

Howard

“Any questions?” asked Howard.

The answer to this never changed. Silence. But it was an interesting breed of silence particular to upscale liberal arts colleges. It was not silent because nobody had anything to say — quite the opposite. You could feel it. Howard could feel it, millions of things to say brewing in this room, so strong sometimes that they seemed to shoot from the students telepathically and bounce off the furniture.

“Nothing? Have I really been so very thorough? Not a single question?”

Howard let the silence stretch a little. He turned to the board and slowly unpeeled the photocopy, letting tongueless questions pelt his back. His own questions kept him mentally occupied as he rolled Rembrandt into a tight white stick.

“I have a question.”

The voice came from his left.

That was a passage from *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith, a book that has greatly inspired me. I would like to continue this scenario, right here, now. Let us continue to call our hero Howard.



Negative reflection no. 1
Original by Penguin Books, 2005

One

The voice came from his left.

“Yes,” said the young man eagerly, when he was acknowledged. “I was wondering – after this lecture in which, if I may be so free, you criticise everything – whether there is anything, any artists, works, books, that you do admire?”

This for Howard was the most difficult question conceivable. He was on his own here and adopted an innocent grin. Why hadn’t he prepared for this? His audience suddenly regarded him with sincere interest and some even held their pens at the ready. He experienced that strange sensation again: here he was the cynic who excelled in inflammatory speeches always directed *against* something, who could only discuss such matters in a negative light, and yet his audience appeared so interested in his taste. As if someone who could express his aversion to things so perfectly, would also be able to talk about what he loved so infectiously. He himself doubted whether he loved anything at all. Because his silence had begun to exceed the limits of the customary pause for thought, the young man sat up

straight in his chair as if giving weight to what, after all, had been a perfectly legitimate question.

“Because, if you yourself create a work, I mean, you are a visual artist aren’t you? – then it must be difficult – to my way of thinking – not having a positive force to motivate you. Something to enthuse about.”

Howard tapped the edge of the lectern with the stick, the stick containing the rolled-up images which, according to him, were indeed nothing less than ashes; more often than not, and always without those he was criticising being present to return the favour.

“Well,” he eventually uttered, “you could say that I distrust artists whose work stems from enthusiasm. So...”

4 A nervous laugh rang through the room, but it was difficult to say whether it was because the students were still enjoying his bluntness or because they realised that his answer wasn’t an answer at all, merely a confirmation of the question.

“So we noticed,” responded the young man. There was no note of irony in his voice; rather sincere interest and this unsettled Howard all the more. The young man leafed through his notebook and began reciting fragments from the lecture Howard had just given.

“The creative process, in your opinion, is driven by dissatisfaction or irritation. Works with a positive intent ‘are *a priori* affirmative rhetoric that only idealists and activists employ’; they make an ‘irritating attempt to

be inspiring’ and draw from an ‘amateurish, pathetic vocabulary’.” The young man looked up with a grin and turned the page over with a flick of the hand and then raised a finger. “‘Romantic vanity precludes criticism and undermines the criteria of the discourse’, and that is why elitism is necessary in art according to you. Right!” He looked up. “You have even confessed to *being disgusted with fellow artists* who, apparently unconcerned, what word did you use... *flirtatiously* arrive at the creative process. Should everyone then constantly undermine their own creative process in order to be taken seriously?”

“Yes,” said Howard at once, pertly dropping his white stick on the lectern. “You *have* to slave away at it. Otherwise you produce poor work.” This motto was received in silence.

“A bitter assumption,” the young man replied. A young woman in the first row, who had busily taken notes during the lecture, nodded in assent. “And furthermore, you haven’t answered our question: what does meet with your approval?”

With that one word “our” the question suddenly became universal.

“In my opinion,” began Howard, while he considered what to say next, “anything *radical* is good.” He let a weighty silence fall, but knew that he had to continue. “If a work has no radical element, it is totally irrelevant.”

“Positive,” demanded someone resolutely from the back of the room.

“I don’t have any ready examples,” said Howard, frowning.

