

William E. Parker: Lecture on Joel-Peter Witkin
University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, September 9, 1987

(Note on the transcription: the following combines two separate recordings of the same lecture. -Bob Martin, November 2022)

Introduction: The following tape is a recording of the major parts of an invitational lecture entitled, *Witkin's Shadow Side Grotesqueries*, presented by William E. Parker, Professor of Art and History of Photography, Department of Art, School of Fine Arts, The University of Connecticut. The lecture was presented to an audience of close to 175 persons on the evening of September 9, 1987 at the School of Fine Arts auditorium. Professor Parker's lecture was presented in honor of an exhibition entitled, *Joel-Peter Witkin, Photographs, Realms of the Grotesque*. Shown September 1-18, 1987, in the Atrium Gallery of the Department of Art Center. The exhibition was curated by Professor Sal Scialora of the Department of Art in cooperation with Pace-Macgill Gallery of New York City and the featured photographer. Attendant to the lecture was a series of 75 slides surveying the photographic work of Joel-Peter Witkin achieved from the late 70s to the present day. Interposed between each of these works by Witkin were examples of art from ancient to modern times featuring the iconography of the grotesque. Also included in the slide presentation were examples of the work of Charles Eisenmann, a 19th century New York-based portrait photographer whose cabinet photographs identified celebrated persons who were, so-called with respect, freaks. The works by Eisenmann were shown to identify a specific 19th century tradition precursive to the 20th century photographic images by Joel-Peter Witkin. It was pointed out that the portraits of freaks by Eisenmann featured in a book by Micheal Mitchell entitled, *Monsters of the Gilded Age*, published in 1979, appeared during times of economic and social crisis in America during the 1870s and 1880s, just as the photographs by Joel-Peter Witkin have evolved in a comparable period of not only economic and social but collective psychic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. The lecture concluded with slides of five works by Joel-Peter Witkin, each presented with specific interpretations of their semiotic and symbolic implications. Not included on the tape are the audience responses to the lecture, during which time Professor Parker offered an analysis of the recent work by Witkin entitled, *Ensanto Oscuro*, Los Angeles, 1987. This photograph appeared in the exhibition and was illustrated on the poster for the one-person show. The slides were projected by Robert Palmer, Department of Art Assistant...now the lecture.

And I would like to forewarn you that it is a rare moment in the history of Parker speech because most of the slides will be shown without a single comment on the images (laughter) but I intend to (laughter), notice my colleagues chuckling over there because I

have prepared enough over the last month and a half or two months to speak for two hours and I won't need slides. I won't do that. But if you catch me over in the Atrium Gallery afterwards I'll be happy to give you all sorts of exegetical commentaries on the work that is on view. But I will comment on six slides at the conclusion...I can tell you that you will be seeing, because I hope you become awash in visual material. You will look at the work of Joel-Peter Witkin from 1975 to the current date: his last work completed in 1987 insofar as that was three weeks ago. He has obviously been in his studio because I talked to him at length on Friday. But keep in mind that you are seeing an evolution. Interposed between some of the slides are art historical sources which served as motivating images for some of the work that he developed. I will not identify those, I will assume that you have all had your surveys of the history of art...ask me afterward. Then we will look at a group of slides that relate to what I might call past grotesque art, literally extending from Archaic Greece to the 20th century. Many of these having had a direct influence upon Witkin, many of them presented so that you will understand that he works out of a very ancient tradition. The third group will be a group of slides by Charles Eisenmann. He is a, was I should say, a photographer of the 1870s and 80s and practiced in New York City. He is one of the most famous of what we would call the cabinet photographers who created albumen prints that were mounted on small cards and particularly of those images that were known with dignity and respect as freak photographs. And the persons configured in these were commissions in some cases, asked to be photographed, and I dare say there was hardly a family album in the 1880s that would not have included an example of the freak photographs of Charles Eisenmann. I also would inform you that these images appeared in a time of great crisis. The depression in America during the 1870s made the depression in the 1930s look like a tea party, to use the old cliché...then return to the five slides and talk about the symbolic meanings of work by Joel-Peter Witkin choosing five images, five or six images to discuss...concerns. So Bob, if you will begin and anyone who says go slower, I will come out and get you. (laughter)...three to four seconds per slide.

