



Life cycle [slide]
by David Allen Hebb

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Montana State University
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of

Master of Fine Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
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APPROVAL

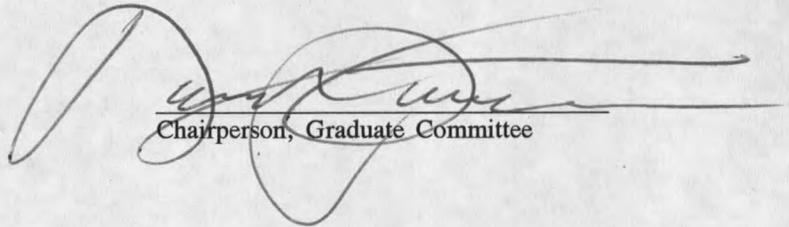
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David Allen Hebb

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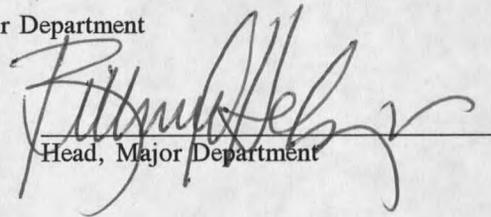


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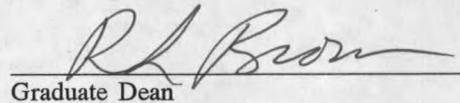


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5/8/97

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Graduate Dean

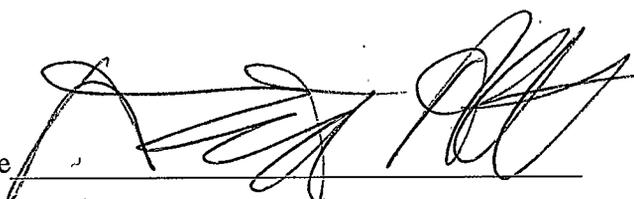
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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Themes of birth, sex and death have been universal in art since the beginning of human history. Artists have portrayed these themes through the use of allegory and symbolism according to their specific cultural and religious heritage. In the Modernist era, artists were expected to individualize their art within the conventions of a current avant-garde movement, and often they employed symbols that had a personal significance as well as a cultural basis. In the current Post-modernist art world, personal meaning has lost its significance. Originality has been replaced by appropriation and deconstruction of meaning to arrive at a synthesis of archetypal images and systems that refer to a personal *and* collective experience.

In the recent history of installation art, there are several artists who have used their personal vision as a way of commenting on larger issues. Both Vito Acconci and Edward Kienholz have presented scenes of personal horror that refer to larger political and social problems. Their work could be described as presenting socially or politically conscious scenes with a personal bias or vision. In contrast, the recent installation work of Louise Bourgeois has its basis in personal experience, and yet refers to larger themes beyond herself. What begins as personal symbolism and autobiography for her takes on the characteristics of collective experience.

In my own work, I am attempting to portray a universal experience, allow for open interpretations, and yet still infuse my own personal viewpoint without basing

my images on specific personal experiences. My thesis installation "Life Cycle" portrays the complex relationship between the cycles of nature and the material realities of an industrialized society. Although this is presented primarily as an antagonistic or parasitic relationship, there are also suggestions of a strange symbiosis, often explored through symbols from a variety of ancient belief systems. The sculptural installation has the structure of a natural and spiritual cycle that has a directional flow. The visual metaphors have multiple meanings and are used to refer to the three most significant stages of metaphysical being: birth, sexual union and death. The construction of the installation takes on the form of a mechanical simulacrum of the cycle between these three stages. By mechanically simulating life and its potential spiritual progress, I am questioning the validity and feasibility of spirituality by suggesting that spiritual progress may be likened to industrial progress, which is shown as a deterioration rather than a progression toward renewal and liberation. The individual forms in the installation are based on archetypal symbols, some derived from various mythological sources (lotus, serpent), and others based on direct contemporary experience (tubing, metallic surfaces, cartoon-like figures).

Throughout history, various culturally unrelated myths and esoteric teachings have used similar symbols to represent the same type of experience or meaning. For example, the serpent and flowing water are found in almost all cultures and have several associations and meanings. Certain symbols are found to have multiple and contradictory meanings, sometimes even within the same culture. The serpent is usually associated with evil in Christianity but has several meanings in the history of

Buddhism, from the protective spirit to the menacing demon. Jung postulated that these types of symbols came from the collective unconscious and have been consciously altered and personalized to fit into specific cultures. I am also altering and personalizing archetypal symbols to reflect a personal vision that has been shaped by contemporary thought and culture.

