
SCULPTURAL EVENTS

STEVE TOBIN'S CREATIVITY

Donald Kuspit

For the first time in the history of sculpture, the artist created three-dimensional objects whose purpose was not to emphasize their solidity and density, but rather the tension created by the unseen geometry at the border of space and mass.

LEONARD SHLAIN, *Art and Physics*

Art wins for connective activity a grain of the finality of death. The urgent outwardness, straining to substantiate an image of an independent whole, bears witness to the infantile, newly won, single object whose loss was so feared. . . .

ADRIAN STOKES, *"Smooth and Rough"*

I shall use the term *event* in the more general sense of a nexus of actual occasions, interrelated in some determinate fashion in one extensive continuum.

ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality*

By bus to the car, and then up a dirt driveway, and then, on level ground, near the old house, a huge pile of bones, rising and falling in a parabola—a marvelous continuum containing actual occasions of death, of finality, as Whitehead may think of them. Truly I was in the presence of the eternal—the ironically eternal, for the inevitability of death announces the transience of life. Tobin called the sculpture, *Bonewall; 2000* (plate 169), a terrifying wall that seemed about to collapse of its own weight, that evoked the dinosaur bones in natural history museums, but here not arranged in a semblance of life, but rather as a monument to its loss and embalment. For every bit of bronze contained a real bone in it, the two eventually fusing to tragic effect—it was the insidious color of decay, like efflorescent autumn leaves—and yet also with a certain exhilaration, a certain elation. For the wall was in the shape of a wave, and the wave rose and fell ecstatically, with a certain delirious inevitability, however inert the bones, however weighty with gravity, however much the whole piece was a cemetery. The wave was pure passage, movement crystalized as single rhythmic shape, a lively event composed of nuances of death, each bone adding its familiar eccentricity to the grandeur of the fluid whole. Preservation and loss, the immortality of bronze and the mortality of bone: Tobin’s work was a triumph of creativity, astonishing in its economy of means and form, a seamless merger of death form and life form in a primordial structure that conveyed the inevitability of both. It was sculpture as the Egyptians understood it, although its terms were modern, a minimalist gestalt composed of found objects—each bone was a kind of module, the gestalt being in effect an eccentric grid—made sublime by being embalmed in ancient bronze. It was a wailing wall, but a wailing wall made elegant by the rhythm of its soaring curve, which grandly rose and fell, a metaphor for the cyclic rhythm and contradictions of life itself.

The psychoanalyst Hanna Segal writes: “Restated in terms of instincts, ugliness—destruction—is the expression of the death instinct; beauty—the desire to unite into rhythms and wholes—is that of the life instinct. The achievement of the artist is in giving the fullest expression to the conflict and the union between these two.”¹ It is a rare creative achievement, indeed, the most difficult kind of artistic creativity. Some artists tilt more to the death instinct, some to the life instinct; few are able to unite—not simply balance—the two the way Tobin does, all the more impressively because he distills each instinct into an essential object-form (bone, wave), at once alive with movement, suggesting an inner dynamic, but also a static, fated pattern, and then merges them, with the uncanny innocence of a child—I admired the urgent delight and investigative curiosity with which he described his own work—into a singular sculptural event, giving them a new bodiliness. And

then charges them with cultural meaning: the death of nature—the destructive wake of techno-industrial progress—was predicted decades ago, and Tobin’s work, which has a certain Pompeiian morbidity and mournfulness, reads as a monument to the ecological holocaust that is upon us, indeed, rapidly overwhelms us. *Bonewall* is a heroic finger in a dam of death that seems about to burst—all that will be left after the seemingly irreversible misfortune of our own making.

2

Tobin is a collector of objects, old, castoff, seemingly trivial, useless objects, the abandoned detritus of life, which he then assembles into architectural structures, or, when they are fragments of nature—roots, a termite hill, a forest floor—simply casts and colors, the natural material, fragile and transient, fusing with the man-made, memorializing bronze, as in *Bonewall*. It is a process of petrification and metamorphosis in one, with every lifelike detail maintained—captured with Pompeiian exactness—but with a magical sense of inner movement, protean transformation. Tobin is not simply quoting and appropriating in standard ironic postmodern procedure—the artistic replication confirming that there was no original in the first place (no roots, termite hill, and forest floor that are the model for all the others, past, present, and to come)—but transforming and transcendentalizing reality, bringing out, one might say, its metamorphic integrity, the process of change that is the core of its identity, the multiplicity of identities, each with its own unique form, that exists under the umbrella of its super-ordinate identity.

Irony is destructive, insidiously hypocritical—it mocks the given, trivializing it into inconsequence in the course of asserting its presence, which is what Marcel Duchamp does with his readymades, which lose their identity as ordinary objects by being presented as extraordinary, avant-garde art but lose their identity as art by readily reverting to objectness and ordinariness, leaving us in a nihilistic limbo of meaninglessness, a mental stalemate in which both objects and art lose authority and purpose, identity and immediacy—but Tobin is sincere, which, as the *New Oxford English Dictionary* states, is to be uncorrupted and without deception. Tobin’s “assisted readymades,” to use Duchamp’s term, are not dadaistic games, generating ambiguity and irony for the sake of ambiguity and irony the way Duchamp does—they are not made with the “ironical indifference” that Duchamp proclaimed as his mode of operation—but rather are meant to make a difference in the life-world. Tobin is neither indifferent to nor deceptive about the objects he uses—he does not attempt to undermine their givenness, turning them into occasions for speculation, into puzzles that cannot be solved—but declares them directly, allowing them their own presence, respecting and cherishing their particularity. For him objects are poetic, not because he projects unconscious meaning into them, the way the surrealists did with their so-called poetic objects, but because they embody process—universal, cosmic process. For Tobin, every object bears in itself traces of a “becoming” larger than its small being. It is a fragment of the great chain of being, a detail in the endless cycle of becoming, in which life leads to death and death leads to life—the fundamental process of metamorphic transformation that is the core of the universe. Tobin is a kind of archaeologist, as it were, discovering the living process in dead

products, using them—all the discarded objects he collects—to track the process, and perhaps unexpectedly, giving the objects new life—if only artistic life—by doing so. Tobin’s art is a meditation on the universal process of transformation, an attempt to deepen his understanding of it to the extent of becoming completely enlightened about it—there is indeed a kind of eureka effect in all his work—not only to become liberated from the process, as the Buddha thought was possible, but also to celebrate it, and plunge into it, rejuvenating himself, recovering his own spirit, the spirit of life that is the spirit of perpetual becoming. Tobin wants to extract the elixir of spirit from matter in order to exist spontaneously and authentically. He is in search of the True Self, evident in spontaneous gesture and personalized idea.² He turns every object he uses—each is a kind of dead bone, a piece of death, like those in his *Bonewall*—into a spontaneous gesture and personal idea, giving it new life, refreshing our sense of its reality and integrity. What is indifferently and matter-of-factly given in the world—discarded to disintegrate in some corner of social indifference—becomes freshly sincere and immediate in Tobin’s art. It acquires a new presence, testifying to its power of self-preservation, furthered by Tobin’s artistic preservation of it, indicating his deep concern for it. “Can these bones live?” Jeremiah asked, and Tobin answers “yes, in art”—in the knowing innocence of art. The best art retains a certain innocence of spirit while knowing exactly what it is dealing with—the ugliness and destructiveness it is dealing with, to recall Hanna Segal’s words—and Tobin’s art belongs to the best art. The kind of artistic reconstruction of dead reality he carries out is a long way from the ironical deconstruction of living reality rendering it dead that Duchamp carries out—a long way from the nihilistic speculation that malevolently disintegrates reality—and more difficult and radical. Tobin’s assisted readymades undo what Duchamp’s assisted readymades did, and show that the readymade—even the manufactured readymade—is not exactly readymade, but the signature, as it were, of the process that created it.

For Duchamp external objects are implicitly bad internal objects; they are all contaminated with the death instinct, and as such peculiarly ugly, unsavory, stale—negative qualities that he defends himself against with his indifference, which, ironically, is another expression of the death instinct. Reexternalizing these bad objects as art objects, Duchamp had the fantasy of freeing himself from their badness, transforming them into the ironical goodness called art. But the result is Sisyphean; the objects, because they are only ironically art, still smell of death—represent death. And since Duchamp is basically pro-death, dominated by the death instinct, the self-defeating, ironical process must be repeated with every object. Duchamp must have realized he could not win the battle with badness—conquer the devilish irony within him, with its gratuitous subversiveness masquerading as philosophical questioning, intellectualized into nihilistic criticality—which is probably why he gave up making art and turned completely to chess, except for his final, explicitly, consummately pro-death work, *Étant donnés* (1946–1966), with its violated, dead woman (the muse who failed him?) and scene from the dead past. (The work, which is a kind of little house, is in effect a tomb.) As for Picasso, art for Duchamp is exorcism—a psychic purge. But Picasso’s life instinct was as strong as his death instinct, which is why his objects, however maligned

and destroyed—however bad—have a certain integrity and libidinous force. They have none of the passivity of death that Duchamp's readymades do.

