Talking at the Boundaries

A New Directions Book

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the sociology of art

i assume that were all here to figure out what a sociology of art might be if there was such a thing what a sociology of primitive art might be if there was such a thing it would be interesting because its obvious that there is another kind of art thats other in its whole social arrangement of making and giving and presenting and looking and reading i mean its obvious that there are other kinds of groups and ways of grouping that there are i hate to use the word other kinds of societies or cultures and that the ways of making giving and looking in those other kinds of groups are sufficiently different to justify calling them by some other name and that the ways of their being different are so much a part of their ways of arranging people into groups for the purpose of making giving looking and receiving to call our way of talking about this art a sociology that is a social logic of this art now there is something unappealing about the notion of a “primitive” art what i mean is there is something both repulsive and attractive about it because there is something inherently repulsive and attractive about the notion of “primitive people” it was a term that arose i think out of a mixture of feelings in people who felt that they were themselves decidedly not primitive primitivity is an idea that got stuck in peoples minds when they began to feel that they had “advanced” to such a terrific degree
sometimes to the degree that they felt “decadent” and they looked around to find things that weren't decadent and naturally they found these smelly little brown people who were repulsive and sexy and sang and danced well and told terrible lies and they called them “primitive” and they called their lies “myths” a myth is the name of a terrible lie told by a smelly little brown person to a man in a white suit with a pair of binoculars.

Now you may not want to believe that because there were other men in white suits with field glasses who followed the first ones and sometimes they were also the first ones who heard these lies and said “these aren't lies they're secret truths” because at the back of every lie there is a truth and it belongs to a “primitive” culture to have a truth that's not like your truth and they gave these lies all kinds of values generally allegorical meanings by which I mean they constructed an ingenious mechanism for converting these colorful nearly incomprehensible and idiosyncratic lies into a series of easily comprehensible and generally accepted platitudes as a matter of fact in its earliest uses this notion of primitive was applied to the Greeks to the history of the “gentile nations” from these first men stupid insensate and horrible beasts all the philosophers and philologists should have begun their investigations of the wisdom of the gentile nations and they should have begun with metaphysics which seeks its proofs not in the external world but within the modifications of the mind of him who meditates it in such fashion the first men of the gentile nations children of nascent mankind created things according to their own ideas but they in their own robust ignorance did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination and because it was quite corporeal they did it with marvelous sublimity such and so great that it excessively perturbed the very persons who by imagining did the creating for which they were called “poets” which is Greek for “creators” hence poetic wisdom the first wisdom of the gentile world must have begun with metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been who without powers
of ratiocination were all robust sense and vigorous imagination this metaphysics was their poetry and the stories they knew to be lies they called them “fables” and “legends” and sometimes “myths” because myths merely meant stories the word myth means a story it comes from a greek verb an interesting verb mutheomai means to tell to talk originally what it meant was to talk when someone gets up and starts rapping in an epic by homer the verb that they use to describe it is mutheomai he gets up to tell a story and he mythomizes so to speak he myths the truth value is not immediately called into question that is it doesn’t mean it’s a lie but if i told you that president nixon got up and “mythed” in congress you’d figure that he told a lie right? if i told you he got up and mythified “the senator rose and mythified for several hours” that would be the end of that on the other hand if i said he told it as it was you wouldn’t really think he was “mything” you’d think he was doing something else so it seems to me there are a number of interesting distinctions one is that the word “myth” meant to say or tell and nothing else and then it got specialized for those tellings that people didn’t believe anymore or felt there was a problem about belief in now what’s all this got to do with the idea of “literal” or “oral” societies well i don’t like the word “primitive” because its wrapped up with these terrible lies and this notion of little poetic beasts who are as talented as children or women or criminals or lunatics some animals and all of those creatures held to be passionate and stupid by all of those other people who were either so content or so fatigued with being so dispassionate and wise now there is another use of the word “primitive” that might be a reasonable use but it is hypothetical i could imagine the use of the word “primitive” the way you use the word “atomic” everyone knows that there are no atoms that is “atoms” don’t behave as “atoms” when you deal with things as a human being they don’t exist as things you encounter atoms are hypothetical constructions invented to support a theory and they are in turn and its only fair supported by this theory
which they have just helped out because of this its not easy
to speak about “atoms” outside of this theory in which they are
merely operators but for the sake of simplification and since
we know the theory lets say that these atoms are primitive enti-
ties primitive whole entities and when you “break-up”
these primitive whole entities you wind up with parts of atoms
which you can consider a problem of its own the notion of
a hypothetical part of a hypothetical primitive whole but as we
imagine a primitive physical entity in all the simplicity of its rela-
tions and combining capacities we might imagine primitive
people primitive human beings who were so to speak
atomic in their humanness as you might imagine a pheno-
menological universal you might imagine also modifications
perversions? of this humanness so you might imagine that the idea of the “primitive” is like a kind of atomic theory of
humanity if that was all it was and if it could be employed
in a nontrivial way if it was possible to form such a theory at
all we could attempt to imagine what are “natural” feelings
what is “natural” thinking the way you can imagine of the
body what is natural movement now you may imagine these
hypothetical states and capacities when they are not obscured by
responses to accidents and become congealed as habits
under the arbitrary conditions of culture so you try to imagine
a cultureless entity but how do you do that? imagine any
group of people two say is it possible to believe that their
ensemble of needs and desires demands and satisfactions
will be perfectly matched over any significant length of time
given even our trivial knowledge of biological systems it
seems unlikely so the outcome of this small group situation will
not be entirely “natural” this too will not be the place to en-
counter truly “primitive” man probably even the situation of a
single man alone will possess enough of the arbitrary in his/her
relation to any given environment no its purely a theoretical
construct primitive man like the atom itself and you
will never be able to encounter it or anything like it and the
value of thinking of it will depend solely upon its explanatory
power but maybe you think this is too extreme so you
think of something less ideal a “natural culture” say
communist utopian sylvan and you imagine these people clad in whatever natural people more or less natural are clad in gardening say because the earth is filled with fruits and vegetables and animals that easily pop into your hand and from your hand they pop into your mouth and you imagine this primitive group of people having primitive relations men and women distributed at random by casual pleasure one might suppose that incest is not a primitive taboo after all there's nothing natural about such a constraint on pairings one might but one might not one might say that since some kind of incest taboo is found everywhere incest is a primitive prohibition but that seems rather silly because even if one could find strong political social reasons why such a prohibition might "strengthen or articulate" the group structure of the group that practiced it there's no need to assume that natural man recognized this or even that all kinds of groups would be "strengthened" this way anyway maybe you don't want to think that political effectiveness is primitive its probably easier even more attractive to decide that the incest prohibition or more precisely some incest prohibition was the first act of sophisticated culture the arbitrary perhaps playful distinction quite invisible between the suitable and the unsuitable but this goes nowhere except back to the trivialities of conjectural history back to the fantasies of "primitive man" which never got us anywhere anyway so let's leave primitive alone and let's talk about something else something that by contrast is fairly clear that before there was writing there was no writing that seems like a fairly minimal assumption before there was writing there wasn't writing we can still find groups of people that don't have writing or until the anthropologists and missionaries got there quite recently they didn't have writing now before people had writing they had to get along without it we are going very slow but it's a radical assumption once there was no writing now if there was no writing id like to call that culture that had no writing for the moment an oral culture because in order to transmit messages or to deal with people outside the range of an arm and more gently than with a spear perhaps when you
couldnt push someone into a place but still wanted to bring him
there to reach someone at the level where physical constraint
is not possible or desirable you use language and in
order to contain nonpresent entities to operate on nonpresent
entities that is entities that are not present at a particular time
or place if you have no way of preserving them in your prox-
imity theyre not there the yam that you ate yesterday
is no longer a yam unless you remember it was a yam if
you remember it was a yam you remember it linguistically
by which i mean that you remember it by a family of features
that distinguish it from whatever else it might get confused with
and in order to talk about that yam communicate about its
badness say lets say it gave you indigestion and you want to
discuss that fact that that particular kind of yam is not a good
thing and you dont want to eat that kind of yam again
you need some way of describing that yam some label for
that yam or some set of instructions by which people will find
that yam but also remember the yam that it once was and
the class of yams it belonged to which means that you will need
at least two categorical assignments for that yam you will have
to have one category for the class of things you know as yams as
opposed to other tuberous foods say and another one for things
that make you sick poisons say all other yams may look
alike but this one better look different feel different
smell different or live in a different place now in
order to remember this yam you might draw a picture of the yam
though it is not easy to see how this will help you if the yam
doesnt look different from other yams if there were no specially
marked visual features that set it apart it wasnt greener say
or more spherical or symmetrical or whatever besides which
this whole notion of drawing is not different from remembering
linguistically the drawing also consists of categorical assignments
you are representing the yam among other yams and its differ-
ences from them and the only special thing about the drawing
will be that those differences will have to be visible but while
all this sounds logical enough it isnt in fact the way drawings get
made by oral cultures anyway since it would be nonsensical to
begin by making a drawing of a yam that you didnt already know to
be the poison yam the important yam or the yam in question you have already started with a clear memory of that particular yam no drawing a picture does not replace remembering it is protoliterary anyway in the sense that it articulates fixes or freezes an already existing memory it commits you in some particular way to a model a particular model of a memory one particular remembering it is therefore a literary activity but talking about a yam is a bit different talking about a yam is not drawing a picture of a yam and remembering a yam is not writing a yam and you have a different way of communicating because you have the problem of remembering and remembering is a very odd form of behavior when its not conducted against a model think of the task of remembering the past a past for which you have no model im sure youve all had lots of conversations over the past week and im sure that if i asked you to remember a conversation you had last week you could produce something you would say was that conversation right? i mean if i asked you anybody? you feel confident? that you could reproduce the conversation you had last week? or any part of it? think about it what do you mean by “remembering” the conversation i can remember conversations i had when i was four some of them i can remember them but i bet i cant reproduce them and if i could reproduce them i dont think i could be sure that i could reproduce them now let me describe the difference between reproducing something and remembering it i did a piece once i did a piece in which i asked ely my wife i asked her to remember something i told her a story read it to her and i asked her to remember it and then the next day i asked her to tell me what she remembered and i recorded it and then the day after i asked her to do it again and then a week later i asked her to tell the story she remembered and then a month later i asked her to do it again and then a year later i asked her to tell me the story and finally just recently i asked her to tell me the story once again and she really tried very hard to remember the story
the merchant of X lived in the town of L and he came to the doctor one day very distressed because he couldn't remember his wife's face. Now I don't remember if his wife is dead or not. I couldn't remember his daughter's faces either. He used to draw very well; he knew the whole center interior of the town when he closed his eyes, he could see it before him and he could always draw it. The courthouse, the pergola? I think, but the merchant of X lived in the town of L in Europe. He came to the analyst in great distress because he could no longer remember his wife's and daughters' faces. I don't recall whether they were alive or not, but he couldn't recall them at all. He used to have a very good memory in his business and also for the town in which he lived. He could recall every building of the main streets; he could also in fact draw them. He was able to draw geometrically the architectural features of the courthouse, the library, and various other buildings and he could quite definitely delineate verbally a kind of conceptual map in his head. He could verbalize it and say and describe it. But as far as his family went, he could no longer do that. He also spoke several languages: German, French, etcetera, and Greek and Latin. It turned out that he could no longer speak German. Though he dreamt in French, he had a dream. I don't remember if it was a dream or an experience in which he looked up and his wife spoke to him and he didn't know it was her.

