

# “ART HYSTERICAL NOTIONS OF PROGRESS AND CULTURE”

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**A**s feminists and artists exploring the decorative in our own paintings, we were curious about the pejorative use of the word “decorative” in the contemporary art world. In rereading the basic texts of Modern Art, we came to realize that the prejudice against the decorative has a long history and is based on hierarchies: fine art above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art, men’s art above women’s art. By focusing on these hierarchies we discovered a disturbing belief system based on the moral superiority of the art of Western civilization.

We decided to write a piece about how *language* has been used to communicate this moral superiority. Certain words have been handed down unexamined from one generation to the next. We needed to take these words away from the art context to examine and decode them. They have colored our own history, our art training. We have had to rethink the underlying assumptions of our education.

Within the discipline of art history, the following words are continuously used to characterize what has been called “high art”: man, mankind, the individual man, individuality, humans, humanity, the human figure, humanism, civilization, culture, the Greeks, the Romans, the English, Christianity, spirituality, transcendence, religion, nature, true form, science, logic, purity, evolution, revolution, progress, truth, freedom, creativity, action, war, virility, violence, brutality, dynamism, power and greatness.

In the same texts other words are used repeatedly in connection with so-called “low art”: Africans, Orientals, Persians, Slovaks, peasants, the lower classes, women, children, savages, pagans, sensuality, pleasure, decadence, chaos, anarchy, impotence, exotica, eroticism, artifice, tattoos, cosmetics, ornament, decoration, carpets, weaving, patterns, domesticity, wallpaper, fabrics and furniture.

All of these words appear in the quotations found throughout this piece. The quotations are from the writings and statements of artists, art critics and art historians. We do not pretend to neutrality and do not supply the historical context for the quotations. These can be found in the existing histories of Modern Art. Our analysis is based on a personal, contemporary perspective.

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## WAR AND VIRILITY

Manifestoes of Modern Art often exhort artists to make violent, brutal work, and it is no accident that men such as Hirsh, Rivera, and Picasso like to think of their art as a metaphorical weapon. One of the longstanding targets of this weapon has been the decorative. The scorn for decoration epitomizes the machismo expressed by Le Corbusier, Gabol Pevsner and Marinetti/Sant’Elia. Their belligerence may take the form of an appeal to the machine aesthetic: the machine is idolized as a tool and symbol of progress, and technological progress is equated with reductivist, streamlined art. The instinct to purify exalts an order which is never described and condemns a chaos which is never explained.

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Joseph Hirsh, from “Common Cause,” D.W. Larkin, 1949:  
“The great artist has wielded his art as a magnificent weapon truly mightier than the sword . . .”

Diego Rivera, “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” 1932:  
“I want to use my art as a weapon.”

Pablo Picasso, “Statement about the Artist as a Political Being,” 1945:  
“No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”

Le Corbusier, “Guiding Principles of Town Planning,” 1925:

“Decorative art is dead. . . . An immense, devastating brutal evolution has burned the bridges that link us with the past.”

Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, “Basic Principles of Constructivism,” 1920:

“We reject the decorative line. We demand of every line in the work of art that it shall serve solely to define the inner directions of force in the body to be portrayed.”

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Antonio Sant’Elia, “Futurist Architecture,” 1914:

“The decorative must be abolished! . . . Let us throw away monuments, sidewalks, arcades, steps; let us sink



squares into the ground, raise the level of the city."

El Lissitzky, "Ideological superstructure," 1929:

"Destruction of the traditional. . . . War has been declared on the aesthetic of chaos. An order that has entered fully into consciousness is called for."

"Manifesto of the Futurist Painters," 1910:

"The dead shall be buried in the earth's deepest bowels! The threshold of the future will be free of mummies! Make room for youth, for violence, for daring!"

## PURITY

In the polemics of Modern Art, "purity" represents the highest good. The more the elements of the work of art are pared down, reduced, the more visible the "purity." Here Greenberg equates reductivism with rationality and function. But it is never explained why or for whom art has to be functional, nor why reductivism is rational. Among artists as diverse as Sullivan, Ozenfant and de Kooning, we found the sexual metaphor of "stripping down" art and architecture to make them "nude" or "pure." The assumption is that the artist is male, and the work of art (object) female.

“ ”  
Clement Greenberg, "Detached Observations," 1976:

"The ultimate use of art is construed as being to provide the experience of aesthetic value, therefore art is to be stripped down towards this end. Hence, modernist 'functionalism,' 'essentialism' it could be called, the urge to 'purify' the medium, any medium. 'Purity' being construed as the most efficacious, efficient, economical employment of the medium for purposes of aesthetic value."