In our Post-modernist society, mass media has employed signs and symbols on such a large scale and at such a rapid pace that it has become difficult to separate the symbol from its meaning. In post-structuralist thought, this overabundance of signs and symbols cause the devaluation of meaning, leaving symbols with no definite referent. However, it is this very ambiguity of certain symbols that give them their power. In a deconstructivist analysis of art, potential meaning and intent are first defined, and then deconstructed to expose all other possible references, associations and meanings, thereby subverting any original intent and authorship. The analysis becomes more important than the original creation, regardless of the intent of the creator. By purposely creating a situation that easily leads to this kind of analysis, it is my "intent" to coerce the viewer to analyze the various possibilities, become aware of the contradictions, and then finally reach an intuitive understanding. The overall "essence" or "feel" of the installation can be experienced intuitively without analyzing the maze of competing metaphorical symbols. Meaning is no longer strictly attached to individual signs and symbols; it comes from the overall effect of the juxtaposition of symbols and their overlapping and contradictory meanings, as well as the form, structure and flow of the installation itself.

The superstructure of "Life Cycle" is based on the traditional linear narrative flow of beginning, middle and end. The viewer enters at the "birth" stage and is directed by the flow of the water through the "birth canal" and down a plastic tube that spirals around the "sex" stage and ends at the "death" stage. This progress is constantly interrupted by the competing cycles and connections between elements at each stage, and by the mutilation and physical decay of the tubing itself. The opposition between the orderly linear flow and the chaotic connections and decay is based on the archetypal concept of balance found in a variety of religions and philosophical beliefs.

Balance is often represented as a duality, such as the concept of Good and Evil, and is present in almost all religions in some form or another. In Taoism, all symbols and qualities are assigned to one of the two sides, "yin" and "yang." All forces of nature are seen to fit into the two categories of male and female, or positive and negative, and the favored balance or harmony (wu) emphasizes neither state. This balance between male and female energy is also fundamental to the Tantric sects of Buddhism and Hinduism. This state of harmony through duality is evident in "Life Cycle" through the balance of symbols, such as the male and female forms in the center "sex" stage, the balance between organic and mechanical forms and the competing themes of order and chaos in the superstructure.

In addition to the dualist structural elements, there is also the archetypal structure of the triad. In the Hindu pantheon, there are three main gods: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer. These three gods relate

directly to the cycle of life and are the basis for the three stages of "Life Cycle," but there is a fundamental difference in the way these concepts are presented. In Hindu belief, Shiva the Destroyer also represents the complementary aspect of Regeneration. The mechanical simulation and decay in the final "death" stage does not suggest the possibility of renewal, which in turn negates the possibility of a true "dualist harmony." Instead, the cycle becomes a one-way path toward destruction and eventual decay.

Despite the open-ended possibilities of spirituality presented through multiple interpretations of religious symbols, there is a pervading nihilism that supersedes any chance of regeneration. The mechanical context both identifies the spiritual possibilities and summarily dismisses them. The viewer becomes aware of artifice and the impotence of mechanical reproduction. The rusting and decay of the mechanical elements are present from "birth" through "death" suggesting that the natural flow toward decay is decaying itself. The archetypal symbols have double meanings that also reflect this decay. The volcano can symbolize the primordial birth of the planet as well as the destructive force of divine retribution. This pessimism is not meant to preclude the possibility of "redemption" (in all senses of the term - social, spiritual, ecological), but merely suggests that our current civilization is imbalanced and headed toward a negative and destructive outcome, and that the spiritual potential of humankind can be superseded by our "rational" inclination toward "progress." Innovations in technology have yet to save our post-industrial society, and spiritual escapism cannot alleviate the exploitation of natural resources

and leftover obsolete materials and by-products of a consumer driven culture.

Therefore, nihilism is not a complete prognosis for humanity, but merely a symptom of a larger disease, the destructive cancer of Western civilization.

In contrast to this nihilistic spirit, there is also an element of comedy, evident in the cartoon-like treatment of the figurative elements and by the haphazard construction of the machines. The comic element is an attempt to mask the gravity of nihilism with brightly colored cartoon-like figures in a quirky Disneyland™ spectacle setting. Like Baudrillard, I believe that the most obviously simulated realities are more “real” than “reality.” By presenting a sugar-coated version of bleak vision, I have already anticipated the comical re-invention and pop culture “marketing” of any subversive statement. The simulation is then referring to itself and its own reality. The comic element offers no relief, but merely exists to show that there is no relief.