You can change your mind if you think that's not the formulation. Try to remember.

His wife had dark hair; he knew that but that's all. He knew this isn't a story that now in my head its wrapped up with the "little herman" and various things like that. I see him in his library.
what do you remember?

i dont think this is not from there "sitting in his library..." and his wife talking to him and when he looked up he couldnt remember her he no longer could draw the principal streets of the town of L though he may have been able to draw the harbor he owned factories or if he didnt he should have

was he getting better or worse?

well i never quite understood his problem it was hard to tell what his problem was

once he had a great visual memory

thats true he had a great visual memory and he knew many languages

but after a while he lost his visual memory

yeah but i dont know

he had to train himself to go differently

oh he had to train himself oh yes with great care he memorized the visual features that he could no longer remember of the town perhaps perhaps he walked through the town again and tried deliberately to recall everything though i dont know if the story told this process or

well didnt he come with a complaint? that is he came there he had a complaint

yeah but also i dont think he spoke the same languages anymore i dont remember if he was melancholy sad or in any kind of distress i dont think so i dont think it was bothering him in his business i just seem to remember

you think he managed to get by in business without that kind of memory?

well business a business i guess tends to lumber along never said what kind of business he was in

be seems to have been a merchant it said he was a merchant
a merchant but i dont see why

"the merchant of x"

i dont see why his enormous memory his former memory why its loss would have interfered with his business

do you remember what he used to do about accounts? how he could remember whether he had spent or lost money or what his books were like?

i dont remember

he always knew where the accounts were because he had a visual memory of the whole system

oh yeah he had a visual image of the whole page he could remember in his head he could go down the columns in his minds eye and remember i assume how much money such-and-such owed him or whatever the details i dont remember but all the accounting pages the bookkeeping books he could recall in his head hed close his eyes and hed see it and he no longer saw that but of course thats not necessary that sounds like

when he lost that what other type of memory did he have? was he able to go any other way?

well as i remember he had something else and he tried to go in that direction to compensate for his loss it wasnt auditory he had to retrain himself to remember all the accoutrements of his life and of his business i dont think he regained his memory the way it had been and i dont i think he forgot latin and greek which he had been fluent in and i think while he no longer spoke french he dreamt in french

why would he have trouble with the language?

i dont see why that should have bothered him

why would he have trouble with the language? what part of the language would he have trouble with?

i think in his head he couldnt remember to

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himself its possible that when he spoke he could speak it but that in his head he couldnt speak any of those languages to himself

any of them?

i dont know if he was swiss or german

now he knew modern greek as well but it wasnt his native language what was the language of his childhood do you remember?

french

you sure?

thats why he dreamt in french

he spoke fluent french was french really his native tongue?

german?

what are you remembering you remember it as french? and which was the language he dreamt in?

i remember certain noble romantic sentences which was the language he dreamt in?

french

and he was fluent in what languages?

he had been fluent in now you say it i recall modern day greek latin and i assume german

and what had happened? i mean what had he lost?

i was never too clear what he lost i was always he lost the ability i remember the sentence “he lost the ability to...” he lost the ability to remember in his mind that visual memory that he had had he lost the ability to call up all those things that he used to remember

including his wife

including his wife visually

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visually but maybe he could still speak the languages

*all of them?*

i assume he could speak german

*what did he finally do what was the outcome you remember?*

the outcome was that

that he had to retrain himself to sort of remember things i think he retrained himself to i think he may have forgotten what the town looked like and he retrained yeah as a matter of fact i think every time he went through the town it was like coming to a foreign place and he didn't recognize it and then he retrained himself to remember it he gave himself a map in his head but he'd have to do it redo it each time each time it was like coming to a strange place in fact i think now that the point of the problem was that wherever he was it was a foreign place and he had to make a conscious effort to hold it together in his head i guess to say to himself "now this is the town of L this is my town where i was born and where i work this is my wife with the black hair dark hair this is my house" i don't recall if after retraining himself every time to do this it may have been that the doctor that is it was suggested to him that he retrain himself i don't recall then if it stayed in his head or if it went away again i don't know if he lost it or if it stayed

*now if you had to put this whole story together now as a single narrative i mean if you had to remember the whole story coherently how would you tell me this story? in one piece if you were going to try and*
the merchant of X lived in the town of L and he came to a doctor with a problem. He was very distressed. He had always had a superb visual memory which helped him in business. He could close his eyes and visually see the page that he wanted from his books. In fact, he would go down the page with his eyes and scan it, perhaps with a finger in his mind's eye, and find the information or the data he was looking for. He also used to draw well and he could draw the whole town of L, including the harbor and the main streets and the courthouse library etcetera. In fact, he could very specifically draw the arch that was in the "principal" building. I remember that word building there was an arch and he could draw that arch. Though is it possible he couldn't remember how it held together? I don't know. Anyway, his problem now was that he no longer could remember his wife's face when he closed his eyes and he had lost his visual memory for his business books as well. Also, the language of his childhood I don't recall what it was. He could no longer speak and he had also forgotten modern Greek which he used to know and Latin. He could still speak French, in fact, he dreamed in French. He had to retrain himself to recall the town and his wife's face every time he entered the town. You see the problem was that every time he entered the town it was a foreign place. It wasn't as if he had been born there and had been there all his life and he had to make a conscious effort to recall the streets and the buildings and various landmarks as well as to realize every time he came to his house that it was his house, "this is my house and this is my wife. This is my house and this is my wife."
mr x was a merchant born in vienna he was highly educated master of german spanish french greek and latin up to a year before he read homer at sight virgil and horace were familiar and he knew enough modern greek for business purposes up to this time he enjoyed an exceptional visual memory no sooner did he think of persons or things than features forms and colors arose with the same clarity as if the objects themselves stood before him when he tried to recall a fact or a figure from his voluminous correspondence the letters themselves appeared before him with their entire content irregularities erasures and all in making computations he ran his eye down the imaginary columns of figures and performed in this manner the most varied operations of arithmetic he could never think of a passage from a play without the entire scene actors stage and audience appearing before him he had been a great traveller and being a good draftsman he used to sketch views which pleased him and his memory always brought back the entire landscape exactly if he thought of a conversation a saying an engagement the place the people the entire scene rose before his mind his auditory memory had always been deficient a year and a half ago an extraordinary change came over him after complete confusion there came a violent change between his old and new self everything about him seemed new and foreign although he saw all things distinctly and clearly he had entirely lost his memory for forms and colors when he realized this he became reassured as to his sanity and he soon discovered that he could carry on his affairs by using his memory in an entirely different way he can now describe clearly the difference between his old and new states every time he returns to a from which place business often calls him he seems to himself to be entering a strange city he views the monuments houses and streets with the same surprise as if he were seeing them for the first time gradually however his memory returns and he finds himself at home again when asked to describe the principal public place of the town he answered i know that it is there but it is impossible for me to imagine it and i can tell you nothing about it he has often drawn the port of a today he vainly tries to trace its principal
outlines asked to draw a minaret he reflects says it is a square tower and draws rudely four lines one for ground one for top and two for sides asked to draw an arcade he says “i remember that it contains semicircular arches and that two of them meeting at an angle form a vault but how it looks i am absolutely unable to imagine” the profile of a man that he drew on request was as if drawn by a child and yet he confessed that he had been helped to draw it by looking at the bystanders similarly he drew a shapeless scribble for a tree he can no more remember his wives and childrens faces than he can remember the town of A even after being with them for some time they seem unusual to him and he forgets his own face and once spoke to his image in the mirror taking it for a stranger “my wife has black hair i know but i can no more remember its color than i can her person and features” now when he looks for something in his correspondence he must rummage among the letters like other men till he finds the passage figures which he adds he must now whisper to himself the words and expressions that he recalls now seem to echo in his ear an altogether novel sensation for him if he wishes to learn anything by heart he must repeat it several times aloud to impress it on his ear when later he repeats the thing in question the sensation of inward hearing precedes articulation this feeling was formerly unknown to him he speaks french fluently but affirms he can no longer think in french he must get his french words by translating them from spanish or german the languages of his childhood he dreams only in words usually spanish words he is troubled by the greek alphabet

