

MY CHRONOLOGY 1920-2001

1920 Born June 24, 1920, London. My father, Joseph Coplans, a doctor of medicine, is injured at the Battle of the Somme during World War I. He names me St. John Rivers, after Dr. Rivers, the psychiatrist noted for successfully treating well-known poets and intellectuals for shell shock, who are then sent back to the front. Although treated by Dr. Rivers, my father, fortunately, is not sent back and he survives the war. I later find my first name too fancy and call myself John.

From almost the first moment of my conscious memory, my situation is contradictory. I am perhaps three months old when my father decides to leave London to live in Johannesburg. My mother is pregnant with my sister, and she feels it will be too much of a burden for her to go to a new country with a child in her arms, another in her womb, and a husband who is liable to collapse at any time. I am left with her mother until a new home is established. Afterward, I am to be sent for.



Professor Joseph Coplans and his sculpture of General Smuts, 1936

Because of his World War I wounds and his constant restlessness, my father spends the years after my birth splitting his time between England and South Africa. He loves the benign climate of South Africa, especially the sunshine, but needs London (and access to the Continent) for his artistic and intellectual pursuits. The Union of South Africa is part of the British Empire, and at this time a British subject is free to come and go at will, which my father fully exploits. But, it is hard on me. I am constantly boarded out either at schools or with my mother's relatives in England.

My father is an admirer of Leonardo da Vinci. He seeks to emulate Leonardo's breadth of vision and his extraordinary range of activity as an artist, scientist, and inventor. Without any training in art, he had partially paid his way through medical school as the political cartoonist to the *London Jewish Chronicle*. After the war, he starts making portrait sculpture, his first subject being himself, and later, well-known contemporaries he admires. Several of his bronze portraits end up in the collection of prominent art institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States.

1922 The first collision with my mother occurs. My grandmother takes me from England to Johannesburg to reunite me with my family. The reunion is disastrous. My anchor to the world is my grandmother. I do not understand the word "mother." A strange woman, with a little girl sitting on her lap greets me and tells me she is my mother, the girl is my sister, and my grandmother is now to leave me. I burst into tears and clutch my grandmother's skirt. Soon, it is obvious to me that I am no longer Number One; my sister now fills that position.

My father's medical practice is booming. There is money to spare. My mother disappears into the background to lead a newly found social life, to be seen only occasionally around the house. A Scottish nanny is hired to look after the children. I fall for her. To my childish mind, I think I have a mother at last, but it is not to be.

One day, to escape the constant vigilance of my nanny, I run into the garden. By the fence, there are some men digging in the street. I can clearly see them and I am amazed; they are the color of chocolate. One of them comes over to the fence and sizes me up. To my astonishment, he puts his finger to his nose and emits a blast of snot to the ground. He then changes nostrils and blows a second gob of snot that is aimed at the first one. Talk about magic! Much to the puzzlement of my nanny, for weeks I go around trying to blow snot the way he did. This is the first encounter in my later involvement with a wide variety of races.

1924-26 The decision is made to return to London. I do not remember the sea voyage, but I remember the house we rent. I'm a disturbed child, in open mutiny. I refuse to eat what I'm served, and I wet my bed. I cause turmoil. It's my will against my mother's. The pattern of my life begins to emerge. Authority must be challenged. I continuously rebel against my mother, but I long to be wanted.

Art books abound in our living quarters, especially those on Leonardo, Degas, Donatello, and Rodin, all of which I look at many times. On the walls of our house are reproductions of van Gogh and other Impressionists. On Sundays, we frequently visit the Tate Gallery to view its many Rodin works. My father urges me to draw and paint, and I do throughout my childhood. We often visit the Science Museum in South Kensington, where my father discusses with me the photographic devices, as well as scientific instruments on display, especially medical ones, many of which he believes he can improve upon. Nothing is too small for his inventive bent—a toothpaste tube, a bottle cap. I remember him spending time and energy on an improved design for a toothpaste cap meant to stop the contents of the tube from drying out, and his perplexity when toothpaste manufacturers, while admiring his design, want no part of an invention that will make toothpaste last longer.

1927 Starting at the age of seven, I am unable to do my homework because my father uses my eyes in his scientific experiments. After school, he dilates my pupils and researches on his giant ophthalmoscope. One time, my father's experiments are regarded as sufficiently important to be the subject of an evening lecture by two prominent scientists at the Royal Society in London. I am the demonstration eye. Well-scrubbed and attired in black striped pants, a shirt with an Eton collar, and a blazer and school tie, my dilated pupils are peered at through his instrument.

1928 The family leaves London for Cape Town. We live at Sea Point, a beach suburb. To get to school I walk along the grassy promenade above the beach. One morning, I pass a bench on which a man is sleeping. His head is thrown back, his eyes and mouth are wide open. He does not move. The man looks dead, but I'm not sure what a dead person looks like. I panic and shout to some nearby people who come running over. They confirm my suspicion that he is, indeed, dead. I'm frightened and beat a hasty retreat. Suddenly, a gull swoops out of the sky and launches a large poop that lands squarely on top of my head. I believe the dead man's spirit is attacking me. I run for my life, and when I'm sure I have put enough distance between me and his spirit, I stop to clean up the evil-smelling mess on top of my head. I have no handkerchief, so I sacrifice my lunch to get rid of it: I unwrap my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and use the brown paper bag as a towel. It will not absorb the gull's poop, and my frantic rubbing spreads it even further. I realize I'm late for school, so I run at top speed to get to class.

When I arrive at school, I sit at my desk. As the teacher comes in, a sea of hands is raised. My fellow students shout to the teacher that "Coplans stinks." She comes over and can't help but smell me. I'm ordered out front and an explanation is demanded. I describe how the dead man's spirit took vengeance on me. I'm told to bend over. I'm given six cuts with a cane and sent home with a note to my mother, telling her to bathe me more often and to stop me from telling lies.

I arrive home. My mother smells me. She is furious at my behavior, and especially enraged at the letter chastising her for not keeping me clean. I'm stripped, beaten, dunked under the bath water, slapped again for bringing her into disgrace, and sent to bed without lunch or supper.

My sister is my mother's little darling and can do no wrong. I'm forbidden to play with boys; instead I must play with her. One day, after a storm has raged all night, and when the sun has broken out in the morning, I'm told to take my sister for a walk on the beach. During this walk, we stumble across a huge sea snake covered with half an inch or so of thick slime. I explain to my sister that the purpose of the slime is to trap tiny fish that the sea snake eats off its own body. To prove my point, I find a long stick. I poke the sea snake and the slime attaches the snake to the stick. I lift the snake and waive it in my sister's face. My sister is terrified. An idea begins to take shape in my mind. I point out to my sister the huge pipes that run out from the beach into the sea. I tell her that they carry the waste from the toilets into the sea, that the sea snakes live in the pipes, and that one day a sea snake will bite her "you-know-what" when she sits on the toilet.

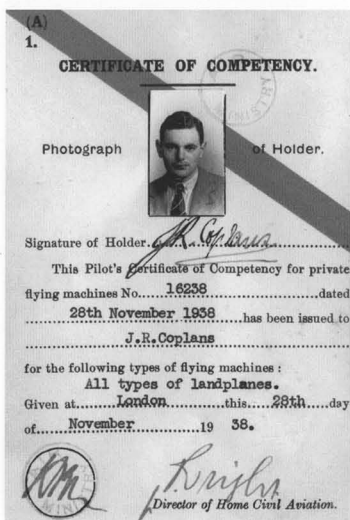
My mother begins to wonder why her little darling starts to soil her knickers. Cross-examination reveals the truth. I'm beaten up and sent to bed supper-less, again. I have lost the round. But, much to my delight, I'm now forbidden to play with my sister. At last, I'm free to play with the boys!



John Coplans with his sister Pamela, 1923

1930 We are back in London. As a child I love the comics, but my father strictly forbids them. I puzzle for some time about how to evade the ban. One day, I realize that my mother can't accurately count. She sends me shopping. After school, I go to the baker, the greengrocer, the fishmonger, and the butcher to buy small quantities of food. I'm ordered to bring back an invoice from each shop. My mother then "adds" the invoices up to see if the total matches the change. One day, I buy a small candy out of the money entrusted to me. My mother goes through her mumbo jumbo of "adding" the invoices, down to the last farthing, and fails to discover my candy purchase. I'm home free. Next time, I decide to go to the newsstand and buy a comic. But, I realize even if I successfully smuggle the comic into the house, the question is, where can I read it without discovery? If my sister sees the comic, she will snitch on me. The only safe place is the toilet. I spend endless time in the toilet reading. My mother becomes suspicious and insists I take a dose of horrid castor oil. Ugh! It is hard to win, but when I do, the pleasure is all the greater.

