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IDA APPLEBROOG AND THE BOOK AS PERFORMANCE

This piece has been conceived by its author as a reading—or, more precisely, as a performance—of a small book by the contemporary painter Ida Applebroog, self-published in the late seventies and entitled *Life Is Good: A Performance*. As an artist, Applebroog has continuously sought to reveal what might be called the “underside” of everyday life. She “reads” the commonplace as an arena of deceit. She reveals in her readings what convention allows us to forget. In that spirit, this piece is a reading of the conventions of reading, with Applebroog serving as a guide.

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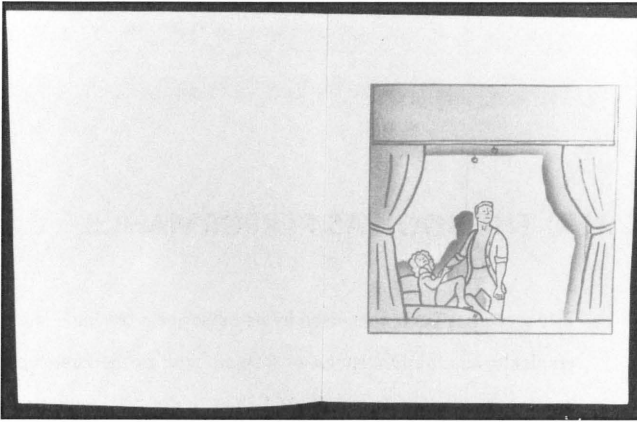


Figure 1

“The first version, that of 1926 I believe...”¹—so Michel Foucault begins his small volume *This Is Not a Pipe*, an essay on René Magritte’s painting of that same name, a work that exists in several different forms. But it is not the Magritte that interests the attentive reader, not yet. It is Foucault’s locution—his “I believe”—casual enough, but subverting, in the very uncertainty of its expression, the authority of the historian, his obligation to know for certain when the version in question was executed, or at least to look it up—an implicit *disregard* for the truth of the matter, an unwillingness to *revise* (a good editor might write in the margin, “Don’t you *know* when it was done?”), or else a calculated disingenuousness, a posture, a *disguise*.

Not only does this “I believe” announce a lack of finish, definition, exactitude; in this gesture, the text entitled *This Is Not a Pipe* displaces the painting(s) entitled *This Is Not a Pipe*, the ostensible object(s) of its contemplation. The phrase effects, at least, a certain distance between the two, for from the very first word, the text begins to perform upon the image, to string out its own version of the version(s), stake out its own territory. The “I believe” is the voice of the storyteller (not the historian), of the entertainer (not the intellectual), of the amateur (not the professional). It is not even the voice of the text—not even, that is, itself. It is, rather, the voice of a man talking. It is as if this text is itself a version of that talk. This is not a text, it says...and so, it is free to say whatever it pleases.

II

This is a book by Ida Applebroog (see figure 2). This is not a book by Ida Applebroog. This is a performance.

This is a performance by Ida Applebroog. This is not a performance by Ida Applebroog. This is a book.

In Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*, there is no pipe, only the representation of a pipe. Perhaps, in Applebroog's books, there is no performance, only the representation of performance. For the space of performance and the space of the book are, it would appear, two discontinuous spaces. The book can document the performance, represent it, but the book, in its binding, in the framed space of its page, in the logic of its beginning, middle and end—in the time, that is, of its reading—the book can imitate performance, but can never be it. Performance is live. The book is dead.

Or is it? Can we animate the book? (We must return, later, to the question of animation.)

Consider the book, the physical reality of the book. The book exists as if it were a door to be opened. It is hinged. But it is hinged like Marcel Duchamp's *Door: 11, rue Larry* (Paris, 1927). In 1933, Jacques-Henry L vesque described the door as follows:

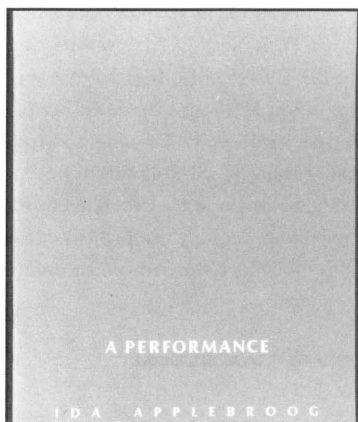


Figure 2

In the apartment which Marcel Duchamp has constructed entirely himself, there is in the studio a natural wood door leading into the bedroom. When this door is opened to enter the bedroom, it shuts the entrance to the bathroom; and when opened to enter the bathroom, it closes the entrance to the studio... 'A door must be either open or closed' had always seemed to be an inescapable truth; but Duchamp had managed to construct a door that was at the same time both open and closed.²

Like turning the pages of a book. As one page opens, another closes; as that page closes, another opens. Such is the physical process of reading itself: the book always open before us even as it closes behind us.