and the only way i could tell that she couldnt remember the story as it had been or more precisely the only way i could tell the difference between her story the story that she remembered and the story that she was trying to remember was that i
happened to have a tape recorder and take it down now surely you can imagine a time when there were no tape recorders and there were no texts i mean if i had an extremely efficient and "exact" kind of shorthand thats sort of paradoxical but if i had i suppose i could have taken it down but as ive said if i had done that writing it down i would have had the story a telling of a story stored in a space which is again something like drawing but if i just told you a story and i asked you to tell it back to me i might think i knew whether you were being accurate right away though i would have only my confidence to rely upon but a year later how do i know that the story you tell me isnt the right story? it is something of a problem if the differences seem important if i were to tell each of you a story now and then one year later ask you to tell me the story again and its not on tape we may have to resort to an argument to decide whether its the same story i may think its not the story but i sure dont have any way of proving that the story you told me is not the story though i may find certain inconsistencies and improbabilities in the story then we could argue it out but in the end there would be no absolute model against which we could check the story thats a very odd characteristic of places that dont have what i would call literal reproductive capacities a nonliteral society cant check against an absolute now this is a construction this oral society weve invented because theres no society in the world that doesnt have some possibility of absolute reference but there may be the possibility of absolute reference and there may not be the habit of using it for example you live in a place and you have to get somewhere regularly and you have to go into places that are confusingly similar say you live at the edge of a forest and you have to enter that forest and then come out of it to get home its a simplified situation but close enough to a reality now when you get to where you were going and youve finished gathering something or other you have to get back and presumably you have to remember where back is there are a number of ways you could do it at least we could imagine a number of ways you might be able to do it but if you didnt
get back to the right place your memory wasn't too good and
this is one situation where you have a fairly clear test of your
powers of memory because if at the end of your wandering you
don't arrive at a familiar village and the hut on the right doesn't
contain the woman who was there when you set out you may
regard this as an improvement but it is clear that your memory
has let you down since it is obvious that most hunting or for-
aging expeditions do not result in the founding of new villages or
rounds of wife trading or life trading it seems at first that this
fact that you can get back to the place that you started from
is a fundamental challenge to our notion of the instability of mem-
ory though I don't think that it is but let us see why we
would suppose that to begin with there is the difference
between the place that you're leaving and the place into which you
must go your home your starting place camp hut villa-
get is a human construction is humanly devised
or arranged even if it is a temporary station you will have
adapted to a human order the place that you're going into is
not humanly arranged it is the forest the desert a kind of
chaos or at least its order is "natural" rather than "human"
when you go into it you can become "lost" which
means that you cannot apprehend its order or relate its
order to your human order so what do you do? you seek
its regularities you make a map the sun rises regularly
more or less regularly in the east this is the order of
nature and it sets in the west if you face it the rising
sun your left hand points north and your right hand south
this axis is the order of culture the human order now
you lay out the space with your home at the center or at
the northern end or whatever and you place in your mental
chart all the landmarks you encounter you know how long it
takes walking swiftly more or less to reach the two tall
rocks or the waterhole and when you know all this and
you mark off proportionate distances in your picture you have
a map now anytime you are in the forest if you are con-
fused all you have to do is find out where you are in your map
to do this you look for the sun you put yourself in position
find your left and right hands and try to remember how long
you walked to the right or the left or forward or backward
and that tells you where you are and how to get back now
i dont doubt that any society any group of human beings has
this capacity to devise a whole spatial representation a
literal space chart that they can stand outside of long enough to draw
and oversee completely as a formal configuration in which
they themselves must be represented by some formal double a
dot or a cross "thats me standing by this tree" i dont
doubt it because its been done by some societies and if some
men can do it im sure all men can do it the question is whether
they do do it or whether its the only way to do it or even the most reasonable sensible way to do it but you
may not really appreciate how freaky a thing theyve done to
do this what theyve done is to isolate a space outside of the one theyre in they have in some sense to alienate
themselves and their world which they have always been inside of to put it “over there” some other place to create a “double” for themselves and for “it” now you
may say they have to do that even if they merely tell a story about
what happened to them they have to isolate themselves from a series of events which was up to the moment of the “telling”
with them all the time as part of a continuous a dura-
tive present now they have to cut it off and push it away as the past and while there is some truth in this it isnt much because a “story” is never present all at once its beginning and end cant be surveyed at the same time so that it never has the isolated and bounded content of a drawing or map
it is never an “object” to be handled at its most alienated it is “material” that passes through your hand moreover when you tell a story if you think of the great tellings there is a progressive act of memory you gradually approach a past you begin in the present outside it say remembering only its name and you call on it and try to find your way to it till at some point you are “in it” and it is then present if only for a while and then you move out of it again
and there is a way of finding a place thats quite a bit more like remembering the past than like referring to a map about a month ago i had to go to encino which is the name of a
"town" not far from los angeles or more particularly i had to go to an art gallery that people described as being "in encino"
i had been there before to the art gallery i had no notion and still have no notion of what encino looks like as a space or where it is on a map or in a picture that would also show los angeles san diego pasadena or the pacific ocean now i live in solana beach and i have a very adequate grasp of what solana beach "looks like" though i dont have a configural or aerial view of it though i could make one ive walked out of my house and all around the town of solana beach or more particularly that part of solana beach that is on the ocean side of the old highway i also know how to get from solana beach from my house to places in san diego now how did i get to encino the gallery in encino i walked out of my house and got into my car which i took in the direction i had been facing when i left the house which by the way was away from the ocean i went past the old highway up a hill past a shopping center called "the place of the seven flags" to a bigger road and turned onto it going left i stayed on this road for a long time how long? i didnt look at my watch but at some point i was passing an empty stretch with no developments a few palms and some chaparral that was camp pendleton sometimes you see tanks and troop carriers there on the left side as you drive on the right side a few stands of eucalyptus screening farms from the sea wind i passed san clemente i could tell by the large ridges we passed and a faint sense of discomfort in breathing we were beginning the smog but you dont notice it right away you realize after a while that youve been sensing a slight increase in temperature feeling a slight effort in breathing and you know youve been entering the smog after a while there are more buildings of an industrial sort oil refineries cracking plants a gypsum plant a holiday inn youre moving toward long beach but you keep going without paying too much attention to the road later then youre going through a long stretch of fairly empty mountains youre getting closer you pass a funny shaped building on your left a little science fictiony and displaced in these mountains then there is another of a different kind
also displaced this time on the right i think its a bank and
you approach it coming down a hill its time to make a left
turn onto another road called the ventura freeway you
drive on this for a short while i dont remember how long
and there is a place to get off i cant tell you what it looks
like but when i see it the angle of light maybe a cluster
of eucalyptus trees and then nothing i think i get off and
find my way left i go straight ahead until i come to a big avenu,
a kind of more open space and turn right i travel along
this street till the businesses get a little flashier and look for the
place when i am in front of it i recognize it now i have no
great fund of information about the australian aborigine but i
have reason to suppose that in some ways he moves around or
used to move around his own countryside somewhat in the way that
i got to encino an anthropologist trying to make a map of the
“territory” of certain western desert people found that “usually
a western desert man will make a small mark representing his birth­
place and from it run a line representing his track to farther water
until he has indicated all his principal camping places” as you
can see this is not a map its a set of “driving instructions”
and it was only by using a large number of “driving instruc­
tions” that professor tindale was able to construct a “map” of the
desert mans territory because a map consists of a very large
family of driving instructions in fact once a map is put
down from some limited number of sets of driving instructions it
can be used to derive an infinite set of driving instructions
because once the axis of culture the left hand right hand
line the north south line is oriented to the axis of nature
the east west line it is possible by counting some kinds of
units steps? degrees? to get from any place to any
other place within the domain of the map whether or not they
have ever been of interest to anyone before hypothetical places
or conjectural places can all be arrived at by reference to
known places and the four points of the compass there are
certainly advantages to this literal career because thats what it is a career and it was the career of the great astronomical
and agricultural societies in the near east which became very
involved with regularities absolute regularities or as nearly
absolute regularities as they could find one might imagine that they had a special need for such a career or rather more precisely that such a career was rewarded under their special circumstances of farming on a flood plain where a great deal of human social and economic organization disintegrated when the waters came we don't have to hold a functionalist position to suppose that an ability to reinstitute land divisions on the subsidence of flood waters or to predict with some accuracy the approach of flooding or to estimate the timing of planting and harvesting in relation to this water clock and solar clock or to dredge the marshes for cultivation and allocate regular amounts of river water to regularly divided land parcels would pay off and maybe even pay off high enough stakes to enough members of this society in return for the loss of human freedom that the regularity would entail for them to put up with it and its not surprising to see trigonometry and geometry and map making all together in this growing literalist enterprise where we also find in this hydraulic society one great center of literacy which is again no accident because if you think of this literalism as a career you can also think of it as something like the career of a disease some alien element perhaps arbitrary a foreign body the first move toward literalism making a mark on a wall say producing a response to that foreign element recognizing it as equivalent to something or capable of being made equivalent to something always and extracting value from that regularity of equivalence one mark for the rising sun to the setting sun one mark for the number one that is for one of anything two such marks for two of anything grasping at the career of regularity in literalism but only grasping because in the beginning making two marks merely reenacts the action of counting "one [makes mark]" "two [makes mark]" it is still a little play "the sun [he puts his stick in the earth making a point and begins to move it] goes from here to there" it is still the act of drawing not a drawing but it is not a long way from drawing reenacting with the hand to a drawing the disease is spreading once you've benefited from any form of literalism it will be easier to try another and another and while all these acts of regularization pay off in
some convenience you will also pay something for them in this way most diseases are not so much problems but solutions to problems that you're paying too much for like atherosclerosis which was solving your diet problem and your lack of activity problem till it killed you well now we have a problem with our overlong career of literalism overlong and singleminded its been so long now that many of us find it hard to understand the terms of any other possible career so hard that we must insist that the western desert man was not making a map or not what we mean by a map its a pity that tindale doesn't give a precise account of what the event was like but that wasn't his purpose at the time so let us reconstruct the event as it probably happened "the western desert man will make a mark representing his birthplace" now how does he do that? for a western desert man "the place where he was born" is not so much the place where his mother gave birth that point on a north-south east-west grid counted off in meters from some objective physical landmark it isn't that his birthplace is the "important place" closest to that physical birth its the nearest important place on the famous path of the "sacred person" he will be associated with a pile of rocks a small waterhole that will be the place of his dreaming and these camping places they will lie along the track of his dreaming more or less the desert mans territory is crisscrossed not by recurrent and regularly spaced lines of longitude and latitude but by sacred tracks of "first people" the sacred ones who wandered through the place sat down here went out of sight there and left a pile of rocks to mark the place and placed the important creatures and plants in the land now these paths are not spaced equidistantly and they do not proceed in right lines they wander from waterhole to clump of vegetation across an arid irregularly watered space covered with spinifex grass and rocks and scrubby little trees and because of the way the people live there a few hundred people living in an area of a few thousand square miles and having to travel in smaller and smaller bands as the year gets dryer and dryer most are familiar with some of each others famous paths within their familiar terrain but less familiar with others paths though they are from
the same group so what any one desert man has is a knowledge of roads and driving instructions some roads he knows better than others now he makes a mark the first mark he makes is for the place he knows best you ask “how does he know where to put it on the paper?” and that’s a good question if he happens to make this map on paper it would be interesting to know does he put it in the middle or near an edge? is he an edge person? because maybe he was born near the beginning of another people’s land or something but I don’t have any answers for that professor Tindale had something else in mind and neglected to say whether the western desert man made his map on paper or on the ground but I would suppose that it would be very unlikely that he the western desert man would line up the axes of the paper with the sunline and his leftright hand line before beginning and it is probable that he would feel more comfortable laying out his pathways in the ground with a stick and that he would push the stick forward through the ground as if he was walking in the direction of the stick unless the habit of using that stick his boomerang say was to pull it toward him as when cutting up an animal but if his working habit didn’t interfere he would probably push the stick forward and reenact his going travelling from his birthplace to his next camping ground try to remember that place and then go on to his next one and so on and so on till he had gone through all his camping places or all of them that he remembered and while I have no evidence for this I can point to two native maps incised on their spear throwers by Pintubi tribesmen of the western desert as these were shown and explained to Donald Thomson who was exploring their country and these are certainly not maps in our sense of the word for one thing though both spear throwers and both maps are from the same people the same band even they are by no means the same one spear thrower shows forty-nine water places and the other shows thirty-six in what seems to be the same territory and only eighteen are the same and while this isn’t terribly surprising since the drawings the roadmaps were made by different people most likely what is more surprising is that these eighteen common places are not in the same place.
by which I mean that they are not in the same relation to each other or to the surface on which they are inscribed in the two “maps”
drawings or more precisely carvings but this may take a little explaining because the carvings themselves exhibit only certain relations found in maps sequential order and approximate relative proximity and accessibility how is this the case? well the carvings consist of more or less circular marks for the camping sites and lines between them for the connecting paths all of the circles are laid out along one or the other of about three rather wavy lines that parallel the long dimension of the somewhat fishshaped spear throwers occasionally these circular watersites are connected by crosslines to an adjacent site on an adjoining longitudinal line so it seems that you can get from campsite 1 to campsite 2 and must then proceed directly to campsite 3 and so on but in other parts of the map it turns out that you can get from campsite 3 to campsite 4 but also to campsite 6 because campsite 3 is connected to campsites 2 and 4 and 6 so what we have is a network of roads marking accessibility and a sort of serial order or a choice of serial order and relative proximity and that's all now you may suppose that one end of the spear thrower marks north and the other south but that is not the case because a place that is at the distal end of one spear thrower may appear either at the proximal end of the other or even at the center it seems that a sequence of camping sites arranged in the mind perhaps as an ordered list is laid out in the order in which the sites would be approached ordinarily first this one then that one but that the list is arbitrarily adapted to the shape of the spear thrower i mean any pintubi would probably know that wakilbi would be much further off to the left if he was going there from kuna but if he put it as far off to the left as it ought to be if the law of proportionality was to be obeyed it wouldn't fit on the spear thrower so wherever it should really be it still has to be made to fit on a piece of wood which was shaped before the map was made and shaped on the basis of very different considerations and while this is easy to understand and a relatively practical solution to a practical problem making a wide terrain fit on a narrow surface there is another difference between these road maps
and our notion of a map even when both maps agree on the watering places they don’t always agree on the way to get from one to another for example there are four places wirra wirra kirindji kanandibarro and markodarindja and they are laid out on map 1 in just that way following sequentially a kind of right angle of which kanandibarro is the vertex but on map 2 they are not only laid out in a single line but in the order markodarindja kirindji kanandibarro wirra wirra that is they are reversed which is a trivial difference because the point of view of the map maker might have been reversed but they are also in a different order which is to say if one map has the order 6 7 8 9 map 2 has the order 9 7 8 6 where we would have expected if sequence were to be maintained 9 8 7 6 how to explain this to one who is used to our notion of maps well it isn’t difficult to explain as long as we remember that this is not really a “map” an arrangement that conforms or is congruent or similar in the disposition of its elements to the elements of the real world conceived in relation to some fixed axes if it isn’t we can suppose that the two waterholes kirindji and kanandibarro which we have called 7 and 8 are neither one of them much further from or nearer to either campsite 6 or 9 then these two kirindji and kanandibarro waterholes 7 and 8 can be imagined to lie more or less on a straight line in the real world at right angles to a line that might be drawn from campsites 6 to 9 the four campsites would then form a kind of conceptual diamond shaped parallelogram and it would be a matter of personal preference whether you went from wirra wirra our number 6 first to kirindji number 7 then kanandibarro number 8 and then to markodarindja number 9 or whether you went from wirra wirra number 6 first to kanandibarro number 8 then kirindji number 7 and then to markodarindja number 9 and this transposition of 7 and 8 could be made either coming from markodarindja number 9 or wirra wirra number 6 and the preference that would lead you to make either choice might have to do with the way in which your particular sacred ancestor happened to go and he may have gone one way on one occasion and the other way on another so that
spear thrower “maps” drawn after photographs in d.f. thomson
“the bindibu expedition” geographical journal volume 128
1962 pp 262-78 the “maps” are slightly simplified in respect
of possibly significant marks of uncertain meaning on the spear
throwers the analysis is my own
this is a reason based on history rather than geography or more precisely on sacred geography rather than geometrical geography

