

*Suzi Gablik*

## “Julian Schnabel Paints a Portrait of God” from *The New Criterion*, January 1984

During 1982 Julian Schnabel was the most talked about artist in New York. In that one year, he had eight solo exhibitions and was included in twenty-two group shows, and there were no less than four pages of bibliographic references for his work. It became impossible in certain circles to attend a dinner party where Schnabel was not the center of conversation. Everybody, it seemed, was asking everybody, in an effort to get at the heart of the matter, “What do *you* think about Julian Schnabel?” Meanwhile, like some storybook prince with sunset-colored hair, the artist himself stood poised on the edge of his own spectacular success. Paintings that in 1977 had sold for \$3,000 were now alleged to be worth upwards of \$60,000. To the Brooklyn-born Schnabel, who had arrived in New York in 1973 fresh from the University of Houston, it must have seemed as if his ambition to become “the greatest artist in the world” might even be fulfilled before the age of thirty.

When a mini-retrospective of his work was mounted at the Tate Gallery in London in the summer of '82, the English art world grew similarly agitated. There was a curious sense on opening night as if the Queen of Sheba or some other great figure out of history had put in an appearance. The truth is that a certain narcissistic drama has surrounded the whole enterprise of Schnabel's meteoric career, to a point which

transcends all responses to his work and which has made even his admirers uneasy. If, as many people believe, Schnabel is truly a tuning fork for our postmodern times, why does the mere mention of his name set off so many unsympathetic vibrations?

“Schnabel,” Robert Hughes has written in *Time*, “is immensely fashionable with collectors for reasons the work does not make clear.” Surely a cultural world that for years now has been accustomed to old tires and stuffed goats as part of the normal vocabulary of painting cannot look with anything but aplomb upon the presence of broken plates and a few antlers hanging on the wall. Surely it is not the clutter of broken crockery that sets Schnabel's critics so much on edge, for, when you get down to it, these are not threatening pictures—not in the way that Lichtenstein's comic strips were threatening when they first appeared, or Frank Stella's all-black stripe paintings. These are not radical pictures; if anything, they seem to have an old-fashioned visionary core, the subject matter ranging at times from St. Francis in ecstasy to images of Christ on the Cross. Schnabel has even painted a portrait of God. Is it the inexplicable intrusion of religious subject matter that suggests, to those who are made uneasy by Schnabel's work, a shadowy, counterfeit practice? Or is it the artist himself that they are unwilling to endorse?

It would seem to be provocative, after several decades of self-referring abstract art, that a number of artists are re-introducing mythological and religious themes in their pictures. We can point also to the work of Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Mimmo Paladino. Are we to view this new trend as evidence of the artist's dissatisfaction with a closed secular world—as an authentic reaching out on their part for the sources of lost myths? Is Neo-Expressionism a true renaissance of sacramental vision, an attempt to reconstitute a world of archetypal symbols forgotten by our society and to bring back to light their meanings? Or is it just another demythologizing tactic of postmodernism, one more form of eclectic pastiche, that merely recycles metaphysically picturesque images into yet another new, salable genre? How can a critic, or anyone else for that matter, determine this? At this point, not unexpectedly, opinions are very mixed. Inveterate Conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth claim that Neo-Expressionism, and the whole revival of painting in general, is market-oriented and regressive; while others—the critic Donald Kuspit being perhaps the most incisive among them—believe that Neo-Expressionism (particularly its German axis) reinstates the power of imagination after the arid intellectualism of Conceptual art and the bankruptcy of late-modernist abstraction. What the new painting obliges us to decide is whether, in transferring their energies to vaguely religious characters and symbols, these artists are acting on whim, or out of stylistic necessity, or from a belief that art can have real mystic value again.

