
READINGS: THE PRINTS OF FRANCES WHITEHEAD

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Particularly someone who writes regularly. There's a degree of implicit conflict in just a psychological sense, under any circumstances, whoever the writer. I'm talking about critical distance. I guess somebody has to do it, and there certainly are wonderful pieces of catalogue writing. I've made this rule for myself, and I wouldn't want to just apply it blankly. Because all of us have relationships with artists, and different kinds of friendships, and because of that, different kinds of intimacy with work. The process of writing from that point of view can often be very valuable for everyone. I don't do studio visits any more. I do them in the case of artists who do not have representation. I don't do them for people who have galleries.

One of the things about writing for a newspaper is that you really begin to see yourself more and more on the side of your readers. They become a very big presence. When I wrote for art magazines, I always felt that I was a spokesperson for artists, and that my main function was to be on their side. But when I started writing for the *Village Voice*, I began to see myself much more as a first viewer, as one might be a first reader, and I didn't want to know much more than the audience. I wanted to get as much as the person off the street would get, and deal with that information. If I did anything for the artists, it was really to show how what they were sending was being received, so they could match up a reaction with their own intentions.

There are all different levels of criticism, and they're written to all different kinds of people. One of the attitudes at the *Times*, which both works to my advantage but doesn't always, is that there are a lot more people out there who are interested in the art world than actually understand how to experience what it has to offer. In certain pieces, I think well, okay, I'll try to write in such a way that somebody who has never been into an art gallery will finally summon up the courage to go into one. But I don't want to have to write that way all the time, and I don't.

Word of mouth was so ferocious in the '80s, particularly with all those art advisors going around. People were selling right out of the studio before they had shows or reviews. Sometimes I feel more pressure than I felt in the '80s, but I never know if that's a factor of the times, or my just being on this job longer, and getting to know people better, and having more credibility. In the '80s a lot of the hype really made me uncomfortable. And in some ways sort of interfered with my ability to see things. I found myself resisting things that got over-hyped. That whole feeling that you're going along with some wave of mindless enthusiasm, if you write positively about something that's being hyped. I find it healthier now, back to normal.

AMEI WALLACH, chief art critic, *New York Newsday*; art essayist, "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour"

I have no effect on the market at all. What *Newsday* does is get audiences. Our readers are not big players in the market. Although the "MacNeil/Lehrer" audience is more educated, they are not that educated about art. My role is, really, to make very complex ideas under-

standable so people can come to art and have an experience rather than coming to it full of anger. Morley Safer really put his finger on a pulse—the anger of the public. And the anger of the public has to do with the economy.

There was a terrible mistake made in the '80s with the heating up of the market. It was extraordinarily dirty, and it was about laundering money, and it was international, and it had very little to do with art. Editors who don't give a damn about art like headlines about money—and you started seeing front page stories in the *New York Times* and in other papers all over the country. People started equating art with money. That sort of thing is fine in terms of publicity—and it's fine as long as we live in a society where everyone believes one day they can be rich or one day they can be president. Now people have a lot of anger about their fates and therefore their anger is focused on this thing that's supposed to be for rich people. It's become a class thing, where art is supposed to be for rich people and the art part has been lost completely.

In the '80s critics had no role in making the market—it was all collectors and dealers, and nobody listened to critics. I think that's changed. Those collectors we knew in the '80s don't exist any more. They're on the sidelines, they're bankrupt, they're not interested, etc. Editors, therefore, are not interested, because what they were interested in was all the brouhaha and all the money. The few places you do read about art have much more weight, and people are much more willing to listen.

