . the ever-elusive masterpiece, to be seasoned to taste. It is a meta-painting, a painting about its own process. Appearing without invitation, it makes no promises. Or is it possible that Baechler’s pizza man is offering a secular equivalent of Communion?

Baechler’s pursuit of lonely modern icons led him to look at furniture ads. Centrally positioned images of chairs and chaise lounges rendered in black gloss enamel soon appeared hovering over generic pastiches of paintings with stripes, chevrons or brushy monochromes. Enlarged to the point at which they begin to lose resolution, the idiosyncratic lines of these chairs resemble Rorschachs, and encourage a perverse sort of meditation. In *Balcony*, 1981, a row of six theater chairs drifts train-like across a painterly heaven, transporting Platonic musings about ideal Forms and their earthly imitations to a Pop Shangri-La. In *New Iberia*, done in the same year, a Stella-cum-Johns chevron pattern doubles as an abstract ground and a literal floor for a Victorian armchair. *Corbu Chaise*, 1982, cynically juxtaposes the image of a Le Corbusier chaise lounge against a green and white stripe motif reminiscent of the pattern of a common lawn chair. In all three paintings, the chairs are presented in three-quarter view and in perfect perspective, taunting the viewer who may not partake of the repose they proffer. Reminding the onlooker that there is no rest for the art-wary, Baechler initiates an ongoing preoccupation with the inherent frustrations of Arts and Leisure. The chairs, as well as the modernist “paintings” they are situated among, are apparitional signifiers.



Sphinx, 1981

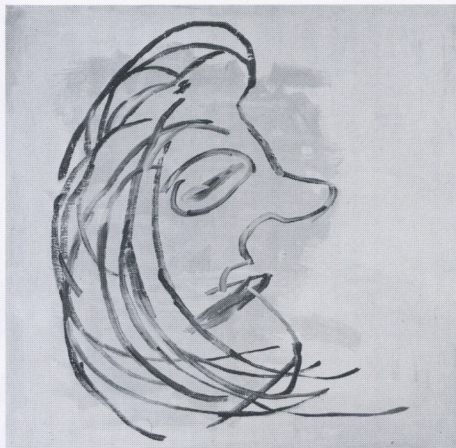
A boy who draws like Raphael would be punished today; they expect of him children's drawings.²

— Pablo Picasso, 1958

I observe the way these people are drawing and a lot of it has to do with educating myself to unknown things. It's a retooling of my skills, continually trying to abandon the things that I know too well. Getting too much expertise is the curse of the artist.³

— Donald Baechler, 1987

As much fertile territory as Baechler uncovered by mining cheap illustration for its metaphysical possibilities, after a year or so he abandoned appropriation in favor of a personal rediscovery of drawing. Inspired by art of schizophrenics and in turn, Dubuffet's *art brut*, he began to do hundreds of quickly executed drawings while sitting in bars. Fascinated by the drawings of unschooled artists, he would ask drunks to draw certain subjects, often Baechler himself. He studied these drawings, sometimes incorporating their formal tendencies into his own work. In a series of paintings done in 1982 and 1983, he selected a few drawings from among the stacks he had turned out, enlarged them, and placed them, much as his earlier found drawings, amidst brushy grisaille fields. In *The Zagreb Picture*, two faces and a truncated figure float incongruously in a sea of grey, held in somnambulant captivity like characters in a Samuel Beckett play. One of the faces reappears in *Oum Kalsoum*, isolated, solemn as a waning crescent moon. In both paintings the drawings remain "projections" or transparent spectres around which a detached drama is staged.



Oum Kalsoum, 1982

Baechler's predilection for textural surfaces, apparent in his work from the onset, was more tangibly realized in the development of a curious collage technique. He began in 1984 to glue scraps of note paper over painted areas, eschewing the build-up of paint from what he terms an "archeological" approach. By 1985 he was editing out false starts by affixing successive layers of canvas, muslin and lace to painted canvas, sometimes resulting in a mass of material as thick as board. Ghosts of buried lines and color peer through the added materials, undermining what little stability the agitated "final" image can muster. Baechler claims he adopted this technique because he "... never get[s] it right the first time." Flaws become opportunities for infusing the paintings with elusive histories, as those found beneath peeling layers of wallpaper in an abandoned interior. The artist leaves decoy palimpsests for some future art historian/sleuth who seeks clues in a rejected composition painted underneath a late twentieth century work.