When, in the Renaissance, Michelangelo depicted God touching the hand of Adam, it was felt by everyone who saw it as a sacramental action; nor is it necessary to identify with any specific religion to experience the way this image “causes” grace, almost as if it were itself imbued with the hidden presence of God. The image hits one just where it counts. By contrast, the florid blue blob that constitutes Schnabel's portrait of God is like light transmitted through an opaque stone. Seen through the eyes of a spirituality that belongs to another state of culture than ours, it appears to have no depth to its spiritual consciousness—there seems more self-indulgence in

it than visionary affirmation. If Neo-Expressionism indicates a genuine struggle to liberate the visionary powers—to reclaim for art those irrational components previously suppressed not only by Conceptual and Minimalist modes, but also by centuries of secularism—does it also aim to correct the spiritual imbalance in our culture? After all, if one believes in the world view of modern secularity, then it is naïve to accept the existence of a transcendent reality. And if there is no transcendent reality, then we are free to play with its symbols at will, irrespective of our prior convictions concerning the real and the divine. Symbols can be lifted out of their time and place, and plundered, as it were, for their picturesque qualities. But in the absence of any correspondence or loyalty to a transcendent reality, can such imagery have any symbolic value? In a society where religious faith no longer exists, can it be anything but banal and dysfunctional?

Schnabel, it would seem, has no particular feelings about God one way or the other—God is just another image to manipulate. Referring to one of his recent exhibitions, he explains, “. . . the paintings were all part of one state of consciousness. It had a chapel-like feeling. I wanted to have a feeling of God in it. Now I don't know if there's a God up there or anywhere . . . Maybe I make paintings larger than I am so that I can step into them and they can massage me into a state of unspeakableness.” As far as I can see, it would be a mistake to look for any visionary function on the part of these works, which seem to aim more at the artist's own emotion than at any communion with the divine. Schnabel's negative encounter with a world that has lost its divine presence seems to take it for granted that we have no proper standards for judging the spirituality of our times. What it tells us, instead, is just how much we have lost the very idea of God—how numb we have become to the experience of the sacred—and how the capacity to express religious truth seems outside the contemporary artist's horizon. Certainly, sacred symbols are doomed to make-believe and artifice in a society where their inner purpose has been suppressed and their forms deprived of any root meaning. And yet the paradox of Schnabel's art, and part of its hold on us, is the way it frequently does seem to aspire to a numinous dimension—which poses the question of the motives

from which this art has been made. If no religious impulse informs Schnabel's art, what reasons can there be today for painting St. Francis, Christ, and God?

I wrote to Julian Schnabel to ask him this, but there was no reply. The reason may be found—perhaps—in a comment by the critic Carter Ratcliff, who wrote in *Art in America* about the mythological overtones of Sandro Chia's imagery that “the conventions of iconography are bearable in our era so long as the artist retains his privilege of confounding them. This leaves each member of the audience along with his responsibility to speculate, to see what he can see.” One of the tyrannies of the secular world view, and the penetration of rationalism into all spheres of life, is that it has become virtually impossible to raise serious questions about the existence of God, or any transcendent realm. We have learned not only to disapprove, but also to ridicule, the significance of the sacred, and to trivialize spiritual themes in which we “can no longer” believe. This loss of symbolic resonance is the peculiar degeneration of consciousness from which we suffer as a culture, and it both defines and limits the conditions of our existence. “One can be quite sure,” writes Elizabeth Baker, the editor of *Art in America*, “that the iconographical nuances of much recent Neo-Expressionist painting are often no more specific in their meaning to the artist than the viewer. Nor need these artists be indicted for such an attitude.” Another critic, writing in *Flash Art* about Mimmo Paladino's work, claims in a similar vein that although Paladino's paintings are filled with mythological symbols, any attempt to analyze them fails, since the signs are disconnected from any source and therefore only represent themselves. And as for the supposed religious overtones of the new art, one of its main supporters and promoters, the critic and curator Diego Cortez, commented recently in *Arts*: “. . . I hate religious art. I wish it would disappear once and for all.”