now this sacred geography or traditional geography is based on these first paths not on literal lines of longitude and latitude which are intended to replicate literally a pathway with respect to the solar path what we come back to is a memory of roads and places and it is very much a matter of memory

because there is no hint on either of these spear thrower road-maps which waterhole is which this you have to remember and you do it by first remembering the first one where you were born? and then you remember the next one and then the next one and so on and if you get confused there is no one to correct you except someone else's memory and as elkin the great australian anthropologist says

sometimes the natives say they know quite well the direction and exact location of a certain sacred site [but] they seldom approach it by the shortest route indeed they frequently set out as though going somewhere else altogether or they seem unable to find their way to the place the explanation is that the sacred place must only be approached by the same path as that taken by the hero connected with it this may lead for some time away from it and some informants may have to search round until they find signs of the track before they can move with certainty

because in order to come to the right place you have to find the right way which may not mean when you are travelling that you must always travel in this order on these paths anymore than a traveller with a modern map must travel along a great circle of the globe clearly you can travel any way you want or have to for the purposes you have in hand hunting or whatever but you can always locate yourself in relation to these famous lines and water places instead of locating yourself by lines of longitude and latitude you locate yourself in relation to famous lines and famous places that have one further advantage over arbitrary ones there will ordinarily be water there you can probably also regard the celebrated and enormously complex kinship systems of these societies as also nothing more than sets of driving
instructions roadways for distinguishing landmarks in a more or less indistinguishable terrain of relatively equivalent things men and women and you don't have to suppose any charts or maps merely a knowledge of the rules of the road as provided by familiar examples say I'm supposed to marry my cross-cousin some girl what's a cross-cousin? in my case since I'm a man it'll be a girl that I should get to by travelling in the right way my instructions are "up one generation..." This roadmap will lead to my patrilateral cross-cousin travel up one generation to a man who will turn out to be my father or any man who can be classed as that which might be any of his brothers or half brothers or classificational brothers drive left to his sister or any woman who can be classed as that turn back down any number of generations to whoever is classed as her daughter and marry her or any her you can reach by travelling that road whose father will agree to give her to you for whatever wives are going for that year if you're supposed to marry your matrilateral cross-cousin that merely means you drive up one generation to a female parent your mother or whoever you can class as that turn right to her male sibling a brother or whoever can class as that turn back down to a woman his daughter or whoever you can class as that and marry her for any of these excursions there are alternate trips what you might call the scenic route you can go up to your mothers mothers mothers mother four generations up as long as you come down four classificational generations to her brothers daughters daughters daughters daughter and at the end of that road there will be a woman waiting for you on the other hand if you happen to begin with a woman if you work hard enough and drive backward far enough there is an ancestor waiting for you which is to say that in kinship also it is hardly a matter of who you marry of finding the right person it is rather a matter of finding some person by going the right way and once again so with marriages as with campsites you may not choose to travel them but they mark out the terrain the only problem and it may not be a problem at all if nobody makes an issue out of it is that the memory of relations
landmarks over any number of generations may become somewhat vague in which case you will certainly convert any marriage you intend into a marriage that was arrived at in the right way and you will redesignate all the necessary intermediate landmarks relations which may not in absolute historical fact have been the right relations to make them the right relations since there is no such thing as an absolute history but only the memory of history which you will adapt to the circumstances of your needs and desires and your sense perhaps of anxiety which is to some extent the way of all historians and possibly it is an anxiety like this that is bound up with the career of writing down some fear of forgetting is it an accident that the dakota winter counts seem to coincide that is their invention and use seem to coincide with the sense of the alien presence of the white man some premonition of the loss of their history which is really a memory of important things dimly felt and worried about the time they first stole the horses with iron shoes when they first got smallpox the appearance of the white trader the small inroads spreading an anxiety that they might go "out of print" the recording of history will only seem necessary the fixing of the past in some external reservoir the message stick the knotted string the cylinder seal the palace inventory the burial inscription if there is some danger of forgetting or losing its an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of the human one deficiency of which is death by placing meaning outside of mind trying to find some way of bringing meaning out of a mind and into a place so it was appropriate for that mycenaean society with all its apparatus and gear for the minoans to have a way of keeping inventories and accounts but its not all that easy to understand how poetry came to be written down or why i mean if poetry was a kind of talking and it had to be if there was no writing then a poet was someone who could talk when the time came could remember other talking and could tell the important things how they had happened and why and what might have happened if these things hadn't happened in the way they happen to have happened now i suppose if the talk seemed
very important and sometimes it may have been say that
the talk was a talking of law of what was acceptable and right
and what was not acceptable and not right and what then in
iceland every summer over every three years the law speaker had to
stand on the law rock and recite the whole law of the land and
the way that we understand that is that the law is already
mixed up with writing because we think of the ten command-
ments and the code of hammurabi"thou shalt have no other
god than me" or "if you steal from me ill kill you" but
the law of power is not the only kind of law that is statute
law the law of edicts and statutes and commandments and
pseudocommandments is not the only kind of law there is the
notion of common law among the germanic peoples anyway
a law expressing someones views of what is fitting among
equals if you happen to kill someone and it sometimes
happens you have to make restitution of some sort to his
people if you divorce someone you have to give back her
dowry all other things being equal "have to"? well
you have to by "law" it is thought just and the law will
work if you the parties concerned are equal in power
and can make the "law" work no there is an oral law
sometimes called primitive law there are courts among
people having no writing though you may think "if there is no
writing theres no reciting" and you re wrong because it is
where there is no writing there is reciting on the condition that
some particular articulation in talking was the right articulation
that one time "do unto others as you would have others
do unto you" or "those that have shall receive and those
that have not even the little that they have shall be taken
away" its not hard to remember that at all give or take a
little if its memorable youll remember it but it will help
if its short and peculiar jingling and twisted in some unex-
pected way its a platitude to say it that you will remember
what is distinctive and that suggests you shouldnt worry about
forgetting and there never will be writing because youll
never need it but you may think something is important and
it isnt short it is a long train of events and articulations and
you are worried that you have to remember it just so it has the
nostalgia of njal talking about law “with law shall our land be built up but with lawlessness laid waste” and we must understand that njal is probably not just saying that hes reciting it hopefully a kind of proverb between talking and writing we probably have reciting and thats the only way i could imagine that the talkings of homer got to be written down otherwise it seems too improbable that anyone would want to write them down not at a time when all of this talking was going on as talking because it would just seem too freaky an idea to use a way of mark making that was used for labels on a can of peaches or a figure in a bill of lading and hope it would hold a way of talking and i dont doubt that homer or some other blind man told those “poems” because they just arent put together the way somebody would put them together if he could lay it out all in front of him and go back and forth over all that talk and take out all of his slips and file away the little side trips that make the talking seem a funny shape kind of uncouth as a “form” but a form only exists in space at least it has no objective existence without reference to some space in which its all together at once so that you can inspect all the parts of it as an overall kind of thing no serial art no art that elapses in time can be looked at all at once unless it is terribly short because there is memory again you cant flip the pages of memory back and forth to find slips of the tongue you didnt notice when you made them or forgot and an oral poem is clumsier if you like literary poems better i mean the saga of burnt njal is much more elegant than the iliad from a formal point of view and theyre both terrific but theyre terrific in different ways if youre a literary man homer is something of a slob the whole opening of the iliad is something of a mistake the talker gets caught by a kind of slip of the tongue and he has no choice but to go right on it begins ordinarily enough as i suppose you all know he asks the muse to give him enough memory to get his talking straight you know the way it goes

tell me goddess

of the destroying rage of achilles peleus son that

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loaded all those woes on the achaeans and sent too early all those brave heros souls down to hell and left their bodies for the dogs and all the birds and yet it was the will of zeus and of that first time when the son of atreus king of men and divine achilles quarreled and drew apart which is okay as far as it goes it was the usual thing i suppose more or less but the turning point the difficult variation in this opening something like the dragon variation in the sicilian defense is in the next phrase because up to here homer could have gotten to the quarrel very easily and worked his way in from there but the next phrase goes

and which of the gods set them on the two of them to fight with each other?

which may seem reasonable enough except none of the gods set them on to fight with each other as homer himself will show in a very few lines sure he says it was

the son of latona and zeus for he was enraged with the king and he sent a plague among the army and the people were dying which is all very well but thats hardly what set agamemnon and achilles quarreling it merely created an anterior set of circumstances that could have caused any number of things the loss of the war by the greeks their sailing away from troy in disgust their death by the plague whatever nothing at all about achilles and agamemnon until the plague gets so bad that hera zeus wife takes things into her own hands and in a dream she tells achilles to call a council if there is no council there will be no quarrel of divine agents hera is as good a cause as any but even thats not enough its in the council when achilles asks for a priest or an interpreter of dreams to explain why the disease that calchas stands up and explains how agamemnons insult to chryses the priest of apollo caused it all and how to amend it that the quarrel starts now you may say thats all right the greeks have a funny view of causality and i say thats nonsense homer isnt
thinking of causality as a matter of fact he isn't thinking at all. He's talking, trying to make his way to the story which he intends to tell this time from the point of view of Achilles quarrel with Agamemnon. Who knows why? And at about the end of the first request to the muse, he's used to asking about divine agencies. He's already named the two main human actors, now it seems to be time to bring in the gods. He's already talked about the dying and the dead bodies and there is the image of them lying on the beach being fed on by the dogs and the birds, so he may as well, or rather he may whether it's well or not, talk about the dying and just before the quarrel broke out there was a disease that ran through the army, and it was on Homer's mind the dying men and the carrion birds and the dogs, and there was Apollo, prince of disease, with his arrows, and he was offended so why not Apollo and the story of how he came to be offended, how Agamemnon kidnapped the daughter of Apollo's priest Chryses, and the old priest came to ransom her under the protection of Apollo, with the fillet and the ransom in his hands and Agamemnon drove him away and insulted him as well. Okay, you say why not this way. The answer is that as soon as Homer says 'which god set them on each other' and names Apollo, he has to tell the whole story of the old priest coming down to the ships with his ransom and politely begging and bribing the Greek kidnappers and maybe a little threatening trouble from Apollo as well, and Homer gives all the speeches. Agamemnon's cruel response:

I won't let her go till old age overcomes her in our house in Argos far from her own country working the loom and sharing my bed and 'don't let me find you here again down near our ships'. It's pretty colorful, but the trouble is with the 'form'. If you care about things like that, because in the council that Achilles calls Calchas will have to tell all over again why Apollo caused all that trouble and Homer's just told that story very well and he has to tell it all over again and it's not so good this time whereas if he hadn't slipped into the 'which god'
gambit he wouldn't have had to tell the insult to chryses twice over in the space of a very few lines now you may say there's nothing wrong with repetition and I would be the last person to disagree with you but the notion of "formal" elegance is usually related to reduction of redundancy of pointless repetition I mean if calchas told the story the second time in such a way that it added something anything eloquence more detail or more information of any kind you could plausibly say it was better written that way but the passage is nothing of the sort it's a mere statement of the insult to chryses and to apollo and what happened thereafter all of which you already know and know better because there isn't much better in the whole poem than the way apollo comes down from olympos with his shoulders shaking with rage rattling the arrows in his quiver calmly seating himself on the ground and sending his arrows rattling "first into the mules and then the swift dogs and then on the greeks" keeping "the funeral fires heaped with the bodies of the dead constantly burning" this is all very magnificent but it's the kind of magnificence that a great chess player improvises right after a structural blunder now in a written work it would have been very easy to go back erase the false step and put the whole colorful description of the insult to chryses somewhat more conveniently in calchas mouth when he explains the plague in the council of the greeks but the iliad is not a written work and there are some things fundamentally different about an oral poem one thing in particular the technique of erasing I mean in a literary poem there's a text and a determined reader can flip the pages back over and over again and there is something of an illusion of spatial form the idea that you can have it there all at once lying under your hands leading to the notion of elegant spatial arrangement and its contraries clumsy arrangements all based on fantasies of some spatial existence that is the result of the minds deceiving itself into forgetting that it has itself constructed this "space" and the "form" that is an imaginary configuration within it by mere flipping of pages and taking this synthetically derived memory produced by constant reavailability and confusing it with real memory
it is this “constructed” literal form which requires the mechanical operations of erasure and excision the only way you can get rid of an object is to destroy it but an oral poem has no such problem if you take a wrong turn make a false start you cant “erase” it but you can recover and you can obliterate it from memory you can take advantage of the weakness of human memory by extending through time some kind of diversionary brilliance if your energy isnt impeded and you get where you have to go without looking tired no one will remember that it took you a few extra steps to get there the principle of economy of form in an oral work is measured out in energy not in length how long is a brilliant passage? how short is a boring one? who remembers? after homer told that story twice remember that story? the insult to apollo? with all those fireworks who remembers how apollo got into it at all? as a divine agent what you remember is the insult to chryses apollos anger flying arrows the mules and the dogs dying and the men and after the poem was “made” i mean after a lot of tellings of the story in many different ways that people “remembered” some tellings and then maybe one telling or one kind of telling seemed very auspicious and the poet the talker or some series of talkers got too fond of their own bon mots and those of their masters and there got to be too much art appreciation and not enough art making though still quite a bit so that the poem was strung out with good phrases that by now the overly sensitive younger poets were pretty much stuck with because aside from everything else they were easy to remember and something of a convenience if you had to do it while singing which is a special kind of talking a little bit peculiar like telling a story on a tightrope or while swimming difficult but not impossible especially if you had all those readymade phrases to do it with so you could save a space for the breathing and also have time to improvise in another part of the talking with the arrangement of the story say to improvise at all you need some kind of cliches but anyway with all of this increase in remembering choice bits its easy to see no its not so easy but possible to see how
that making poems talking poems could start dying and
people could start trying to remember sombody's good talking
and therefore reciting and from reciting its not too
far to trying to save it in writing but we know all about that
about how writing is about anxiety trying to hold some-
thing still and we can sympathize with it too easily even
plato who was afraid of writing at least socrates was afraid
of it and says so in the phaedrus how writing will destroy
human memory that is real memory because people will
come to rely upon this writing and will not exercise their minds to
come to the truth and how it writing is like the stupid
child of indulgent parents that will spout words that you will
want to question more closely and when you ask it more nar-
rowly to tell you its meaning it will answer nothing at all and
have to run back to its parents to find out the answer and yet
with all this platos own theory of forms is the pathetic child of
literacy the notion of a fixed paradigm a pattern against
which all exemplars can be checked or you hope they can
well maybe it was socrates who saw the trouble coming
because he committed nothing to writing and plato com-
mitted everything but we know this story how we got here
its harder to understand what an oral culture is doing when its
making art say and easy enough to understand about stories
and talking but you want to know what about pots?
because pot making is one of the things they do in oral cultures
some of them and some people call those pots art if
this pot making is art its the art of making pots its not the
pots that are the art pots are the outcome of the art now
why do i say this because its sometimes easy to forget this
and start rushing to the pot to find the art if pot making is
an art lets think about the way people learn to make pots in pot
making cultures can somebody say "here is the ideal pot in it
is the very idea of a pot study that pot and copy it" maybe
they could but they dont not what im calling oral cultures
anyway if they say anything at all which they may not
they say something like "this is the way to make this kind of
pot first you get ready and you sit down sit down
here no youre not ready go away youre not
ready yet go think about the clay  heres some clay take it go for a walk  feel the clay go feel the clay” you know they may have very elaborate routines which are from their point of view all part of making the pot and you will find that in oral societies they frequently have quite elaborate routines for making all kinds of things or used to have in totem pole making cultures or boatmaking cultures maybe before you make the thing that youre going to make you go out into the forest and find a branch and youre not going to “use it” not in the sense that it will enter into the boat that youre making or be a mechanical instrument used in assembling it its part of the “role” of boatmaking its what “boatmakers do” you go out and find this branch and youre getting into the spirit say of boatmaking and youre producing auspicious circumstances the right mood say the right set for doing this thing and then you sit down in an appropriate way and set about working at it in an appropriate way maybe you even talk to appropriate people in some appropriate way before you work on it and then if it doesnt come out in some sense we could talk about later its symptomatic that something was wrong with the way you made it its not that it was a bad thing it was that you didnt make it right that is you didnt do the right thing the art of this particular kind of society is a way is a way and it leads to things but the things it leads to are only places along the way they may be merely stages of the way so a pot is an outcome of a way and its not a prototype what you do in a literal culture is you take a model of a particular pot and this pot this particular pot exemplifies all pots that you want as you have someone in a dress factory who works at sewing the parts of the dresses of which the factory will make very very many if they are lucky and she sews much better more carefully and accurately to a pattern that the patternmaker cuts out of a stiff paper like oaktag and this seamstress who is more skilled than the others is the samplemaker and she makes out of cloth which is not very much like oaktag pieces and sews them into a dress and if the dress fits the dummy which is the ideal prototypical shape for a woman of that size a twelve say  then they use the
pattern to trace out other ideal sizes 10 14 16 18
by a series of ideal amplifications bust so much hips so much waist so much for the purpose of which ideal amplifications they have an ideal amplifier a man called a grader who accomplishes these amplifications and reductions on the same stiff paper which he gives to another man called a marker who carefully marks these patterns onto a long sheet of paper which will be laid over the material that they will use in the dresses by another man called a cutter then they will cut up all the cloth by following the patterns marked on the marker and the pieces of cloth cut up in this way will go to the operators who will sew them into the dresses that real women will wear now you may object that the different sizes of women are not quantized in such a way that they are proportionally grouped in magnitudes that are neat multiples of each other or that an individual woman may be a perfect 12 at the waist and yet a fourteen at the breast which is true but just too bad because it is more convenient to make dresses for ideal women than real women more convenient for the makers if not for the women and all of this is the strategy of a literal culture tracing off a pattern and in theory because it is never so in practice a literal culture will produce things that look more like the pattern than the pattern after a while the notion of replication belongs to that culture ideally such a society seeks regularity and uniformity and increases convenience for the maker who is fundamentally distinct from the user because his convenience may be served otherwise and this convenience may lead to a total disjunction between making and using which may reduce to rubble the whole apparent purposefulness of the initial prototype now an oral society does not gravitate to the notion of replication the ideal example because as anyone will easily see there is never a situation without some trivial or not so trivial accident in making the pot the temperature was perhaps too great or there was a piece of sand where there shouldn't have been but occasionally is one but if you made it the right way you made it the right way everybody knows that if you make something the right way its going to be a little different than if you make it the right way some other day in fact you dont