1931 I attend London's St. Marylebone Grammar School, and make friends with twin brothers. There is a shed in the garden at the back of their house. The boys' father encourages us to create a natural history museum in the shed. We dig up the bones of their dead cat buried in the garden, and improvise many exhibits from materials available to us. We haunt the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, copying as many of the exhibits and labels as we can. Butterflies and insects are easy, but what we passionately desire is a piece of the bone of a dinosaur. This artifact is beyond our reach. I devise a plan. The three of us will go to the museum. I will take a small hammer in a school bag. The other two boys will go to the furthest reach of the big hallway and kick up a din to attract the guards. We realize this plan is problematic because the two brothers will be held and reported to their father. Then, I devise a new plan. The brothers are to go to the far end of the hall and in unison sing "God Save the King." When we put the plan in action, just as we expect, the guards come running, perplexed by two little boys fervidly singing the national anthem. In the meanwhile, I successfully hammer away a toe bone of the largest dinosaur, concealing it in my schoolbag.



British Civilian Flying License, 1938

During this time, my father experiments with three-dimensional movies. His large collection of stereo cards is the starting point for his experiments. (These cards eventually get me into serious trouble at school.) He discusses how he feels it is possible to improve upon the existing system whereby viewers have to use a two-colored pair of spectacles to see a three-dimensional image. Later, in Johannesburg, with a 35-mm projector, he gives a successful demonstration of his black-and-white 3-D movies, viewed by the naked eye, to a select audience. I see the presentation, so I know his system works.

1933 At age thirteen, I am expelled from St. Marylebone Grammar School for taking so-called "pornographic" photographs to school. The images are Victorian stereo cards of chastely naked females (published by suppliers of watercolors to Queen Victoria to assist artists in rendering the nude). I am extremely interested in female nudity, and I'm perplexed by their status as "pornography;" the severity of my punishment bewilders me.

The headmaster writes to my father to inform him of the reason for my expulsion. My father replies, contesting my expulsion, explaining that I had the cards with his permission. The headmaster replies

that my father is a corrupter of children and not fit to be a doctor or a parent. I never know all of the details, but I do remember that my father takes the headmaster's letter to the police because it contains criminal charges that are very serious. The police investigate and find the allegations absurd. My father sues for libel. The chairman of the school's board of trustees telephones him and says a mistake has been made, asking if it can be settled amicably. My father requires that the charge of "corruption of children" be withdrawn at the morning prayer meeting of the boys and staff, and that the headmaster apologize and take me back in the school. All is agreed. The chairman will be there to supervise. We go to the school. The headmaster duly apologizes, whereupon my father marches up to the platform and denounces the headmaster, stating that it is his professional opinion, as a medical man, that the headmaster requires psychiatric treatment and is unfit to teach, let alone be a headmaster. He consequently withdraws me from the school. My father seizes me by the hand, and we march triumphantly out of the lecture hall. Despite the excitement caused by the whole affair, the question of pornography hangs above my head for quite a few years.

My family leaves again for South Africa, this time for Johannesburg. Father sends me to boarding school, then discovers after a year or so that he can't afford the fees. I'm withdrawn and sent to a day school.

1936 I'm a poor student, confused by constantly changing countries, schools, and languages, and decide that I have had enough education. I leave home at age sixteen, and get a job as an office boy.

1937 Given the state of the world, I decide that World War II is inevitable. I get a job as an assistant baker on a ship going to England, optimistically hoping to join the Royal Air Force as a pilot. When I arrive, I present myself at the Air Ministry. I'm interviewed, accepted, and sent to a civilian flying school to get my pilot's license.

1938 As soon as I am eighteen years old, I'm commissioned into the R.A.F. as an Acting Pilot Officer and sent for training, after which I receive my wings.

1939 Germany invades Poland; Great Britain and France declare war against Germany. My father is living in Cape Town. The war begins and he is determined to take part in it. For years he has been rabidly anti-Nazi, warning me of the coming Armageddon that will suck in the Jews. Despite his determination to play a role in the defeat of Hitler, his old war wounds prevent him from serving in the British or South African military. However, some years later, when I am in the Far East, I receive messages from him from Australia, where he has gotten a job as a civilian medical officer, examining recruits.

I injure my head playing rugby and am medically grounded. Without the requisite qualifications to become an engineer or supply officer, I'm given a gratuity and returned to civilian life. The war is over for me.

1940-42 Ever optimistic, I decide I cannot be left out of the coming Armageddon. I volunteer for the army; somehow I pass the medical and receive a commission in The Cameroonians (Scottish Rifles). Because of my so-called African background, I am seconded to the King's African Rifles in East Africa. I'm detached from my regiment, and sent to Blackpool with other young officers who are reinforcements for the King's African Rifles in Nairobi. In Blackpool, I'm billeted in a house full of whores who have been evacuated or gone on their own to the seaside resort to avoid the bombings in London. It is winter and bleak as can be, with high tides sending huge waves against the promenade and an endless rain. Except for a couple of movie houses, there is nothing for us to do except wait for a ship to transport us to Mombasa in Kenya.

The town is blacked-out at night. There are pubs aplenty and women galore. Sex abounds, free of charge, for the intending young heroes. White-faced and physically worn-out from too much sex, we desire nothing more than to get on with the war and to do our number.

London is being heavily bombed. One Saturday night in the city, during a weekend leave to see my family, I clamber onto a roof of a house in Paddington, next to the St. Mary's Hospital, and watch the docks and the old city of London burn, the sky overhead pulsating with orange light, search lights stabbing the night amid the ineffectual barrage of anti-aircraft guns. It is like watching a movie. German bombers zoom a few hundred feet above our heads as ambulances drive in and out of St. Mary's entrance leaving off the wounded.

A ship at last—the Empress of Britain. She isn't an Empress for long; we are bombed on the second day out and limp back to harbor. We return to the same hotbed of fucking. Problem is that most of the women are nearly the same age as our mothers; sex, after its initial excitement, is like wearing worn, thrown-away clothing.

Another ship leaves from Southampton, and we are aboard. Nothing to do but to learn Swahili, exercise, drink, and gamble. Christmas Day, we sit down to a lunch of turkey and all the fixings, including a Christmas pudding afloat in rum. Suddenly, alarms are ringing, shells are flying overhead. We scramble for life jackets as we watch great spouts of water rocking the ship. A German pocket



2nd Lieutenant, The Cameroonians, 1939

battleship is shelling us from some twenty miles away. All the Germans need to do is to aim in our general direction to successfully sink any ship in this convoy jam-packed with merchant ships. The commodores signal to beat it at top speed. The ship shudders, black smoke pouring from her funnels, while our destroyers run around helplessly.

Eventually, we arrive at Mombasa and disembark, while the majority left on board sail for Egypt and the war in the desert. As a junior officer, I take part in the capture of Italian-occupied Somaliland and Ethiopia. A lowly platoon commander, I am an observer of everything going on. I am in and out of tented military hospitals with various tropical diseases, but nothing to cripple me enough to be relieved of my duties. I get a rare sick leave to visit Nairobi. The defeated Italians, both civil and military, are slowly being evacuated. There is little to do but gossip. No newspapers, just old copies of *Reader's Digest*. My life is boring.

My unit goes north from Kenya to Mogadishu. The Italians have run from Mogadishu fleeing westward, but not before blowing up the sewerage system and abandoning their heavy weapons. On arrival, we discover that the flies are out of control; they have taken over the city. It is impossible to eat, except under a mosquito net.

We still have a distance to go to catch up with our forward units, and we are shitting so often that we stop wearing pants and cover our nether regions with towels. We look like an army of women. On the road the men hang their butts over the tailgates of the trucks, farting and shitting away. When we stop for our hourly breaks, hundreds of men crouch in the ditches and do their business. It is hard to tell if we are suffering from diarrhea or dysentery.

Most of the time we encamp somewhere in Ethiopia. We live in tents either in the hilly countryside, or somewhere on the endlessly flat veld dotted with acacia trees. The hyenas and lions are out every night, baying, growling, and snuffing around our fires, our guards not daring to fall asleep. Dysentery, malaria, and ticks are a constant hazard. Very often, at the end of a day, and when about to bathe, I must be de-ticked by having a fellow officer examine all the hairy parts of my body, especially the private parts. He burns the ticks off with the end of a lighted cigarette, otherwise the heads remain buried in the skin and cause festering sores.

At night, the officers and non-commissioned officers socialize separately. The officers are allowed a ration of one bottle of whisky a month and as many cigarettes as they want. The whisky is cheap (whenever we get it). When it does come, we drink ourselves stupid. The Somalis wake at about four in the morning, make tea in big kettles, and chatter endlessly. Sometimes, they forget that you can hear from your camp bed what kind of a shit they think you are.

