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by

Nicholas John Dobson

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DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ART

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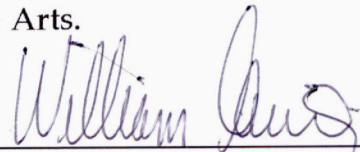
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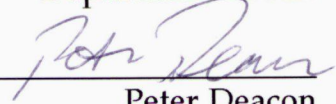


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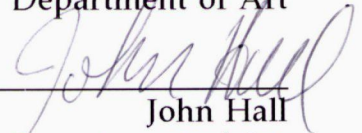
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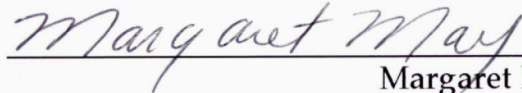
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Of course this thesis would not have been possible without the patience and participation of my supervisor, Bill Laing and committee members: Carol MacDonnell, Peter Deacon, John Will and John Hall.

Dedication

To my mother and father:
from whence I came.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Explaining the art that I produce has been one of the most difficult things ever asked of me largely because the issues I treat in my sculpture and prints are of a personal nature. The problem lies in trying to be objective in discussing the work and the ideas that pertain to it while still representing it in a truthful manner. This does not mean that this paper is an attempt to mitigate the actuality of my work but that it has aspects that I am uncomfortable with and would have preferred not to discuss.

The reason the work is of a personal nature is that it examines and represents criteria I believe are important to the formation of identity. Because many of these issues cannot be empirically defined I must often talk about myself: however, this is one subject on which I am the greatest authority. I am aware that all artists take a considerable personal risk just by hanging their work on the wall (since most work does represent an independent perspective) but I also believe the general topic of my thesis, that of identity, doubles the risk.

What artists create must relate to their lives if only because they are making it; as a basis for discussion I feel I must talk about some challenges to my value system that have led to the creation of this body of work. First, I think at about the age of ten or eleven, I decided that there was no God. I cannot remember precisely what caused this revelation (I seem to recollect reading an article on how scientists had discovered a method of creating amino acids by exposing various chemicals to extremes of heat and cold, a chemical reaction that could have led to the formation of life without a God) but it led me to reject

things connected with a spiritual existence and I became very attached to the material world.

This irreligious view of the world gradually began to change when I came to University to pursue an undergraduate degree. Perhaps it was the group of people that I associated with at the time but I eventually came to realize that not everyone subscribed to the profit motive (or they may have been very good at disguising it). The futility of the pursuit of material goods became very apparent to me when I was forced to deal with a crisis situation that made me confront my own mortality. The question in my life was no longer 'how much can I get' but 'who was I' and 'who would care when I was dead'.

For an atheist, living in a secular society, this query caused me a great deal of consternation. As a result I began to use art to rationalize death and think of my work as an externalization of my identity. I also began to look at how other times and cultures treated the subject of death and identity.

This proclivity was as much a result of opportunity as direction. In addition to my studio courses I was also taking Art History and Cultural Anthropology and was exposed to historical and cultural traditions that dealt with these issues.

In consulting the discipline of Art History about the question of mortality I found the most obvious place to begin was in seventeenth century Holland where Vanitas still life made its debut. What interested me about the paintings was not their formal aspects but their philosophy. The idea of acceptance of events and resignation to life was a concept that I found extremely foreign, having been taught that resistance was crucial to existence; I still fight the inevitable but at least now I know better.

The philosophy expressed in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the inspiration for Vanitas painting, postulates an unending cycle of life: individual identity is defined as a point within the inexorable process of death, transience and inevitable regeneration. Although hinging on the existence of a supreme being (something I still have difficulty believing in) the wisdom of the book's author became a landmark for my search and a model for my work.

My other academic interest at the time was Cultural Anthropology. What I took from this discipline was the concept that to properly analyze any cultural construct you must have a point of comparison from outside the subject: cross cultural comparison uses examples from other societies as a reference for analysis. Most of the societies we dealt with were tribal, probably because they provided the greatest degree of contrast to our own, but they still dealt with the same questions of basic existence as white North American culture.

What intrigued me in studying tribal people was how they lost their sense of identity when they relinquished their myths and rituals (the loss of identity was often characterized by drug abuse, alcoholism, and an inability to function within the social group). Ethnographers have also documented that the foundation for identity in tribal culture is inculcated through the ritual indoctrination of myth. North American natives have made significant progress in regaining their individual and cultural identities by demanding autonomy and revitalizing their myths and rituals. However, this raised some questions for me regarding my own identity. I was born in Britain and came to Canada at an early age; how has the removal from my native culture affected me? Admittedly, there is a great similarity between all western cultures but there are also some significant differences and, as a result, I have often had difficulty identifying myself as an Albertan. The other question stems from the sheer size of the

Western cultural construct: how can any individual ever identify with such a Leviathan?

I began to look for an artist who might help me deal with the first question and found a Canadian who fit the bill almost to perfection. In 1991 I came to Calgary and the Glenbow Museum to see a retrospective of Jack Shadbolt's work, an artist who came from the same background as I to an environment that must have seemed as foreign for him as Alberta did for me. The way he dealt with his new environment through his art has informed the way I have dealt with mine.

The answer to the second question was not quite as simple. I had to ascertain how the individual made choices about appropriating modern society into a personal identity, and the significance of those selections. Ritual in contemporary culture is not inclusive the way many rituals are in tribal society; decisions must be made in determining what institutions will be used in the formation of the individual. Identity, instead of denoting a sameness to the society, now can only mean a sameness to the self since the life experience of each person is different. The conundrum of reconciling a desire for conformity with an impetus for individuality has served to refocus the search for identity on the body: the one aspect of our being that we share with all other people.

I think the artist who most epitomizes contemporary society's use of the body as a demonstration of identity is Joseph Beuys. Beuys used his own body in his works of art until it was the artist that became the work of art. There is an analogous relationship between his work and society's focus on the body as an expression of identity; the terminal capacity of the body as a means of expression: because everyone must die we are inevitably confronted with the ultimate vanity of any project we engage in.

Although the subject of my thesis is 'identity' it seems that every page I have turned in my studies has left me face to face with the question of mortality. For this reason I have found the last few months of my graduate program very disconcerting and difficult. When I set out to make the sculpture and prints in this show I had no idea how fully this question would permeate every aspect of the work. It is the writing of this paper that has forced me to confront my work as it really exists; I wonder if, in some cases, it is better not to know what you are doing. Relating identity to transience and regeneration is an activity that can put life in perspective but the excessive pursuit of meaning in this vein, as Koheleth (the author of the book of Ecclesiastes) himself would know, is pure vanity.

CHAPTER TWO:
VANITAS

"He who is perpetually aware of approaching death
will overcome everything with ease."¹

St. Jerome

Although there is a long tradition for Vanitas and *memento mori* subjects in art history I have selected the Dutch Golden Age as a precedent for two reasons. The first is the similarity between the cultural context of seventeenth century Holland and twentieth century Alberta, both possessing a fundamentalist Christian movement that has a great deal of political clout, a capitalist government for whom the dollar seems to be the bottom line, a basically tolerant attitude towards a great variety of religions and a climate of uncertainty about the future due to sweeping changes in the economic environment. The second reason is that the Dutch, due to the prominence of a Calvinist religion that advocated rigorous examination of biblical texts, seemed to have an understanding of the Book of Ecclesiastes that fairly well corresponds to my own (my own understanding due to a review of some fine exegesis on the most examined book of the Bible) .

However, there are differing interpretations of the content of Dutch Vanitas pictures so in this chapter, after a brief synopsis of the seventeenth century Dutch socio-political situation I will outline the traditional positions on the actual content of Dutch Vanitas and then argue for my own.