The young man regarded him patiently. “I saw Alex van Warmerdam on TV recently, within the context of his new film, and he created such a bitter impression. He was asked which hero he would choose to give him a master class and he couldn’t think of anyone. He said he should have been asked the question a week in advance. Is it really so difficult for you now as well?”

Howard was silent.

“Your own work?” suggested the young man.

6 “I couldn’t consider my own work as an example myself. But yes, I do try and incorporate radical elements.”

“I should say so,” answered the young man. “It is a perfect example of radicalism. Take *WTC Jumper III*” He held three fingers up to accentuate the Roman number in the title. “I have never seen such a painful painting. You chose to make a hyper-realistic study of the shattered corpse of someone who had jumped from the towers on 9/11.”

Howard was embarrassed by this shameless reference to his own painting. It was impossible to go along with this.

“But you can’t say that can you,” said the young man with an ironic chuckle.

It was quiet again. Howard had one example that he could cite, albeit not without shame. He knew that it always succeeded in shutting people up when they expressed doubts about his taste. It irritated him that he had to dig it out once again, because he was increasingly beginning to suspect that, as an example, it was outdated. As such it would be a confession of the fact that since seeing that work a number of years ago he had never regained his enthusiasm.

“A work by Alfredo Jaar,” he said. “*Lament of the Images.*”

He had seen it at the Documenta in Kassel: a blinding white light in a blacked-out space accompanied by a text. The text describes cases in which images that should belong to our collective memory have been physically taken away from us. One of the texts, for example, is about the image archives that Bill Gates acquired and subsequently stored in a former mine complex; protected against deterioration, but at the same time inaccessible to mankind. The work examines this critically. The images are literally and figuratively painfully absent, but they are abundantly manifest in our imagination.

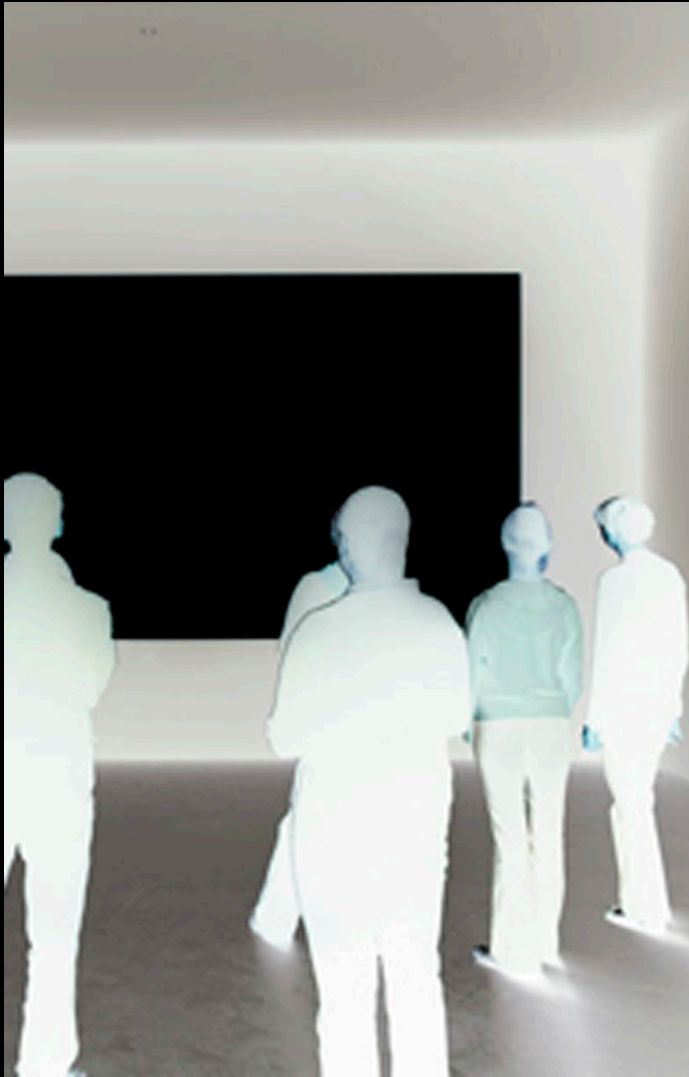
A murmur of consent sounded here and there. He had dismissed it, the terse question that he thought he had only to answer on behalf of others, but now plagued him; because his answer was not an answer that left him feeling satisfied. *Lament of the Images* lamented the



Negative reflection no. 2A
Original by Alfredo Jaar, 2002

total lack of images. It was itself a non-image. As soon as he had made his pronouncement Howard realised that it was anything but a confession, rather a negation, a sham choice to confess a love that was just as blank as the white light of Alfredo Jaar's installation.