By the time we have broken the back of the Italian army, but not yet cleaned them up, we have become an army of occupation, under the control of the Ethiopians. We hear rumors that Haile Selassie wants control of the conquered Italian Somaliland as war reparations. Sounds reasonable on paper, but the Somalis are Mohammedans, and the Ethiopians are Copts, both religions often antithetical to one another. The Somalis consider themselves superior to ALL other races, including westerners.

By putting two and two together, I gather that the local political situation is enormously complicated. It appears that Selassie does not necessarily trust the intentions of the British. (Obviously, he remembers his humiliation by the British refusal to support him in 1936, at the League of Nations.) It also appears that the British don't understand what Selassie is up to either. Before we have finished re-conquering his country, he "shelters" a number of senior Italian administrators whom he refuses to hand over. We hear that he needs their expertise to help run the country, because the Italians utterly destroyed his pre-war infrastructure when they captured the country. The whole political arena is in flux.

There are three Somalilands abutting Ethiopia. The French occupy the northeast, at Djibouti, and control the railhead to Addis Ababa. They are committed to the Vichy scum and deny the use of the port and railway to either the British or the Ethiopians. During the heyday of colonialism in the nineteenth century, the British had captured a slice of Somaliland and administered it from Hargeisha. Berbera, a tiny port in the territory, is now used for off-loading and the trucking of all supplies into and out of Ethiopia, particularly our mail, ammunition, and most important of all, our whisky! A third Somaliland exists to the south, abutting Kenya. Captured by the Italians in the nineteenth

century, and administered from Mogadishu, it is now under British control, and it is the springboard for the capture of British Somaliland after Italy's entry into the war.

The more we succeed in running the Italians out of Ethiopia, the greater our difficulties. The provincial Ras want things to return to the old ways. We certainly are not there to run things, but we do need to supply our units in the field without danger. Local Shifta (bandits) attack our lines of communication and seize the supplies intended for our troops. Worst of all, they kill the drivers and the Askaris escorting the convoy.

A decision is made to teach one group of Shifta a lesson, and off we trundle to give some severe punishment as a warning to others. Of course, as soon as we get anywhere near, the Shifta beat it to the hills with their loot. We have no means to chase them. There are no roads, and we have no mules or camels. The answer turns out to be to destroy their habitations—stores of food, crops, cattle, goats, and chickens; and to render their water wells useless by using them as latrines. Our Askaris eat huge steaks for a few days, and protest our protection of the elderly and sick left behind, whose sons have killed their fellow tribesmen. Although we kill no one, our actions can be regarded as extremely repugnant. But that's war, which tends to ignore the complicity of a so-called "civilized" people sitting in judgment of those who challenge the status quo.

My unit, the Fourth Uganda Battalion of the King's African Rifles, is camped on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. The officers and non-commissioned officers are white. Each white non-commissioned officer of the rank of sergeant and above has his counterpart in a tribal non-commissioned officer of the same rank. There are, in essence, two battalion sergeant majors (one black and one white), but the black sergeant major is junior to his white counterpart. Each race eats and shits separately. Our battalion commander is known as "Knob Pink" because he never buttons his fly, and his penis is invariably on parade. Even though he is drunk most of the time, he is affable and well-liked. Most of the company commanders are white settlers from Kenya. The junior officers, like me, are seconded from a variety of British home regiments.

All orders to the East African troops are given in Swahili. Each company is made up of different tribes who have their own languages, and like the whites, communicate in Swahili. Idi Amin is a sergeant (so I am later told) and as anonymous to the white officers as any other black sergeant.

My division is the Eleventh African and is made up of East and West African units. Addis Ababa is being surrendered; the whole damn city is full of Italian women and children, and the Ethiopians want their capital back. There is to be a Victory Parade with the Ethiopian army heading the procession. The political branch makes the decision that the victorious British are to take second place. I do not remember the decision bothering us; we want to get into Addis for licentious purposes, mainly for co-opting women.

My closest friend, David Sheldrick, later chief game warden of Kenya, also a platoon commander, and like me, barely twenty years old, discusses the situation. Somehow, through the bush telegraph, we hear that the Italian Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of Aosta, keeps for his prime use in the officer's brothel a beautiful whore. David and I discuss whether we can get into the town before anyone else and grab the tastiest fruit for ourselves. We are not supposed to show our faces in Addis until after the Victory Parade, but we figure if we go in the night before, we may stand a chance of success. The problem is finding the brothel in the dark. We have an Italian military doctor, a prisoner-of-war, attached to our unit. By good fortune, he knows where the brothel is, and being an affable man, he agrees to guide us. We sneak out as soon as it is dark and make our way to Addis.

We find the brothel. It looks like a crummy, two-storied hotel in a Western movie. The place is empty, except for a fat madam waiting with her dozen Italian girls slouching around on couches or perched on stools in front of a mirrored bar. Money passes hands. Drinks all around while we inspect the girls. I recognize the Duke of Aosta's whore immediately. So does David. I say, "I'm senior to you, she's mine." She intervenes, points to David and says, "Heem," grabs his arm and disappears with him up the stairs. I can hear other vehicles approaching. I realize no time is to be lost if I want a choice woman, so I grab who I think is the second best. I am so hungry for sex that discrimination is not the order of the day.

I zip into her room, clothes off, ready for action. Boy, oh boy. She puts on a flimsy, see-through nightdress, but keeps avoiding me by running from one side of the room to the other. What the hell

is this, maidenly fears or an act to get more money? I grab my pants and pull out more notes. It makes no difference. She grabs the money, emitting squeaks of "Mamma mia, mamma mia," while she runs around. I lose patience. I hear music below and voices through the paper-thin floor. I want it now, and damn well make that plain, at which point she runs to the wardrobe, briefly scuffling about inside and brings out a Beretta pistol from on top of a folded dress. Still squeaking, she offers the pistol to me on bent knees. She is frightened out of her wits because civilians carrying arms (after surrendering) do so at peril of their lives, at least at some peril to their freedom. Anyway, this performance is too much, and I decide to get on with some sex. I grab the gun, pull out the magazine, and point the gun at the floor, clicking it. "Bang!" There's a bullet stuck in the spout. Feet pound up the staircase, the flimsy door is knocked out, and fellow officers with their pistols drawn and cocked for action peer in. By the time I explain, sex is out of the question, and I shamefacedly dress and slink out to our truck to wait for David, who soon comes out, smirking. I have to wait three years before I get a screw. But that's another story, and I'm not sure I'm going to tell it.

1943-44 We, the East African contingent, are packed into troopships to be delivered to Ceylon, with four Askaris bunked in the ship's space usually given to one white soldier. A tight fit. There were women on board too, nurses and records staff who, because they are sacred, are given twice as much space as they need.

The Japanese pick up our trail one afternoon. We watch one torpedoed ship near us in the convoy going down, as the Askaris run up and down the hull of the sinking ship, trying to pull some women out through the portholes. The image haunts me for years—the destroyers racing up and down with sirens blaring, catapulting depth charges, and sending waves made by the depth charges all over the place. We are not allowed to stop to rescue the men struggling in the water. Afterward, silence and a beautiful tropical sunset, as we pound on toward our destination. We sleep on deck that night, and thereafter until we reach port.



Captain, King's African Rifles, 1943

Empty trucks and a guide wait dockside to take us to our campsite up in the jungles of Ceylon. We pack the Askaris into the trucks and set off. A few miles out, we run across a herd of tame Indian elephants trundling down the road. The trucks crash into ditches, the men run for cover shouting, "Tembo, Tembo," as they try to climb the nearest palm trees. It takes hours to convince them that these elephants are tame and can be ridden like horses. When we arrive, our camp is in a torrid zone, infested with mosquitoes and poisonous snakes. We imagine we are being put here to be acclimatized for Burma. We can't wait to leave.

In India, our units are greeted by the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Mountbatten, and given a pep talk on how we are going to "hit the Japanese for six" (a home run to you). Mountbatten is obviously heavily made up, and speaks in a somewhat high falsetto voice. The Askaris think he is a woman disguised as a man, or some kind of transsexual, or a person dressed in drag. They begin to titter at his performance; we have to shush them up.

I'm sent off to Calcutta on some errand. I remember checking in at the officer's mess in Chowringi, and being given a forceful warning about the thousands of people lying on the sidewalk outside. Our informant describes how each night, scores of starving people die. At dawn, the garbage carts come around, and if a man, woman, or child doesn't move after being brutally kicked, they are loaded into the carts and their bodies disposed of. We are warned that to take a crust of bread outside, and to give it away, is to court certain death.

