# GHOST/FACE: GEOFFREY FARMER

SCOTT WATSON

Explosions, parade floats and processions are recurring motifs in Geoffrey Farmer's art of expansion, deferral and detonation. A figure often appears, but one involved in disguises and costumes. This presence desires to animate or occupy objects. The recurrences in Farmer's work are provocative; they seem to imply a structure of meaning. Because of the artist's interest in Aby Warburg (the founder of iconology, who once called art history "a ghost story for adults") and "the occult," we might take his strange figurations and juxtapositions as the disclosure of a hidden symbolic order—or, more accurately, the desire to construe one.

In any event, it is really the way Farmer makes his art—for example, establishing kits that not only contain the documents, materials and props for an installation but also "place holders for a future idea that doesn't exist yet"[1]—that has been the most unusual thing about it. This approach allows the works to continue to change with each installation. The occult symbolic constellation in the recurring themes and images makes a sociology and a cosmology of this process. Its method is what is most valorous about Farmer's art, for it places in perpetual potential confrontation the works and the institutions that own them or attempt to install them.

Farmer's practice might be "located" within the field of contemporary practice both through his process and the range of materials he chooses to deal with. The "influences" of teachers and the examples of other artists offer one sort of guide. But I place "locate" in scare quotes to indicate at the outset that I'm not sure that the metaphoric topography the words "field" and "locate" give rise to comes into view so easily. Farmer's work is ironically replete with references to a spatio-temporal extra-dimensionality. In interviews and statements he has given some markers.

The background of "influences" might include the instruction in performance art, class "4D" at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (ECIAD) in the early 1990s, at a time when the college was attempting again to break down the old beaux-art disciplinary categories. Farmer credits the group therapy-like atmosphere Sylvia Scott created in her classes as helping to establish the way he began to work in "a spontaneous way on an exhibition, during the time of an exhibition."[2] Farmer's year (1991-1992) at the San Francisco Art Institute was critical to his development. Kathy Acker would have shown Farmer what a ferocious satirical weapon psycho-sexual bricolage can be, and thus he was encouraged to explore the world of desiring correspondences to be found wherever popular entertainments offer an image of the grotesque.[3] Through Acker, Farmer would have come to know the work of Gertrude Stein and William Burroughs, and theories of transgression, especially the anti-psychiatry work of Deleuze and Guattari. His involvement with Acker initiated his "interest in the novel, in the structure of narrative" as the basis of procedures of visual art.[4] As a young artist, even while making videos and performance works, Farmer was best known for his drawings and occasional painting. The drawings were shown unconventionally, *à la* Eisenman or Pettibon, in piles or pinned in clusters on a wall, revealing his consistent interest in situations and procedures.

Farmer's other affinities include a triad: Cindy Sherman, Paul McCarthy and Robert Filliou. There is perhaps a complex politics involved in invoking these



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names in Vancouver, city of "photo-conceptualism." Cindy Sherman's practice, in particular, would appear inimical to Vancouver School rationalism. McCarthy advances minimalist performance through a scatological attack on the symbolic order and the Law of the Father. Both Sherman and McCarthy use their own bodies, puppets and prostheses to undermine the normal view of personal subjectivity. The question of "psychological make-up" is fundamental to their work, just as it is to Farmer's.[5] Both quote cinema and are contra-Hollywood. Of the trio, Filliou is the one who has an actual connection to Vancouver. He made an important body of video work at the Western Front in the late 1970s.[6] I think that for Farmer, Filliou stands for a practice of performance he finds sympathetic, especially Filliou's performances that involve a dialogue or engagement with another person or a social situation. Furthermore, there is in Filliou the example of an artist who initiates expanding structures that are meant as models of both how the universe unfolds and how society ought to function. Farmer is interested in notions of "work" and the figure of the "worker." Filliou, who was an economist before he became an artist, developed his Fourierist/Fluxus ideas of a poetical economy in which there would be only ludic work under the influence of Mahayana Buddhism. This involved him in notions of eternity, expanding but fracturing structures, dialectical paradoxes, things that multiply, chance operations, rhizomic relationships and the active inversion of meaning.