If Neo-Expressionist works are indeed immune to interpretation, being filled with a symbolic content that proposes not to signify, it is difficult to see how they pose a challenge to, or reverse the trend of, formalism, as has been claimed. Rather, they seem to extend the formalist mode, by creating yet another aesthetic style

whose primary meaning seems to be that of shifting around parameters in the art world. Beyond this, the ultimate ground of their truth and the basis of their conviction remains unclear. Not embedded in any enduring beliefs or practices, locked out from any ultimate meaning, they can only float, gargantuan and occluded, through the spiritual vacuum created by our culture, emancipated from all conviction. Schnabel claims his paintings allude to some kind of power—the power of primitive, magical things—but you can't attach some broken plates and a pair of antlers to a canvas, hand it over to Mary Boone to sell, and hope for mythic significance. The essential inner attitude is missing—the devotional frame of mind. In addressing this issue, of the way signs of ultimate meaning in our culture are devalued to objects of transitory and commercial interest, it seems to me that we are really addressing a much larger theme: the failure, in our secularized age, of the moral and religious impulse, and a serious disturbance in man's relationship to God.

For nearly all of human history, the world was enchanted. As material and rationalist values have gained pre-eminence, however, spiritual values have declined in direct proportion. Once uprooted from the world of symbols, art lost its links with myth and sacramental vision. The kind of sacramental vision to which I am referring is not that of routine church-going or religious dogma as such, but a mode of perception which converges on the power of the divine. It is what Theodore Roszak has called “The Old Gnosis,” a visionary style of knowledge, as distinct from a theological or a factual one, that is able to “see” the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material. This sacramental vision, which underlies our perception of the Absolute, can never be completely uprooted, according to Mircea Eliade; it can only be debased. However much we ignore, camouflage, or degrade art's “sacred elements,” they still survive in the unconscious. Indeed, the recalling and setting up of sacred signs is the even more urgent task of an artist in times estranged from symbol and sacrament. Before art can be *successfully* re-mythologized, however, we must, as a society, suspend our unbelief. This means breaking

through the terrible limitations of modern secularism.

Traditionally, artists have used art as a material means of reaching spiritual ends. Many sociologists have pointed to the fact that there is no known human society without some conception of a supernatural order, or of mystical forces governing ordinary events. Only modern Western society has taken it upon itself to discredit the mystical, believing that such “baggage” ought to be dispensed with, and that rational man should “face reality” without any superstition; but this attitude is in no way true of the original human condition. Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Alexis de Tocqueville all maintained that the religious impulse, far from being mere superstructure or illusion (as Marx and Freud claimed), is functionally necessary to society, and is, moreover, an indispensable mechanism of integration. “Men cannot abandon their religious faith,” Tocqueville wrote, “without a kind of aberration of intellect and a sort of violation of their true nature . . . . Unbelief is an accident, and faith is the only permanent state of mankind.”

Among those who see transcendence as a necessary constituent of human life (and secularism as a dehumanizing aberration) are the contemporary sociologists Robert Nisbet and Peter Berger, for whom the decline of the sacred in human affairs is the most traumatic change man has experienced since the beginnings of settled culture in the Neolithic Age. Freud may have rejected religion as a neurotic illusion, judging the world of myth and magic negatively as errors to be refuted and supplanted by science, but as illusions they have been positive and life-supporting, providing civilizations with their cohesion, vitality, and creative powers; and where they have been dispelled, there has been a loss of equilibrium and uncertainty—nothing to hold on to. In refusing to acknowledge the reality of any experience that is not scientifically provable, the scientific world view has condemned much that is vital to culture and creative growth. To see things in this alienating way may be the particular compulsion of the modern Western mentality, but it does not necessarily reflect the way things really are. Although we may value technological power more than sacred wisdom, scientific rationalism has so far failed to prove itself as a successful integrating mythology for industrial

society; it offers no inner archetypal mediators of divine power, no cosmic connectedness, no sense of belonging to a larger pattern. Science, in the twentieth century, has had little to say about spiritual values, nor, it would seem, has art.