I arrive at the time of the Great Bengal Famine, when tens of thousands are dying from starvation all over Southeast Asia because the Japanese have cut off the rice supply from Burma, and the rains have failed elsewhere. We know that food is scant, but never imagine anything like what we see. I do not eat for two days, and afterward my hunger is so great that I have no difficulty stuffing my stomach.

Fortunately for me, I have heard of Firpo's, a reliable source for packing and sending bottles of

Bombay gin in the mail. I pay enough for a bottle a week for several months. It is an inspired decision. I rejoin my unit and we soon set sail, again, for India.

Everyone seems to know that a big push is underway. It is a pitiable sight to watch the half-starved, bony, underweight Indian laborers trying to lay heavy railway track. They are replaced by a company of large, black American engineers. The difference is astonishing as one watches one well-fed, strong American do the work of several Indians.

We are transported up country to near Imphal, where the Japanese have attacked and been repulsed. A brigade of East Africans is organized, with four battalions instead of the usual three, and a small amount of artillery. The extra battalion is Gurkha. We are camped high up on a plateau, and consequently freeze in our thin, tropical battle dress. We can't wait to get into the jungles of Burma to get warm again. The day comes when transport arrives, and we trek across a high mountain range onto a flat plateau, near the Irrawaddy River. We have joined the Fourteenth Army and are ready for action. We know the Japanese advance forces are nearby, and that digging in is imperative.

The brigade transport officer is wounded on reconnaissance and is evacuated. I'm to report to brigade headquarters as his replacement. I don't understand why headquarters needs a transport officer when we are infantry, and now have no transport. Every night we listen to the "BBC World News" at nine o'clock. To our astonishment, the announcer states that troops of the Fourteenth Army are attacking the Japanese, spear-headed by the Eleventh East African Division. What the hell? The Eleventh East African Division has just been pulled out of the Arkan and is somewhere in India. We soon find out the truth. The Japanese locate us and throw a huge force at us. Before we know what has happened, the Fourteenth Army leaves us and begins crossing the Irrawaddy to outflank the Japanese. We form a defensive perimeter. Our brigadier is as happy as a drunken lord. He is in battle. The Japanese tighten their attack.

Our artillery is blazing away like mad. Ammunitions and food are being air-dropped ceaselessly. The Askari's 120-pound sacks of maize are a problem for the American air-supply unit. We get orders to take cover as a rain of sacks is dropped, including our mail and my bottle of gin, which I manage to hide (my need is greater than anyone else's). We dig in, and I share my slit trench with my orderly. He is not allowed to drink hard liquor, so I have my bottle to myself and suck a modicum each night to quiet my nerves.

There is no way to evacuate the wounded. Our airstrip is too dangerous to land on because the Japanese have it covered. Our Somali battalion doesn't like the situation, and despite orders to hang tight, they ignore their officers and begin their own little war by attacking the Japanese hand-to-hand. The Japanese are continually shooting at us, and we do very little in return. Our orders are to hold out at all costs, as the Fourteenth Army's armored units race down the other side of the riverbank, outflanking the Japanese. Too late; they realize what is happening. Tanks are sent in to rescue us. The airstrip is reactivated. We are ordered to evacuate and to go to a rest camp in India. We are stinking and only too pleased to get out as fast as we can. We arrive at our rest camp as the monsoon starts, and we are inundated with the rain.

It's strange. I remember feeling sick and then lying flat on my face in the water. I wake up in a hospital, in an enormous ward in Calcutta. There are dozens of naked men of all races lying on beds. Two orderlies come over to me. One seizes me by the hair and pinches my nose. The other rams a bottle of salt water in my mouth and says, "Sahib, drink. Drink it all. Don't vomit or you will die." I don't vomit, and I don't die, though plenty of others in the ward do. I recover.

1945 All sense of time has long since disappeared. I come out of the hospital, and I'm told to report to G.H.Q. India, in New Delhi, where I'm to become a staff officer. The East Africans return home. I'm still weak from my bout with heat exhaustion, very depressed, and run down. I need to be near comrades and friends, not sent to a strange place to begin a new career. It's several days' journey from Calcutta to New Delhi, and I'm ordered to report to a transit camp near Calcutta, where my transportation to Delhi is to be arranged.

I arrive at the transit camp too late for supper; I make up my bed and go to sleep. In fact, I oversleep. In the morning I walk toward the officer's mess hoping to get some breakfast. I pass a full colonel wearing a large fruit salad of medal ribbons (some dating back to World War I). He is

seated in a camp chair, beating off flies with a whisk. I greet him. He stops me, and in a strong Scottish accent, wants to know if I have heard the news. I explain my late arrival and ask for the news. His immediate response is to ask me if I have a bottle. Yes, the last bottle of gin is in my kitbag. In no uncertain terms, he pulls rank and orders me to fetch it. I return with the bottle. He has his mug at the ready. He grabs my bottle and gives himself a mugful, telling me to load up. I am still waiting for the news.

"It's over," he says. "We can go home." He tells me that the Americans have dropped the atom bomb on Japan, and the war is over.

"Drink to it," he sputters, as he swallows more of my gin. I'm at a loss; I tell him I don't know what an atom bomb is. "Laddie," he says in his Scottish accent, "it's a new bomb that is so powerful it has destroyed two large cities."

"Destroyed two large cities?" I ask.

"Destroyed two large cities, aye." I sit there stunned. All those years of fighting and it ends in mass destruction.

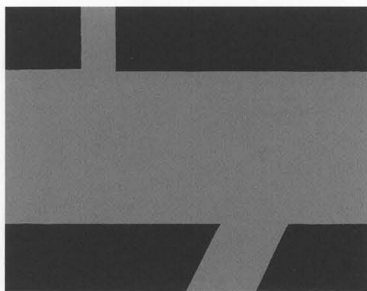
"All the women and children?" I ask.

"All," he says, as he empties the bottle.

"You sound as if you don't approve. You're stunned? You're sorry?" I ask.

"Yes." He looks at me and breaks into heaving sobs. I beat a hasty retreat.

1947-57 I get a sinking feeling as each day draws near for my demobilization. What on earth will I do after eight years in the Army? The only thing I'm good at is barking orders. I read and reread the government booklet listing grants for further education, and there is nothing I'm qualified for except—I reread the paragraphs several times to make sure—to become an artist, a job for which there are no real qualifications. Damn it, I know enough about painting and drawing; I'm sure to be a winner if I apply. Besides, there is the notion of an easy life, of being your own boss, of models and café life. Yessir, that's the life for me. I apply and receive a grant.



Abstraction No. I-III, John Coplans, 1951.

Finding a place to live in London is the devil, especially if you need room to paint, which is what I decide to do. Even now, with the war won, there is a shortage of food that continues for several years. We are rationed to one egg per person, per week; it's miserable. I find a room at the Abbey Art Center, a house owned by a collector-dealer of Tibetan art. Living in the house is Alan Davie, a Scottish artist, who uses the balance of a pre-war grant to travel on the continent. In Italy, he goes by chance to Peggy Guggenheim's house in Venice and sees her Jackson Pollock, by which he is incredibly taken. He shows me a photo. Pollock's ideas match Davie's interest in his own Celtic past. He has found a perfect subject matter. As much as I try to coincide my own past with my current painting, it eludes me.

My grant finishes, and the cushion against the hard reality of making a living is gone. I briefly become a brush hand in a gang of house painters doing up government buildings after years of neglect. I realize there is work for all who want it, and I become a contractor. My living quarters steadily rise in quality, price, and to some extent, in the fame of the landlord.

My next landlord is William Empson, the poet, and I live in his basement in Hampstead. I pay his wife the rent every month. Rising up a bit in the world, my next apartment is rented to me by Richard Burton, the actor, and this time I pay *his* wife quarterly. Soon, I decide I'm a sucker not to be a capitalist, and I find a bombed building, which I repair and rent as apartments. I rent one apartment to Mordecai Richler, the Canadian writer, and true to form, *his* wife pays me the rent. (Among creative men it seems that the man does the thinking and the woman the banking.) Although I'm still working as a contractor, I spend nights and weekends developing my painting, or at least trying to.

London has a number of exhibition societies that are, in effect, cooperatives run by an elected membership, the oldest and most conservative being the Royal Academy, which owns its spacious premises off Piccadilly. In addition, there are a number of exhibiting societies formed by artists of a more avant-garde outlook, but none of them are effective places for a newer and more radical generation to exhibit. I show at two of them: the Royal Society of British Artists in 1950, and the London Group in 1954. These societies are good places to show at for teachers and artists whose work is without a significant bite.

