THE BIRDS ARE SINGING IN GREEK

A Thesis

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by
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*****

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Because of a learning disability, I have a difficult time putting my thoughts into written form. For this reason, I have used an interview format to facilitate the production of this thesis. The original transcript was edited in an attempt to clarify ideas and make the text easier to read.

The Interview

Peter: The title for your thesis exhibition was *The Birds are Singing in Greek*. Where did you come up with that title and what does it mean?

Michael: *The Birds are Singing in Greek* comes from a Virginia Woolf Novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the novel, there is a character Septimus who is going insane. I think he is in St. James Park, and he looks up at this tree and the birds are singing to him in Greek. That was just such an amazing passage, the idea of birds singing in Greek, what a different way of looking at things. The idea of different realities and sanity and insanity, and at what point do you cross the threshold is fascinating. In my thesis show when you walked into the gallery you got this sense of imbalanced. The gallery was arranged with the frame of a house that was close to the size of the gallery, the height of the Structure started at eight inches near the door and increased in height to eight feet in the back of the gallery. The whole form slanted at probably a ten or twelve degree angle (plate 1). With everything else being straight, you were never really quite sure from where to draw your bearings or how to orient yourself in the space. One of the concepts that I'm working with is, how as a gay
man, do I orient myself in a relationship, when all I had growing up were heterosexual role models. I'm very domestic, I have a really strong nesting instinct, and for me I want to find one person, one man, and hopefully settle down, get a house, you know the whole bit. I want the all American dream, but I want it with another man. Well our society says no you can't do that; things are changing and there are ways of doing it, but it's still a matter of making your own rules. For me this has been somewhat of an insane and difficult process.

P: You mean trying to get to a point of a relationship with a man like you described or to get to the point of making your work about your own experience as a gay man, or both?

M: Well both. It's like the world is telling you to lean one way and you're trying to lean the other way, or worse stand-up straight. You don't know where to orient yourself or ground yourself. I guess that's the thing, grounding yourself.

P: I was just thinking as you were talking you used the word stand-up straight, but even our language, straight in this culture as opposed to gay, and using studs—construction. You use language a lot in a very humorous way. It's like there's a lot of these jokes and little suggestions and illusions and some of them are very straight forward, some of them are much more clouded and you have to circumnavigate to get your way around them.

M: I guess some of them are in jokes. No matter who you are you can understand them on some level, maybe not the same as the person standing next to you, but that's the beauty of it. If you look at the world through straight eyes that's how you're going to view everything. Hopefully in some of these pieces I push people to question what I'm saying and the way they're thinking.

P: Your work, especially the sculptural installation seems to be about
domesticity. Many of the sculptures look like furniture of some sort. Why is that so?

M: One of the problems that I have with art in general is its elitist attitude, that it is some sort of grand intellectual pursuit, that’s it’s exclusive. I think a lot of people have a phobia when it comes to art, they are afraid that if they don’t understand something they will be perceived as stupid. So many people don’t even make the effort to begin with. One goal I have in my work is to get over that hurdle and make objects that are more accessible to the average viewer. In most of my work I try to use objects or forms that are immediately recognizable so that you don’t have to say what is that. You can understand the form or the material and then you can interpret your own meaning from it, but at least your not afraid of the object itself.

P: Like a chair?

M: Yes like a chair. You go into a gallery and there is a chair sitting there, you can immediately say, “this is a chair.” You understand the form. And from the form you can absorb the content. However when it comes to content, a lot of my work is somewhat ambiguous. Although I might be working with a specific issue or idea that leads me to create a piece, it’s up to viewers to interpret the work for themselves. If they see something different in the work than I did, that’s fine with me. The important thing is that they see something that makes them think. Whether it’s the same thing I’m thinking or not, it doesn’t matter.

P: So if I go in and I see a chair and all I get from that is that it’s another form of a chair like the one I sit on at my dining room table and I don’t go beyond that, that's fine with you? Cause there's obviously more to your chairs than just...

M: Hopefully I’ve gotten beyond that. In my work you can tell it’s a chair, but it’s not a chair that you can use. Maybe the seats missing or there are spikes on the chair or
something like that, so it's the form of a chair, but it's not functional. Hopefully most people are inquisitive enough to look past the obvious; OK it looks like a chair but it's not really a chair, what's the artist trying to do? Sure there are some people that would say it's a chair and leave it at that; those people are so problematic that I wouldn't even know were to begin to reach them.

