

Between Worlds: Howard Kanovitz, Painter of Contradiction

by Jorn Merkert

'Photography has destroyed verisimilitude.'

Elias Canetti

I.

Howard Kanovitz paints pictures in which the everyday, the familiar, the self evident, the banal once more become an occasion to view reality with amazement.

I sit in a taxicab that has stopped by the side of the road and look out through the windshield. I see the asphalt roadway in twilight, and the headlights of oncoming cars. Directly in front of me, illuminated by the headlights of my taxi, a large roadsign amid lightpoles with powerlines strung between them, the words "Sugar Plum." I see a rearview mirror which sharply reflects, in reverse, another sign on the other side of the road. Simultaneously, I see trees in front of me tinged with the halflight of dusk. I can scarcely distinguish individual trees, only brown-yellow silhouettes in a golden haze. These are not just outlines but masses of color in the midst of which I discern the back of a roadsign on the left side of the high-way. Above I see a dense, misty, luminous, orange-beige sky. At the same time as I see all this, I suddenly realize that I am also seeing an out-of-focus rendering in my field of vision of the windshield frame, a portion of the dashboard, the taxi meter, its numerals, the driver's hack license, and an I.D. photograph.

Actually, I don't see all this.

What I'm seeing is depicted in a painting, a painting titled "Sugar Plum" (1974; plate, p. 18). The painting creates the illusion of its existence as reality. The scale of the objects is exactly as I might see them. I am inside the painting. The windshield suggests an undefined space in which I sit and out of which I see.

I see a painting the model for which is a photograph, a painting which shows me a unified camera-derived image simultaneous with what I would see sequentially in real life. Which is more tangible, what I see, or what I imagine I am seeing, the latter of which characterizes what I would see if I were truly seeing? Which is more tangible, the fact that I see a painted canvas, or the fact that I might experience the reality? But the reality in question is itself "only" a photograph from which this image was painted. What I see with

particular clarity is that which appears behind the windshield and is thus separated from me: a highway landscape, also a hybrid landscape, which on the one hand is romantically evocative of a drive in the country but on the other is interrupted by signals which simultaneously evoke an urban image. But in this landscape appears a road sign - "Sugar Plum" -an image within an image within an image within an image within etc. ...That is, the image of the word within the image of the highway, in front of which a mirror image appears, within an image painted from a photographic image. A look at Kanovitz's image of banal reality tells me of the inaccuracy of my everyday way of seeing and gives me the opportunity to put it to a test. I will not only test what I see but how I see it. Would that also be a "reality check" -whatever "reality" means? Quite offhand, I ask myself about my attitude as it relates to seeing, and realize that my seeing relates to recognizing. The precision of the image leaves nothing to be desired. But precisely by means of and within the precision of the image I feel myself subject to illusion. So in the rarefied atmosphere of a museum or a gallery this deceptively authentic-looking reality is proposed to me while at the same time making me aware that this can't be reality but only an image of it. Indeed, an image of an image of this reality. I suspect that this image of reality could deceive me if I let it.

II

In 1956, when he was 27, Howard Kanovitz's paintings had as yet nothing of this eye-provoking interaction between homogeneous and mutually contradictory realities. They nevertheless already reflected differentiating and diverging levels of reality. These works show the artist in a completely different relationship to the world -a completely different painter. In his almost abstract yet more figurative expressionist style of this period, Kanovitz only thematically approaches his immediate environment and day-to-day life.

"Four A.M. Eastern Standard Time," painted in 1956 (plate, p. 10) depicts an early-morning jam session in Kanovitz's Lower East Side loft. The scene is captured in a free, spontaneous improvisation. The eye needs some time before it can recognize the room or any particular details, until it grasps, for example, that the background to the left of the jazz band includes a big studio window opening to a view of

the neighborhood cityscape in the early hours before dawn. Kanovitz paints himself and his friends on this canvas, not as an anecdotal portrait but as an atmosphere and mood of a free, unselfconscious, youthful group. In his contribution to the present catalog, Michael Florescu has proposed that the self-portrait which Kanovitz has placed on the left-hand edge of the group represents him simultaneously as player and observer. Until the early 1950s the painter Kanovitz was an accomplished jazz musician. He was introduced to art and then to art school by a member of his own band in the late 1940s. He was close to concluding this chapter of his life when in 1956 he planned an extended European trip to see the art of the old masters in Rome, Florence, and Paris. With this painting he bids an almost sentimental farewell to his period as a jazz trombonist. The palette limits itself to a rare confrontation and interplay of two colors, red and blue, which vibrate with life. But despite the boisterousness of the colors, which might be appropriate to the jam session theme, he freezes his nocturnal musicmaking in an almost melancholy stillness. He remains introspective, despite all the tumultuousness of the brushwork reflecting his uprooted inner life. The artist tries to render feelings of joy that are suffused with a powerful yearning for life, directness, and unobstructed openness. That explains the spontaneous brushwork, which does not aim at a kind of art that is locked into a static, hermetic, stable order. Instead, it insists on being a direct slice of life, a notation of the present moment, guided only by feeling. One theme is already present in the foreground that will preoccupy Kanovitz again and again -that is the confrontation between inner and outer worlds. His handling of the theme aims to evince internal through external reality and thereby define its relations to the world. In these early paintings he achieves this by presenting an emotionally charged interpretation of figures and objects and an expressionistic exaggeration of their external form. At the same time, the painting is characterized as an ordinary everyday occurrence. But because it is emotionally charged, the unconscious and subconscious is suspended in the content. The psychological aspect of Howard Kanovitz's art is discernibly related to the manner of his brushwork.