even think about it being different from the one you made the right way the other day as far as you're concerned they're quite the same thing if you take two pots made by two good potmakers who are of the same type belong to the same atelier perhaps one was the teacher of the other and they're both very good and if it's really an oral culture more or less and one pot looks different from the other to you you might have to work fairly hard to get these two potmakers to admit there was really a difference between the two pots or finally to admit that they had noticed it right away but didn't think it meant a great deal because they would think that the difference between the two pots was the difference between any two pots that were made in the right way now of course you could say "look the beak is a little longer here bent a little over here" and you say "and a little wider over there" and "yes yes" they say looking at you like the fool that you are because it has always been evident to them that if you can make it the right way you make it the right way if this is true all other things being equal we should come to see a fundamental difference between what we are calling oral societies and literal societies in an oral society they will keep to the right way and in a literal society they will keep to the right thing and since the right thing is itself a literal exemplar of other right things in such a society you will have an attempt to adhere rigidly to the right thing if you are convinced that you already have the right thing as in certain hierarchic societies and if you are convinced that you do not as yet have the right thing you will try to seek out what that is by inspecting other things which are not quite the right thing and attempting to finish them to the degree of perfection that will make them the right thing but once you're convinced that you have the right thing you'll demand absolute adherence to it and if there's any difference of opinion about whether it is the right thing or not you're likely to have something of a conflict between the party that believes they have the right thing and the party that believes they haven't the result of this will be that any change in any thing will seem much more important loaded so to speak when a thing is involved with a notion of its rightness so that a literal society will exaggerate any
change at all in a thing it takes seriously and it will seem to this society that any changes at all in its things the things that it notices are terrifically radical and such a society will imagine itself struggling between order and revolution however trivially it may be changing it is therefore a much more rigid and inflexible society than an oral society which we can imagine as continually accumulating small variations somewhat randomly in the sense that the work under hand is continually varying in the direction of the needs of the moment and habit of the hand of the human being who is making whatever he is making and because there will be no exemplar to hold up the work against or more accurately because no one will feel obligated to hold up the work against any previous work to compare these slight deviations there will be a constant fluidity in the working of this oral society their workmen artists will always be modifying things in an easy going way without really thinking about trying to be different because whatever difference there may be this workman will be likely to regard it as the same which will lead to the slightly paradoxical conclusion that oral societies are probably always changing and fluid and that their changes may be as great as any changes in any literal society or much greater but they will not flatter themselves or threaten themselves with the notion that these changes are "revolutionary" as long as they are made in the right way because the idea of a revolution is based on the degree of deviation from a prototype now all this depends to some extent the confidence in any product of the right way depends on some reservoir of memory and i think it is more useful to think of this memory as a group possession that is i don't think of this memory as being an idiosyncratic individual faculty it involves an individual faculty that is exercised in a social context with other similar faculties memory of most sorts of cultural things is something negotiated by individuals but negotiated with other individuals and "stored" in socially constructed systems like language or socially articulated systems like personality so that there will not really be such extreme idiosyncrasies in judging the right way though there will be considerable biasing in the direction of single personality or situation if the work at hand is not
something that many people must be concerned about in the aspect that is undergoing modification something as socially neutral as its shape perhaps now you say that may be true all other things being equal but since they aren't always equal what then? then there will be change of a slightly different sort say among yoruba potters the nigerian yoruba society was until fairly recently and still is largely an oral society but that isn't the way change will occur in yoruba pot making that is you can have a family of great potters the grandmother a potter her daughter a potter and her daughter a potter and they may all three have made pots for the same distinctive social purpose a cult purpose say and all three pots may be quite distinctively different and these pots may seem quite different to the three potters even though they were all made in the right way the granddaughter may say seeing a pot of her mothers which she may not have seen for years "yes thats a pot of my mothers they used to make them like that in those days" and she will not say "we used to make them that way" even though she may have been making pots in those days why is that? thats because the yoruba have a "renown" system an individual potter can become famous she may be publicized by something quite equivalent to an art magazine that is by the religious cult of which she is a member she may make pots for the members of this cult and it will be through the distribution system of the cult that her pots are seen since her pots are commodities and are commissioned it is advantageous to her to have these pots act as her advertisement so to speak each pot if it bears the marks of her individual style is an advertisement of her work and it turns out that because being a potter is a profession and because this profession is rewarded by individual commissions obtained from as far as dahomey it is practical for a potter to introduce enough distinction in her own wares to be identified by so it will follow that every professional potter will look characteristically different from every other potter in fact that is probably part of the right way but it ought to be a corollary of this that once she has achieved a "characteristic style" she may vary casually inside of it but it would be unlikely that she would vary to the
point of obscuring the style that is her trademark so a Yoruba potter will behave something like an American painter of the 1930s when painters were creating characteristic commodities and this act was called "finding one's style" and it is because of this perfectly honorable but commodity distribution system and information distribution system which has powerful effects upon the work that is done in its context that the right way here intersects with the right thing in a special manner and why i am talking about a sociology of art rather than a psychology of art now it is possible in an oral society to have renown without commodity i mean that's what Homer was about wasn't it? praise poets and epic poets and tellers of tales had no commodity they had a service you can see that very clearly in the case of Paul Radin's two Winnebago storytellers the ones who tell the twin story for him they both have the right to tell it which means they have acquired in a legal way the telling rights for this story and the story in spite of what Radin seems to be saying about it is not the same but the blow snake brothers appear to be both owners of the same rights that is to tell a story about a particular pair of important figures in their own way and if Winnebago society had been in better shape at that time they might have been very well known for their abilities to tell these stories as it was they had to be well enough known for their ability to tell these stories for Radin to find this out but we know that language arts don't have a commodity in oral societies what there is is more like a franchise with rewards for services rendered you could collect gifts or whatever and this would probably promote individual differences among story tellers which in the nature of things didn't need very much promotion but you can also have in an oral society a considerable art that has no reward no economic reward for art services and little renown take a string-figure artist like Narau the mistress of something over 200 complex and distinct string figures made from the manipulation of a 30 inch loop of kurrajong bark-fiber cord with her two hands these figures made mainly by women themselves or among themselves with their own hands though occasionally they may be joined by another woman for a four-hand figure now these
figures are final configurations that are the outcome of anything from 1 to 30 transformations of the original loop there are even two known figures with more than 40 transformations so that the string-figure art is a way an elaborate way of getting to some recognizable place the figure which usually has a name like emu eggs two cunts the morning star the menstrual blood of three women a sea eagle catching a mullet and so on which figures are landmarks of a story so to speak the story of the two sisters who came into this part of arnhem land yirrkalla invented string figures probably string making as well and named everything important in sight that is to say the story of the two women is like the string-figure making a trip through the countryside naming important things but this art what is it? a kind of travelling dance conducted on your hands maybe invented sometimes or at least adapted to your own hands habits in the way a dancer will find a way to adapt a choreography to her own body or his own and whether it is a choreography with newly invented figures or improvised figures narau knew more figures than any other person in yirrkalla and probably 1/5 of all the string figures ever recorded in the world so that it is very likely she invented some and modified others and if she modified them or the way to get to them who would know? at the speed at which she made them a transposition of a loop a mirror image reversal of an asymmetrical figure will not be so easy to recognize and there will be few to recognize these variations anyway since this is not an art played out before a vast admiring audience or even an intent circle of connoisseurs and if narau was a great artist she was a great artist without a great audience and like a lot of artists narau practiced an art with no economic and virtually no social stake she worked for a biochemist and did her art on the side which from an artists point of view has both advantages and drawbacks with which we are all familiar but at any rate nobody was in a position to examine the amount of change she introduced into her art the main pleasure of which must be considered the pure pleasure of transformation which would lead to change while the secondary pleasure would be the
pleasure of recognition which would restrain this change which we would ordinarily be in no good position to estimate except for the accident that an anthropologist observed her working at a slow motion rate which he had persuaded her to undertake so that he could watch her work and he found that when he asked her on one occasion to duplicate an already mounted figure she made the “wrong figure twice by two different techniques” on other occasions she proved to be unable to arrive at the intended figure at all but sometimes while aiming at one figure she arrived at another something like it which is to say that sometimes you get there and sometimes you don’t but sometimes when you don’t the place that you get to is right enough to call the place which suggests that a constancy of naming may disguise considerable change in making because “the menstrual blood of three women” is a good name and you may like to find different very different figures for that naming so that an art of making or working could give way or give ground to an art of naming a kind of poem accompanied by a hand dance in a string set