P: That's not the audience you are...

M: It is important for me to try and be as inclusive as possible, but there are limits.

P: You know it's interesting that you say you want your work to be as inclusive as possible, when you are part of a group that historically has been excluded from the mainstream. I am of course referring to gays and lesbians.

M: Being part of a group that is often excluded, I think it is important that I try and not exclude others in my work. That holds true to the pieces in my thesis show, which I refer to as narrative furniture. They are about different relationships that I've had or about being gay, or about just being a human being in general. Sometimes I wonder, when I look at my work, am I limiting myself to just dealing with gay issues? But then I realize that I'm not dealing with gay issues, I'm dealing with issues of being a human being trying to relate to other people. It just happens to be that I'm gay, and for me that's a natural way of being. That's the way I am, so to relate to other people in that way is very natural.

P: I read an essay you wrote for Columbus Art. It was a response to a show of Gay and Lesbian Artists, and if I remember correctly the problem you had with that was how to distinguish between art that deals with gay and lesbian issues or concerns verses art by gay and lesbians that was perhaps about anything.

M: Well the show was billed as art by gay and lesbian artists, but there was no work in the show that dealt directly or indirectly with gay and lesbian issues. The whole show was
setup as part of gay and lesbian pride month, but it didn't allow anybody to experience the uniqueness of being gay or lesbian or try to convey the fact that there aren't so many differences between straight and gay. It really wasn't a growing experience at all, and when you put a show together of just gay and lesbian artists with no rationale except for the fact that the artists are gay and lesbian it's a form of ghettoizing. I think that's a really dangerous thing to do. I think it's a needless thing to do, especially in the art world, which has been historically supportive if not just tolerant of gays and lesbians.

P: It's interesting that you don't really identify yourself as a male or female in your work. I mean this one piece which consists of two chairs of very different sizes between a table that says "From where I was sitting he looked great" (plate 2). You never identify the gender of "I" anywhere. Is that an attempt to be cryptic or is it that you just aren't quite ready to present yourself as a gay man?

M: I think in this instance it's because this work is autobiographical, I'm speaking in the first person. It would be unnatural for me to talk about myself as he.

P: In a place like this your audience may know who you are. I'm just thinking in terms of wanting to reach a more inclusive audience.

M: I was trying to be inclusive in a different sense. You know if a woman looks at this piece, she may read it and place herself in the piece. If it's a man maybe he places himself in the piece, as either the "he" or the "I". This piece is purposely ambiguous, to allow viewers to experience the piece and deal with whatever issues they need to.

P: But it's a question of how far you want to promote or push your particular experience. There are some gay artists for whom this is not an issue at all in their work. Maybe it's a question you think about all the time. Is a work like this stronger because it is more open ended or would it be stronger if it was more...
M: Well I don't particularly like hitting people over the head, if you look at the work itself, it's really quiet. The form doesn't hit you over the head. I don't necessarily want the content to hit you over the head either. As an artist, I want to present images or objects to people that make them think, make them question. I'm not interested in giving people answers. Basically I don't have any answers to give them. I'm searching myself, but I want to question people, or cause people to question themselves. I want people to have to work. I'm not trying to hit home a point, I'm trying to get people to think, and maybe it's just a little nudge, but it's there, I think.

P: Oh, I think it is too. So what about all the different media you use. Is there anything important about the materials?

M: Most of them are simple construction materials. In the thesis show The Birds Are Singing in Greek, I used Simple 2 x 4s, which are one of the most basic building materials you have, along with concrete blocks, linoleum, formica, etc, all of which relate to a house. As to why I use them: they're inexpensive, they're accessible, I like the look and feel of them.

P: So where were you born?

M: I was born in South Bend, Indiana.

P: It seems there is a trend to look at work without taking into consideration the artist or the context; it seems obvious to me that's not the way to look at your work.

M: Out of context or in context?

P: Well I mean, I asked you where you were born, and I was going to ask so how does any of that relate to your work, but the answer to me seems obvious. I don't know maybe not to you.

M: What is the answer?