So perhaps the book, once it is addressed, once we take it up, exists not so much in framed space—*bound* and reified—as in real time, as a series of (separate) experiences that are strung together in space (like film). Perhaps, then, the performance and the book are not

so much in a relation of similitude as in a relation of equivalence. This book is a performance (not this book is *like* a performance). The book as performance exists in a condition of simultaneity; the book as performance is, in its particulars, always becoming and always already gone, always, at once, simultaneously, present and absent. Perhaps there is a useful analogy to be drawn between the book and the work of, not Duchamp, but of another arbiter of presence and absence, Christo. Christo wraps things—buildings, coastlines, islands and bridges—not in order to hide them, but to unwrap them again, to make a gift of them. To wrap the Pont Neuf in Paris was to give the Pont Neuf back to the French, who had forgotten it. To wrap the Reichstag would be to give the building back to the Germans, who have forsaken it. To wrap, to bind in cloth and string, in order that the binding might be opened, in order, in fact, to invite us to see what's inside, as if for the first time—this is precisely the project of the book. You can't tell a book by its cover. You must uncover the book.

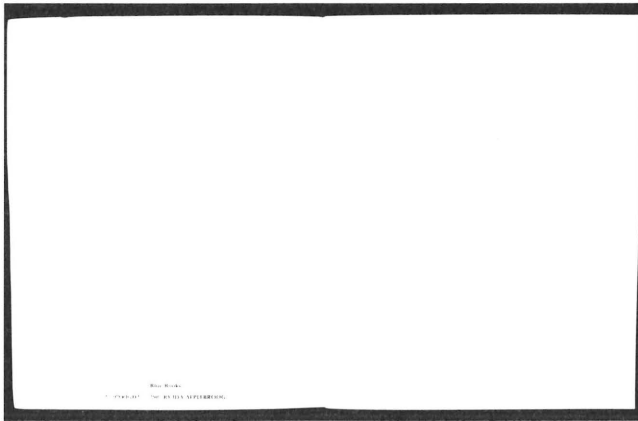


Figure 3

III

The book opens to blankness. Or almost blankness. There is, on the inside front cover, the copyright, and the series name: this is one of Ida Applebroog's Blue Books (see figure 3). The book's cover is blue, with white print. The type here, on the inside, is blue. Perhaps, after all, there is something to a book's cover.

I remember thinking, when I was a student, how appropriate it was that they called the small lined pamphlets

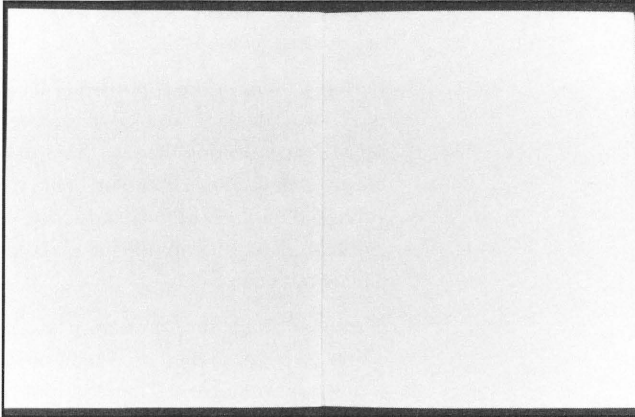


Figure 4

we purchased for essay exams “blue books.” Exams were never happy occasions, not at least when the blue book was in hand, waiting for you to fill it cover to cover, over the course of the next several hours, with half-lucid insights in response to some ill-conceived question dreamed up by the professor only minutes beforehand. Blue books made one blue. (“Among the derivations of the word, I especially like *blavus*, from medieval Latin, and the earlier, more classical, *flavus*, for the discolorations of a bruise, so that it sometimes meant yellow, with perhaps a hint of green beneath the skin like naughty underclothes.”³)

Yet, admittedly, sometimes in the course of an exam, in the course of filling up space, the blank space of the blue book—like the blank space of this page, as I am writing here, now—something like genuine clarity could be briefly achieved, and you could feel good about the experience. You could transform the situation in the performance of it. That was, of course, the pedagogical point. The blue book contained within it a certain narrative imperative. It not only waited to be filled; it demanded to be filled. And it was, fundamentally, dialogical. One filled it only in response to someone else, albeit under duress.

