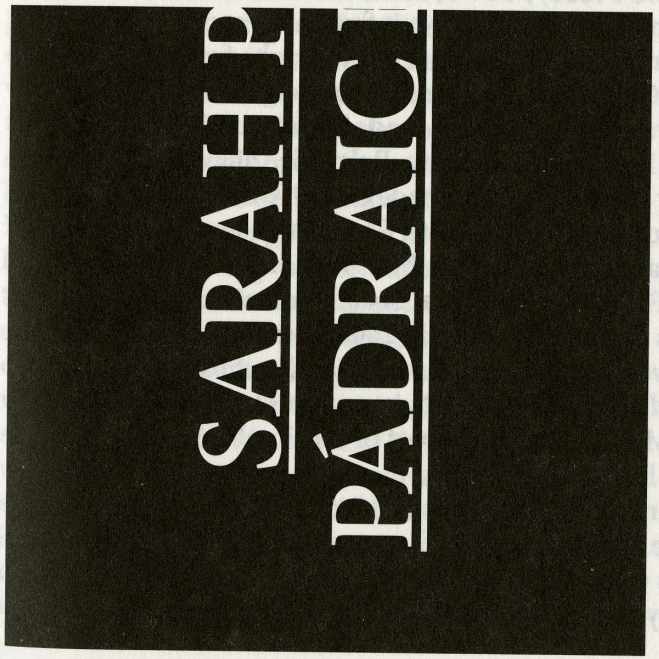
WE NEW TRADITIONALISTS



Every era has to reinvent the project of spirituality for itself. (Spirituality = plans, terminologies, ideas of deportment aimed at the resolution of painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, and transcendence.)

Susan Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, 1969

The point of departure for this text is a project developed by Sarah Pierce between 2006-2008 titled *The Meaning of Greatness.*

The scheme of *The Meaning of Greatness* involves several components: A remake of Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, 1970; an archive of letters written to the student government at Kent State University from the May 4, 1970 collection; photographs from the Student Cultural Center Archive in Belgrade circa 1972; various 'test pieces' made by art students in the Faculty of Sculpture, Belgrade, 2006; drawings by Pierce's mother, made circa 1956; and a pamphlet of texts selected with Grant Watson. A large curtain divides the exhibition space into quadrants. Following the initial installation at Project Arts Center in Dublin in 2006, Pierce reinstalled the work as part of the exhibition *Feminist Legacies and Potentials in Contemporary Art Practice* at M HKA Antwerp, part of Edition II of If I Can't Dance.

In April of 2008, Pádraic E. Moore initiated an exchange with Pierce regarding parallels between his work and hers. Pierce responded to this invitation by suggesting that Moore contribute to

this volume. *The Meaning of Greatness* continues in the following conversation between Pierce and Moore, and as such remains unfinished and not wholly formed.

PÁDRAIC E. MOORE: One of the aspects of *The Meaning of Greatness* I find particularly intriguing is what I see as a tendency toward conflating disparate but synchronic histories. In the exhibition you brought together threads of autobiography with canonical, perhaps even mythical, narratives. Ultimately there is a fascinating loss of definition between the two. Do you believe that there is meaning in temporal synchronicity?

Sarah Pierce I'm remotely familiar with the concept of synchronicity as it occurs in Jungian psychology, wherein the individual finds meaning in events that occur together. It's complex, but the idea is that *acausal* connections produce meaning, which is the basis of Jung's work on the collective unconscious. I'm interested in things that are not causally related, but where temporal proximity allows for meanings to emerge that are neither historical nor contingent and which hinge on a certain recognition of the conflicts or contradictions present in 'knowing.' So with synchronous events, knowledge is not synthesis as in unification (which is, I think, inconsistent with dominant notions of synchronicity). Knowledge is closer to what Sergei Eisenstein describes in *Film Form*, when things come together, often in conflict, to produce meaning. Meaning is never, can never be, autonomous. Knowledge leads to a kind

of 'undoing' — which is not a call for irrationality over rationality; it is more about a sort of intellectual thinking that resists rationalization (or historicization, bureaucratization).

PM: In the case of art, the tragedy of premature death can result in a situation whereby the artist's persona assumes an archetypal, almost mythological quality. This process is invariably abetted by the circulation or re-emergence-of artworks and images, resulting in the prematurely departed artist achieving something approaching ubiquitous presence and immortal status. A theme evident throughout your previous work is your preoccupation with the work of antecedents such as Eva Hesse (1936-70), Robert Smithson (1938-73) and Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-78). You and I seem to share an interest in considering the ways in which these premature departures often alter the lens through which the author's work is posthumously viewed.

