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First-Person Authority

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Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993–2007 by Robert Morris. Edited and introduced by Nena Tsouti-Schillinger. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. 273. $84.95 cloth; $23.95 paper.

It should come as no surprise to those familiar with the artist Robert Morris that the title of his new collection of work and writings, *Have I Reasons*, invokes Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations:* "Have I reasons? The answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons" (65). Wittgenstein, after all, was a major point of reference in Morris's first collection of writings, *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1993), as the theorist who spoke most directly to Morris's concern with the suppression of the linguistic dimension of art by modernist criticism. Morris transforms the "I" of Wittgenstein's interrogation into the declarative of the book's title, implicitly offering the authority of first-person narrative and to promise "reasons" behind the Morris oeuvre. Wittgenstein is joined in this second volume by the likes of Noam Chomsky and Donald Davidson; the latter's linguistic philosophy is addressed directly by two essays, and his influence is felt in several others. This interest in the theoretical underpinnings of language is also no surprise; Morris has consistently been one of the most well read, articulate, and intensely self-conscious artists in the last one hundred years, and as Tsouti-Schillinger argues in the introduction, "any complete analysis and assessment of Morris's total artistic contribution would prove inadequate without consideration and inclusion of his copious writings." What is surprising

is the powerful presence of the words of others in these pages, and not only from the recurring voices of his favorite theorists. Morris repeats pet quotations throughout the book (Elizabeth Bishop's remark that the twentieth century was "the worst so far" appears in at least three essays) as well as numerous epigrams, block quotes, and intersectional quotations. This idiosyncrasy crescendos in his essay for the National Gallery's recent Jasper Johns retrospective, which carries a list of citations to rival any academic article.

For those in search of the artist himself, the opening account of Morris's childhood in Kansas City, "Indiana Street," seems to offer just the tidbits of artistic origin that typically fill artists' biographies. Describing the physical terrain of Indiana Street, for instance, Morris writes, "It was with secret pleasure that I squeezed my body between the pole and the side of the garages, making my passage usually at dusk. Although unnamed, and perhaps unnamable, such spaces, of which there were many around the neighborhood, took on a special character. I would usually visit each once a week" (22). Under the sway of such evocative images, what art historian can resist picturing Robert Morris squeezed inside of *Passageway,* the narrow semicircular channel of painted plywood he installed in the entrance to Yoko Ono's loft in 1961? And who can help finding the many faces of Morris's career prefigured in the characters that populate his memory? The Morris who would grow up to dance with Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti of "youthful strength and delight in physical grace of movements" (29) seems already personified in the neighborhood ice delivery man. The wraithlike Turtle Bill trolls the streets in a cart full of rags and scrap iron that prefigures Morris dressed in rags for his performance of *War* (1963). Morris's late references to autism are presaged by the mentally handicapped boy, who "with the inertia of what the others termed his 'simpleness,' seemed to have dropped through the insulation of their linguistic repressions to move against some clammy, sexual membrane that pulsed hidden and unmentioned just below the surface of those lives on Indiana Street" (28). But what binds together the myriad phenomenological, socioeconomic, political and sexual awakenings related in this opening gambit is the trusted voice and coherent identity of Morris the Author.

In the two essays that follow "Indiana Street," Morris uses his knowledge of linguistics to reflect on the role of the artist in the writing of his own history as well as the role of reason in artistic production. Switching from first to third person for "Writing with Davidson," Morris agrees with the philosopher's assertion that reasons (associated with beliefs and desires) are sufficient to hold the status of causes. But the inclusion of Davidson quotations in the borders of *Blind Time Drawings,* a

set of drawings made with Morris's eyes closed or blindfolded, unsettles the notion of intentionality associated with reason, belief, rationality, and holism (all central to Davidson's philosophy) through the voluntary renunciation of control and judgment in these chance-directed actions. Throughout the essays, the interplay of reason, artistic intention, and the personal pronoun further obscure the already ambiguous role of artists' writing in criticism and art history. Morris most directly confronts the issue of self-interpretation in "Professional Rules," which returns us to the first-person of the title only to take it away again:

> In the studio I ask myself this question: What will happen if I do *a* and then *b*? After that I ask further, Now what happens after *c* and then *d*? Much later, and in the context of the public space of the gallery, is it then a misinterpretation for others to take the object I have made as first a "statement," about which subsequent questions are then to be asked? And you—that is to say, R. Morris; and I will adopt the *you* to address him from here on in—want to say that your questions in the making not only preceded the object but resulted in it? (63, 65)

The first half of the collection is concerned with the fixity that the object, the gallery, and the stable first-person of the artist seem to lend to artistic practice. It is the latter that Morris frequently abdicates, only to restore it again and again in his writing, oscillating between adamant self-erasure and reluctant authoritarianism. Such play is reminiscent of Morris's 1962 *I-Box,* a plywood cabinet whose I-shaped door opened to reveal a photograph of a nude, grinning Morris, that suggested both the fading away of the artistic persona behind the pronoun and a further assertion of authorial continuity.