In contrast, for Tobin, external objects are implicitly good internal objects; however dead, old, and useless (he finds many of them in those open graveyards called flea markets, where the dead are given one last viewing and hearing before they are completely discarded, buried, and forgotten), the life instinct is latent in them, which is what makes them memorable. For what keeps every memory trace alive is libido. Reexternalizing them as art objects, Tobin makes their libidinous aliveness manifest, shows that they are still charged with positive instinct, however much they seem to have been overtaken by the death instinct. "Death, where is thy sting?" Tobin seems to be asking, as he pulls the sting out by turning objects into living art. Tobin's is a celebratory, life-instinct art, rather than a defeatist, death-instinct art. His art is reparative and restorative, healing and facilitative, rather than negativistic and destructive. It does not insidiously poison the wellspring of life, as Duchamp's art does. To use Hegelian language, if for Duchamp, art is negation (as he said it was), then for Tobin art is the negation of the negation, a reaffirmation of the real, restoring it to a lived experience. It once again becomes fresh. There is something depressing about Duchamp's assisted readymades, for all their cleverness—which negates art as well as reality—while there is something uplifting, indeed, inspirational, about Tobin's art, and even sacramental. It is deeply sacred and spiritual, and as such goes against the grain of the trendy and one might say morbid obsession with irony, inaugurated by Duchamp to the detrimental effect of art.

I think the point is made decisively by Tobin's *Adobe*;1994, *Lantern House*;2001, and *Matzoh House*;1996, all of which are in effect memorial chapels. *Adobe*(plate 150) is made of a thousand M-60 bullet-proof tank windows (military surplus, as Tobin has told me), *Lantern House*(plate 157) is made of more than a thousand glass lantern slides of old art, slides now as obsolete, discarded, and "surplus" as the art (they were about to be destroyed when Tobin rescued them), and *Matzoh House*(plate 152), celebrating the unleavened bread Jews first made in the desert while fleeing slavery in Egypt, is made of about a thousand matzohs cast in bronze, like the bones of *Bonewall*. (In a sense, matzohs stand to bread—proverbially the staff of life—as bone stands to the flesh of life. The bronze in effect leavens the dead, "unfinished" matter, "finishing" it, as it were, by immortalizing it, giving it immortal life.) Tobin has rescued these objects—glorified trash, in the case of the windows and slides—from oblivion, and treasures them, showing that there is still life in what seems dead, still meaning in what seems to have lost its meaning, giving a fresh voice to what seems to have fallen mute and become stale and dull. However subliminally, *Adobe* is a chapel to the war dead, *Lantern House* is a chapel to dead art, *Matzoh House* is a chapel to dead Jews, the victims of the Holocaust. In each case, discarded things, symbolizing death, and each a kind of brick, are used to build a house of eternal life. Leavened by Tobin's imagination, the dead are raised into the city of God, where they are no longer the surplus of life but the substance of spirit. Resurrected as living art, the dead become testimony to its redemptive power. (The tank windows and glass slides also symbolize the built-in obsolescence and wastefulness of modern technology.)

Tobin's small houses are not exactly cozy—they are empty shells, affording little intimacy, and, at best, temporary shelter—but they are radiant with light, for all their implicit melancholy. Standing in them, one cannot help feeling claustrophobic, but also elated. It is the same paradoxical feeling that the *Bonewall* arouses—a disturbing feeling of death and loss and, simultaneously, a joyous feeling of eternal life, each inseparable from and generating the other. Standing in *Adobe*, one is standing not only in a tomb, but also under a dome, and in *Lantern House* and *Matzoh House* one stands under the high-pitched room of what is in effect a fundamentalist church as well as within a morgue. Tobin's structures are sad places, but they are also joyous places of worship. They are gloomy sanctuaries, but the sun shines through them. Each window, slide, and matzoh is a kind of stained glass window pane. Passing through the different patterns on the matzohs, and the seams between them, the light seems more radiant than usual. It focuses into sharp rays that seem to penetrate body and mind. We become freshly aware of our surroundings, and our own consciousness. Similarly, light radiates through the plate-glass slides, which stand out in splendor, casting the pattern of their grid on the ground, where it becomes a kind of aura surrounding and bathing the spectator. The same thing happens in *Adobe*. Light not only passes through the windows, but also seems to intensify and become concentrated in doing so. The surroundings are visible through the windows, adding color to what is otherwise a sober interior. Thus one interacts with Tobin's architecture as though in a cathedral—a minimalist cathedral rather than a grand Gothic cathedral, but one affording a religious sensation just as grand, and even more concentrated, indeed, as distilled in its deceptively simple structure. Interestingly, *Adobe* is open at the top, like the Pantheon in Rome. To me this suggests the underlying pantheism of Tobin's art—its openness to the sacred spirits whatever form and material they take. Open space is never far from Tobin's works, which for all their closure—*Adobe* is clearly a kind of cocoon—are never hermetically sealed. They may symbolize inner space—entering them one is in effect entering oneself—but they are made of objects that belong to outer space, and are open to it, as the light that flows into them indicates, even as it becomes inner light, suggesting that we will never be alone in the darkness, for the spirit is with us.

As sculptures, *Adobe*, *Lantern House* and *Matzoh House* are in a class by themselves. In fact, they are not simply free-standing sculptures, but museums full of what are subliminally experienced as paintings—lyrical expressionist paintings in the case of *Adobe*, abstract paintings in the case of *Matzoh House*, and representational paintings in the case of *Lantern House*. The houses may be geometrically pure constructions, but on the inside they are visionary and picturesque. The windows, glass slides, and matzohs may be modules in a grid, but they are also flat surfaces. They are planes on which images magically appear—dream screens, as it were, so engrossing that we forget the world outside the chapel. Tobin's houses are little theaters in which a magic lantern show—a kind of perceptual epiphany, full of spiritual import, generating fresh consciousness of the world and ourselves—is always in process. Tobin's picture planes/panes are also a critique of modernist flatness. Tobin puts flatness to expressive and pictorial use, implying that it never can be pure. Images are always implicated in flatness

for him—it is not an indifferent surface but inherently expressive. It is not empty but a cornucopia of mythic images. It may be abstract, but it is also the space of representation. Tobin's structures are an innovative dialectic of two- and three-dimensionality as well as of abstraction and representation, each element dependent on, indeed, inseparable from the others.

Tobin's fascination with light, the most sacred of substances—however insubstantial—is perhaps most evident in the *Waterglass* series. In a sense, they are light-made material, even as the light with which they are imbued makes their material seem immaterial. Tobin's sculptures explore the affinities between water and light, establishing an analogy between them, for both flow and seem formless, but take a certain precise, inevitable form. The sculptures are made of glass that seems to have remained in a liquid state. Each column has the look of a petrified process, the life instinct frozen in its tracks—a frozen waterfall. It is an emotional, fact-driven libidinous process made dramatically visible—visually exciting, conveying its inner excitement. One speaks of the light that gives life and the water of life. Both water and light are the prerequisites of life—their primordial interaction presumably generated it—and are in fact archetypal symbols of it. Tobin's work encapsulates the force of the life instinct in a column that rises like a primordial phallus, a tumescent fetish that amounts to a joyous, indeed, ejaculative affirmation of being, especially because the column seamlessly unites the fundamentals of being, light, and water, in exuberant liquidity. They are fountains of joy, rising above the earth even as they seem to descend to it, without ever exhausting their power.

Tobin's two columns are sculpture at its most primordial—sculpture that does not simply occupy space but dominates it. If one thinks of the primitive megaliths at Stonehenge as the first sculptures, then Tobin's columns bring sculpture full circle, purifying and transcendentalizing it in the process. Where the stone columns at Stonehenge are opaque, colorless, static, dense, and crude, Tobin's glass columns are dynamic, refined, transparent, and colorful—suffused with the surrounding light, the column becomes a prism fragmenting it into atmospheric color—and made of loosely knit strands of glass. (Dare one think of them as strands of semen, or is that too much of a flight of interpretive imagination?) For all their intensity and energy, they seem remarkably self-possessed; if Stonehenge is the barbaric sublime, then Tobin's columns are the sublime civilized. Both columns are huge monuments, but those of Tobin seem lyric as well as epic, delirious with life rather than stolid and oppressive, for they celebrate eternal *joie de vivre* rather than announce the inevitability of death. Tobin's sculptures fall with the force of gravity, but they also rise in defiance of it, to great, ecstatic heights. It is the familiar expressive paradox of Tobin's works. I sometimes think of Tobin's columns as abstract renderings of Jacob's ladder—the Old Testament describes it as pure luminosity—which linked heaven and earth, and was thus simultaneously idealist and realistic. Tobin's columns are awesome symbols of numinous deity, and as such objects of wonder and worship. Tobin is a mystic of process, which embodies itself in an infinite variety of forms and objects, but nowhere is his mysticism more evident than in the process that constitutes the columns.