Almost 25 years later, he will formulate the same problem in a completely different way. Then, through his use of photography, everyday objects will be rendered in a state of alienation, but so precisely rendered that their loss of physical presence becomes visually tangible as they become an almost abstract image of themselves. Simultaneously, the concept of the object takes over the object itself. For Kanovitz it is only in this

contradiction that he finds it possible to make the life around us intelligible by means of images. Thus, the nature of the subjectivity with which objects are charged is confronted by Kanovitz in his later so-called photorealist paintings by an investigation of the interrelations between those objects. The fragility of the meaning of things he will make self-evident by establishing contact between those things which in his mind consent to that contact. He will examine these interrelationships when he juxtaposes contradictory elements, or, by means of photographic techniques, allows them to interpretate. This takes us back to questions which we already asked about "Sugar Plum" at the outset and which may help us recognize where we stand in our relation to reality.

III

Kanovitz's trip to Europe in 1956 was from the outset more than just the "grand tour." It differed from the classic standards of fine arts training in which the art student was obligated to travel in order to see the great monuments of Western art. Now the situation for European artists is different, in that the mandatory art-trip points toward New York City and the United States. Most American artists of Kanovitz's generation were ambivalent about the necessity of steeping themselves in the European heritage.

Regardless, Kanovitz was not traveling as a typical American. He is a first-generation American Jew. His parents arrived in the U.S.A. around the turn of the century from the Lithuanian capital of Vilna under the threat of pogroms. His father came first, in the year 1904, and began to make his life in the New World. His future bride followed two years later. It was in this transition from the old to the new that the young people began living together, themselves still steeped in the old country ways but finding that these ways, although often a source of comfort and security, no longer sufficed to solve problems in the alien New World.² This ambivalence between the conservation of old traditions necessary for survival and the equally necessary renunciation of such answers to life's problems certainly also shaped Kanovitz. This trip represented a return encounter with Old World ideas he had grown up with. Here, on familiar ground, he carried within himself that conflict which we have already encountered in the contradictions implicit in the content of his work. We shall further pursue this thread of complex contradiction in Kanovitz's art.

In the course of his European trip Kanovitz lived for several months in Florence and while there found Italian painting to be in close harmony with his artistic attitude (which

he had not yet been able to put to use in his work). He particularly admired the early Italians Uccello and Piero della Francesca.

He studied, visited museums, copied, and sketched. (By a stroke of luck, a studio was offered him at this time. An artist his own age was leaving Florence for a couple of months and made available to him what had been the studio of Adolf von Hildebrand, a famous turn-of-the-century German academic sculptor. Judging from the photograph of the studio -see p. 22 of the present Catalog -it had not lost too much of its original appearance. Still adorning the high walls of the studio were plaster casts of the Elgin Marbles, parts of the Parthenon frieze depicting the battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs.)

Kanovitz's interest in Italian painting led him to an intensive analysis of Western painting tradition and esthetics, together with an analysis of the issues arising from the use of nature as a model, in its relationship to painting. In order to deal with these concepts, it was essential that he understand the language and thinking characteristic of Italian painting. What is the relationship in Italian painting of the figure to the background? How is perspective achieved in the representation of space? How does the figure express plasticity in relation to the background while still maintaining its existence as an abstract organization of colors? How, after ardent search, was the new consciousness of reality realized through the innovative painterly means of the early Renaissance? How can space be represented as an illusion by means of single-point perspective on the two-dimensional surface? How can reality be interpreted in the painting and, beyond that, be raised to the level of icon? In order to conceptualize this, we might speak of an art-educational experience quite alien to the typical American one.

On the other hand, we must mention the fact that in 1951 Kanovitz was a student and assistant of Franz Kline. His paintings from the early 1950s, of which only a few remain, and several are on view in this exhibition for the first time, place Kanovitz unmistakably as a student who is following in his teacher's footsteps. His paintings of that period show accomplishment in form and color, but are substantially derivative. Discernible in these early works, however, are his feeling for color and approach to the problems of space as it relates to the two-dimensional surface and how color values may shift their expression according to their position. In this context we should note, first, that in 1956, around the period when he returned to figurative painting in 'Four A.M. Easter

Standard Time," Kanovitz had already grasped the psychic power of color and form as an expression of inner reality. Second, he received this directly from a painter who found his way, as did Jackson Pollock, to a personal statement that put in question the very idea of painting as understood by Europeans. To Kline, likewise, a year in London shortly before World War Two had been significant in the development of his artistic identity.

Kanovitz was thus artistically equipped in a manner contradictory to the Italian painting that had so moved him, and it is hardly surprising that his artistic consciousness suffered a crisis. For two years he traveled around Europe and North Africa. In 1958 he returned to the United States. Almost all the works done after his European experience had no plausibility for Kanovitz, are parenthetical to him, and have been for the most part destroyed. Only at the beginning of the 1960s did he again succeed in creating paintings that he now stands by.

IV

With his abstract paintings of 1962, Kanovitz gives a self-reliant answer to the problems raised by American abstract expressionism. Certainly one sees in paintings such as "Wanderjahr" (see plate, p. 58) or "Ouequechan" (No.5 in the present Catalog) both the influence of his teacher Kline and a coming-to-terms with him, as well as with other Americans such as Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and Philip Guston, and European-Americans such as Hans Hofmann and Willem de Kooning. As Kanovitz's reaction to the American brand of the existential experience, the 1962 paintings do not merely (as still in 1951-52) follow in the master's footsteps, but constitute an answer to the discoveries implicit in the latter's major works.