I'm not allowed to write catalogue essays. It's a total conflict of interest. I'm a daily journalist, and I cover these galleries all the time. It's such a dicey thing. Are you going to be influenced because these people pay you money? Yeah, probably. The problem is most people don't make a living as a critic. Would I do it if I didn't have a full-time position and just did articles here and there? I don't know. Every case has to weighed on its own merits. I was asked to write a catalogue for Roy Lichtenstein's prints, and I couldn't because I cover Leo Castelli, his dealer. But I really would have liked to. If somebody writes a *museum* catalogue essay about an artist they admire and want to write about...why is that different? I think MOMA makes markets much more than a gallery does. The museum wants to be above it all, but the museum has much more at stake in the market than a dealer does.

I don't know that critics can make the market. I do think that critics can say things that get listened to—but only by people who are interested in art.

Caveat emptor, urges Morley Safer, who seems to believe that critics are among those most complicit in conning the public. These critics, however, view themselves not as apologists of artists and dealers, but as writers sincerely engaged in the business of elucidating works of art, whatever form or language that takes. Many thanks to all of them for this monetary distraction. —FH

READINGS: THE PRINTS OF FRANCES WHITEHEAD

by Kristen Brooke Schleifer

Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks
The lady of situations.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Like the High Priestess of the Tarot deck, Frances Whitehead presides over an arcane body of knowledge whose true interpretation remains perpetually half-veiled by her cloak. Long a patroness of obscure and discarded information, she conjures up forgotten symbols that resonate with familiar, yet elusive, meanings and shrouded revelations.

Although schooled as a printmaker, Whitehead has become known over the past decade as a sculptor, first building large-scale, quasi-embellished constructions in richly textured metal, then progressing into the use of organic materials such as shellac and mica. Elegantly spare, these works never fully gave up their secrets; it is as if, by paring down her ideas into their essential forms, she created something impenetrable. Only their esoteric, alchemical titles provide etymological clues to revelation. The dumbbell-like *Arsenic* (1988) is, quite literally, an early chemical symbol for the poison. The cone and armature *Alembic II* (1988–89) is named after a vessel used in alchemical distillation. A flat ring of shellac is folded at its diameter to form *Halve* (1991). Learning Whitehead's vocabulary, however, is no guarantee of comprehension. Vaguely recognizable, yet foreign, her sculptures resist translation.

In the past year, Whitehead has moved toward installation, a format that allows the multiplicity of her concerns to emerge. Recently on view in the exhibition *The Nature of the Machine* at the Chicago Cultural Center, her efforts have taken a botanical shift, the ancient meanings of plant materials echoing her conceptual themes. *The Dream* (1993) comprised a fragrant veil fabricated from cast pine rosin on an armature of zinc and steel, gradually dissolved by oil of laurel from a glass dripper poised above, a mantle of laurel leaves, glass pistils and stamens submerged in laurel oil, and laurel plants encased in zinc armatures. Opposite these botanical symbols for fame and desire stood glass pots of deadly nightshade (*atropa belladonna*) laden with lethal berries. In *Untitled (for the Lotophagi)* (1992–93), oil of rosemary (remembrance) floated in a lotus (forgetting) "dish" of zinc and steel mesh coated with green shellac. Nearby, rosemary topiaries spelled out "memory," "amnesia," and "anamnesia." In these complex, sensuous installations, Whitehead abandons the reductivism of her previous objects, engaging in dialogue rather than resolution. Through the dialectics of sense and intellect, she attempts to recover the origins of meaning from the distorted transmissions of time, history, and memory.

In 1991, on the cusp of this abrupt transition, Whitehead created her first formal prints—a

series of 19 lithographs and monoprints—at Segura. Their technical complexity, combining double-sided printing with manual applications of shellac, has made editioning the images a slow process. To date, only five have emerged in multiple: *Amnesis I* (ed. 40), *Conclusus II* (ed. five), *Conclusus IV* (ed. 40), *Historiograph I* (ed. five) and *Schematic III* (ed. five). Still others—*Amnesis II*, *Anamnesis*, *Schematic II*, and *Topology*—are in progress. Layering mysterious forms from mathematics, science, and anatomy with the often cryptic, embryonic notations of her sketchbooks, the prints function as a kind of codex to her three-dimensional work, bridging her earlier objects and her latest tableaux.