Louis Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture," 1892:

". . . it would be greatly for our aesthetic good, if we should refrain from the use of ornament for a period of years, in order that our thought might concentrate acutely upon the production of buildings well formed and comely in the nude."

Amédée Ozenfant, Foundations of Modern Art, 1931:

"Decoration can be revolting, but a naked body moves us by the harmony of its form."

Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," 1951:

"One of the most striking of abstract art's appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare."

## PURITY IN ART AS A HOLY CAUSE

Purity can also be sanctified as an aesthetic principle. Modern artists and their espousers sometimes sound like the new crusaders, declaring eternal or religious values. A favorite theme is that of cleansing art. The ecclesiastical metaphor of transcendence through purification (baptism) is used to uphold the "Greek" tradition (as in the van de Velde quotation) or the "Christian" tradition (as in the Loos quotation). Cleansing and purification are sometimes paired with an exalted view of the artist as a god, as in Apollinaire's desire to "deify personality."

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Henry van de Velde, "Programme," 1903:

"As soon as the work of cleansing and sweeping out has been finished, as soon as the true form of things comes to light again, then strive with all the patience, all the spirit and the logic of the Greeks for the perfection of this form."

Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," 1908:

"We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament. See, the time is nigh, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will glisten like white walls, like Zion, the holy city, the capital of heaven. Then fulfilment will be come."

Guillaume Apollinaire, The Cubist Painters, 1913:

"To insist on purity is to baptize instinct, to humanize art, and to deify personality."

## THE SUPERIORITY OF WESTERN ART

Throughout the literature of Western art there are racist assumptions that devalue the arts of other cultures. The ancient Greeks are upheld as the model, an Aryan ideal of order. Art in the Greco-Roman tradition is believed to represent superior values. Malraux uses the word "barbarian" and Fry the word "savages" to describe art and artists outside our tradition. The non-Western ideals of pleasure, meditation and loss of self are clearly not understood by the exponents of ego assertion, transcendence and dynamism.

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David Hume, "Of National Characters" (on Africans), 1748:

"There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences."

Roger Fry, "The Art of the Bushmen," 1910:

". . . it is to be noted that all the peoples whose drawing shows this peculiar power of visualization (sensual not conceptual) belong to what we call the lowest of savages, they are certainly the least civilizable, and the South African Bushmen are regarded by other native races in much the same way that we look upon negroes."

André Malraux, The Voices of Silence, 1953:

"Now a barbarian art can keep alive only in the environment of the barbarism it expresses . . ."

". . . the Byzantine style, as the West saw it, was not the expression of a supreme value but merely a form of decoration."

Roger Fry, "The Munich Exhibition of Mohammedan Art," 1910:

"It cannot be denied that in course of time it [Islamic art] pandered to the besetting sin of the oriental craftsman, his intolerable patience and thoughtless industry."

Gustave von Grunebaum, Medieval Islam, 1945:

"Islam can hardly be called creative in the sense that the Greeks were creative in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. or the Western world since the Renaissance, but its flavor is unmistakable . . ."



Sir Richard Westmacott, Professor of Sculpture, Royal Academy (quoted in *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France*, Francis Haskell, 1977):

“. . . I think it impossible that any artist can look at the Nineveh marbles as works for study, for such they certainly are not: they are works of prescriptive art, like works of Egyptian art. No man would ever think of studying Egyptian art.”

Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 1908:

“No ornament can any longer be made today by anyone who lives on our cultural level.”

“It is different with the individuals and peoples who have not yet reached this level.”

“I can tolerate the ornaments of the Kaffir, the Persian, the Slovak peasant woman, my shoemaker’s ornaments, for they all have no other way of attaining the high points of their existence. We have art, which has taken the place of ornament. After the toils and troubles of the day we go to Beethoven or to Tristan.”

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## FEAR OF RACIAL CONTAMINATION, IMPOTENCE AND DECADENCE

Racism is the other side of the coin of Exotica. Often underlying a fascination with the Orient, Indians, Africans and primitives is an urgent unspoken fear of infiltration, decadence and domination by the “mongrels” gathering impatiently at the gates of civilization. Ornamental objects from other cultures which appeared in Europe in the nineteenth century were clearly superior to Western machine-made products. How could the West maintain its notion of racial supremacy in the face of these objects? Loos’s answer: by declaring that ornament itself was savage. Artists and aesthetes who would succumb to decorative impulses were considered impotent and/or decadent.