These works also remain artistically characteristic of European tradition while at the same time attempting to get outside of it. In them Kanovitz deals with abstract color/space relationships which occur only on the surface of the canvas. Within these relationships he discovers the subjective imagery of his inner landscapes. If one examines them carefully, one gets sudden glimpses of something like landscape in a terse shorthand of form and color. Spatial concepts also evolve from them that may seem to allude to American Indian spatial concepts. Still, one never sees actual renderings of landscapes or spaces. These paintings are subjective dialogues in which Kanovitz endows his environment with sensibility. He invents a personal color/space hierarchy and at the same

time develops an expressionistic "interaction of color" relating to reality in almost the same way as Paul Klee's "harmony parallel to Nature." At the same time colors, color movements, and the forms these assume on the surface may stand symbolically for objects, not however for their quality as things, but for their spatial interrelationships. Compared with what was actually a very similar objective in "Four A.M." there is in these paintings a renunciation not only of the least taint of representationalism but also of the least possibility of specifying his relationship to the world in quasi-literary terms. Yet titles like "Wanderjahr" or "The Drunk" (Catalog No; 7) are an open invitation to the viewer to empathize with the emotive content and the psychic charge, tensions, or releases. At the same time, Kanovitz abandons the brushwork characteristic of "Four A.M." -which was free, spontaneous, rapid, nervous. The new paintings are more ample in movement, more relaxed in composition, but at the same time no longer characterized by frankness, uneasiness, and openendedness. In these works he regained the centered, self-contained image which holds its own in a universal context, but at the same time stands in close proximity to the European genre of "devotional" art, an icon of the subjective. But this sureness, this cool, lively self-containment and, as it were, tranquil self-discovery also mirrors great inner security. Kanovitz, who never stays in one place, thus also rapidly achieved the freedom after that prolific year to give up what he had won, to "upset the apple cart" in order to strike out in a new direction, without relinquishing the means which he had just fully mastered. He found his way back to the figure.

V

Paintings such as "Wade Ins" (1963) (plate, p. 61), "Hermaphrodite" (1963) (Plate, p. 60), or "The Artist's Parents" (1965) (plate, p. 64) do not attempt define space realistically. Abstract planes of color define space in ways that can occur only on the surface of the painting. Their structural composition evolved from Kanovitz's abstract work.

"Wade Ins" is first and foremost an emotional reaction to political and social reality.³ It's subject is racial violence. The event is not depicted in illusionistic perspective. The drama of the riot, people striking one another, is treated as a relief-like progression of bodies and spaces on the painting's surface. It is the color values, lights and darks, the

shadings of brown tones that define space in this painting. The panel with the hand-lettered title running across the top of the painting further strengthens this formal interpretation. At the same time, however, Kanovitz makes direct reference to compositional elements in the Elgin Marbles, which he had had in front of him every day in the Hildebrand studio in Florence. In the context of the rectangular format of the Greek temple frieze metope, the problem of space representation and of the figure in space does not yet arise. The development of the painting required abstract organizational thinking, which he had mastered in his paintings of 1962. Kanovitz was now ready for objective figuration. The expressive intensity of his brushwork was that of an abstractionist, not a figure painter. "Wade Ins," not quite as subjective as "Four A.M.," clearly exhibits a highly subjective character. The figurative theme of "The Hermaphrodite" (plate, p. 60), "The Bather" (plate, p. 62), or "The High Jumper" (Catalog, N. 13) is isolated and monumentalized upon an undefined background. The result is a concentration on the isolated figure simultaneous with a consistent painterly handling of both figure and background. An attempt is made to transcend the apparent contradiction between realism and abstraction. The delineated figure becomes an abstract organization of color on a surface, which makes the background a part of the subject matter. In this fashion Kanovitz solves the basic problem of the relationship between figure and background. Content and theme being secondary, the main consideration is the use of a painterly process in formulating the artistic order. In this manner, Kanovitz has replaced traditional perspective by a perspective of his own created by a dynamic balance between figure and ground. The painting acts as a kind of "harmony parallel to Nature," abstract values without superficial realism. The painting exists as a painting and as an autonomous object. In Goethe's words, it is "a counterpart responsive to reality."

After his father's death in 1963, Kanovitz came upon some old family snapshots while putting the family papers in order. In the snapshots he recognized, through his emotional link with them, special pictorial qualities which stimulated his artistic imagination -the ordinary, everyday occurrence, the unexpected, the spontaneous, naive esthetic which makes an abstraction of reality while closely approximating it, the frozen moment, the slice of life, the transposition of a spatial situation onto the surface of a picture, the authenticity and, as well, the blurring of real-life intensity. With the conviction of a new insight, he was drawn to newspaper photographs. These were to have a special

influence. He began to make drawings from photographs, "The Bather," "The High Jumper," and came to terms with the found object, photography, just as he had with any other object in nature. He transformed the photographs in the drawing process and by squaring them up (use of a grid) isolated units of light value important to the process of painting. The photo dissolves into an abstraction by virtue of the drawing, and the subject matter is transposed as an abstract pattern onto the surface. The grid, once obtained, served as the basis for a cartoon which was then drawn on the canvas and later painted.