Vanitas paintings take their name and a great deal of their inspiration from the Old Testament's Book of Ecclesiastes the first verses of which read:

"Vanity of vanities, saeth the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity."² This biblical book is considered by many as an admonition against the accumulation of wealth. Art history has determined that the origin of the Vanitas still life is early seventeenth century Holland — in the Dutch Golden Age — a time of unprecedented abundance in European culture. There is also general agreement on the cultural influences that worked to bring about its inception at that time: the Dutch economy, a high mortality rate due to constant war and the occasional ravages of the plague, and a Calvinist reaction to the excesses of great wealth. What is interesting about Vanitas paintings is the analogous relationships they allude to between the text they represent and the political, social and economic system in which they were created.

A variety of circumstances, political, natural and economic had worked to ensure this country was the wealthiest the world had seen. Holland was the European banking center; being the only nation to allow the trade of monetary metals across its borders meant many countries would conduct all foreign business in Guilders. European royalty kept accounts in Holland as a hedge against being overthrown. As Sir William Temple wrote in 1658 "...the exchange bank of Amsterdam is the greatest treasure real or imagined in the world."³ In addition to its banking assets Holland had an extended colonial empire reaching around the globe from which great wealth was derived. Being the natural crossroads of the continent, and having the fastest and largest merchant fleet, virtually no trade was carried out without Dutch involvement.

Although there was an aristocracy its authority was generally curtailed by burgomasters who had risen to power in 1585, filling the void left by the ouster of the Spanish. For the first time in its history power was, to a large extent, held by the Dutch middle class. The political elite arose from the middle class of

merchants and trades' people. Republicanism was not the only prize won by the hard fighting Dutch; their autonomy allowed, even demanded, intellectual tolerance.

Due to its relative small size and its location between two of the great powers of Europe, France and England, and having just won an extended war against a third, Spain, the Dutch realized there was little room for infighting. After the rigors of the Inquisition freedom of worship became a political necessity; tolerance was the order of the day.⁴ The country became a haven for political and religious dissension and many, especially those who had money, found refuge there. It was the safest country in Europe.

European thinkers had begun to abandon the world view of mediaeval scholasticism, a perspective that maintained all manners of life were mystically interrelated. With the rise of science, humanism and medicine it was beginning to be felt that humanity could have an effect on its environment and that it may eventually be able to control nature. Dutch thinkers were looking for a new truth rather than seeking to reaffirm old values and beliefs.

However, in an environment of open intellectual discussion, religious freedom and unprecedented wealth, in short one of great change, it is no wonder that artists chose to draw on the Bible for subject matter; all societies in times of crisis grasp what is familiar in an effort to stabilize precarious and rapidly changing situations. These issues were no doubt complicated by the fact that the years 1624 to 1625 brought a plague that claimed 9,879 lives. Another plague in 1635 claimed an additional 14,582.⁵ Death was an omnipresent threat to Dutch society. Vanitas, in this context can be seen as a fundamentalist reaction to contemporary issues. This point is affirmed by the fact that the majority of Vanitas paintings came from Leyden, and those that were produced elsewhere

were either produced by Leyden born painters or those trained in Leyden, a town that had a Calvinist University.⁶ Therefore, the Dutch enthusiasm for Vanitas painting is representative of a desire to re-embrace traditional ideals and morals as expressed in the Bible.

Unlike many European countries, Holland was decidedly Protestant in its displays of wealth. The Dutch were not interested in building massive edifices like St. Peter's, they did not have a court or aristocracy to maintain, and, since the reformation, the church had little power to divert large sums of money from the people. Wealth found itself spread throughout the general populace. Need was not an issue; even the poorest were fed thanks to a large fishing fleet and coastal waters abounding with fish.⁷ The Dutch were the original European consumer culture and acquired things on the basis of desire; only land was in short supply, leading to a demand for paintings as gilt edge investments. However, Dutch society's lack of a tradition of extravagance led to an ethical discourse on wealth. It is in response to these two issues that Vanitas painting became popular: in a largely Calvinist society the need for a moral focus in which the question of wealth could be discussed and perhaps rationalized, was answered by paintings that quoted a text admonishing adherents against the production of great wealth; and the need for investment property considering the shortage of land.

Art Historians have viewed the content of Vanitas still life in several ways. Ingvar Bergström in his book Dutch Still Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century explains the phenomenon as a moral problem, a Calvinist response to the issue of conspicuous consumption. He describes the genre as "...intending to convey to the spectator a message of a clearly moralizing import, as may be inferred from the very term."⁸ This is an interpretation that demands we accept the text of Ecclesiastes at its most literal: that vanity is a sin and the production of

wealth is vanity and that the paintings warn the Dutch of the sins of wealth. However, the production of the painting is, in itself, a manifestation of wealth.

Another opinion about the paintings is expressed by Onno ter Kuile. In this reading the paintings become *memento mori*, reminders of the transience of life and the imminence of death. In the book Seventeenth Century North Netherlandish Still Lifes we are told Vanitas "...points out the transience of life on Earth."⁹ Again this is expressed within Koheleth's text but it is an interpretation that fails to acknowledge those meanings that make the book a valuable philosophy of life even today.

In this context the paintings seem paradoxical, at least with the benefit of hind sight. A major function of art, according to many art historians, is the preservation of history. The narrator of the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, Koheleth, tells us:

...I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and the labour that I had labored to do: and behold all was vanity and vexation of the spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.¹⁰

Here, Koheleth iterates a philosophy calling for the rejection of worldly goods, a philosophy in contradiction with the production of Vanitas paintings and the entire Dutch social order that supported it. Even considering the paintings and artists separately from their environments, the idea of manifesting this biblical text is ironic in the extreme. The painters who produced these paintings intended them to last for a very long time, perhaps forever, if the seventeenth century idea of historical time is taken into account. Yet Koheleth states "...there is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after."¹¹ Again, in direct contravention of the preacher's words the artists produce work

that must be left "...unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? ...This also is vanity."¹² It would seem that Vanitas paintings are vanity in the extreme considering their production in the face of the biblical wisdom they seek to reflect.

The problem with both Bergström's and ter Kuile's interpretations of Vanitas painting is that they accept the Book of Koheleth as a moral critique and on one level it is. Neither of these interpretations is entirely wrong, it is just that they do not represent the whole truth. Norman Bryson stabs closer to the heart in his essay Abundance. Here he observes the logical flaw of Vanitas:

....as rhetorical injunction to resist temptations of material pleasure, the Vanitas can be seen to modern eyes to be flawed by a serious, perhaps fatal contradiction. It is one thing to hear from the pulpit, or read in a scripture or in a Calvinist commentary that, vanity of vanities, all is vanity, that man born of woman endures but for a moment... It is quite another to encounter the same sentiments in a work of art.¹³

Bryson describes the pictures as indulgences, which they are by this measure. Then in an inspired exhibition of postmodern thought he manages to justify the images on the basis of semiotics. Comparing the divergent thought of Saint Ignatius and John Calvin on how biblical passages should be read, Bryson manages to conclude that, for the painter, and by extension Dutch society, the success of Vanitas images is reliant on the assumption the images cannot lead us to a greater *visual* understanding of biblical text. This idea is based in part on his interpretation of one of Calvin's commentaries dealing with Isaiah xxx: 33, a passage dealing with the last Judgment:

For Tophet *is* ordained of old; yea, for the king is prepared; he hath made *it* deep *and* large; the pile thereof *is* fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.¹⁴

He quotes Calvin "...the term fire represents metaphorically that dreadful punishment which our senses are unable to comprehend."¹⁵ The other half of Bryson's argument is held in an examination of St. Ignatius' concept of spiritual exercises whereby the visual consideration of a religious subject was complemented by an imaginary application of the other senses. So if we were considering the last judgment our spirituality would be intensified by imagining the smell of brimstone or the heat of hellfire.

