

POSTCARD: from Paris

Column by
Allan deSouza

Le Jardin de Palais Royal, Paris

Gillian Wearing

Trauma

Hopital Saint Louis, Paris

May 12–September 24, 2005

Musee des Moulages, permanent collection

Hopital Saint Louis, Paris

Rebecca Horn

Bodylandscapes

Galerie de France, Paris

May 12–July 9, 2005

Tony Cragg

New Works

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris

May 21–June 25, 2005

Tony Matelli

Fucked

Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

April 2–May 28, 2005

Edmond Couchot and Michel Bret

Natural/Digital

Biche de Bere Gallery, Paris

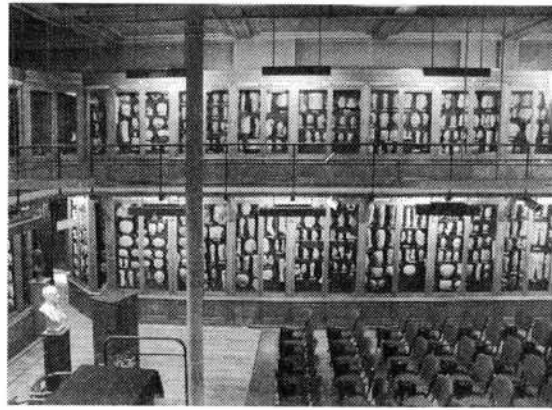
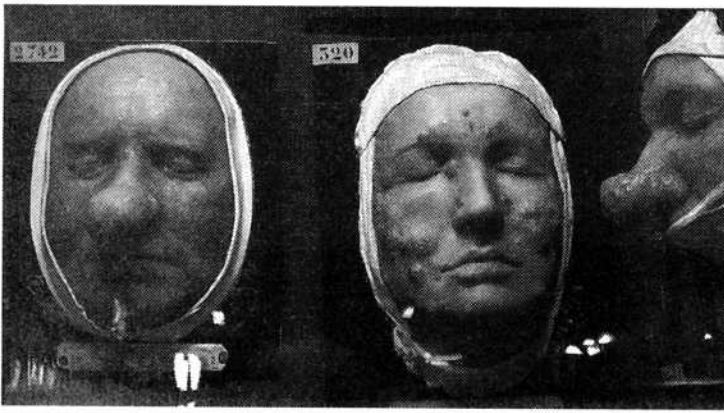
May 26–July 3, 2005

Walter Benjamin's *magnum opus*, *Passagenwerk*, was an unfinished expedition through the passages of Paris—those *flâneur*-haunted, covered shopping arcades that date to 1800. Built following Napoleon's Egypt campaign, the arcades are sanitized, Europeanized *souks*. Sky-lit and iron-wrought, they tunnel between streets, but open up vistas in which one can still get lost in cruiseship imaginings of empire. Precursors to all venues unashamedly capitalist—from the European department store to the American mall—arcades are secure, under-surveillance simulacra of the street. Purveyors of the exotic for the delectation of *messieurs et mesdames*, these dreamscapes brought the shopping experience in from the weather hazards and uncouth bustle of the open sidewalk. With no windows to the outside, they form a self-enclosed, scopic universe—like a theater or cinema. Benjamin optimistically conceived his *Passagenwerk* as a retelling of the Sleeping Beauty story, as an awakening from the dream—the *traum-a*—of capitalist progress and human submission to its apparent inevitability.

With its vibrant public life, Paris is a perfect city for sleepwalkers *and* streetwalkers, a term that is here more applicable to those men and women who saunter, stroll, mark their territory, cruise the boulevards and lounge in sidewalk cafes and bars, heads swiveling to check out their fellow passersby.

Whether one ventures onto the streets as ambulatory *flâneur*, stationary *voyeur* or slinking *poseur*, one inevitably participates in the grand spectacle. And though Karl Marx decried the razing of historic Paris to make way for the Paris of the sightseer, one never quite escapes history's march to simply watch from the sidelines. In Paris, you are the parade.