Suppose we define performance as anti-theatrical, as an art form that “displaces illusion with real time, character with personality, skill with spontaneity, artifice with the banal. It values idea over execution.”⁴ This also seems to me a reasonable description of an examination as

opposed to an essay. We open a blue book, and these are our expectations.

Perhaps, then, we are supposed to fill this book up, write in it. Turn the page, and there is more blank space (*see figure 4*), confirming the fear that maybe the book is empty, that it is an actual blue book, that the performance promised on the cover will indeed be our own, not Applebroog's. Still, no one has asked us a question yet. This is not an exam.

There is only blank space before us. To put pen to this paper, to begin to fill it up, would be to take it over, make it our own, colonize it. Then we would be to Applebroog's book as Warhol is to Campbell's soup. (The copyright haunts us, though, prohibits our imperialist instincts).

Out of the blankness, a sense of urgency develops, requiring us to turn the page, and fast, if for no other reason than to relieve us of the threat of the blank space itself. The blank space threatens to transform us from consumer to producer of the book, the performance. It is as if we must move on. We must see for ourselves just what it is Applebroog has in mind.

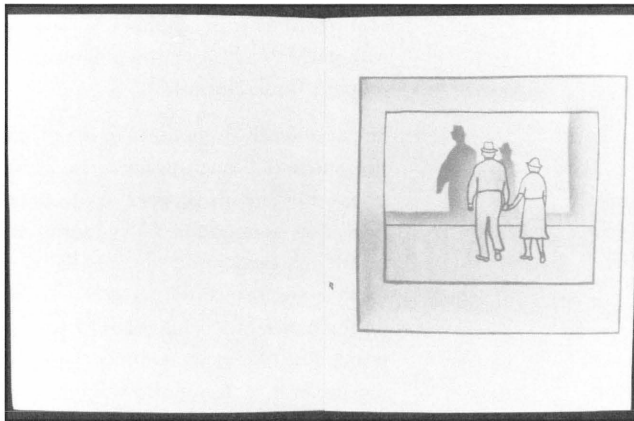


Figure 5

IV

An image (*figure 5*).

It is hard to say, spatially, just what we are looking at. Are we looking through a window upon the scene, two people, one male and one female, walking away from us, across the street, backlit by a light that is itself peculiar, not streetlight, not that diffuse, but squared, regular, as if

projected? The next series of books, the *Dyspepsia* series, makes the window analogy explicit (see *figure 1*), though in those books we are outside looking in, much more in the position of the voyeur. Here we are on the inside looking out. It feels, in fact, as if this couple is on stage, before a spotlighted backdrop, on stage without knowing they are on stage. But then, what is it we are looking through? A window in the projection booth? The light comes from our right, from someplace parallel to us, but not contiguous with ourselves. Perhaps we are not looking through anything at all, except a frame. Perhaps we are looking at a picture. Given the casualness of the rendering, the *blue print* quality of the image, it may be that we are looking at the picture of a picture. (Each of Applebroog's books exists, in fact, in a unique, larger version, done in multiple panels on vellum.)

The space depicted in this picture is shallow, very shallow indeed. One wants to yell out, tell the couple it is time to turn, left or right, one way or the other, that they are walking straight into a wall. Perhaps they are blind. It is not catastrophic, this sense of their imminent peril. It is not as if they are about to walk off a cliff, into deep space (the space, say, of Renaissance painting). It is just that their (spatial) alternatives seem rather smaller than the length of their stride. They are embarked on what Kirk Varnedoe has called in his recent book "the Road to Flatness."⁵ They are about to bump right into the space of modern painting.

Suppose they are, in fact, approaching a painting, a minimalist one, say a Robert Ryman or an Agnes Martin or a Robert Irwin. Perhaps they are casting their shadows over a work of art. "The big challenge for me," says Irwin, "was simply always to try to maximize the...physicality of the painting, and to minimize the imagery. It's about presence, phenomenal presence. And it's hard: if you don't see it, you just don't see it; it just ain't there. You can talk yourself blue in the face to somebody, and if they don't see it, they just don't see it. But once you start seeing it, it has a level of reality exactly the same as the imagery—no more, but no less."⁶ Before this minimalist work, this couple is about to experience the many pleasures of white, the subtle differences worked upon the visual field by a change in light, literally by their arrival on the scene, as they cast their shadows over the field of the

otherwise uniform canvas. They activate the painting, make it come to life. They, or their shadows, perform upon it. (For Mark Rothko, the canvas was a stage set, upon which his viewers acted out their lives.)