“Life Cycle” is a simulation of a higher metaphysical reality beyond the “objective” or everyday reality in which we collectively and individually live. It is a Disneyland™ of philosophies, an interpenetration between subjective and cultural realities. The “objective” or “higher” reality exists within the symbols themselves, but is left vague and indeterminate. Is the rusty water a symbol of mechanical decay or a metaphor of blood? Does the lotus constrict the central figures with threatening blades, or do the figures rise above and burst out? Is the industrial aspect a menacing counterproductive force, a decaying obsolescence, or does it merely reflect our need to endlessly and hopelessly reproduce and simulate the archetypal processes of naturally occurring cycles with mechanical precision and repetition? Is the machine

inherently flawed due to its inability to grow, die and be reborn? Should I laugh or should I cry? All interpretations are viable; none are absolute or dominant. All realities are possible; none are definitive. All are equally "real," and all are explored within the vague and contradictory framework of the collective unconscious, constantly shifting and mixing, never absolutely defined as real. All symbols, when deconstructed, can have multiple and opposite referents. Meaning is entirely based on the point of view of the observer. In the context of art, the viewer feels the need to find meaning and explore possible associations. By overlapping metaphors, I offer the viewer innumerable possibilities. The viewer is then freed from the hegemony of a singular belief system and is encouraged to "reconstruct" a personalized meaning, but cannot ignore an intuitive feeling of despair.

LIST OF SLIDES

1. "Birth" stage, mixed media, approx. 8' x 7' x 8', 1997
2. Detail of "Birth" stage
3. Installation View
4. "Sex" stage, mixed media, approx. 8' x 20', 1997
5. Installation View
6. "Death" stage, mixed media, approx. 8' x 4' x 4', 1997