Necessary to the traversal of the city's geographic terrain is an accompanying *flâneurie* of time; Walter Benjamin describes the Parisian dandy walking his tortoise as a perambulation so intentionally slow as to literally defy time. A modern-day counterpart to this temporal defiance is a certain laxity, a failure to convey information that I found particularly galling (pun very much intended). One example: after tracking down the Musée des Moulages (wax casts), which was not listed in any guide book but which I'd read about in a medical article, I was told by an attendant that the only way to view the collection was by appointment. Following much cajoling on my part, her only concession was to point me to a phone number on the door. After writing down the number, I asked if I could use her cell phone, to which she replied that it was now no use because the woman I should speak to had just walked past me, presumably to lunch, while I was writing down the number. If I wanted, I could wait. Sometimes the only



power one may exert against the bureaucrats is to wait them out, so I did.

It was hard not to see such occurrences—and there were others—as a conspiracy directed at me personally. But I learned to understand it in part as the sanctity of the Parisian lunch—that nothing would delay it or stand in its way. One day, I planned a series of gallery visits, mapping out the most efficient multi-arrondissement route, and intent on eating on the go to save time. *Quel Abomination!* By 12:30, a number of galleries on my itinerary had shut for lunch, forcing me to my own lunch to wait them out. Resistance was futile, and with cafes seemingly at every corner it wasn't long before my eating and walking habits had “gone native.”

Another day, I was part of a group of artists having lunch (*naturellement*) at the Ministry of Culture in the Palais-Royal, former residence of, amongst others, Cardinal Richelieu, the young Louis XIV, Colette and Jean Cocteau. We were ushered into a magnificent chamber with a balcony and terrace overlooking *Le Jardin*. Roland Barthes described looking at a photograph and realizing that he was looking into the eyes of someone who had seen Napoleon. In that room, I felt something of that puncture through the fabric of the present to a more direct connection to history and especially to

the events and forces we euphemistically call “Western Culture.”

Into this manicured time trap Daniel Buren has subtly insinuated the present. Using his trademark stripes, he has created blinds for each of the many windows that line the gardens. At mid-day, some were pulled down, others raised, in a constant play of mass participation. For the forecourt, Buren also created a forest of truncated pillars, whose slightly weathered-looking gray stripes reminded me of Andre Malraux, writer and former Minister of Culture, whose civic contributions included a decree that the then smog-blackened Paris buildings be cleaned to their present gleaming white. Buren's stripes are not only an addition to the present architecture, they suggest a partially erased past, as if those ministry workers had got creative, or had simply gone for lunch, leaving dark stripes on everything (a week later, in New York's Guggenheim Museum, I noticed the remnants of the recently de-installed Buren installation: newly painted white stripes—shimmering afterimages—along the rims of the slightly off-white multi-story curving ramp, where Buren had earlier placed vertical strips of green tape).