However, Bryson tells us that:

...Calvin's loyalty is to the word not to the image. Vanitas painting of the seventeenth century grows out of deep internalization of this priority of the word over the image, instead of the word and image fusing in the white heat of Ignatian imagination.¹⁶

Bryson postulates that the Vanitas painters, reflecting a Calvinist disdain for images, were separating the text and images: the images worked solely as symbols for worldly belongings.

The basis for this argument might be construed as being that our imaginations are better than any picture, but this author goes further by asserting Calvin believes we cannot even imagine an afterlife let alone render it. We are condemned to inhabit a small world and hence the Vanitas with its limited window portraying worldly possessions will perpetually remind us of our mortal plight.

Bryson's assertion that Vanitas is a Calvinist lexicon seeking to circumscribe the Italian tradition of the transcendent vision has its truth as does

Bergström's and ter Kuile's but there is a simpler explanation that precludes none of these: that the Vanitas painting works in analogy with the scriptures it alludes to.

One reason for the supposed contradictions in the paintings can be found within the text itself. The attribute that defines Koheleth's words as truly great wisdom is its incessant contradiction that in itself echoes life. Ecclesiastes, a book that exegetes classify as a book of wisdom, alternately even called the Wisdom of Koheleth, finds futility in wisdom; by increasing wisdom you increase pain, and the pursuit of wisdom is vanity. However, how can vanity be recognized without the application of wisdom? The Preacher also tells us happiness is worthless but maintains the only worthwhile pursuit is joy. In fact the text carries the exact paradox of the Vanitas painting: it issues an admonition against the writing of books.

Human existence is contradiction and the Wisdom of Koheleth has value because it reflects the world. In fact, it is true that things have meaning because they exist in contrast with something else. Like Lévi-Strauss' famous binary example of the raw and the cooked, we organize meaning by pairing things of opposite nature: dark and light, up and down, left and right and good and evil. The relevance of this assertion is comparatively simple to prove: try to imagine a world with no up, not just the *word* but physically - *no up*. It is a concept that is almost impossible to visualize; in fact trying makes it quickly apparent that in the absence of up, down becomes redundant, meaningless.

The focus of the Book of Ecclesiastes is the transience of life and the inevitability of death and how all functions of life bind to these central premises: in Koheleth's eyes life must be lived with joy but with an awareness of its transience. This scripture was a statement from a man who once disillusioned

recites it as a means of reaffirming his faith in life; a way of recentering his personal existence through a ritual incantation using verse and diatonic.¹⁷ Poetic recital of how things are and have always been is a universal ritual for re-establishing humanity's appropriate place in a cosmic order. According to the preacher we will find the pattern for a meaningful existence when, in the face of our own mortality, we can accept the perpetual contradictions in life as truth. Koheleth was saying we're all going to die and be forgotten but that we must still live life with joy. Confronted with his mortality Koheleth has discovered meaning in eternal regeneration.

Undoubtedly, the people of Holland would have felt their identity as a society challenged by the radical changes being wrought by the economic and social developments of the times. This is a far more logical reason for the popularity of Vanitas still life than assuming the public would buy a painting making a moral statement that was, in effect, critical of the person buying it. When people buy something on the open market it is a statement of their own taste; when buying a painting for investment purposes the purchaser must have some interest in the subject matter. It follows, therefore, that the Dutch, who bought many Vanitas paintings, were reaffirming their religious sentiments and their world order when they made their purchase. The Vanitas still life is a statement of the identity of the seventeenth century Dutch people, both individually and collectively.

This reflects the purpose of my work as well: although it is ostensibly a moral critique, it is primarily a meditation on life and mortality, a contemplation of the issues that define us as human beings. The relationship between the sculpture and the prints is one of simultaneous creation and destruction, an explicit statement that when something dies something else is born. And,

analogous to the preacher, I am attempting to make a visual poetry that ritualizes a world order for myself.

CHAPTER THREE:
RITUAL AND IDENTITY

Although art is a reflection of life, as history progresses it is a mirror finding itself further and further removed from its subject. Unlike its contemporary counterpart, art for archaic humanity was not a specialized endeavor isolated from society but a technology that, when incorporated into ritual, assisted people in life's day to day activities. Art, along with music and dance, were technologies that aided survival. What we would consider art in these cultures — fetishes, masks, or ritual costumes — they would designate as objects of great magical and spiritual power through which they would exercise a degree of supernatural control over their environment. Indeed, many of the tribal cultures found in this century did not have a word for art.¹⁸ Life in traditional society was not a compartmentalized series of special components basted together to produce a Frankenstein culture that would lurch through a self-generated history, but a seamless whole that floated through an ahistorical time, conscious of itself in relationship to the known universe.

Any study of art from traditional cultures other than a basic formal discussion should be an examination of the technique of ritual as a means of coping with the rigors of life before the advent of western scientific thought. However, my intent in this chapter is not to understand the mechanics of individual artifacts, it is to illustrate that the myths and rituals that require their production impose an identity on the individual that will lend a sense of purpose to his life: ritual, by virtue of its effect on identity, provides a context for personal meaning.

Meaning in life has become more and more difficult to realize in the contemporary world because of the rapidity of change and the concurrent devaluation of traditional religious institutions. In spite of scientific advancements, the question of mortality continues to intrigue people, as indicated by the popularity of films like the nervously self-conscious Monty Python and the Meaning of Life. In an environment rationalized by empirical thought there is still the need to ritualize our existence. How does this proclivity effectively manifest itself in a secular environment?

Myths are stories that are used to relate a culture's ontological concepts and archetypes to successive generations. They describe such things as the beginning and the end of the universe (cosmogony and eschatology) and deal with the paradigmatic behaviors of mythical archetypes (gods or heroes). These stories, passed from generation to generation, represent a culture's search for truth and identity in its environment.

Consequently, rituals are the patterns of behavior that function to indoctrinate and reinforce the lessons of myth and therefore the culture's identity. Evan Zuesse defines ritual as "... those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences."¹⁹ This, in some respects, is a myopic view of ritual in traditional culture, as it fails to acknowledge the larger picture in which it functions with myth to ensure a pattern of behavior that will allow the continued survival of the society. If we can accept the idea of historical western society as a cosmic structure this definition can work quite well, both on a contemporary basis and in relationship to my own work, because the survival issue is not as immediate. However, it should be remembered that ritual, whether a group practice or a private meditation, is a mechanism societies use to cope with the

environment by encouraging individuals to form personalities that will integrate constructively.

It is difficult to place my own work in a context of traditional ritual because of the diversity and complexity of the classifications described by anthropologists and religious specialists. Even if there was a definitive standard the comparison would not be easy because of the individual, meditative nature of my work and the socially oriented nature of most ethnographically described ritual. However, it is an important precedent for my work.

Rituals respond to four criteria: therapy; ideology; salvation; and revitalization.²⁰ Rites of passage — those rituals accompanying birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood, promotion, occupational specialization and death — would respond to all except the therapeutic. This is part of the problem with situating my own work. In the context of a graduate program the ritual is one of passage, performed to initiate candidates into a higher level of a social hierarchy (i.e. the possession of another degree) and necessarily entailing a transition of identity. Yet the process of manufacturing and burning the sculpture is, from my perspective, meditative and therapeutic — a manifestation of both my ascetic and nihilistic sides. However, there is an aspect of danger inherent in my work (for example the unburned matches in Four Thousand Natural Shocks or the sharpened branches in Animus) that is a direct reference to rites of passage as they were handled in traditional culture.

Traditional cultures impose puberty rites on all youths arriving at the age of majority to indoctrinate the individual involved to the societal expectations of their new position. The intent of this ritual is to remove the initiate from his life as a child and install him as a responsible adult within the community. In most cultures the ritual is carried out at a predetermined time of the year with all

youths of the determined age. The collective situation in which rites of passage are carried out eases the individual's fear and ensures a sense of unity and collective identity amongst the group.