Farmer's 1990 *Notes for Strangers* was an early intervention into a system. It involved writing notes to strangers on the bus. Farmer would hand the stranger the note as he left the bus. A collection remains of notes to those who left the bus before he could deliver them. The piece seems a playful intervention into the anonymity of the crowd on the bus. Walter Benjamin's use of Georg Simmel's *Soziologie* to invert the delight of the Baudelarian *flâneur* in crowds is well known. It was on city buses and trams that people first had the experience of having to look at each other for long periods without speaking. "This new situation was, as Simmel recognized, not a pleasant one."[7] Especially not on Vancouver's over-crowded class-based public transport system. *Notes for Strangers* is kind of a Fluxus gesture in that it proposes an affable sociability (instead of socialism) and interconnectedness, as if one free agent (the artist) could set in circulation a work—a consciousness—that could readily be absorbed by others. But the condition of ordinary people is not so pleasantly pictured or imagined in other works of Farmer's, especially those involving containers.

The first kit came from working with containers. *Void Numbering Project (Continuous)*, dated 1992, began as a student work in which the art school's (ECIAD) garbage containers were brought into the gallery space numbered with blue paint. Thus the artist unintentionally provoked a confrontation with the school's sanitation workers and a first encounter with institutional negotiation. The numbering continued beyond this situation, extending the work throughout the city. Farmer identifies the apparatus he made to number the bins—a cardboard box/pinhole camera, paint, rag and brush—as the first kit. The notion of a kit as, say, the assembly of materials and tools required to make something, began to be the basis of a series of projects. The idea of the kit transfers the work of art to its potential in the tools, materials and procedures used to make it. This primary displacement, from finished work or installation to a process that always defers final form, informs all the kits, and subsequently they become much more complex.

The 1996 exhibition/installation *Home Alone (Becoming Your Own Spaceship)*, shown at the Or Gallery in Vancouver, was an early example of how Farmer experimented with narrative and form, allowing associations to radiate or leaf out from a ready-made, in this case a vitrine containing an extensive collection of E.T. figurines. The E.T. character and film, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), was conflated with Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Some of the thematic concerns of this early exhibition were continued in an installation/video made for the Belkin Art Gallery exhibition *6: New Vancouver Modern* (1998). *The day that I floated away from the society that I had known* was the first project to inhabit an institution, using what was on hand to produce the work on site. The videotape component of the exhibition had been



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shot in the gallery at night. The gallery becomes a starship where, among other activities, an unexplained medical procedure is performed on a prone and bandaged body, a Nietzschean image of the artist as convalescent. In one magical sequence, objects bounce and shatter as they are tossed down the gallery's interior cement staircase (an image of intentionality as destruction and process as entropy), creating a haunting musicality. The interconnected resonance and implications of these highly charged images provide shifting constellations of signification. The titles tell us that E.T. and *2001* are tropes of alienation. The transformation of the site involves spatial and temporal warping.

The video work for *The day that I floated away from the society that I had known* was at one point called "Wormhole." A wormhole "is a hypothetical topological feature of space-time that is essentially a 'shortcut' through space and time."[8] Spatial-temporal metaphors abound in Farmer's work and are tied to his interest in narrative and the novel. It would seem apt therefore to enlist Mikhail Bakhtin's useful term "chronotope" (literally, time-space) to describe this intersection at the centre of the artist's practice. "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."[9] Imagine then how easy it is to build a wormhole in a chronotope. Indeed, this is what narrative flashforwards and flashbacks are. The compression or extension of time is part of the conceptual fabric of the kits, which also extend and compress spatially. A work like *I thought that I could make a machine that would pierce the fabric of reality, in your world it appears as a 16th-century sign* (2004) is a chronotope that not only connects one era to another but that also attempts to bridge the unreal and the real. The image on the sign is unreal, a portal, like a vision in a crystal ball of a past, future or faraway event. An island surmounted by a pyramid explodes and subsides in a turbulent sea. One might think of the destruction of Atlantis. But perhaps it is more urgently a wish image of the destruction of a false metaphysics (the pyramid).