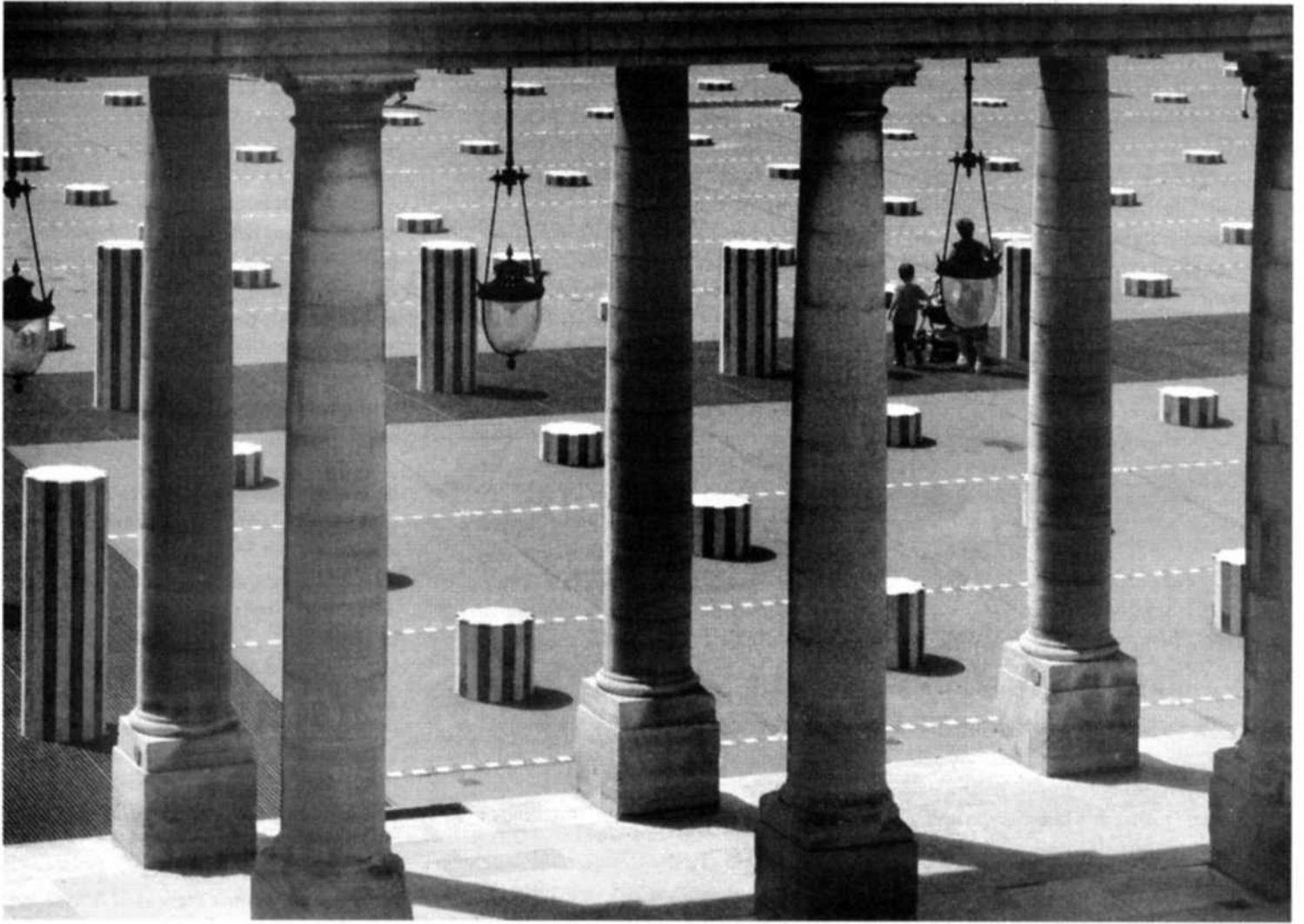
Back at the Musée des Moulages, while waiting in the lobby for lunching-lady, I was able to watch (twice) Gillian Wearing's

half-hour-long video, *Trauma* (2000), a series of talking head interviews recounting different childhood torments. While this kind of confessional outpouring is now familiar (and even though these were related so convincingly as to seem almost rehearsed), what distinguished and linked the interviews was that each interviewee was wearing a “skin-tone” mask suggestive of cinematic burn victims or bank robbers, which made each individual appear vulnerable and simultaneously threatening. Inverting the more familiar media masking of the eyes by a black band, the masks revealed only the individual's eyes, emphasizing their expressiveness.

It seemed rather an odd choice of artwork to view before entering the museum itself, and yet, when I finally did, it made it easier to view it as an anthology of human narratives rather than merely as inert objects. The collection is housed in glass cases on two levels, and is arranged alphabetically according to disease, with case after case of body parts: faces, tongues, hands, breasts, buttocks, feet, penises and scrota, each neatly edged in white silk as though just that part were exposed for surgery and the rest of the body was discreetly hidden. Several casts of the vulval area revealed a very human stage in their process of fabrication by including the fingers of the patient as she held apart her labia. While clearly made

Left: Allan deSouza, *Musée des Moulages* (details), 2005.