SP I think it is important to note the tendencies at play in art history, especially as they materialize through myths of the artist. Dying young is tragic, but neither the lives nor the work of the artists you mention were about tragedy on any level. There is a section in Anne Wagner's essay *Another Hesse,* which describes Hesse's journals and talks about how to read them. Wagner points to various instances, from catalogue texts to reviews written after Hesse's death, in which biographers and critics turned to the artist's journals to locate the meaning of her work. Starting from

the apparent tragedy of Hesse's death, these readers set about promoting the legacy of what they regarded as the feminine genius of her work. However, were we to read Hesse's journals in the context of her life rather than her death, we might discover a different Hesse, someone less 'damaged and chaotic' (words often used to describe both Hesse and her work) than we had imagined previously. As Wagner notes, this does not make Hesse's work less significant; but it does make some of the writing surrounding her work since her death seem less potent. Read unabridged, the journals are, in places, nearly as remarkable as the lists Hesse made to organize her time, which mark out time spent on 'us,' meaning her marriage, and on 'me,' meaning her career. Her choices undercut all the myths of universalized feminism. In one of her journals she wrote, "Excellence has no sex." I often think and wonder about this statement and the tensions it sets up — tensions that persist today.

PM I think it would be inaccurate to consider your work nostalgic. For while you do reference, celebrate, and perhaps even mourn events and occurrences of the past, you also insist that these events and occurrences remain loaded with potential. Though I am well aware that notions of progress and temporal linearity are inherently problematic and indeed contentious, I believe that they remain not only valid but also essential. Am I correct in assuming that it is not your desire to reside in an idealized notion of the past but rather to progress

forward via a process of excavation?

SP: In *The Sociological Imagination*, American sociologist C. Wright Mills talks about the interdisciplinary aspects of intellectualism, and the practice of keeping a file, or set of files, with all the ideas or materials that compel one's research. He recommends periodically spreading the contents out and arranging them to figure connections between them. In some ways, *The Meaning of Greatness* is such a file. Convened temporarily, it is driven in places by merely coincidental affiliations, but which lead to unexpected readings often immersed in dissent and self-determination. These events or occurrences already exist next to one another — this proximity has a potential to produce *undertonal* meaning. Again, I'm referring to Eisenstein. Undertonal meaning exists between images, between the events of remembering and forgetting.

PM Do you believe that in general the notion of progress has become problematic?

SP The first sentence of a short story by Yukio Mishima begins, "On the twenty-eighth of February, 1936…" The events unfold: a soldier returns home to his young wife, and in his loyalty to his country and her loyalty to her husband both end their lives by committing *seppuku*. The story is inextricably linked in my mind to my mother, because her birthday is February 28, 1936. It's merely a coincidence. This is how I think of progress. Moving through events, we muddle

meaning, we conflate circumstances, and we tend to find temporal synchronicities with significance to us. Mishima's story is called *Patriotism*, a term which, like Derrida's concept of responsibility, requires arbitrary and incoherent irrationalities also found in sacrifice. In Mishima's words:

"Was this seppuku? — He was thinking. It was a sensation of utter chaos, as if the sky had fallen on his head and the whole world was reeling drunkenly. His willpower and courage, which had seemed so robust before he made the incision, had now dwindled to something like a single hair-like thread of steel, and he was assailed by the uneasy feeling that he must advance along this thread, clinging to it with desperation. His clenched fist had grown moist. Looking down, he saw that both his hand and the cloth about the blade were drenched in blood. His loincloth too was dyed a deep red. It struck him as incredible that, amidst this terrible agony, things, which could be seen, could still be seen, and existing things existed still."

As with our soldier, at times, blind conviction is our downfall. The moment we think we are on the right path, the next moment might turn to terrible doubt and chaos.

PM Much of your work reflects upon moments or situations of politically engaged countercultural activity. Would you agree that as we shift into an increasingly incredulous future — in which chronologies are compressed and time is accelerated — encountering and contemplating, indeed vicariously accessing such moments can facilitate

temporary diversion from the anomic present in which we flounder in a state of political abstinence and in which ideals of revolution and progress have been rendered problematic?