Original by Alfredo Jaar, 2002
Negative reflection no. 2A



Negative reflection no. 2B
Original by Alfredo Jaar, 2002



Negative reflection no. 3
Looking for traces in Dutroux' home in Jumet, 1996

Two

Howard's studio was unlike other painters' studios. Its walls and floor were not smeared with paint, there was no dirty sink full of old brushes looking the worse for wear from constant contact with water, and there was no chaotic collection of useless objects scattered around the room waiting for the artist to harvest inspiration from them. Howard's studio was spotless although it did contain a wealth of things, but organised so scrupulously and in such a way that only he could fathom their ordering and, as a logical consequence, only he had the patience to maintain it.

When anyone asked him why he kept it so tidy he would persist in maintaining that a true painter not only looked after his canvases, but also his studio if need be. Behind this euphemism lurked a far more banal cause, namely, he could not tolerate chaos and he found it absolutely impossible to work if something in his periphery was not according to his taste. Few people knew that he spent at least two thirds of his time in the studio rearranging things, removing paint stains, and whittling down the rows of paintings.

As regards the latter, this meant visiting the landfill site regularly – he worked on large canvases and hated reusing material. The waste that he actually generated always cost him a great deal of time. He endeavoured to reduce his aborted canvases into ingenious, small fragments so that the people who worked at the landfill would be unable to recognise the scenes depicted – they would certainly label him as perverted. Mutilated limbs and, for some time now, monsters from a series of child rapes posed a real problem. But he could not paint anything else. He had once surprised friend and foe alike with a simple painting of an African child soldier: nothing worse than a skinny youngster brandishing a machine gun in the air. That was not what the public expected of him.

His completed works stood in the four-metre-high rack in the corner, arranged by exhibition. Nothing more needed arranging today; he had done that yesterday. He forced himself to arrange the canvases from his last series, *Infant Rapes*, I through to IX, against the long white walls of his studio in order to take stock of the work to date, a moment he had long postponed.

The paintings had a drab tone, not pastel in the sense of colours whose vibrancy has been toned down, but rather like the dingy tones of a colour film with a high sensitivity. You got the feeling that the images were not exactly under-developed but that half way through the process they had somehow been stifled or subdued.

REPRODUCTION
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Negative reflection no. 4A
Original by X, 1996

Howard had many admirers among the reviewers of his work. They saw “latent images” in his suppressed style, images not wanting to be visual but rather mental. As if during their creation they had refused to become concrete.

As a rule, the jubilant tones of the viewers embarrassed him. He was seldom criticised. The paintings pre-empted any criticism. It was, for example, pointless to consider them ugly. If you attacked them, you were politically correct. Howard himself did not enjoy his way of painting, but that was as it should be. He adhered to his credo of “sincere ugliness” when working on this series of paintings. His paintings had to be a definition of this, a sample card of horror.

He spent most of the time on the settings, grimy places where he imagined that his central figures assembled. They were in stark contrast to his bright, white studio with neatly arranged bookcases, the steel window frames - all that glass. Photos he had cut from newspapers hung on the walls. Images of the places where Dutroux had locked up his victims and, a recent addition, the shelter where an Austrian girl had been kept before escaping from her kidnapper. She had been missing for eight years.