I should note here that the term, rite of passage, denotes a transition that exists in reality, involving the shedding of one identity and the assumption of another, a symbolic death and rebirth of the individual.

Initiation usually begins with a community-enforced isolation from the parents and the rest of society during which the group is indoctrinated by tribal elders. This procedure is carried out with story telling and ritual reenactments of the actions of the culture's gods and heroes. An aspect of ritual passage I find important is the restatement of the mythical acts of creation of the culture's universe. Apart from giving initiates a sense of common origin, serve to renew the society: not unlike the poetic musings of Koheleth. The novice is given a feeling of his place in his culture's cosmos and is made to feel, because of the ritual invocation of creation, touched by his culture's deities.

Although I do not refer to specific mythical traditions or gods this is a premise I try to reflect in my work. Ritual burning of the sculpture is analogous to death, a common destiny, and the redrilling and resetting of the matches in Four Thousand Natural Shocks is a metaphor for renewal, an indication of the never ending cycle of life. Each match, and the hole that is drilled for it, leaves its mark upon the surface of the sculpture, symbolic of my belief that every human being, no matter how short or insignificant their life, has an impact on the collective body of humanity.

Another manifestation of initiatory dogma is the heroic story used as a paradigm of behavioral patterns. The hero is fearless in achieving those things the culture feels are of value, risking his life (again the presence of imminent

death) in pursuit of something larger than himself. These stories act as a model of courage and decency to youths. Besides indoctrination, rites of passage often include an ordeal, perhaps circumcision, sub incision, or the knocking out of a tooth, a physical alteration of the novice that is a final manifestation of his symbolic death as a youth and from which he is reborn as an adult, that, once endured, parallels the hero's bravery. Ritual and myth sanctify ideal types of behavior and those people acting in the prescribed manner.

Although ritual is a technology of survival it represents a trade off for the individual who must give up some of himself to reap the benefits of the collective: the self is suppressed so that the individual will act as a functioning part of the culture. Initiation demands the individual to contribute by farming, hunting, building or whatever is needed. What the individual takes from the ritual and passage into adult society, apart from the material and interactive benefits, is a sense of place in a cosmic order. His identity with the group in a historical framework gives his life meaning.

Myths and rituals, by answering questions of identity and providing paradigms for behavior, represent the infrastructure of the traditional society, allowing it the flexibility to deal with not just ongoing change but the certain eventuality of trauma. Ritual is used to unify groups in the face of adversity. In times of drought, plague, or war chanting, dancing and other ritual behaviors instill a sense of hope and community that may be all anyone can have in the face of catastrophic situations.

The continued well being of any culture demands the physical and mental health of its population. The sense of place and purpose ritual inculcates in the individual assists in dealing with the ultimate test: death. In a life of intermittent ritual adherents believe they are constantly dying to themselves and being

reborn with another identity. Apart from the advantage of a religious belief system that postulates an after-life, ritual, by offering a series of symbolic deaths and rebirths, mitigates the prospect of death as being just another passage to negotiate.

Death is a trauma that is eased for the individual and the society when the metaphysical issues surrounding it are placed in a context that allows for the acceptable expression of grief; one that will not be too disruptive for the society as a whole. Voltaire was correct when he wrote that "If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him."²¹ The existence of a supreme being and an afterlife mitigates the finality of death and permits it to be a dignified natural passage; an experience that serves to bind societal groups together.

However, meaning in the face of death is a question that must be addressed by all societies regardless of belief or disbelief in a deity. Societies must provide a context for identity in order to survive. On a personal level an existential comprehension of life demands an awareness of our own mortality because it is, with the possible exception of taxes, the only universal in human life. Foregoing a deep philosophical discussion of existentialism I will let it suffice to say that the thought process demands that our actions have meaning, even if our lives were simply a series of reflexive movements. Because we think we would try to attach meaning to that movement.

If human action has inherent meaning, the pattern of actions or behaviors we take within our cultural environment over the course of our lives is what constitutes our identity. The greatest threat to identity in our lives is that of death: what is the point of any action if, in the end, it will be annulled by death? Answering this question is the most important function of ritual and myth.

The urgency of this function can be best illustrated by examining the threat that the death of the individual holds for society. When a group is confronted with the death of a member its continuity and stability is threatened. Apart from feelings of grief, individuals are also confronted with their own mortality. As I have stated, ritual, by rationalizing the process as a part of history, acts to place the loss in a larger, cosmic context and provides an acceptable forum for the expression of grief. Even in the absence of a concept of an afterlife, interment rituals establish a context and a value for the deceased that renders the prospect of death more palatable. Perhaps this point is best illustrated by considering death in the absence of ritual. Imagine if, when dead, bodies were thrown in a trash compactor. Because the body symbolizes the individual's identity its treatment signifies the perceived value of a lifetime of contribution to the group. No-one struggles for ends that have no meaning. For society to draw from the individual those actions required for its continued function the group must provide a dignity to the memory of its members.

Providing meaning in the face of death has become a particular problem for modernity because of the shrinking role of religion. The certainty offered by the prospect of an afterlife disappears with secularization; rituals and myths that did lend a sense of permanence to the world have been undermined by the need of a scientific culture to examine and question everything. Although science has revoked the truth of myth and ritual it has failed to render any insight into death, let alone conquer it: in spite of the advancements of medicine we all still die.

One reason for the primacy of empirical thought in western society is that it demonstrates our presumed cultural superiority. Through years of colonialism technology gave westerners the means to conquer the world using empirical

thought as a rationale for subjugating the barbaric 'other'. Auguste Comte first iterated this as a comprehensive theory in 1830 with his Law of the Three States, in which he proposed that two early stages in the development of thought, the first being the theological and the second the metaphysical, were stages humanity passed through to arrive at the third stage of Positivist or Scientific thought.²² Comte theorized that in early stages of societal development phenomena were described in largely supernatural ways but as history progressed scientific descriptions eventually superseded earlier superstition. This theory enjoyed much support until Comte decided to establish a new pantheon of scientific gods to complement his new religion. However, the western world continues to exalt science above all other belief systems.

The perception that scientific and technological achievement is the crowning glory of civilization has established it as a paradigm to which all things are measured within our culture. This has led to the devaluation of traditional systems of support that do not stand up well to empirical analysis. We have an irrational need to explain everything on a scientific basis. This tendency works to validate the extant hierarchy because scientific thought is based on a method of examination that is self-validating and critiques that arise from outside the parameters of scientific thought are thought to be of lesser value than those from within. Science is established as the voice of authority.

Unfortunately, that authority cannot answer all questions nor solve all problems. Often it is the relentless search for knowledge that becomes the problem. Empirical thought cannot provide an alternative society as stable as one based on an ontological order because it cannot allow any idea to remain unchallenged. If reason alone were used to construct a cultural order it could never allow the founding premises to be accepted as truth because the nature of

truth would change when tested with different criteria. For example, revisionist history has recently suggested that Allied fire bombing was just as heinous as some of the atrocities perpetrated by the Germans thus threatening the idea that the Allies represented the forces of good. The pilots see this as impugning their own integrity (which it does) and find that a meaningful aspect of their lives is no longer respected. A society constructed in this manner would eventually fail because of the relentless challenge to individual identity and meaning due to society's constant reevaluation of itself.

Science's obsession with the truth fails culture not only because of its challenge to those institutions that sanctify meaning but by refusing to deal with the single greatest threat to identity: death. Mortality is a fact of life that cannot be rationalized. In fact death represents failure to a medical community whose primary purpose is the preservation of life. In a climate of denial, death has become increasingly private. When the medical community is faced with death it rationalizes it by treating it as an epidemic. The terminally ill are sequestered away in hospital wards instead of dying in their own homes with the support of their family. Autopsies are routinely performed as if identifying the cause mitigates its finality. the term 'natural causes' rarely appears on death certificates anymore. If medicine, a major technological organ of contemporary society, views death as a threat to its omniscient identity how can it offer comfort to the individual?