SP: Yes, we flounder, we accelerate, and perhaps we stall. The ideals of revolution and progress are as problematic as notions of legacy and 'the cult of genius' found in art. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In posing this question in 1988, Linda Nochlin cautioned us not to take the bait. Take pause! Before compiling a list of female names to add to the canon, consider why it has been so difficult to retire the canon altogether. In Belgrade, there is a wooded area near the university where Milosevic began construction of a Museum of Revolution. Only the building's foundation exists; the museum was never built. It is a space that preoccupies many artists who visit Belgrade — it is so ripe for interpretation! Visiting Belgrade in 2006, I arrived during the week of Milosevic's funeral. When I went to the university's Faculty of Sculpture, I met with the second- and third-year sculpture students; looking around their studios, I was drawn most of all to the 'test pieces,' preliminary studies for future works which try out ideas or test the properties of certain materials. I knew from studying the work of Eva Hesse that she sometimes exhibited small non-works, or non-pieces — the three-dimensional tests for larger sculptures. In her biography of Hesse, Anne Wagner begins with the question, "What does Hesse's art look like?" It was with this question in mind that I proposed to

exhibit these unfinished works at the SKC Gallery. Some of the students' test pieces are remarkably like Hesse's in both material and form. It was during this period of research that I began to think about the associations between 1970s radical art practices and the present-day student demographic.

PM: Your work seeks consistently to question and problematize ideas of originality and authorship, while also — paradoxically — corroborating a kind of pantheon via reconstitution. Are you interested in the idea of a canon?

SP: Instead of a canon, I imagine a more affectionate past. Formative and unfinished, not yet art, not yet within the realm of the documentable. This is a concept I'm working on at the moment: a way of relating to the past that is neither Oedipal nor forged as critique. Recall the dictum from Hesse's journal: "Excellence has no sex." Of course, at this stage of her life, Hesse was profoundly invested in balancing her career with her marriage to artist Tom Doyle; I often wonder whether she wrote these words in hope of distinguishing her work from that of other (male) artists — or whether she simply hoped the mantra was true. As a statement it betrays the era in which she lived, where equality meant obscuring differences between the sexes. Hesse also made lists to help organize her time — time spent on 'us,' time spent on 'me' — and to keep track of works she was making, books she was reading, and artists she had met. As I was reading Hesse's biography, it occurred to me at a certain point that Hesse and my mother

were both born in the same year. They grew up in New York a few miles from each other, both born into families with moderate incomes, both with educated parents. Each attended an Ivy League school and pursued classically 'feminine' majors. Among other coincidences are Hesse's period of study at the Art Student's League, where my grandfather once taught, and the close resemblance of her marriage and my mother's. So perhaps my interest in Hesse is nostalgic for that reason. Reading Hesse's biography, I am also reading about my mother.

PM: Our epoch is rather chaotic for the fact that numerous historical fragments drift randomly out of context, ultimately creating a kind of amnesiac present. Do you feel compelled, as I often do, to give order to history and historical information — and, if so, is this ultimately an attempt to impose a sense of order or clarity upon the chaotic present?

SP Returning to Eisenstein — every film is infused with a 'fourth dimension,' where knowledge takes place in the gaps *between* images. Perhaps the concept of an 'archival fourth dimension' might describe connections, both material and formal, that incite a contest between time and material, between remembering and forgetting, between official stories and personal histories — a contest (or to borrow Eisenstein's words, a *conflict*) that lies at the crux of any notion of 'representation.' More than *how* we know or *what* we know, the archive shows how we map time, and how we escape it. *The Meaning of Greatness* involves sharing one's

experience and the incidents of political attachment as (collective) forms of distribution. Here, the audience is the fourth dimension: the nuances, the whispers between people, the students, the demonstrators; all these variables sit side by side. Greatness is managed and mismanaged culturally, socially, personally, and so it is more than just time or legacy; it is our interpretation of events, which is never only objective or subjective, but always multiple. When we open the meaning of greatness to the possibility of social and artistic intervention, to relationships, to players, and to forces that are often veiled, we can begin to see the gaps, the breakdowns, and the faltering mechanisms that condition how we know and what we know. One of Jung's favourite quotes came from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass,* in which the White Queen says to Alice, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards."

PM And didn't the king say something like, "Begin at the beginning and go on until you come to the end, then stop"?

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This text is based on an e-mail conversation that took place in April 2008. Pádraic E. Moore writes: "I initiated contact with Sarah expressing my interest in her work. I sent her an image of an exhibition I had organised. The conversation took place in person. I recall the studio space well. It was an illuminating conversation."