P: To me obviously yes.
M: Well I guess it does because I'm coming from a Mid-West middle class background where the individual family house was important. Everybody I knew grew up in a house with one single family, as opposed to living in an apartment complex, or a high-rise. So to me the basic unit of dwelling is a one family house. As far as my growing up in Indiana, I didn't grow up in Indiana, I got older. I was born and then I proceeded to spend 22 years in Indiana, but I don't necessarily think I grew. It wasn't until I got out that I started thinking for myself. I've really changed in the last 2-1/2 years that I've been in Columbus. For better or for worse, I've changed, and I think that's growing. Basically I stifled myself in Indiana. I was pretty closeted, and basically I just didn't do anything about developing myself. I let other people or circumstances define who I would be instead of myself, so this work that I'm doing is a real exploration for me, as far as who I am, what I want, and what I want to be. To that extent, maybe that's why all my work is about being gay, because I spent the majority of my life not looking at it or not dealing with it, not saying anything about it, and I've got so much to say.

P: So the art is a way to discover who you are?

M: Yes, and who I want to be. I use my work to illustrate or visualize a concept or situation that I find difficult to understand. Often, I'll start with the concept or idea, and then figure out how to illustrate it. With much of the work in my thesis show, I started with the titles, which often ended up as text in the work. The text is really important in adding meaning or content to a piece, the piece itself is an illustration. In some of these pieces the title has been the key to understanding the piece. I'm working on a piece now where title cards are the piece, and the paintings that go along with them are just numbers, and the content is on the little card itself.

P: So the painting then is just kind of a device to make this thing read as art?

M: Yes I guess so. I had an architecture prof who made the observation that when you
walk into a gallery or a museum, and see a painting you like, the first thing you do is turn and look away. You look at the card to see who the artist is, what the title is, in hopes that you'll understand the piece more. So what I've been doing recently is either incorporating the title into the piece or making the title card an integral part of the piece. It's really nothing new, you can look at the work of artists like Barbara Kruger or Jenny Holzer where words are used in a very significant way.

P: Or people like Allen Kaprow. Then there's the other extreme ofuntitled work.

M: I've done a couple of untitled, but in making most of my pieces the title comes first, it's were the fun is. I think language is very important, but I'm not real comfortable with written language. I'm comfortable with it to a certain extent and like using it in small segments or one liners. I think language is really fun to play with. There are so many words you can take in different ways, the double entendre.

P: In your show that was in the gallery, The Birds Are Singing in Greek, I don't think there were any title cards.

M: That's true.

P: A lot of the pieces have text as elements within the piece. Visual elements as well as formal. If the text was taken away, do you think it would become an exercise in design or in formal relationships between objects and angles and geometry.

M: All of these pieces could stand without text, as exercises in visual play. It was very tempting to leave off the text, but that's not what the work is about. I feel that leaving the text off would have been taking the easy road and not really giving anything of myself.

P: Some of your text or titles remind me of really good stand-up comics, who depend on that quick anecdotal use of language. It's real direct and very descriptive, containing all sorts of subtleties which make it funny.
What about the pieces without text, what's going on there?

M: Well in a piece called *An Occasional Table with Innuendoes*, the objects lying on the table are the visual equivalent of a double entendre (plate 3). They were all objects that looked as if they had a distinct purpose, but also invited you to read other meanings into them.

P: For example?

M: For instance the English garden dibble, which is used for planting bulbs. You stick it in the ground to make a hole then drop a bulb in. It's a beautiful object. But it's also very phallic. You look at it and you kind of snicker, a lot of these objects are like that.

P: It does have that phallic shape to it but then it has a metal sheet on the end, a very pointed metal sheet which might also cause one to grimace a bit. These types of objects appear quite often in your performance work. Why is that?

M: Well I was working through a lot of things in my performances. You could describe most of my performance work in one word, angst.

P: Were you doing performance work when you got here?

M: I really started performing the second half of my first year of graduate school, but quickly found that I was too close to the work. I needed to create a distance between myself and the work, so I stopped performing in the works myself, around the beginning of my second year of grad school. Basically, I had no confidence in the work and needed to step back and see it for myself. I started working with several dancers, placing them in environments that I had created. I could direct them and was able to see what was happening. I was much more comfortable doing that, than performing myself. I have since stepped even further away and stopped using people entirely and just use objects.