Apart from my activities in exhibition societies, there are the galleries to contend with. They are staffed by young women whose daddies are doctors, dentists, or accountants. They have taken undergraduate degrees in art history at the Courtauld Institute, and graduate degrees in sneering at suppliant artists from the dealers for whom they work, which is to say that they don't know enough to make any difference. (It's amazing how things are pretty much the same, half a century later, at least in New York.)

I am friendly with Denis Bowen, an artist who is a natural rebel. Bowen is not prepared to leave his future to the vagaries of the market and dealers' tastes, so he opens his own gallery in the New Vision Center, in a basement location, where I show. I also show at a tonier gallery on Cork Street. It's still there. I sell a little now and then, and to get by, I teach one day each week at a provincial art school. With all due modesty, I teach Beginning Design, not Painting.

In London, in the forties and fifties, museums are mostly dead and inactive. There is one exception, the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London's old Jewish quarter, which does a number of exceptional exhibitions. Apart from the Whitechapel, artists are pretty much on their own, left to struggle as best they can. I don't remember any grants or critical encouragement, and when criticism does take place, it is usually misplaced or ignorant. An artist has to survive and he cannot unless he has the time and money to buy materials, pay the rent, and eat. One way to survive is by teaching. The hardest way is by exhibiting and selling.

My painting is derivative. During the better part of the fifties, I work in a style that is known in Europe as tachism. Its origin owes much to the work of two American painters, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, whose work is labeled "Action Painting." Later, this term is replaced with Abstract Expressionism. In any event, the work of these two artists is hardly seen in Europe, except for an odd reproduction here and there. And, their work has traceable European roots.

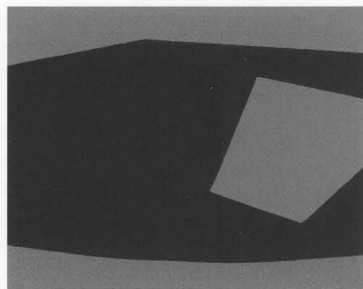
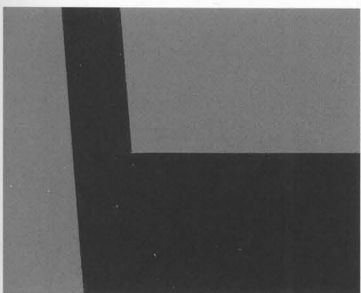
Be this as it may, tachism involves applying paint freely, loosely, and expressively, and using the style for one's own bent. I simply join the club, and become one of many.

In the midst of this extremely spotted history, comes the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Lawrence Alloway. Alloway cut through the indecisiveness of the time like a sharp knife.

The Institute of Contemporary Arts is what it claimed to be—contemporary—and it attracts some of the best younger artists, as well as the usual number of losers. Alloway holds discussion groups one night a week around a single subject. I attend many, but not all of them. These sessions are the only way artists can make their views known. (I recently looked up the attendance at these seminars, and they varied from as few as five or six people to as many as twenty-four.) Probably the most important ones are about Pop Art, a name that Alloway pioneers. However, despite the so-called "radical" subject matter, the method of painting, the actual placement of the paint on the canvas, is invariably the old-fashioned, lugubrious art-school way.

Although I later do the first museum exhibitions of a number of important Pop artists (Lichtenstein and Warhol, with a bow to Wayne Thiebaud), I can't for the life of me find any first-rate painting in London, in spite of the fact that the ideas are often interesting. This includes Richard Hamilton and David Hockney. As far as I am concerned, I am still unconvinced by the art I am seeing in England (excluding a few artists like Francis Bacon), and this includes Eduardo Paolozzi and the "This is Tomorrow" crowd.

Why Alloway? Why give him so much credit? Alloway is not at all a likeable person, but he is tough, much tougher than I am, and I take my hat off to him. He is unrelentingly wide-angled in his criticism, the very antithesis of Clement Greenberg, with his absolutist orthodoxy. Alloway tries hard to sniff things out and nearly succeeds in those crucial years that he is at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The man has never been given his due, and I hope that sooner, rather than later, this will happen.



1958-59 Alloway comes back from the States with an exhibition from Los Angeles of art called "Hard-Edge Painting." The works have a geometric style that is basically intuitive, without the intellectualized backbone so common to the followers of Mondrian. However, while this exhibition changes my work, what comes as a sheer intellectual shock is the "New American Painting" exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1959. This exhibition consists of the first generation of the Abstract Expressionists, and although I view the show many times, I am never able to sort out who is the most innovative artist (excluding Pollock, of course, whose status is never in doubt). I am determined to go to the States, not to visit, but somehow to stay, because I see the future of art is in America, and a move will change my life by giving me a way to finally find myself as an artist. With all the travails of my youth, I feel I need a place that is disconnected from my past, one where I can make a new beginning.

1960 I sell everything to be able to arrive in the States with cash in hand. I take a freighter to Boston, where I have some relatives. I remember very little of the city art-wise, other than the Institute of Contemporary Art on the Charles River. I meet a second-hand car dealer and trade a couple of small paintings I have carried with me for an old car, which I load and set out for San Francisco via New York and Chicago. Why San Francisco? I have some misbegotten idea that after New York, San Francisco is an important art center. After all, it is where Clyfford Still has emerged, and I believe that it has a sophisticated art scene. I also have some romantic notion that physically the city will be like Cape Town, a beautiful place by the sea.



John Coplans, Richard Diebenkorn, 1967

Obviously, I have to visit The Museum of Modern Art in New York and see its collection. It is an amazing experience. There is nothing comparable in any major city in Europe, neither Paris nor London. There is also New York City's architecture, particularly, Mies's Seagram building on Park Avenue, and the important skyscrapers dotting the city's skyline. I find the Seagram building too precise, geometric, and cold, and I am appalled by the buildings that are filled with masses of clerical workers cut off from daylight. I can't imagine working for some thirty years or more under such conditions. It seems to me that New York is two cities: one high above where the bosses sit and look out over the city, and then go briefly down to the street and up to their apartments, overlooking the city at night. Then, in another New York, the majority of the citizens live just above street level, more often than not without any kind of a view. The more I look at these towering skyscrapers, the stronger my conviction becomes that this new twentieth-century architecture is on one hand packaging, and on the other hand a way of squeezing the maximum amount of usable space out of a site. Fuck the workers, they are there only as necessary adjuncts of capitalism. I am shocked. Overnight I have become a left-wing Commie.

In Chicago, I get lost for what seems like forever in the city's huge black ghetto; I drive round and round without finding an exit. Not another white face in sight, and a worrisome hostile atmosphere. After a time, I begin to fear that I am deliberately being mis-directed. What is happening to me? Eventually, with a sigh of relief, I get out and spend more time looking at the city's architecture than at art. Then on to Taliesin North. The staff instantly corrects any visitor if he or she says "Wright" in a conversation. It has to be "Mr. Wright." Very strange. Can you imagine having to say "Mr. Picasso" all the time?

Then, the long haul across the endless flatland of the Midwest, with roads as straight as Roman ones, across the high passes of the Rocky Mountains (remembering the terrible Donner Pass tragedy), and into California. When I hit San Francisco, I have no idea I am actually in the middle of the city; I have to ask where I am.

I have a contact, and quickly get a loft above a lesbian bar on Jackson Square. Every Saturday night there are organized fights outside the bar. Each female contestant faces opposite the other in a Karmen Ghia car at the end of the short street. Then, the sound of shattering glass and the screeching of tortured metal, as they charge at each other like two big, angry animals in heat. I dare not go into the bar. One morning, I find a dead man on my doorstep. No one is surprised. It's the end of the road; people come to San Francisco to die.

By chance, I go out to Berkeley to the University of California's art department and nose around for any available part-time teaching positions. Indeed, there is one open. At the last minute, a visiting teacher informs the department that he cannot come. The department makes enquiries about me, and offers me the job for one year as a visiting assistant professor in the design department. I am to teach Basic Design. Luck is with me; I am all set. I have a loft to paint and live in and a livelihood, for at least a year.

There are five other visiting artists from New York (Michael Goldberg, Angelo Ippolito, Hugh Townly, Harold Paris, Julius Schmidt), and we get together and decide to liven up the school. I suggest an exhibition of our work in the city, and find the Bolles Gallery that agrees to take us on. It is run by Phil Leider, who later becomes editor of *Artforum*. His assistant is Jim Monte, who is to become a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Before my stint at the university is up, I decide to go to Los Angeles to find out what is happening. Turns out that the San Francisco art scene is a closed community, with no interest in anyplace else, least of all Los Angeles.