Whitehead is preoccupied with equivalences. An avid collector as well as a maker of objects, she is drawn repeatedly to particular forms. Her “archive,” a walk-in closet at the back of her studio, is cluttered with the fruits of her magnificent obsession—thrift-store housewares, mechanical parts, her own miniature sculptures in paper, metal, and wire. Her initial, aesthetic attraction to a found object may or may not be spontaneous (she steadfastly maintains it is), but, once any object is procured, she submits it to rigorous analysis, drawing and redrawing the form like an architect working in reverse. In the course of this schematizing process, relationships between seemingly disparate forms appear. An engine wrapping, for example, when visualized on its side and rotated 360°, generates a shape that mimics another of her curios—a green-glass flower dish. A telephone receiver, viewed from the side, becomes the cross-section of a human vertebra. A flat paper ring, pinched at either end of its horizontal axis, recreates an African *ngotho*, an ivory ceremonial bracelet. These patterns, mapped out in her sketchbooks, begin to collapse the distinctions between industry and nature, science and art, decoration and utility, tracing their seemingly separate evolution to a single, unifying source.

Whitehead’s formal explorations find their analogue in topology, through which dissimilar objects—a donut and a coffee cup, for example—may be mathematically proven to be distortions of the same geometric principles. The donutlike torus and the more complex Klein bottle, two common figures in topological study, float dreamlike across the prints or hover reverently at center. These found images, generated onto aluminum plates by xerox transfer, are superimposed on a sheet of drawings, also transferred to aluminum plate, from Whitehead’s sketchbook. Both the drawn and appropriated images are documents of Whitehead’s “research”; they link the prints to the rest of her oeuvre, revealing distinct formal and conceptual threads. The recurring concentric circles of the torus, for example, recall the earlier *Halve* and presage the lotus dish in her recent installation.

By opening her sketchbook for scrutiny, Whitehead reaches what is for her an unprecedented level of intimacy. Viewed against the

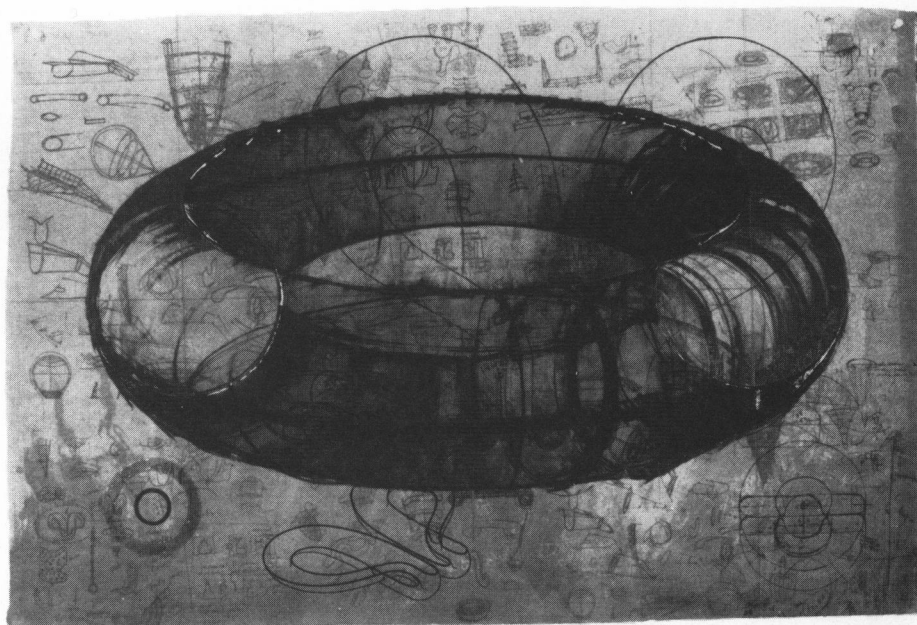
almost stubborn objectivity of her three-dimensional work, this gesture marks a stunning and deliberate invasion of her own privacy. Whitehead’s imagery is equally personal and revelatory, shifting from the cool abstraction of her previous sculpture to unabashed biomorphism. The correspondence between rational, mathematical forms and reproductive organs is strikingly apparent. The phallic, tubular construction of the Klein bottle, once bisected, becomes both pelvic and uterine. In the print series *Conclusus*, a mysterious bottle or paddle shape with striated markings appears, on closer inspection, to be a splayed human organ. Like the topological figures, it is a found image, although precisely which organ it is—a bladder? a penis?—is never clear. (Even Whitehead herself can’t say; the image was not clearly captioned in the original text.) Its gender ambiguity echoes that of the Klein bottle, yet also suggests an invasive surgical procedure—a forced laying-open, an unwelcome imposition of science on nature. The drawings in the background become, then, an attempt to reconstruct and regenerate through the creative power of “art.” Like Leonardo, whose exhaustive empirical observations informed his mechanical inventions, Whitehead dissects in order to rebuild. But, as with all experiments, some efforts disappoint. For example, initial attempts to fabricate the ribcagelike forms in the sketches failed. The Klein bottle itself is unbuildable, an imaginary form possible only in four dimensions. Beneath the surface of these prints lurks the frustrating realization of human limit, the power to conceive without the power to originate. After years of rational inquiry, the synthetic can imitate, approximate, substitute for, or perhaps even improve upon nature, but at some point nature will have its revenge.

