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ABOUT THE COVER

About the Cover: Peter Callas, Obaluaye, from Seriinge, animated film, 1994. Seriinge is a work in progress about the history and cultural identity of Brazil. It includes an investigation of the coded methods used to conceal the identities of Yoruba Orishás within the appearance of Catholic saints. Shapannon is the Orishá of pestilence and fever—the god of smallpox and contagious diseases. Because he is so feared, his name is never uttered. He is known instead as Obaluaye or Omolu. People possessed by Obaluaye cover their heads and bodies with long fringes of straw and dance as though possessed by convulsions, itching and shivering of fever. There is a syncretic connection between Obaluaye and Saint Sebastian in some regions of Brazil, which comes from the association of smallpox sores with the Christian martyr’s bleeding flesh, caused by arrow wounds. Seriinge is being produced with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission, while the artist is an artist-in-residence at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Technologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany.

CORRECTION

In the review published in Leonardo 27, No. 4 (1994) of the book Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought by David McNeill, the year of publication was incorrectly indicated. The correct year of this book’s publication is 1992.
The Demon’s Face: An Artist’s Discovery of the Metaphors of Child Abuse

Stevens Seaberg

I grew up in a family of teachers, inventors, writers and artists. Like other families, our family had a certain number of addicts, alcohol being the favorite addiction. My father was an alcoholic, and so was my grandfather. Family stories, from all sides, usually involved the humorous and bizarre. One grandfather was said to have always walked through the house by walking over the furniture rather than around it. The other grandfather was said to have been on the verge of boarding a train with his first wife when he suddenly stepped back off the platform. The train blew its whistle, started and left the station carrying his wife into the distance and, as far as we knew, into oblivion. My family’s life, in fact, seemed to be a series of performances of the strangest kind, going as far back as a pilgrim ancestor who was fined for being found “overcome” in the blockhouse while on guard against the Indians, and my great-grandmother who was obliged to work Sundays in her family’s backyard rope factory while her older (and obviously more favored) sister played Donizetti’s “Overture to the Daughter of the Regiment” on the piano. This same piano was later burned up in the Chicago fire of 1873, which also cooked a barrel of sauerkraut my family had buried in the yard to save from the fire.

At the age of 8, I could already mix a dry martini and make a Manhattan cocktail for my grandmother. My father was usually out of town, selling bows and arrows and trying, I now believe, to stop drinking by avoiding his fellow newspapermen and the bars they frequented. As my father, grandfather and inventor step-grandfather drank and argued over how to decorate the Christmas tree and participated in other alcoholic family pastimes, I watched my sober artist mother draw.

As a child I wanted to be a chemist, as I was fascinated by bottles, of course, and the mystery of the chemical transformation. Mathematics, too, seemed important to me—particularly as a way of ordering chaos. But, I eventually found the lives of chemists and mathematicians too narrow and I became an artist, still not forgetting the bottles, balances, mixing, counting and the strange lines, shapes and “pretzels” of calculus and non-Euclidian geometry.

Although I have never been an alcoholic, I have certainly had problems with drinking: in an alcohol-related automobile accident at the age of 23 I lost the sight in one eye. Like my great-grandmother who had lost her leg in a train accident, I had become a kind of metaphor of what might be called “technological abuse.” Otherwise, I led what seemed to be a normal life—for an artist, that is. I married a writer, had children, found jobs teaching, lived in a house and made art.

Once, as we stood in a local bookstore, my wife held up a book and said: “This is you.” I was shocked—the title was Adult Children of Alcoholics [1]. I read: “You are always trying to clean up your mess.” What mess?, I shouted. Of course there was a certain amount of mess in my studio—piles of paper, sticks, paint tubes—but wasn’t that the way it was with all my artist friends?

I began going to a support group for adult children of alcoholic parents. There were not many artists in the group, but these were my kind of people. They had toy bears printed on their sweatshirts, they dressed in black or white—or both, with the pattern divided up the middle. They talked about Christmas, depressions and divorce, and argued about whether to believe that God was good or just another patri-

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Fig. 1. Skeleton Dancer, monoprint, 18 x 22 in, 1989. (Created in collaboration with Conrad Ross) The original work is in color and shows a blue figure on a black background with a dark red border. It illustrates the disoriented and skeletal victim of abuse in its “Black Box.”
A chal abuser. We all wept and laughed. Like their black-and-white clothes, their feelings were never “in-between.” As I listened to their metaphoric talk and looked at their strange outfits, realizing at one point that I, too, was dressed all in black, I saw that my father’s and grandparents’ alcoholism had affected everything in my life. Among these things—my behavior, my thoughts—was surely my art.