The question of figure and background, as I mentioned earlier, becomes, with the use of photographs as subject matter, the predominant theme of Kanovitz's paintings of 1965, to the point that in some paintings this preoccupation achieves the status of a theme. "Nude Greek" (plates, p. 25), "Reclining Nude Greek" (plate, p. 67), and "The Lovers" (plate, p. 73) are typical examples. In almost ornamental fashion, the figures are woven into the background, which in its technical handling has become even more anonymous, a surface painted by a housepainter. But there is a third plane in the picture, whose surface character demonstrates yet another type of abstraction. The figure is "realistic" because it is painted from a photograph. But the tonal treatment of the nude figure has been broken down in such a way that the eye reconstructs it into a "deceptive likeness." In almost Matisse-like fashion, Kanovitz paints a bed with a boldly patterned quilt. This pattern serves to describe the object in an abstract color sense while nevertheless depicting it in the anecdotal sense, which sharply distinguishes it from the nude figure in the degree and kind of abstraction used in its construction. All this is backed up by an anonymously brushed background which exhibits no further distinctive brushwork, no color nuances. But the monochrome surface not only isolates the objects, not only takes from the the spatial relationship which they imply, not only alters the realistic/abstract balance, specifically that of surface (the body) which stands in front of another surface (the bed) both of which are backed up by a third surface (the background), but also may be understood as a magical superelevation of the figure. This is reminiscent of the gold background in medieval and Byzantine painting. The "banal" image undergoes an escalation to the level of an icon somewhere between reality and the invisible world, and by means of this artifice becomes an exact likeness.

This manner of figurative image discovery via abstraction is developed by an across-the-board use of abstraction in such paintings as "The Dance" (plate, p. 75), "New Yorkers I" (plate, p. 71), and "New Yorkers II" (plates, pp. 12, 27), as well as "The Dinner" (plate, p. 78) and "Lunch at Ratner's" (plate, p. 79). The subjects no longer help to define the mechanics of the picture space, as was the case with "Nude Greek." They are all equivalent. Their appearance in the painting is much like that of objects in an abstract still life. In "The Dance" the figures are not really standing. In "New Yorkers" they are not really sitting. Space, and with it their space, is as if sucked away, withdrawn. There remains only a chair in "The Dance" as an ornamental formal element equivalent to the figures and their gestures. The figures' very physicality is reduced to intersecting abstract color/shapes, which enter into equally important formal relationships with one another, as well as with the background, which now may no longer be called a background." Even the mullions of the windows in both versions of "New Yorkers" consist purely of flat color strips made up of rectangles and squares which stand in marked opposition to the rounded and quasi-organic forms of the figures. Further, the view out the window is less a view than a fragmented, flat picture within a picture. Its grey contrasts with the red background and engages in a color dialogue with the other color areas in the painting. It is also worth noting that only the heads and hands of the figures are color-differentiated and tonally rendered. The areas we have designated as abstract are painted in flat solid color. The subjective, agitated idiom of the brushwork characteristic of Kanovitz's earlier work is here completely abandoned. As in the earlier works, these paintings are color/space related compositions, but the abstract has given way to the objective. At the same time, the tonal, "realistic" treatment of heads and hands stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding picture space as well as to the bodies to which they belong. Simultaneously, because of their cut-out character, the heads and hands approach the nonfigurative. The individual color areas in the picture are organized relative to one another in accordance with principles of composition independently of their relationship to one another as objects. Although these paintings are based on photographs as patterns, and although Kanovitz has always in a certain way taken strict care to stick as closely as possible to the object of depiction, namely the photograph, he at the same time comes to terms very freely with its original pattern on the formal level. He in fact cuts it up, puts it back together, corrects it, transforms it into a collage.

This becomes especially clear when you know the background of "New Yorkers I" and "New Yorkers II." This source was a news photograph of the composer Richard Rodgers sitting with associates in a darkened theater. Dissatisfied with "New Yorkers I," Kanovitz began work on a second version. He revised the content, asking a carefully chosen group of friends to take one or another of the poses depicted in the news picture. He photographed them one by one, made drawings from the photographs, and transferred them to canvas, while retaining the same basic composition. Various significant details were expressively intensified, however. The fortuitous character of the news picture was transformed in the largescale composition.

In the confrontation between the snapshot-like situation characterized by precise realism and the sharply delineated, quasi-ornamental abstraction found in these paintings, we may discern two procedures of basic importance to the subsequent development of Howard Kanovitz's art. First, he breaks down the representation motif by means of a linear equivalent of a tonal situation and supplies it with an esthetically determined color structure. Empty background areas define and emphasize the picture space. He uses a rare sensibility for color relationships, movements, combinations, and interweavings.⁴ Secondly, he introduces abstract color areas as figurative components, although apart from their outlines they are not figuratively defined in either tone or texture. These shapes become immediately recognizable by virtue of their relationship with one another.

The precisely outlined objects in the painting (window frames, chairs, arms, articles of clothing, etc. transformed into ornamental relationships) are accepted by the viewer's imagination as images of reality, particularly because the eye has been induced by the painting's realistic portions to see the whole in figurative terms. From this it is clear that, apart from their role in the composition, the abstract shapes used to define the figurative components are also a deliberately introduced disturbance factor, creating in the viewer's eye a tension and heightened concentration relative to the painting's content.

So the space we are dealing with is at once a picture space and (in the viewer's imagination which has been provoked by fragments of objectively depicted reality) a "real" space, one that is not illusionistically simulated but only suggested to the eye, which is thereby challenged to revise its own perceptual mechanisms. The figures are so real they absorb the space surrounding them -it does not need to be represented. Perspective is

likewise superfluous. From photography-based "realism" of figuration we have moved to its antithesis: free, open-ended shape as a spontaneous picture element, a device which, applied in this dialectical fashion, challenges the viewer to see dialectically. According to Peter Sager, these blank areas derive from Pop Art (which in turn took them over from advertising art).⁵ In my opinion, however, if you take a hard look at what Kanovitz is doing here, it becomes obvious that he is using this method in an altogether different fashion, to generate a tension

which, rather than serving to trivialize in the manner of advertising art, instead serves to elevate everyday thing to a universal level. Here we are dealing with a concept that meshes with yet another aspect of these paintings' content: "New Yorkers" is a social painting. As noted earlier, the placement of figures in front of anonymous color backgrounds served not only to monumentalize but correspondingly to isolate. We have also pointed out the historical connection with the gold background in medieval painting. But in the old religious paintings this type of background quite unambiguously represents a promise of felicity in Paradise; in Howard Kanovitz's paintings the blank background is a void, serving as a visualization of that anxiety and loneliness in which, uprooted and homeless, we only seemingly have our place.