Howard had no extraordinary fascinations or fantasies. Quite the contrary: he had no fantasy. He collected these photographs solely for technical purposes; he was unable to create such spaces in his head. This was

Original by X, 1996
Negative reflection no. 4A

REPRODUCTION
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Negative reflection no. 4B
Original by X, 1996

beyond him, beyond his imaginative powers. And so he copied seemingly nondescript details in the photographs onto his enormous canvases. Modular ceilings, the way in which passages were hacked out of underground walls, shelf brackets without shelves, articles of clothing stuffed away, a keyring hanging on a nail. His backgrounds had to contain those elements that would make his paintings credible. The more trivial, the less premeditated, the more convincing. That was the *leitmotif*. The meticulous scattering of these details precluded them from playing a leading role. He resisted objects or compositions that confirmed a cliché or contained an art-historical reference. In this way he sabotaged the normal approach to viewing his work: if it was good, you could not simply accept the image. He destroyed work that failed in this respect.

Looking at the paintings made him think of the trance-like state in which he had created some of them. If he immersed himself totally in his work, he felt uninhibited, oblivious to himself, almost weightless. He wondered how, after finally settled down to work without any distractions, at the peak of your concentration, the feeling could be so blissful when you were preoccupied with *that* kind of tableau. How can you be oblivious to yourself if you adopt the role of observer of the most horrid spectacles in your paintings?

What he now felt could not be further removed from that state of oblivion. He did not know if his work was

terrible or successful. He tried to look at the images from a distance, but he was never able to judge it as clearly as he could other people's work.

He thought about the young man at the college who had challenged him at the end of his lecture about his hobbyhorse, sincere ugliness. He preferred not to recall the incident, but it had played on his mind ever since. The feeling that his development had stagnated had been with him for some time now. How long could you make variations on such themes as suicide, rape and the visual consequences of disasters, the aftermaths? How long can you continue to insist that there is no place for beauty in art?

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People knew by this time what to expect of him. What had first shocked them, was now the subject of intellectual discussion; something, in his opinion, that was equal to acceptance. He had made his point. But the solution to why he persisted was also clear; brutality, controversy and his own revulsion with what he made, these were the things that presented themselves. They had to be extracted through work, that was true, but it was at least clear when he had succeeded in his intention. He could deduce when a painting was finished. The criteria were not so diffuse and personal.

Looking at the series, the explicit denial of beauty struck him as easy for the first time. If you want to create something of beauty - if you want to be open about something in a positive sense - when have you

then achieved your objective, he wondered. How do you decide when you have succeeded? He accused himself of lacking courage. He took no risks and he began to see this being reflected. The deficiency was embedded deeper than he would have liked. Not only did he deny beauty, he was not prepared to reveal anything. He selected his subjects with this in mind, so that they represented a universal sort of objective ugliness. You could hardly contest that quality. There was nothing subjective about it. You could not say "that is what Howard considers ugly, that it is where he reveals himself".

Try as he might, he could not conceive himself making a painting that would move him, enthrall him or impassion him. The most obvious choice seemed to be to paint homage, but even that was inconceivable. A homage to whom? It shocked him that he could only conceive of a homage to the work - put between quotation marks - of John Wayne Gacy Jr., the serial killer who entertained at children's parties dressed as a clown and who, it was eventually discovered, had buried the bodies of twenty-nine boys and young men in the crawl space under his house. And damn it, no matter how much he resisted it, he thought it was a good idea, too.

19

Three

Every time he visited Paris, Howard felt like someone without an identity. I am an “I-less” person he thought to himself somewhat amused. The word played in his head. The feeling of animosity stopped him from constantly having to keep himself in check, as was his custom. This was a relief, but it unnerved him as well. He sometimes had the sneaking feeling of being too impressionable, far too receptive to influences: afraid that his ego would have altered once he had regained control.

Let us follow Howard during his visit to the *Musée d'Art Moderne*, and let us look at him through his own eyes.

I curse the rain. I curse Paris. I've crossed the entire city for one or other exhibition by people I've hardly heard of. Pierre Huyghe? It sounds like a Flemish name, hui-ge, but the man at the ticket desk corrected my pronunciation when I said which exhibition I wished to visit. “Ouikh”, okay, the French will persist in pronouncing it in the French way and I memorise the name.