P: So you're not performing at all?

M: That's right, for now at least. Someday I might return to it, but for now I have chosen
to embody my ideas in objects.

P: **Before we move on tell me about the performance work you did do.**

M: The first performance piece I did was called *Toying with Objections* (plate 4). For this piece, I worked with another grad student, who was in the dance department. The piece used traditional elements of theater, separation of audience and performers, dramatic lighting, with a clear beginning and end and a sense of chronology in the action. The piece was very minimal in staging and motion, which was almost undetectable. There was a soundtrack that was equally as minimal. It took the form of a play even though there wasn't a narrative. Visually I thought it was interesting. I don't think it worked well when you look at content; I didn't know what I was trying to say, and was too worried about form. I wasn't very specific in the work. At this point it wasn't an intentional unspecificity, but rather came out of my own unclarity. In an attempt to solve this problem I decided I needed to stand back and direct the work. And that's what I did in a collection of three performance pieces, which I referred to as paintings. All three paintings; *Untitled, Queen of Peace, and Ophelia*, reference historical paintings or genres. In the first piece, I used the same dancer I had worked with in *Toying With Objections*, but this time in a solo (plate 5). The performer was sheathed in very elastic fabric that was hung from the ceiling and lit from within. This fabric bag was then centered in a metal cage measuring about 12’x12’. The movement was again very slow, primarily just pushing out against the sac or falling, but being supported by the sac.

P: **What was the performer wearing inside the sac?**

M: Inside the sac he was nude.

P: **So there is this naked person twice caged, the cage of the fabric and then the cage of the metal grid. What was the title of this?**

M: This is one of the few pieces that I left untitled. There just didn't seem to be one word or phrase that could sum up what I was trying to say. The concept I was exploring was that
of safety and how the barrier that one erects to keep out harm can also work against you to keep out positive things as well. It's very easy to relax in an environment that is safe and unchanging but it can also be very stifling. Do we construct havens or cages for ourselves? The fabric that enclosed the performer is very womb-like, it's safe, it's comforting, it holds him up, it supports him, but it also encases him. Encase him, as does the metal cage on the outside, which is not at all nurturing, but rather very cold. This piece is a direct quote from a fresco painting of the incarceration of Saint Paul by Raphael, which I had seen several years earlier in one of the Papal apartments in the Vatican. In the painting by Raphael an angel comes to free St. Paul, who has been imprisoned by the Romans. The angel comes in an explosion of light which illuminated the inside of the cage. It's so beautiful. It's all about liberation. The second piece, called Queen of Peace refers to an entire genre of paintings of the Virgin Mary enthroned in heaven (plate 6). Most of these paintings had Mary on a large throne flanked by this grandiose architectural backdrop, which more often than not included barrel vaulting. Queen of Peace is an indictment of religion more than anything else. By enthroning Mary (religion) we have disempowered her, she has become a prisoner to her position, ineffective.

P: Were you raised Catholic?

M: Yes, very much so. I went to a Catholic high school and then went on to Notre Dame for college. I'm well steeped in the Catholic beliefs. I consider myself an atheist now. I think the Catholic church and organized religion in general have some real problems. But that's a whole other kettle of fish.

P: So what was the third piece.

M: It was called Ophelia and refers to a painting by one of the pre-Raphaelite painters of Ophelia from the Shakespearean play Hamlet (plate 7). When I first saw the painting, I was just blown away, it's just an incredibly powerful image and this was my interpretation of it.
P: What did it mean to you?

M: This piece was done at a time when I really didn't know what I wanted to do artistically and found life in general very confusing. I felt out of control, as if I were in a river with the current pulling me along but not having anything to grab on to. My original concept was to build a large tank with several water pumps and then submerge myself in the tank and have this water cascading past my body. It eventually turned into *Ophelia*, where a male figure, who is somewhat androgynous, lies face up on large sheets of corrugated metal. The figure is dressed in a diaphanous gown which is being blown around by a series of small fans that encircle him. When the figure moved the dress would flow and the hair would blow as if it was underwater.

P: You showed this piece at another gallery didn’t you?

M: Yes, I did this piece and the untitled piece with the cage again, but substituted a fourth piece for *Queen of Peace*.