Of the same works Sam Hunter has written: "Something of the ubiquitous American experience of urban loneliness haunts many of these paintings. ..." ⁶ Especially in the case of "New Yorkers," we should again be aware of the presence of polyvalent levels which are introduced in formal terms but must be understood in terms of content. The paintings' point of departure is a newspaper photograph of Rodgers and associates, a picture rendered anonymous by the very fact of its exposure to a mass audience. This anonymous social picture is transformed into an individual typical one when Kanovitz paints it. While, in the second version, he replaces the "anonymous" businessman faces with likenesses of his friends, this individualization itself becomes anonymous, because the actual occasion for the content never happened. The friends never in fact came together in such a meeting. But because they nevertheless assumed these poses, they also surrendered something of their personal individuality and became unimportant as persons. The personal transformed into the anonymous (the news photo) remains anonymous in a private personalization (the painting) but with the difference that the

figures portrayed in the painting have gained validity as universal types.? "New Yorkers" exhibits a breadth of theme and a depth of content that make of it a worthy reflection of American society; however, the artistic means used to achieve this end all stem from the European classical tradition.

VII

"The Opening" (1967) (plate, p. 28) represented a summing up of Kanovitz's insights as an artist up to that time. The techniques of using photography in his art were highly refined; and at the same time he had broadened his collage technique in such a way that these experiments would soon lead to a new type of painting. Moreover, he had for the first time utilized a procedure that in coming years he would come to use exclusively: "painting with air," i.e. with the air brush. "The Opening" represents a typical art opening, one that never actually happened but easily could. In accordance with this concept, the painting is thematically complex, depicting a mixed crowd in which "anonymous" art-lovers rub elbows with well-known artists, critics, museum people, and other luminaries, shown in groups they would never actually have formed in real life ...or would they? Thus we find, left to right: Thomas B. Hess, then editor of Art News, an unknown woman, the painter Barnett Newmann, Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art, Howard Kanovitz, the collector Max Wassermann, Sam Hunter of Princeton University, an unknown couple, the art dealer Frank Lloyd, Mrs. Max Wassermann, H.H. Arnason, formerly of the Guggenheim Museum, Irving Sandier the art critic, and Kynaston L. McShine of the Museum of Modern Art.

Kanovitz had photographed them at numerous openings and other events in the course of that year and had assembled the figures from both formal and thematic standpoints. However, form and content overlap. An initial consolidation of the pictures yielded a broad panorama. Frequently, the compositionally necessary poses did not harmonize. But they had to harmonize. The composite painting had to be at least as authentic-looking as the photographs on which it had been based. Extremely significant gestures turned up; only, more often than not, they belonged to less significant persons. Content and formal values were either so unevenly distributed or, conversely, so much alike as to drain them of all potential tension. So Kanovitz went out again and took more pictures. He compared the new batch with those already collected. Putting them all

together, he superimposed some of the pictures, made composites and cut-ups of others, constructed relationships that had never existed in reality but were typical and could have happened that way. From all this emerged a first collage, which was already moving more in the right direction. It was now time to introduce a number of artificial corrections. Certain friends were asked to pose in attitudes typical of an opening. Kanovitz had himself photographed in the street, conversing with Tom Hess. H.H. Arnason posed in his office at the Guggenheim. While assembling this jigsaw puzzle, Kanovitz discovered that one figure might be very nice but the head wasn't held right. For example, Guggenheim director Tom Messer was looking the "wrong" way. So Kanovitz mounted Hunter's head on Messer's body. For the color composition, he prepared an almost abstract collage with multicolored pieces of paper, so as to regulate the patterning, movements, shifts, and overall distribution of colors. For the sake of color relationships, garments and persons were occasionally switched, even sometimes the placement of a given figure's feet, the attitude of a hand, the pattern of a garment, down to such details as a cigarette, handbag, or cocktail glass. The finished collage was photographed, then projected by means of a slide projector onto tracing paper. It was copied in outline only in those portions that would later actually appear in the painting. All this was done piecemeal - fragments of garments, garment patterns, hands, heads, poses, all of which could be readily combined to the best advantage. These Kanovitz transferred by means of carbon paper to the canvas by tracing the drawing over the carbon paper. At the same time, the individual fragment was drawn in its abstract color relationships. Color areas were delimited either by solid lines or by dotted lines or strokes signifying various tonal values. This represented a renewed process of abstraction and analysis not limiting itself to materials but touching upon faces as well as garments, alienating and transforming them into chunks of subject matter to be reassembled solely by color. Color fields were still painted by brushwork; a face, for example, was constructed like a mosaic. Between roughly adjacent color fields, the canvas was treated with a transparent glaze. Finally, the finished figures were covered with precisely matching stencils. The blue background was then applied with a spray gun, which distributed the color evenly and texturelessly over the surface. This created a luminous (one might almost say "optimistic") blue background, while at the same time suggesting a vast abyss intensified by that expressive power inherent in every blue.