① DAVID HEBB



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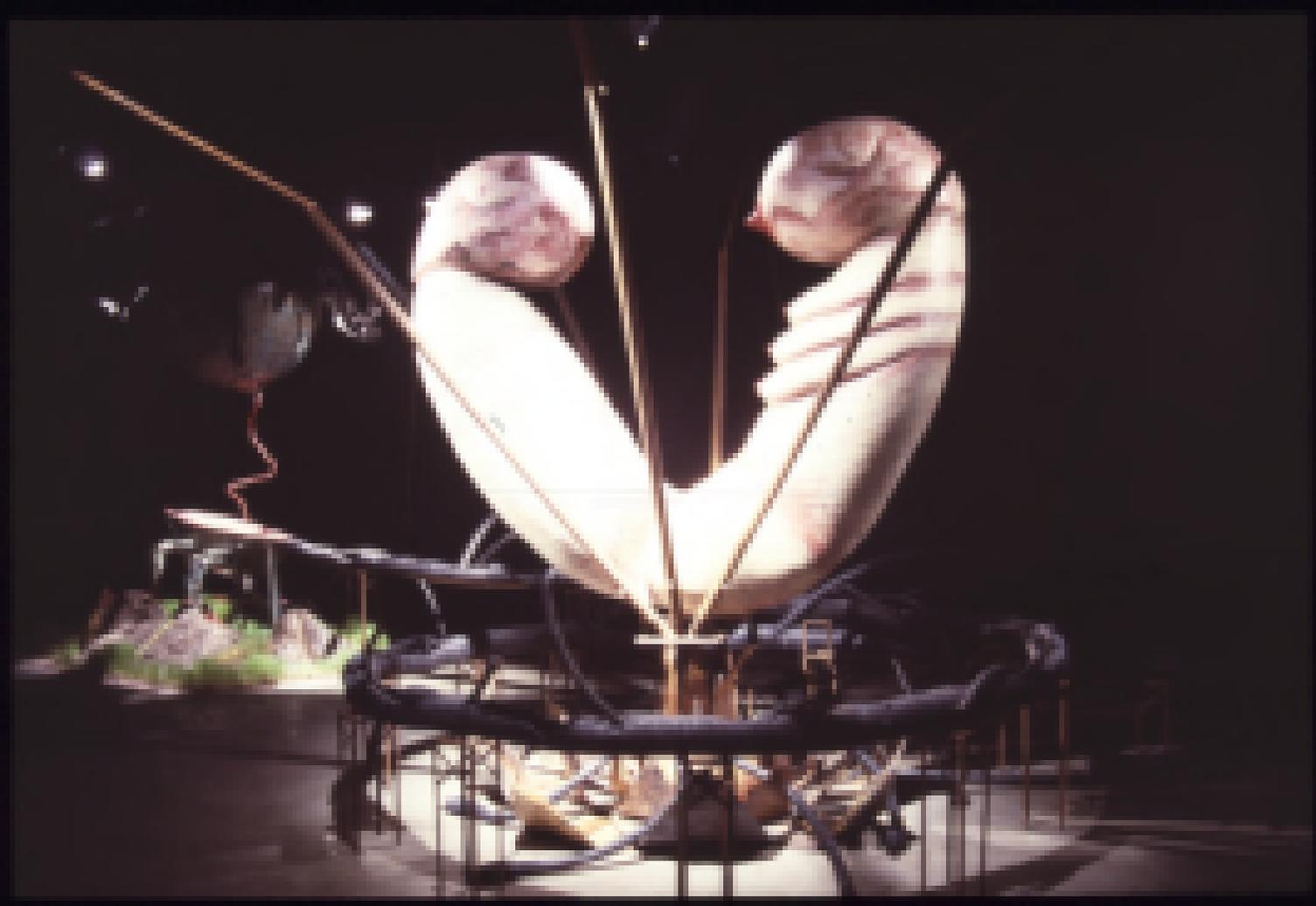
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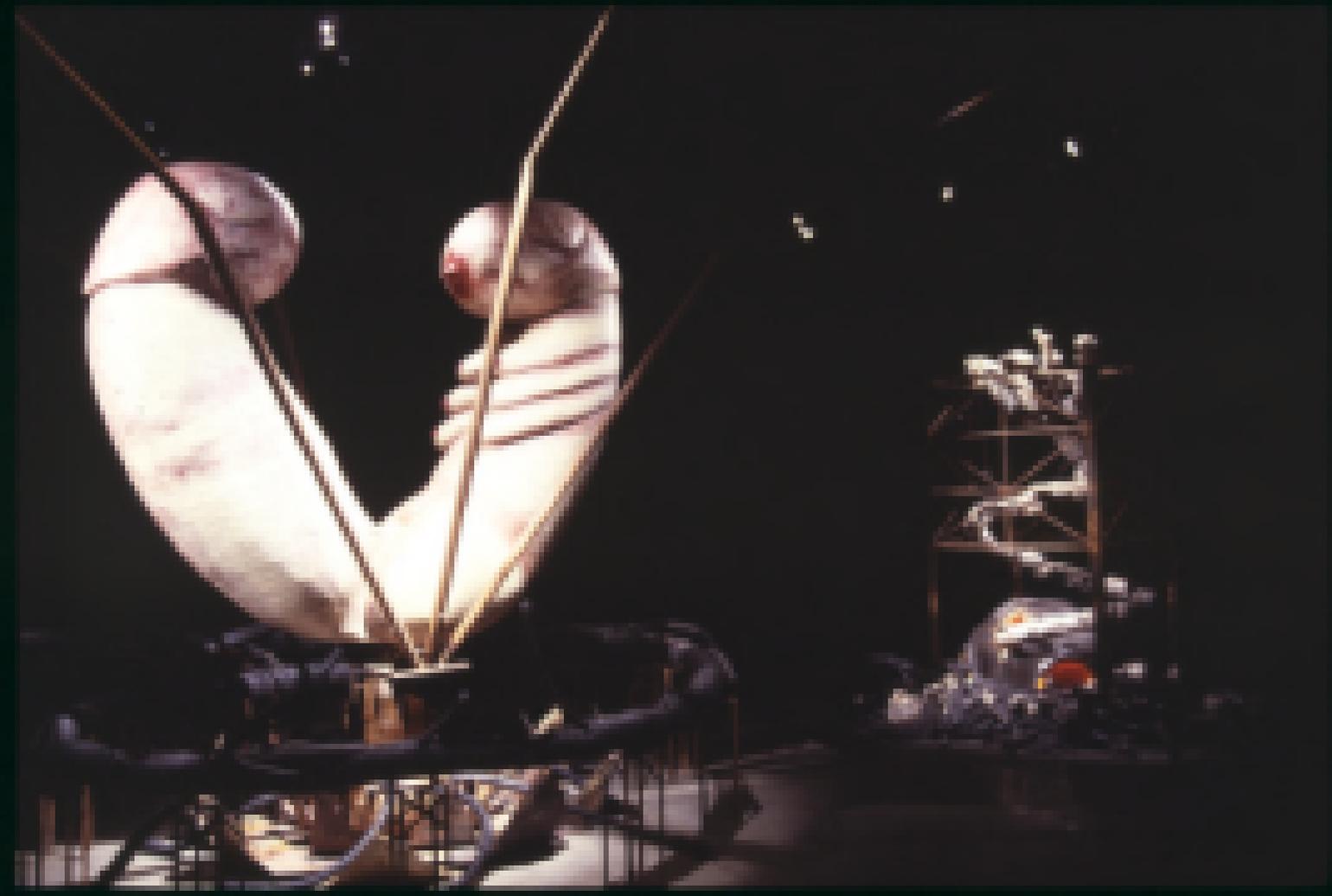
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