This is in stark contrast to the climate of acceptance that is found in ritually oriented cultures. Chris Shilling, in his book The Body and Social Theory, observes that in traditional societies:

...when death occurred its significance denoted a disruption to the *social body* more than it did the passing of the *individual body*. There was a resignation

about one's own death, an acceptance that nothing could be done about it.²³

The emphasis was to preserve continuity and stability in the society by providing a meaningful context for death rather than fighting it.

The relationship between the increased importance of the individual and the decline of ritual is due to its communal nature. The values of contemporary society are more difficult to delineate as the behavior necessary for survival becomes less rigorous. Societies feel less compelled to require the individual to function in a prescribed way when group viability is not threatened: accordingly, in contemporary life identity becomes an individual interpretation.

However, in a world where the individual is one among billions, identity becomes even more challenged, especially in an environment that supposedly values the uniqueness of the individual. Shilling postulates that in modern society turning the body into an expressive medium constructs identity in the absence of culturally sanctioned ritual.²⁴ This tendency is evident in the recent proliferation of the use of body art, tattoos and jewelry. However, it goes far beyond the use of dyes and baubles to alter the body's appearance. Our knowledge of the body allows us to manipulate it through diet, exercise, and surgery. In short the body has been emancipated from many natural constraints and the modern individual, now restricted only by his access to the means of alteration, can have the body, and therefore the identity, he or she desires.

The cultivation of the body is an attempt to deny mortality — eating the right things; exercising regularly; pursuing healthy life styles; having the right surgery — all are intended to put a greater distance between the individual and the inevitable. As the individual pushes the limits of what the body can endure the ultimate limit is pushed further into the future. Working on the body

through diet and exercise is a means of taking control of our lives: People who are in very good health are less likely to die. Ultimately the attempt to deny death must eventually prove futile.

Contemporary attempts to ritualize identity in terms of mortality do little to mitigate death's finality, as people discover when they grow old or become sick. It is the socializing aspect of ritual, its ability to create bonds between a society and its members, that lend the individual and the group strength in the face of a threatening trauma. Recent trends to create identity through the acquisition of goods or through the modification of the body are simply stop gap measures that will ultimately fail the individual when they are most needed. Construction of a spiritual identity cannot be achieved through the selfish accumulation of wealth or a self-interested manipulation of the body; nor is it a process that may be rationalized through empirical thought. It may only be achieved through a creative interaction with the community.

Material existence's vanity was a reality that manifested itself to me in the threat of mortality. A family member who was extremely fit came very close to death. It was in the subsequent challenge to my identity that I realized the importance of the externalization of the self through process. The production of ritual objects was the means through which I could identify myself with my cultural and historical environment: an atavistic activity pursued in a meditative manner.

CHAPTER FOUR:
JACKSHADBOLT AND JOSEPH BEUYS

Western civilization has acted to moderate the role of ritual in many cultures, including our own, and art has found itself dealing with more secular issues. The separation of art from its central function in ritual has also served to separate artists from their social environment. As cultures became more secular art became more esoteric, an evolution that has led to the popular conception of artists as being misunderstood and alienated (a notion that is not entirely false). In the twentieth century artists, realizing that photographers had usurped their function as recorders and commentators, began experimenting with primitivism in an effort to revitalize their role in society and deal with their identity crisis. Artists have reintroduced ritual, not entirely with the intent of reintegrating art with culture, but as a means of introspection that can reinstill meaning, and therefore personal identity.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in North America because of the displacement of the dominant culture from its European precedence. White North Americans have a brief history on this continent and their cultural roots are correspondingly shallow. As Margaret Atwood has said, "The problem is, what do you do for a past if you are white, relatively new to the continent and rootless?"²⁵ Recently, this has been exacerbated by the rightful recognition of the history of white oppression and native rights to vast chunks of territory. Those of European descent have been made to feel as strangers in the land of their birth. Many people would have little sympathy in view of our treatment of the native population, but Europeans remain a fact on the North American continent and will do so for the foreseeable future. Although it has been five hundred

years since the American advent of European culture there seems to be little in the way of a distinctive culture for white Albertans, other than that culture they bring from their home lands.

This problem was made even clearer for me during a recent trip to Britain. I was born in England many years ago but in spite of this fact there was no doubt the locals viewed me as a Canadian — a polite American. People were also quick to tell me that as a North American I had no history. This was not a revelation for me; I had long been aware of the spare cultural precedent for expatriate Europeans in North America. However, I was also aware of a prominent Canadian artist, Jack Shadbolt, who had endeavored to deal with some of the same problems.

Identity is a subject that has been widely treated in recent art and a discussion of it would not be complete without Joseph Beuys. This artist was a seminal influence for me and many continue to see similarities between our work. As I became more familiar with his work I decided to put more distance between myself and some of the ideas that form the basis of his artistic discourse. However, the ideas I deal with and many of the ideas Jack Shadbolt explores are often found in the German's oeuvre.

In the fall of 1991 I came to Calgary to see a major retrospective of Jack Shadbolt's work and was instantly won over by the vigorous color and plasticity of the paintings. There was a 'primitive' quality to his work that reflected some of my own interests, particularly in some of the sculptural pieces shown. On further investigation I found that Shadbolt, like myself, was born in England and came to Canada at the age of four. He felt the same alienation to the North American environment and, like me, used his art to close the identity gap. Victoria, the town in which the Shadbolts settled, was "only one half a century

old...yet its inhabitants had already established the basis of a rootless, therefore uneasy, English culture."²⁶ In his early years as a painter he had an interest in social commentary as exemplified in watercolors like Granville Street at Night or Cambie Street Fair but as he progressed into his career he left the genre as he became interested in tribal art and its ritual aspects.

By the end of the 1930s, after seeing Picasso's work in Paris, particularly Guernica, Shadbolt began looking at Northwest Coast Indian artifacts for inspiration. He became entranced by the 'primitive other', the tribal counterpart, like many twentieth century artists: a natural progression from his Emily Carr inspired interpretations of the British Columbia rain forest. Soon he was painting interpretations of ritual masks that had originated with the local native tribes. These paintings function as objects as much as pictures, a quality that accounts for his next major step as an artist. In the early sixties Shadbolt began collecting pieces of driftwood, modifying them, gessoing them and finally painting them in high chroma colors. These found objects were like outward manifestations of the artist. Shadbolt said "I have produced a body of work of an experimental nature to build a sculptural anthology of my own — a body of familiars which establishes a statement of my inner self...."²⁷ In many cases he would then commit their images to canvas, completing a process that took the raw nature of driftwood, ritually imposing a human identity on it, and finally transforming it into another media.

Shadbolt's ideas have served as a partial impetus for my own work: I use found pieces of wood to act as self-surrogates for externalized rituals. I impose my identity onto objects that had already passed through the boundary between life and death by modifying them with knives and paint. There are several differences between Shadbolt's process and my own, the most obvious being the

intrinsic nature of the transformation in my sculpture: allowing the pieces to burn themselves out. There is a difference in the way we rationalize our work as well; Shadbolt, as a preliminary to applying color, paints his driftwood white "...to further remove them from naturalness."²⁸ I render many of the pieces I work with white as well, with paint and cheese-cloth plaster, with the intent of evoking a bone-like quality. Rather than denying their naturalness I want to emphasize their deadness. The use of plaster and cheesecloth is actually a direct reference to the paleontological practice of plastering fossils for their removal to the laboratory, an allusion that places the work in a temporal context. I want the objects to be *memento mori*, things that were living and are now dead, and the work to be a mediation between myself and mortality.