two conch shells
two cunts
or one cock and one cunt
two bottles
two waterholes
a man lying down
a leech in a rakia swamp
three huts
frog in a pool
ripples on a pool
clouds
menstrual blood of three women
three freshwater snakes
three women sitting down
fishnet
two catfish
human shit
emu tracks
fire sticks
yam
who knows what possible narratives can be constructed so?
while dancing if you know the story? in hawaii it was
common to recite a fragmentary journey poem or topographical
love poem that is danced on your hands by your fingers with
the string

up rose the sun in its curved path the sun
over the field of ahuena set in the calm of kailua
then kona

or to use these figures to “tell stories” or “to act them out”
among the eskimos of alaska and indians of canada

“door boy door boy who stands over there
door boy shut the door why dont you shut the
door?”

“ive got my coat on” (goes away)

between this string dancing and naming there is a lot of play
of room in these hand dramas for variation and change for
continual if unemphasized invention and change it
is even possible under some conditions for making to give place
entirely to naming as among the duchampian lega in their bwami
ceremonies where if there ever was a strong tradition of making
it is now mostly dead and where a single “sculptured” object
may be given away casually or broken accidentally to be
replaced equally casually by some other object that will be equally
sacred and not even ordinarily distinguished from the object
it has replaced though this new object may be an artifact that
looks nothing like the “original” or it may not even be an arti-
fact at all but a natural object a birdsbeak or shell say
or even a commercially manufactured product a perfume
bottle maybe which will be known as the same thing because
it can be so named because it is capable of the same semantic
function so may be named “the same thing” and no one
displeased or noting the change but you say “what about
form?" and ordinarily I would be prepared to not understand you and answer as easily as you ask that question "what about it?"