People have nightmares about my paintings sometimes. It pleases me enormously.⁴

— Donald Baechler, 1987

Baechler's further involvement with collage coincides with an increasing abandon in his drawing style. Drips of paint become profuse, and lines break up due to their trek over the canvas' varied topography. The lush grey fields of the *Oum Kalsoum* period make way for more austere backgrounds evocative of bleached desert sands. In *Bay of Bengal*, 1985, a distorted figure (a mutant descendent of Picasso's pre-cubist *Woman with Loaves*) balances skele-

tal globes on her turbaned head and shoulder. Two extra noses and three eyes are barely visible through a white-washed patch of muslin covering an earlier attempt at unlikeness. One need not know that this looming giant of a painting is subtitled *No Future* in order to catch its apocalyptic overtones —its protagonist is already embalmed. The hand-clenching figure in *Holiday in Cambodia II* (a companion piece from the same year) is like an Atlas begrudgingly bearing the world's weight while an anthropomorphic cluster of globes hovers menacingly at his side. Apparently, Baechler isn't offering any guaranteed return fare on his vacation charters.

You always do the same painting whether it looks different or not.⁵

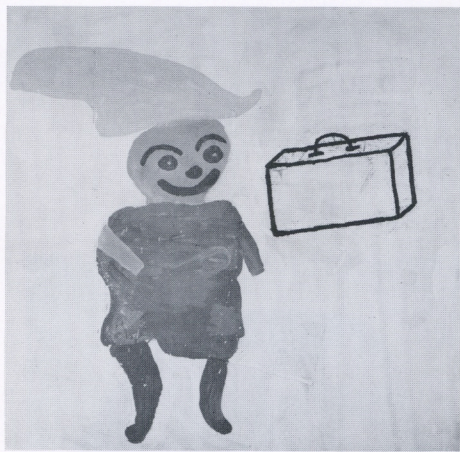
— Andy Warhol, 1981

Composition with Toy Boat, from a series done in Paris in the spring of 1987, features a Fisher-Price faced toy/child defined by geometric areas of color, rather than the artist's typical black-outline device. The figure's stub-like arm points to a sailboat rendered in black lines. Pointing is a child's earliest means of acknowledging recognition of something that is Not-Baby, and here, the limitations of pictorial representation as language are likened to a child's frustration toward things that are physically or conceptually out of reach. As in *Bay of Naples*, the representational elements in the composition address the limbo world of painting in which they are stranded. The motifs of abstract painting that served as backgrounds in Baechler's work of 1981-1982 are reborn in the simple geometries of the gesturing figure. Washcloths affixed to the canvas relinquish their original identities to become canvases within the canvas, through which the characters of the painting pass in their precarious voyage from concept to image. In Baechler's alchemical world of reversal, travel, an abstraction, is represented by the image of a toy boat, while the figure is dematerialized by its metamorphosis into a toy. Their interaction is about as absurd as a stop sign talking to a traffic light.

In *Coney Island #2*, a work from an ongoing series begun in 1987, an intriguing equilibrium between abstract and figurative elements is realized. Here, a disembodied doll face is suspended in a grey field packed with yellow rectangles. Like an amoeba that absorbs and transforms materials from its environment, the face is composed solely of circles, crescents and a triangle. Yet Baechler's harmoniously coexistent arrangements of shape and color do not describe a geometry of innocence. Given the artist's tireless exploration of figuration and abstraction as symbiotic, interchangeable signs, the mournful doll can be read as a warning against too self-righteous a regard for any mode of representation.

Though I have not yet had a nightmare about Coney Island, I can feel one coming on. Meanwhile, I hear that Donald is painting in Naples this summer.