This series of usurpations is played out not only in the frequent shifts of grammatical person but also in the quotation and scripting of others by Morris. This tack was central to Morris's performances during the 1960s and 1970s, most poignantly the performance *21.3*, in which the artist, dressed in the stale tweed of academia, mouthed the words of an essay by Irwin Panofsky's along to a recorded reading of the text. The transcription of *Birthday Boy,* a projection shown in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence in 2004, similarly blurs the distinction between artist and scholar, presentation and performance. In the work two actors deliver "academic" lectures on Michelangelo's *David* that begin by denying, but ultimately indulge in, the notion of object of art as an object of desire. The distance enforced by academic language breaks down as the two lecturers are handed glass after glass of red wine. As these presentations are

revealed as acts of projection, slides of Krazy Kat and Mussolini make their way into the carousel, along with images of *David* morphed into the body of a black woman and a middle-aged man.

It is also worth noting that the only Morris interview included in the collected writings takes place "From the Chomskian Couch," as an imagined conversation with Noam Chomsky, who acts as the analyst to Morris's analysand. If we were to look at the generation that preceded Morris—to Jackson Pollock's stint in Jungian analysis, for example—we might find the analyst's couch to be the very symbol of the artist-subject as the great wellspring of art. Yet the unconscious that Chomsky plumbs is not Morris's but the "imperial unconscious" (IMPUNC) dedicated to the suppression of the other, and a peculiar American rejection of pastness. The IMPUNC is one in a set of newly coined acronyms that suggest the conjoining of the art world and the military industrial complex: the mega image (MEGIG), American Phenomenological Awe (AMPHENA), the multiscreen video installation (MUSCRIVT) or the installation art of the spectacle (INARSE). These, Morris argues, are the facets of the "Wagner effect," an utterly American art "of looming icons of dominating presence, offering a kind of odd forgiveness secretly addressed to those whose guilty lives make such expressions possible" (129). "Style," Morris continues, "does not matter much for the Wagner effect, gigantic size and expense being the generating engine. Of course, besides the grandiosity, touches of the mystical and allusions to origins don't hurt either—they didn't hurt Wagner" (129).

Morris links the Wagner effect first to the shift by American museums from an institution open to the public, to an institution that serves the public, and subsequently to the entry of the artist into the larger service economy that caters to popular taste. Initially an attempt to overcome the contemporary environment of spectacle, Wagnerian art was quickly absorbed by it. Amid this rapid commercialization of the aesthetic, Morris asks the timely question: "What, I would like to know, is to be asked of the social body that sometimes finds itself inside a museum?" (158). Just as the artistic unconscious has been displaced by an imperial one, we find that the empirical-phenomenal body of '60s art has been replaced by a decidedly less innocent social body whose two-page list of resentments is detailed by Morris in "Solecism of Sight." "Clearly the social body today carries more wounds than half a century ago," writes Morris, and with an uncharacteristic glimmer of faith continues, "Perhaps even its somewhat callow narcissisms and feckless optimism is beginning to fade, making room for the possibility of a certain self-criticism that it never felt much need of before" (159).

It is from this position of criticality that the volume ends, closing with an essay that situates the painting of Jasper Johns within the context of his military service, and that endows Johns's work with renewed relevance in a new era of American military aggression. Readers of Morris's second volume of writings will be struck by the explicitly political viewpoint of such essays, as well as by the deft handling of philosophy and prose that graces even Morris's more polemical writing in his old age. From his position as resident art world curmudgeon Morris continues to "play out the drama of the shifter," as Rosalind Krauss put it in her 1977 article "Notes on the Index." Morris dislodges the "I" from its indexical relation to an existential subject and shatters Davidson's linkage of it to rationality and belief. The "I" of Morris's recent writing has always already escaped these moorings, but the impish wordplay of early works like *I-Box* is joined in these later writings to a melancholic imperative "to accept the darker shadows within ourselves, and to meditate on that fallen world into which we have been cast" (253).

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