Recapturing Spirit in Contemporary Art

Franklin Sirmans

"NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith" grew out of a desire to examine the multiple meanings of spirituality in contemporary art. While several exhibitions in the recent past have explored spirit, the subject has often been treated as ethereal, apolitical, and, at times, anti-intellectual, and form and composition alone are highlighted. But, in a world where religion has always informed issues both sacred and profane, its presence in contemporary art cannot be overlooked. As noted by art historians Richard D. Hecht and Linda Ekstrom, "Contemporary art is not just about the production of secular culture, hermetically sealed off from religion. ... Contemporary art can also be an act of religious creativity."[1] Many of the works in the exhibition intertwine religion and spirituality—and their attendant rituals—with the secular, both defining and dissolving the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds in which we live.

The artists in "NeoHooDoo" hale from the Americas—from Vancouver to New York, from Miami to Havana, from Guatemala City to Bahia. The decision to focus on this region of the globe is an attempt to address a "lost" spirituality, rooted in the Americas and influenced by the hemisphere's particular political and social history. Colonization, oppression, slavery, and the resulting diverse populations unite the Americas while setting them apart from the rest of the world. This complex and difficult history finds expression here in often subversive works by artists who unearth rich, unexamined aspects of the past that have a spiritual resonance in the present.

Much of the art in this exhibition, while rooted in African and indigenous practices, is also influenced by European culture. The violent acts of colonization ruptured, but did not obliterate, the traditions of displaced people. Sacred rituals were adapted to survive, which often meant going underground and integrating characteristics of European customs.[2] For example, the religion Vodun, which came from West Africa, became the basis of Vodou in Haiti, Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, and Hoodoo in the United States.

The name for this exhibition was inspired by Ishmael Reed's poems "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" and "Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic" and his novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, a body of writings that presents a pluralistic view of the history of the United States, with a focus on African American culture.[3] Reed coined the term in the late 1960s when many subverted rituals and practices came to the fore. Their expression in art—in works by Betye Saar and Joe Overstreet, for instance—played a distinct role in the formative issues of the times, such as civil rights and world peace movements. "Neo-HooDoo is a 'Lost American Church' updated," Reed wrote in his poem "Neo-HooDoo

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Kcho (Alexis Leyva Machado)
Columna Infinita, 2005
Metal propellers
H. 19 ⅝ inches (49.8 cm)
Collection Daniel Yankelewitz,
San José, Costa Rica
Courtesy of Pan American Art Projects,
Dallas and Miami

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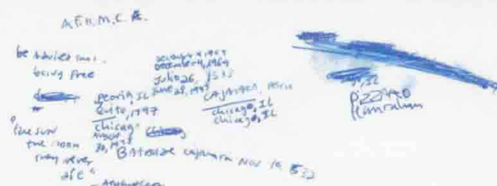
Manifesto," first published in 1969.[4] In *Mumbo Jumbo*, published three years later, he saw his own moment as a time of promise that recalled or perhaps signaled a return to the blossoming of African American culture of the 1920s, particularly in the Harlem Renaissance, the setting of the novel. Reed has qualified this Afrocentric emphasis: "When I say Afro-American aesthetic, I'm not just talking about us, you know, I'm talking about the Americas. People in the Latin countries read my books because they share the same international aesthetic that I'm into and have been into for a long time. And it's multicultural."[5]

The forty-eight works in this exhibition range from that pivotal time when Reed began asserting the idea of NeoHooDoo to the present and together engage in a dialogue on spirituality.