— Barry Blinderman



Composition with Suitcase, 1987

Notes

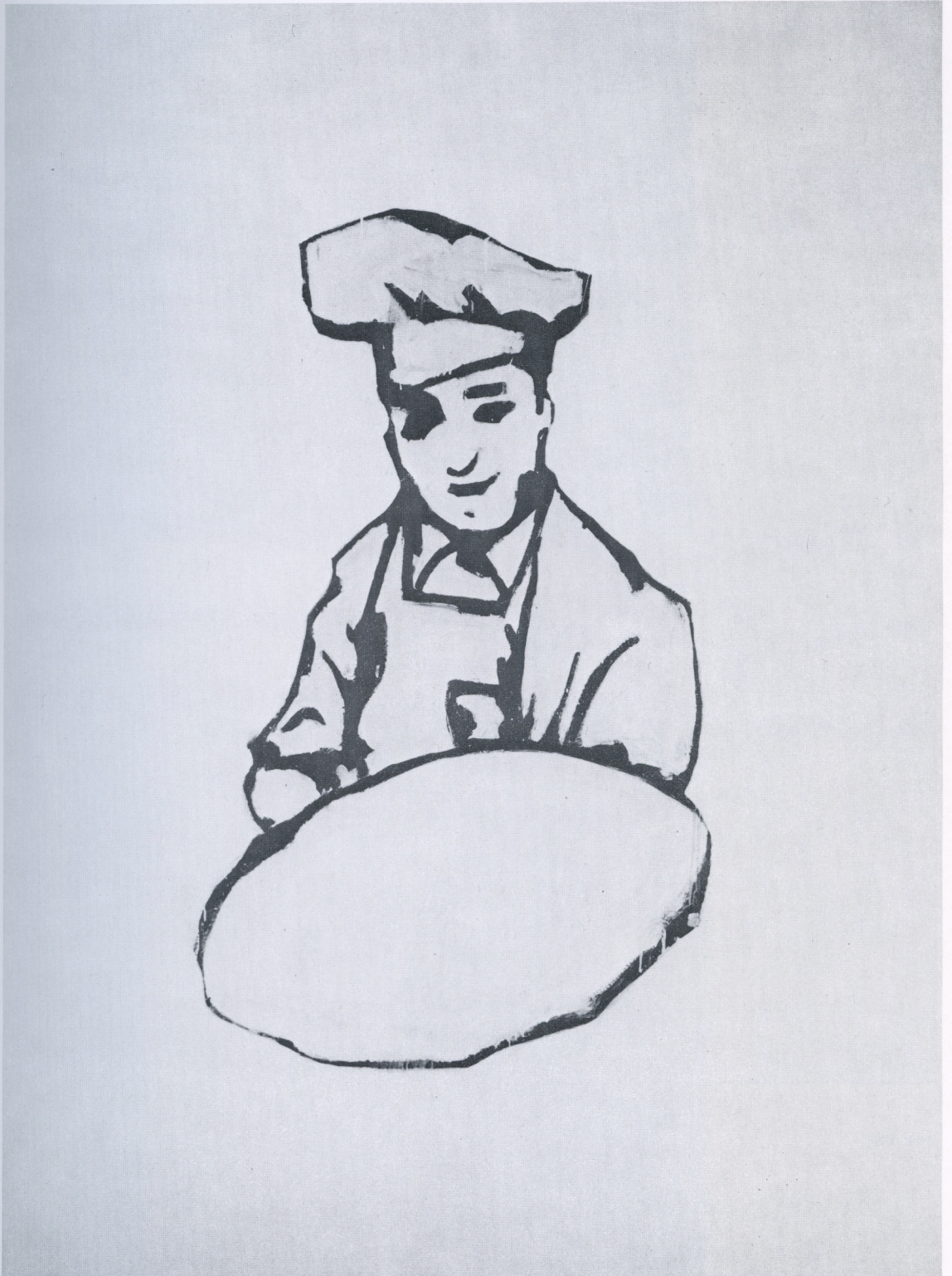
¹Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1962.

²Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, 1972, p. 104.

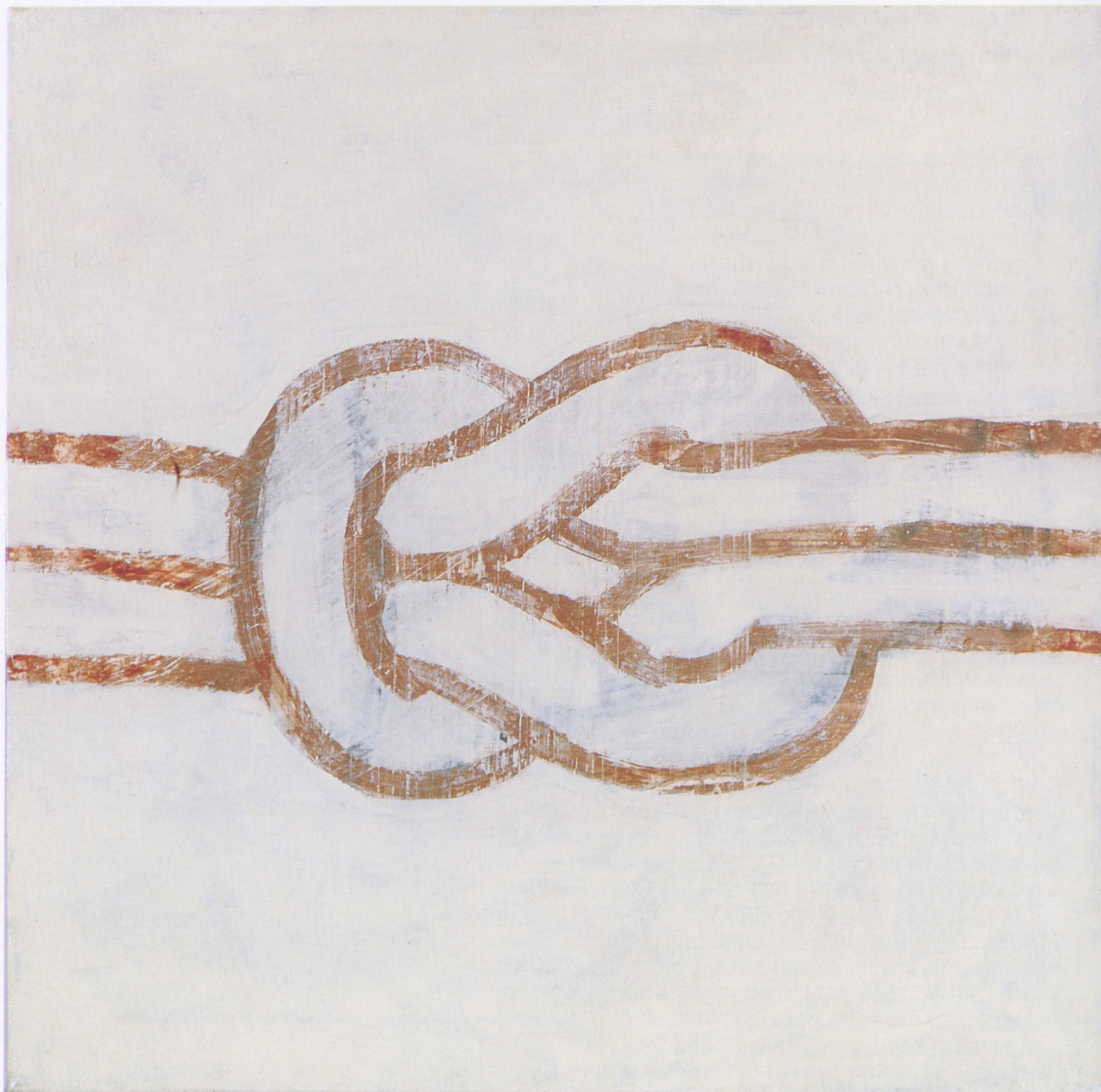
³Paul Taylor, "Donald Baechler," *FlashArt*, October, 1987, p. 90.