In primitive spiritual cosmology, power comes from the mysterious forces of the cosmos. Art was a form of meditation, a means of establishing contact with this spirit world and participating in its creative energies. For the individual, the sacred was something emphatically other than himself, its power transmitted from a pool of ancestors and spirits to which the individual gave his allegiance, and which in turn gave his life the only abiding significance it can have. Man found his own truth by recognizing that he cannot, with any meaning, live out of himself alone. Our own secular ideology has led us to eclipse this sacred dimension—the sense of participation in a timeless reality—and to pursue immortality through the individual’s own acts and works. Hubris means forgetting where the real source of power lies, and imagining, as we now do, that it is in oneself.

In modernist culture, nothing is sacred. We now live in a world that is constantly more managerialized and power-hungry, but with considerable confusion as to where the power really lies. This confusion reached fairly ludicrous proportions recently in the chicken-and-egg situation which developed over the difficulty of determining exactly who is responsible for Julian Schnabel’s huge success. Some magazines have presented him as the “protégé” of his dealer, Mary Boone, who, as it happens, received more publicity during the last year than any of her artists, having been written up in *New York* magazine, *Life*, *Esquire*, *Saturday Review*, *Savvy*, and *People*. Being described as Mary Boone’s protégé, however, enrages Schnabel, who was quoted in *Art News* as stating that “Basically, she is known because of me. I think Mary is famous because Leo [Castelli] is famous. But what artist is really famous,” he adds, “compared with Burt Reynolds?” “I cannot make an artist if he does not have the proper qualities,” Leo Castelli comments, in *New York* magazine. “But I can do it better. Mary and I. We can make an artist charismatic.”

Charismatic power cannot come to anyone except from his innermost being, through the

resonance of his belief in his task. At this point it has become virtually impossible to balance out the simple expression of the individual against its full-scale commercial manipulation and exploitation in the art world. Belonging to a prestigious gallery that competes for the artist on the market means that all esteem earned in this way is doomed to remain equivocal. There will always be uneasiness over the significance of any success where the claims of merit are derived from power blocs seeking to secure their own dominant interest. The paradoxical nature of contemporary moral experience has been well demonstrated by Alasdair MacIntyre, in his study of moral theory, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre argues that each of us is taught to see ourselves as an autonomous moral agent, but each of us also becomes engaged in modes of practice which involve manipulative relationships with others. Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire *not* to be manipulated by others; but in the world of practice we find no way open to us to embody our own principles except through those very modes of manipulation that each of us aspires to resist in our own case.

A market atmosphere, with its constant demands for something new, is highly unfavorable to the creation of authentic and permanent values. The form of a producer-consumer society has made the world into an enclosed world: nothing exists outside it. Its ends are to be found within itself. When this tendency becomes monopolistic, it drives out all others, and a peculiar false life, which now seems the most “natural” thing in the world to us, begins to grow at the expense of a more valid life. The situation is so extreme at this point that, in MacIntyre’s view, belief in managerial expertise has all but replaced belief in God in our culture, and we no longer seem to have any justifications for authority that are not bureaucratic and managerial in form. Modern mass culture has tried very hard to avoid the moral and spiritual aspects of human living, and affluence has become the successful alternative to religious renewal.

Our own era seems to be producing increasing numbers of artists who are content to receive their stamp exclusively from the power apparatus of the New York art world, and who, in their mode of life, reproduce the ideology of the soci-

ety that molded them. Adapted to and perfectly at home in the system, they understand that language of these conditions and how to handle them; the world does not impose on them any mission beyond the realization of their own professional aims. In the life of a professional, there are no ultimate concerns, only present ones. The world is perceived as an arena for the achievement of one’s own success and satisfaction; there is no struggle to realize ethical values. And to the extent that art itself has lapsed into this function—of primarily serving the career interests of artists and their dealers—it has come to lack what used to be its unquestionable moral substance, its link with intrinsic value. To the extent that an artist seeks only personal objectives, personal satisfaction, and self-aggrandizement, we cannot say that he fulfills any moral obligation.