Linked to this dialogue is Whitehead’s use of “green” materials—shellac, flora, essential oils. On the one hand, she displays an environmentalist’s bent, returning to the nontoxic, the organic, as an antidote to the mixed

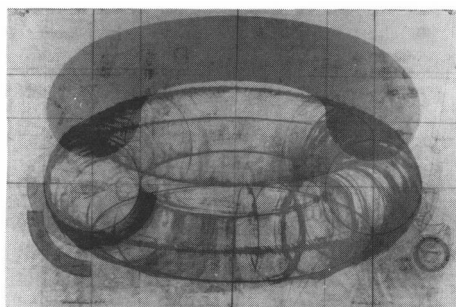
blessings of industry. On the other, she employs the rationalist’s determination to bend nature to human will, pushing the physical limits of her media. Through years of experimentation, she has achieved a control over the process of shellacking that allows for duplication—with a fair amount of effort. The liquid, tinted in orange, green, or black, is brushed directly onto the paper or poured onto a sheet of plastic and cut to the desired shape, then applied to the paper using an additional coat. Glistening with translucent color and light, the layers of shellac add a palpable richness to the prints, a suggestive contrast to the flat quality of the ink. In *Anamnesis*, a shellacked section of the torus rises from the printed image like an awakening, bringing viewers to a new state of revelation.

Anamnesis, like the recent rosemary topiaries, plants Whitehead firmly on the side of nature. Both works are pointed wakeups calls to a society anaesthetized by mass production and consumption. Her long-standing interest in natural and archaic sciences—chemistry, botany, alchemy—dovetails into this sensibility. In the age of info-technology, the natural world has become anachronistic, quaint, or downright primitive—something our “advanced” contemporary society must “get back to.” Whitehead’s command of science seems daunting, yet the bulk of information is hardly complex; most of what she knows, she points out, is high-school stuff, the kind of thing people learn and promptly forget. The prints themselves have a timeworn aura that speaks of suppressed and recovered memories. Shellac and tusche washes deliberately age the works until they resemble artifacts. The *Historiograph* series goes further, incorporating miniature prints of the torus and Klein bottle in chine collé, relics of an early experiment at Segura. By assuming the authoritative mantle of history, the prints become ancient palimpsests or precious scrolls, keepers of lost wisdom.

