



Bernhard Sachs
ELEMENTS

Death by Drowning

Consider some notions of the body's definition within the work of Bernhard Sachs. Here the body inhabits the terrain of philosophy: it experiences being through the reconstructive power of memory. This is memory that resides in personal dreams of the individual and in the various manifestations of public memory: biography, film, photography. These forms of public memory validate the notion of history, although this is a history that can be constantly revised, rewritten, and reinscribed. (Sachs' own practice of reworking his images presents a process of reconstruction). The body is adrift in memory. Anchorage to language (making the body a part of the processes of describing the world) can reinforce existence. Following Sartre, Camus and Gide we can summarise that the act of violence affirms the experience of *being*.

In Bernhard Sachs' latest drawings we can discern figures who are tattooed. Tattooing here signifies consciousness through inscription, and religion, psychology and faith through ritual. In Sachs' *Language and Utterance. Demonstration: The Vienna School Reconstruction of the Original Trauma. St Kilda, 4.45 a.m. 1993* (From X-ray of painting 'Judith and Holofernes' by the Anonymous Master of the Tattooed Madonna) is enacted the decapitating of Holofernes' head by Judith, her forehead covered with exquisite tattoo markings or ciphers. Here then, are two extreme forms of inscription: that decorating a body, and that caused by the act of decapitation itself. Holofernes' body is inscribed by a mark that exposes the body – like the body of Jesus of Nazareth inscribed by the marks of thorns, cuts, nails, lashes. Here too is the empowerment afforded by the tattoo – transformative and affirmative. Witness the religious texts inscribed upon the body of Max Cady in Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* which take the *word made flesh* to its logical conclusion.

Nietzsche has theorised that corporeal inscription is at the origin of all consciousness. Tattooing as it exists in our culture retains only by default traditional and spiritual associations. Here tattooing functions variously as a sign of cultural (or sub-cultural) kinship, as a fashionable object of desire and signifier of sexuality, as an individuated personal symbol or talisman, and as a conceptual trope that encompasses linguistics, grammatology and symbology.

The inscription upon the skin of the figures in Sachs' work doubles as inscription on the surface of the paper and so refers to a history of writing, of drawing, and of art. If there is an essentiality implicit in inscription, we can describe it in terms of Jacques Derrida's notion of the origin of language in the visual. Consider also, via a history of art, Kandinsky's contribution to the discourse on inscription:

The point burrows into the surface and establishes itself for all time. Thus it is inwardly the most concise constant assertion, which is made briefly, firmly and quickly. For this reason, the point is, both in an external and an internal sense, the primordial element of painting, and especially of 'graphics'.¹