For Tobin, “the event itself is the only truth,” as William Warmus says,³ and every object he uses is a kind of event, a combination of elements that form a pattern, or are integrated into a system. Virtually all of Tobin’s objects have fallen on hard times, that is, they are no longer “eventful”—they have lost the life that held their parts together and are on the verge of disintegrating. The mission of his art is to restore them to life—to liberate the life that still exists in them, so that art becomes a triumph of life over death. Tobin’s works are not the Triumphs of Death they appear to be at first glance, but triumphs of life, however much they may be the products of a destructive process, as in the case of his ongoing series of *Exploded Claypieces*. (He has also exploded glass.) The entropic fate that has befallen the objects that Tobin uses cannot be completely undone, but it can be counteracted by putting them to artistic use, which for Tobin means spiritual use.

In his architectural sculptures Tobin does this by subsuming the object-images of which they are built in a grid, linking them together in a series that forms a simple, self-evident pattern. It is enlivened by the light that passes through it, suffusing the geometry with a life of its own—a sacred life, as I have argued. A grid is uniform, and uniformity is entropic, as the art historian Rudolf Arnheim reminds us,⁴ but the endless, idiosyncratic play of light undoes the procrustean entropy, or at least makes it seem less absolute. The playful light lends its idiosyncrasy—the sign of aliveness and individuality—to the windows, glass slides, and matzohs. They flash in the light, which seems at once momentary and continuous, like a suddenly recovered memory, no longer a deceptive trace but a living presence—a sudden epiphany. Thus the grid becomes a glistening mosaic, a grand visual event constituted by the colorful tesserae of the object-images, which blaze like falling stars in a cosmic structure. The eventful walls of Tobin’s temples are like Byzantine mosaics, which are at once precious and dynamic, transcendental yet immediate, durable yet elusive. Tobin in effect raises the dead—what has become a victim of time—into a timeless, transfigured space, giving it a higher life by eternalizing it into art.

Tobin’s architecture explodes with light, and his glass columns—which dominate the architecture of which they are part, even as they stand apart from and within it, and are an architecture in their own right—look explosive, but, as the *Exploded Clayworks* indicate, Tobin enjoys real explosions. They seem the opposite of grid uniformity and repetitiveness, but they are also inherently entropic.⁵ To my mind they are the clearest demonstration of Tobin’s deceptively simple ability to change death into life, or rather to find life in death, as well as of his ingenious use of entropy against itself. Self-containment turns into uncontainment in them, that is, a ceramic vessel explodes into chaos, but Tobin finds the beauty in chaos. Indeed, the result is weirdly organic; “stimulated” by the explosion, a geometrical form has become a seemingly formless organism. Like a god, Tobin has created new organisms, which seem at once vegetable, animal, and mineral—truly bizarre and surreal, yet oddly harmonious and very real. With his usual sensitivity to material, Tobin brings out the life in dead clay, getting it to bloom into a kind of monumental formless form, like his waterfalls of light, and like them informed and infiltrated by color. The performance of the explosion, which

is clearly a grand event, destabilizes and destroys the vessel, replacing it with a new, seemingly unstable—“eventful”—identity, not as easily understood, “placeable,” and nameable as the vessel. Indeed, place has been destroyed and returned to space. A differentiated, discrete object has “regressed” to undifferentiated, messy material. Tobin has turned a familiar object into an unfamiliar shape, a mundane matter-of-factly real object into an oddly elegant, enigmatic, unspeakably real artistic object, bringing it to sublime life.

Indeed, Tobin’s exploded objects are extraordinarily beautiful by reason of their subtle, luminous glazes as well as dramatic shapes, and all the more aesthetically exciting by reason of their exquisite oddness. They are also subtly erotic, not to say covertly sexual: the “petals” formed by the masculine explosion belong to a rare female plant, as their labia-like look suggests. The explosion is orgasmic and, as in every orgasm—the ultimate “happening,” so to speak—opposites unite, not only the instincts of aggression and libido, as Freud said, but also male and female psychosoma become one undifferentiated being, that is, form a single, prelapsarian, sacred monster, as Plato wittily suggested. Tobin’s “performed object”—the brilliantly bizarre result of a “progressive,” avant-garde art action, full of danger and perhaps desperation, ironically reinstating a “regressive,” “oceanic” state of being, deeply secure and pleasurable, and strangely tranquil for all its sensuality—is such a mysterious sacred monster.

In short, a mysterious new object, full of emotional, aesthetic, and sensual conviction, and deeply alive—every one of its details seems full of intense, exuberant life, like those of Tobin’s structures and columns—has been created out of a fatal, seemingly tragic explosion. In Tobin’s hands, the violent explosion has become a transfiguring event rather than a destructive loss. Among other things, it is a miniature version of the big bang that created the strangely elegant universe. Tobin’s exploded vessels are in fact microcosms of the expanding universe, their molten geometry following the laws of nature. Nature is inherently artistic; it generates archetypal patterns. It is impulsive but systematic. Tobin’s exploded vessels are archetypal patterns—patterns so fundamental and deep they seem impossible to see with the naked eye, although they are to be perceived if one knows how to look, how to see the form in the formless.

Tobin’s exploded clay and glass pieces, together with his so-called *Squeezeseries* of 1998—clay quickly squeezed in what might be called a spontaneous hand explosion—reveal “the unseen geometry at the border of space and mass,” to recall Shlain’s words. Such a border is pure tension, and Tobin’s exploded pieces—they put the squeeze on the vessel—are reified tension. What we see is chaos objectified—a fractal structure in which whorls and torsions have a certain consistency. The chaos-creating explosion is a demonstration of the creativity of chaos. In a sense, Tobin is a student of chaotic dynamics. As James Gleick writes, “those studying chaotic dynamics discovered that the disorderly behavior of simple systems acted as a *creative* process. It generated complexity: richly organized patterns, sometimes stable and sometimes unstable, sometimes finite and sometimes infinite, but always with the fascination of living things.”⁶ This is an exquisite description of Tobin’s exquisite—strangely aesthetic, weirdly vital—exploded vessels.

They are explorations in the fractal dimension. It is a way of articulating “qualities that otherwise have no clear definition: the degree of roughness or brokenness or irregularity in an object.”⁷ One might say that Tobin’s explosion brings out the roughness or brokenness or irregularity in the vessel, which suggest the energy latent in it, and that went into its making. As Gleick observes, fractal geometry claims that “the world displays a regular irregularity,” “a certain characteristic degree of roughness [or irregularity] that remains constant over different scales . . . despite its immeasurability in terms of *length*. . . the claim turns out to be true.” The term *fractal* is derived from the Latin adjective *fractus*, which is derived from *frangere*, “to break.” Gleick notes that “in the mind’s eye, a fractal is a way of seeing infinity.”⁸ In a sense, Tobin’s exploded, broken sculptures are infinite “structures,” articulating the irregular or rough—which is the unseen geometry at the border of space and mass, and which is experienced as broken—as a sculptural end in itself. Tobin’s roots, termite hills, forest floors, and bone walls—all organized explosions—make it clear that irregularity is a natural phenomenon, indeed, the fundamental creative mode of nature. Each is a “different scale” of nature, and Tobin’s works show how irregularity cuts across different scales of being—animal, vegetable, mineral, as noted, and, implicitly, also human. Gleick writes: “Pattern born amid formlessness: that is biology’s basic beauty and its basic mystery. Life sucks order from a sea of disorder.” Erwin Schrödinger, the quantum pioneer and one of several physicists who made a nonspecialist’s foray into biological speculation, put it this way forty years ago: A living organism has the “astonishing gift of concentrating a ‘stream of order’ on itself and thus escaping the decay into atomic chaos.”⁹ Tobin’s sculpture moves between pattern and formlessness, showing how pattern is born amid formlessness—for example, a house and wall built out of scrap material (every pattern imposes an architecture on formlessness, which is why I think Tobin has a penchant for architecture)—and how pattern disintegrates into formlessness; for example, how an exploded vessel becomes formless material.