The Art Institute is staffed by Clyfford Still followers who are antithetical to the university staff interested in Willem de Kooning. In the meanwhile, I wander into the Art Institute where Walter Hopps is lecturing on West Coast art. I am stunned by his remarkable grasp of its history, and immediately know he is more than meets the eye. His talk makes a visit to Los Angeles even more compelling.

I don't remember whether it is on my first or my second visit to Los Angeles that I stumble into the Ferus Gallery. This gallery has been founded by Walter Hopps with Edward Kienholz, an artist noted for his social commentary assemblages. It seems like a pretty amateurish setting, intended to give some L.A. artists public exposure. Irving Blum has come from New York looking for some kind of an "opportunity." He notes the mismanagement of the Ferus gallery and asks to take it over, relieving Hopps and Kienholz of their burden. They are only too pleased to get rid of it.

1961 On one visit to the gallery, I see an exhibition of paintings by Andy Warhol. He is completely unknown and his work appeals to Blum, especially Warhol's perplexing set of thirty-two images of flat, poster-like paintings of Campbell's soup cans, painted without visible brushstrokes. I talk to Blum about the work. He is half out of his mind over the fact that he has sold some to big-time Beverly Hills collectors who think they are a joke, and pay \$200 a whack to decorate their toilets or bathrooms in their expensive homes. I go back to the gallery several times to see the Warhol show. My impression is that it's very important art, far in advance of the British Pop images I know from London. My fascination is such that Blum is impressed. I push at him not to break up the set, but he points out that he is only managing to keep the gallery going by the skin of his teeth. I don't give up. (I am like a Jewish mother who knows the truth and everyone else, including the Pope, is wrong.) On my third visit, my harangue wears Blum down and he caves in, picks up the telephone, and tells his collectors that Warhol will not allow the set to be broken up. He explains that he is devastated, but the sales have to be cancelled. I ask him what he is going to do with the series. He says that now they are his. I ask him how he is going to pay for them. "Never you mind," he says. I later discover that he takes several years to pay for them, a bit at a time. He sells them in 1996, to The Museum of Modern Art in New York for \$15 million. Every now and then, when I'm teetering on the edge of being broke, I force Blum to take me to dinner at an expensive restaurant and tell him that he owes me. He buys one of my photographs. He owns several of them.



The Visitors, UC Berkely, 1961



Roy Lichtenstein, Praeger, 1967

I go back to Berkeley, and we visiting artists organize a panel to disrupt the complacency of the art scene. Harold Rosenberg is one of the participants. He is a major critic in support of de Kooning.

During the panel, the subject of de Kooning and Still comes up, along with the same old arguments. I intervene with comments about Pop Art, arguing for it. The university responds by withdrawing its offer of a job for another year. Unlike the army, they cannot court-martial me, but they do their best to drive me out of San Francisco by not re-hiring me. I have an exhibition at the de Young Museum, then pack up and go to L.A., but not without stirring up San Francisco one more time.

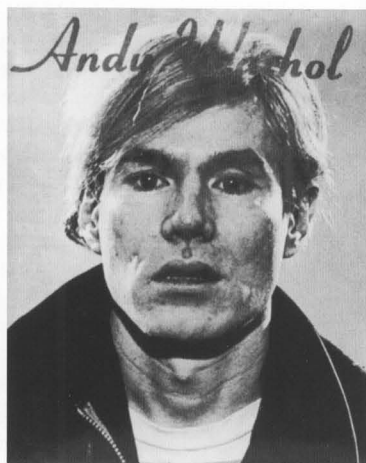
1962 Phil Leider sends me to John Irwin, a print salesman who wants to publish a magazine. I convince him that what we need on the West Coast is an art magazine, and that it is the perfect opportunity for him to be an immediately successful publisher. He agrees.

The format I suggest for a magazine is square, so horizontal and vertical images can be equal. We are in business, but the problem is that Irwin knows nothing about art. The very name *Artforum*—meant to suggest that all art is equal and deserves equal coverage, trash or not—befuddles him. We have a hard time convincing Irwin that the purpose of the magazine is to deal with art that is important, but that has received no critical coverage. Finally, he gives in and we are on our way.

I write an article for each issue, and Leider writes the book reviews. But Irwin is completely inexperienced and totally disorganized. We get him to hire Leider to manage the magazine while he gets the ads. Leider had the distinction of being the fastest typist in the army during his service and had gotten through college by writing Masters' theses on a wide range of subjects at \$50 a throw.

I become the outside man, advising Leider on the exhibitions we need to cover. In no short time, the magazine is a going entity, but Irwin's pockets are empty. He is completely broke. In comes Charles Cowles, the adopted son of Gardner Cowles of *Look* magazine fame. Cowles gets his stepfather to take the magazine over for the cost of its debt, and to give it a stipend of \$5,000 a month, a large part of which goes to Charles Cowles' extravagant style of living (first-class plane tickets when traveling to see exhibitions, and so on). Leider doesn't care as long as the bills get paid. In the meantime, I'm teaching at the Chouinard Art Institute, and Andy Warhol has given me a painting.

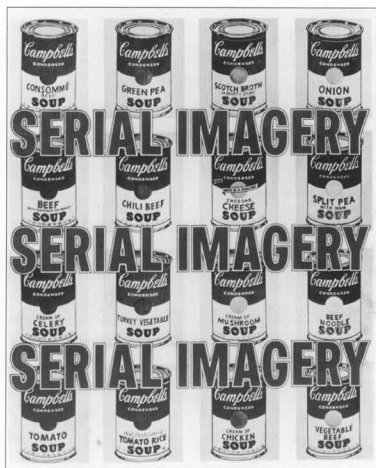
1963 I realize the magazine is going nowhere unless it is read in the East by the New York art audience. I sell my Warhol to get enough money for a plane ticket and a hotel room for a trip to New York. I ask Barbara Rose, the critic, to gather together some of the better young critics to meet me. I suggest they might write what they want for the magazine. They are agreeable and so is Leider, who is desperate for writers.



Andy Warhol, Pasadena Art Museum / New York Graphic Society, 1970

I begin to have somewhat of a crisis over my dual roles as an artist and critic. I'm uncomfortable because I'm beginning to be asked to show my paintings in exhibitions, in my opinion, because I have more value as a writer who can get publicity for my art than for the value of my art. I decide to make a choice between my writing and my art; I cannot continue doing both. I choose writing. Maybe it is a false excuse, one that I erect because I am stuck as a painter. Certainly, I feel my painting is ordinary, and I am unable to push it.

I stop painting and devote myself to writing. When I operate critically, I look for art that is intriguing and worthy of more than nominal support. I am not interested in erecting a theoretical structure into which all art has to fit. I also take seriously the idea of supporting West Coast artists, writing about them for journals other than *Artforum*. I publish many pieces in *ArtNews*, *Studio International*, and *Art in America*.



Serial Imagery, Pasadena Art Museum, 1968

1965-1966 By the end of 1965, the magazine is beginning to be weighted with articles about New York artists. Leider falls for a number of New York critics, including Michael Fried, Max Kozloff, Barbara Rose, and others, giving even more articles and covers to New Yorkers. Despite the fact that I am writing as often as I can about the California scene in other journals, and doing survey exhibitions in Seattle and Vancouver, nothing satisfies West Coast artists' hunger for coverage.

I am appointed director of the Art Gallery of the University of California, at Irvine, and one of my exhibitions is on California ceramicists, who although quite revolutionary artists, are treated as craft people. Artists like Peter Voulkos and Kenneth Price are consistently admired, yet their work is kept at arm's length by major institutions. I also get the idea that when I am doing an exhibition, I can write a catalogue essay, which taken out of its context, can reach a far wider audience than might see a show.

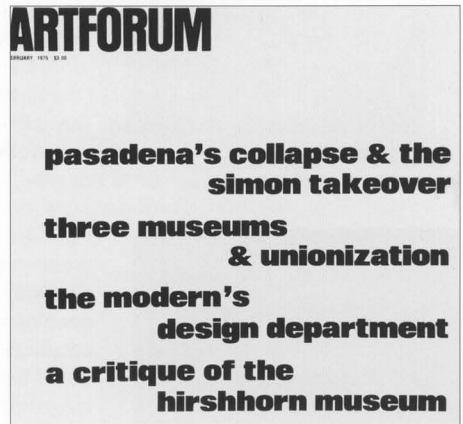
When I had arrived in the United States, the number of institutions dealing with contemporary art, let alone modern art, was infinitesimal. The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art did contemporary art shows. There were public collections like the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., and the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, but these institutions were closed to contemporary artists. In short, the audience for contemporary art had been small. In Los Angeles, the second largest city in the United States, there was only the Pasadena Art Institute. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art did not exist. The Pasadena Art Institute, despite owning the Galka Scheyer Blue Four Collection, was a pitiful institution, without money or any means of support. Its 55 Paul Klees and innumerable Jawlenskys, plus a number of Feiningers, were uncatalogued and therefore unseen and subject to harsh changes in climate. There was virtually no modern art to be seen in public collections.