⁴Taylor, p. 91.

⁵Barry Blinderman, "Modern 'Myths': An Interview with Andy Warhol," *Arts*, October, 1981, p. 145.



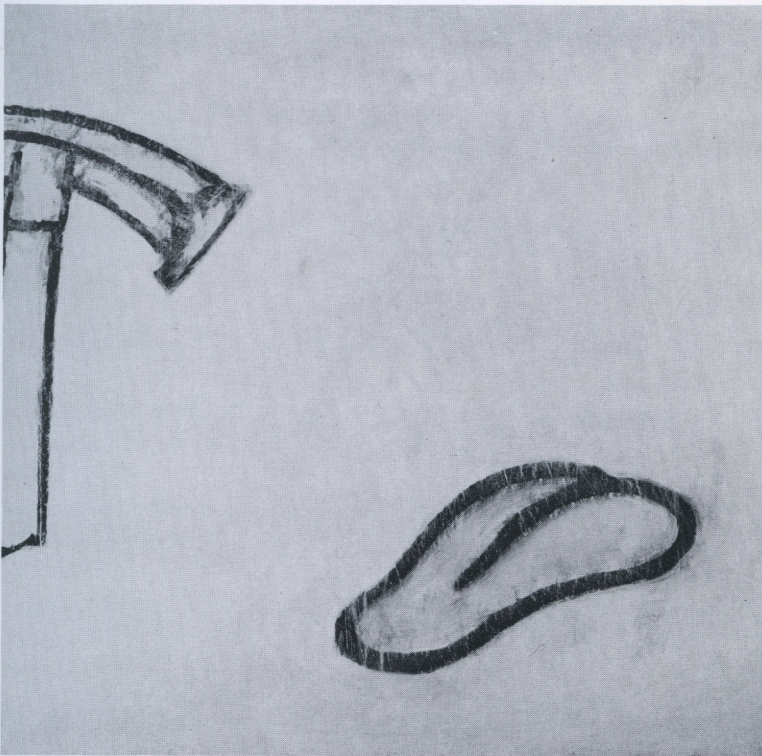
Bay of Naples, 1981



Knot, 1981



Marital Aid, 1981



Crimes of Passion, 1981



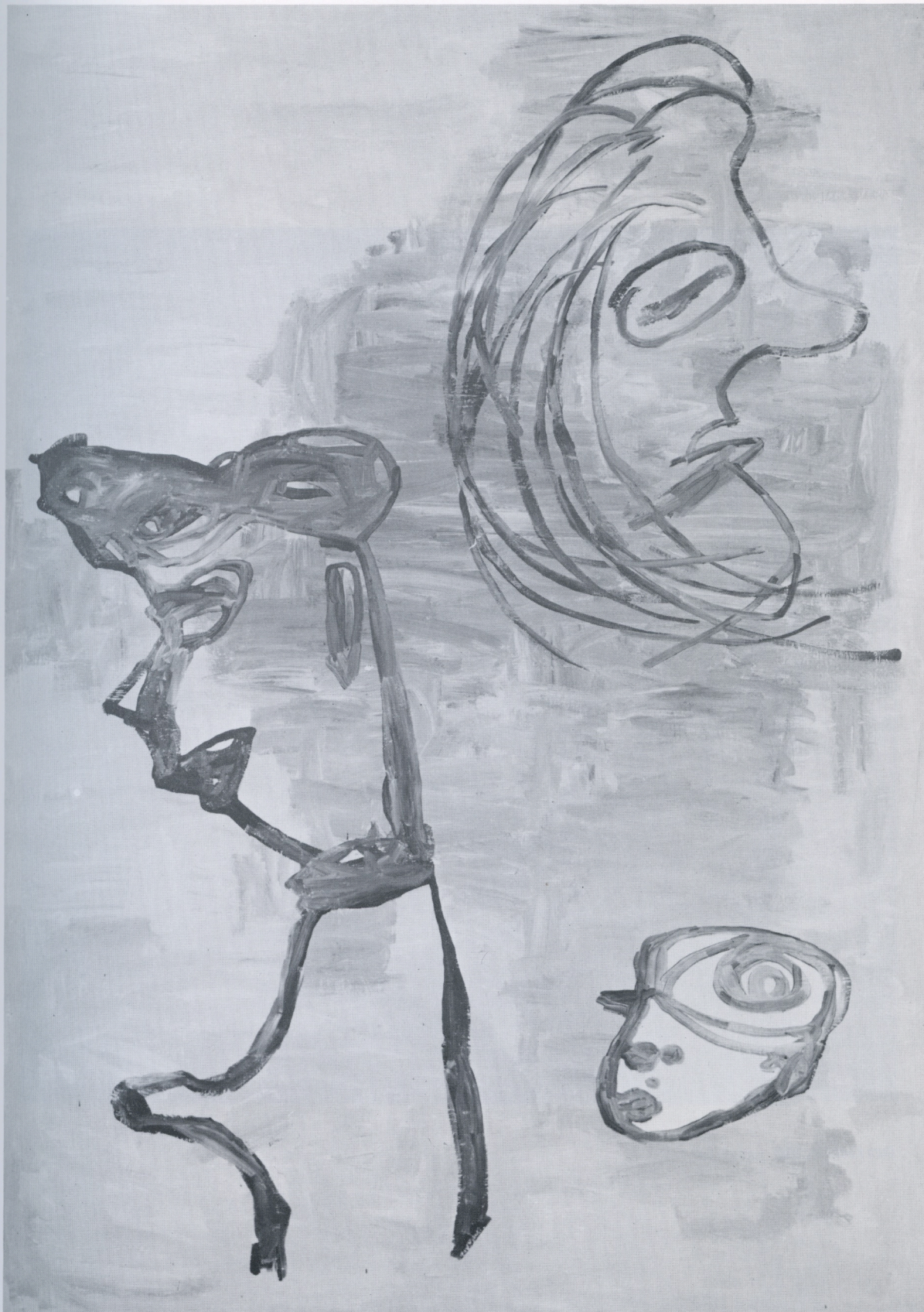
Corbu Chaise, 1982



Balcony, 1981



New Iberia, 1981



The Zagreb Picture, 1982-83



Oum Kalsoum, 1982



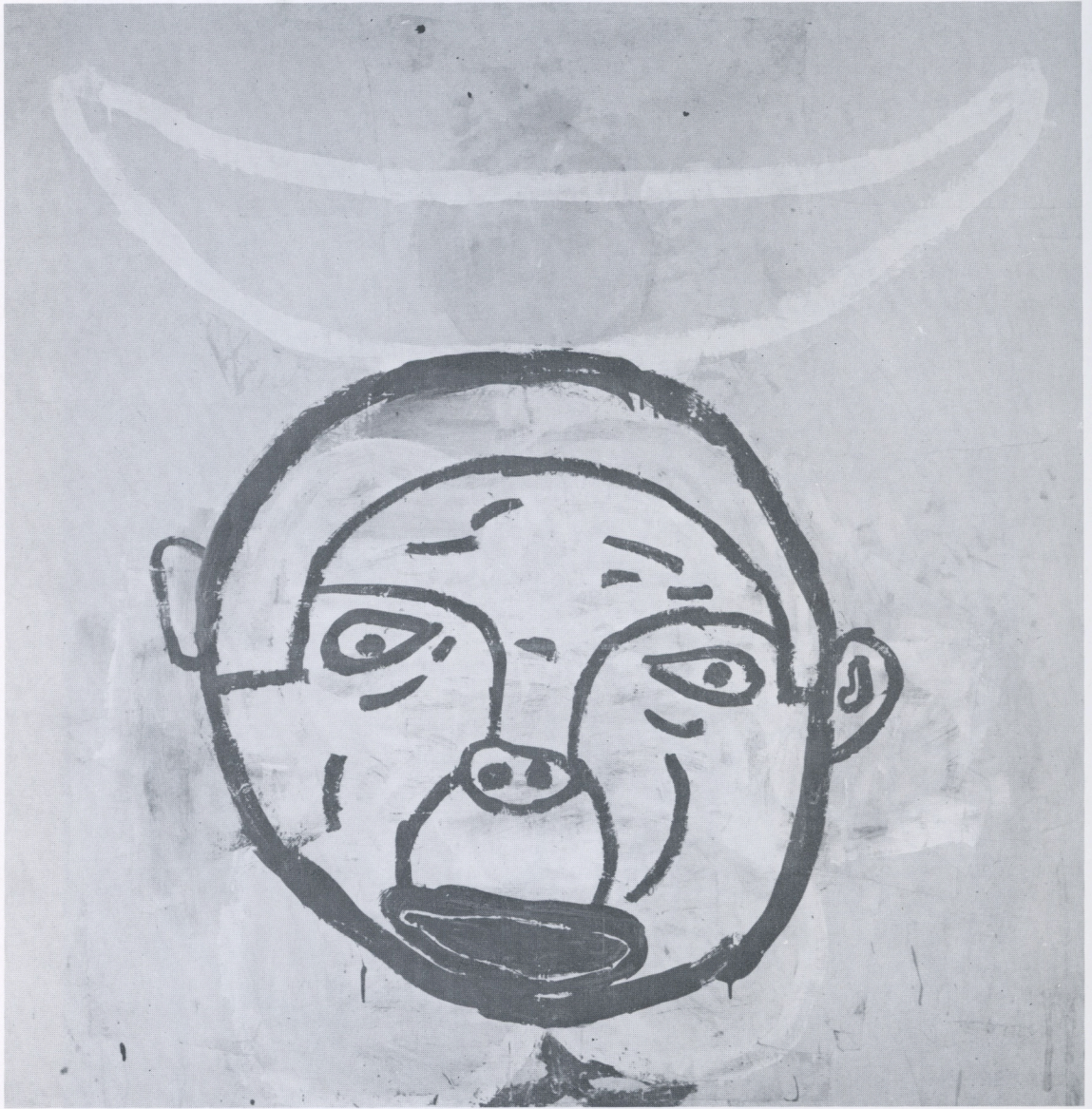
Self Portrait, 1982



Bay of Bengal, 1985



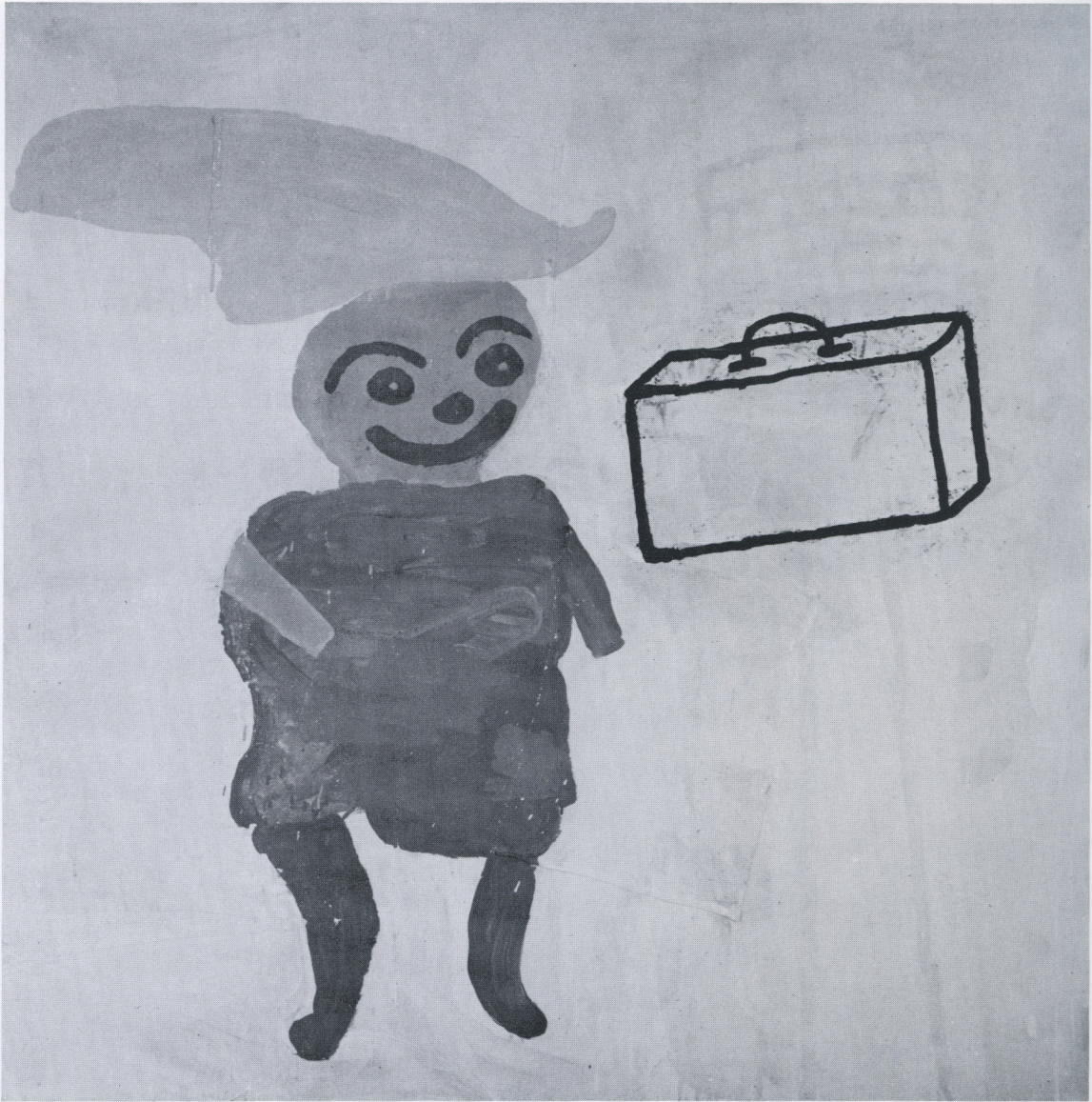
Holiday in Cambodia II, 1985



Untitled (Toothache), 1985



Composition with Toy Boat, 1987



Composition with Suitcase, 1987



Coney Island #2, 1987



Ipanema Suite #5, 1987

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Bay of Naples 1981
enamel on canvas
84 x 61.5 inches
collection of the artist

Balcony 1981
enamel on canvas
96 x 62 inches
collection of Angela Ho,
New York

New Iberia 1981
acrylic and enamel on canvas
76 x 52 inches
collection of Philip Taaffe,
New York

Science 1981
enamel on canvas
24 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

Sphinx 1981
enamel on canvas
24 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

Knot 1981
enamel on canvas
24 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

Marital Aid 1981
enamel on canvas
24 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

Crimes of Passion 1981
enamel on canvas
24 x 24 inches
collection of the artist

Corbu Chaise 1982
rhoplex and enamel on canvas
96 x 54 inches
