



3-1995

True Confessions?

Robert Jensen

University of Kentucky, robert.jensen@uky.edu

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/art_facpub



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Jensen, Robert, "True Confessions?" (1995). *Art & Visual Studies Faculty Publications*. 6.
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/art_facpub/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Art & Visual Studies at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art & Visual Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

True Confessions?

Notes/Citation Information

Published in *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, v. 26, no. 1, p. 26-28.

The Print Collector's Newsletter © 1995 [Art in Print Review](#)

The copyright holders have granted the permission for posting the article here.

nate, is conceived as something of a tourist album. Its 50 color and black and white photographs of random ironies from around the world—a battered flophouse sign that reads “Sunshine Hotel,” a chain-link-caged Christmas tree—are tipped into a small hardbound book, with pages left open at the end for “notes.” Scattered among the found follies are some slightly more deliberate gestures, by the artist and his friends: Milan Kunc is shown at a café in Italy with a pair of wineglasses raised to his eyes as goggles, and there is a color shot of Roiter’s own handiwork in the form of a wooden campstool set up on a patch of grass in San Francisco and engraved with the words, “God made artists; the Devil made tourists.” Clearly, Roiter enjoys playing the latter’s advocate.

Australian Allan Mann’s *Charts & Ciphers* (Ballarat, 1994, signed and numbered edition of 60, \$A70), another kind of travel guide, is a set of ten screenprinted images on unbound cards presented in a 7-1/4x8-3/8-in. wooden box. The five “charts” and five “ciphers,” each a compound of pictographic symbols, are, a prefatory note explains, “intended to be visual puzzles...which have a relationship to ancient maps of exploration, to secret ceremonial rites of progress and acceptance, to coded messages of discovery...”; each, in turn, may be thought of as having a bearing on the others. Mann, a printmaker with a longstanding interest in the evolution of languages, has also produced a larger folio-format book of related material called *The Stoneposts Suite*, in an edition of seven (\$A900).

Blind Trust: Guides for the Uninfected, a collaboration between Robert Flynt and Chris Packard (self-published with support from the MFA Photography Department of the School of Visual Arts, designed by Flynt with Bethany Johns, New York, 1994, \$10), documents and extends a November–January exhibition at the Temple Gallery of Temple University, Philadelphia. There, Flynt’s imagery was presented as 7-ft.-high ink-jet print panels adhered directly to the wall, along with cibachromes and other color photographs; as in the book, where they are reproduced in black and white, Packard’s texts were incorporated into the visual material. The photographs are of living men, mostly nude, always underwater, along with classical statuary, Greco-Roman wrestling diagrams, and anatomical charts and drawings. The object, ably achieved, was to reinvent drowning as a metaphor, for the subject is the cost of living, healthy, amid ceaseless death by AIDS. Packard’s writing is precise, poetic, urgent, and fresh, and in the book it is also reprinted by itself, for greater clarity. A helpful essay by David Deitcher concludes the publication; “More than a few viewers of *Blind Trust* will think that it does not concern them,” he calmly begins, with tact that could hardly be more chilling.

NANCY PRINCENTHAL

Nancy Princenthal is an art critic who writes this column regularly for PCN.

TRUE CONFESSIONS?

Egon Schiele. By Jane Kallir, with an essay by Alessandra Comini.

Published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1994. 192 pp. 101 illustrations. \$45

Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years. By Patrick Werkner.

Published by the Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, Palo Alto, 1993. 328 pp. 166 illustrations. \$49.50

Egon Schiele: Art, Sexuality, and Viennese Modernism. Edited by Patrick Werkner.