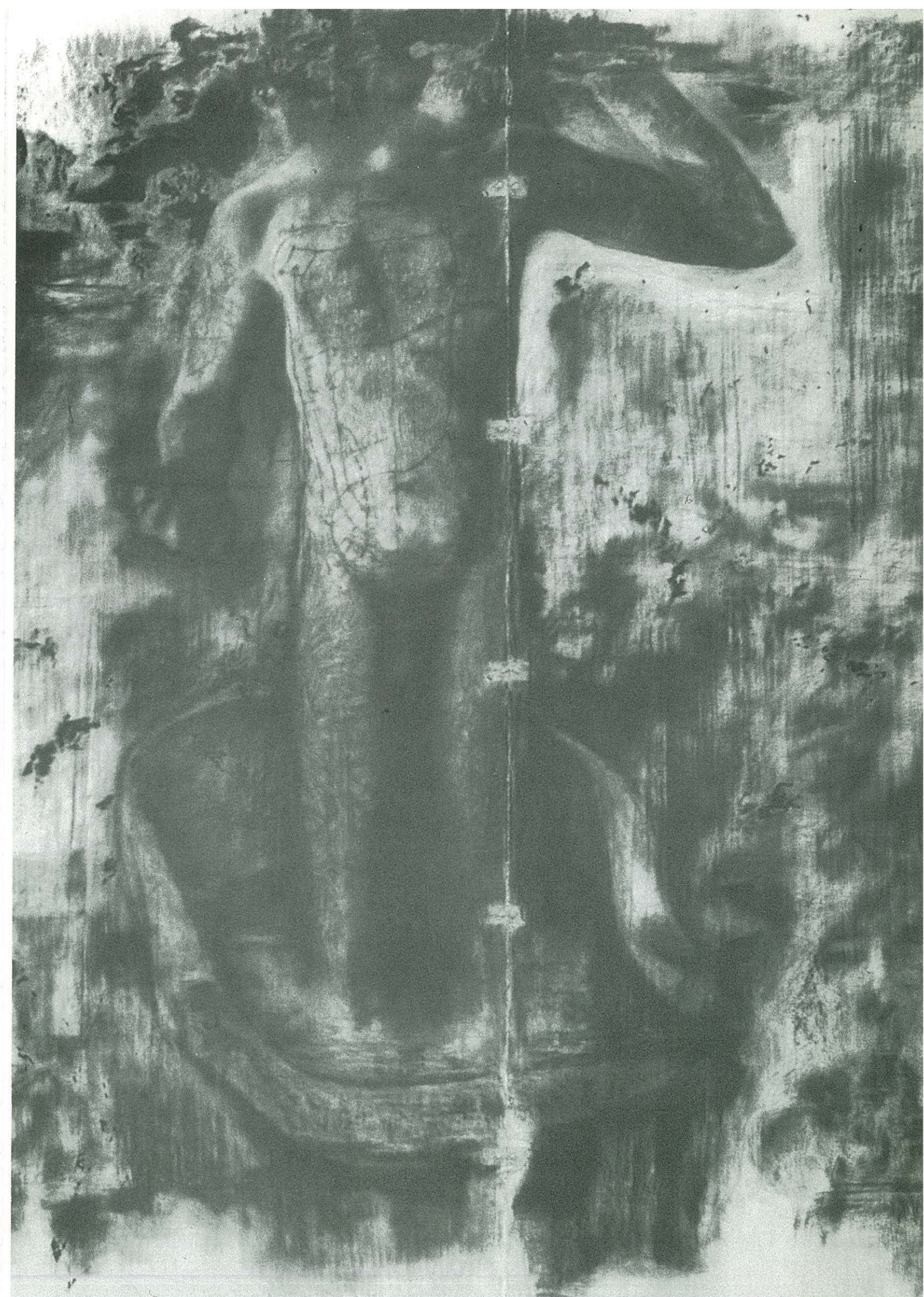
As Australian tattoo artist eX de Medici has pointed out, Kandinsky's location of the point at the origin of visual representation is analogous to the process of tattooing. Even where tattooing occurs via the action of incision in the skin and the insertion of pigment, the notion of drawing is implicit. As a text written on the practice of Maori tattooing in the early nineteenth century explains:

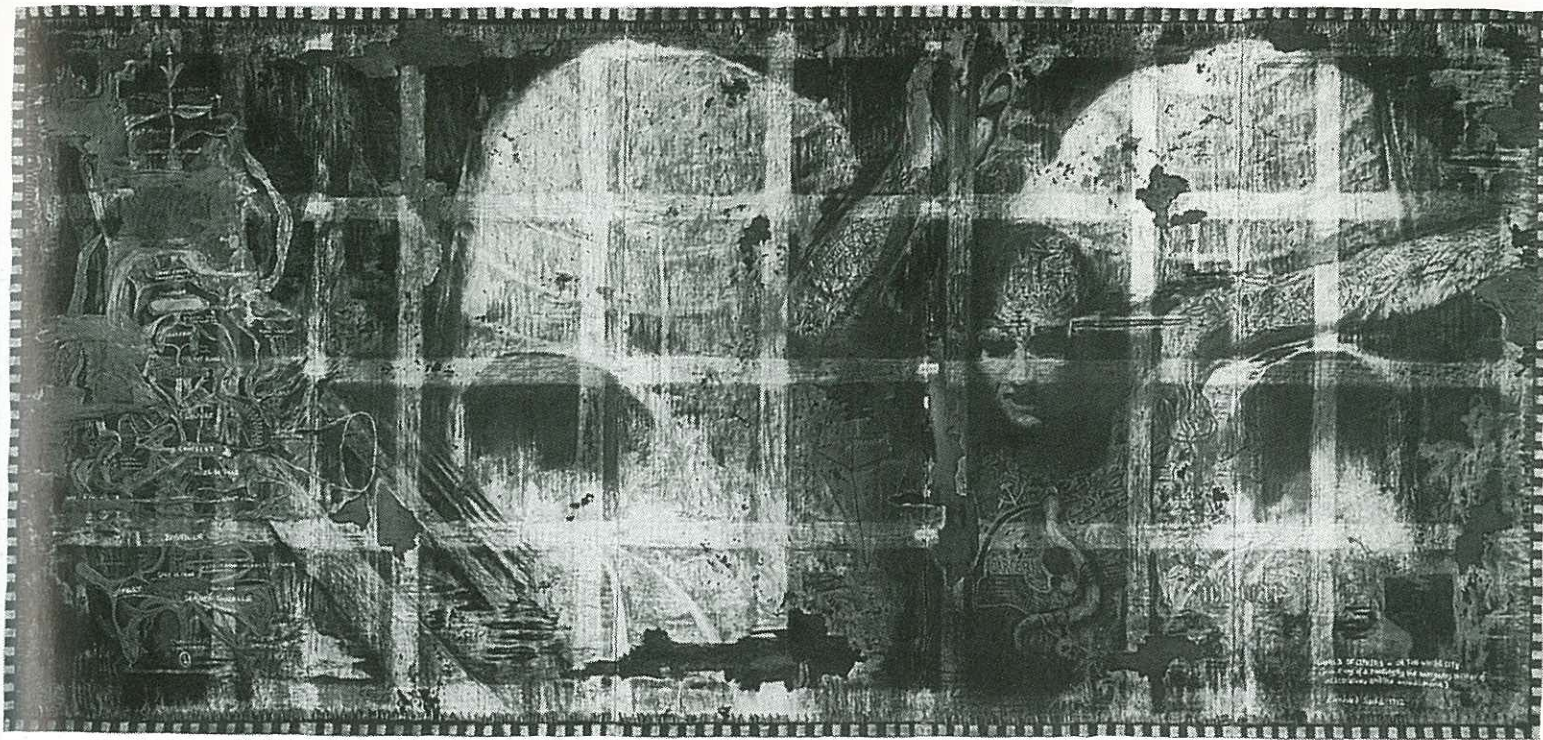
It is the chisel which cuts but before the cut there is the drawing, the putting on of the pattern. Drawing is the beginning of tattooing.²

In Sachs' work we can also link corporeal inscription to processes of mapping: bodily and psychological. The marks on the skin of Sachs' figures can be read in terms of the ritualised signification of traditional tattooing simultaneously overlaid with the mapping of physical and psychological spaces and temporal movements (in Sachs' case between Melbourne, Vienna and Jerusalem). A recent work makes this clear: from an organically developing web of lines that signify an urban map emerge (in betrayal of the inscription of place names) bodily signifiers – veins, arteries, facial features.³ Here we find overlaid (collapsed) systems that activate and preserve mnemonic processes.⁴

Sachs' work has been written about in terms of the shifts it proposes between exposure and concealment, substance and transparency, and the complexities of various histories, memories, fictions and philosophies.⁵ Sachs' imagery, often referring to the photographic and the filmic, explicates the complexities that lie within the notions of the fictive or authoritarian. His use of X-ray imagery exposes the symbolic and metaphoric constructions that lie embedded within the history of art; and his scenarios enact the psychoanalytic dramas of the experience of psychic spaces.