I had several artist friends who I knew were also children of alcoholic parents, and we arranged an exhibition called “Children of Alcoholism.” There weren’t many of us. We had a gallery show with 19 works and a stage performance. As we painted the set and arranged the props, I could see that we were making visual analogues to the language of 12-step groups. One artist made paintings of piles of old shoes, clothes and sports equipment, jumbled together into what could only be seen as “alcoholic-ness”—that is, the psychological “mess” of substance abuse. The chaos of the abused child’s life was spread across the stage floor as we emptied my friend’s prop boxes of childhood junk. Another artist hung a family of painted canvas figures on clotheslines strung across the stage. These included babies in high chairs, family pets, the washing machine itself and a full-sized family car. It was the alcoholic family “hung out to dry.”

I stood alone in the tiny gallery, which was in a friend’s backyard studio, and looked at the exhibit’s paintings, drawings, photographs and sculpture. Everything was so close together that it was impossible to avoid seeing that all of us were painting, drawing and sculpting the same things. The most peculiar similarities were found in the choices of color, particularly red and green, red and blue, orange and green or, more particularly, an off-red and an off-green. I suddenly thought of the adult children at the Al-Anon group (2) in their blue jeans and red shirts. Almost every work, except those in black and white, contained this particular color combination. The strangest form, however, was what I soon began to call the “Black Box”: a square of black in which a childlike figure was often placed—in one case, a ceramic doll in the middle of black sampler with writing that alternated in red and green. One sculpture was itself a box that contained four bound stonelike balls, standing for, as an accompanying photograph showed, the artist and her three brothers and sisters. It was not hard to interpret this box as the prison of the children of alcoholism. I began to look around the exhibition for these Black Boxes and found one immediately in my own contribution, a childlike skeleton figure apparently falling down in a dark square, colored a sickly green-blue and surrounded by a frame of murky red. In the corner of the picture was a bottle (Fig. 1).

When I went home I was almost afraid to face my own art, which hung on every
wall. This was the fear of facing the facts of my existence. But I was also fascinated and, like all victims of abuse, searching for the answer to the pervasive pain of adulthood. In my work I could see the same elements I had seen at the gallery and theater in the works of my colleagues: the volcanoes, the pyramids, bottles, cleft faces and black boxes, with the constant juxtaposition of red and green, and black and white, as well as fragmentation, dismemberment, skeletons and nudity.

The key to these visual images was to be found in metaphor. The feelings of the abused are like the feeling of being in a black box or room, without escape, air or sense of direction. The Black Box is a visual summing up of the sensations of oppression, abandonment and fear. I didn’t know what the red and blue meant—anger and depression? The blues?

Even process could be seen as analogous to abuse—that is, the ceramic doll in the black box was the psychologically hardened result of parental absence and insensitivity. I had printed my own little skeleton onto the paper from an articulated figure I had made from a thin metal sheet, fastened together with paper clips, inked and laid down on an inked background, along with images of objects such as bottles, knives, scissors and crutches, and then run through the etching press (Fig. 2). It was an objectification of my own feelings at being “flattened out” by my family’s drinking, as if the wheels of my father’s car were actually rolling over me as he arrived home drunk from work.

The flatland produced by the printing press was a metaphor for the psychological flatland I was living in with the memories of my childhood unhappiness. It was also a mathematical conception, a place where I was trapped in only two dimensions, while other people, particularly my abusers (I felt), were able to move in three. When I discovered that mathematicians had actually made studies of what they called “flatland,” where a right-handed glove could become a left-handed one by turning through a forbidden dimension, the hair stood up on my head.

At this time, during the early 1980s, my absurd dances with skeletons had already gained me some reputation, and for several years I worked with a group of performers who called themselves Seaberg’s Skeleton Theater. Some of the performers were wooden articulated skeletons that I discovered I could dance with. When I realized that in these performances I was acting out my childhood with my often intoxicated...
Looking at the Ping-Pong balls, which made such funny eyeballs, I remembered playing Ping-Pong by myself in the basement. That, too, was a metaphor for my loneliness because I would put up a board—my silent partner—against which to hit the ball. It was also like my father's reaction to me—which was very often no reaction. He was the board against which I hit the bubble-like ball and from which it rebounded—I got a reaction but not a response. In one of my constructions, created at the beginning of my realization of the true meaning of my work, I used a Ping-Pong ball as an eye for a cyclopean figure whose head was a row of dynamite sticks and whose neck looked like the rising smoke from a green pyramidal volcano. It was myself, of course, smoldering thoughts capped by a time bomb of anger supporting my punished eye (Fig. 4).