Right: Allan deSouza, *Musée des Moulages*, 2005.



as teaching tools and cast directly from the body, then painted, there is also an inevitable focus on the severe malformations and phages that most people—certainly in Europe—would never see, and certainly not in their terminal stages as here. Just the names themselves were highly evocative: *Affections Diverses, Troubles Trophiques, Ulceres Exotiques, Vices de Conformation*. Others, more familiar, simply evoked dread: leprosy, syphilis, tuberculosis, carcinomas, elephantiasis. From massive growths that seemed like attached bodies to gaping holes where the skin and flesh had been eaten away as though the body were turning itself inside out, they evoked the terror of the flesh behind the mask. Since these casts were made mostly before medical knowledge of disease transmission, they suggest a terror of what lies within one's own body. I also thought of them as consequences of the contagion routes perpetrated by the *flâneur*—skin diseases as a different mapping of the city. It seems more than coincidence that Jules Baretta, who made the first casts in the collection, had previously made casts of tropical fruit for window displays in the arcades.

The next day, on my own traversals across the city from one gallery to another, I often had to be buzzed in from the street through metal gates or massive double doors—prophylactic against the incognoscenti—into

courtyards that resembled private garden *soirées* that just happened to show art. Some standouts on exhibit were Rebecca Horn's new drawings and paintings, with appropriately spiky titles like *Walpurgis Night* (2002), and *Cactus in My Head* (2004). Bursting with flaring lines and arcs of color, they transposed Julie Mehretu's bustling landscapes into figures. The works' verve and energy were contrasted by an older *Painting Machine*, from the 1980s, a wall-mounted contraption that cranked lumberingly to produce a single flick of a paint-loaded brush. It's a joke on the clumsiness of the machine, since it clearly can't compete with the dexterity of the human hand evident in the later works.

At Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Tony Cragg evinced a different kind of dexterity with sculptures that gave solid form to swirling energy. Like tornados harnessed to a potter's wheel, the materials (in this case bronze, wood and stone) seemed to have been spun outward and upward from a central axis to solidify into human profiles. Perhaps a little mannered, at their best they suggested Francis Bacon's portraits, with the paint smeared away from the clearly delineated profile.

While Franco-American relations have lately been more stormy than usual, it doesn't seem to have carried over into the gallery scene. There was quite a roster

of U.S. artists with solo shows, including Jean Shin, Lawrence Weiner, Joan Jonas, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, James Casebere, Francesca Gabbiani and Tony Matelli. Matelli showed *Fucked (human version)* (2005), a Pythonesque (complete with spurting clay "blood"), roughly sculpted, barely human figure set upon, hacked, sliced, dismembered and generally interfered with by all manner of weapons—including sporting goods, kitchen knives, swords and garden tools. This is what it feels like after spending a whole day tramping from one gallery to another.

My last stop was Biche de Bere Gallery, where nature is fabricated and activated by the human. An interactive work, *Les Pissenlits* (2005) by Edmond Couchot and Michel Bret, consists of a projection of digitally rendered dandelions fronted by a microphone on a stand. It's clearly an invitation, but for what? Karaoke? While I stood at a safe distance, a gallery attendant explained that if one blows into the mike the dandelions would disperse accordingly, then regroup. Minutes of fun followed, blowing hard, gently, from a distance, up close, the dandelions' movements enticingly dreamlike. It could be a momentary fix for a prisoner or a high-rise urban dweller, anyone nature-deprived of even weeds in sidewalk cracks. Finally, art for the armchair *flâneur*.

Allan deSouza lives and walks in Los Angeles.

Left: Allan de Souza, Daniel Buren's *Les Deux Plateaux*, Le Cour d'Honneur, Palais Royal, 2005.