The works also speak of a bodily experience that resides in the space between death and consciousness. The charcoal dust that allows the images to exist also proposes asphyxiation. The references to memory and sleep cannot escape allusions to death. There is a startling sense of bodily presence that embraces the violence implicit in consciousness. Water, in art and literature, is often posited as a metaphor for the unconscious or dream-state. In





World of Ciphers – Or The Whole City
 (From X-ray of a painting by the Anonymous Master of
Incarceration and the Entombment) 1992

surrealism, the dream landscape is one that undergoes a process of liquefaction. Dying in one's sleep allows the submerging of the mind into the geography of dreams.

When a body is drowned the liquid nature of its internality that defines it from the outside (blood, urine, semen, lymph) is no longer of consequence. There is no longer a distinction between internality and externality; body and water are both simply liquid – an erasing of bodily definition, a body that becomes one with its outside. Like a boat in the grip of a whirlpool, we are approaching an implosion: a liquid vortex of dreams, memories, death and water.

Like sleep, drowning has a certain filmic quality to it. We imagine that sleep allows the reconstruction of a memorised past and a forecast future. Sleep reinvents memory, twists, collides and collapses temporal perception, but only sometimes can we remember our dreams. The struggle for life at the moment of death (which reaffirms, paradoxically, the very experience of *being*) induces, so we are lead to believe, a cinematic narrative. Our life flashes before our eyes – a form of analepsis. If the death-induced sense of temporal space betrays the notion of speed (like dreams), then death may offer us the chance to live our lives again.

CHRISTOPHER CHAPMAN May 1993

Notes

1. Wassily Kandinsky, 'Point and Line to Plane', from *Kandinsky : Complete Writings of Art*, G.K. Hall & Co., Massachusetts, 1982, p.547.
2. Tattoo process described by Te Rangikaheke in the 1850s, from D.R. Simmons, *Ta Moko: The Art of Maori Tattoo*, Auckland, 1986, p.24.
3. The work *Trance Landscape Without Mercy : Demonstration : The Moscow Metro, St Kilda 4.45 am 1992*, 1992 was exhibited at Sherman Galleries, Sydney.
4. On this point see Lynne Cooke's reference to the British artist Simon Patterson in her essay 'The Site of Memory' in *Double Take: Collective Memory And Current Art* (exhibition catalogue), The South Bank Centre/Parkett, 1992, p.36.
5. See for example Kris Hemensley's text in the *Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art 1990*, p.74; or Clifford Davey review of 'Psychosoma' in *Art + Text*, 44, 1993, p.88.

Elements

There was earth inside them, and they dug...
 They Dug and heard nothing more;
 they did not grow wise, invented no song,
 thought up for themselves no language.
 – Paul Celan, 1963

1. Concerning Reconstruction – the *St Kilda Demonstrations*
 Through the act of demonstration, certain constitutive elements in the project *During Philosophy* are presented as a series of reworkings, restagings or recapitulations: elaborations of principles embodied in symbolic or metaphoric form. These reconstructions instance, through a density or compression of meanings into the particular (to the point where they approach a critical mass), both a situation or condition, and

a structural relation – the relation of the act of reconstruction to that to which it refers: a complex forming of the event or situation itself analogous to memory and the process of remaking or re-forming involved in an act of remembering and particularly retelling.

Each act of reconstruction alters the event – the relationship between them can be rendered as one of inherence (Deleuze). The determination of these reconstructions is analogous rather than analytic, the condition manifest or embodied simultaneously at different levels – each reflecting the other (for example, dissolution or dissociation as material, formal, and psychological principle in *The Temptation of St. Anthony – Suicide, Room 69, Hotel Ostbahnhof, V. (From X-ray of a painting by the Anonymous Master of the St. Anthony Temptation). Somewhere near the slate mines at K.*) 1991 – 1993. There is no attempt with the *St Kilda Demonstrations* to depict, rather they are, in every sense of the word, re-presentations.