Published by the Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, Palo Alto, 1994. 166 pp. 45 illustrations. \$37.50

In his preface to *Egon Schiele* (1985), still one of the most interesting readings of the artist’s work, Frank Whitford complained that “there seems to be something about the artist that inspires in his admirers and collectors proprietary feelings, an exaggerated sense of self-importance and the conviction that although others have every right to be interested in Schiele they should not have the temerity to discuss him in print. Not only do many collectors deny access to what they own, they also do their best to prevent it from being reproduced.” Fortunately, even before Whitford’s book reached press, Christian Nebehay published extensive and essential documentary material as *Egon Schiele. 1890–1918. Leben. Briefe. Gedichte* (1979). Recently, Jane Kallir’s *Egon Schiele: The Complete Works* (1990) not only provides a nearly definitive, fully illustrated catalogue raisonné, her discussion of the works employs documentary materials heretofore unavailable. Yet even today Whitford’s complaint is not without some validity.

The control over the interpretation of Schiele’s oeuvre is best observed indirectly. A characteristic example is Kallir’s repeated use in her monograph of the unpublished memoir by the son of Anton Peschka, Egon’s sister Gerti’s husband, testimony that functions largely as hearsay evidence, but is used to establish critical points in the psychological, sexual, and professional relationships between the artist, his sisters, mistress, wife, and models. Since the memoir exonerates Schiele from his most scandalous reputed behavior (proposed by Whitford, among others), that is, an incestuous relationship with Gerti, it helps Kallir deny the existence of Schiele’s “supposedly abnormal sex life.” She argues that “there is no evidence whatsoever” for such a conclusion.² This denial is significant because it defends an artist whose imagery was intentionally polemical on the subject of transgressive sexuality, so much so that he was forced to endure an infamous 24 days in jail in 1912. Charged with kidnapping and statutory rape (both a misunderstanding) and with public immorality, he was convicted for the last offense, which pertained to his having reputedly shown indecent works to minors in his studio.

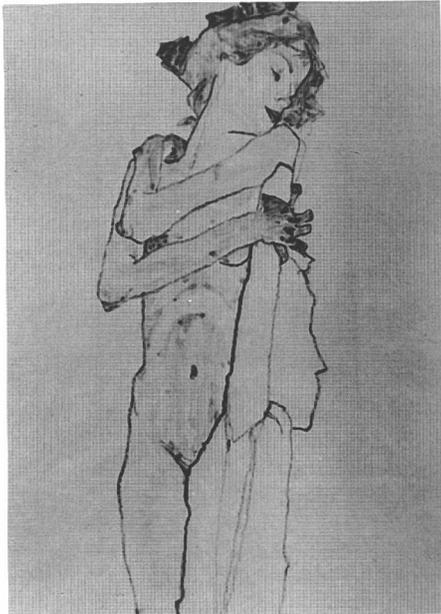
In a more subtle vein, the preface to the

1994 Schiele exhibition catalogue observes that it is now possible “to plot a retrospective exhibition with a precision heretofore impossible.” Yet the catalogue, edited by Kallir, offers as its major critical essay only a personal reminiscence by Alessandra Comini, perhaps this country’s preeminent Schiele scholar, regarding her early contacts with the artist’s family. Comini reflects very little upon what was at stake in these early encounters. In addition, while the exhibition and its beautifully illustrated catalogue have provided American audiences with the opportunity to become more deeply acquainted with the artist’s work, there is little in the organization (by themes) and the individual entries by Kallir, which inevitably reprise in summary form the arguments of her earlier book, that would indicate what, precisely, are the benefits of the new “plot.”

The foundational contributions to our understanding of Schiele’s work made by Nebehay, Kallir, and Comini ought not to prevent our recognition that they have not been disinterested critics. Kallir and Nebehay entered Schiele scholarship as art dealers trading in the artist’s works, while Comini’s intimacy with the artist’s family—which, at one level, is to be praised—also constitutes the basis for another kind of prejudice. A certain decorum and hero worship are to be discovered to varying degrees in each author. Even when acknowledging the artist’s failings, Schiele’s biographers have consistently chosen to justify, or at least to contain, the artist’s sexual politics, his narcissism, and his professional self-promotion under the guise of genius.