For art world insiders, the painting is full of information; yet amid the celebrities are also anonymities -just as for the great majority of viewers, every one of the persons represented is an unknown quantity. Once again, the particular spills over into the general, just as it did in "New Yorkers." It seems as though it hardly mattered to Kanovitz why the people in his painting came together. If it does really represent an art opening, the art doesn't seem to matter (there is none represented in the painting) but communication does. The arrangement of the figures draws the viewer in, precisely because (thanks to the creation of an anonymous space in which the "realistic" figures are enclosed) the scene is being played nowhere and everywhere at one and the same time. The silhouette-like figures anticipate yet another formal development in Kanovitz's work, that of his free-standing cutouts. The wealth of photographic material that had been assembled in the preparatory stages of "The Opening" had brought Kanovitz in the course of his collage studies to the idea of isolated figure groups. "The People" (plates, pp. 31, 82) emerged a year later, in 1968, and in the artist's conception formed, together with "The Opening," a single work extending into three-dimensional space. In "The People," the content-related process of anonymization is developed on the formal level. We are shown only rear views of people who appear to be intently gazing at something. In their arrangement vis-a-vis "The Opening," these cut-outs are attention-grabbers. We, the real viewers, are compelled to strike poses exactly like the ones they represent. Like them, we enter into communication with "The Opening" as a painted picture hung in an exhibition. But "The People" also belongs to the depicted opening and is plugged into that painting's theme. In any case, the reason for the gathering of all these people would vanish and there would be no more opening if there were no art to look at. The void would be back with a vengeance, as Hunter called it, "the ubiquitous American experience of urban loneliness. ..." For us as viewers, this void is physically tangible, too, in the space between the free-standing figures and the picture on the wall. The invisible connections between all of these elements suggest space without representing it by means of perspective. Not all of Kanovitz's paintings correspond to "The Opening" or "The People" in the details of their genesis and development, but on the whole they definitely do, and certain general principles may be seen to underlie all of his work. The basic fundamental is a coming-to-terms with the world, while maintaining distance from it. To this end he utilizes found objects from everyday reality. To be sure, they are not juxtaposed in the alienating fashion dear to the

Surrealists. They are instead invariably composed into an image of reality that could correspond to reality. That which does not exist quite the same way in reality is introduced as if it were real, and vice versa. Photorealism and trompe-l'oeil serve as instruments to that end. The claim to authenticity proper to photography is extended into painting by means of this method. Kanovitz's collage method is therefore not simply a technique but also relates to the intellectual content of his work. It creates not only visual but intellectual illusions, leading us to pose certain questions. The trompe-l'oeil becomes a trompe-l'esprit. By painting deceptively realistic copies of reality, Kanovitz is at the same time an inventor of reality, insofar as he invents realities in his paintings, which create an effect of being simple found objects that were copied -therefore real things. But he does this only the better to deceive us.

VIII

As we have seen, Kanovitz's discovery of the cut-out in "The People" was already anticipated by his isolation of figures in front of the blank areas serving as background. Isolation represented in this fashion was transposed and thematically intensified when he went a step further and exhibited shapes that already had a cut-out character as literal cut-outs, a step that amounted to elevating these fragments of everyday reality to an image of the whole. These cut-outs are inextricably linked to the subject by their very shape, which replicates the subject's silhouette. This correspondence between figuration and abstract image was well suited to the further refinement of Kanovitz's skill as a technician. The technique of reducing a photographic image of an object by means of a drawing to its constituent color zones and then transferring it to canvas Kanovitz was now enabled by the use of the air brush to refine to an extraordinary degree. The very fact that the subject is broken down into fields of color enabled him to work with specially cut templates and achieve subtle nuances, unimaginably delicate transitions. The use of compressed air permits extremely precise modulations and opens up all kinds of other possibilities, whether through regulating the air pressure, or varying the distance between nozzle and painting surface, or the duration of the spraying, or spraying several times with several different colors. However, this technique, distinctive as it may be at the outset, involved a certain loss of personal touch. By the very fact of its perfection, the technique approaches the perfection of photography and the anonymity of photography, as well. It is

not the subject that is being rendered, but its image. At the same time, the photograph becomes itself a subject. The perceptual mechanism of the camera's single eye is quite different from seeing with two eyes.

To reflect this difference between the two kinds of seeing in his paintings and to make of it a thematic element was, however, secondary for Kanovitz. He instead introduced this problem as a formal element only in order to pose other questions.

Our surprise and doubt about reality, which was provoked by the photographically deceptive object painted onto a surface, could not fail to be heightened by the identity between image and external shape. And it was even more provoking to discover that - besides the correspondence between the painted image and the subject itself, between the shape of the painting and the shape of the subject - the size of both subject and painted image now corresponded! The line of experimentation embodied in "The People" is further developed in "Mazola and Ronzoni" (plate, p. 95), "Mr. B.J." (plate, p. 103), and "9th Street Junk" (plate, p. 100). Like his contemporaries in Pop Art, Kanovitz was becoming increasingly preoccupied with objects seen in everyday life rather than with figurative social themes, because in the every day objects the tension between art/reality and the illusory image was readily generated. Was it not inevitable that this complex, polyvalent mediation between contradictory elements would be readily and aggressively available in objects that were at the furthest possible remove from the dignity of being considered worthy of depiction in a work of art? The cut-out figures now stood in empty space not only in the formal sense but in physical reality. But in still another way, what was originally an artistic concept - figures placed in front of a blank background - was now transposed into reality. The background, now cut away, was replaced by the "real" wall in the gallery, in front of which the picture was hung. The reality of the exhibition situation was introduced in contradiction to the reality of "realism." The two realities contradicted each other, pressing their separate claims to reality. In the long series of window paintings, from 1968 to 1970 (plates, pp. 87, 92, 93, 98, 105), Kanovitz heightens this contradiction. A trompe-l'oeil painting of a window placed in front of a wall claims to be a window in that wall. The illusionistic representationalism of the painting, which is a reality as such, puts reality itself on the spot. At the same time, the window painting makes no claim about itself beyond the fact that it is a picture. It further emphasizes this claim by thematically restating the question: Isn't the thing framed by the window a picture? Isn't it the picture?