The Emily and Jerry Spiegel
Collection, New York

Self Portrait 1982
acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 inches
collection of the artist

Oum Kalsoum 1982
acrylic on canvas
48 x 48 inches
collection of the artist

The Zagreb Picture 1982-83
acrylic on canvas
96 x 68 inches
collection of Tony Shafrazi,
New York

Holiday in Cambodia II
1985
acrylic, rhoplex, muslin and lace
on canvas
111 x 66 inches
collection of the artist

Bay of Bengal (No Future)
1985
acrylic, muslin and rhoplex on
canvas
111 x 66 inches
collection of Tony Shafrazi

Untitled (Toothache) 1985
acrylic, muslin and rhoplex on
canvas
64 x 64 inches
collection of James Brown,
New York

**Composition with Suit-
case** 1987
acrylic and collage on canvas
59 x 59 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery,
New York

Composition with Guitar
1987
acrylic and collage on linen
59 x 59 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

**Composition with Toy
Boat** 1987
acrylic and collage on linen
59 x 59 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Coney Island #2 1987
acrylic, collage and varnish on
canvas
54 x 54 inches
collection of Paul Anderson,
Chicago

Ipanema Suite #1 1987
ink on paper
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #2 1987
ink on paper
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #3 1987
ink on paper with collage
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #4 1987
ink on paper with collage
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #5 1987
ink on paper
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #6 1987
ink on paper
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #8 1987
ink on paper
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Ipanema Suite #10 1987
ink on paper
12.5 x 8.75 inches
courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery

Biography

(b. 1956, Hartford, Connecticut, lives in New York City)

Education

- 1974-77 Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore
1977-78 Cooper Union, New York
1978-79 Staatliche Hochschule fuer bildende Kuenste, Frankfurt/M

Solo Exhibitions

- 1988 University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois (traveling to Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond)
Thomas Cohn Arte Contemporanea, Rio De Janeiro
- 1987 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
Mayor Rowan Gallery, London
Ascan Crone, Hamburg
Galeria Leyendecker, S. Cruz de Tenerife, Spain
- 1986 Akira Ikeda Gallery, Nagoya, Japan
Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles
Anders Tornberg Gallery, Lund, Sweden
- 1985 Pat Hearn Gallery, New York
Galerie Ascan Crone, Hamburg
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
- 1984 Galerie Ascan Crone, Hamburg
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
- 1983 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
- 1982 Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York
- 1980 Artists Space, New York
Studio Cannaviello, Milan
- 1979 Galerie Patio, Frankfurt/M, West Germany