He was born in Brooklyn, New York, September 13, 1939, an identical twin, although a fraternal triplet died, of an Italian Catholic mother who divorced his Russian-Jewish father when he was a baby. Of his first conscious recollection, when he was six years old, Joel-Peter Witkin has written in the book entitled by his name: "It happened on a Sunday, my mother was escorting my brother and myself down the stairs of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church, walking through the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screams and cries for help. The accident involved three cars, all with families in them. Somehow in the confusion I was no longer holding my mother's hand. I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars: it stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I reached down to touch the face, to ask it, but before I did someone carried

me away. It could have defeated me and I would have become insensible. Instead I chose to accept the injury and go on because my will is stronger than death, stronger than the lostness of these times. This, my first conscious visual experience, left its mark. Out of it grew my visual work. My use of severed heads and masks, concerns with violence, pain and death, of things extravagant, fantastic, emotional, and deserving of adoration. When I was sixteen, I read several books on photography and purchased a camera. I spent several days looking through the camera, then secretly came to know I wasn't holding a machine, I was holding her face." In the early 60s, Witkin was in the U.S. Army with an MOS as a combat photographer. Once upon a time, for four months, he was in India meditating, studying Buddhism, and photographing temples. For several years he was involved in primal scream therapy. He writes, "My work concerns itself with the impossibility of consummation between person and symbol. But the very fear of my being, the very vacuum of my existence, creates an insistence of belief which makes the possibility of a union between person and symbol—plausible. I consider myself a portraiturist; not of people but of conditions of Being. I am making a record of events which will show how one person, one phantom, engaged the world. I believe this work represents a visual biography of what one man, myself, did to create dialogue with the infinite."

Joel-Peter Witkin is not a naive, primitive, outsider artist. He is definitely not an Innocent. Despite his seemingly instinctualist strategies in the development of his photographic work, despite his having professed on many occasions that much of my imagery is spontaneously realized on location, in the studio, much is realized by happenstance, utilizing whatever props or materials are at hand. He holds three academic degrees: a Bachelor of Fine Arts in sculpture, received in 1975 from the Cooper Union School of Art. A Master of Arts in photography, achieved in 1977 at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. And a Master of Fine Arts degree, again from the University of New Mexico. His dissertational project work, which indeed with the writing alone would be considered... was identified by his graduate faculty committee as meriting the award of the MFA degree with high distinction, the highest honor that that university can bestow. He said to me: "I have never been a teacher of art, Bill, I started graduate school late, at 37. In those years I worked as a restaurant waiter to support myself, my work, my wife, and my son. Only in the last three years, moving back from this date today, have I been able to be self-supporting through my own photography." In the major monograph on his work, entitled interestingly enough, by the name of the man, not with any reference to his work, the book, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, published by Twelve Trees Press in 1985. The dedicatory page states, "To Cynthia, who was my wife before I met her." And in the book, an image entitled, *The Capitulation of France*, 1982, the child in the grotesque mask tethered to the breast of the obese woman, whose face and hands have been scratched away, is his son, Kersen. These persons, his loved