P: Why?

M: I didn't feel that particular piece was addressing issues that were of great concern to me and it didn't fit in with the other two paintings. The piece that took its place was called *Two Cocks Under One Roof* which had two live roosters in cages encaged in this simplified structure of a house (plate 8). It questioned the possibility of two men living together. It was a visual pun.

P: So, you haven’t performed since *Toying with Objections*?

M: There was one piece called *Absolution* which was a private performance. I was the only one involved and there was no audience present. It dealt with my fear of painting and the notion that painting was the highest form of art. I felt that since I couldn't paint or at least I perceived that I couldn’t paint, I wasn't an artist. So I allowed myself this piece to absolve the sins of painting. The piece was about an hour in duration and consisted of me, nude in front of a large canvas repeating a simple motion over and over as penance for not
painting. After I did this performance painting was never really an issue; I didn’t feel second rate because my work didn’t involve oils on canvas. My work became satisfying irregardless of the materials I used.

P: So you released yourself from having to paint and could now do performance, correct?

M: Well, not exactly. Shortly after I did Absolution I turned primarily to sculptural work.

P: What persuaded you to make this change?

M: One of the things that drew me to performance to begin with was the immediacy. There is no place to hide. It’s just you and the audience. It’s there, it’s immediate, and that was inviting, but it’s also frightening. Even though I know it’s not true, I still buy into the notion that all I have to do is find the right person and I’ll be happy. My work is all about finding a partner, and it’s just too painful to do a performance talking about having a partner without having a partner, if that makes any sense.

P: It's too immediate?

M: Yes. It's like being hungry and talking about food, it just makes you more hungry, and it wasn't real healthy for me.

P: How does making objects soften that?

M: There's a step between you and the audience, you're not as vulnerable. I can make an object and work through something without having somebody watching me and when I'm happy with it I can choose to share it or not.

P: So it's the removal—there's more of a distance.

M: Yes, I'd say so, which is contradictory to why I originally got into performance. But I found that at this point in my life I need that distance for the sake of my sanity. I don't know if that's the right attitude to have, but that's the one I have and I'm not going to apologize for it.

P: Well, if performance is no longer an issue with you lets talk more about
the objects in your show. One piece that intrigues me is the walking cabinet.

M: The title of that piece in its final version, is *A Place for Dreams and Corn Flakes* (plate 9). The form itself is a tabernacle, which is where the unused hosts are stored after they've been consecrated. In the Catholic faith it is believed that the hosts actually become the body of Christ, so a tabernacle is a very sacred place. In this particular instance I've made the outside formica, which is a very common, domestic material. So essentially I'm crossing the secular with the religious. *A Place for Dreams and Corn Flakes* represents the idea of creating a specific place where corn flakes and dreams are given the same weight. Sometimes we forget about our dreams and just put them on the shelf, and it's a very dangerous thing to do. This particular piece is referring to how I've changed over the past two years and how to a certain extent I've lost some of my idealism. I've become a little more cynical, and put some of my dreams away in that cabinet with the corn flakes, which to me is not a desirable thing to do. I have to guard against becoming too cynical, and putting all my dreams away.

P: *Was the title on the piece?*

M: No. There were certain pieces where if the title was not part of the piece then it was not included. The ones in which text was critical, the verbiage was either on the piece, part of it, or aside from it. There was a piece in the show that I called *There Wasn't A Comfortable Chair in the House* and it refers to a specific relationship that I had been in (plate 10). I was dating this guy and neither of us lived in a house that contained comfortable chairs on which to sit and just talk, so consequently we always ended up in the bedroom, in the bed. The chairs were made of glass and cinder blocks, so they were very fragile, yet very sturdy at the same time. Sitting on top of the chair seats were wooden spikes. The chairs portrayed a collection of contradictions, mixed messages and perplexed purposes. They were real indicative of the relationship. This is one piece that didn’t have a
title included with it, because I didn't feel it would have made the work any more accessible. Knowing the title, wouldn't have helped the viewer understand the piece anymore.

P: Looking at the installation as a whole, what is the significance of the grass? I mean the whole interior is carpeted in grass which, unlike the furniture, is usually outside a house?