Many of Tobin’s works, particularly the forest floor pieces, seem to exist on the cusp between pattern and formlessness, neither decisively one nor the other. Tobin’s sculptures have the aura of living organisms because they seem like streams of order even as they signal the disorder of atomic chaos. Indeed, Tobin’s tank windows, plate-glass lanterns, and matzohs can be understood as atoms in a stream of order—the elemental order of seriality. They show irregularity within regularity, both because each is different from the other however similar in form, and because the stream of order is implicitly fractal; it has a characteristic degree of irregularity that forms a subliminal pattern within the larger pattern of the piece. It is Tobin’s understanding of the fractal dimension of life—the dimension that gives life to what seems lifeless—that makes his sculpture vital. Tobin heals the dead on the fractal level, which is why his works seem remarkably alive however informed by death, that is, “the decay of atomic chaos.” “Our universe is a subdivision of order with a whole system of chaos,” Tobin writes. “On our planet . . . there are many subdivisions of disorder and chaos”¹⁰ and Tobin’s art distills this dialectic of order and chaos to its quintessence. Mathematics is the domain of reason in which the dialectic is spelled out, and Tobin, a graduate in mathematics, with

a strong background in science, is a natural mathematician. Like D'Arcy Thompson, Tobin has a remarkable sense of the mathematics that informs organic growth or, as Thompson put it, the mathematical "*conformation*" of the forceful process of growth.¹¹ Tobin's *Sunflower 2,2000* (plate 145) makes the point explicitly. Steel fireworks-launching tubes become phallic petals, conveying in a single work Tobin's unique vision of the explosive yet rhythmic repetitiveness—dynamic harmony—of natural growth. It also conveys Tobin's independent realization of the ultimate goal of abstract art, namely, what Piet Mondrian called the dynamic equilibrium of pure forms.

One might say that Tobin's sculptures are a demonstration of the fractal character of creativity—of what Whitehead calls the "creative advance into novelty."¹² They are also an American demonstration—all the more so because they rehabilitate American Transcendentalism, in its empirical idealism and in modernist form¹³—of what the art historian Gustav René Hocke calls the "tradition of the irregular," which he regards as the source of regenerative creativity.¹⁴ Irregularity is generative of regularity and, as such, more primordial, and regression to the creativity of irregularity—once thought of as inarticulate, incoherent, and unintelligible, but in chaos theory understood as fundamentally articulate, coherent, and intelligible, and as such the fundament of all subsequent articulateness, coherence, and intelligibility (the deceptively simple basis of deceptively complex pattern)—is necessary for the regeneration of life. Thus, in Tobin's way of thinking, the inarticulate is no longer the abyss of decay and death—the formless unreal—it was traditionally thought to be, but a cornucopia of concrete possibilities of stable pattern. The art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig regards the inarticulate, nongestalt elements in art as the dynamic vehicles of primary process thinking, and the coherent, instantly comprehensible, relatively stable gestalts the vehicles of secondary process thinking, in which the intense affect and unconscious fantasy self-evident in primary process thinking are creatively and consciously mastered.¹⁵ Tobin's sculpture fuses primary and secondary process thinking—organic, primordial, deeply felt fantasy together with logical structure, sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly geometrical (the serial and the fractal)—in a tour de force, "self-conscious" demonstration of creativity, a demonstration that makes us conscious of the creative self as well as of its expressive products. Tobin's exploded works have a proud autonomy, even as they apotheosize creative process. In this they are like abstract expressionist painting, which the art critic Harold Rosenberg described as action painting. Tobin's exploded works, as well as his squeeze pieces, are abstract expressionist action sculptures, holding their own with the violent ones Willem de Kooning unexpectedly made in the 1970s, and even more violent and radical because they have nothing to do with the figure, however bodily they are, indeed, however much they expose the insides of the body in all their mysterious, intimidating aliveness.

The sense of bodiliness is crucial to Tobin's sculpture, and many of his works deal directly with the body, human and animal, and also vegetable. He puts vegetables, and sometimes fish, in women's high-heeled shoes, turning a familiar fetish object into a cornucopia, thus ingeniously modernizing the traditional idea of woman as symbol of fertility and

abundance. He mounts elephants' heads on frog bodies—utterly incommensurate creatures, one a big land animal, the other a small water animal—creating a new mythological monster, emblematic of the union of opposites traditionally represented by the cosmic snake with its tail in its mouth. In one strange work a frog carries a heap of infants on its back, freshly hatched from its eggs. He puts an infant's head, its mouth open in a scream, on a giraffe's body, and adds a chain around its neck, as though the newborn monster has broken free of bondage. A sculpture of the meditating Buddha, sitting cross-legged in the traditional position, acquires the head of a giraffe, a horse, a bear, and a fish, and lastly that of an infant, also with a chain around its neck, a symbol and relic of the great chain of being, the endless cycle of births, from which the Buddha has been liberated by his enlightenment, his compassionate detachment. There are more infants—one in a baseball glove; one holding a ship of small infants (a miniature ship of the dead, resembling those found in the pyramids); one precariously balanced, on one hand, on a kind of tower of suburban Babel, with a large dog in front of a row of small, neat, dull houses; one precariously balanced, on one leg, on the back of a turtle, along with a fish, a human figure, and, balanced on his shoulders, a lion reaching for a basket; and one balancing itself on a house, with a seesaw—on which an animal and an animal head are seated—balanced on its head, and, on the animal head, two guns balanced on another seesaw, with a rifleman standing and taking aim at the largest gun.

There are many more of what Tobin calls his *Toy Bronzes*, indicating not only his playfulness—sometimes grim, as when he places a skull, with a rose on its forehead, on the body of a meditating Buddha, one hand raised in blessing; and sometimes seemingly sacrilegious, as when he replaces Christ's small head with the giant head of an infant in a rendering of the Last Supper (suggesting that Christ will be reborn)—but also his visionary religiosity. And his purpose: to achieve enlightenment, like the Buddha, thus liberating himself from the cycle of life and death, while acknowledging them, as his various ships of life and death indicate.

The *Toy Bronzes* are Tobin's most personal works. The infant is a self-symbol, and the scenes that Tobin stages—the toys clearly have a theatrical flair—are odysseys of the self in search of salvation. They are a remarkable convergence of the beliefs motivating modern art: the *Toy Bronzes* are children's art, theater of the absurd, and sacred art rolled into one tense object. From the beginning modern art thought that it could plunge to the depths and climb the heights of feeling and thought with no formal and thematic inhibitions—no settled assumptions about how art should be made or what its subject matter should be. Tobin's *Toy Bronzes* are the climax of that conviction—a fresh declaration of that independence, rooted in openness to the unthinkable and faith in the spontaneity of mind and feeling that modern art triggers. To regard the *Toy Bronzes* as a kind of latter-day surrealist poetry—a provocative combination of incongruous objects, intended to arouse unconscious fantasy—is to miss their larger point. They are convulsive, if not as convulsive as the exploded vessels, and, as André Breton asserted, the convulsive is beautiful (at least in modernity), but their convulsiveness is a trace of the spontaneity with which they were created. Such creative spontaneity is a sign of sincerity and, more deeply, of authenticity.¹⁶ This makes them post-

modern as well as modern—post-cynical, one might say. They are charged with a fresh feeling for life as well as art, unlike the oddly jaded, tired sense of both that exists in surrealism. Indeed, Tobin's *Toy Bronzes* give us a new sense of their deep inseparability. For Tobin, each by itself lacks ultimate meaning.

In his *Toy Bronzes* life redeems art and art redeems life. A strong feeling for life brings dead symbols to mythic life, and symbols that have been deadened into kitsch objects, that is, reified into popularity, acquire new mystical significance by being transformed into art—bizarre, absurd, but strangely sublime, high art. For Tobin's reconciliation of irreconcilable objects is not an aesthetic trick, but a daring way of communicating the spiritual aspiration that is beyond the ken of kitsch, and what, however unwittingly, it denies. For to aspire spiritually is to realize that there is more to life than the gross materialism that kitsch reinforces. Thus Tobin's *Toy Bronzes* turn kitsch against itself, not simply to make an avant-garde point—de-kitschifying to de-familiarize the familiar—but to point to a spiritual reality incomprehensible to the kitsch mentality. There is more to life and art than the kitsch mentality can comprehend, Tobin suggests, and he uses kitsch to evoke that. Kitsch is a conventional mode of representation that stereotypes what it represents, but Tobin uses it unconventionally to represent the unrepresentable—the uncategorizable, like his *Toy Bronzes*. Indeed, Tobin repeatedly goes against the aesthetic grain to create objects that are aesthetically uncategorizable however aesthetic their effect. In his hands, reality itself becomes uncategorizable—sublime. Kitsch reduces the uncommon to the commonplace—petrifies everything into a platitude—but Tobin's cunning toys restore our sense of the uncommonness of the given. They convey a sense of a child's wonder at reality—the child's sense of the immediacy and novelty with which it is given—its playful presence and marvelous innocence.