family, figure most significantly in his belief that he has written, "Between the advent of pain which is birth, and apotheosis which is death, there is that convalescence, which is life." In the 1985 monograph, and in an essay he wrote in 1987 for the New York City Alternative Museum exhibition catalog, entitled, *Repulsion, Aesthetics of the Grotesque*, the photographer has stated this, "The impulse to make a photograph begins with a drawing made from references made from history, art, a person or a thought. This drawing is the codex of a search involving people and elements combined often in disparate ways. This physicality is then recorded through a camera. The exposed film is developed, resulting in a strip of twelve sharp negatives." (And those of you would recognize the 2 ¼ by 2 ¼ format camera) "I then choose one negative which I scratch and cut into. I do not collage or superimpose. I work alone during printing and begin by communicating with my equipment and chemistry, thanking them all in advance. I place a negative in the enlarger and the darkroom becomes a kind of holy house, a refuge for phenomena. After the negative image is brought to size and focus, tissue is placed over the enlarging paper and sprayed with mists of chemicals and water; this part of the process occurs in darkness. While making the exposure, I press upon and often tear the tissue, creating a fusion of tones and spaces within the image. After receiving exposure, the paper is placed in chemistry which develops the image and allows it to be seen in the light. During this time, I change the image by use of additional marking on the negative, exposure, diffusion or chemical treatment of the paper. By the esthetic use of these agencies which at times takes days to complete, I expand the visceral impact which originally occurred in front of the camera. The final event is the print. A toned and archivally treated image I can replicate, in which the form and the subject and the subject's context are transcended into an idealized formality possessing an esthetic language which engages profound dichotomies within the viewer. And having touched that place, my hope is not only to show the insanity of our lives, but also that this work will be seen as part of a diverse and desperate times." He writes also: "What has been created in my work is visual...which has as its objective not the ideal but the subjective elements of pathos. It is an art directed to the other in us so that we may elevate our feelings to empathy and finally to transcendence of action in order that our higher selves can dispel fear so that we may help and heal each other. I choose the subject in the hope that through its brutal explicitness and by formal presentation, that an evolution will be maintained. That all art must be born out of the need to define mortality. I attempt to find wonder and beauty in the landfill of our histories and ourselves. The subject matter is grotesque since it is what we have in our darkest moment become: a grotesque, as in all art. All true art," as Witkin says, "Is not matter orphaned in description, it has a life beyond itself. The roots of art extend to the spirit world. Ancient treatises described it as an expression informed by divine beauty. It is the overtone of meaning. What flashes in the lightning. It is the true power of destiny, it is ourselves in union with the ineffable." The grotesque? What is this? Many of us are probably familiar

with scholarly and even more accessible studies concerning the varieties of form and iconography of the grotesque in art. Even most sophomores know Wolfgang Kayser's psychoanalytic interpretations first published in the German language in 1957 and translated by Ulrich Weisstein into English for the Indiana University Press edition of 1963 entitled, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Some of us know Mikhail Bakhtin's translated books on Rabelais and Dostoevsky. Wherein, as has been written about his works, "He locates the origin of the grotesque in popular festivals and their culmination in the carnival, and in his tracing of the relationship between the grotesque and the folk belief in an indestructible and material mother, a mother called nature, a mother called earth. Bakhtin's...carnivalistic practice which debases and derides the serious routine of life, civil and religious authorities, established laws and moral values, suggested that this debasement corresponds to a fundamental desire to be integrated with the earth, the cradle of all living beings." Or for those who have studied the history of photography, you might remember A.D. Coleman's, *The Grotesque in Photography*, published in 1977, prior to Joel-Peter Witkin's true emergence. And were it to be re-edited, we know his work would figure significantly in Coleman's book. To my mind, the most significant study of the grotesque, published this very year, 1987, by Northwestern University Press, is the astoundingly informing and utterly hold onto the arms of your reading chair and have a seatbelt on your consciousness book entitled, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex*. How is that for a title? Subtitled: *The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques*. Authored by Ewa Kuryluk. Trusting that my pronunciation of her name is not too grotesque. A profound study promoted in its initial stage by a fellowship at the Institute for the Humanities at New York University and in its terminal stage by the Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University, both auspicious honors. Kuryluk states, "The term grotesque was coined in Italy at the time of the Renaissance when the overgrown ruins of Roman villas and baths were excavated in the vicinity of Rome and Pompeii. The ancient remains were not properly identified but were believed, falsely, to represent artificial grottos dug in antiquity for Diana and the nymphs. Because the ruins were thought to be caves, the mural decoration preserved on their walls, or more precisely that part of it which the Italians were completely unfamiliar, was called grotesque, coming from and belonging to the grotto or cave. This unfamiliar part consisted of frames or borders surrounding well-known mythological scenes. These frames, typical examples of late Roman style, were made from floral, animal, architectural, and human elements which, winding one around the other and growing into each other, formed a surprisingly and ambiguous whole. Before this discovery the Renaissance notion of ancient art was based primarily on knowledge of classical sculpture and architecture. Consequently, the newly discovered heterogeneous and chaotic frames contradicted the norms of clarity, balance and harmony, features which were assumed to have governed the ancient mind. Ancient clarity and harmony, so suitable for expressing the normative aims of a civil and religious order, could no longer