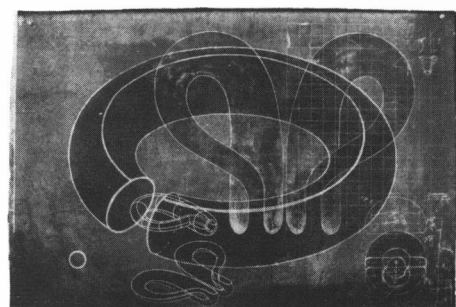
Dispensing these primeval secrets is Whitehead herself, the artist as conjuror or sorcerer



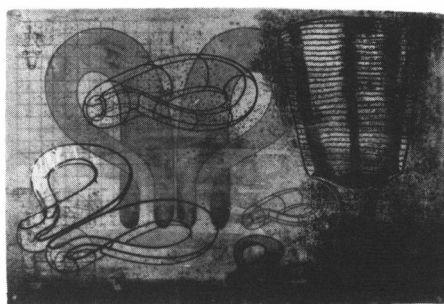
Frances Whitehead, *Amnesis II*, lithograph with shellac (24-1/2x37 in.), 1992. All works courtesy Segura Publishing, Tempe.



Anamnesis



Topology I



Conclusus IV

ess, mediating between the visible and invisible worlds. Appropriately, her process partakes of the magical. Each piece of Kayasuki paper is printed recto and verso; only with the application of shellac, which soaks the paper and renders it translucent, do hidden images emerge. The more coats of shellac, the more translucency is achieved, deepening the pictorial space. When applied to both front and back of the paper, the shellac cutouts create further trance-like visual effects, pushing glossy elements forward and drawing matte images back. The compositions appear to float and shift, mimicking the surreal interplay of the rational and subconscious. These formal manipulations parallel Whitehead's preoccupation with memory as both a psychological and cultural construct. Certain information, pushed to the fore, becomes "valuable," while, under the surface, a wealth of knowledge and experience lies dormant, forgotten, yet ever present and no less crucial. Like the Vedic *maya*, the veil of illusion that both obscures and reveals, the shellac-soaked paper offers a glimpse of an alternate universe behind the perceptual curtain.

As a sibyl, however, Whitehead is stubbornly abstruse, calling images up from the mist but refusing to interpret. There is something intimidating about someone who has answers, yet speaks only in riddles. But Whitehead is not given to easy or complete revelations,

whether personal or artistic. In many ways, she operates from a culturally received position that keeps femaleness, and its apparently dangerous powers, underground. Her early interest in esoterica functioned, in one sense, as a brilliant disguise—using a highly scientific, manmade vocabulary to express a furtive female intelligence. The true riches of her prints are similarly concealed: applied on verso, the sensuous wealth of her materials—shellac, gold and silver leaf—prosper unseen, turned to the wall. Her recent move toward botanical materials—first the shellac and plant resins, and now the plants themselves—more directly embraces the traditional realm of feminine influence. Whitehead's transition stemmed from her own garden, an unexpected profusion of vegetables, herbs, poisons, and nocturnal blossoms reclaimed from the rubble of the former crackhouse next door. For Whitehead-as-woman, this secret garden is a nurturing endeavor, a haven from the blight of the city, yet once pressed into the service of her art, it becomes almost sinister, a laboratory for bizarre experiments. Whitehead herself is something of an urban Morticia, cooking up the belladonna jam. She straddles the borderline between heresy and enlightenment, where one woman's witchcraft becomes another man's science.