William Cordova
Untitled (atahualpa, geronimo, zapata y hampton), 2007
C-prints and color ink
Dimensions unknown
Courtesy of the artist and
Arndt & Partner, Berlin



Many of the works in "NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith" were made to memorialize and evoke the lives and spirits of others and are elegiac in tone. Such is the oeuvre of Doris Salcedo. But rather than appropriate the memorial-like monument or altar often used to honor the dead, she has chosen to use architectural space or large pieces of furniture to create a physical manifestation of collective mourning for countless people. Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios*, 1992–93 and 1996 (frontispiece, pages 124–25) commemorates, on a large scale, those who have disappeared amid political violence in her native Colombia. Shoes inserted into a niche in the wall, like caskets encased in stitched animal skin, become the funereal remnants of lives lost. After extensive research into the stories of these individuals, Salcedo made a work that protests, remembers, and constitutes a reliquary for the victims' survivors. Although her minimal, colorless objects look mute, they clearly relay narratives of violence and fragility in equal doses, in effect restoring to these people something of their identities.

While recent history provides the backdrop for many artists' explorations of the spirit in contemporary art, others look specifically to earlier histories. Jean-Michel Basquiat's aesthetic interests were formed by his upbringing in a highly diverse immigrant culture, and his work has been dissected for its relevance to the legacy of Africa in North America. His Neo-Expressionist paintings literally address this conflicted history in image and text. In *Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*, 1982 (page 95), around two figures (a black native and a white settler) he wrote the words "colonialization" and "god," and cited the name of the early colonizer "Cortez," illustrating the interlocking presence of religion in the violent conquest of the Americas. The piece is crudely constructed with Basquiat's trademark crossed bars as stretchers for the canvas, revealing the importance of the materials to the potency of the piece.

While Basquiat's painting suggests the complex collective experience of colonialism, some of William Cordova's works, dating back to 2002, conflate violent events spanning time and place to reveal the cyclical

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Brian Jungen
Prototype for New Understanding #10, 2001
Nike Air Jordans
11 × 14 × 23 inches (27.9 × 35.6 × 58.4 cm)
Rennie Collection, Vancouver
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

nature of oppression in political history. Cordova has created several works, including photographs, drawings, and installations, with variations on the title *the house that frank lloyd wright built for atahualpa*—sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish—linking the sixteenth-century Incan ruler with the twentieth-century architect in a mix of concepts relating to colonialism, modernism, and the history of art. The Incas' last sovereign inspired Cordova's site-specific installation *the house that frank lloyd wright built for atahualpa,* 2008, which the artist created for this exhibition (not illustrated). Conjuring the beginning of colonialism, this new work evokes Atahualpa's death at the hands of the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro, despite the fact that the Incas had filled a "ransom room" in a house in Cajamarca, Peru, with gold to save their leader. In *la casa que frank lloyd wright hiso para atahualpa*, 2008 (page 100), fake gold drips out from underneath the house. In yet another work, Cordova juxtaposed the Incan structure with the town-house in Chicago in which Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were murdered in 1969 (opposite).

Radcliffe Bailey took on history in his installation *Storm at Sea,* 2007 (page 110), in which a sea of found piano keys undulates under model ships and an African sculpture of Ogun, a Yoruba god of war. Clearly evocative of the Atlantic slave trade, Bailey's assemblage of found materials parallels the transport of the estimated twelve million Africans who, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, survived the arduous crossing to the Americas. The prominent placement of the sculpture in Bailey's piece invokes the Atlantic as a transitional space for the art and religion of Africa, in addition to being the site of terrific horror that it was. Two works by Kcho—*Kayak*, 2002 (page 111), and *Columna Infinita*, 2005 (page 13), offer more recent narratives in which the sea is an allegory of transition and displacement. The skinny wooden form of *Kayak* hints at the shape of this type of boat. With nails hammered into the top surface, this non-functional vehicle references the Congo wood fetishes known as *nkisi nkondi* (see page 69) in which metal insertions signal the hope for justice in settling disputes. *Columna Infinita*—a title the artist has used several times, referencing Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, 1918—is composed of rusted motorboat propellers. Neither of Kcho's constructions could be considered seaworthy, reminding us of the makeshift vessels that Cubans, Haitians, and others have used to flee their troubled island homes.