The man behind the counter looks at me suspiciously. Am I aware that the museum closes in half an hour? I nod; I am intentionally late. I shall have to rush round the exhibition only stopping when something catches my gaze. That suits me. There are no crowds so late in the afternoon - that's another advantage. More than half of those present are attendants, loitering discreetly around the doorways whom I only become aware of once I have taken in half the room. All the better. There is nothing more splendid than having a museum to myself. Art is best experienced if you are all alone, in the same way that it's easier to pass judgement when you don't have to take anyone's presence into account. I can be blunt and merciless.

Pierre Huyghe's artworks are not modest. Although they are genuine manifestations, they are not rigid as regards content. The work appeals to me, I don't know why. It is sometimes difficult to interpret this feeling. You enter the first room and you have the feeling that you are an invited guest. The work does not seem to be waiting for my judgement, but rather something far more simple, namely, solely my presence. The work is for me, I am for the work. It does not tower above me, like other exhibitions, I don't have to be ashamed of what it makes me feel.

Just as my footsteps reverberate so, too, do Pierre Huyghe's sentences that he has hung in white neon light on the wall over the light grey, linoleum floor. Je ne possède pas la Musée d'Art Moderne, I do not own this museum. Well it damn well looks like it, Mr “Ouikh”. You say you don't, and you

then appropriate it, without any shame. That is exactly what artists should do, they should brazenly permit themselves to present their individual systems in an absolute manner. Don't be modest, that is a pitfall.

This is also the radical aspect that I defended so forcefully after my last lecture at the academy. A work should have at least one radical aspect, I said. It does not matter how you express it, whether you say radical or rigorous, or absolute, or sovereign, or free. Something that stands alone, subordinate to nothing. Something unfiltered that has seeped through from the earliest concept into the most definitive form. Something you need not compromise about.

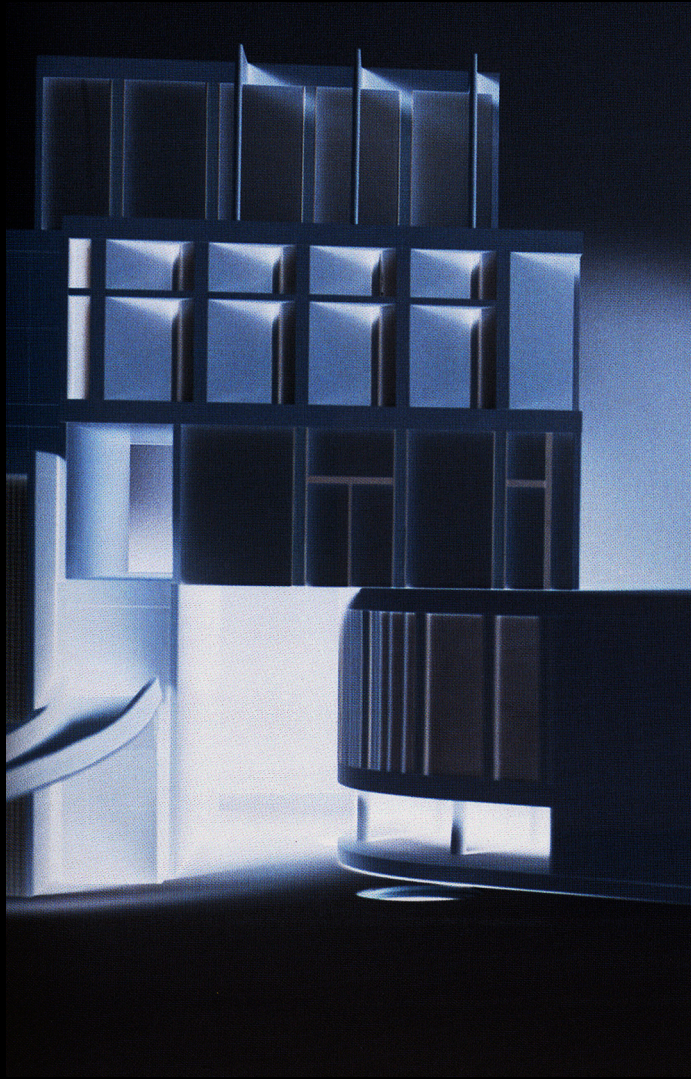
The sentences in neon light release Pierre Huyghe from any responsibility, he calls them Disclaimers. An excellent title, I wish I'd thought of it. He is saying: I am not responsible for them. In this instance it relates to the quotes he uses by other people, but I see it in a broader context: an artist who releases himself from his responsibilities is free in his choices. He may bend everything to his will and use it at his pleasure within his own constructions.