2. Concerning cities The currents elaborated on in *Elements* are structured around the evocation of three cities, Melbourne (St Kilda), Vienna and Jerusalem, an evocation predicated on physical location and location in the imagination. In Melbourne, the reasons are self evident. The Viennese reference is to an archetypal Central Europeanness and a particular form of origination (psychoanalysis). Jerusalem is constructed as another form of origination to do with the Word and the Law, but also as messianic destination. Both cities have about them the apocalyptic and a horizon of doubt.

In the project *During Philosophy* the image of the city has been axiomatic: as the embodiment of language – the point where language becomes nature; as an architecture framing half a life of transience – for example, hotel rooms in which no-one lives, but through which passengers perpetually pass; and *vis à vis* the body – a fatal merging of internal and external where the in-habiting of the city becomes a descent into one's own body, where 'the city' becomes 'I', is rendered organic, becomes nature, and the 'I' becomes a stranger to itself, at large in the city inside it. The heroic 'I' becomes a subject-in-process dispersed in the boundlessness of momenta over which it has little control, but conscious of itself in its dissociation. Intimations of death.

3. During Philosophy *During Philosophy*, initiated in 1985, provides a particular purchase on issues around representations of history beginning with an abstract tension, grounded in sheer facticity, between the envisaging of the act of understanding (consciousness) as a rendering transparent (Heidegger) and the resistance implicit in the opacity of (material) presence, a dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment (expressed through recurrent reference to the photographic mediation between the visible and the material, particularly through X-rays and X-rays of paintings, but also bound up in the phenomenology of photography in general and the difference between what is able to be seen and what is shown). The world articulates itself and we find ourselves irrevocably in it, bound up in its articulation – we are from the start in form, in place and time, in language. But it is an articulation characterised by the uncanny evasiveness of insistent physicality, by the chimeric suggestion of meaning beyond appearances. This is confirmed intuitively – we feel we are more than we seem, we are more than our bodies, we are in motion, we are passengers in transit between destinations – we refer to ourselves.

Resolution resides in an inhabiting of histories, in the definition afforded by action, simultaneously provisional and absolute in its irrevocability, in its command of the moment. Motility itself assumes significance as a materialisation, a cipher for transcendence embodied, but as a materialisation framed by phantasmagoric suspicions, suspicions of aporian complicity and suspicions of projection (autobiography – the world as it recedes from us or ontology as perspectival construction). In the final analysis, this dialectic is predicated on a reductive determinism in the compulsive, in an articulation of drives, pulsations becoming form, existing at the limits of volition and circumscribing it, a tragic relation in a Sophoclean (or Nietzschean) key implying questions of faith and redemption. This 'History' is decidedly unstable.

BERNHARD SACHS June 1993

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

Bernhard Sachs

Born 1954, South Australia

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1978 Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
1986 Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne
1987 *During Philosophy*, Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne
200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne
1988 (*Photography*) *During Philosophy*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
Republic Night/Nervous Interiors (*During Philosophy*), Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne
1990 (*Photography*) *During Philosophy – Notes and Fragments*, University of Kent, Canterbury, U.K.
Deutscher Brunswick Street, Melbourne
1991 *In the Waiting Room of Ideology – European Works 1990-1991*, Irving Galleries, Sydney
1992 *In the Waiting Room of Ideology – European Works 1990-1991*, Noosa Regional Art Gallery, Tewantin, Queensland
The Western Line, Gallery YZ, University of Western Sydney, Sydney
Antidialectics, Sherman Galleries, Sydney
1993 *Elements*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
- ### Selected Group Exhibitions
- 1979 *April-May Show*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
1980 *Five Performances*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
Experimental Art Foundation Performance Week, Adelaide Festival of the Arts, Adelaide
1984 *Expatriates 2*, Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide
1986 *Blake Prize*, Blaxland Gallery, Sydney
Drawings, 70 Arden Street Gallery, Melbourne
1987 *Golden Shibolet*, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne
1988 *The Thousand Mile Stare: A Photographic Exhibition*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
Australian Perspecta 1989, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1989 *Imaging AIDS*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
Joye Art Foundation Exhibition of Australian Art, Baudoin Lebon, Paris, France
1990 *Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Contemporary Prints and Drawings, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
International Works on Paper, Christopher Leonard Gallery, New York, U.S.A.
Savage Drawing Exhibition, R.M.I.T. Gallery, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne
Artists Against Animal Experimentation, Deutscher Brunswick Street, Melbourne
1991 *City of Lake Macquarie/Charlestown Square Art Prize*, Lake Macquarie, N.S.W.
Group Show, Irving Gallery, Sydney
A Selection of Australian Contemporary