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Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 1908:

“I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects. I believed that with this discovery I was bringing joy to the world; it has not thanked me. People were sad and hung their

heads. What depressed them was the realization that they could produce no new ornaments. Are we alone, the people of the nineteenth century, supposed to be unable to do what any Negro, all the races and periods before us have been able to do? What mankind created without ornament in earlier millenia was thrown away without a thought and abandoned to destruction. We possess no joiner’s benches from the Carolingian era, but every trifle that displays the least ornament has been collected and cleaned and palatial buildings have been erected to house it. Then people walked sadly about between the glass cases and felt ashamed of their impotence.”

Amédée Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, 1931:

“Let us beware lest the earnest effort of younger peoples relegates us to the necropolis of the effete nations, as mighty Rome did to the dilettantes of the Greek decadence, or the Gauls to worn-out Rome.”

“Given many lions and few fleas, the lions are in no danger; but when the fleas multiply, how pitiful is the lions’ lot!”

Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Cubism*, 1912:

“As all preoccupation in art arises from the material employed, we ought to regard the decorative preoccupation, if we find it in a painter, as an anachronistic artifice, useful only to conceal impotence.”

Maurice Barrés (on the Italian pre-Renaissance painters), 1897 (quoted in *André Malraux, The Voices of Silence*):

“And I can also see why aesthetes, enamored of the archaic, who have deliberately emasculated their virile emotions in quest of a more fragile grace, relish the poverty and pettiness of these minor artists.”

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## RACISM AND SEXISM

Racist and sexist attitudes characterize the same mentality. They sometimes appear in the same passage and are unconsciously paired, as when Read equates tattoos and cosmetics. The tattoo refers to strange, threatening customs of far-off places and mysterious people. Cosmetics, a form of self-ornamentation, is equated with self-objectification and inferiority (Schapiro). Racism and sexism ward off the potential power and vitality of the “other.” Whereas nudity earlier alluded to woman as the object of male desire, here Malevich associates the nude female with savagery.

“ ”

Herbert Read, *Art and Industry*, 1953:

“All ornament should be treated as suspect. I feel that a really civilized person would as soon tattoo his body as cover the form of a good work of art with meaningless ornament. Legitimate ornament I conceive as something like mascara and lipstick—something applied with discretion to make more precise the outlines of an already existing beauty.”

Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 1908:

“The child is amoral. To our eyes, the Papuan is too. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is not a criminal. But when modern man kills someone and eats him he is either a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddles, in short everything he can lay hands on. He is not a criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty percent of the inmates show tattoos. The tattooed who are not in prison are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies at liberty, it means he has died a few years before committing a murder.”

Meyer Schapiro, “The Social Bases of Art,” 1936:

“A woman of this class [upper] is essentially an artist, like the painters whom she might patronize. Her daily life is filled with aesthetic choices; she buys clothes, ornaments, furniture, house decorations; she is constantly re-arranging herself as an aesthetic object.”

Kasimir Malevich, “Suprematist manifesto Unovis,” 1924:

“. . . we don’t want to be like those Negroes upon whom English culture bestowed the umbrella and top hat, and we don’t want our wives to run around naked like savages in the garb of Venus!”

Iwan Bloch, *The Sexual Life of Our Time*, 1908:

“. . . [woman] possesses a greater interest in her immediate environment, in the finished product, in the decorative, the individual, and the concrete; man, on the other hand, exhibits a preference for the more remote, for that which is in process of construction or growth, for the useful, the general, and the abstract.”

Leo Tolstoy, “What Is Art?” 1898:

“Real art, like the wife of an affectionate husband, needs no orna-



ments. But counterfeit art, like a prostitute, must always be decked out."

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## HIERARCHY OF HIGH-LOW ART

Since the art experts consider the "high arts" of Western men superior to all other forms of art, those arts done by non-Western people, low-class people and women are categorized as "minor arts," "primitive arts," "low arts," etc. A newer more subtle way for artists to elevate themselves to an elite position is to identify their work with "pure science," "pure mathematics," linguistics and philosophy. The myth that high art is for a select few perpetuates the hierarchy in the arts, and among people as well.

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Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 1939:  
"It will be objected that such art for the masses as folk art was developed under rudimentary conditions of production—and that a good deal of folk art is on a high level. Yes, it is—but folk art is not Athene, and it's Athene whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension."

H. W. Janson, *History of Art*, 1962:  
". . . for the applied arts are more deeply enmeshed in our everyday lives and thus cater to a far wider public than do painting and sculpture, their purpose, as the name suggests, is to beautify the useful, an important and honourable one, no doubt, but of a lesser order than art pure and simple."