According to the sociologist Émile Durkheim, there are no genuinely moral ends except collective ones; behavior, whatever it may be, directed exclusively toward the personal ends of the individual does not have moral value. Moral goals involve something other than individuals: their object is society. Morality is threatened, therefore, when individualism comes to play an excessive part in the life of a society, subordinating everything else. Individualism destroys that complex equilibrium within a society whose various elements limit one another—since from the standpoint of liberal, individualist modernity, society is simply an arena in which individuals are free to pursue what is useful or agreeable to them. Certainly, much time has been spent during recent decades in denying that art has anything to do with either spiritual or ethical values. Its purely aesthetic purpose was re-emphasized recently by Clement Greenberg, at a conference on culture at the University of British Columbia. “It is barbarism, as Thomas Mann once said, to take aesthetic values and introduce them into questions of morality . . . I have never felt that morality should in any sense be affected by the aesthetic factor . . . I don’t see art as having ever, in a real sense, affected the course of human affairs,” he stated.

Many of our artists, suffering the repercussions of this desacralized mentality, have pretended for some time now that painting is merely a way of solving formal problems. The total opposition between art and life that formalism

proposes exempts art from its moral tasks. “What is of importance in painting is paint,” Jules Olitski declares; and in the same way, Kenneth Noland state, “It’s all color and surface, that’s all.” Conspicuously missing in this “demystified” art is the mediation between God and man that has been present in art for most of its history until now. This is one of the things that makes recent modern art a thing for which there is, on the whole, no historical analogy: this act of the will which consists in man’s shutting himself off against any “higher reality,” or divine life. The very conception has largely been lost to artists in the late twentieth century.

In a sense, Schnabel’s desire (along with other Neo-Expressionists’) to reinstate subject matter of a mythic and symbolic kind, and even to draw on traditional religious iconography, ought to be a corrective breath of fresh air, after so much reductive abstraction. And in many ways, it is: the mystical world view that emerges from many of these pictures strikes a lot of people as right. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe in the prophetic consciousness of someone so frankly out to get what he wants—personal success in the New York art world, not metaphysical truths. Culture-bound artists are likely to be content with the situation as they have found it, not objecting too much to the competitive demands of a system which they view pragmatically as promoting their own best interests. But an artist in today’s world who believes that everything is in order, as long as the power apparatus continues to serve him well—who trusts the world as it now is—does not need to be equipped with moral courage. Merging himself successfully with the coming and going of the contemporary scene, having no will but that of realizing himself in his career, he can abstain from any criticism of it, because he is indifferent to what sort of future he is helping to bring about.

It is at this point that I should like, baldly, to pose a question: can we study art for moral results as we already study it for social and aesthetic ones? I am convinced not only that we can, but that we must—that the social, the aesthetic, and the moral are inextricably intertwined, and that we have absolved ourselves

of these vital connections at our own peril. Art is not value-free, as science tries so hard to be—it is motivated and purposive. When the question is one of moral worth, however, it is not the finished product which we see that concerns us, but the inward principles directing it, which we do not see. Questions of “ends” are really questions of values, signifying the basis upon which an individual will choose one course of action rather than another. We infer these values—since we cannot know them directly—from their expression in behavior. Moral philosophy offers a partial analysis of the relationship of an individual to his motives and intentions, and the intended (or unintended) consequences of his actions. The Machiavellian, for instance, does things to attain ends he never mentions or actually denies, while professing other ends which he wants everyone to believe.