Summoning the belief and the power of the spiritual, Gary Simmons' Bottle Tree series (see pages 31,93) calls to mind a tradition that traveled from the Congo to the southern United States. Believed capable of capturing evil spirits, bottle trees were placed in front of homes as a kind of protection. The smooth, seductive surfaces of Simmons' pieces suggest a factory finish, and thus avoid the nostalgia that a fetish can evoke. Conveying a palpable immediacy, the works in the series embody a remnant or artifact of tradition but, at the same time, signal the degree to which the past remains viable in the

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present. Perhaps also referencing the tradition of bottle trees, David Hammons created a circle out of used Thunderbird bottles in his *Untitled*, a 1989 assemblage (page 91). Evoking a group of people who may have taken solace from the alcohol, the piece, like many other works this artist has made with used Thunderbird and Night Train bottles, is multilayered. It constitutes a respectful acknowledgment of jazz greats John "Trane" Coltrane and Charlie "Bird" Parker, the latter of whom drank to soothe and to inspire himself; and it commemorates those who drank the cheap wines that were developed for the so-called misery market of the poor. Exploring the consumption of alcohol as a rite of passage as well as an imposed social activity, Nari Ward invented the word "liquorsoul." Known for large-scale sculptures that often incorporate found objects such as discarded baby carriages, oven pans, and fire hoses, Ward arranged the letters of a broken, nonfunctioning neon sign to create *LiquorsouL*, 2007 (pages 116–17).

Questioning singular meanings of printed materials, Jimmie Durham in *A Street-Level Treatise on Money and Work*, 2005 (page 48), poetically juxtaposes found maps, advertisements, receipts, letters, and posters in an attempt to redirect and reinterpret language in a new context. His work, along with that of Rebecca Belmore (see pages 37, 41, 128) and Brian Jungen (see pages 15, 44, 98), is addressed in Jen Budney's essay, in which she discusses how the sacred signs, symbols, and language of oppressed people have been subverted, and how maintaining and integrating those artifacts into Western modes of representation is crucial.

The penchant of these artists to place found objects and artifacts in new settings brings to mind the writing of Greg Tate, who is represented in this catalogue. In "Hoodoo Is What We Do," Tate waxes poetic, as he is wont to do, on the subject of the African diaspora, citing George Clinton, Miles Davis, and Jimi Hendrix in a text that could easily be sung. Music plays an important role as well in the works at hand. Terry Adkins's feather sculpture *Signature*, 2007 (page 123), plays on the trademark costume accessory of the great 1920s and 1930s vocalist Bessie Smith; her song "Preachin' the Blues" is a classic example of African tradition recast in a New World form. With its many references to Hoodoo, early Blues music represents a potent confluence of secular and spiritual ideas and culture.

In any discussion of the transatlantic voyage of African music, dance, and visual art forms, the research, writing, and lecture/performances of Robert Farris Thompson are essential to an understanding of the deep African roots of New World culture. In "Communiqué from Afro-Atlantis," an important article from 1999 republished here, Thompson noted the African-based origins not only of bottle trees but also of basket weaving in Halifax and marimbula instruments in Cuba, as well as mambo and the Kuba textile patterns found throughout the hemisphere. Recognizing contemporary musicians from Marc Anthony to the Wu-Tang Clan, Thompson's text captures, in its content as well as his incantatory writing style, the vitality with which the past infuses contemporary life. While criticism helps us find our way through the discussion of this project, poetry is something to be invoked and celebrated by a griot. Here Quincy Troupe fulfills that role in a poignant coda with the poem "An Art of Lost Faith."

In another essay in this catalogue Arthur C. Danto explores a possible universal meaning for spirit in art. Using Immanuel Kant's definition from his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as both a basis and a point of departure, Danto suggests that within the pluralism of today's international culture, the artist's spirit or "creative power" would not be easily expressed in Renaissance-style tableaux. While this practice was apt for illustrating ideas central to Christianity hundreds of years ago, Danto asserts that today's artists may consider the found object and other unique materials more apt for conveying meaning.