Recently, in my studio, I recalled the blissful state which you can only enter when you begin to work, when you drop everything else and can finally stop paying attention to counter-productive conditions, like the questions that scientists ask themselves: is this result correct, have I read enough sources, is the quality of my result verifiable? Have I quoted correctly? Actually, no matter how paradoxical, it all boils down to forcing yourself to abandon all responsibility. Then you get the

impression that you are detaching yourself from the systems that you imagine you are dependent on, by putting yourself on the spot, with brush in hand, camera, typewriter, whatever. What is the point of holding up a mirror to myself when I work? It only acts as a brake; it forces me to make compromises.

And what use is my advice to other people? I am nothing other than a distorted mirror that forces itself uninvited on others who are busy with their own development. It was easy putting down people who flirtatiously arrive at the creative process. "Anyone who doesn't have to slave away makes poor art" I only say that because, before I can finally begin to work, I have to spend weeks slavishly adhering to rituals that I inflict upon myself... a clean, well-organised studio, a palette full of terror, the requirements of realism, and then the most suffocating mother criterion of them all – the need for a difficult birth. It is true, when I finely get that blissful feeling, concentration, flow, that is not the moment that I work within the narrow margins of those criteria, on the contrary, it is when I step outside, when I lose sight of them for a moment.

If I could, I would stay longer. Stupid to think half an hour would be long enough. That was a real under-estimation. The film in the projection room lasts that long, now I can only see half of it. Fortunately it has just started a new loop. A wooden puppet of an old man shuffles across the screen. The figure has deep furrows in his forehead, signs of a seriousness he has contended with throughout his entire life. The heavy spectacles, the receding hair line, the grey hair carefully