This question lends itself to being refined, folded and unfolded at successive levels of complexity, all of which leads inevitably to further paintings. What is the painting? A shaped canvas representing a window with a frame? Or is it what the window frame surrounds like a picture? Or is it what we see behind the windowpane? Or is it the other half of the picture? Is the Soho skyline (plate, p. 93) with its complex outline of rooftops and watertanks, which are completely darkened, hence sharply silhouetted against the bright sky background, only an example of how very real reality can appear, regardless of whether it is presented flat or in three dimensions? Or is it an ironical picture element which only happens to resemble a skyline? Is it actually just an abstract configuration of shapes, which for compositional reasons has a place in this painting -because its angularity constitutes an abstract quality to set off the lush and subtly nuanced handling of other portions of the painting?

If Kanovitz paints trompe-l'oeil, it is not merely to demonstrate a technical perfection reflecting an art-for-art's-sake esthetic stance; it is instead always a way of asking questions about our reality and our relationship to reality. The provocation inherent in Kanovitz's work doesn't come from the perfection of his technique, but rather from his juxtaposition of technique and content, together with the fragmentation of content. The abstraction process which we have traced step by step from the outset of Howard Kanovitz's career as a painter was zealously linked by him with internal reality, so long as it appeared to be purely abstract. As it would now seem that the illusionistic realism of his paintings cannot be intensified any further, abstraction has shifted to the conceptual complexity of the subject matter. And precisely in the window painting series, we once again encounter Kanovitz's old theme, between internal and external, between inner world and outside reality.

Kanovitz represents this theme when he unfolds seemingly related fragments of reality only to reveal that they are not truly related at all, even though we often encounter them the same way in reality; he does the opposite as well, demonstrating that things we are not accustomed to see in juxtaposition are in fact deeply related; and he does both things without the slightest recourse to Surrealist fictions. The painting, however, still remains an independent object which sometimes acts against the grain of reality, the better to reveal it, showing the world other than it is actually organized, although the picture often creates the illusion that things might in fact look that way.

IX

"Projected Street Scene" (plate, p. 108), "One by Threes" (plate, p. 115), and "Composition" (plate, p. 110), all executed in 1971, were exhibited at documenta v in Kassel in 1972 and classified in the exhibition category "Questioning Reality: Image Worlds Today." Many critics also spoke of them as "photorealism," a term intended to denote the dialectical confrontation of many artists with photography as thematic content, which could be pegged in terms of "doubt as to the nature of reality." These artists' investigations were immediately hailed as contributions to the definition of the difference between our organic two-eyed vision and the mechanical registration of reality by the one-eyed camera. Superficial as our experience of reality may be, Kanovitz does not make its dubiousness intelligible by means of exotic juxtapositions. He puts himself much more to the fore relative to what he sees and what surrounds him. He takes chunks of all that and demonstrates the multilayered dubiousness of our apparently self-evident position on this side of the surface of things, represented, ironically enough, as a glimpse inside the artist's own studio. Kanovitz reflects the basic doubts about reality that anyone might have and makes them all the more believable by depicting his own private doubts just as he experiences them in the course of his work. He nails them, as it were, by the very act of representing them artistically as an esthetic problem facing the artist in his own studio. As these doubts are embodied in completely ordinary objects and spatial situations, they also mesh plausibly with the viewer's own most private doubts. The believability of artifice is thereby demonstrated. Kanovitz deals with the problems of photography/painting/reality in toto and in the process uses both photographic subject matter and photography itself as they have never been used before. He develops the same doubts vis-a-vis reality that were formulated in his earlier work by the device of photographs, projections, traced and painted photographs hanging on the wall, objects, walls, and so forth, which he transforms into "images" and paints. In the process the objects are rendered neither larger nor smaller than they are in reality; this makes it possible to represent reality either by the object or the photograph. In this fashion, every object belonging to the everyday environment is available to be manipulated and used at will as subject matter. In the structuring of this type of subject matter and in the intersections of the levels of reality captured in it, an

element of collage enters into the conceptual process of creating the painting. However, this doesn't automatically turn the painting into a collage.

In "Sugar Plum," which we discussed at the beginning of this essay, and also in "Hotel Quai Voltaire" (plate, p. 129) (1974), Kanovitz discovered correspondences to this vision of the world in an everyday reality that had nothing to do with the studio atmosphere. What had been investigated in all its polyvalent complexity in an impressive series of studio paintings was now shown to be discoverable on the "outside," without having to make a "scenario" out of the motif.

The utilization of projected slides as subject matter led to a further development of the collage principle -the intersection, superimposition, and interpenetration of projected picture elements, or projections onto pictures hanging on the studio wall. The different pictures and picture-realities seemed not only to serve as mutual commentaries but simultaneously to keep at a distance and absorb one another. The subject matter is not merely obscured if it takes a lot of time to discern one image within another or reconstruct the fragmented portions of an image. The fragmentation of photographic images is often so complete that the objects are no longer identifiable but have become abstract, especially in cases when not only mere portions of objects were depicted in the slide but, in addition, the projected images themselves were cropped by the picture format. The fragmentation of the images and of the painting itself is at times so radical that one is tempted to speak of a tachiste-type abstraction characterized by fragment-images of the subject matter.