Kallir’s satisfaction that there exists no evidence for Schiele’s sexual “misconduct” is really an assertion that there is no *written* evidence to this effect among the surviving memoirs, artist’s statements, interviews, and police records. What she chooses to ignore is precisely the evidence that inspires such suspicions: Schiele’s works. How shall we regard the early paintings and drawings of Gerti, nude, and what are we to make of the many images of the artist and his models masturbating or of the fact that many of these girls had just reached puberty? No doubt, Kallir hoped to correct the insidious conception that the connections between biography and art are in Schiele’s case self-evident. Whitford, for instance, quoted Serge Sabarsky, one of Schiele’s most important collectors and another biographer, to the effect that “few artists need explanation less than Schiele...one can be overwhelmed by the starkness of the imagery or even shocked by it, but no explanation of a “message” is necessary, no analysis is required—the artist has said all he wants to say in his own clear language.”³ Given the choice between no and every connection between his biography and his art, future Schiele scholarship must inevitably explore a middle ground, however methodologically elusive this task may be.

Particularly before his arrest, Schiele’s art may be understood to belong to a genre heretofore little explored in the visual arts, that is, the confessional image. One must use this term carefully, because in a wider sense, all artists who



Egon Schiele, *Standing Nude Girl with Folded Arms* (*Gertrude Schiele*), watercolor and charcoal (17-1/2x12-3/8 in.), 1910. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

make self-portraits are to varying degrees making confessions. In most instances, questions of personal identity (and particularly the expression of guilt) are overridden either by professional self-presentations or aesthetic explorations or both. Works of art are generally unreliable forms of evidence, particularly in work that claims to be confessional, since what is intended versus what might be unintentionally revealed is all but impossible to establish. What is different about Schiele—although not unique to his work—is that he allied his self-portraits to a category of depictions of largely female nudes. Their erotic treatment was precisely one of the principal signifying elements in Schiele's art, isolating him from his competitors in the struggle for an audience. Schiele, like his father-figure, Gustav Klimt, made truth-telling about sex the central point in his art. Unlike Klimt, whose erotica was almost entirely devoted to the depiction of women and who never painted a self-portrait of any kind, Schiele inserted his own identity into the sexual transactions he depicts. Schiele was perhaps less explicit than other artists of his generation (one thinks of the pornographic sketches of Picasso during his early Paris years) in depicting sex acts. What he does give us are scenes of masturbation, his own and that of his subjects. In the absence of other explicitly sexual imagery, Schiele's autoerotic tableaux have led some to draw conclusions about Schiele's sexual anxieties, presumed or real impotence, and a fundamental fear of women. Clearly we have to be wary of such simple associations; Schiele scholarship needs to become more subtle and more historical in its treatment of the artist, and to avail itself, as it heretofore has not done except in the most prosaic ways, of the new theoretical work on gender and psychoanalysis.

If we have had to wait so long for compelling analyses of Schiele's sexual anxieties, under-

stood both from the vantage of the sexual attitudes of fin-de-siècle Vienna and from the psychological state of the artist, it is due at least in part to the fact that most Schiele criticism has been cast in the monographic mode. The format fosters the propensity to treat the artist exclusively under the rubric of "genius," and thus the artist's stories get told largely within a self-referential envelope; the artist is sole producer of his unique vision, which in turn may be made to excuse much. "Influences" become the material for creative gestation, and individual works are offered as illustrations to an overall developmental history of personal style and sensibility in which commercial, political, and even cultural circumstances appear only as background material. The insular character of this pattern perhaps explains why Schiele studies have been so little touched by work that overtly critiques the cult of genius and destabilizes the authorial subject. Most notably, his art has not been subject to a sustained feminist analysis.