The character E.T. is an early example of what Farmer would develop as a classically grotesque figure, that is, a figure that is both disgusting and empathetic. Turning again to Bakhtin, the grotesque refers to birth and death, the beginning and the end of life. The grotesque is not fully formed, but always coming into being and is, therefore, a figure who is all potentiality, whose form is in the future tense.[10] Thus the grotesque figure resembles both a fetus and a corpse. He is the personification of the *informe,* something inchoate and base but fertile. In Farmer's work he is variously puppet, hunchback or worker. The worker and the idea of work are fundamental to Farmer's chronotopic spaceship. The work of art becomes an endless work that generates the figure of the worker. While on the one hand he positions the artist as a universe of one, on the other, he imagines specific histories of labouring. The *informe* should be associated with the as yet unrealized forces of productive labour defined by Marx as the proletariat, of which the artist is the magical advance guard and the grotesque underling is the embodiment. The grotesque is unfinished, until and unless there is a class revolution. The major works of Geoffrey Farmer exist as it were in solidarity, as they too are unfinished.

The idea of an incomplete work is not only the basis of modern art but also of some modern philosophical investigation. The major works of Karl Marx, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno are incomplete constructions. It isn't just that these thinkers died before completing their ambitious projects, something about those projects, and the period in which were conceived and executed, called for them to be left open and fragmented. Farmer's emphasis on process implies more than a deferral that merely makes completeness remote and ideal. The process is the work. A cosmological model of process can be found in the titles to his digital collages, such as *In the beginning the end often looks like this, engulfed in stillness, immobile and ultimately in the final version, haunted* (2004). Or, imagining the world as a voiced text or exponentially amplified invocation: *Which is to defy the power of language?... One billion to the tenth power reflected in a mirror then into another mirror then fed into a microphone and amplified a billion times, then reflected into another*



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*mirror, then tripled by ten billion cubed, reflected into another microphone and amplified another billion times of total surprise and shock* (2002). A social model is found in the works themselves.

Farmer draws upon Dickens and Hugo, polemical witnesses to the degradations of the working class in nineteenth-century London and Paris, for a number of important chronotopic projects. Specifically, works from *Hunchback Kit* (2000) to the recent *Nothing Can Separate Us (When the Wheel Turns, Why Does a Pot Emerge?* (2007- ) allude to Hugo's saga of medieval Paris and the figure of Quasimodo, the grotesque bell-ringer. Quasimodo is a Caliban-like proletarian figure. The title of the exhibition *The Blacking Factory* (2002) refers to the young Charles Dickens, who at the age of twelve was suddenly consigned to work in a blacking (shoe polish) factory—an experience that initiated the writer's lifelong campaign against child labour. *Pale Fire Freedom Machine* (2005) is a factory for turning furniture into the ink used to print a list of admonitions to workers. In *Wash House: even the foul dirt and putrid stains of your life know their fate!* (2004), Farmer built a container/shack that housed a working washing machine and dryer. The piece was installed at the art gallery of Farmer's alma mater, and thus directed at art school students. A poster in a sort of idiomatic New Age hyperbole advertised that the work was a free laundry service, but for more than washing clothes. A vast symbolic ritual was invoked around cleansing. "Did you ever think it would come to this? I mean did it ever occur to you how close we all are, at any point, to completely disintegrating, evaporating, dissolving, falling apart, breaking down and separating? We are all one or none!" The piece's odd skein of references points to another kind of cleansing. The shack itself was modelled on a photograph of a Canadian concentration camp hut from the 1940s (the camp was used to house Japanese-Canadians during their wartime internment). The poster appropriates language from the packaging of Dr. Bonner's soap—a soap made by a holocaust survivor who wrote metaphysical screeds on the packaging of his product.[11] Thus, the laundry, as in the exponential titles of some of the digital collages, reflects and amplifies to draw historical crimes into its peripheral orbit. These are perhaps also inferred by images of haunting.