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy,” William Wordsworth declared in “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” and Tobin's toys embody these intimations. If, as I have argued elsewhere, works of art are toys for adults, then Tobin's toys are very adult and artistically sophisticated even as they are full of childhood fantasy and alert innocence. Toys are what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called transitional objects—paradoxical objects that are at once found and created by the child, and as such simultaneously objective and subjective, resonant with the maternal body yet clearly different from it—and if the child's transitional objects help him make the transition away from seeing things in a childlike, subjective way (as extensions of himself and his primary relationships) to seeing them as objective and separate symbols, then the most engaging of the adult transitional objects called works of art restore the lost subjectivity of childhood, which remains alive in us but covered over by adult responsibilities, objectivity, and amnesia. Tobin's art toys recover the deepest, most elemental, yet peculiarly transcendental level of that lost subjectivity, that is deeper even than childhood narcissism, with its delusion of omnipotence, and in fact anti-narcissistic and deeply object-related: the sense of our bodies as part of the ever-changing, everlasting flux of universal life, the primitive unconscious identification with life in every form—be it animal, vegetable, or mineral (and every object is a synthesis of all three, as Tobin ingeniously demonstrates)—that keeps us alive.

Charles Baudelaire, who called children's toys "barbaric" and "primitive"—these were complimentary terms for him, for they meant authentic, which is why toys were a relief, cognitive as well as emotional, formally as well as expressively, from the largely inauthentic, cliché-ridden, hidebound Salon art he reviewed—declared "a lasting affection and a reasoned admiration for that strange statuary art which, with its lustrous neatness, its blinding flashes of color, its violence in gesture and decision of contour, represents so well childhood's idea about beauty."¹⁷ The toy became the model for art, just as the child became the model for the artist. Paul Gauguin made this explicit when he declared that to find an original image of a horse he had to go "back very far, even farther than the horses of the Parthenon, . . . as far back as the toys of my infancy, the good wooden hobby horse."¹⁸

For Baudelaire, "the child is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial."¹⁹ Certainly this describes Tobin, who roams the world for trivial things to transform into art through his keen interest in them. "The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*," Baudelaire adds.²⁰ Tobin is clearly drunk on the latent newness in old things—those things he restores to a state of newness through his art. "Genius," Baudelaire climatically wrote, in what has become a credo of modern art, "is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered at will*—a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood's capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated. It is by this deep and joyful curiosity that we may explain the fixed and animally ecstatic gaze of a child confronted with something new."²¹ By this standard, the creative genius of Tobin consists in his use of the raw material of the world—the random detritus left over from life, found by him randomly—to renew our curiosity about ourselves, and, more deeply, our place in the universe and the objective universe itself. Tobin has created his own universe of transitional objects, each a sort of heuristic gambit into the depths of the self, where, in a transformative act of self-discovery—in a kind of eureka moment, which is what Tobin's "explosive" works embody—it realizes that it belongs to the larger universe, a mystical experience that overcomes the alienation and isolation that the intellectual objectification of the universe inevitably brings with it. Tobin in fact seems to be collecting and accumulating literally everything in the universe of man and nature, in order to alchemically re-realize it through the experiment—which is what each explosion (and each combination of objects) also is—of his art.

The child is "the greatest imaginer," Wassily Kandinsky declared,²² and to renew curiosity is to reimagine reality, which is to restore it to the life it lost to the adult mind. To be the artist-child is to reexperience the givenness of the self and the universe with all the freshness and naivete at the command of one's peculiar being, which means to immerse oneself in the rhapsodic flux of objects while realizing one's limitations, holding one's own within it—maintaining a sense of self and difference—while going with its flow. Simultaneously and correlatively, one realizes that the objects flow and hold together while maintaining their separateness—that there is a current of unity that binds them. One realizes that their harmony is spontaneous and innocent, and one has to be in an innocent state of mind to experience it spon-

taneously, no doubt the state of mind in which Tobin put together different objects—different in kind as well as in scale, material, and form—to create his toys. Those objects maintain their objectivity and differences while becoming radically subjective when combined in the toy, which is what one must be to be spontaneously creative, to see the unity in chaos.

Tobin, then, is the innocent child—indeed, newborn infant—who appears in many of the *Toy Bronzes*, and who has in effect made them. The infant juggles the world, reimagines it, so that it seems newly born, like the infant itself. Tobin's infant is supernatural, filled with supernatural strength, making it invulnerable—hardly the vulnerable, weak, natural creature the usual infant is—conquering the adult world with its imagination, and redeeming it for and through the imagination. Tobin's infant is clearly absurd, and the toys it makes and plays with are also absurd, for, like every transitional object, they are a combination of reality and fantasy, fusing ordinary realities to create an extraordinary fantasy. They thus do a kind of violence to everyday reality, and are in fact inherently violent and about the violence that exists in the world. In one of Tobin's *Last Supper* toys, a giant Crusader, sword in hand, completely covered in armor, and displaying a cross on his shield, stands above a small, doomed Christ, who is calmly accepting his fate. No doubt the Crusader thinks he is spreading the Christian faith—and, unconsciously, that he is avenging the betrayal and death of Christ—but Christianity has become violent in his person, suggesting that it is inherently aggressive as well as, self-contradictorily, peace-loving and long-suffering. This is why it is absurd. When heaven comes down to earth it becomes tragically insane. But, as Tertullian says—and Tobin says with him—“because it is absurd,” because the baby-god's double-sidedness pulls itself in opposite directions yet integrates both sides, it is impossible to comprehend, however often it can be represented.

Tobin's work captures, with brilliant precision, the absurdity—the double-sidedness—of life and art. It shows Tobin's sense of tragedy, which contrasts with the possibility of salvation. It is a small ray of hope in an emotionally ugly world—as small as the Christ in Tobin's work. Like Hieronymous Bosch, Tobin pictures a small, irrelevant Christ in a grotesque reality. Nonetheless, there is a theodicean edge to Tobin's piece. Put to artistic use—re-presented in art—reality seems better than it is. However bad it still looks, it no longer seems emotionally bad, suggesting that art has a certain healing, calming power—the power to reduce and manage anxiety, which relieves the self of its feeling of doom and fatalism, and thus makes life seem less tragic and mad. With unusual directness, Tobin's *Toy Bronzes* demonstrate the alchemical, ethical character of art; its transformative, redemptive power. Changing the *prima materia* of horrible reality into the *ultima materia* of artistic gold, Tobin suggests that life is not as terrible as it seems, as terrible as it is. An art toy can make an important, long-term difference, however slow-working and however short-lived its effect seems, the way, according to fractal theory, the flight of a butterfly in Asia will eventually make a difference to the weather in America; that is, the toy will change the atmosphere of life for the better, giving it a subtle new aesthetic texture that affects and informs every aspect of it, showing that art is a promise of goodness that has been kept, in however small and childish a way.

If each of Tobin's *Toy Bronzes*—and in a sense all his works are toys—is a theater of the absurd in a sculptural nutshell, then, as Antonin Artaud, the artist-theorist of the modern theater of the absurd, argued, they must also be examples of “alchemical theater,” which, according to Artaud, the theater of the absurd epitomizes. Alchemical theater, “the one at the root of all the Great Mysteries,” is “essential drama.” It “is associated with the second phase of Creation, that of difficulty and of the Double, that of matter and the materialization of the idea.”²³ Tobin has said that “art is not just about making objects,” but “happens in the formation of an idea and the maturation of this idea. For me, the art is the personal, emotional, and mental growth that occurs as a result of realizing an idea. The object that is created only documents this growth.”²⁴ The question is, what idea? Is there one idea that all of Tobin's objects are trying to realize—one fundamental idea that they materialize and document?

I think so, and Artaud's idea of the theater of the absurd gives us a clue. Tobin himself has said that it is “process”—which is the “essential drama” of reality, as Whitehead argues in *Process and Reality*, and peculiarly absurd, for its product is the dead trace of itself or, to use Artaud's words, “a mere inert replica” of itself—but the question remains: What particular process is embodied in Tobin's products? What absurd idea is Tobin's “art process” trying to realize, concretize, articulate? It is an idea so absurd that only the thoroughly absurd, theatrical process called art can realize it: the idea of an “archetypal and dangerous reality,” to use Artaud's words, “a reality of which the Principles, like dolphins, once they have shown their heads, hurry to dive back into the obscurity of the deep.”²⁵ According to Artaud, the problem of art is to find archetypal reality in everyday reality, a problem compounded by the fact that archetypal reality can only be known indirectly while everyday reality can be known directly. One can only glimpse archetypal reality the way one glimpses the elusive dolphin, a slippery, partial form spontaneously breaking through the familiar surface of the sea and quickly disappearing back into it—a numinous sign from the depths suddenly given solid shape, yet as fluid, ungraspable, and unpredictable as the sea in which it lives. Archetypal reality is always on the move, always returns to the absurd depths from which it unexpectedly emerged. It makes us realize that the sea is not as familiar and knowable as we think it is. Archetypal reality is thus absurd and protean, and the experience of it is absurd and protean. One must deliberately cultivate a sense of the absurd, Artaud suggests, spy the absurd lurking in the banal, the archetypal lurking in the incidental. To sense the absurd is to be in the presence of archetypal reality.