The word “end,” of course, can mean either an aim being openly pursued, or an end incidentally achieved. Is making money, and becoming a success, a primary or an incidental function of making art? If this distinction seems irrelevant, it is only because our unwillingness to consider the gap between our consciously intended goals and the mode of life now necessary to achieve them has brought about a situation in which art is ceasing to serve the values it once did, and is beginning to serve other values not originally connected with its ends. For this state of affairs, however, we tend to blame conditions, not individuals. The Kafkaesque quality of bureaucratically structured existence is that things are done but no one is answerable for them. Unless we come to see this fact in some detail and clarity, we shall be unable to appreciate the true crisis of art in our time, or to reverse our present tendencies. Every artist today finds himself increasingly enveloped by a cultural system that makes up his destiny and requires that he act in certain ways, predetermining in crucial ways his relationship to things. More and more he finds, following the spirit of the times, that he needs to “go along to get along.” Decisions become a professional rather than a moral affair. It is not difficult to see that the same situation comes into view quite differently, depending on which of these relevance structures—professionalism or ethics—is applied to it. Professionalism offers a shortcut—an easy way out of moral dilemmas—because it artifi-

cially insulates the process of decision-making against the influence of more than one type of factor. Manipulating strategic factors in the environment in order to promote careers and products successfully becomes what matters. Success is operational; any means may be used for achieving it. When bureaucratic claims and demands take precedence, the authority of morality is diminished, and its purposes in varying degrees frustrated. Everyone is reduced to being a reflex in the system.

What if we believe that *however* we act at this point, the results will be the same—that individual actions are quite helpless against the entrenched bureaucratic models of our culture? Are we then justified in doing nothing? Obviously, no single individual is responsible for a social situation he finds himself in if nothing he could have done would have prevented it. But he may be responsible for not trying. The assumption that my action will be useless does not absolve me of responsibility for the actions I might have taken but didn't. An individual who feels uneasy about the events surrounding him but becomes paralyzed and unable to act is more responsible for the continuation of those events than the person who struggles to improve them and fails. The first step in breaking the hypnosis under which we are living is to develop the willingness to acknowledge that we are *all* a cause in this matter. When we view our actions merely as part of the general course of events, it seems impossible to attribute the events to individuals. But each individual is a tiny wheel with a fractional share in the decision that *no one effectively decides*. This, it seems to me, is the central problem of responsibility: that we are all responsible for the events of this world in terms of our own actions, even though it is not possible to relate these events to ourselves causally in a definite and clear manner.

What I have been trying to argue is that the artist has a basic choice as to whether or not he is to be a moral agent. Morality depends on choice—on deriving the ends we seek, and the means we use, from a consistent set of values. In those situations where conflicting interests come together, unless we find the right means to the goal, the “good” that we seek escapes us. Moral ideals of what is “good” are implicit in our way of life; they set limits to the ways and means by

which we conduct our lives; they condition our sense of right and wrong, and underlie our criteria of success. If this inner commitment to moral value is present and vital, it will assert and transmit itself.

As Hannah Arendt pointed out, whenever true authority existed, it was always joined with responsibility for the course of things in the world. The solitary shaman does not exist simply for his or her own benefit. It is precisely this exalted conception of the artist's mission that gives art its authority—the conception he has of his work, and the moral ideal to which he is committed. One of the more worrying side effects of modernism's posture of estrangement has been the generalized refusal on the part of artists to assume responsibility for the course of things in the world. As a society of “professionals,” we have no objects of dedication except a specialized pursuit. Arendt speaks of the “sad opaqueness” of a private life centered on nothing but itself. Authority, she states, gave the world permanence and durability, which human beings need. Its loss is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world. A consumer's society cannot possibly know how to take care of a world, because its central attitude to all objects, including art—the attitude of consumption—spells ruin to everything it touches.

So what are we to do? Obviously, we do not all agree on moral principles and on particular obligations, even if we are all more or less resigned to the business of earning a living. Does this mean, then, that basic practical conflicts have no ethical solution? Obviously, as F. Scott Fitzgerald used to say, the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. The subject of ethics has its *longueurs*, and sometimes it strikes people that—were I to have it my way—worldly failure is the only sign of virtue which can possibly keep the ideals of the profession from fading at this point. And if it can't be done, Gertrude Stein once nearly said, why insist on trying to do it? Why spend time shooting at pendulums?