The ghost face, basically two holes cut in some cloth or a piece of paper or a wall, is a recurring motif in Farmer's work. In his recent airplane installation *Airliner Open Studio* (2006) it appears as two incandescent light bulbs viewed from their screw thread ends. It is sometimes tied to ghostly figures, sometimes it floats free of any bodily figuration, sometimes—as in *Actor/Dancer/Carver* (2003)—it is found in evocations of a faux primitivism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari devote a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to this semaphore. In "Year Zero: Faciality," they name this reduction the "white wall/black hole machine."[12] Positing that this "faciality machine is the social production of the face,"[13] they argue that it is binary abstraction that territorializes the whole body and the surrounding environment. Its core semiotic is racial: "It is the White Man himself."[14] The white wall/black hole machine crushes other possible systems and is the vehicle by which bodies and social groups are kept in order. In this construction the white wall is "the almightiness of the signifier" and the black hole the repository of the "autonomy of the subject," as in this social law: "You will be pinned to the white wall and stuffed into the black hole."[15] Thus this faciality, the front (white) face reduced to white wall and black hole, "is the inhuman in human beings, that is what the face is from the start."[16] Although they touch upon painting, Deleuze and Guattari do not discuss galleries, where a literal white wall dominates the environment. Farmer punches holes in this wall, facializing it. The face is always a ghost in Farmer's work, the museum a haunted house.

Much of the violence in Farmer's work is directed toward the white wall/black hole machine. Gallery windows are blasted out by a fiery explosion in *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (2002). In *Airliner Open Studio* he steps on and crushes a white wall/black hole machine. (The machine was two light bulbs, placed side by side on a concrete floor and viewed from the thread screw end. In the video they are projected large as a cinematic "close-up" of a face, crushed by a geisha-like improvised shoe.) In *Actor/Dancer/Carver*,



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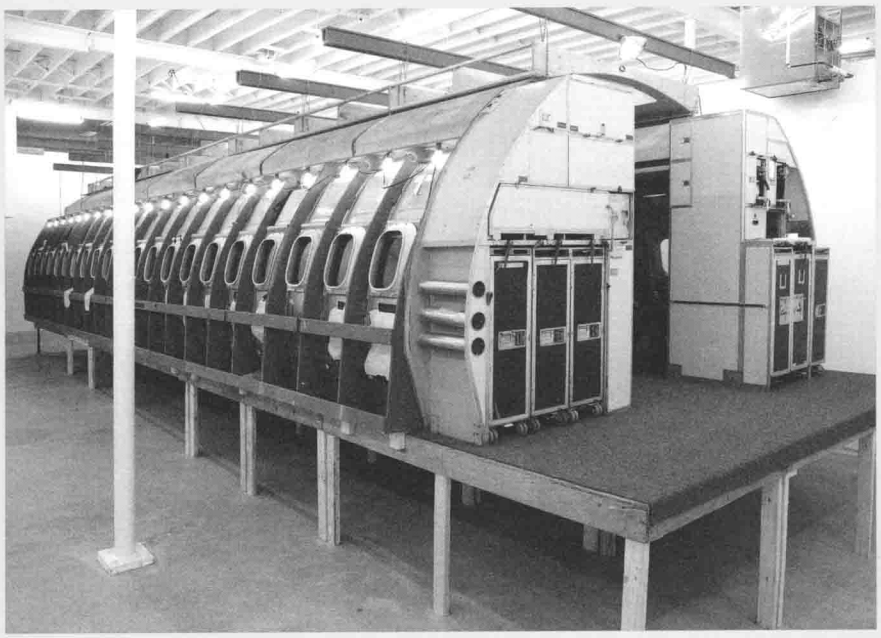