An extraordinary change occurs between 1960 and 1970. One of the factors that brought an immeasurable exuberance to the scene was the emergence of Pop Art. Pop was an art that the public could grasp, and they responded in huge numbers. I remember doing a Warhol exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1970, and having some 5,000 people, from all over the Los Angeles area, turn up for the opening.

1967 Leider is so miserable about the hostility of the West Coast artists that he decides to move *Artforum* to New York. I stay in Los Angeles as the West Coast editor.

I begin a series of exhibitions in one of the smaller galleries of the old Pasadena museum building, on West Coast artists. I present Robert Irwin, Jim Turrell (one of my students at Irvine), Judy Chicago (then known as Judy Gerowitz), and Doug Wheeler, all in rapid succession. I write catalogue essays in support of their work, which Leider uses in *Artforum*, except the ones on Wayne Thiebaud and Doug Wheeler. My essay on Wheeler is written in the context of phenomenology, which Leider does not understand. I had read the American phenomenologist J.J. Gibson in the fifties in London. Gibson is also the key to my writing on James Turrell, who had studied phenomenology as an undergraduate. I take it as my responsibility to give as much of a hand as I can to Southern California artists, writing articles and reviews of exhibitions for other art journals, and becoming a voice for Los Angeles artists. I also do the first exhibition of work by Roy Lichtenstein.

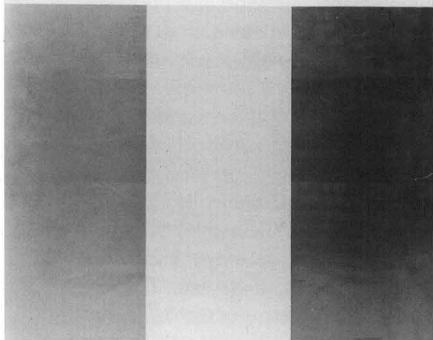
1968 When Jim Demetron resigns as director of the Pasadena Art Museum, Walter Hopps, who had been working as a freelance curator, becomes director. His first major exhibition is a retrospective of Marcel Duchamp, and the exhibition gives a major impetus to the development of art in the area. It's a long story, but Hopps is fired and I take over as acting director. The trustees have a madcap scheme to build a new museum, which they do. I am responsible for moving the old museum into its new quarters. After Hopps, there has been an interim director who hires me to do the opening exhibition. But I have too much on my hands, and we agree that an outside curator should be called in. Alan Solomon, who had taken my position at Irvine when I left, is asked to take on the job. He proposes an exhibition about American art that we agree to. But when I read



Artforum, 1975

the exhibition proposal and learn of Solomon's intentions, I am intensely worried. Solomon's exhibition is to be a celebration of New York painting and does not include a single West Coast artist, not even one of international fame like Richard Diebenkorn or Sam Francis. I am thunderstruck. I have a terrible row with Solomon when I insist that we cannot open a West Coast museum without a single artist from the West coast.

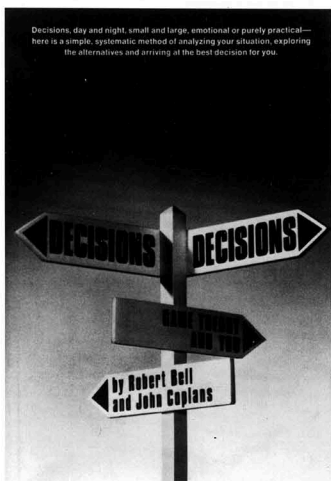
ELLSWORTH KELLY



Ellsworth Kelly, Harry N. Abrams, 1973

with the idea of an active editorial board, something that Leider has avoided at all costs. We are to meet once a month and hammer out who will write what. I retain the right (which I don't think I ever used) to override any decision. The editorial board members have the right to book the reviews they want to write in advance, but I can hardly remember this ever happening.

Every month, I prepare a list of the major exhibitions to be covered, and the reviews editor assigns the galleries to be reviewed. The only full-time editorial staff-member, apart from myself, is the managing editor. The younger reviewers initially choose all the photographs for publication, which they mark "essential," or "if possible," should the writer not care if an illustration is used or not.



Decisions Decisions, W. W. Norton, 1976

I design the magazine and write articles as often as I can. The process goes like this: I go around to the galleries all day on Saturday and see as many shows as I can. I attend all museum openings to get a feel of the exhibitions and to decide the kind of coverage the magazine should give them. Obviously, the editorial board has space preferences concerning the amount of space the magazine should give for an article, as well as for the number and sizes of illustrations. The managing editor tells me how long an article should be (in inches) and what the supporting photographs are. If I am short of material, I read the gallery reviews and select a review, which I ask the writer to add on to. This system allows younger writers to make larger contributions. There is a paste-up person who follows my instructions. I lay out the articles and sequence them. I choose the covers.

Three things are done at the same time: the writers are commissioned to write, the incoming articles are read and edited, and the magazine is designed. Finally, the magazine goes to press. On top of these duties, I have my own writing to do, and since Cowles is not

often at the magazine, I also have the publisher's duties to oversee—the accounts, distribution, advertising, and a myriad of small publishing details.

Early on in my tenure, the burden of the work puts me in the hospital with muscle spasms; my back is frozen with anxiety. Moreover, the editorial board does not go smoothly; rival camps form and quarrels break out. At one stage, I get Max Kozloff in to give me a hand. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson refuse to be edited by Kozloff. In 1976, I ask Lawrence Alloway to work with us, and he and Kozloff form a camp trying to push their ideas through. It is often a miserable existence for me.

Then I make a terrible mistake. I go to the chairman of the board and demand space and a budget for West Coast art to be included in the opening. It is a blunder of the first magnitude. Because of various constraints, we can only manage a small representation, and I offend the West Coast artists whom I have so long supported. They are enraged and express their feelings loudly and clearly. I have had enough. I am overtired and I resign.

1970 I curate a show on Andy Warhol that travels to Europe, and another exhibition on Richard Serra.

1971-1979 I leave California for New York to take over the editorship of *Artforum*. Apart from visiting New York over the years, my stays in the city have been brief, and I am more or less a stranger except for what I know about the art scene. I recognize that I need help, so I come up

Sometimes, I get artists to write: Robert Smithson writes on Central Park. I send Robert Morris to Peru to write about the Nazca markings. Other times, I get hold of first-rate historical articles. I remember one on Islamic art. I am at the magazine from 1971 to 1977, and I must confess that I often see the work through a haze. The pressures are terrible.

Dealers say they will not advertise unless they have more coverage; it is all done suavely, except in the case of Marlborough Gallery which tries outright bullying by canceling their advertisements because Peter Plagens has made some remark in his article about the appearance of their gallery that they don't like. Sometimes, artists physically attack me, as Richard Serra does one night at MoMA. During an opening, he savagely stomps on my feet because I will not go his way about an article in some other magazine. It takes four guards to stop him from choking me to death. I never know who is going to strike out at me, when, and over what.

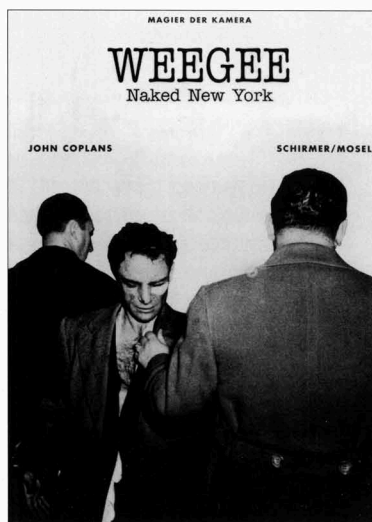
In the early seventies, Max's Kansas City on Park Avenue South is a crucial meeting ground for artists, museum curators, and critics. On any given night, Barnett Newman is there at one table and Warhol and some of his gang at another. I'm sitting with Robert Smithson, listening to him tear Carl Andre to pieces, right in front of his face, and Carl is refusing to defend himself. Many of the artists run tabs, trading work for drink and food. You might eat somewhere else, but at the end of the evening you go down to Max's to see who is there to talk to.