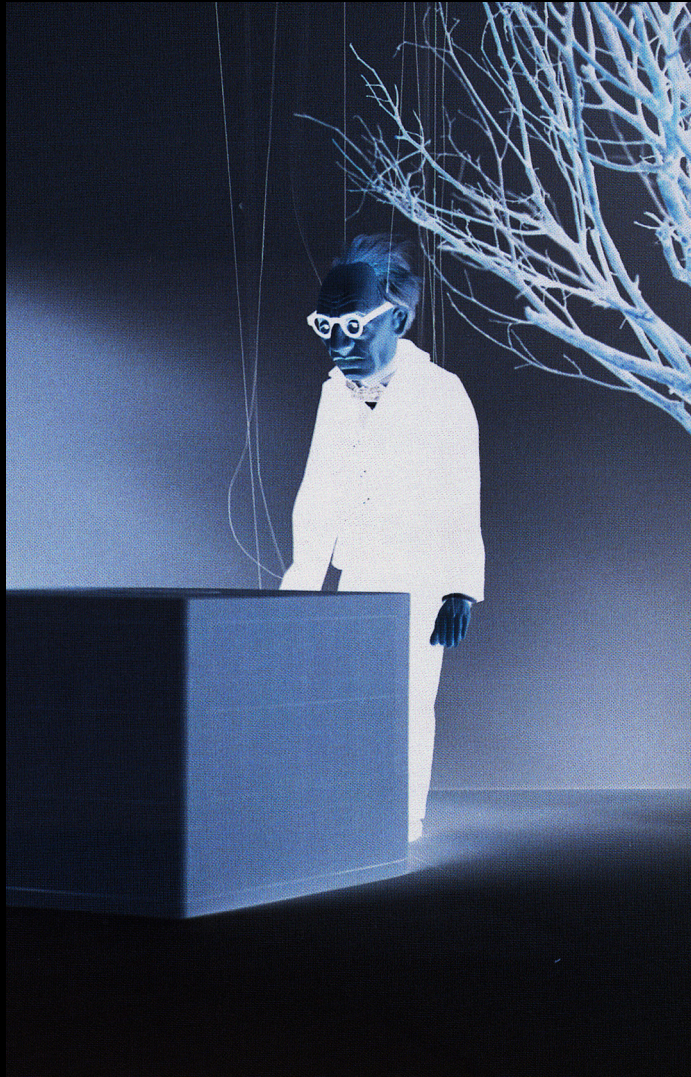


Negative reflection no. 5A
Original by Pierre Huyghe, 2004

combed back. It looks like *Le Corbusier*. Is it *Le Corbusier*? Unbelievable, who would have thought of turning him into a puppet. The way in which the architect's tragic face has been cut from wood moves me unexpectedly. The other figures are equally marvellous. The *décor* is the best of all. It is so clear and the quality of the film is so high that all the marionettes, the building that keeps recurring, and the bare branches that serve as a tree, these can all be viewed down to the tiniest detail. This film is a feast for the eye, I cannot put it any other way.

Le Corbusier, the genius, struggling to satisfy a commission: completing the only building he was able to build in North America, a department of Harvard University. But right from the outset his plans were overshadowed by other people's demands and by the pressure put on him. He looks sadly at his work, an austere, geometric building with curved extensions. The building is a compromise. The other figures turn away from *Le Corbusier* and criticise him. What do they want from him. They force him to make compromises and are disappointed at the result. As if their disappointment could ever be greater and more poignant than that of the perfectionist architect himself. He is plagued by a black spectral figure, a science fiction-like monster that strongly resembles a huge cockroach. He is Mr Harvard, dean of deans, his client who simultaneously epitomises all the limitations in his head. It is as if this film maps out my thoughts on the ground.

Negative reflection no. 2B
Original by Pierre Huyghe, 2004



Negative reflection no. 5B
Original by Pierre Huyghe, 2004

Four

“I don’t know how they’ll receive this,” said Howard’s gallery owner. Guests keep trickling in, literally, because it is pouring down outside. It pleased Howard that they were prepared to face the weather for his opening.

“Doesn’t the damp worry you?” enquired the gallery owner, as she gazed at the entrance where the visitors were half-heartedly shaking out their umbrellas and swiftly falling into conversation with acquaintances. The threshold steamed as the moisture evaporated. “This is bad, very bad for your work, you realise that.” She adjusted her skirt with a nervous downward flick of the hand and peered into space with her fish eyes. Her helpless attitude charmed Howard. He grinned and then pouted his lips.

“Undoubtedly. I’m just pleased that they came.”

“Do you think they’ll accept it?” she whispered.

He thought about this. “It would be a strange world if they didn’t,” he muttered and stared at the painting hanging on the wall opposite the door. The rest of his paintings formed an imaginary *Schlucht*, a corridor, to that one work. It was the first painting you saw as you entered.

“A strange world?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered deciding not to explain further.

“Do you think that people are only interested in my harrowing images? Why are they here do you think?”

He nodded his head towards the visitors. “Are they hoping to see more child rapes?”

The gallery owner was silent but, together with Howard, she followed the movement of the public. Maybe they do, answered Howard in his mind. Maybe that is why they have faced the rain to see my work because they want to be shocked, because they adore the way I dare to paint this. Maybe they are no different than death metal fans, who attend a concert in the hope that the music will be more brutal than on the album.

Nearly everyone paused at the painting at the rear. Some people glanced at each other briefly out of amazement and exchanged subdued remarks. They were persuading themselves that he had made the painting. Howard saw the movement of their lips, but he overheard nothing. He could well imagine what they were saying. A woman stole a glance at him as she returned to the entrance to collect the list with the titles of the works.

The Seven Men, this is the title of the last painting. Six painters, Howard’s mentors and sources of inspiration, standing in a sloop out at sea watching Howard as he walks away from the boat over the surface of the water.