The glimpse of archetypal reality is an orgasmic, visionary, transformative moment, Artaud insists. It is also fraught with the danger of permanent madness—the irreversible sense of the absurdity of reality. Intense experience of archetypal reality can make a lasting, deep impression, leaving one unable to function in—indeed, abide—everyday reality, and unfit to associate with other human beings, and even dangerous to them, which in fact is what happened to Artaud, who spent many years in a mental hospital writing hostile, threatening letters to various people. Experience of archetypal reality is fraught with danger because it is an alchemical moment in and through which one makes “contact with the *Manas*, forces latent in every form, unre-

leased by contemplation of the forms for themselves, but springing to life by magic identification with these forms. And the old totems are there to hasten the communication."²⁶ One may identify with these forms to grasp and use the energy in them, but become too entranced by them to be able to dis-identify with them, and thus go mad, overwhelmed by the energy. As Nietzsche said, if one looks into the abyss, the abyss may look into you. Each form is a magic lamp with a creative genie in it, but one may be overpowered by the genie, who will no longer do one's creative bidding. Tobin's *Waterglass*, *Toy Bronzes*, *Exploded Clay*, *Squeezes*—bronzed natural forms, and bronzed human junk are all totemic, and, like all art totems, are meant to establish contact and hasten communication with archetypal reality while avoiding madness by giving it everyday realistic form. (No doubt this is the saving grace of art.)

Tobin's sculptures are evocative semblances of archetypal principles, affording experience of archetypal reality—archetypal experience, one might say—without diving with it back into the obscurity of the deep. One will drown there, like the man who fell in love with a mermaid and followed her to the bottom of the sea. But, like the ancient musician and poet Arion, who survived the sea by riding on the dolphin's back, one can ride the sea's surface on the back of a work of art, identifying with it the way the artist does, and hanging onto it for dear life when it plunges back into the unconscious depths from which it emerged. One clings to the work of art only to the depth that one's consciousness can tolerate, and then lets go, returning to the everyday surface of reality, once again living in a sea one has learned to swim. Tobin's archetypal sculptures are trophies he has brought back from his deep plunge into the creative unconscious. He has an amazing tolerance for its process. To put this another way, his sculptures are the precious pearls of art he grew from the crude material of life that found its way into the oyster shell of his self, irritating him into creativity and, as if placed there deliberately, reminding him of archetypal reality and creative process, which are one and the same in the depths of the unconscious. Tobin's *Cocoons*, *Doors*, and *Torsos* sculptures are early totemic embodiments of the archetypal. They seem to be preludes to his houses, which are sacred spaces meant to afford an archetypal, creative experience of reality. They have been installed in a cave and a church, that is, in prehistoric and historic sacred spaces.²⁷

Commenting on the installation of his *Cocoons* in the Retretti caves in Finland (plate 16), Tobin writes:

The Retretti caves are the most unique museum space I have ever seen. The atmosphere of the stone has a powerful effect on the artwork. The sculptures are transformed from autonomous objects into indigenous phenomenon. Just like the stone is a matrix for a geode crystal, these organic glass artifacts appear to have been formed from the rock.

The caves are transformed by these installations. There are no lights or supports visible in the installations so it seems that the viewer has entered an alternative reality. There are no reminders that you are in a museum. The works combine with the caves and suggest other times and unknown cultures. These sculptures perceived as artifacts are clues to the birth and evolution of the soul of man. The viewer may reevaluate his concept of time, spirit, and cultural origins.²⁸

A true romantic visionary, Tobin yearns for the integration of primitive nature and sophisticated art. There is something more: the magical moment when dead matter becomes living spirit. “The caves lend their power to my installations and these sculptures bring life to the cave,” he says. It is the power of growth and transformation: The caves contain the cocoons like a womb, in effect incubating them until they are ready to hatch. Hatched, they become floating spirits, to refer to a group of long white sculptures, *Dream*;1993 (plate 14). Suspended, they have broken free from their cages, the spirit freed from the body, as though levitating. Two are marked with the blazing red of illumination, as though anointed by the sign of enlightenment. It is the inner eye made manifest at the moment of insight into being. They are implicitly human figures, as their Cycladic forms suggest—human beings who have become saints, abstracted into transcendence, like the saints painted on the walls of the Retretti church in which these sculptures were also exhibited. Like the cave, the church has a prehistoric—even ahistoric—look, for it also seems to stand outside of and apart from what James Joyce called the nightmare of history, especially because the moment when both contributed to human history has passed. Both are inner spaces untouched—uncontaminated—by outer events. Tobin’s *Doors* (plates 47, 53–55, 57, 58) were also installed in the Retretti caves, where they glowed with an inner light that seemed to emerge from their color, and most remarkably, his *Regeneration* pieces, which include such works as *Vongole*;1989 (plate 5) and *Regeneration*;1989 (plate 6). The *Retretti River*; 1993 (plate 126) glows with a luminous waterglass—another wondrous integration of nature and art. There is a magical cultlike magnificence to Tobin’s Retretti installations, all the more so because of their “archaic” context.

What idea, then, do Tobin’s sculptures realize? What fundamental, absurd idea—and every fundamental idea seems absurd from the perspective of everydayness—do they embody? They embody the idea of the fundamental itself, more particularly, of archetypal creative process, which gives birth to life that seems like sacred art, and art that is as sacred as life. Tobin’s sacred infant—a baby-god, as it were—is the epitome of life-as-art and art-as-life. Tobin has written: “There is a mental creativity which conceives an idea. There is emotional creativity which reflects personal feelings and emotions. And there is physical creativity which is the intuitive expression of the body.”²⁹ All three creativities are facets of a fundamental creative process, the way, according to Nathan the Wise in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s play of that name, the three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are paths to the same one, universal God. Whatever their affinities, glass, clay, and bronze are three very different materials, and the process of working them is different, but to deal with them creatively one needs intuition into archetypal process as such, that is, one has to be a child-artist with a sense of the alchemical character of metamorphic transformation.³⁰ Only then can one begin to test the limits of one’s materials, finding new creative possibilities in their fluidity, which is exactly what Tobin does. Clearly he merges with his material medium, in an act of projective identification, to bring out its archetypal potential.

The alchemical moment of making contact with the archetypal forces latent in form and releasing them through one’s identification with them—is it too paradoxical to say that Tobin’s explosion of his vessels signifies his

creative identification with the forces latent in them, and thus the destruction of the everyday self that is necessary to experience the archetypal reality?—is a moment of conversion, which is the ultimate spiritual moment; the moment when one fully realizes the spirit in oneself, in life, in the universe. The “difficulty” and the “double” that Artaud spoke of have to do with one’s everyday socialized self—which involves a peculiar double of oneself, making one what William James calls “twice born.”³¹ Art is a process of doubling reality to spiritual effect, which is why to make art seriously is to have a conversion experience. It means to make art with a self-transformative purpose in mind, consciously or unconsciously. The self-transformation and, one might say, self-creation—personal, emotional, and mental growth, as Tobin said—that results from art making eventually transforms the life-world. For to transform oneself for the better is to transform the life-world for the better, in however small a way, since one is in fact a small part of it: to change for the better already makes the world a better place to live in. Whatever is doubled becomes a new form—a creative revelation of new life—for the creative forces latent in the original form become manifest in the art form, or, as Artaud would say, the art double. The same thing happens to the self when it doubles itself through conversion, when it is transformed by the alchemical conversion experience: the formless forces within it—its creative spiritual energy—are released, giving it a new, more vital form. The liquid colors and agitated textures that inform Tobin’s works, down to the depths of their subtle material—perhaps most conspicuously in his *Doors*—are the poignant trace material of the *manas*.

6

Along with *Bonewall*, bone is a central, conspicuous component in one of Tobin’s *Toy Bronzes*. A skull is mounted on—centered in—a circle, a familiar symbol of the cosmos and completeness. Seven infants grow from it, and an eighth infant sits, arms wide open, on the base that supports the circle, which has an ellipse within it. Or do the infants ride on the circle like the dolphins riding on the sea? The work is clearly totemic, indeed, an idol of worship. To me this sacred toy is the climactic statement of Tobin’s idea of archetypal reality and creative process. It unites the alpha and omega of newborn life and age-old death, epitomizing the ceaseless interplay of process and reality, the cycle of becoming and being that sustains the universe.

The iconography is familiar to those who know the Vedanta. The figure is a composite of Kali and Brahman. It represents what Sri Ramakrishna called “the Primordial Power . . . ever at play. She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were. This Power is called Kali. Kali is verily Brahman and Brahman is verily Kali. It is one and the same reality. When we think of It as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call it Kali.”³² The infants symbolize creation, the skull symbolizes destruction, and the earth in which the totem is rooted symbolizes preservation. The sculpture is simultaneously inactive and active, at once Absolute and Relative, as Ramakrishna adds, and as such a union of the numinous and phenomenal.