Whitehead's prints mark her first direct confrontation with gender difference and issues of creativity. Implicit in this is deliberate forgetting as a cultural defense. Historically, knowledge belonging to women has been perceived as a threat, something to be co-opted and made "safe" by the masculine realms of science and art. Whitehead's compulsive veiling, then, serves as both a protective mechanism (a way to avoid being burned at the patriarchal stake) and a metaphor for the hidden powers of the female. The combination of geometric, "rational" images and intuitive scribbles, and the attendant play of her anthropomorphic mathematical forms, return the body to uneasy coexistence with the intellect. With this resurrection, Whitehead begins to question the true locus of creative power. The secret, invisible anatomy of the uterus is at once an unreproducible conundrum (the Klein bottle) and the *prima materia* (the torus) from which all other forms spring. Splitting the Klein bottle apart only deepens the puzzle, leaving the inquisitor with twin Möbius strips, impossible to fully penetrate or escape. Whitehead plays with the mathematical paradox of these twisting surfaces, where "outside" is simultaneously "inside." As a result, the fallopian anatomy of the bisected Klein bottle suggests a trapped, if vast, potential for giving birth, waiting for the midwife.

Whitehead's prints are simultaneously a celebration of artistic, intellectual creativity and an indictment of its labors, which ultimately can only give rise to approximations of life. Her topological exercises practice evolution on a private scale; the iconic torus and Klein bottle are supreme ancestors, the secret bloodlines between one act of generation and the next. In their anthropomorphism, Whitehead finds a correspondence between the creativity of the mind and that of the body. Ultimately, howev-

er, "similar" is not "same." At the heart of her unifying process is an attempt to compensate for a schism, a missing link. These prints, transitional works in her artistic relocation from the intellectual to the sensual, are both formal and intimate explorations. Like the split Platonic hermaphrodite, Whitehead is searching for a lost half, venturing to the mysteries of the "other side" in desire and pursuit of the omnipotent whole.

Kristen Brooke Schleifer is a writer living in Chicago.

NEWS OF THE PRINT WORLD: *People & Places*

Taking a Gamble. "We're in a very odd time in photography—one of the oddest times I can remember," says private collector George Reinhart. "It's like playing roulette." At the fall **photography auctions** many records were broken, some quite unforeseen. There was, of course, Stieglitz' *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait—Hands with Thimble*, selling at Christie's for \$360,000 (PCN's prices do not include the buyer's premiums), highest ever for a single photograph at auction. Most people expected that, for one reason ("the finest print ever to come up at auction," says Peter MacGill of Pace/MacGill Gallery, who bid up to \$300,000) or another ("the hype before the sale," says Reinhart). But a surprise to everyone was the Stieglitz photogravure of *The Terminal*, estimated at \$7,000–\$9,000, selling for \$95,000 at Christie's. And Tina Modotti's *Two Callas*, estimated at \$30,000–\$50,000, selling for \$170,000. And the Eli Lotar *Slaughterhouse* at Sotheby's, estimated at \$1,500–\$2,500, selling for \$28,000. The list goes on. Such moments spiced up sales that otherwise dragged on through a grand total—for Christie's, Sotheby's, and Swann's—of 1,790 lots. Not even **Swann Galleries**, usually boasting a modest buy-in rate, escaped unscathed. Their total on October 6, \$423,635, was less than last fall, with 181 lots bought in at 29%.

The size thus remains hefty, with houses promising, as in the past, to trim down in the future. "Though we can't be sure," says Beth Gates-Warren, expert at Sotheby's. "I'm always reluctant to turn things down, because it affects the liquidity of the market. Things come in at the last minute—seven of our top ten lots came in the week before we finalized the sale." She might well feel reluctant: 44% of **Sotheby's** total on October 7 was carried by the top ten. Altogether, the house earned \$2,467,875, nearly a million more than last spring, though the buy-in rate was 36.5% on 660 lots. Despite the heft, Sotheby's was a handsome sale, "such extraordinary material, across the board," says Reinhart. A Man Ray rayograph ("the most beautiful I've ever seen," says Man Ray expert Timothy Baum) estimated at \$50,000–\$75,000 ("for no reason, other than a lack of understanding of the market"), sold for \$100,000. Among the more impressive historical lots, an anonymous daguerreotype of *P. T. Barnum and Tom Thumb* sold for \$34,000 to the National Portrait Gallery. "I tried to buy it years ago," says Reinhart. A dis-