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1988 Museum of Modern Art, New York; *New Acquisitions: Prints*
Galeria Leyendecker, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain
- 1987 Lawrence Oliver Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; *Drawing Suites*
XIX Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil
Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, France
- 1986 Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; *An American Renaissance: Painting and Sculpture Since 1940*
Anders Tornberg Gallery, Lund, Sweden; *Face It*
Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, West Germany; *Vom Zeichnen*
Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Austria; *Vom Zeichnen*
Stavanger Faste Galleri, Stavanger, Norway; *Norsk-Amerikansk Treffpunkt*
Galerie Montenay/Delsol, Paris, France

- 1985 Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina; *Innocence and Experience*
Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy; *Anniottanta (the 80's)*
- 1984 Bucknell University; *Contemporary Perspectives*
Charles Cowles Gallery, New York; *Totem*
Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg, Denmark; *New York Now — Works on Paper*
The Contemporary Art Center, Cleveland, Ohio; *Champions*
Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy; *Arte di Frontiera*
Pat Hearn Gallery, New York; *Portraits*
- 1983 *The Terminal Show*, Brooklyn, New York
Robert Fraser Gallery, London; *Black & White*
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York; *3-D*
Bonlow Gallery, New York, *Painting into Sculpture*
- 1982 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York; *Young Americans*
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York; two man exhibition with Ronnie Cutrone
Semaphore Gallery, New York; *Three Artists*
Renaissance Society, Chicago; *Art and the Media*
- 1981 Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York; *Episodes*

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- 1987 Baker, Tom. "Art," *The Face*, October.
Smith, Roberta. Review of Shafrazi exhibition, *The New York Times*, March.
Taylor, Paul. "Donald Baechler," *FlashArt*, October.
- 1986 "Portfolio: Donald Baechler," *The Paris Review*, Spring.
- 1985 Adams, Brooks. Review of Pat Hearn exhibition, *Art in America*, September.
Morgan, Stuart. "Artists Pages," *Artscribe*, December.
Steenhuis, Paul. "Mondrian Met Een Pik," *Metropolis-M*, January/February.
Taaffe, Philip. Review of Pat Hearn exhibition, *FlashArt*, Summer.
- 1984 Koether, Jutta. "Zuviel Farbe, Zuviele Ideen," interview, *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal*, February.
- 1983 Pincus-Witten, Robert. "Increments of Inaccessibility," *Arts Magazine*, May.

Selected Catalogues

- Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York, 1981, *Episodes*, text by Carter Ratcliff
- Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, 1983, *Donald Baechler*, text by Robert Pincus-Witten
- Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, 1984, *Homage à Picasso*, text by Diego Cortez
- Galerie Ascan Crone, Hamburg, 1985, *Hamburger Gemaelde*, text by Joseph Kosuth and Franz Dahlem
- Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, 1985, *Donald Baechler*, texts by Wilfried Dickhoff, George Condo; Jiri Georg Dokoupil and Philip Taaffe
- Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 1985, *An American Renaissance: Painting and Sculpture since 1940*, texts by Sam Hunter, Kim Levin and others
- Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York, 1986, *Donald Baechler*, text by Alan Jones
- Mayor Rowan Gallery, London, 1987, *Donald Baechler*, text by Stuart Morgan

Acknowledgments



photograph by Charles Mason © 1988

Acknowledgements

This exhibition and catalogue would not have been possible without the energy and enthusiasm of many people. I would first like to thank the lenders to the exhibition: Paul Anderson, James Brown, Angela Ho, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, The Emily and Jerry Spiegel Collection and Philip Taaffe. Thanks are due also to Tony Shafrazi, for his cooperation and involvement with this project; and to Julie Chai for her assistance in arranging the loans of artwork and supplying documentary information.

I am grateful to Steven High, Director of Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, whose interest and efforts in traveling the exhibition will afford the show a wider audience; to Paul Anderson, for his continued support of our publications; to Jeff Fritzen at Bloomington Offset, Inc., whose patience and expertise helped our production efforts enormously; to Laurie Dahlberg, Assistant Director of University Galleries, who edited the catalogue essay; to Ed Forde, Chairman of the Department of Art and Charles Bolen, Dean of College of Fine Arts, ISU, for their advice and support of this exhibition. I would also like to express my thanks to the Illinois Arts Council, for their generous funding of our programs this year.

Finally, I want to thank Donald Baechler for his active role in planning the exhibition, contributing to the concept of the catalogue, and for ceaselessly disturbing my idea of what art should be.

Barry Blinderman, Director
University Galleries
May, 1988

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Catalogue design: John H. Walker
Photography: Charles Mason
Typesetting: Jeanne Lee, Illinois State University
Printing Services
Printing: Bloomington Offset Process, Inc.

ISBN 0-945558-01-5

This exhibition and catalogue have been funded in part by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a State agency.