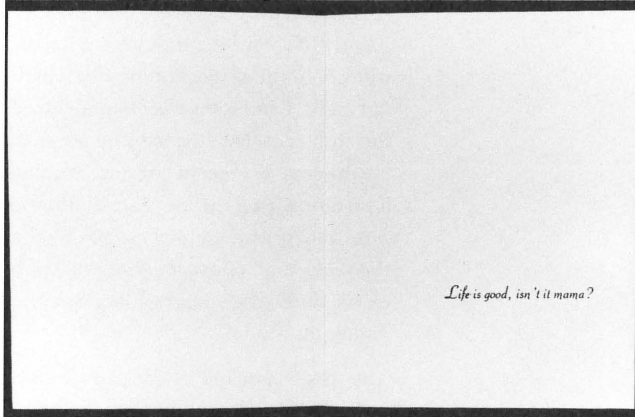


Figure 6

V

But what a life.

The text intrudes (*see figure 6*). The image speaks. Papa speaks.

For this would appear to be the voice of authority, the voice of the Father. One could go so far as to say that this text overpowers the image, colonizes it, bathes it in an unwarranted happy optimism. (*Happy Families* was the name of Applebroog's retrospective exhibition at the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum, February–May 1990.) Certainly the text causes us to revise what we see. No longer are we willing, quite, to place this couple in the space of the museum. They would be blind to minimalist painting. They read, now, after the text, like an image of middle America come to the city. They are there, before us, cheerfully walking into a wall.

The voice, you say, doth insist too much. Possibly. But if this couple does not have far to go, they have, at least, each other. Maybe that is enough. Somehow, in all its banality, the expression rings true. These are the kind of people who say such things. And believe them.

And even the authority of the voice, of the Father, seems harmless enough. It's reassuring rather than threatening,

innocent rather than duplicitous, simple rather than complicated. It is easy to laugh at such a sense of well-being, only to recognize, afterwards, the intimations of a certain nostalgia sweeping into your shallow and empty landscape like a fresh zephyr off the sea. The typeface, too, reads like a Hallmark card, the kind you willingly send your grandmother even though the sentiment is too thick to cut. And you mean what it says (you *want* to mean it), though you maybe do not read the whole thing before mailing it off.

This is disconcerting. These are not feelings proper to the space of performance, to the space of modern art. Life is not good, and we know it. Things are not this easy. In the other works, the other books, there is always an aura of what Carter Ratcliff has called “the emptiest forms of contemporary life.”⁷ In *Look At Me* (see figure 1) the histrionic woman pleads with her equally histrionic lover, “Look at me. We are drowning, Walter.” This is *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (the movie version) replayed as real life (the Applebroog version). The emotional life of the couple, their studied lack of attire, their thespian demeanor, scripted by Tennessee Williams, mediated through Hollywood, filtered through Applebroog, acts itself out in the bedroom before us. Walter is Paul Newman; the woman, Elizabeth Taylor.

Now *this* is a performance. You look, in comparison, at the old couple walking away, their backs to the audience, and it’s a miracle we can even hear what the old man has to say. Walter and friend are playing to us. They are meant to be seen (even if we see them through the window, as voyeurs). The old couple is playing to no one. We do not hear what the old man has to say so much as we *overhear* it. We do not see the old couple so much as *oversee* them.

Let’s call it a question of *oversight*. Oversight contains within itself the dual connotations of responsibility and disregard, territoriality and forgetfulness. Oversight raises, in short, the question of the colonizer. Suppose in this essay—so much about so little—I have colonized this text, mined its resources, stripped it bare, robbed it of its simplicity, imposed my will so thoroughly upon it that it is no longer recognizable for what it is (or was). Suppose that is what I am supposed to do. Suppose that is the condition of the book as performance. Suppose the book as performance submits itself to my oversight.