Amédée Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, 1931:  
"If we go on allowing the minor arts to think themselves the equal of Great Art, we shall soon be hail fellow to all sorts of domestic furniture. Each to his place! The decorators to the big shops, the artists on the next floor up, several floors up, as high as possible, on the pinnacles, higher even. For the time being, however, they sometimes do meet on the landings, the decorators having mounted at their heels, and numerous artists having come down on their hunkers."

Le Corbusier (Pierre Jeanneret) and Amédée Ozenfant, "On Cubism," 1918: (quoted in Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*):

"There is a hierarchy in the arts: decorative art at the bottom, and the human form at the top."  
"Because we are men."

Andre Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, 1953:

"The design of the carpet is wholly abstract; not so its color. Perhaps we shall soon discover that the sole reason why we call this art 'decorative' is that for us it has no history, no hierarchy, no meaning. Color reproduction may well lead us to review our ideas on this subject and rescue the masterwork from the North African bazaar as Negro sculpture has been rescued from the curio-shop; in other words, liberate Islam from the odium of 'backwardness' and assign its due place (a minor one, not because the carpet never portrays Man, but because it does not express him) to this last manifestation of the undying East."

Barnett Newman, "The Ideographic Picture," 1947 (on the Kwakiutl artist):

"The abstract shape he used, his entire plastic language, was directed by a ritualistic will towards metaphysical understanding. The everyday realities he left to the toymakers; the pleasant play of nonobjective pattern to the women basket weavers."

Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, 1972:

"In the same sense that science is for scientists and philosophy is for philosophers, art is for artists."

Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note by the American Editor," 1970:

"In a sense, then, art has become as 'serious as science or philosophy' which doesn't have audiences either."

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## THAT OLD CHESTNUT, "HUMANISM"

Humanism was once a radical doctrine opposing the authority of the church, but in our secular society it has come to defend the traditional idea of "mankind" and status quo attitudes. The "human values" such authorities demand of art depend on the use of particular subject matter or particular ideas of "human" expression. Without humanist content, ornament, pattern and ritual or decorative elaborations of production are condemned as inhuman, alien and empty. "The limits of the decorative," says Malraux, "can be precisely defined only in an age of humanistic art." We could rather say that

the generalities of "humanist" sentiment characterize only a small part of world art, most of which is non-Western and decorative. But why should anyone prefer the false divisions of these writers, based on ethnic stereotypes, to a historical awareness of the interdependence of all "human" cultures?

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Camille Mauclair, "La Réforme de l'art décoratif en France" (on the Impressionists), 1896:

"Decorative art has as its aesthetic and for its effect not to make one think of man, but of an order of things arranged by him: it is a descriptive and deforming art, a grouping of spectacles the essence of which is to be seen."

Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 1954:

"Paintings or sculpture are self-contained statements about the nature of human existence in all its essential aspects. An ornament presented as a work of art becomes a fool's paradise, in which tragedy and discord are ignored and an easy peace reigns."

Hilton Kramer, "The Splendors and Chill of Islamic Art," 1975:

". . . for those of us who seek in art something besides a bath of pleasurable sensation, so much of what it [the Metropolitan Museum's Islamic wing] houses is, frankly so alien to the expectations of Western sensibility."

"Perhaps with the passage of time, Islamic art will come to look less alien to us than it does today. I frankly doubt it—there are too many fundamental differences of spirit to be overcome."

". . . there is small place indeed given to what looms so large in the Western imagination: the individualization of experience."

Sir Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, 1928:

". . . the painter was apparently willing to spend hours of work upon the delicate veining of the leaves of a tree . . . but it does not seem to have occurred to him to devote the same pains and effort on the countenances of his human figures . . . he appears to have been satisfied with the beautiful decorative effect he achieved."

André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, 1953:

"The limits of the decorative can be precisely defined only in an age of humanistic art."

"It was the individualization of destiny, this involuntary or unwitting



imprint of his private drama on every man's face, that prevented Western art from becoming like Byzantine mosaics always transcendent, or like Buddhist sculpture obsessed with unity."

"How could an Egyptian, an Assyrian or a Buddhist have shown his god nailed to a cross, without ruining his style?"

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## DECORATION AND DOMESTICITY

The antithesis of the violence and destruction idolized by Modern Art is the visual enhancement of the domestic environment. (If humanism is equated with dynamism, the decorative is seen to be synonymous with the static). One method "modernism" has used to discredit its opponents has been to associate their work with carpets and wallpaper. Lacking engagement with "human form" or the "real world," the work of art must be stigmatized as decorative (Sedlmayr and Barnes/de Mazia). So decorative art is a code term signifying failed humanism. Artists such as Gleizes and Kandinsky, anxious to escape the tag of the decorative, connect their work to older, humanist aspirations.