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Janine Antoni uses the visceral medium of animal skin in *Bridle,* 2000 (pages 114–15), one of a series of works that she created for her 2001 exhibition "The Girl Made of Butter." The title refers to a folktale of the Bahamas—the artist's birthplace—in which a girl melts away after her mother leaves her alone with two boys. In *Bridle*, cowhide—an emblem of the American cattle ranch—has been stretched taut and anchored to the floor and ceiling. Enough of the rawhide has been cut cleanly away to create a backpack. This work not only suggests the commodification and destruction of natural resources but also underscores the human body's primal need for animal skin as protection. When first shown, the piece was exhibited with a photograph of Antoni bathing in a trough filled with milk and a tagged cow feeding at her breast, evoking the Madonna and Child and alluding to the idea that the communion of humans and the natural world is akin to the presence of the spirit.

For Robert Gober, the domestic object is a source of enigmatic memory. In the sculpture *Untitled*, 1998–99 (page 92), a steel pipe pierces a handwoven basket. The basket, an example of Americana elevated to the status of artwork, has been violated by a symbol of industry and progress. Painstakingly crafted, Gober's sculptures explore cultural and sexual identity with a watchful eye on North America's puritanical colonial history. At the heart of that history is the U.S. prison system, which currently houses one of every hundred adult citizens. In Gober's *Untitled (Prison Window)*, 2003–07 (page 11), a surreal, beautiful reddish blue sky beckons through the crossbars. Are we the jailed or the jailers? In another examination of colonization, Dario Robleto's sculptures signal the devastation wrought in war and in the name of Manifest Destiny (see right). *Deep Down I Don't Believe in Hymns,* 2001 (page 126), comprises a military blanket that has been "infested" with dust derived from a melted vinyl LP recording of Neil Young and Crazy Horse's song "Cortez the Killer." In this piece, the Spanish conqueror

Dario Robleto
Conjugal Sorrow, 2005–06
Handmade paper (pulp from letters to brides from soldiers who did not return from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, and cotton), colored paper, rosary of Saint Francis of Assisi (patron saint against dying alone), World War I chaplain's metal rosary beads, carved-bone knitting needles, braided hair flowers, silk, poplar, and ashes
13 × 17½ × 4½ inches (33 × 44.5 × 11.4 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and D'Amelio Terras, New York

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of Mexico becomes a surrogate for the smallpox with which U.S. soldiers deliberately infested the blankets distributed to American Indians with the intent to wipe them out.

Pure form plays a key role as a sign of the spiritual or as a marker of ritual. Artists such as James Lee Byars, Marepe, and George Smith engage the circle as an abstraction of eternal rhythms. For Smith the circle signifies life as well as his travels in Africa; the curved shaped of his *Spiral to the Next World*, 1990 (page 112), suggests an eternal continuum. In Byars's *The Halo*, 1985 (page 94), and Marepe's *Auréolas (Halos)*, 2004 (page 102), the circle literally shines: Byars's piece is made of brass; Marepe's comprises a ring of loosely joined industrial lights. Both artists seem here to have fashioned objects of ambiguous interpretation. Hammons's circle of bottles (page 91), with its narrative suggestions, also resonates with this group of works. In John Cage's large abstractions on paper, such as *River Rocks and Smoke 4/10/90 #11* and *#16*, 1990 (pages 120, 121), Cage applied lines and washes of color with exacting care: an infinite circle here, an unending line there. But in fact, influenced by Zen philosophy, his creative process—in his graphic work no less than in his music—depended on the chance mix of elements, in this case, fire and smoke.