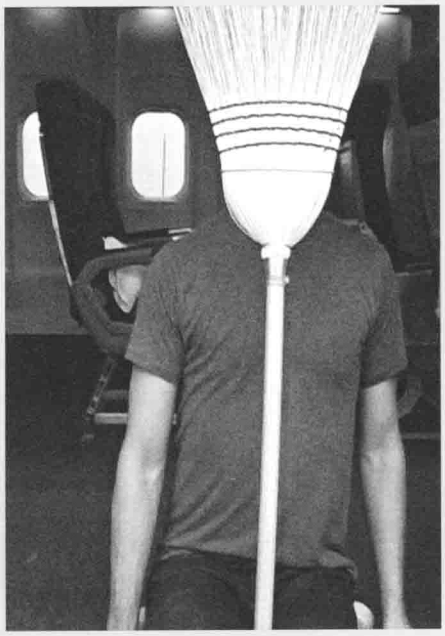

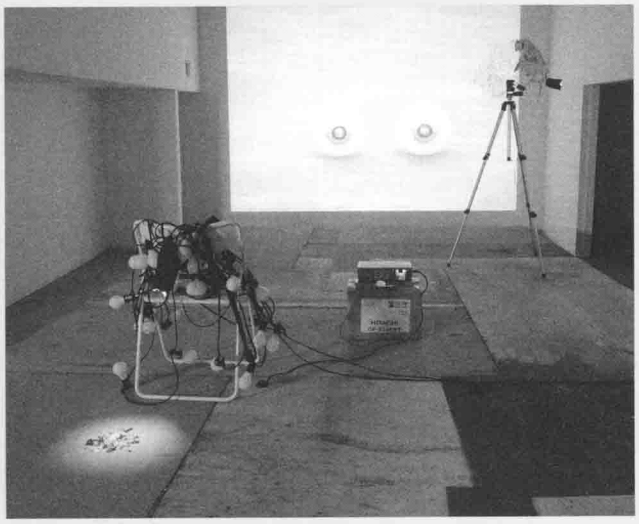

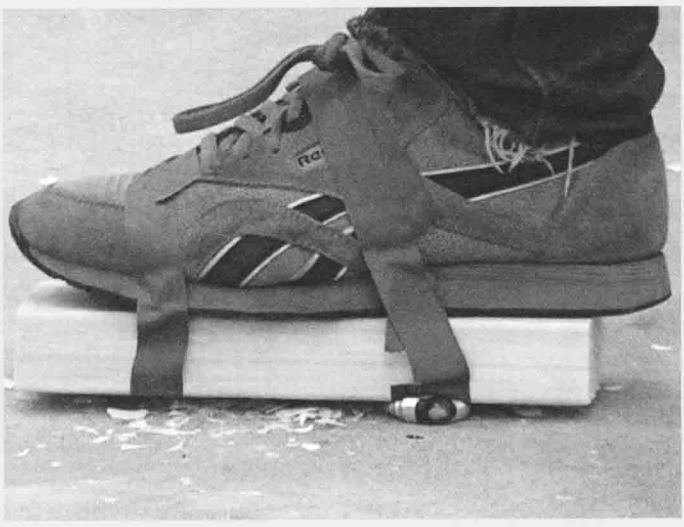

**Airliner Open Studio**, 2006. Installation views at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver



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he deploys an inverse of the white wall/ black hole. For this piece he installed a video camera in a basket/mask placed over his head. The basket/mask is eyeless except for the hole for the camera. Blind, with his movement hampered by a rope tied to both feet, limiting his step, and his hands enclosed in wooden, padlocked boxes, he ventured forth into a city park. The resulting tape lasts about ten minutes before the horizon suddenly tilts to the sky and the grass engulfs the screen in close-up. The video view is framed by the rough edges of the hole in the basket. The effect is like looking out from a moving grotto. The white wall is a black border. Its edges are torn as if seeing outward involved a violent effort. The camera, propelled by the artist/dancer/carver, encounters three obstacles in the urban pastoral of the city park: a wire mesh fence, a children's playground and a cedar bush. Thus, all of landscape is summed up as a kind of blindness and extension of the face. Falling down becomes a way of destabilizing the horizon, the primary signifier of "landscape," through a blind chthonic sublimation of the face.