Shadbolt wrote "I want a dangerous kind of art...risking the demonic."²⁹ His work functions as a ritual invocation of the forces that may lend an other-worldly power to the work. This reflects an aspiration to the shamanic, a tendency observed by George Woodcock who suggests that the vocation among Westcoast Indians "...became to a great extent diffused and universalized."³⁰ As Mircea Eliade has written "The difference between 'consecrated' men and the 'profane' multitude... lies in the amount of the sacred the former have assimilated... In this respect we could say that every Indian shamanizes."³¹ By the same token contemporary artists who deal with the spiritual become shamanic.

Scott Watson theorizes that Shadbolt's work is concerned with the creation of a personal mythology that expresses a nostalgia for the natural world.³² I think this may be a misrepresentation of what actually happens in Shadbolt's work largely as the result of a misunderstanding of the function of myth and ritual. They do not bring us closer to the natural world. As I have

shown, combined, myth and ritual are a method by which practitioners derive a sense of control in their environment allowing a feeling of security vital to the formation of productive identities.

Shadbolt once described the central figure in Place, a painting of his backyard, as a "lost person locating himself in a place."³³ As Watson observes, the painting "...summed up the dilemma of the colonial culture in dealing with the indigenous culture" and "...provides the medium in which a feeling of rootedness, belonging and spiritual ownership of place could be nourished."³⁴ Shadbolt, like myself, is attempting to build both a cultural and personal identity by trying to recombine the once integrated concept of art, myth and ritual.

Ritual, as a human technology, incorporates myth and art in order to engender identity, whether on a societal or an individual basis. Cultures use ritual to exercise the necessary control over the group to preserve a feeling of security in which productive identities can be formed. By indoctrinating new members and by mitigating the effects of death and potential disaster ritual gave continuity, stability and meaning to society.

Over time, as western culture has become more fractured and specialized, art has gradually become separated from its original function in ritual and, therefore, from the people it served as a technology; by the nineteenth century, traditional forms of art such as painting, print-making and sculpture were used primarily as documentary and social commentary. In many ways art, the individual and society now act as alien entities rather than as a unified force. Unfortunately, technical advances such as photography, film and television have usurped even the documentary role and twentieth century visual artists have found their identities challenged because of the corresponding marginalization of

art. To counter this trend artists have been reinvesting meaning into their work by reincorporating ritual.

Artists use ritual to recenter themselves in an increasingly foreign environment. Jack Shadbolt, like myself, has incorporated this function because of the unrooted sensation of living in a North American white culture. He uses art as a basis for stability by painting ritual objects that physically impose his being on objects from his new environment, creating a personal mythology.

Whereas Jack Shadbolt's search is an attempt to place himself culturally and to become comfortable with his surroundings, the artist in this century who is most well known for his work in the vein of identity has a different motivation. Joseph Beuys, too, was interested in this subject; however, the focus of his work extended beyond his self to the degree that he, through his personal mythology, was attempting to create an identity for an entire culture. Eventually critics would point out that the artist had ceased to be a shaman and had become a self-appointed messiah; his concern, in a final analysis of his work, can only be construed as self-aggrandizement.

Unlike Shadbolt and myself Beuys did not develop an interest in identity through immigration to a new country. His interest arose as a result of the havoc that the second world war had wrought on the collective German identity; from the age of twelve until just after his twenty-fourth birthday Beuys lived under Hitler's regime of National Socialism. During this time the collective identity of the German people was well rooted in the mystique of a strong leader and the focus of a sense of purpose. In schools the main text book was Mein Kampf which was studied, finished, and then studied again. As Beuys said, "Everyone went to church, and everyone went to Hitler Youth."³⁵ After the fall of Hitler the German identity was confused; the years of the 'one thousand year Reich'

became an era that liberal minded Germans wanted to forget. Twelve years of purpose had fallen in on itself to become a vacuum, a hole in the identity of young Germans.

The society that Beuys' countrymen grew up in was completely overturned by his twenty-fourth birthday. Institutions that had led the country were discredited and disbanded; Germany was occupied by foreign troops. In a country where national pride was an integral part of an individual's identity, patriotism became anathema.

Nazism tainted many aspects of German culture. For many young Germans sensitive to their image abroad it was impossible (and still is) to enjoy work by any artist who had become associated with National Socialism without flirting with the image of Nazism; Wagner, for instance, because he was Hitler's favorite composer, is still associated with the Third Reich. Germans were cut off from their cultural heritage.

The focus of Beuys' artistic career, his identity, along with his methods of dealing with it are rooted in this same milieu. After having a major portion of his identity composed and then compromised by the Nazi regime he set about making a new self-image through the creation of personal myths.

The most famous of these myths is, of course, his now famous rescue from his downed Stuka on the Russian steppes by Tartars. Beuys has produced photographic 'evidence' of this story: pictures of him standing beside the wreckage of the downed aircraft that were supposedly taken soon after his crash. Benjamin Buchloh, in a 1980 critique of Beuys and his work, asks some obvious questions about this scenario: "Who would, or could, pose for a photograph after a plane crash, when severely injured? And who took the pictures? The Tartars with their felt — and — fat camera?"³⁶ I think, due to the

dubious nature of the artist's story and to the numerous articles and supporting evidence against its truth, it is more appropriate to treat this tale as a myth or, more correctly, as an allegory for his remembered emotional and intellectual states at the end of the war. With its veracity so obviously impaired the most interesting aspect of this story becomes its approximation of rites of passage in which the ritual death of the uninitiated leads to a subsequent rebirth to new status. Beuys affirmed this as his intent by stating that his rescuers tried to tell him that he was not German and that he should join their clan. The artist used this 'myth' to mentally sever his connections to National Socialism and create a new identity as a shaman in a Tartar tribe.

Although he had made a symbolic separation with the totalitarian regime many of Beuys' ideas were derivative of Mein Kampf, particularly those that deal with propaganda. While John F. Moffit ties the artist to the tome he is careful to state that the intent of Beuys' use of these tactics is different from Hitler's: "...needless to say, what follows does not mean to suggest that Beuys was a Nazi."³⁷ However, he asserts that the artist's later actions "...had their roots in this highly impressionable period."³⁸ The author quotes directly from Mein Kampf to compare with the artist's performance works:

Action, speech, and music are the pillars upon which the great national celebrations rest. Music serves to prepare the celebrants. Speech opens their hearts. *Aktion* creates meaningful customs.³⁹

Beuys' *Aktionen*, or performance works, were based on 'meaningful customs' or *Feierstunden*, concepts, knowing Hitler's interest in Wagner's operas, that may have had their roots in *Gesamtkunstwerks* (literally - complete works of art - embracing music, story, dance, theatre and visual art).

In How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, a Beuys *Aktionen*, the artist rhythmically rocks back and forth whispering explanations to the hare (while his voice is amplified for the audience) as if the incantation and pictures would revive the dead beast: as Jesus had done for Lazarus. Beuys, imitating Hitler's *Feierstunden*, was at once creating a 'meaningful custom' for his audience and increasing his personal power of identity.

It is interesting that Beuys, who at one point was a member of Fluxus, a group that went to extremes in trying to maintain the anonymity of individual artists, should become so interested in himself: to the extent that he became the work of art. This can be attributed to his desire to reestablish a cultural identity for Germany. Beuys pictured himself as a latter day Moses leading his people out of the wilderness. However, the artist's early indoctrination to Fascist philosophy through Mein Kampf eventually led him, however innocently, to pursue a course parallel to that of Hitler: a tack toward megalomania.

Although Beuys' creation of an identity took a rather perverse turn towards the end of his career there are aspects of his work that I still find stimulating; particularly the artist's restatement of Dadaist notions of chance through process oriented artwork, and his grounding of these ideas on a religious - philosophical basis. Beuys extrapolates on Dada by combining the ephemeral nature of his work — Fat Chair, Explaining Things to a Dead Hare, — with his assertion that every man is an artist, creating an eloquent reiteration of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The King James version of the Bible, chapter nine, verses ten and eleven reads:

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there* is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest. I returned and saw the race *is* not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the

wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. ⁴⁰

Beuys, like Koheleth, places everyone on level ground and elevates the work of all people with his democratic concept of the artist.

