

after the goldrush

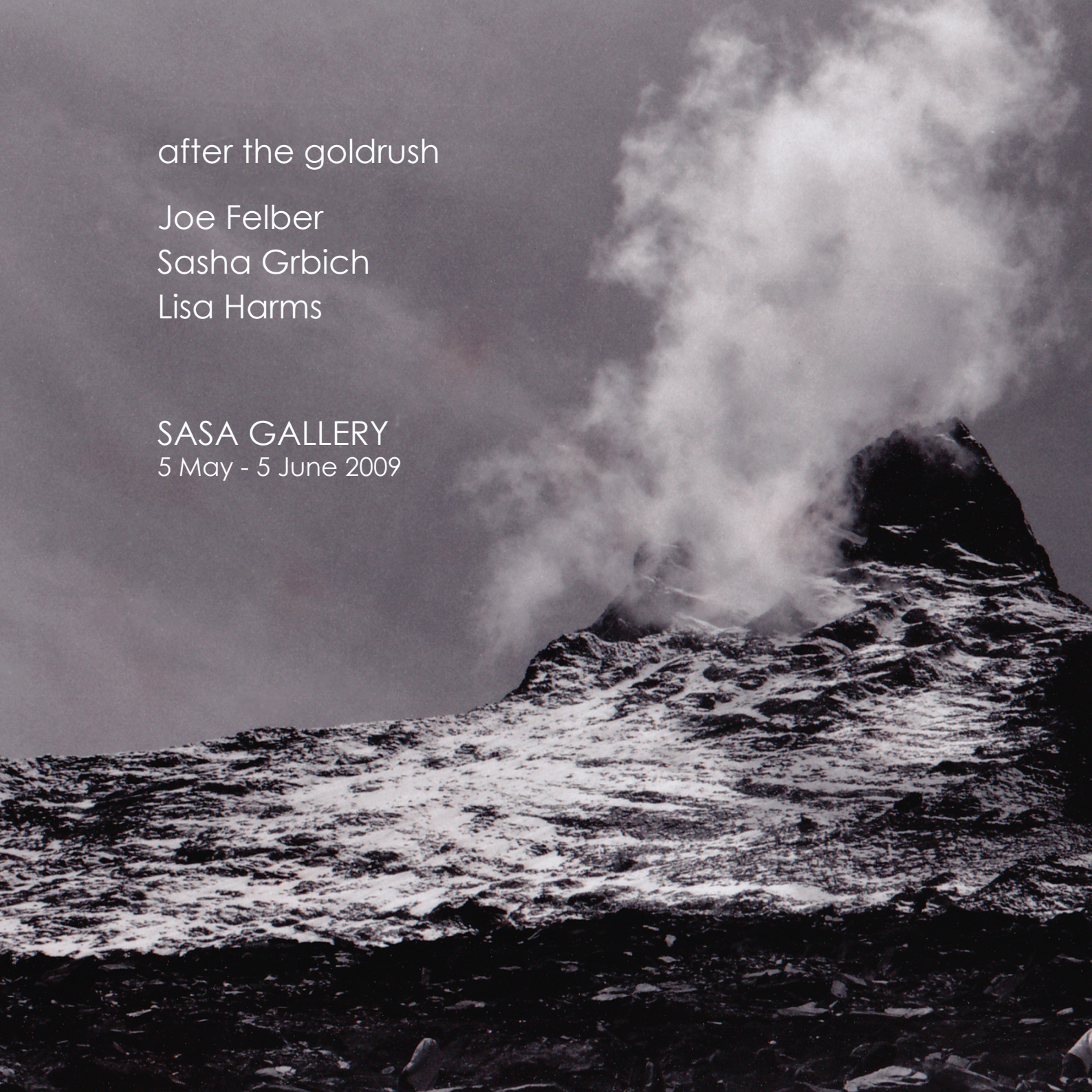
Joe Felber

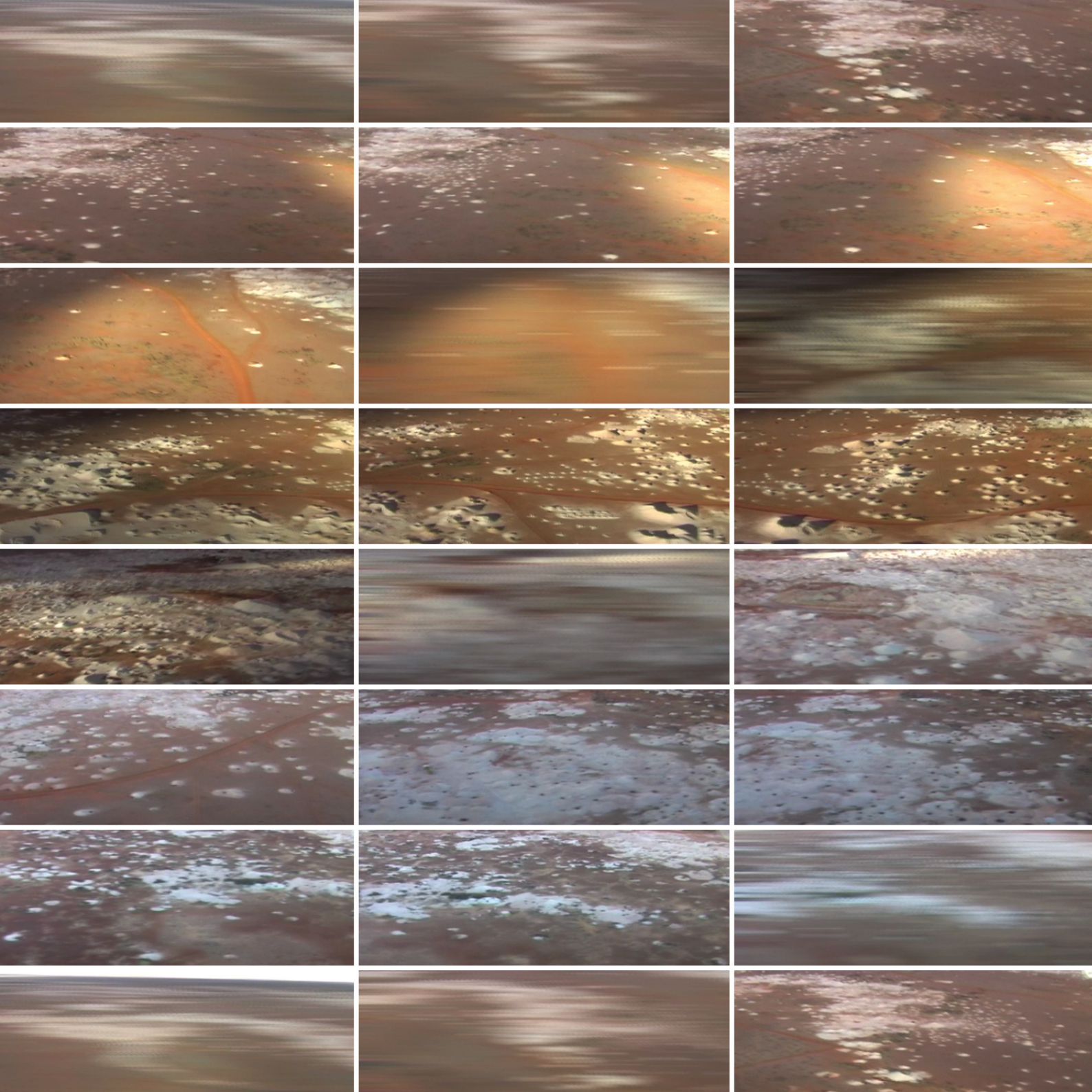
Sasha Grbich

Lisa Harms

SASA GALLERY

5 May - 5 June 2009





Front: Joe Felber, 2006, *Mountains (Zermatt)* (detail), photographic series
Middle: Lisa Harms, 2008, *untitled (Coober Pedy)*, video stills
Back: Sasha Grbich, 2003, *oilflowers*, video still

Lisa Harms

things touching quite by chance

a story about beginnings:

The idea for this combination of works germinated in conversation with Joe Felber as he showed me a series of photographs he had taken of the Alps in his native Switzerland. The images were austere and pristine, the mountains apparently timeless/immutable/untouched: eddies of mist, drifts of cloud the only visible signs of temporal or physical change. Depicted in crisp, richly toned black and white they held an aura of documented, hushed permanence. I can't remember the substance of our conversation that day, what has remained and continues to flavour these photos with poignant intensity is just a fragment: **"the mountains are crumbling" he told me...** Editing footage taken on a road trip through outback South Australia some time later, I was taken by a recollection of those desiccating Swiss mountains and a sense that they mirrored the vistas I had recorded on the other side of the globe. The landscape surrounding the opal mining town of Coober Pedy is surreal: for many unfolding kilometers, the minefields can be viewed from the vantage point of the Stuart Highway, extending from the unfenced verges towards the horizon...irrevocably encroaching, artificially constructed, neatly piled 'mountains' of excavation debris, dotted over a vast and obviously spreading stretch of ancient country.¹ Aesthetically the ranging, scarred landscape is sublimely beautiful. A silently proliferating moonscape of softly, subtly shaded protrusions: unsettling despite (and perhaps because of) its beauty, the obvious dangers of the multiple open shafts...proclaimed on roadway signs and souvenirs warning against running, walking backwards...are apparently (according to the pilot of our scenic flight) irreparable, refill creating the worse hazard of quicksand.

Juxtaposed, the mountain images are both other than they seem...the apparent permanence of the European topography an illusion in the face of exponential climate change...the insubstantial nature of the proliferating minefield mountain range and it's attendant multiple shafts, in fact, alarmingly permanent.

Against these natural and artificial landscapes, I imagined the flower pieces by Sasha Grbich I'd seen in 2003. They repeat and escalate formal aspects: implying abysmal depth against the lofty height of the Alpine reaches, echoing the sense of endless proliferation apparent in the stretches of debris...enacting also, a materialised confusion of boundaries between the natural and the artificial. These works fascinated me when they were first shown for the energetic, ecstatic abandon they calmly evoke...a horizontal floor projection of pink plastic flowers sliding sensuously and apparently endlessly into a darkly viscous morass of black sump oil, periodically inverting in speed and direction to fly, propelling skywards...a soundtrack of dripping fluid opening the imagination to unseen, cavernous space. The version shown in 2003 was paired with masses of tiny white artificial flowers, clustered like barnacles, purposefully echoing a heady illusion of irrevocable growth.

I pictured these works together as an elaboration of felt connections, a material poem figuring layers of desire in landscape: the European mountain idyll of the (White) Australian imagination, the transcendence of the body in voyeuristic passage (a tourist view...the danger of immersion/freefall safely screened by window/screen/frame)...a transcendence troubled by allusions of heady, sensuous abandonment, by the engulfment of burgeoning appetite, the afterlife of industry.

As poem and as elegy: the aerial view over increasingly scarred and inaccessible South Australian lands presents the evidential aftermath of untrammelled desire enacted over time. The title of the installation *after the goldrush* was taken from the Neil Young song, which similarly laments a damaged environment.

approximately present tense (time of writing): March 20, 2009 email from Joe...notes about the work: the presence of the mountains, the joy, adrenalin and physical risk embodied in reaching their heights. The photographs, he writes, affect the drama of sublime presence recaptured: an attempt to fix, to record this presence, this "sheer beauty". These mountain outlines might recapture the proximity of danger, but are also iconic to his homeland, their familiar, loved contours increasingly under threat.² He cites Cezanne's reputed comment "*One has to hurry if one wants to see something. Everything disappears*". Attached to the email are images, one of them a close up of a small, framed holiday snap: his partner (long before they met), as a very young woman smiling inside of the view, the iconic Matterhorn looming in the distance behind her. In conversation later that day, he tells me this record of her past prompted the series of Alpine photographs, taken while on an extended stay in Europe alone, her distant presence a reverberating echo unregistered but connected across space and time within each framed view. He will make a large drawing, transferring copies from one of the photographs onto gessoed plywood. Tracing lines and shadows of light: the resulting image a memory trace rather than reproduced illustration, a substantial shadow figuring both the potency of recall and the loss of physical substance...emulating, he writes, "an alpine symphony by Richard Strauss (1911), a tone-poem for orchestra".