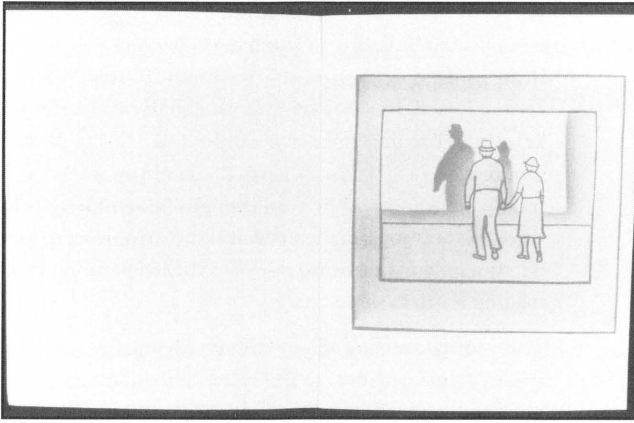


Figure 7

VI

Which brings us back from the question of the text, back to the image (*see figure 7*). This is like the movies, before the talkies. We were in a scene, we broke momentarily for a little dialogue, and now we are back to the scene again. Nothing has changed.

So, maybe, this is a silent film (maybe a blue movie).

As we all know, thinking back to Eisenstein, a film is a composition of discrete shots, or "cells," that collide like the individual lines of haiku. Within a given shot, other collisions can, of course, occur, collisions of scale, light and dark, various graphic elements, and so on. From outside the visual realm, other elements collide with the shot. Language, first as typography and then as sound itself, is an element meant to collide with everything else. Eisenstein advocated the contrapuntal use of visual images and aural images. For Eisenstein, this collision of various competing and contrasting elements was the animating principle of cinema, what he called *montage*.

So this is montage.

The book as performance as montage.

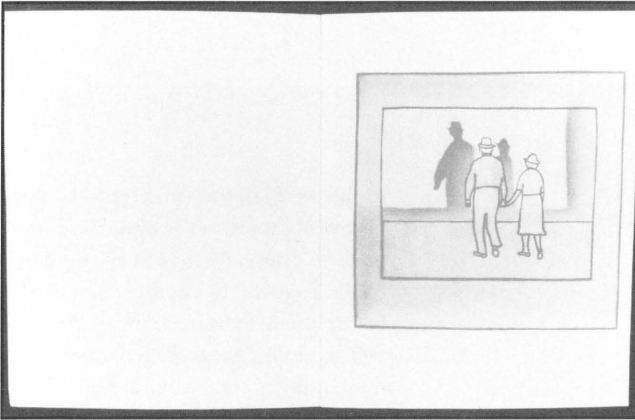


Figure 8

VII

But what if the collision is always the same? If the same image collides with itself, again and again, is it montage? Is it even the same?

We turn the page, and the image repeats itself (*see figure 8*), and then repeats itself again (*see figure 9*). This is beginning to look like a flipbook, the kind cartoonists use to animate their characters. “The catch is,” as Carrie Rickey has pointed out, “when you flip the pages the figures don’t move.”⁸ An invitation to animation without the animation. Something like life itself.

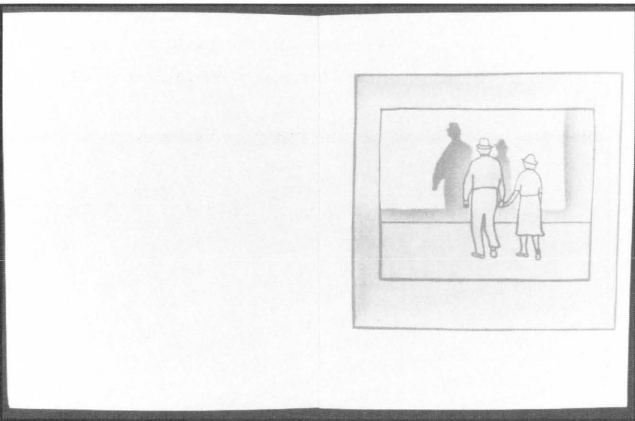


Figure 9

VIII

In this world of the same repeated (*see figures 10 and 11*), history is a thing of the past. Here, indeed, there is no past, no future, no time at all. We are suspended *en abyme*. As the couple stares at their own shadows on the wall before them, we stare at them, like the man in Magritte's 1937 painting *Not to be Reproduced*, the man staring into a mirror, not at his own face, but at the back of his own head.

We become aware of a new present tense, in which we not only know ourselves as the shadows that we cast, but in which we also see ourselves seeing, see ourselves seeing our own future. We are condemned to the space of this line drawing of ourselves, walking blithely into the blank wall before us.