It appeared that this figure represented not only feelings such as burning anger or choking on smoke but also the objects that I associated with those feelings—there was the lonely game of Ping-Pong in the basement, and also the logpile of firecrackers or dynamite sticks that looked like the logs my father and I saw together in the backyard for the fireplace. These were like my own dismembered limbs or like my body truncated and made immobile by what I felt was my father's dislike of me. Such a stack of sticklike objects I began to call "The Body Pile," a metaphor for the psychologically or often physically maimed victim of abuse. The connection between the piled logs and the dynamite sticks in Cyclops (see Fig. 4) was like a kind of rhyme—like the way two words can be related in poetry by their similarity in sound even though they have superficially different meanings. These log images were connected by their similar shapes or groups of shapes, then, that indicate a shared meaning, in this case an abusive one—the hurt of the rejected and cast-off child, as well as explosive self-destruction or eventual combustion in a fireplace. I wondered if my pilgrim ancestor's log blockhouse didn't also contain some of these messages and wasn't, metaphorically speaking, an appropriate place to be found unconscious, like a child knocked senseless by an uncaring and inebriated parent.

To perform on stage, in parks or at galleries was like moving into the third dimension to escape the oppression of Flatland. I had always admired acrobats who could jump against the wall and turn a backflip onto the floor. One of my first performances occurred when I was alone with my wife in the gallery where I had one of my first one-man shows. There was a raft-like object there and, among other things, an installation with a crucified skeleton and mourning figures standing beside it as in the stabat mater. We took our clothes off in a moment of adult/child inspiration, and I posed like a despondent shipwrecked survivor on the raft of the Medusa (Fig. 5), while she knelt like a donor or supplicant in the midst of the skeleton crew around the cross. The metaphor was not only that of loneliness, but of isolation in a liquid environment—alcohol and tears—now dry, and of a naked witness at a scene of suffering. Our skin-clad bodies represented not only our vulnerability and our abandonment by people who should have protected us but also our human vitality.

The Skeleton Theater slowly began to focus more on the live performers than on the inanimate ones. As this happened, we became those objects themselves, taking on their metaphorical meanings in terms of our own objectification as victims of abuse, turning ourselves into puppets and tumors. the way we felt we had been treated, as one treats a stone, stick or leather belt.
act of sexual intercourse. The people, however, who should be the Haves, watching the scene below from the windows of their apartment or office building were themselves without heads, arms, hands or legs, not to mention clothes. Some wept. Others were split in two by the joint in the walls. The Thirst in the work, I now believe, is a thirst for love; and, perhaps, that is what drinking is all about. It is also interesting to me that the naked-torso people were flattened out, whereas the skeleton people were in a three-dimensional reality. A water faucet was to the right in the scene, but it had no pipe connection to anything, a mirage in the desert of feelings.

Although what I have been writing about is very personal, it is not only my story. What I have found out about my own art has opened windows—like those of the truncated nudes in *Thirst*—onto a street of skeletons. The metaphors of child abuse are everywhere, not only as sticks and bones but as convolutions, entwined snakes and Gordian knots that stand for the labyrinthine mystery itself.

But there is one more important image among the many I have not touched on, the “Hidden Face.” In one of the drawings from our original exhibition, a young woman’s face is shadowed by the brim of a man’s hat she is wearing. The shadow hides her feminine features, and her eyes look out from beneath the brim with a certain anxiety. One of my drawings at home also features a hat, but under it was nothing at all, I had thought. On one side was an egg and on the other a darning egg, and in the middle the handleless top of another darning egg (Fig. 8). I had often wondered what it was about, particularly the smear of charcoal that made a circular pattern between the egg shapes to the right and left of the hat. Now I saw it, a froglike face, whose head was the hat, its eyes were the two egg shapes on each side and its grinning mouth, the smear between them. No wonder I had never been able to get rid of it. It was the face of a drunk. Now I have seen it many times in other paintings. Poe describes something like it in his short story “King Pest, the First” [5], in which one of the ghouls’ faces is so round and her mouth so wide that her earrings keep falling into it at the corners. The face in my picture could be either that of a man or woman. It was my hat that the face was wearing. The darning egg was my wife’s. The faceless smile, however, was my father’s, or at least the way his smile looked to me when he was drunk. It was the frog-prince waiting to be turned into a man, or so I had hoped. That is the face I had a hard time forgiving, but, forgiven or not, it apparently still belongs in my art. Its bizarre quality, in fact, seems right in keeping with my own experiences and the family history with which I was brought up and seems to stand for the mysteries behind them—abuse, addiction and creativity.