M: Like the slanted house, the grass on the interior of the structure is about orientation. I'm part of a group that has traditionally been excluded from society. Gays and lesbians are kept on the outside, I tried to turn things inside out.

P: The grass doesn't seem to fit into your kind of aesthetic, does it have any other references? For example to the earth or to a natural state verses man made.

M: No, there were no other intended references, but there was a practical reason to including the grass. Like the walls along the perimeter, the grass helped create an environment. In addition to providing a cohesiveness to the show, the grass helped to soften the objects which would have just been too severe on the bare floor. Most of the pieces have a hard edge of cynicism to them, the grass provides an out for the viewer, a sense of hope.

P: Is all your work based on cynicism?

M: God, I hope not. I will admit to using a fair amount of it but I also try to see the lighter side of life and use humor in my work. I just completed a piece that was in a show several months ago called If Only Men Were Boards (plate 11). The piece consisted of a series of ten of the most bent 2 x 4s I could find. The piece originally came to me in a lumber yard when I was looking for very straight boards that I could use for my thesis show. Then it occurred to me that all I could find were crooked boards and straight men. I had to laugh at that point, so I made a piece out of it. The piece itself was quite formal, in the style of minimalism - minimalist being a regular, unvaried repetition of a simple form. This piece
took on the look of minimalism but conceptually was challenged via the title. I think a lot of my work is self-referential to itself as art. It makes a comment on art, as well as a comment on life. Another piece that does this is entitled *Oops* (plate 12). In this piece I took five ceramic balls and dropped them off a shelf I had mounted on the wall. On a personal level this work was about a relationship that I had just entered into, but after returning to town after a short trip came back to find there was no relationship. It seemed I dropped the ball, it just didn't bounce back. On another level this piece was about art and the importance of the art object in a gallery. Having broken objects on the ground in a gallery was really confusing to a lot of people and caused them to question what had happened. Several people reported that a piece had been broken and were quite concerned about it, they couldn’t see art in conceptual terms rather than on a physical level.

**P:** Some people's work is all about the uniqueness of a material or an object. Your work appears to be very analytical work. Not just because it's made of mass produced objects which tend to have sharp edges, geometric shapes, very repetitive kind of patterns and textures, but also because the use of language is very decisive and intentional. There's obviously thought in the relationship between the text and the object. Do you agree?

**M:** Yes, I think there is a very important link between the text and the object. But I don’t think of my work as analytical, that’s not the way I work. It’s really quite funny, when I sit down and talk about my work, I’ll say something, then I'll look at the work and the work illustrates the exact opposite of what I'm saying. I like things to be immediate and easy, but my work looks like it's really toiled over, but it has not been. I don't work too hard to transform objects. Even though my work may look very formal the important thing for me is the content.

**P:** The more you talk and the more I look at your work, it appears that the
way you arrive at a solution is intuitive and then the mechanics of bringing that solution into physical reality are analytical or logical.

M: Yes, but I think there's still a certain amount of intuition used in developing the physical object. I don't think of things in analytical terms, it's not a step by step process but rather a matter of knowing when something is right and when it isn't. If it's logic, it's my own.

P: And what kind of logic is that?

M: It's the logic that says 1+1=3, it's the logic that lets you see beyond what other people see, to see something new. Artists are the eyes and ears of society, and must therefore make society conscious of its actions. It's our job to see things and then point them out. That's the role of the artist in society.

P: Isn't that a fairly romantic notion of an artist?

M: So, I'm a romantic.

P: I thought you were a self-proclaimed cynic.

M: I developed my sense of cynicism out of self-preservation. But I still love walking through the street of Paris in the rain.

P: So romanticism will never die?

M: I don't want it to die. Yes I am cynical, but I never want to give up my romantic ideas, because that would be giving up my dreams, and I refuse to do that.
PLATE I

The Birds are Singing in Greek
PLATE II
From Where I Sat He Looked Great
PLATE III
An Occasional Table with Innuendoes
PLATE IV
Toying With Objections
PLATE V
Untitled
PLATE VI
Queen of Peace
PLATE VII

Ophelia
PLATE VIII
Two Cocks Under One Roof
PLATE IX
A Place for Dreams And Cornflakes
PLATE X
There Wasn’t a Comfortable Chair in the House
PLATE XI
If Only Men Were Boards
PLATE XII
Opps