This esthetic approach, developed in paintings such as "Projected Man" (plate, p. 141) or "As It Is" (plate, p. 139), works in quite different fashion in the large-scale pastels dating from 1978 which were an outgrowth of Kanovitz's intense preoccupation during the late Sixties with drawing as a medium. By the end of the 1970s, Kanovitz had virtually ceased to paint with acrylics on canvas. What with the increasing formal complexity and intricacy of the image content, the laborious and technically painstaking work of drawing with pastels permitted what was actually a more easygoing style. At the same time, Kanovitz dropped much of his earlier repertory of technical aids. He does continue to work, as he always did, from drawings transferred via slide projector to the picture surface. But the still life-like arrangement of objects, or more accurately, of projections, is first tested on a small picture screen by back-projection, adjusted, and as it were, esthetically conjugated. Subsequently, the objects projected one by one on the screen serve as a model

from which Kanovitz makes a drawing. He is no longer drawing copies of things -glass, ashtray, table, eyeglasses but photographs of them. In the large pastels, divers realities fall through one another and together. No longer do the things we see make up the theme of the picture. The theme is rather the experiences we make of these things, the awareness we have of them. Pictures of things become so abstract that they become image-concepts of things. Kanovitz is at the same time moving in idiosyncratic fashion on a wide curve back to his own beginnings in a psychologically based abstract style. The images interpenetrate, become visible in a flash, sink back again and fade, exactly as the images of our subconscious mingle with the images in our conscious mind. They are mirror images of the internal/external worlds.

X

In our study of the chronological development of Howard Kanovitz's thought as an artist, we have become intimately acquainted with pictures which sought to define themselves retrospectively, as if mirroring a reality as dubious as that of real life. Kanovitz does not find our position vis-a-vis reality nearly so obvious as reality itself seems to proclaim. We got acquainted with these pictures as organizations of surface, color, and shape, as independent objects which continuously formulated their own reality, to stake their claim against "real" reality. They did so by the most contradictory solutions. Many simply pictured other pictures, were copies of photographs or mirror images, projections, window views; in the picture itself, various spatial situations occurred - sometimes represented, sometimes left out -in which the objects were forced to assert their own physical shape in contradiction to the emptiness surrounding them. These partially contradictory spatial representations put the picture in all its contradictions onto a single plane; the representations were thereby subjected to a kind of distancing and abstraction; they were transformed from a superficial realism to the status of images as a "counterpart responsive to reality." At the same time, the reality of photography as an independent object was emphasized. A photograph may be depicted like any other object. The fact that image size may independent of the real thing introduced an independent image reality into the picture. This led to a further convolution-the image of an image inside a picture within a picture, etc. Here the most disjunct, contradictory layers of reality are interwoven on

many levels. Also, the picture could and often did consist of complex superimpositions and interpenetrations of projected image and object fragments.

Always, however, even when Kanovitz is not utilizing exactly traditional techniques, his thought belongs to European tradition. His paintings remain paintings in accordance with our classical conception of what painting is. They reflect reality. Although the medium itself is put in question, the paintings afford a glimpse of realities surrounding us. These realities have found authenticity of a sort in photography, that medium claiming to be a more exact image of reality than the painted picture. Kanovitz, however, subverts the authenticity of photography by introducing it as an apparently unmodified picture element and then raising it to the level of painting. His figurative themes -portraits, landscapes, still-lives –form an unbroken connection with the age-old tradition of painting and are in no way eccentric. They are simply contemporary. Landscape is often viewed from a car. Civilization and technology are always present -cars, highways, roadsigns, drive-in theaters. A view of the sea shows not just a boat, but a motorboat. We are however most alienated from those landscapes which still have something of undisturbed nature about them although it is always made clear that this is our own damaged, contemporary environment whenever some portion of whatever is still left of nature is depicted. But there is more. Because of our separation from the natural world as represented by a windowpane or car window, we see nature as something fragmented, something we still yearn to take part in but can no longer reach. Here Kanovitz makes formal use of classic repoussoir technique. What in Caspar David Friedrich was a rear view of a figure or a rock formation is in Kanovitz the frame of a studio window or a steering wheel, a rearview mirror, or dashboard. Kanovitz's works often project a feeling of familiarity to me (despite all the surprises they may spring) because he makes use of a European painting idiom which nevertheless mirrors the reality of the New World with American eyes. Yet Kanovitz, whose basic theme is the many-layeredness of reality, himself remains between realities, between worlds. His way of seeing is rooted in Psychology as a theme of painting. It is concerned, not with the image of Man, not with the image of things, but with that which passes between them. Thanks to such a vision, thanks to such an approximation of reality which leaves the object alone and as it is, in order to get behind its secret, the most ordinary things become special things, and the copy is turned back into an image of verisimilitude.

Notes

1. Kanovitz was a trombone player. At the end of the 1940s he started his own band, The Earl Kay Quartet. His drummer, Athos Zacharias, was already an art student, and it was he who first induced Kanovitz to sign up for art school.

Zacharias appears in the photograph of the band on p. 46 (lower right-hand corner).

2. The full title of this painting is "Segregationists Break Up Wade Ins at Saint Augustine."

3. Erika Kluesener, in her discussion of "The Drinks" (plate, p. 39), gives an exhaustive description of how this picture was modified, its composition corrected, and successive color areas applied.

4. Peter Sager, "Zu den Arbeiten von Howard Kanovitz," in *Ausst. Kat. Howard Kanovitz, Hedendaagse Kunst, Utrecht, 1973*.

5. Sam Hunter, "Howard Kanovitz's New Paintings," in *Arts Magazine*, April 1975, Vol. 49, No.8, pp. 75.77.

6. Compare B.H. Friedman, "Focus as Physical Reality," in *Art News*, October 1966, pp. 47-48, 75.76. The businessmen were replaced by depictions of (left to right): Morton Feldman, Larry Rivers, Sam Hunter, Frank O'Hara, Howard Kanovitz, Bob Friedman, and Alex Katz.