Because, after all is said and done, moral pursuits are unlikely to advance anyone's career today, and will only produce a conflict of values

which cannot be resolved, given the general state of affairs. Since everything suggests the continuation of these trends, how can we keep ourselves from becoming gifted functionaries of the system on the one hand, while still managing not to starve to death on the other? Unfortunately, these moral questions cannot be solved; they can only be faced. But the fact that there is not a clear set of priorities for settling them in no way frees us to abandon the problem. All that can be said is that there are two obvious dangers to be avoided.

One is the danger of defeatism—succumbing to the feeling of powerlessness that makes it seem as if we are being dragged along in the wake of a system we cannot hope to challenge. The second is the danger of eliminating as irrelevant all moral considerations that cannot be brought within the scope of pragmatic careerism. In today's complex world, the kinds of value that motivate us are often contradictory. They will not combine readily into an easy solution determining what we should do. But the seeming impossibility of complying with these contrary demands has led us to evade them, in many cases, altogether. Ambiguously alluring is the possibility of setting oneself against the world, turning away from it and avoiding its reality—as many of the early modernists did. Their remoteness from the world gave them an inward distinction. The social situation of today, however, compels immersion: retreatism and rebellion at this point are as unsatisfactory as submission and conformity. The romantic outsider, discordant with everything, will not be adequate to the task. Resistance remains essentially negative unless it leads the self beyond a mere posture of defiance. Every artist must fight on behalf of his own essence, but without that Pavlovian hunger for reputation which, as Rhett Butler once told Scarlett O'Hara, is something people with courage can live without. Only a personal self able to resist the tyranny of the world by standing in ethical personal relationship to it will stand a chance of holding out against the imperatives of the bureaucratic environment. Through our choices, we can move our world and our existence from a position of moral ambiguity to one of clarity. But to be in any sense effective, we must proceed in conjunction with the system and strive for rescue, even while we are enmeshed in it.

The potential for rescue, however, hangs neither upon luck nor wishful thinking. It hangs upon acquiring an ethical outlook, in the face of the whole world, that will allow us to see that our decisions and acts have influence. We are the stewards, not the victims, of our circumstances. The first sign of awakening in the individual is that he or she will manifest a new way of holding oneself toward the world. Not engaging in society's power games becomes a kind of natural power that can have a positive, contagious effect on other people, just as if a spark were leaping from one to the other. This was what Gandhi referred to as "soul force" or "truth force"—the recognition that we can take back for ourselves the power we have given others. Buddha said to stop being identified with material things—because what gets your attention gets you. If you give your attention to the external power structure, then it is going to control you, and that is not where the control should be. If we do not pursue this path on our own initiative, however—of finding a place in the world without selling our souls to it—there is nothing left for us but shipwreck, or the self-willed enjoyment of life amid the coercions of an apparatus against which we no longer strive. Ω

*This article, originally published in the January 1984 issue of The New Criterion, is republished here with the kind permission of the author. Suzi Gablik, artist, critic, and teacher, is the author of numerous books and articles, including Conversations before the End of Time (Thames and Hudson, 1995, an anthology of interviews by Gablik including one with [philosopher Richard Shusterman](#)), The Reenchantment of Art (Thames and Hudson, 1991, excerpt available [here](#)), and Has Modernism Failed? (Thames and Hudson, 1984) The theme of this early book was revisited in an article entitled "[The Nature of Beauty in Contemporary Art](#)" (New Renaissance, vol. 8, no. 1 [1998]), in which she rejects the high modernist idea of art for art's sake, insisting instead that "Artists whose work helps to heal our soulless attitudes toward the physical world have my full respect and attention because, for me, beauty is an activity rather than an entity, a consciousness of, and reverence for, the beauty of the world."*