Art, Deutscher Brunswick Street, Melbourne

- 1992 *Fact*, Linden Gallery, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (touring)
Reference Points, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
Rediscovery: Australian Artists in Europe 1982-1992, Expo 92, Seville, Spain
Public Sphere-Personal Vision, Linden Gallery, Melbourne
Psychosoma, Pilsoll Gallery, Hobart
1993 *Dobell Drawing Prize*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Collections

The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; Mornington Peninsula Arts Centre, Mornington; Joye Art Foundation, Sydney; City of Lake Macquarie, Newcastle; Box Hill College of T.A.F.E., Melbourne; South East Cultural Trust, Riddoch Art Gallery, Mount Gambier; St Kilda City Council Collection, Melbourne.

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Edward Colless et al, *Redescubrimiento Artistas Australianos en Europa 1982-1992* (exhibition catalogue), Expo 92, Seville, Spain, 1992
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Juliana Engberg, 'On the Campaign Trail – Bernhard Sachs' Republic Night/Nervous Interiors (*During Philosophy*)', *Agenda*, vol.3, no.1, October 1988, pp. 36-7
Charles Green, *Republic Night/Nervous Interior* (*During Philosophy*) (exhibition catalogue), Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne, 1988
Charles Green, 'Republic Night/Nervous Interior' (*During Philosophy*)', *Tension*, no.15, December 1988, p.14
Charles Green et al, 'From Leantime to Dreamtime: the Eighties', *Tension*, no.19, January 1990, p.67
Kris Hemensley, 'Bernhard Sachs', *1990 Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art* (exhibition catalogue), Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1990
Kris Hemensley, *Otis Rush 4*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1989, pp.127-9
Linda Hicks-Williams, 'The Marvellous Mundane: transformations in contemporary Victorian photography', *The Thousand Mile Stare* (exhibition catalogue), Victorian Centre for Photography, Melbourne, 1988
Robert Lindsay, *Golden Shibolet* (exhibition catalogue), 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1987
John MacDonald, 'Different points on the same horizon line...', *Joye Art Foundation Exhibition of Australian Art* (exhibition catalogue), Baudoin Lebon, Paris, France, 1989
Bernhard Sachs, *Antidialectics* (exhibition catalogue), Sherman Galleries, 1992
Bernhard Sachs, *During Philosophy – Notes and Fragments* (exhibition catalogue), University of Kent, Canterbury, U.K., 1990
Bernhard Sachs, 'Fragile History', *Joye Art*

Foundation Exhibition of Australian Art

- (exhibition catalogue), Baudoin Lebon, Paris, France, 1989
Bernhard Sachs, *In the Waiting Room of Ideology – European works 1990-1991* (exhibition catalogue), Noosa Regional Gallery, 1992
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Bernhard Sachs, 'Notes (*During Philosophy*)' *Australian Perspecta 1989* (exhibition catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1989
Bronwyn Watson, 'Melancholy maps of the subconscious', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 18, 1992

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Front cover: *Language and Utterance, Demonstration: The Vienna School Reconstruction of the Original Trauma, St Kilda, 4.45 a.m. 1993* (From X-ray of painting 'Judith and Holofernes' by the Anonymous Master of the Tattooed Madonna) 1991-93

Left: *Demonstration: The Original Passage from Berlin to Melbourne. St Kilda 4.30 a.m. 1992* (*Book Burning*) 1992-93 (detail)