be seen in absolute terms. Balanced figurative scenes formed only the center, which was surrounded by the fantastic and chaotic; under the sunlit surface of white marble extended an obscure grotto." The cave of the shadows. The under-mine of consciousness"...Kuryluk identifies not only the obvious examples of the grotesque but gives new attention to what should have been considered by others who have written so splendidly on this theme, and I will read you but a brief list: "She deals with the anti-world of femininity as opposed to the world controlled by men, a fitting subject that is quite ancient and not simply a problem of today. The anti-world of childhood is contradicted by the world governed by adults. The anti-world of the hidden, forbidden, apocryphal, and heretical as different from the universe of the established and sanctioned, the canonical and the orthodox. She deals with the anti-world of Satan, hell, paganism, and damnation as distinct from the world of Jesus, heaven, Christianity, and salvation. She deals with the anti-world of sin, flesh, and death as divided from the cosmos of virtue, spirit, and the eternal light. She deals with the anti-world of darkness and corruption, down below and to the left as distant from the world of light and purity, high up and to the right. She deals with the anti-world of apocalypse, war, and disintegration as contrary to the world of peace, order, and togetherness. She states that we notice the grotesque primarily from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century. She then excurses on the issue of the earlier forms of the grotesque which were not dead at all that appear in the Middle Ages. She talks about a subculture...at the end of the Renaissance and function in opposition to the official culture until the beginning of the 20th century. And finally she states, "One can still trace the dim shadows of the traditional grotesque in 20th century arts and literature, theater and film. They remain, however, echoes of the world that is not with us any longer. The grotesque may be vaguely remembered and written about in scholarly publications but it does not rule the imagination today. Sense-like (?) combinations and manifestations of the archaic and the infantile can be clearly seen in Dadaism, Surrealism, Neo-Expressionism, Collages, and Happenings. Distortions and displacements indeed represent the most common quality of Modern Art. I promise you an exciting read if you dare to engage with this book. If I give it up. Kuryluk mentions several features, particularly formal features that are associated with the grotesque that we can find not only in the art of the past and certainly evidenced in the art of Joel-Peter Witkin. Such elements as: separation, mixture, and reassembly. For example, as in *Anatomical Theater*, whole entities and parts of reality, considered normative cultural icons, and in short any things that belong together are separated, dissected, torn apart, dispersed, disturbed, displaced. There is also elongation and compression in the grotesque, enlargement and miniaturization applicable to an element of a picture or to the entire image. For example, these may be evidenced in people with handicaps or they may be inventions. Such things as the elongation or compression of shadows, elongated or truncated body contours, distortion of body parts, missing body parts, radical differences

in sizes of figures, two-dimensionalization of three-dimensional forms and figures. There is also what we know as duplication and multiplication: multiple arms, repetitive figures, animals, things, many-breasted figures, fur-faced figures, obsessively repetitive marks, patterns, stainings, figures of extraordinary distortion. She also mentions the issue of reversal: entire figures or only parts of them. Whole images or only fragments are reversed. Left often becomes right, up becomes down, each can be exchanged for the other. The negative can be made positive, the shadow turned into light, black into white, above the waist the figure appears female, below a male. Gender differentiation is replaced with androgyny. Three-dimensional figures or objects can be rendered flat or made even more three-dimensional than they are, or the reverse. There is simplification and overcrowding. Figures appear *en face*, apparent with frontality. Some details are left out, some figures are extremely isolated from other forms. They fill the shallow picture plane as if from a tableau, a theater stage, a claustrophobic stage, a shadow theater. There is a filling of the shadows of the picture plane, though not evident in anything you are seeing in Eisenmann, but certainly in Witkin and also in the art of the past. Filling of the shallow picture plane with lines, dots, scarifications, as if the artists or the subject of the work are plagued by pathological *horror vacui*, fear of empty space. There is always fantastic interpretation and projection. The moon might have a face. Accidentally realized lines, shapes, and patterns may suggest phalli, body parts, may suggest caves. Distorted figures become other than human: a lobster, a fish, a lamp, an elephant, a totem, or some other animal such as a crab. Black and white becomes synonymous for darkness and light. Extremes of value contrast and plasticity of form suggest original or nascent genesis, sometimes even frenzy, sometimes ecstasy, sometimes conflict. I might add that Kuryluk goes into a thorough discussion of the major iconographic themes in the development of the history of the grotesque, and to my mind one of the most intriguing studies ever written in the history of art. And certainly worth any historian's time as well as any individual who is interested in this particular field...