Further, sculptures like Fat Chair work like their painted counterparts in Dutch Vanitas painting; slowly melting and rotting away, their transience is a physical illustration of the futility of human existence. The ultimate expression of the artist's genius (if genius may be used to describe anyone) may be the Sisyphean task he has created for museologists: the vain endeavor of preserving his work.

In spite of the analogous relationship between Beuys and Koheleth, the artist eventually became obsessed with his identity as an end, rather than a means of placing himself in a societal context. His pursuit of a personal mythology inevitably drew on the doctrine that informed his youth and required he expand his search for identity beyond a personal horizon. Like a contemporary pied piper of Hamelin, Beuys' felt hat and vest became a uniform that proclaimed the most recognizable personal identity in twentieth century art.

It is the pedagogical nature of Beuys' art, the desire to extrapolate himself to the general populace, that Shadbolt has avoided by keeping his work introspective and affirmative of the general conditions of his life. This is likely the result of two very different life situations that the artists grew up in. Shadbolt, although feeling displaced in his environment, could hardly have experienced the kind of disorientation that Beuys did by losing his entire adolescent world to Fascism.

Any mythology I have created in my art is of an entirely personal nature: a means of asking questions that allow me to develop a greater understanding of

myself. I have no desire to indoctrinate anyone or to become a shaman. However, the ritual of introspection and the activities it generates imposes an identity on those so engaged, both from within the individual and from the surrounding group. I do wish to redefine my relationship with contemporary society.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WORK

The works in this exhibition borrow from several technical, cultural and religious sources in order to express ideas concerning ritual, identity and mortality and the relationship between them. They can also be interpreted as the artifacts I have created during a ritual process of meditation on the nature of human existence. Like Hindu renderings of Nataraja, Shiva's incarnation as Lord of the Dance, whose every step destroys a cosmos and whose every wave of the hand creates one, the prints and sculpture in this exhibition are manifestations of a ritual that attempts to embody the simultaneity of death and regeneration as a construct to place the individual in a universal order.

Before I deal with the individual pieces in this show I shall say something about some of the elements that are common to more than one.

The stumps and logs are surrogates for the body in the ritual process of creating the sculpture. The reasons I chose wood for this function are manifold. First, the wood was once a living thing and its use parallels the use of skulls in Vanitas painting; they are *memento mori*. Second, wood is very flexible due to the variety of forms available (for example, log shapes, stick shapes and stump shapes) and the ease of manipulating it as a material (drilling and painting). Third, it burns and is therefore threatened by the presence of the matches. Fourth, the cross-sectioned pieces of wood reveal their yearly rings, alluding to the temporal nature of life. Finally, it is a traditional sculptural material that has been used cross-culturally, by both tribal and western cultures.

The matches most clearly represent two things. On one level they are symbolic of individual people and their burning represents the transience of life.

However, extrapolating this idea reconfigures their symbolic meaning so that they may simultaneously act as events and beings; hence they represent the rapid passage of not only life but the events that make it up. In addition the process of laying out, marking, and drilling the holes as well as the actual installation of each match is an ongoing ritual meditation of the perpetual nature of existence: another allusion to Vanitas.

The technologies used here most importantly reflect their own usage as a means of coping with life: they work as an adaptive mechanism. But more than this they represent a desire to blur the dividing line between art and science; a wish for a time where culture may once again become a holistic entity. The different technologies are also symbolic of different eras: an additional temporal allusion. Finally, the different technologies bring to the work aspects of my other roles in life.

Four Thousand Natural Shocks is a grouping of four free standing sculptures, each constructed of a section of tree mounted on a tripod of branches. The surfaces of the stumps are drilled with approximately one thousand one-eighth inch holes into which matches are pushed; in all but one of the group the matches have been burnt. The title alludes not only to the one thousand holes in each but also to a line from Shakespeare in which Hamlet is contemplating suicide:

...and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to⁴¹

You don't have to be suicidal to know that life can be a series of 'shocks'. In this case the matches each symbolize an event in the lives of the

anthropomorphic sculpture they penetrate. The three spent sculptures represent three spent lives while the fourth is awaiting its "hour upon the stage."⁴²

The intent is hardly morbid, though; all three of the burnt sculptures have been ignited more than once, an allusion to the cyclical nature of life. The way the stumps are precariously mounted on the branch legs, while emphasizing the tenuous nature of existence, lends a sense of movement and life to the work. The four pieces also carry a sense of interaction and community as if they were commiserating with each other on the transience of life.

In Trigram I have represented a portal that is blocked by three horizontally hung logs suspended by one inch manila ropes which are in turn wrapped around two metal cleats. Again the logs are drilled in a grid pattern and in each hole a match is inserted. The logs are coated in plaster and then stained, in stripes, with vermilion lithographic ink. The logs, hanging from taut ropes and heavy enough to flex a metal pipe, are charged with thousands of matches that threaten to light at the slightest touch.

The diversity of materials is intended to represent technologies from different periods of history, with the intent of illustrating the passage of time . For example, ropes are a truly ancient machine and evidence of their use in ancient Egypt exists. They were probably used by any human who might find an appropriate vine. The red and white stripes are ritualistic in nature, and in this respect are representative of a human technology that has existed for millennia. However, they also refer to the barber poles of mediaeval medical tradition (red for blood and white for bones) and barriers which might indicate high tension electricity and other hazards. Matches were invented in 1827 by an Englishman named John Walker. Submerged Metal Arc Welding is a technology developed since the First World War that not only represents recent history but my own

life: a reference to my employment as a construction worker. By using these different technologies in conjunction with one another I am placing myself in a historical relationship with the people and cultures that have used them over the centuries.

The title, Trigram, refers to the eight configurations used in the I-Ching which, when used in combination with one another, denote one of the sixty-four possible fortunes in the Book of Change. The I-Ching is the age old book of wisdom that is regularly consulted by many Taoists, usually when they are confronted by a change in their life situation. The advice imparted by the oracle falls into one of four categories: advance confidently; advance cautiously; stay where you are; retreat. There are, however, particular subtleties involved with each fortune that should be considered in light of the situation. Ultimately, the three thousand year old tradition of consulting the I-Ching deals with spiritual welfare and a correct way of living not with material gain. Confucius, the venerated ancient Chinese philosopher and moralist, reputedly said on his death bed that if there was one aspect of his life he could change it would be to have consulted the I-Ching more often. This sculpture is a meditation on the decisions we make in our life and the directions they lead us.

Fire Field is again constructed in a framework that is indicative of a blocked passageway. However, in this sculpture there is no way around the field; the wooden partition completely blocks the opening. The panel is hung in the framework to create a sense of this side and the other side, denoting the barrier between life and death. The other side is completely void. The matches are again arranged in a grid pattern, with heads pointed down so that they will ignite in rapid succession: one event leading to another.

I decided that randomness should be an important element for Fire Field in order to reflect the uncertainty of life. To effect this the sculpture was lit in one area on the bottom and allowed to burn itself out with no interference. The pattern then, although predictable, is a result of chance: how the wind might affect it; whether the surface of the wood caught fire; the pattern of the soot that was left as a result of the burnt matches. The ignition of this sculpture surprised me because the seam between the two panels of birch plywood caught fire and burned for nearly an hour after the matches had exhausted themselves, creating the charred central stripe. Another surprise occurred after the burning when the sculpture was stored in the loading dock of the Fine Arts Building. It was eventually noticed by the University's Fire Marshall (I was in Great Britain at the time) who was alarmed by the unburned matches left in the sculpture. He directed the technicians to either remove the sculpture from the building or remove the matches. Upon returning from England I decided I liked the sculpture's appearance without the unignited matches and the fact that they had been removed without my intervention: another element of chance. I decided to leave the piece as is.