March 25, 2009 email from

Sasha...she has new work in production (which will replace the clustered plastic flowers): all-white artificial flowers, this time encased/engulfed in plaster, coated in a slick, shiny surface of industrial enamel. They will appear progressively around the gallery space as "spills", or "slips"...like "artefacts from events, something thrown on the wall – a little loss of control " she writes... she is using the genre of still-life as foil: its dual/ambivalent functions as "*celebration of the inanimate world: and as memento mori where the representations also serve to reinforce that 'all things must pass'*".³

These things are clinging to the wall like a nagging memory, they are clustered in the shadows but multiplying instead of fading; an unhealthy profusion (cancerous and easy-wipe clean). Flowers are frozen in bloom: like still-life but with the life bleached out of it, celebrating (like a deadened echo) the beautiful ways we can fake the natural world.

A beautiful oil slick. New white goods. Fake flowers (the favored gift from cemetery goers to the dead; a tribute to impermanence made in a material that lasts forever)...I return again to a memory of wandering in the Port Augusta Cemetery once when a gust of wind threw the hundreds of fading fake flowers at the bushes on the perimeter; stuff caught dead in the stream of life...

Artificial beauty, stifling things that are at once attractive and repulsive; a quiet mighty army encroaching on our space and growing into their own poisonous and beautiful bloom.⁴

future(past imperfect)

As for myself...after site visits, I'm planning a wall drawing titled *Street View*. It will run along the length of the gallery space (towards the projected minefields) utilizing an architectural element as shadow-line, which will stand in for the Stuart Highway. The drawing will be sourced from screen

grabs of Google Maps "street view" which offers a dislocated witness to distant locations from behind the laptop screen. This viewing platform is globally available, compiled from stills taken from the vantage point of road traveler: giving a voyeuristic illusion of immediate experience, an unpopulated unfolding scenario (the invasion of privacy the pertinent rationale). The street scenes I witnessed along the Stuart Highway from the vantage point of my own car (which will be shown on a series of monitors clustered to the back of the gallery) are also strangely unpopulated...all action it seems, is underground, the town itself flooding periodically...at dinnertime with hungry workers.

I've been reading...reflecting on W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of 'landscape' as the medium of exchange between the human and the natural; the privileged medium of possession (landscape the framed stage upon which we might find and lose, or lose ourselves) and further, the medium by which the natural is mediated by culture (landscape the delimited representation through which claims to possession are both legitimized and naturalised).⁵ In 'Territorial Photography' Joel Snyder analyses documentary landscape photography: 'passive recordings of pre-existing sights'⁶ as it operated to legitimise exploration and exploitation in America's West during the late nineteenth century. He describes aesthetic tendencies across this supposedly impartial, documentary genre, affective, although not ascribed to photographic practice: to harmonise 'Edenic' nature with signs of industrial activity, or to represent the land as harsh, unforgiving...boundless desert. Both representational tendencies, he claims, naturalised the exploitations and excesses of industrialisation. Both sidestepped, elided the question of indigenous presence and ownership...romanticising inaccessible

reaches tamed by industry, against unpopulated expanses of uninhabitable, sublime prospect.⁷ I ask myself...does the apparently deserted and disturbingly - *aesthetically* - beautiful construction which is the Coober Pedy moonscape/minefield; it's contours of human scale, its intimations of individual longing, its coupling of fortune with industrious activity...its inexorable efflorescent spread (situated as it is, adjacent to the less overtly vast, not so beautiful underground industry at Olympic Dam), operate to naturalise an acceptance of the entire region as one of limitless prospect...effectively sidestepping (ongoing) questions of possession, dispossession, environmental care and consequence?

(I also ask myself the question...it niggles at my conscience...to what extent does my own reflected desire, my excesses, my appetites, my own routinely deflected attention, support such elisions?)

Endnotes:

1. The Coober Pedy precious stones field is approximately 4,954 square kilometres of which 10% has been worked. www.cooberpedy.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm, accessed 25/03/2009.
2. Joe Felber cites Professor Martin Beniston, Fribourg University, Switzerland, who claims 50 to 90% of current Alpine glaciers will have disappeared by the end of 21stC.
3. Richard Greyson, *Still Lives, Still Lives*, Adelaide: Artlink: 1997, vol 17/3
4. Sasha Grbich, email correspondence, 25 March 2009
5. W.J.T Mitchell (ed), *Landscape and Power*, Chicago & London: Uni of Chicago Press: 1994
6. Joel Snyder, 'Territorial Landscape', *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell (ed), Uni of Chicago Press, Chicago & London: 1994, p.176
7. *ibid*, pp.175-201

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