Elongation and compression, enlargement and miniaturization, simplification and overcrowding, fantastic interpretation and projection. "I met this man in San Francisco. He was the inventor of a penis pump. He also told me he had his penile opening enlarged for the insertion of his fingers. He invented also a pump for his girlfriend's clitoris. Since then she has turned lesbian." (laughter) He places them instinctually before the carnival billboard. Again, presenting the imagery that Kuryluk so beautifully defines as an extension of Bakhtin's thesis. That it is in the rituals of celebration of folk forms and others where gigantism, where distortion, where obesity, celebrate the excesses: the powers of earth, not of humanity. Next please... This is a picture entitled, although the titles are not that significant, *History of Commercial Photography in South America*. In Sante Fe, I met a man wearing a black leather jacket. This man had a patch over his eye. We were in a restaurant. He began to talk to me. He said he recognized me, that he knew of my work. The man stated to me that he had lost his eye in a surfing

board accident. And then he said shortly thereafter, he discussed and admitted his bisexuality. And he said he wanted a photograph made of his primary fantasy: I want my blind eye replaced by a cock. Joel arranged to have the picture taken at the guy's apartment where he could fulfill his fantasy. The chap who permitted the use of his cock was a leatherboy that he had known. The cockman was gang raped as a youth. What is intriguing, if you ask Witkin about this work, he never explicates the meaning. He tells you every detail of the persons, the place, the things, the conditions, but never dares to intrude upon the psyche of those with whom he works and feels often blessed by the fact that he fulfills their fantasies. What is intriguing about this work is what Joel Peter Witkin could never have intended. There is a magnificent prescience about his naming it *History of Commercial Photography in South America*. I said, Joel, have you ever heard of Hercule Florence? And he said no. And I said, oh, that's right, you studied the history of photography before the new edition of Newhall and before Naomi Rosenblum's text. Josephore Niepce and Jacque Louis Daguerre are not the earliest innovators in the history of photography. There was another man, named Hercule Florence, who lived in Brazil, a Frenchman. He wore a tuxedo when he worked on his images. We have none of the images except labels for prescription bottles and other medical material, and what you might call replications of documentary material, and so therefore there are doubting Thomases, but we have copious notebooks with chemical formulas, procedures, all of which have been tested and work. What is intriguing is that Hercule Florence maintained that his vision—now notice that, not the camera's, not the print's—his vision could not occur without his own urine. Because he used his own urine as the acetic acid to stop the development of the silver. (laughter) I do not recommend to students to do this if you run out of stop bath, it is not very trustworthy. The other thing that is intriguing is Bonnie Gordon, the contemporary American photographer has pointed out, that primordially in terms of the history of photography which begins in the caves of Altamira and Lascaux, that body parts have been associated with camera elements: the aperture and the lens with the eye; the bellows literally with the belly, the receptive film plane with the retina of the eye. In fact, all images associated with retinal vision are traceable back to the eye itself. The man replaces his blind eye with a penis. He wishes, as Joel-Peter Witkin says, what most people tend to not recognize they wish for, to be incorporated by someone or to incorporate someone, or a part thereof. What is intriguing to me is that when we read Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, she makes great moment of the camera as a phallic instrument. She talks about its capacity to rape, that it is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood, and she uses the word penis in association with camera work. The blind eye is being replaced by the penis of the leather man. To give new vision. To emit perhaps urine instead of semen. To fix the moment. The man in the tuxedo, just like Hercule Florence, fulfills his fantasy while he still suffers the desperate tendency not only of all people, but what all photographs rob us of, the capacity to get the world back. To be in that world that is configured in the