Call it *bas-reality*, a sort of low relief, the underside of realism rather than the dream fabric of the surrealist vision. Bas-reality is the side of everyday life we know but choose to ignore, not the unconscious, not even the repressed, but that which makes us simply *uncomfortable*, like a letter left too long unanswered, like a yellowing bruise on the neighbor kid's arm.

This couple is what we, to our great discomfort, already know—our past (these are *our* parents) and our future (they are whom we will become). It is always the same.

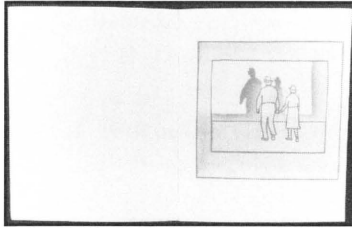


Figure 10

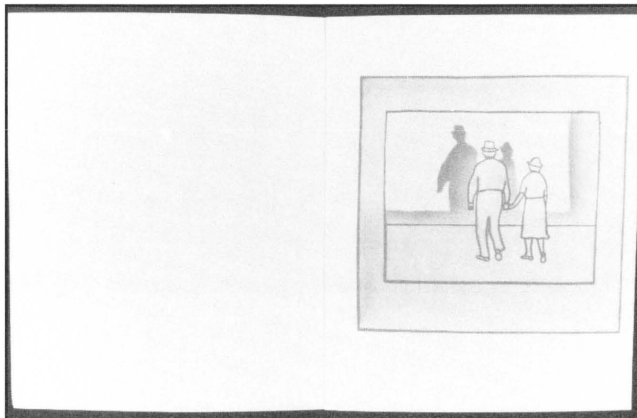


Figure 11

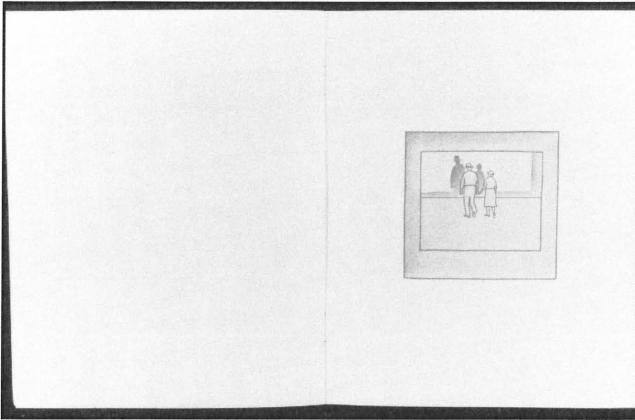


Figure 12

IX

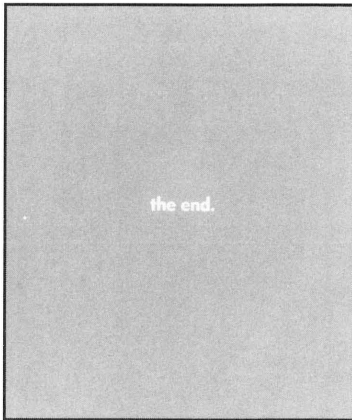


Figure 13

Until now, on the last page, it is not the same (see figure 12). Or not quite.

There is a difference in scale.

But it is, in fact, the same. Nothing has changed. We have only moved away, moved back. If there is change, only our motion has brought it about.

So this is a movie (for Eisenstein the screen was always a frame, never a window), and it is over, and we have gotten up from our seats, and we are leaving the theater, and one last time we look back at the screen, still the same, there before us.

This is not, however, the end (see figure 13).

This is a performance. *This* is a performance. Not Ida Applebroog's, not any longer, but mine.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Michel Foucault. 1982. *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California Press, 15.
- ² Quoted in Arturo Schwarz. 1970. *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Abrams, 496–97.
- ³ William Gass. 1976. *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Boston: David R. Godine, 6.
- ⁴ Bonnie Marranca. "Notes on a Poetics of Performance," in *Theatrewritings*. New York: Performing Arts Journal, 136–37.
- ⁵ Kirk Varnedoe. 1990. *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern*. New York: Abrams, 25, 27, 29.
- ⁶ Quoted in Lawrence Weschler. 1982. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 61.
- ⁷ Carter Ratcliff. 1987. From the "Documenta 8 Catalogue," in *Ida Applebroog*. New York: Ron Feldman Fine Arts, 35.
- ⁸ Carrie Rickey. "Return to Sender," in *Ida Applebroog*, 9.