**References and Notes**

2. Al-Anon is a 12-step group for those who are troubled by loved ones’ drinking. It is an offshoot of Alcoholics Anonymous.
Stevens Seaberg: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life

Kenneth J. Knoesel

The status of the artist from the vantage point of psychology remains a messy affair. How should readers view Stevens Seaberg's life? [1] As part of a lost genre? As a Vasari life transposed into the register of late-twentieth-century America? A glimpse of Bohemian opera? A dismembered confession that waits to be made whole in the eye of a postmodern conjurer? Perhaps we should look more closely. Seaberg's life might be framed in a psychological ViewMaster as a case history placed within panoramas from Freud, Piaget or Vygotsky. I would suggest that it is Vygotsky who provides openings for an interrogation of Seaberg's work [2].

Although space does not permit such an interrogation, there are good reasons for thinking of Vygotsky. One reason involves his extended criticism of the aesthetic as an independent spiritual phenomenon. Art is not spiritually isolated but functions as a record of social interaction. It participates in memorializing the strategies used to entail the volatility of art. Another involves Vygotsky's study of abnormal or damaged communication as seen in his work with autistic children. In each case, Vygotsky explores the ways in which communication works as a complex and negotiated process of shunts and feints. Seaberg's narrative opens such a process within a revelatory moment in his understanding of his own art. He repeatedly asks questions not only about how his art records abuse but about how art engenders psychosocial interaction. Probably more than anything else, the narrative embodies an indictment of how a defensive formalism reinforced by economics stifles the ways in which art enters and interrogates our lives.

Seaberg's life is a complex case of history, especially if we approach it as a self-conscious commentary. What Seaberg recognizes is that an artist's own understanding of his or her work involves lies and misrepresentations. The story that Seaberg tells is about such recognition. His art, as well as the art of others, becomes revelatory when he begins to understand it as expressions of abuse experienced as a child. But the account that Seaberg gives us is not simply about the discovery of a philosophical key that abruptly defines a pattern in decades of creativity. It is not that simple. In the stories that Seaberg tells, we see how art functions within a much larger dialogue that encompasses not only our inner dialogues with ourselves but the myriad of conversations that we have through time with all those present and absent. Seaberg is well attuned to such dialogue. But there is a larger social aspect here as well because art works as a catalyst to dialogue and functions as part of a culture's self-interrogation. While viewers inevitably approach art through an array of aesthetic criteria, Seaberg challenges himself to see how such criteria can function as evasive gestures.

Seaberg steers art away from the aesthetic and into everyday life. While this is easy to see in the stories, it is also present in the conscious exploration of technologies present in all of Seaberg's work. He tells us that he wanted to be a chemist. He writes of the "Batland" created by his printing press, which also worked to confine two-dimensional mathematical space. The skeletal figures (see Figs 1 and 2) look as though they had undergone a primitive x-ray process. The use of junk for the sculptures, the detailed study of bridges, mines and railroads that have occupied Seaberg for decades also marks his dialogue with the technological landscapes in which we live. Much of this also marks the ways in which art becomes involved in the shadow work of archaeology.

Seaberg provides a life or case history that challenges us not to simply read it against a set of theoretical positions but also to see it as a confessional expression that may resonate with our experiences. This life, however, should not be held at a pathos-filled distance but should be allowed to insinuate itself and function as a catalyst for our own responses. I have seen all of the artwork and many of the performances that Seaberg describes in this article. This work repeatedly undoes the aura of aesthetic space. The performances, for example, undermine audiences' expectations and desires for distance. By bringing art into dialogue, Seaberg challenges the audience to perform its own response to art. Probably Seaberg's repeated challenge in the multiple registers of his work is not only that viewers participate in the creation of his art, but that the artwork in which we participate leads to a realization of how we make art through living our lives.

References and Notes

1. I have known Seaberg for 17 years and have watched the development of the projects discussed in his article. My comments are hardly impartial but come from years of conversations about individual projects, art history, philosophy, science and technology and, perhaps most significantly, our lives within the communities of which we are part. My comments emerge from our mutual interrogation about our lives.

2. See Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language, Alex Kozulin, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); see also Mikhail Yurovetsky, Lev Vygotsky (Moscow: Progress, 1989).

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