picture. To replace that world that has stopped. Next slide please. This is the *History of Commercial Photography in Juarez*. She, a friend, in *Vogue Magazine*'s professional studios, agreed to pose with a man who asked that he be part of one of these tableaux. This man, as Joel says, could pull his intestines out of his anus. He was a foreman at a construction company. We know that is a cleansing act in Asia and India. And that it is certainly part of advanced yogic practices. He said to me, Bill, the foot up the anus was a spontaneous determination on location. She was wearing stockings, she didn't mind, her foot was protected. Witkin also believes not only in incorporation, but he says one of the basic human responses for everyone is to go *from* ourselves *into* the other. We want to be absorbed. And he also knows this is one of the desperate problems not only of pathology, but even of normalcy. To be individuated we can't go into someone else. We cannot incorporate or be incorporated into. She lies upon the couch like an active Odalisque. She reminds us a great deal of those daguerreotypes that define the nude female in erotic poses. He, spread eagle, receives the foot. She is Eros. She wears the cruciform image on her forehead. The paternal Christ has now entered her mind, become an expression of her mind. The great sacrifice, Logos, has now become the domain of the feminine, of Eros. Spirit now is controlled by matter. And matter sticks her foot up the anus of passive Logos, the analytical one who can no longer act. Who can no longer be, as it were, in power. Next slide please. *The Collector of Fluids*, 1982. And I beg your attention to the cryptic writing on the blackboard on the wall behind. The woman is suctioned: in the area of her pudenda, at her breast, her mouth, her nostrils, and her eyes; the major orifices of the human body. Some of my students remember my discourse on their current phrase, *it sucks*. And I told them when I spoke at Princeton University by invitation to tell about some of the freaky interpretations that I arrived at, I will say no one said, it sucked after I was through. It sucks, they tell me, when I give them a tough question. How did you like the book? It sucked. (laughter) What did you think of the movie: Oh, it sucks. (laughter) And I sit here and recognize that right within my very midst is not only a form of profound epistemology, but I also recognize a confusion about the horror that that expression means. She is being sucked, her fluids are being collected. The logos inscriptions that mean nothing, the language that does not communicate to most, look like ciphers of meaninglessness against the wall, as if from an academic storeroom in which the content and information no longer has meaning. She is being ravaged by suction. What is being removed from her? Not milk, not urine, not saliva, but her heat. When I hear 'it sucks,' I shiver when I realize how those notions associated with the second law of thermodynamics are so apparent to us today. You have heard of the heat death of the universe. You probably saw Godard's great traffic stoppage in a film. You have also probably heard the word entropy. That there will come a point when all things will stop. Entropic randomness will occur and the heat will drain from us as if it had been sucked out of all things, animate and inanimate, and then the world shall end in fire. We know that Faulkner denied such. We know that

