

MATRIX/BERKELEY 125
Nayland Blake

University Art Museum
late March - early May 1989

Untitled ("The Miracle of Unmanning"), 1988-89



Nayland Blake's installation, The Schreber Suite, takes its name from Daniel Paul Schreber, a late nineteenth-century German judge, who chronicled his experience of delusional paranoia in the extraordinary book, Memoirs of My Nervous Illness (1903). The Schreber Suite is an attempt "to duplicate the sense of displacement, volatility, and confusion" experienced by Schreber, while drawing attention, as well, to aspects of the subject's historical context. Blake combines works of his own creation with various turn-of-the-century artifacts, including a number of works borrowed from the Museum's permanent collection. These images and objects are juxtaposed with excerpts from Schreber's text: one series of textual fragments, for example, is used in place of didactic exhibition labels.

Since its publication, Schreber's book has been eclipsed in significance by the psychological studies it inspired. The case was first mentioned by C.G. Jung in The Psychology of Dementia Praecox (1906). It was Freud's Psychoanalytic Notes on a Case of Autobiographical Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides) (1912), however, which firmly established Schreber as an object of psychoanalytic discourse. In this work Freud concluded that Schreber's paranoiac psychosis was the result of his repressed homosexual desires. In another, more recent psychoanalytic treatment of the case, "On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis" (1957-58), Jacques Lacan found in the Schreber phenomenon an important illustration of the

structural linguistic principles of the unconscious.

Blake's installation is informed by such analyses; yet, rather than simply illustrating one or another of these interpretations, he has attempted to come to terms with Schreber's own bizarre point of view. For, in much the same way Freud used himself as a subject for his early experiments in psychoanalysis, Schreber believed himself to be an objective observer of his own mental processes. In fact, Schreber's memoir displays an odd combination of self-possession and insanity. The judge's insight into his own psychosis led Freud to comment that Schreber "ought to have been made a professor of psychiatry and director of a mental hospital."¹ This is a remarkable recommendation, considering that Schreber regularly heard voices, experienced visions of winged creatures, was prone to fits of howling, imagined himself to be slowly transforming into a woman, and believed that, after being ravished by God, he would give birth to a race of saviors.

Schreber's explanation of his delusional symptoms involved a complex cosmology of hierarchically arranged spiritual powers. He divided heaven, for example, into "anterior" and "posterior" realms. The "anterior realm" was further divided into two deities, Ormuzd and Ariman, who, he believed, controlled various aspects of his sexuality. The "posterior realm" consisted of three sub-hierarchies, including one divided into upper, middle, and lower "Flechsig" --the name of Schreber's psychiatrist-- and another

incorporating "devils," "fleeting improvised men," and "miracled birds." It is this remarkable schema which Blake has illustrated in Diagram of the Heavens installed on the back wall of the gallery. Here, the names of Schreber's various divine entities are etched on glass shelves placed beneath the gallery skylight. These names, readable through the ephemeral shadows which the etched glass casts on the gallery wall, create a visual analog to Schreber's hallucinatory visions. Light enters into Blake's work as a creative force, symbolizing the imminence of Schreber's God as well as, in the traditional manner of a Christian annunciation, the power of immaculate conception by which Schreber imagined himself destined to bear divine offspring.

In other parts of the installation, Blake has attempted to go beyond the standard psychoanalytic interpretation, established by Freud, of sexual repression as the central cause of Schreber's paranoid psychosis. The judge's belief that various parts of his body were being altered against his will, towards his ultimate transformation into a woman, is illuminated by Blake's linkage of this delusion to the archaic practice of reconstructing a child's posture by means of mechanical restraining devices. Indeed, Schreber's father, a founder of the physical culture movement, used such devices regularly. One may pause to reconsider the significance of Freud's assertion that "the enormous significance of homosexuality for paranoia is confirmed by the central emasculation fantasy,"² in light of the

fact that in Schreber's day castration was routinely prescribed as a cure for homosexuality, reportedly by Schreber's own doctor.

While contextualizing Schreber's case within the social and cultural conditions of the judge's own day, Blake also brings out the lingering discomfort with overt and polymorphous sexuality in our own time. He accomplishes this in part by including in The Schreber Suite a number of turn-of-the-century artworks culled from the Museum's storage room. Many of these works, by artists such as Rops, Klinger, Orlik, and Schiele, convey a sense of sexual anxiety which, Blake suggests, had caused them to be banished to the Museum's basement. The return of the repressed is carried even further by the inclusion in the gallery of a mirror identical to those found in the Museum restrooms. While this mirror is installed so as to reflect the viewer along with the resurrected artworks, Blake has simultaneously appropriated the mirrors in the Museum restrooms by covering them with a passage from Schreber's Memoirs.

The Schreber Suite is a highly poetic and open-ended exploration of the intersection of sexuality and culture, in particular as manifested in one individual at the turn-of-the-century. Blake's approach to Daniel Paul Schreber is not so much by way of interpretation or analysis but through the creation of resonant objects and tableaux which bring this man's remarkable experience to life.

Lawrence Rinder

The Freud/Jung Letters,
ed. William McGuire, trans.
Ralph Manheim and R.F.C.
Hull, Bollingen Series XCIV
(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton
University Press, 1974),
p. 311.

Ibid., p. 369.

Works in MATRIX (all works
are lent by the artist):

1. Untitled ("The Miracle of Unmanning"), 1988-89, framed silhouette, 10 x 15".
2. Diagram of the Heavens, 1989, glass, steel, 21 x 19'.
3. Displacement and Rectification, 1989, mirrors, shelves, 2 x 8' ea.
4. Schreber Box, 1989, mixed media, 21 x 21 x 18".
5. Design for Schreber Throne, 1989, pencil drawing, 4 x 4".
6. The Compression-of-Head-Miracle, 1989, leather, aluminum, 30 x 15 x 8".
7. Untitled ("Miracled Birds"), 1989, mixed media, 2 x 5 x 1".

One-person exhibitions:

Media, S.F., From Paths of Pain to Jewels of Glory '88;
Richard Kuhlenschmidt
Gallery, L.A. '89; Mincher/
Wilcox Gallery, S.F., The Elision of Failed Effect '89.

Selected group exhibitions:

Randolph Street Gallery,
Chicago, IL '88; Fuller-Gross
Gallery, S.F. '88; American
Fine Arts, NYC '88; Artspace
Annex, S.F. '89.

Selected bibliography about
the artist:

Hammer, Jonathan. Shift Magazine, Issue 1, '87.
Helfand, Glen. San Francisco Sentinel, Feb. 20 '87, Jan. 8 '88.
Baker, Kenneth. San Francisco Chronicle, Feb. 24, July 15 '87; March 10, April 24 '88.
Van Proyen, Mark. Artweek, Oct. 8 '87.
Berkson, Bill. Artforum, May '87.
Indiana, Gary. Village Voice, March 8 '88.

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