In more detail, Kali is often represented as “Siva, the dancing god . . . per-

forming a sort of play for which there is no spectator—like a child. ‘God’ is the lonely cosmic dancer whose gestures are all beings and all the worlds. These stream forth without end from his tireless, unremitting flow of cosmic energy as he executes the rhythmic, endlessly repetitious gestures. Siva . . . is not enthralled; and that this is the principal distinction between the Lord and the life-monads that are dancing also in this universal play.”³³ It is the many beings—life-monads—that Tobin plays with in his art, the many playful worlds that ceaselessly flow from him. His boundless creative energy does indeed seem like a divine gift. The “little beings are trapped in the illusion of all these phantasmagoric forms”³⁴—the endless phantasmagoria of Tobin’s sculptural illusions, sometimes generated by serial repetition, sometimes informed by gestural rhythms. The abstract ellipse inside the circle symbolizes “the sublime blank of Brahman, true being, which is devoid of physiognomy as well as of all other attributes and definitions.”³⁵ It is the inactive foil to the expressive skull—Brahman—that counterbalances the false being of Kali. Both kinds of being belong to the same order of reality, which is why they are part of the same figure.

The life-monads are phenomenal—they are enthralled by the dance of life, delirious with the illusion of their own vitality and autonomy—while Siva the Lord, emblematic of true being, is detached from his own dance. He is sublimely indifferent to his own Kaliesque excesses, one might say. Siva dances with ritualistic exactness, as the rhythmic repetitiveness indicates, thus demonstrating his self-control and spirituality, his conscious mastery of the “uncontrollable forces in human nature.”³⁶ These “animal instincts and energies” are symbolized by the aggressive animal—a raw symbol of raw instinct—that crowns the skull. The life-monads are the ever-changing expression of the cosmic energy of the continuous dance, but Siva knows that the dancing life-monads are linked in a great chain of illusion. They do not realize their own transience. They are animated by cosmic energy, but it will leave them, moving on to lend its life to other beings. Siva is enlightened—he has broken the chain of illusion and thus become liberated, a god transcending time, with its cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction (as noted, the broken chain appears in other toys, dangling from the enlightened infant). However ecstatically he dances, he expresses his primordial power in transient form. In this expression of primordial power, Tobin is perfectly blank, perfectly sublime. The inexpressive, motionless ellipse symbolizes this perfect detachment, selflessness—his inner Brahman nature. “The sun is never contaminated by darkness; nor is the Divine Being by this world of ignorance in which his grace so miraculously plays.”³⁷ Tobin’s geometrical ellipse, at rest in the center of the cosmos, which forms a dancing aura round it, is this “pure Self.” Below it and outside the cosmic circle is its organic double, the impure, ignorant self, a life-monad trapped in illusion. Thus Tobin’s totem is a tree of life as well as a symbol of the transcendence of life, which is what geometry invariably is, however embedded in life.

In general, Tobin’s sculptures are “a stupendous dionysian affirmation of the dynamism of the phenomenal spectacle” of life, even as “their tangibility itself is simply a gesture, an affectionate flash of expression on the otherwise invisible countenance of the Goddess Mother whose play is the universe of her own beauty.”³⁸ That invisible countenance is the sublime blank that is the

heart of Tobin's fatal toy. It is the space where cosmic energy is concentrated, before it expresses itself—explodes—in playful life-monads, epitomized by the infants. It is the archetypal reality that is the true object of Tobin's devotion, however much he is also devoted to all the life phenomena that stream through his art, indeed, that he preserves as art, as though in a reliquary. Tobin's visionary toy is the sinister expression of cosmic beauty, indicating that he is a mystic with a profound feeling for death as well as life. One cannot be a credible mystic without this double-sided consciousness.

In fact, Tobin may be more in love with death than with life—dead, inanimate objects, the ruins of life, one might say, are the point of departure for most of his sculpture—for death enlightens us about life. Indeed, Tobin's skull seems to be experiencing a moment of enlightenment, like that skull with the rose on its forehead. This is perhaps why it seems more introspective and substantial than his infants are, and, paradoxically, more full of life, as the animal identified with it suggests. God, after all, is the Lord of death as well as of life, and Tobin's sculpture reads more as a Triumph of Death than a triumph of life over death: the floating infants don't have enough weight and power to counterbalance let alone defeat the stoic skull. The sculpture is a kind of Dance of Death, with each infant a dancing limb of Death, their little bodies animating it. Tobin's Death is pregnant with life, as its full belly and litter of infants suggest—the sculpture is implicitly androgynous—but it also dominates life. Similarly, the *Bonewall*, for all its rhythm, is an apotheosis of death. Both works confront us with death and dramatize it, however much they acknowledge life. In fact, the dancing Siva is also Kali, "the dark and beautiful Goddess-Dancer of the Cremation Ground."³⁹ Bones are all that remain of bodies that have been cremated. Set in a cave and church, the glistening glass cocoons look like sacred bones as well as fruitful wombs. Tobin's series, *Earth Bronzes*, also seems like cremation grounds full of "holy fear" rather than new growth full of the joy of life. Tobin's skull has archetypal presence, as befits death, which is the true door to the sublime. The sublime is the beginning of the eternal—an intoxicating, anesthetizing foretaste of it that covers over the bitter taste of death and empties the self to prepare for the enlightenment, to make it as blank as Brahman—as religion has told us since the beginning of time, which is where Tobin's sculpture begins and ends.

7

Perhaps nowhere is Tobin's awareness of time—as both singular moment and fluid continuum—more evident than in his *Termite Hills*, *Roots*, and *Earth Bronzes*. Each captures a singular organic moment while suggesting the continuum of nature in which it is a grand detail. To use Henri Bergson's language, each is a natural duration that carries its own development within it, remaining unique while exemplifying universal growth. Tobin regards them as his "signature pieces," perhaps because they seem like idiosyncratic script, perhaps because of their ever-changing complexity, perhaps because of their "experimental" form, all of which are aspects of his creative process. If Tobin's essential alchemical feat is to transform fluid time into hard bone—with bronze the most durable bone—or to show the Zen bones of changing time, as the Buddhists call it, then these sculptures are Tobin's most exemplary creations. The finished *Earth Bronzes*, "with its bugs,

leaves, snakes, and all . . . shaped like Renaissance doorways and windows,” as Tobin says (another example of his awareness of universal morphology and the correlation of art and nature)—it is dug out of the pine forest near Tobin’s home—is in effect a passage of time preserved forever, even as its passing is meticulously recorded. Similarly, the *Termite Hills* and *Roots* are time eccentrically on the move and bursting with life—the former literally crawl with life (termites are superb alchemists, their destructiveness initiating a creative process that transforms dead matter into organic life)—and, above all, expanding limitlessly and spontaneously. Like Tobin’s *Bone Wall*, his *Earth Bronzes*, *Roots*, and *Termite Hills* commemorate what has been in nature and what will be again in art, where it will endure forever, whatever fate befalls it in the course of time.

Tobin’s *Termite Hills* and *Roots* have extraordinary, startling presence. Their texture as well as their “wild” shapes—they are in fact raw wilderness—contributes to their vividness. One of the *Roots*, *Untitled; 2001* (plate 211) has the same red luminosity, making it stand out all the more, evident in other works. The *Termite Hills* and *Roots* seem to be on the move, propelled by some invisible power. They are “prehistoric” giants bestriding the earth, like the dinosaurs of old—extinct beings unexpectedly given a new lease on life. They are as imaginative as the windmills Don Quixote saw in his mind’s mad eye—fantasies produced by nature. As Louis Pasteur said of Odilon Redon’s dream creatures, they deserve to live, all the more so because they obey the laws of nature, even as they express human passion. Tobin has carefully dug the roots out of the earth—as much a creative act of violence as his explosions, and with results that are as delicate. He has in effect transported the termite hills from their native Africa, exhibiting them on the grounds of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where they upstaged, not to say outclassed, the architecture of its building. They are a more ancient—completely natural—architecture, more inventive and imaginative than the architecture of any civilization. They are also eternally fresh, while every building sooner or later becomes a stale ruin. Nature endures, civilizations inevitably die. Tobin clearly suggests that nature as a whole has no history, however many changes occur in it—“natural history” is a misnomer, a contradiction in terms from Tobin’s point of view—while humanity has a limited history, and in fact is rather short-lived compared to other natural species. Termite hills and roots have been around longer than human beings have, and are likely to continue to be around when human beings become extinct, that is, self-destruct.