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Aldous Huxley on Pollock's Cathedral, 1947:

"It seems like a panel for a wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall."

Wyndham Lewis, "Picasso" (on Minotaure), 1940:

"... this confused, feeble, profusely decorated, romantic carpet."

The Times of London critic on Whistler, 1878:

"... that these pictures only come one step nearer [to fine art] than a delicately tinted wallpaper."

Hans Sedlmayr, Art in Crisis: The Lost Center, 1948:

"With Matisse, the human form was to have no more significance than a pattern on a wallpaper..."

Dr. Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia, The Art of Cézanne, 1939:

"Pattern, in Cézanne an instrument strictly subordinated to the expression of values inherent in the real world, becomes in cubism the entire aesthetic content, and this degradation of form leaves cubistic painting with no claim to any status higher than decoration."

Albert Gleizes, "Opinion" (on Cubism), 1913:

"There is a certain imitative coefficient by which we may verify the legitimacy of our discoveries, avoid reducing the picture merely to the ornamental value of an arabesque or an Oriental carpet, and obtain an infinite variety which would otherwise be impossible."

Wassily Kandinsky, Über das Geistige in der Kunst, 1912:

"If we begin at once to break the bonds that bind us to nature and to devote ourselves purely to combinations of pure color and independent form, we shall produce works which are mere geometric decoration, resembling something like a necktie or a carpet."

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## AUTOCRACY

Certain modern artists express the desire for unlimited personal power. The aesthetics of "modernism"—its egomania, violence, purity-fixation and denial of all other routes to the truth—is highly authoritarian. The reductivist ideology suggests an inevitable, evolutionary survival of the (aesthetic) fittest. Reinhardt declares throughout his writings that all the world's art must culminate in his "pure" paintings. Ozenfant equates purism with a "superstate." Mendelsohn believes the advocates of the new art have a "right to exercise control."

“ ”

Ad Reinhardt, "There is Just One Painting," 1966:

"There is just one art history, one art evolution, one art progress. There is just one aesthetics, just one art idea, one art meaning, just one principle, one force. There is just one truth in art, one form, one change, one secrecy."

Amédée Ozenfant, Foundations of Modern Art, 1931:

"Purism is not an aesthetic, but a sort of super-aesthetic in the same way that the League of Nations is a superstate."

Erich Mendelsohn, "The Problem of a New Architecture," 1919:

"The simultaneous process of revolutionary political decisions and radical changes in human relationships in economy and science and religion and art give belief in the new form, an a priori right to exercise control, and provide a justifiable basis for a rebirth amidst the

misery produced by world-historical disaster."

Adolf Hitler, speech inaugurating the "Great Exhibition of German Art," 1937:

"I have come to the final inalterable decision to clean house, just as I have done in the domain of political confusion..."

"National-Socialist Germany, however, wants again a 'German Art,' and this art shall and will be of eternal value, as are all truly creative values of a people..."

Frank Lloyd Wright, "Work Song," 1896:

"I'LL THINK  
AS I'LL ACT  
AS I AM!

NO DEED IN FASHION FOR SHAM  
NOR FOR FAME E'ER MAN MADE  
SHEATH THE NAKED WHITE

BLADE

MY ACT AS BECOMETH A MAN  
MY ACT  
ACTS THAT BECOMETH THE  
MAN"

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**W**e started by examining a specific attitude—the prejudice against the decorative in art—and found ourselves in a labyrinth of myth and mystification. By taking these quotes out of context we are not trying to hold these artists and writers up to ridicule. However, to continue reading them in an unquestioning spirit perpetuates their biases. The language of their statements is often dated—indeed, some of them are over a century old—but the sentiments they express still guide contemporary theory in art.

Modernism, the theory of Modern Art, claimed to break with Renaissance humanism. Yet both doctrines glorify the individual genius as the bearer of creativity. It seems worth noting that such heroic genius has always appeared in the form of a white Western male. We, as artists, cannot solve these problems, but by speaking plainly we hope to reveal the inconsistencies in assumptions that too often have been accepted as "truth."

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□ We relied heavily on Joseph Masheck, "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness," *Arts Magazine*, Sept., 1976, for the quotes about carpets and wallpaper.

To Amy Goldin whose ideas and encouragement made this piece possible.

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