others feel that this is but a notion of science that can be proved true in local senses but never in the profound senses concerned with eschatology or last things. But I hear, what did you think of, it sucks, the heat is being drained out of me. It drained my energy. I am afraid of entropic being. I am afraid of dying. It has nothing to do with cunnilingus or fellatio. It has nothing to do with the erotic. It is the profoundest expression that I know of that surrounds me at least five to six times a day, that I know of that shows our terrible fear that we are, as Edward Albee said, "that everything in this slipping land is not peachy keen." Next please. Matter is being sucked there. Her heat is being destroyed. And we find that, and you will see in the exhibit a number of images in which Joel-Peter Witkin presents pre-op transexuals, but as androgynous figures: this is *Madame X* of 1981. And here we have perhaps the most profound area of all of his concerns: we know that he chooses to describe to us visually, photographically, fetuses, babies, human and animal specimens obtained from University laboratories and other legitimate sources. We know also that he has advertised for the widest variety of people to serve his purposes. May I just read you what he closes his book, the book entitled *Joel-Peter Witkin*, published by Twelve Trees Press. The man has the audacity, and has gotten dozens of responses to this request with an address that states this at the conclusion of the book: "Afterword: I cannot make my images without models, usually nude, or people with unique interests or collections. I ask them for a photo, a phone number, and a brief letter to be sent to me at my permanent address, by all interested people, this is an ongoing request. Models or sources for the completed work receive a finished print made by me as payment. A partial listing of my interests would be: physical prodigies of all kinds, pinheads," (think of Eisenmann) "dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, pre-op transexuals, bearded women, active or retired sideshow performers, contortionists (erotic), women with one breast (center), people who live as comic book heroes, Satyrs, twins conjoined at the foreheads, anyone with a parasitic twin, twins sharing the same arm or leg, living Cyclopes, people with tails, horns, wings, fins, claws, reversed feet or hands, elephantine limbs, etc." (I pause there to say to you, didn't Eisenmann already achieve it?) "Anyone with additional arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips. Anyone born without arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips. All people with unusually large genitals. Sex slaves and masters. Women whose faces are covered with hair or large skin lesions and who are willing to pose in nightgowns. Five androgynies willing to pose together as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Hairless anorexics. Human skeletons and human pincushions. People with complete rubber wardrobes. Geeks. Private collections of instruments of torture, romance; of human, animal and alien parts. All manner of extreme visual perversions. Hermaphrodites and teratoids (alive and dead). A young blonde girl with two faces. Any living myth. Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ." Write Joel-Peter Witkin, Post Office Box 188 (laughter) This sounds so utterly grotesque, so exploitative, and yet I ask you to think as he does, that what he is after is the Self. I was truly touched when he said to

me this past Friday, "Bill, what is amazing to me is that people think there is something wrong with me." He said, "My work is part of me, of my life and the times. Of the period I am living in and all others are living in. Yes, I deal with the dark, the shadow side, but as a passageway to the self, to the divine, to the sacred. Yes I show those combination male and female forms to seek an androgyny not in gender or genitalia but a psychic androgyny where persons will be conceived of as persons and not some type, class, category, disposition-- politically, economically, sexually, or otherwise." He says, "If the times were different, these desperate times we all live in, I would not necessarily do such work." I said, Joel, do you ever go grocery shopping with Cynthia? "Well of course." Do you play games with your child? "Yes." And he told me about the recent toy he had given him. Do you do things like rest? Do you do things like eat a meal in peace rather than in conflict? Joel, do you have people around you who may appear to meet all the norms of what we expect, or even the ideals? He said, "Yes." I know this man is normal. He wrote to me in 1980, this statement: "My philosophy is simply that the work I make shows my isolation from the force of creation, God. I make the work in order to find *it* and myself. Notice that, *it*. I wrote him back: Joel, from a Jungian viewpoint I made much from the fragment in your note about the philosophy of isolation from the force of creation, God, and of your stated intention to make the work in order to find *it* and myself: God as an it, God as a force, god as an energy. God posited in the self that proves that not only psyche but body are simply the world. My emphasis, when I told you what I felt about your work, Joel, was that the constellation of the demonic in the work is present. But I see the demonic that you configure as a preparation for the discovery of the self an emerging *numinosum*: the numinous, the sacred, the holy beyond all awesomeness for our time. I also see an admission of the shadow aspects of our being: the negredo that the alchemists called the blackness that we refused to admit that lurks behind our purportedly enlightened masks. Ironical, yes Joel, that you use light to reveal the grotesque and dark sides of human form and nature. But, thank God, I feel you are redeeming our humanity and our vulnerability. Preparing the way with others for the generation of a new numinous force: not the idea of God, but *it* as yet revealed, but called upon or not, surely becoming active again. As Yeats said, "What beast now slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" As Paul Tillich said, "God is the God that comes when the gods of theism have disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."

Thank you.