I mean I'm willing to assume that any group of people of any kind whatsoever in some part of their life may want to take advantage of the literalness that is offered by an object to turn a meaning that is only potentially in the mind and actually only in the working of the mind in a situation or the working of a hand or a whole body I mean you may want to get out of that shifty ground that we call the memory which isn't a reservoir really but is some action taken in some place and you may want to alienate yourself from this meaning long enough to interrogate it and convert the act of meaning into the object of meaning so you can articulate it at whatever cost that may require and so your working halts temporarily in an object that you can interrogate if only as a station well then this object will be packed it will be something like a condenser filled with energy organized energy that came from some place and can go some other place if you understand its organization if you know what kinds of leads to take it out on I mean what is the "form" of a "sacred bundle"? Here is where the notion of "form" begins to break down what about form? Form is a notion arrived at by subtraction a residue in the sense that the form of the milk is its bottle which is a notion of form as a shell or a leaving fingernails or hair clippings surely one of the most stupid notions in the history of art is the notion of "form" because in the sense in which it is meaningful it is almost totally obvious and trivial while in the sense that it is meaningless its so eccentric a theory so totally freaky and based on such absurd notions of the human that it is hardly worth considering at all what I mean here is the notion of some kind of specially "significant form" the idea that there is something particularly and universally satisfying about something like certain simple geometric shapes and by the way this is the most modest form of such a claim because earlier in the century more grandiose claims were made for the transcendental value of geometricity but the claim is silly because it is made in a vacuum there's just too much evidence that shows
that what is humanly satisfying or exciting is too contingent to be described this way i mean you may find plenty of situations where geometrically simple arrangements are significant others where it is exciting to find a jumble and others where spatial arrangement doesn't seem to matter at all any more than olfactory arrangement might matter in a story or a system of tactile values in a play at the same time its totally obvious that the acoustical signs will be important in a radio piece because you wont otherwise hear it and visual signs will have to count in a tableau but who would ever disagree with that? and why call the visible signs of a tableau its form? as opposed to its content i mean all content is content you say that something has a shape and its shape is “meaningful” and you don't exactly know what that meaning is okay consider the shape of an arrow the shape of an arrow is very meaningful because thats how it enters its object when you speak of the form of an arrow what you mean is the efficiency with which its designed for penetrating what its supposed to penetrate and the difficulty obtaining when you try to remove it at least at first thats what you mean and this determines the way its made with several qualifications to obtain an arrow somebody has to make one right? you dont merely snap your fingers and say “arrow!” and have an arrow snap into your hand that way you would wind up with a paradigm of arrow because whatever design you imagined your arrow would entirely manifest your intention it would be perfectly designed in terms of your mental definition of “arrow” and whatever that might be youll be stuck with it but arrows are made out of things and then there are the ways that you make them ways you like to work youre a man that works you may as well enjoy yourself right? so you realize while working that if an arrow has a point it will enter easily i mean a point is lets say a generalization a refinement of a blade which is merely the principle of the wedge or the inclined plane the australians have a spear that terminates in a blade and it kills animals too but a point is an inclined plane considered from at least one or two additional reference planes at right angles to the planes from which the blade
faces are inclined and since inclined planes are simple machines that reduce the amount of force necessary to move a resisting load. A point should penetrate more easily than a blade. It goes in easier and if it widens enough but not too abruptly to block the entrance of the arrow because the steeper the inclined plane the more force is required to move a load and if it does not widen too slowly to make a large enough wound when thrown with the particular amount of force that it is usually thrown with or shot with and these are conflicting considerations. Efficiency of entrance which means maximum penetration and maximum wound width which means a larger surface tear and say you add to this a barb a backwards hook that makes it difficult to pull out. These are all separate lethal ideas all about killing and maiming penetrating and cutting and tearing. The point penetrates and the edge that is the intersection of the inclined planes is a cutting edge. They're all "functional" but not strictly speaking necessary. I mean the Australian blade-ended spear also kills and nobody knows the relevant kill statistics so while all this is "functional" it's not all obligatory and then you've got the stone. If you use stone and if you hit chip or flake the stone the wrong way it breaks. So you don't hit the stone the wrong way that is obligatory if you want an arrow head and the arrow head will have the marks that are characteristic of the right way or the family of right ways for hitting that kind of stone. So the marks that you make will have something to do with the kind of stone you use but the stone that you use may have something to do with the stone that happens to be around or even more likely with the kind of stone you happen to like and you may happen to like it because its shiny or hard or because it takes well the kind of marks you happen to like to make because there may be several available stones several adequate ones adequate for their purpose and for the tools you have and for the way you like to work because you're a guy who likes to work arrows and you spend a lot of time working arrows so you're entitled to your preference. You find "that's a crummy stone. I don't like that stone." and there are stones that "look good" it's nice to have slick
snappy arrows if you're an arrow man you have a thing about arrows and you like "good arrows" you have a sense too about how you might like to make an arrow like when you flake an arrow there's a clear mark you can make a simple intelligible mark as opposed to a crummy mark and after a while you have an idea of the snappy arrow the well made arrow and you have an idea of dapper arrows sincere arrows (a sincere arrow goes right to the point) clumsy arrows worthy arrows that are laborious but efficient maybe the ground point lacking the boldness of the flaking style there's no reason why you won't play you spend a lot of time making arrows now somebody looks at that arrow and he says "what's the meaning of that arrow?" and somebody says "death" and you say "no it's not just 'death' we also shoot at trees for fun we have contests in our village there are guys who like to shoot arrows for sheer pleasure independent of death and we have ceremonial arrow shooting because killing our food is the way of our life and we use it in our musical performances arrow-target-percussion music and arrow-string music and arrow-wind music and there is also just a liking to have arrows as liking to have a thing that is a pleasure to hold" and after a while you say "is that the meaning of the arrow?" and you say "well there are a few 'meanings' for the arrow there are meanings for the arrow maker it's an arrow he liked it's an appropriate arrow and maybe his distinctive arrow and belongs to the attitude toward making arrows of a whole atelier whose character is defined by an arrow of that sort" it's based on the notion of the snappy arrow or the stylish arrow and there's nothing "formal" about chic this is not based on a notion of "pure form" or the universal recognition of some particular family of shapes as better or worse style is content pure content it is even often polemical content and you can hate it or love it not because of what it is but because of what it represents this is all about meaning perfectly straightforward meaning it has nothing whatever to do with pure contemplation or esthetic values whatever they may be the notion of pure form and pure esthetic contemplation is a straightforward argument by example for a particular idea
of the good life which may be manifested in a personal style
the way people stand say think of the way people stand
or walk as a stylistically meaningful enterprise in order
to go from one place to another in a human community
and for reasons that are not perhaps so functionally clear
you have to support yourself on your feet walking the
way people walk surely theres more to walking than getting
from one place to another because people can get there in a
lot of ways on their hind legs so you “walk” if you go out
into the street youre going to see “english walks” “dandy
walks” “struts” “sexy slinks” “gunfighter walks”
“a genteel promenade” “a cavaliers paseo” “a philosophers spazier” (with his hands behind his back peering occasionally
at nearby spectacles before returning to an absent forward
gaze) “a tennis slouch” or a vernacular shambly walk
just “hulking along” now all of these walks are significant form to the extent that they represent styles loaded with
content these people walking this way are representing themselves to the world and to themselves with these walks they
know how it feels and they like it there are people who like
to shamble they sort of “hulk along” now its not entirely
a disaster to hulk along because these people who hulk along
get to places too often they get there on time too sometimes
more often than other people who dont hulk along as
they stumble in the door theres no way of talking about
anything meaningful without talking about it as meaning there
is no special occasion that can be described as an “esthetic occasion”
but the act of identifying a totally nondescribable experience
as fundamental and fundamentally nondescribable is a particular
performance somebody named benedetto croce is performing
some kind of dance and i dont know whether i like it

“but what about these forms that are persistent and remain virtually unchanged even in oral societies for gene-

rations like benin bronzes say?”

well im not really convinced that benin bronzes are so unchanged and there are probably better examples of relatively stable ways of
working with apparently very similar products made by different

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artists for long periods of time and while i can think of examples they are i believe the outcome of very special situations i can think of this in the situation of a sacred art with a sacred technology and highly valued materials where the initiates the master makers are both makers and users of the art or where the audience users are enormously concerned with the precise outcome of the art making to such an extent that they take entire control over the processes of making controlling the materials and the workshops the training of the acolytes and the quality control over the products of the workshops like science this is a powerful vested totalitarian art form what i have in mind is something like the sacred art of radium poisoning you have here a combination of the necessary elements radium is a material of very high value and scarcity difficulty obtained by a severe and refined technology it must be handled with care in minute doses requiring elegant measuring devices for weighing and testing and preserving and it is necessary to use only this means to poison the king in fact it is only this sacred material that may be allowed to cause the death of the priest king because it is the only material whose value is on a level with the sacred person of the ruler the holy king to be poisoned by the dematerializing force of the holy material and it is no point to have a ruler who doesn't rule or whose life is too short for the society to benefit from the experience he acquires as a ruler and moreover there is available a great expertise in measuring out refined doses of radium in millicuries and refined magnitudes of damage in becquerels of organic disintegration and the point of this art form is to sharpen the kings perceptual field through a domain of gradually concentrating pain which will come to isolate him from the distracting pleasures of his own senses and their easy gratification by a sacred and scientific mortification of his royal flesh in this system there is for any ruler a perfect place for his cessation when this single point of pain that has been diffused by a kind of leukemia through his body to his mind renders him incapable of kingship if the art is to be successful that is the point at which he has fulfilled the most refined and most perfect conditions for this art work this is an object for priestly scientific and artistic study it requires
not only schooling but research the young prince must be studied to determine his psychological and physical capacity to handle pain. The psychological and physical durability of the royal person, it will require decisions about dosing and timing of that dosing and because this is a grand theatrical art associated with other arts of performance there will be reasons to decide how the minute quantities of radioactive material should be administered to be ingested slowly in his favorite foods and beverages or to be worked into luminescent jewelry worn close to the body so that the young ruler may ride glowing into battle and one would have to combat the unlikely and unworthy possibility that he might choose to outlive his term and resist the wise poisoners by contriving to avoid the poisons and they would be forced to confuse him by poisoning him unawares in the food he least liked by working the poison into radioactive jewels or even into perfumes on the person of his favorite mistress and then yet there is one final requirement that the perfect success of this art form be ensured by penalizing all failure severely by an arrangement whereby if the king does not die at the appropriate hour or minute or second since the technology is so refined that the chief poison artist be killed in the interval and that the assistant poisoners be killed in succession as required during the interval within which the audience awaits the luminous death of the king in such a system if you are not through bad luck forced to kill off the whole artist population you could expect a very stable literal art.