The two pieces, Animus and Anima, were created at the same time. As in the other sculpture they are an externalization of myself and, as the titles suggest, represent my Jungian male and female sides. The male rendering is a piece of wood that was taken from a Laurel Leaf Willow that my father and I planted when I was a child. Over the years I have regularly pruned the tree to keep it from taking sunlight from other trees in the yard and, recently, have amputated some fairly large pieces of the tree: this being one of those sections.

For anyone who knows this particularly prolific variety of tree the manifold suckers thrusting their way out of the burl come as no surprise; this

plant has an enthusiasm for life that has confounded many gardeners and, as a result, has often led to the shortening of its life cycle. The metaphor here involved the physical manifestations of the tree's interaction with life and my interaction with the tree.

In Anima I am contemplating the female side of identity which, as in traditional symbolism, is manifest by sensuality. This tree did not grow in my parent's backyard, it was a piece of wood that one of my advisers and myself found one day. The trunk is stripped of its bark to reveal the flesh of its wood and in its crotch I have drilled a grid pattern of holes that are charged with spent matches. I have also seared a track from the base of the sculpture to the fork.

The rope basket and metal stand in Suspension refer to the construction trade and its use of rope, metal and welding as technologies. An old and very dear friend dug the roots out of his garden; I threw the stones in to keep the ropes taut.

Magic Box consists of a substantial chunk of aspen poplar taken from the local area encased in a highly finished wooden box, featuring dovetailed ends. The surface of the trunk is modified by stripping two bands of bark to reveal the fleshy wood underneath. The box has several doors through which the viewer can look at the inner wood. The box makes reference to vitrines (museum display cases) and magic boxes in which a magician might saw an assistant in half. The connection I am making is that the practice of displaying artifacts in a museum and the magic trick are both attempts at defying death. Further, the construction and materials used in the box are the same as those housing the prints, this emphasizes the objectness of the exhibited prints.

The process of print-making is the seminal activity of this body of work. This is a medium that carries an explicit reference to temporality in its use: each

print is a *fossil* of the original matrix. Like a ritual restatement of the act of creation the process of producing multiple images from a matrix reaffirms the cosmic order by mimicking the surface of the plate. The images identify with the matrix.

The images also represent a symbolic regeneration of the sculpture — actually a second regeneration because the prints must first go through a photographic process before they are committed to the etching plate — a means by which the brief life of the burn is extended into time. While producing this work I thought of the burnings as being events and the subsequent distribution of the prints as event horizons: the ever fading flicker from the sculpture projected on a thin veneer of paper. This capitalized on the photographic ability to freeze a moment in time and the photo-etchings became a sanctification of that particular instant.

There is a paradox inherent in these prints in that the paper preserves the image of a fire that would destroy them should they ever come in contact. The juxtaposition of destruction and creation is carried through with the moth image. The moths, if real, would consume the paper, just as the paper will eventually turn to dust. The portrayal of these two forces that would be destructive to their support alludes to one of my central themes — Vanitas.

In addition to the transience of life, like a Vanitas still life, the prints also make a moral statement. The moth drawing close to a flame symbolizes the person that is drawn to temptation, eventually getting burnt.

The winged manifestation of these creatures represents a transient stage in their lives when they are freed of earthly constraints to mate and then find a suitable place to lay their eggs. The erratic movement of the moth (which is similar to that of the flame), the shape, design, and colouration of its wings all

serve to attract other moths, a function of this sexual phase of their existence. The moth's configuration is similar to a vulva, an organ which is symbolic of the creation of life.

When creating the series of prints for my final exhibition I decided that the inclusion of the moth was redundant. The etchings were more effective in surviving the sculpture as documentation if they were simpler in their composition. These prints also represented new works while burning or works that have already been destroyed.

The most important aspect concerning the alignment of the work in a gallery context was to create the sense that the show represented a ripple of time arrested from a continuous stream; for this reason I decided not to light the walls behind the two sculptures Fire Field and Trigram in order to create an illusion of greater depth, making the gallery appear as if it continued beyond its walls. Selecting these two sculptures to stand in front of the end walls is a result of their transitional symbolism: they represent gates through which you may step beyond.

Of course the subject matter treated in this show is infinite and indeterminate, not one that may be empirically defined. Perhaps it seems incongruous to manifest ideas of such a metaphysical bent in such a material manner but it is not the pieces that hold the content, it is the relationship between them; the analogous relationship between process and the transition between states of being. Expressing these ideas in print or in sculpture may seem to denigrate their value in realization but is no worse than attempting to express them in writing.

CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSION

Drink! for you know not whence you came, nor why:

Drink! for you know not why you go, nor where.⁴³

Omar Khayám

The title of my thesis, 'id', refers to Freud's model of human psychic apparatus, specifically that part accounting for unconscious instinctual desire. This is not because the show is an outpouring of libidinous emotion but because Freud once used his own model as an analogy for the way modern artists functioned between western culture and the tribal sources from which they drew their inspiration. The artists were the ego, European culture the superego and the tribal cultures the id. In retrospect this analogy seems racist, relegating tribal people to the status of animals, but I believe Freud realized tribal culture had something of value to impart to us. A part of our identity will always be tied to mystical experience if only to deal with the question of mortality.

Identity is the common thread running through this paper, although in some chapters it is more difficult to see the relationship. The second, third and fourth chapters of this paper deal with some of my influences: art historical, anthropological and contemporary artists that have had an effect on the way I produce art: the subject of the fifth chapter. The connection between identity and the former two subjects is fairly concrete: Ritual and Identity concerns itself with the role of ritual in forming identity and chapter four deals with the similarities between Jack Shadbolt's, Joseph Beuys' and my own handling of this question in art work. However in my second chapter, *Vanitas*, the connection to

identity may at first seem spurious. In fact during the writing and researching of this paper I have worried that I would not be able to establish an integral relationship between the two.

It is sometimes difficult to see the forest for the trees. As existential philosophy has noted there is nothing more critical to the make up of a complete personality than an awareness of mortality and a life philosophy that grows from that awareness.

Ecclesiastes, as I have stated, is more than a moral code, it is a life philosophy that holds its relevance 2700 years after its writing. It is a biblical book that transcends the parameters of Christianity. The sentiments of its author are echoed in writings from many ages around the world: from Lao Tsu, a Chinese contemporary of Koheleth, to Omar Khayám, the great 12th century Persian poet and mathematician. Lao Tsu's Tao te Ching and Khayám's Rubaiyát both call for life to be lived in the moment: sensible advice I have proven for myself with my experience as a graduate student.

Before I came to Calgary the fuel that sparked my aspirations as an artist came from the avante garde; I concerned myself with the new, the original. I admired those artists at the cutting edge who set trends and broke new ground, all the while looking to the future. Anyone who has known this urge knows that it can be equally compelling to make art about the past; brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers and friends all inquire why you don't make art they may recognize, like landscapes or portraits. I believe that neither of these constitute a good reason for making art: you must do it for yourself.

Consulting with others who have completed a Master of Fine Arts I have found that the work produced is quite often manifest of the experiences encountered while completing the degree. I can say this about my work as well:

the issues of transition, formation of identity and positioning oneself in a historical construct are as much a part of my experience in an academic situation as they are of the art I have created here. I have often wondered during this degree whether I am making art or if I am the one being made. The boundaries between artist and art have blurred.

I have found there is a truth to making art in this manner that relates closely with words of Koheleth. It is as important to make art for the moment as it is to live for it.

 Endnotes

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³⁸ Moffit, p. 93.

³⁹ Moffit, p. 95.

⁴⁰ Eccl. ix, 10-11.

⁴¹ Hamlet III. i.12-15.

⁴² Macbeth V. v. 24.

⁴³ Edward Fitzgerald, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayám, 4th ed., 1879, st. 74.

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