The recent anthology devoted to Schiele's work, edited by Patrick Werkner, derived primarily from papers presented at a 1990 symposium held at Stanford University, while rarely even hinting at a feminist analysis, does offer an important beginning for a reconsideration of the artist. The book also palpably demonstrates the sharp differences in interpretation still available. For example, in his contribution to the volume Werkner takes the position that Schiele made "his most original and also most disquieting contribution" in his early work. Conversely, in an essay comparing Schiele to Arnold Schönberg, Leon Botstein, a historian of fin-de-siècle Austrian society, concludes that Schiele's mature and important works date from the final years of his life (a preference he shares with Kallir). He further regards the early work as exemplifying "a coy attitude toward candor, rather than interior distress and angst (as in Kokoschka and Gerstl)." Similarly, whereas Botstein has Schiele capitalizing on the Viennese obsession with sexuality, the architectural historian Peter Haiko, in an essay on obscenity as a problematic in the similar reception of Schiele and modernist Viennese architecture, describes the period as one "of intense sexual repression" where "the charge of obscenity was an especially potent means of defaming works of art." Haiko unfortunately leaves the nature of "repression" unexamined and treats both obscenity and works of art as normative, rather than contested, terms within the debate he recounts. Haiko moves on to firmer ground with a fascinating discussion of obscenity in the journalistic reception of Adolf Loos, but the apposite presentation of obsession/repression in these two analyses points to serious interpretive aporias.

The remaining essays in the volume, on such topics as van Gogh's impact on Viennese modernism and the use of the body as metaphor, are uniformly stimulating. The essays, however, that open most new ground and, for that very reason, leave the most questions unanswered, are those by the art historians—Werkner, on the themes of the "child woman" and hysteria, and

Albert Elsen, on the influence of Rodin's erotic drawings on Schiele's work. Elsen offers new insight into Schiele's drawing practices, proposing not only Rodin as a direct source of inspiration for Schiele's choice of subjects and compositions but, and this is the most original aspect of his argument, also for his specific way of drawing. Elsen believes that Rodin taught Schiele fundamental lessons in draftsmanship, encouraging a new spontaneity, a far less mediated form of transcribing the subject onto paper. On the whole a convincing argument, what Elsen leaves out must still be considered. His claim for Rodin's importance comes at the expense of other experiences that may have equally shaped Schiele's style. I am thinking in particular of Schiele's (controversial) debt to Kokoschka's drawings dating between 1908 and 1910, and to a less often recognized connection between Schiele's compositional mannerisms and the European poster movement (with its debt in turn to Japanese prints). Sherwin Simmons' recent essay on Kokoschka's posters (PCN, XXIII, 161) demonstrates just how important it is that high modernist art be reconsidered in light of contemporary advertising culture. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Elsen takes little interest in the sexual politics and the institutional lessons offered by Rodin's drawings. He chooses not to mention, for example, that the exhibition of such drawings by Rodin cost the director of the Weimar state museums, Harry Kessler, his position in 1906. Given such a cause célèbre, is it not important to consider how the "obscenity" of Rodin's work would come to bear on Schiele's interest in the sculptor?

Werkner, in this essay and in his chapter on Schiele in his book *Physis und Psyche* (1986), recently translated under the title *Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years*, offers a wider context for Schiele's style and handling of subjects. Werkner aspires to present a balanced, contextual, and carefully documented look at Viennese art and culture around 1910. Thus, in both instances, he attempts to place Schiele's work within a broad understanding of sexual politics in fin-de-siècle Vienna. In the essay on the child woman and female hysteria, Werkner benefits in particular from Sander Gilman's work on fin-de-siècle sexual stereotyping, that is, on the class, race, and gender prejudices that inform Schiele's selection of pubescent models. Werkner also relates Schiele's work to contemporary, especially Freudian, models of hysteria and its representations. But because Werkner wishes to be firmly "historical," he does not allow himself to consider Michel Foucault's fundamental insights in *The History of Sexuality* regarding exactly the matrix of subjects that most concern Schiele—the female hysteric, the masturbating child, the pedophilic-inclined adult, all played against the notion of "conventional" sexuality. Hoping to preserve Schiele's avant-gardist credentials, Werkner believes that the artist's ambition to tell the truth about sex, to offer, as he phrases it, more than "the sultry, languorous atmosphere that characterizes works of both art and literature at this time" truly separates Schiele from his

peers. He goes so far as to represent Schiele's work as a "tabooless and sometimes merciless exploration of eros." Yet in the same sentence, he also recognizes that Schiele's presentation of sexuality was often theatrical. This he dutifully attributes to the role of popular entertainments and modern dance in inspiring the artist to new modes of representation, rather than to any self-conscious posturing by the artist.