The contrast, not to say discrepancy, between the museum building and the *Termite Hills*—and for that matter the *Roots*—is disturbing, for it suggests that nature can never be outdone by human art, which, as Tobin suggests, is, at its best, a kind of homage to nature. Where the “competition” between painting and sculpture was an issue in Renaissance art—Tobin’s church installation seems to revive it, however briefly—Tobin suggests that the competition between architecture and sculpture is the fundamental issue of modern art. His point is reinforced by the fact that so many museums seem to diminish the art they exhibit, and in fact seem deliberately designed to defeat it, as has been said of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York. There was a protest against the structure by more than a hundred

artists, and artists have continued to protest such museum structures as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Tate Modern in London. Tobin steps outside the museum, in effect dismissing it, not simply because of its inhospitable space and unnatural design, but because of its irrelevance to the spirituality of art and nature. By siting his *Termite Hills and Roots* outside the museum, Tobin not only suggests that his art is more spiritually important than any museum in which it might be shown but also that the museum is beside the point of art, which exists to articulate and convey the spirit of natural life. Tobin clearly shows that his sculpture can stand on its own; it does not need to be "showcased" by the museum, which would turn it into an aesthetic novelty, betraying its natural aesthetics. Standing outside in the open space of nature, Tobin's *Termite Hills and Roots*, with their seemingly free form, confirm that he is a free spirit. In sum, Tobin's sculpture has its own inherent drama, which is why it does not need to be staged in the museum. Caves and churches are more suitable venues, not only because they are sacred spaces appropriate for a sacred natural art but also because they have the complicated openness and rhythmic intensity of nature itself. They are not simply theatrical spaces but also spiritual spaces. The sculptures in and of themselves are spiritual spaces, as the luminous glass *Tepee* (plate 131) Tobin constructed at Retretti—it is the ancestor of his *Adobe*, *Lantern House* and *Matzoh House*—makes transparently clear.

Casting the *Termite Hills* in bronze, Tobin not only monumentalizes what is already naturally monumental—he regards them "as monuments to the insect gods and the glory of nature," to use his own words—but suggests that nature always works on a monumental scale, with no loss of subtlety in the detail. The details of termite hills and roots are in fact incredibly subtle, and comprehensible only in the subtle terms of fractal mathematics. Tobin has said that his sculptures exist to show "the power, beauty, and sophistication of nature," but they have a power, beauty, and sophistication—and vividness—of their own, all the more so because they are nature spiritualized as well as re-embodied, and thus nature revitalized. Tobin's *Termite Hills and Roots*—the climax of his interest in the irregular and labyrinthine—are sublime and uncontainable as well as beautiful and contained—a further revelation of the dialectical deepness. Just as Tobin renews art by rooting it in nature, so he renews nature by revealing its inherent artistry, which is dialectically mathematical. Its mathematics and aesthetics are one. It is a point that the Renaissance concern with perspective and proportion made, and that Tobin's fractal art makes more incisively and subtly. Mathematics is the human art by which nature is best comprehended, and the best way to immerse oneself in its depths. Clearly Tobin's study of mathematics prepared him to be an artist, for it serves and stimulates his creative relationship to nature.

NOTES

The epigraphs are quotations from: Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 368; Adrian Stokes, "Smooth and Rough," *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 2:241; and Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Humanities Press, 1955), 113.

1. Hanna Segal, "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Aesthetics," in *The Work of Hanna Segal: A Kleinian Approach to Clinical Practice* (Northvale, N.J., and London: Jason Aronson, 1990), 203.
2. Winnicott distinguishes between "the False Self . . . represented by the whole organization of the polite and mannered social attitude" and "the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea" of the more bodily True Self. D. W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 143.
3. William Warmus, "Steve Tobin: The Event Itself Is the Only Truth," *Sculpture* 20, no. 2 (March 2001): 30–37. Washington, D.C. The phrase is also the title of Ulla Koskinen's introduction to the catalogue documenting Tobin's installation in the Retretti caves in Finland. See *Steve Tobin at Retretti* (Retretti Art Center, 1993).
4. Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1971), 52. The grid, "a minimal structure at a low level of order," epitomizes what Arnheim calls "the emptiness of homogeneity."
5. *Ibid.* For Arnheim, the explosion's "disorderly destruction" is as much a means of "tension reduction" as is the grid. However, the fragments that remain after the explosion are heterogeneous rather than homogenous in appearance, in contrast to the modules that form the grid. In the explosion, tension is released, while in the grid there was none to begin with.
6. James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987), 43.
7. *Ibid.*, 98.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 299.
10. Quoted in *Steve Tobin: Reconstructions* (Collegeville, Pa.: Ursinus College, 1995), 44.

11. D'Arcy Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 11, 13.
12. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 196.
13. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1836 essay "Nature," the manifesto of American Transcendentalism, Tobin seems to believe that "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul." He also has Emerson's sense of nature's inexhaustibility, and the same ecstatic trust in it. Tobin's art is his way of saying, to use Emerson's words: "[T]he currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."
14. Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literature* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1959), 8.
15. Ehrenzweig distinguishes between the "surface mind," with its "Gestalt tendency," which can find coherence even in chaos, and the "depth mind," which "tends to be inarticulate," and seems, to the logical surface mind, chaotic and elusive, all the more so because it seems purely expressive and thus irrational. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953).
16. Lionel Trilling writes that "[a] very considerable originaive power had once been claimed for sincerity, but nothing to match the marvelous generative force that our modern judgment assigns to authenticity, which implies the downward movement through all the cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins" (Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972], 12).
17. Charles Baudelaire, "A Philosophy of Toys," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 199.
18. Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1968), 84.
19. Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *Painter of Modern Life*, 7.
20. *Ibid.*, 8.
21. Baudelaire, "Philosophy of Toys," 199.
22. Explaining why children's art has a "pronounced effect . . . upon the unbiased, untraditional spectator," Kandinsky remarks that, in words that could be Baudelaire's, "the practical-purposive ele-

ment is foreign to the child, since it regards every object with unaccustomed eyes and still possesses an undimmed capacity for taking in the object itself" (Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* [New York: DaCapo Press, 1994], 250–51). As the literary critic William Empson puts it, "the child has not yet been put wrong by civilization, and all grownups have been." Empson notes that "this feeling about children" arose "when the eighteenth-century settlement had come to seem narrow and inescapable" and "when the scientific sort of truth had been generally accepted as the main and real one. . . . It depends on a feeling, whatever may have caused that in its turn, that no way of building up character, no intellectual system, can bring out all that is inherent in the human spirit, and therefore that there is more in the child than any man has been able to keep. . . . This runs through all Victorian and Romantic literature; the world of the adult made it hard to be an artist, and they kept a sort of taproot going down to their experience as children." The child is "in right relation to Nature, not dividing what should be unified . . . its intuitive judgment contains what poetry and philosophy [and art] must spend their time laboring to recover" (William Empson, "Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain," in *Art and Psychoanalysis*, ed. William Phillips [Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1957], 191).

23. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 51.

24. Tobin, 14.

25. Artaud, *Theater and Its Double*, 48.

26. *Ibid.*, 11.

27. George Frankl notes that the prehistoric "cave temples," perhaps the first site of what Artaud called "the Great Mysteries" and Frankl describes as "mystery rituals," were "deep and almost inaccessible places" that could be entered only by "narrow passages," symbolic of "the passage of the vagina that leads to . . . the maternal womb," the archetypal "sacred chamber" (*Archaeology of the Mind* [London: Open Gate Press, 1990], 105–106). Tobin's houses have a similar narrow entrance and a womblike and cocoonlike character. Does Tobin explode the vessel to escape the womb?

28. Quoted in *Steve Tobin at Retretti*.

29. *Steve Tobin: Reconstructions*, 14.

30. Mircea Eliade notes that "the alchemist takes up and perfects the work of Nature, while at the same time working to 'make' himself," which seems to be an apt description of Tobin's artistry. The alchemist thought that "nature maintains the same rhythm of birth and death in metals as in vegetables and animals," an idea that also seems to be Tobin's. The alchemist regarded his alembic as the visible equivalent of the invisible "subterranean solitude," where Nature did her work. More particularly, the alembic was a second, spiritual, man-made (and male) womb, in which "Nature's processes" could be "accomplished in a single moment." This seems to describe Tobin's sculptural ambition. Tobin's alchemy is especially significant because it puts found objects to positive spiritual use, in sharp contrast to Duchamp, who used them ironically—negatively—to mock, profane, and finally subvert the alchemical process of spiritual transformation, that is, the artistic process of spiritualizing nature or making the spirit implicit in it explicit. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (London: Rider, 1962), 46–47.

31. James distinguishes between "the healthy-minded, who need to be born only once, and . . . the sick souls, who must be twice-born to be happy." For the latter, the "difficulty" of life, to use Artaud's term, is that it will be "canceled . . . by death," which is a natural phenomenon. James adds: "There are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other." This describes Tobin's art, which transcendentalizes the natural, that is, reveals the spiritual life in natural life. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 186.

32. Quoted in Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (New York: Pantheon, 1951), 564.

33. *Ibid.*, 428.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 427.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 578.

38. *Ibid.*, 598.

39. *Ibid.*, 580.