Eclipse, 2006 (page 101), a found African sculpture that the artist Sanford Biggers cut in half, questions the role of ritual objects in a museum, where they are distanced from their traditional functions. Half of the sculpture rests on a low pedestal, while the other is positioned higher. The artist's intent, it seems, is to make us think about whether such work can ever be displayed out of context and recapture its inherent meaning. *The Curandera's Botanica*, 2008, the piece created by Amalia Mesa-Bains for this exhibition (not illustrated), integrates formal elements from two previous works, *Perfume Laboratory: The Hall of Science*, 2000 (page 99), and *Curandera's Room*, 2007 (not illustrated). In these

Amalia Mesa-Bains
Queen of the Waters, Mother of the Land, 1992
Mixed media
144 × 240 × 72 inches (365.8 × 610 × 182.9 cm)
Installation view at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

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works, as well as in the altarpiece *Queen of the Waters, Mother of the Land*, 1992 (opposite), the artist investigated distinctions between artwork and object. In her new mixed-media piece, she addresses rituals of mourning, exploring ideas about scientific and faith-based healing. Betye Saar's use of windows, shallow boxes, and altars also plays with our expectations of works of art by situating her creations between the aesthetic and the vernacular. Recently, Saar has referred to these works as "ancestral boxes," alluding to their link with traditional belief systems and objects of ritual importance. Her *Gris-Gris Box*, 1972 (page 127), contains charms, or talismans, to ward off evil and bring good luck (gris-gris). Michael Tracy's *Cruz de la Paz Sagrada* (*Cross of the Sacred Peace*), 1980 (page 118), similarly pays homage to the fetishized object, juxtaposing elements associated with the practice of North American Catholicism, in which Tracy was raised, with the Mexican reliquaries he admired. Multilayered and textured with natural materials and libations, this cross displays a patina akin to those of many African ritual pieces.

Whereas Biggers, Mesa-Bains, Saar, and Tracy use familiar elements of spiritual practice, the human body serves as a ceremonial object for other artists in the exhibition. Julia P. Herzberg's essay highlights the role of ritual and performance in the work of a number of Caribbean and Central American artists. Of particular importance to the exhibition is the late Ana Mendieta. Working in isolated natural settings that acquired ritual significance through her interaction with them, she constructed and destroyed her "earth-body" forms, which she created by imprinting her body in sand or mud or by painting its silhouette on various surfaces (see pages 64, 108–09). José Bedia is an initiate of Palo Monte (an African-derived religion practiced in Cuba) and a student of Native American beliefs; his work draws upon this religiously inflected, cross-hemispherical experience. A new version (not illustrated) of his

Michael Joo
***Salt Transfer Cycle*, 1993–95**
Still from eight-minute looped video with sound
Commissioned by the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco
Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York

Regina José Galindo
***Confesión (Confession)*, 2007**
Performance commissioned by Galería Caja Blanca,
Palma de Mallorca, 2007
Lambda print on Forex
32 1⁄16 × 49 inches (81.5 × 124.5 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Prometeo Gallery di Ida Pisani, Milan

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Las Cosas que me Arrastran (The Things That Drag Me Along) from 1996 (see pages 58, 119) speaks to the emigré's sense of never being free from past experience and hence incapable of real self-determination. Other artists engaged in similar work and represented in this exhibition (and discussed at length elsewhere in this catalogue) are Tania Bruguera, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pepón Osorio, and Ernesto Pujol.

Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit,* 1971 (page 103), stresses the ritual that every artist performs in going to the studio to create. This work comes from a time when Piper, who is a philosopher as well as an artist, was studying Kantian thought and felt removed from the world. She made fourteen photographs of herself to document her physical existence, but at the same time questioned the nature of this corporeal definition: as the series progresses, Piper's body actually becomes less and less visible, until finally it disappears. Also focusing on the performing body, Michael Joo's *Salt Transfer Cycle,* 1993–95 (pages 19, 106–07), is a physically challenging yet elegant effort to express the complex transactions between inorganic elements and living things. A video shows the artist diving into and swimming through water in which two thousand pounds of MSG has been dissolved; he emerges, salt encrusted, to crawl, and then to run. We see him next sitting in a forest where elk approach to lick him clean before the cycle can begin again. Piper's intellectual discipline and its impact on her corporeal state, and the extreme physical demands that Joo made of himself, all point to a state of being "possessed," which in a religious sense describes the process of taking on the "spirit." Regina José Galindo, in contrast, often places her body in precarious situations to direct attention to today's political realities. A series of recent videos shows the artist receiving an electrical shock from a stun gun (page 63); her naked form being hit by water from a powerful hose aimed at her; and her head being dunked into a container of water by a large man who holds her by the neck (pages 19, 113).

While many of the artists discussed above actually perform as part of their work, Felix Gonzalez-Torres created a stage for performances by others in his *"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform),* 1991 (pages 104–05). This work is defined as much by absence as by presence. At times the platform, unoccupied, gleams—a pale blue box ringed with lights. At other times, someone with headphones appears and dances on the small stage. Focused on the integral element of a place for dance, this piece elicits two disparate realms—the countless, cool square boxes of Minimalist art with their "promise of an eventual present"[6] and the club stage with its hot lights—and speaks to issues of private and public, contemplation and action, and the sacred and profane. This leads us back to *Mumbo Jumbo,* in which Reed describes "Jes Grew" as a psychic scourge that makes the hosts it has infected want to dance freely. It is a dance of liberation: "[T]he Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. ...Some plagues arise from decomposing animals, but Jes Grew is electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy. Terrible plagues were due to the wrath of God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods."[7]

Like Reed's early writings, the works in "NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith" illuminate various ways of living in the present-day Americas. They are an embodiment of ideas in the forms of the ritual and the sacred that come from this unique and vast cultural expanse, and they validate the spiritual as a foundation for the making of contemporary art. As Reed said, "NeoHooDoo believes that every man is an artist, and every artist a priest."[8]

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NOTES

1 Richard D. Hecht and Linda Ekstrom, "Unveiling the Sacred in Contemporary Art" (lecture from the conference, "The Cultural Turn III: Profane and Sacred," University of California, Santa Barbara, Feb. 24, 2001).

2 In a discussion of the layering of trace presences, cultural historian Stuart Hall stated: "*The African presence* is a trace of that particular version of Africa that is 'alive and well in the diaspora,' rarely, until recently, allowed to express itself in its own voice, but deploying indirect, subterranean means. ... *The European presence* is the colonizing voice that everywhere confidently assumed its own superiority and ascendancy, but that by long cohabitation became subverted and translated." See Stuart Hall, "Afterword: Legacies of Anglo-Caribbean Culture—A Diasporic Perspective" in Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven and London: Yale Center for British Art in association with Yale University Press, 2007), p. 179.

3 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972). In many ways, this book remains a living and breathing document. The conflict in Haiti it describes seems particularly resonant in light of the present war in Iraq. While Reed's Wallflower Order—an international conspiratorial group dedicated to monotheism and the pursuit of preventing people from dancing—prompted some to call the author paranoid, this satirical invention pales before the much grimmer acts of rendition today. Also, the restitution of artworks stolen or appropriated during conflict that is currently a very real concern for collectors, dealers, and museums was imagined by Reed in his discussion of the Mu'tafikah, a group of black, yellow, and red men who aim to "liberate and restore stolen artifacts" from the Center for Art Detention on 82nd Street and Fifth Avenue, New York (a.k.a. The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

4 Ishmael Reed, "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," in idem, *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), p. 20.

5 Quoted in Reginald Martin, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4, 2 (1984), p. 180.

6 Hamza Walker, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Traveling*, exh. brochure (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 1994).

7 Reed (note 3); (reprint, New York: Scribner's Paperback, 1996), p. 6.

8 Reed (note 4), p. 21.

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