Following both Botstein and Foucault, one might well want to consider Schiele's sexual truth-telling not to be significantly in opposition to society, despite his imprisonment, but rather precisely oriented toward meeting a societal demand, and therefore that his work sustained rather than fundamentally criticized the social order. Surely future studies must address the environment, indeed the demand, for pornographic drawings, which Schiele explicitly inherits from Klimt. To consult the catalogues raisonnés for either artist is to be struck by the extraordinary number of drawings of the female nude—conceived not as preparatory drawings, nor as academic drawings as such, but as exhibition drawings, produced deliberately for sale. Not very subtly, the spectacle of sexuality is directly tied to consumerism.

Werkner's suggestion that Schiele was fascinated by contemporary popular theater and by modern dance, especially as practiced by Ruth St. Denis and the Wiesenthal sisters, is also both important and incomplete. The revolution in modern dance offered artists an astonishingly novel repertoire of gestures and body movements. But Werkner gives himself little space to follow through on this observation, being satisfied here only with establishing the formal connections. We need to know not only that dance "contributed to a heightened awareness of the human body as a means of expression for the spiritual experience of the individual" but *how* it did so and *whose* spiritual experience we are talking about. Left unsaid is how the dancers' underlying goals of gender and sexual liberation were reflected back in the visual arts. How, for example, does one reconcile the at least incipient feminism of St. Denis and Grete Wiesenthal with the often explicitly misogynous attitudes of many Viennese artists and intellectuals, Schiele among them? A more subtle, if also more general, reading of these conflicting forces is offered in a book then unavailable to Werkner, Jacques Le Rider's *Modernité viennoise et crises de l'identité* (1990). (Unfortunately, and rather inexplicably, Le Rider shows no interest in the Schiele case.)

Clearly, the more we seek to analyze "objectively" the work of an artist like Schiele, the more we are in danger of refusing to see its polemical character. What gets elided in such discussions are not only how Schiele's work connects to a wider visual culture but also how the gender and sexual issues are assumed, but hardly discussed. The difficulty of working out the complex interactions of often quite contrary ideological positions is likewise reflected in Werkner's *Austrian Expressionism*. He organizes the book around a series of portrait sketches devoted to Richard Gerstl, Oskar Kokoschka, Alfred

Kubin, Arnold Schönberg, and Schiele, as well as a chapter on fellow travelers. These essays are preceded by two chapters, the first on the Viennese art world and its reception of French modernism in the glory years of the Secession, that is, between 1897 and 1905 (with a subsequent discussion of the Klimt-organized *Kunstschau* of 1908 and 1909). The second chapter treats Secessionist aesthetics, with its cult of beauty, and then analyzes its overthrow in the "expressionist" period under the sign of "hostile powers," that is, the assertion of Expressionist truth-telling against the sexual repressions of contemporary Vienna. The book is bracketed on the other side by a comparably general discussion of the aesthetic, philosophical, and social issues entertained by Austrian Expressionism, beginning with a chapter titled "Body and Soul," in which Werkner provides a wider intellectual and artistic context for how the body came to be conceived as a vehicle for artistic truth-telling and for personal identity. The next chapter, "Affinities and Differences," attempts to summarize what was exceptional about Austrian Expressionism vis-à-vis its European variants, while the last chapter, "Art History as the History of Ideas," is somewhat deceptively titled, since it is exclusively concerned with the philosophical resonance of Viennese Expressionism, juxtaposed against such doctrines as monism, the collapsing of mind and matter into a single principle. Werkner's brief survey of these matters serves primarily to establish the artists' independence from any one doctrine (even romanticism). This, ultimately, Werkner takes as evidence of the fundamentally contradictory character of their art.