If the group of artists centered around the Cedar Bar in decades past shared a common outlook, an aesthetic interest, they were limited in number. Max's Kansas City, on the other hand, is a meeting ground for the most diverse group of people, including art historians, critics, dancers, performance people, artists of both sexes, collectors, and dealers, each pursuing his or her own interest. This mass of continuously changing people defies categorization. People from Europe and other parts of the States drop in on a constant basis. The tables are open seating; you shift from one to another and stay according to how long you are welcome. Social distinctions and fame and money are, for the most part, disregarded. There is no other spontaneous meeting ground in any other part of the world like it. To experience Max's is to experience something quintessentially American and democratic. When Max's begins to lose its energy, from 1973-75, there is no other place to go. The shape of the New York art world changes.

Max's is enormously important to me; apart from the gossip continuously circulating, I pick up serious rumblings of discontent which sharpen the dialogue and enable me to make moves for the magazine in advance of the dissent. I am always keeping my ears to the ground, which means I can get out of being tied to my desk.

In the meantime, Gardner Cowles, the owner of *Artforum*, writes to me. Seems the money he has been advancing since the sixties is a loan, and he wants interest on it. (I suppose that's how the rich get richer.) Here is a famous art magazine, and to Cowles it is only an investment for his stepson. I can't tell if he knows the real value of what he owns, what it represents. He not only wants interest on the money, but I suppose repayment, sooner or later.

He sends for me and offers to sell me the magazine. I decline it; and before I know what is happening, Charles Cowles flies down from Seattle, where he is working at the Seattle Museum of Art, and asks me to meet him at some smart-assed lawyer's office. He is Jackie Kennedy's lawyer, so I expect to be fired, and I am.



Weegee, Schirmer/Mosel, 1978

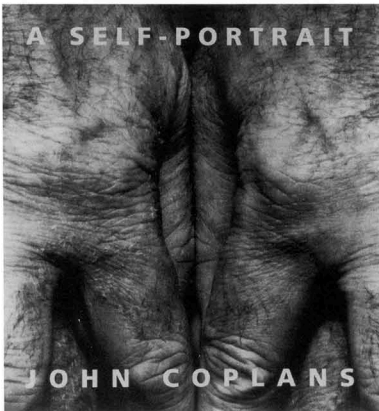
1980 I leave New York and take a job running a small provincial museum in Akron, Ohio. It gives me breathing space. I am sixty years old, with no money or pension, with a job in the sticks, and a board of rubber-headed vice presidents trying to run a museum in Ohio. The woman with the money, who wants to build a nice little modern museum (she is one of the richest women in the world), dies on me and I have to get out. Once again, I quit.

There is nothing to do in the evenings, and I begin playing around with photography, trying to find out how I can draw with a camera. I have a collection of Carleton Watkins photographs, accumulated over the years, and I get the idea of selling them and using the proceeds as a scholarship (from a man I admire intensely) to become a photographer myself. It is a mad idea. What will I do when the proceeds are used up? I certainly am not going to become a commercial photographer. Refusing to write any more art criticism, I write my last article on Philip Guston.

1981 In January, I pack up my belongings, sell my library to a gallery dealer, and drive back to New York to become an artist, again. I borrow a tiny apartment and I concentrate on my photography, learning how to develop my negatives and to print. I begin making portrait photographs of couples.

Daniel Wolfe becomes my dealer, and I have my first museum exhibition, of portraits, at the Art Institute of Chicago. I receive a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.

1982 I feel I have not yet found my subject matter; I need to test street photography. Using the same camera as Weegee, a 4 x 5 Speed Graphic, I travel around the country making photographs of parades.



A Self-Portrait, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 1997

1983 I travel to Cairo, where I am Distinguished Visiting Professor at the American University. I photograph in Egypt with Lee Friedlander. I develop my negatives when I return. I am singularly unimpressed by them. Friedlander telephones and asks me whether I got any good photos. I prevaricate, and ask him about his. He replies, "Nothing interesting." Relieved, I confess.

1984 I remember that in Akron I had taken photographs of myself in the nude with a timer; it has taken me these couple of years, trying this and that subject matter, to look at the nude self-portraits and recognize I had already struck gold and I didn't know it. I daydream. In one dream, I travel down my genes and visit remote ancestors, both male and female. Inspired by these journeys to the past, and the earlier nude self-portraits I had made of my body in Akron, I begin directing an assistant as she takes photographs of my body. To remove

all references to my current identity, I leave out my head. I don't know how it happens, but when I pose for one of these photographs, I become immersed in the past. The experience is akin to Alice falling through the looking glass. I use no props; I pose against a neutral, white background, and before I know what has happened, I am lost in a reverie. I am somewhere else, another person, or a woman in another life. At times, I'm in my youth. Sometimes (but very rarely), it seems that a contemporary event triggers the image, but when I think about it, I realize I have merely relived an episode that happened long before. The process is a strange one. I never know from one moment to the next if this power to time-travel will dry up, or what the next set of photographs will be. In the beginning, I make very few images, no more than nine a year, on the average.

I use Polaroid Positive/Negative film that develops both an image and a negative in half a minute, thus I can see the resultant image that my assistant has taken almost immediately. Over time, I refine the process, with the use of a video camera connected to a television set. The video camera is placed in such a way that I am able to look through the back of the 4 x 5 camera I use. I see the image upside down on the television set. My eyes see myself, and I can frame the photo according to will. Sometimes, I discover I don't have to see myself in advance. The image is in my head and I know how to pose for it.

My prints are straightforward—only their size and sharpness are subject to adjustment. However, they are not exactly the kind of images that collectors want to hang behind their couches.



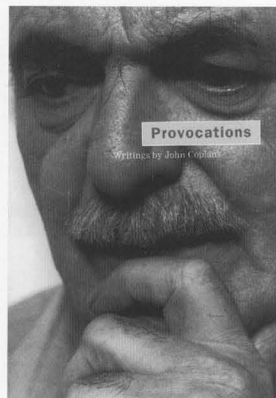
Portrait of John Coplans by Lee Friedlander, 1983

1985-89 I receive a second Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985, and a second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1986. I begin taking photographs of my hands, and produce an artist's book, *Hand*, in 1988. By now I am a well-known artist and photographer, and my work begins to be widely shown and to be acquired by museums in Europe and America. In 1989, I begin taking photographs of my feet, and produce an artist's book, *Foot*. I begin making multi-paneled forms.

1990-94 A previously written essay of mine about Andy Warhol is published with another essay by Jean Baudrillard in *Andy Warhol: Silk-screen Prints* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1990). I'm flattered even if I can't stand Baudrillard's writings.

I am named to Richard Koopman Distinguished Chair, University of Hartford, in 1991. I'm paid what, in my opinion, is a large sum of money, to talk several times to the students. I have a retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1994, and become a visiting professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts for several weeks.

1996 *Provocations*, a collection of my critical writings, is published by London Projects. Printed at the end of the book is "A Letter to My Son." It gives him detailed instructions for the disposal of my body. I write him that I'm to be cremated, the ashes divided into little piles and packaged in much the same way drug dealers package cocaine. I instruct him to deposit each packet in a different place. Westminster Abbey is the first choice. Apart from being Jewish, I'm not famous enough to be buried there among the English kings, queens, nobles, poets, writers, and military men. I want him to surreptitiously pour some of my ashes into an interstice in the ancient walls. That way, when he comes to London he can say hello to me at the Abbey. He can also truthfully tell his children that his father is buried in Westminster Abbey. Other places include the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, the pyramids in Cairo, the Parthenon in Athens, the Taj Mahal in India, and so on. Little bits of me deposited in all kinds of interesting places around the world.



Provocations, 1996

2001 The French government awards me Officer de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. I continue photographing myself and have numerous exhibitions. Since I began trying to be an artist in 1947, it has taken me almost fifty years to finally arrive.

I am asked by the publisher of this book to bring the chronology up-to-date. So, I write:

All my images are atavistic. They seem to refer to distant models and to numerous sources. At one moment, I may echo the Venus of Willendorf or a fragment of a warrior from the Parthenon. My imagery is not bound by rules; I wander freely throughout the history of art. In fact, what we call "art history" is contingent on the invention of the camera. With the camera, images may be transported over time and space to be sorted and compared. My images are arrived at spontaneously, without a specific goal. We only recognize their inspiration if we know the original source upon which they are based. I come and go at will, wherever my memory leads me.

When I photograph, I usually begin with some idea, and if a photograph emerges, the idea becomes recognizable. I never really know where I'm going in advance, and only recognize where I've been, after the fact. Sometimes, a single image is a summation of a culture.

Thus, my images are not so much dependent on my sight, but rather on where my mind takes me. And the proof lies in the fact that I have lost most of my eyesight last year due to Macular Degeneration, which damaged my central vision. I can no longer read, but other parts of my mind have taken over my central vision, compensating for the loss. I continue to make images, and some of the new ones, like the last four images in this book, seem to show that the making of art is a very mysterious process. One's own.