Negative reflection no. 6A
Original by Mark Tansey, 1984

A solitary figure. One of them points, the others look as though they are standing in a museum. The foremost figure holds a lifejacket in his hand to be on the safe side, but holding it as if he knows it will not be needed. Howard himself extends an arm out in front of him, seemingly to feel something, and he follows the movement of his own hand intently. It is unclear what he wants to feel, the water or the paint that forms the water.

“It’s attracting the most attention, have you noticed?” said the gallery owner bumping into him. She seemed to hesitate. “Actually it is quite a leap. I did have my doubts I have to admit. You are generally so consistent. That was your strength. You never indulged in excess.”

Howard just listened. A salutary sensation of satisfaction welled up in him.

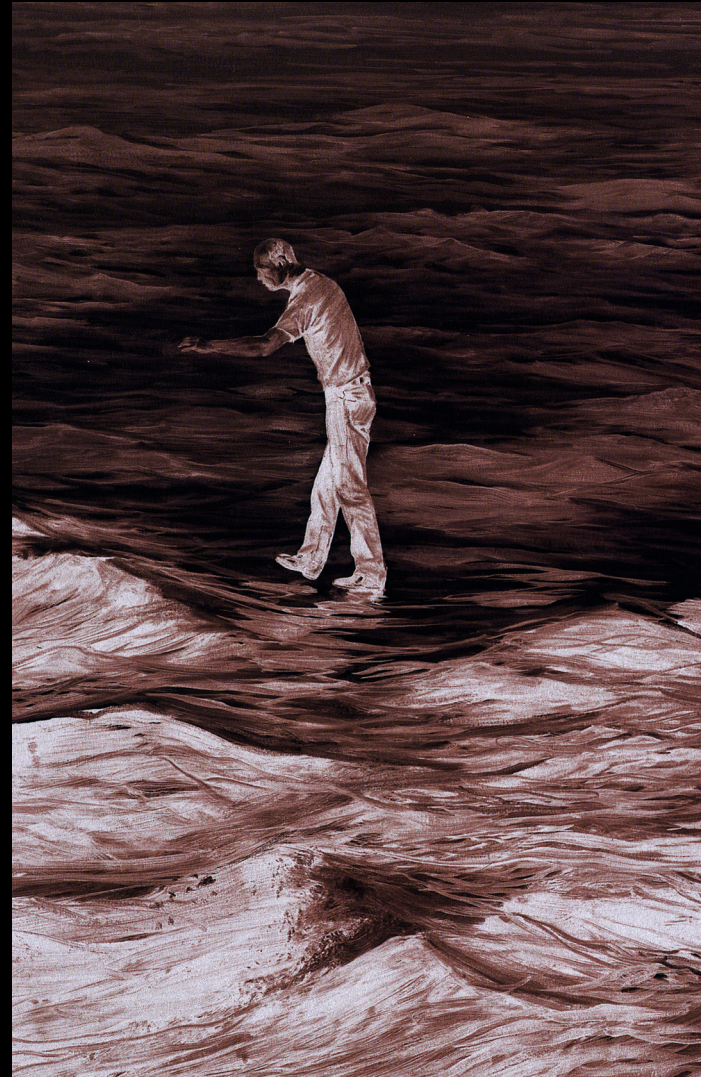
“But it isn’t a sudden change of style,” she said. “That’s what’s so brilliant. You don’t go beyond yourself.” She glanced at him uncertainly.

“Thank you,” was all he said.

“You love this, don’t you?” she laughed.

“I know,” said Howard, “I am a horrible character.”

Original by Mark Tansey, 1984
Negative reflection no. 6B



Negative reflection no. 6B
Original by Mark Tansey, 1984

About the text

Howard was written at the request of Academie Minerva, Groningen, and presented there on 13 October 2006. During the presentation the illustrations were screened on a television monitor.

Within the construction of this story, the visual images only appear as reflections of the works that actually exist. For this reason they are processed into mirror images — forming a negative of the text.

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Original by Mark Tarry, 1984
Negative reflection no. 01