The void is our most modern term of reference for the macro and microcosm, the ideological cosmology that is produced by the white wall/black hole machine. For those of us under the sway of the machine the universe is mostly a big emptiness, dotted here and there with billions of stars. They might support life on far away planets but no longer direct ours here on earth. Our heaven is indifferent. Like most of the universe our world is mostly nothing as well. Matter is increasingly frivolous, consisting of undetectable signs of waves or particles separated by a nothingness inconceivably vaster than that that constitutes solidity. Inside ourselves, we confront also a region of nothing. Only electrical currents, signalling an illusion called consciousness, which deflates when the currents are interrupted. This popular scientific outlook, which is expressed almost every day in newspapers and on television, is itself a production of the white wall/black hole machine. "Void in, void out," as Charles Olson put it.[17] In *The Special View of History*, first formulated in the 1950s, Olson, the founder of projective verse, suggests that the "Void" is one of a triumvirate of to-be-discarded concepts – "Void, Chaos ... the trope Man" – that constitute an outworn cosmology. Olson suggests that these old notions must be replaced. The universe is not a teleology that begins in chaos and arrives at "Man" through a plan; rather, "creation is the success of its own accident."[18] "Man is no trope of himself as a synecdoche of his species";[19] rather, we must arrive at a recognition of "man as source of his own sense and act of order."[20] Farmer's work is also valorous in its attempts to destroy the regime of a dying cosmology through a proposal of ceaseless production. Narrative in this context produces a counter cosmology.

One of Farmer's most recent works, *The Last Two Million Years* (2007), turns a book into a museum, through a deadpan poetic transformation of a Reader's Digest history of mankind. By simply cutting figures from the book and arranging them on an ascending series of plinths, Farmer returns its organizing rationale to the history museum as paper cut-outs. The cut-outs are as fragile as butterflies, obviously not really able to maintain the discipline of progress. A child's breath could knock out an era. But there are no "eras." Instead, images and incidents, once part of the master narrative, are isolated and the emphasis displaced to objects. For example, the Venerable Bede is a man sharpening his quill, the Aztecs become a wheel used as a toy. The piece looks like a dimensionalization of a Warburg memory screen. (Warburg assembled these as associational clusters of images from art history and print culture to produce what Georges Didi-Huberman calls a *knowledge-montage*.)[21] In *The Last Two Million Years*, cut-out figures from an illustrated book create a productive binary: the figure is isolated from the book and occupies a museum plinth, while whatever was on the verso page becomes a silhouette, a clear form outline that, however, renders incoherent the verso image. Thus Warburg's forces of rationality and irrationality are brought into play, into narration. The forty-two titles, the last being *Sad Face*, form a counter-narrative to the intention of the illustrated history book. Title number 37, *Ancient space, the horror, fierce, but again turns back into an eye*, is only one of several that raise the cosmological problem of the white wall/black hole system. This is but one thread of the ongoing ghost story, presented here in fragile, miniaturized, epic form.



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1. The artist in conversation with the author, September 10, 2007.
2. Ibid.
3. See Geoffrey Farmer, "Kathy's Requiem," *Boo Magazine*, no. 11 (1998). Farmer's reminiscence, written on the occasion of Acker's untimely death, shows what a powerful figure she was for the young art school student.
4. E-mail from Geoffrey Farmer to the author, October 2, 2007.
5. "They [Sherman, McCarthy and Filliou] were making manifest a thinking process and including it in different ways within their work. As well, at some point, there is a question about psychological make-up, and I really identified with this." The artist in conversation with the author, September 10, 2007.
6. Filliou visited Vancouver in 1973, 1977 and 1979. In 1973 he interviewed artists about Intermedia on a tape made by Paul Wong. In 1977 and 1979 he made tapes at the Western Front with Kate Craig.
7. Cited in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso Editions, 1976), p. 38.
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wormhole; accessed November 4, 2007.
9. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984).
11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._H._Bronner; accessed November 4, 2007.
12. See Chapter 7 (pp. 167-191) of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987).
13. Ibid., p. 181.
14. Ibid., p.176.
15. Ibid., p.181.
16. Ibid., p. 171.
17. Charles Olson, *The Special View of History* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), p. 48.
18. Ibid., p. 53.
19. Ibid., p. 49.
20. Ibid., p. 51.
21. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Knowledge: Movement (The Man Who Spoke to Butterflies)," in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

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