Of the chapters in between, perhaps most interesting are those devoted to Gerstl and Kubin. Gerstl's work, tragically terminated by his suicide in 1908 and compromised by the destruction of many paintings and personal artifacts, is here perhaps for the first time fully integrated into a discussion of the artistic culture of Vienna in the first decade of the century. While Werkner makes no breakthroughs in his archival material, he does establish Gerstl's significance, if not his influence on subsequent painting, as a paradigmatic representative of the cultural forces at work in the era. Likewise, the essay on Kubin firmly underscores the importance of an artist, who, owing to his practice as a graphic artist, has all too often been assigned to the periphery of studies of high modernist art. Although it is outside the project Werkner set for himself, I believe the best evidence for the value of this reassessment is Franz Kafka's deep admiration for Kubin's work.

However much Werkner's book is a sober reappraisal of the rise of Expressionist art in Vienna, in many ways it remains tied to older (and indeed Expressionist) understandings of Expressionism. The almost schizophrenic format of the book, the structured alienation of biography from its social context, helps maintain the impression of Viennese Expressionism as a movement of isolated geniuses. Werkner develops connections between the artist essays only where those relationships are

obvious, as in Schönberg's involvement with Gerstl, or where the relationship had been made problematic, as in Kokoschka's jealousy over Schiele's success. Because he treats his artists in so insular a fashion, the core of the book fails to realize the promise of the framing chapters. Offering a convenient and very often highly suggestive portrait of the Viennese world of this period, Werkner ultimately falls short of the task of integrating these artists into the cultural and political horizons of their time. He wishes us to settle for "conundra" as a confirmation for the "spiritual profundity" and self-understanding offered by this art. This is less a diagnosis of the "confessions" offered by his artists than a recapitulation of their mystifications. Werkner in many ways has opened new doors into the study of Schiele and his contemporaries, but these are doors he himself has chosen not to walk through.

ROBERT JENSEN

¹ Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele*, New York, 1985, p. 6.

² Jane Kallir, *Egon Schiele: The Complete Works*, New York, 1990, p. 254.

³ Whitford, p. 7.

Robert Jensen is currently a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center.

Le Désert de Retz, A Late Eighteenth-Century French Folly Garden, The Artful Landscape of Monsieur de Monville. By Diana Ketcham. Photographs by Michael Kenna.

Published by Arion Press, San Francisco, 1990. Edition of 400, 10x16 in. 120 pp. 88 illustrations, with 32 duotones by Michael Kenna. Publication \$375

Published by MIT Press, Cambridge, 1994. Trade edition, 9-1/4x11 in. 174 pp. 74 illustrations, with 12 photographs by Michael Kenna. \$39.95

The subject of both these publications, fraternal twins, is a remarkable garden created in the late 1700s just outside Paris by a "gentleman of fashion" named François Nicolas Henri Racine de Monville. Fortunately for us, one of the "fashions" he followed was that of building a personal pleasure garden, a fantasy of architecture and landscape that attempted to mirror the ideals of the Enlightenment. M. Monville's grand centerpiece is a mansion in the shape of a broken column, inside of which a masterful arrangement of rooms is reached by a spiraling staircase at its core.

Remarkable in its time, and visited by the likes of Thomas Jefferson and King Gustavus III of Sweden, both of whom copied part of the design, Le Désert de Retz was stripped of valuable plants, as well as art and furniture, during the Revolution, but it was not destroyed. In its ruined state in our own century it became a favored picnic spot of André Breton, the overgrown park and the empty buildings and pavilions a Surrealist wonderland.

Given this history, it is surprising that the Arion Press publication is noted as the first book on the subject. Ketcham's text, in French and English, is as interesting as the place, and