Michael Fajans at the New Federal Courthouse in Seattle

Three Sets of Twelve

Essay by Eric Dahl - September 10, 2004. University of Georgia







Detail - Level Three

Detail – Level Two

Detail – Level One

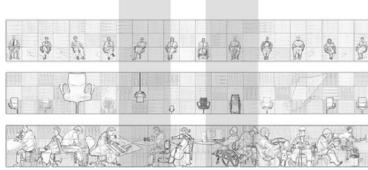
Three Sets of Twelve is a large mural recently installed at the new United States Courthouse in Seattle, Washington. It is also the most extensive existing collection of realist figural depictions by well-known Seattle artist Michael Fajans. Recognized for his integration of realist and minimalist aesthetic conceptions and for his commitment to social content, Fajans took five years to design and execute this work. Finely painted with airbrush acrylic on cherry veneer, the work is comprised of three nine-foot by eighty-foot panels, one above the other on a wall three stories high. On the first level, twelve people are shown seated at their work, twice life-sized in full color, painted with great care to represent not only each character's working posture and expression but also the physical objects associated with his or her occupation. The second level features a courtroom chair shown in twelve different visual aspects, suggesting the complex experience of becoming and serving as a juror. On the third level, the same people from the first level are shown exactly life-sized, in black and white, seated as a jury, looking at the viewer with a unified gaze.

Viewing the Mural at the Courthouse

As you enter the new courthouse, the view of the mural from the lobby is obstructed by the elevator columns and landing areas. From any position on the main floor where it is possible to

look up and see that there are three levels to the mural, you can only see each of those levels

partially. Additional dramatic views of this disrupted set of images are available from outside the building through its high glass windows, but to view the mural fully requires that you use the elevator to see it from at least three different locations. Viewing the progression of perspectives from the first to the second to the third floors imposes an arrangement of events in time. The vision of the



Artist's Sketch of entire mural

people at their jobs (first level) seems to precede the disorientation of observing one chair from many perspectives with differing psychological overtones (second level) and finally the realization of the same twelve people from the first floor as a jury (third level). However, the sequence of the levels has been made indeterminate because an elevator has been intentionally incorporated into the perception of the work. You may be traveling up or down without knowing which buttons have already been pushed, perhaps a metaphor for how it can feel to interact with and comprehend the modern justice system. It is typical for Fajans' public murals, like his award winning stage settings, to be affected by and respond to their architectural context.

At the same time, the content of the entire three-level mural is more than a sequence of narrative events and must be conceptualized as a single, coherent creation. Taken together, the multiple levels of the mural offer a visual analysis of a complex and essential component of democratic society—the jury system and its relation to justice. The work invites us to assimilate layers of interrelated visual information which combine direct pictorial representation with a more abstract conception. The combined effect allows us to formulate a richer understanding of the jury system, particularly its reliance on individual participation and acceptance of a collective responsibility by ordinary citizens to achieve social good. The artist thus chose in 1999 a moral and political subject for this very prominent public work of art that evokes fundamental social issues explored in our culture by artists and philosophers at least since the foundation of Athenian democracy 2,500 years ago. Like the most famous trilogy of Aeschylus, Fajans' *Three Sets of Twelve* is art intended for the public that asks us to explore how the quest for justice is defined in terms of the relation of citizen to citizen, how good prevails despite moral contradictions, and how a transcendent art form can enable us to view the complexities of social life philosophically.

As a painting rather than a play, the mural offers an objective configuration which is gorgeous, conceptually ambitious, and contributes to a tradition of using visual mastery to convey social comment. This kind of purposeful social art dates at least from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* works of Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, and it has survived, sometimes perilously, decade after decade throughout the last century. In terms of relevance for the present and future, the mural already demonstrates a political prescience. At the time of its dedication in the fall of 2004, the justice system it explores and implicitly promotes is under increased stress in terms of a weakening

commitment in some contexts to open judicial proceedings and experimentation with the military tribunal as an alternative to trial by jury.

In his public art, Fajans never uses his technique merely for decorative display or to demonstrate a positivist aesthetic dedicated to observed visual fact. He always has something to say of personal and coherently moral significance—the latter not a popular trait among many artists during much of his career. Moreover, the maturity of his conceptual grasp of the social implications of his subject and his mastery of figural representation have allowed his public art to avoid the impotence of irony—this is not a sly sidewise satirical comment by someone who finds his society inscrutable or unworthy of coherent analysis. If you think you sense some statement of straightforward social depth in Fajans' paintings, follow your instincts. His large-scale public art is characterized by openness to psychological and political expression, and is meant to be accessible to his audience through both a visual/emotional and verbal/critical apprehension.

Level One - A Group Portrait of Individuals



THREE SETS OF TWELVE: Level One, (9 feet by 80 feet) acrylic on wood, 2004

The images on the first level are the most accessible: twelve figures in an illusion of low relief on cherry panels with the wood grain of each panel vertically oriented. This is not a complicated construct; the thematic signals are clear. Twelve people sit side by side, each depicted in the practice of their everyday work, in the job-specific chair from which they will be summoned to serve as jurors and to which they will return when their service is completed. Though some viewers might wonder if this is a collection of giant photographs, the layered, airbrushed figures are painted with a precision of detail and focus that exceeds the capabilities of contemporary film processing. There is no photographic process in 2004 for printing fine figural images on wood. Each wrinkle of flesh, seam of clothing and strand of hair has been individually painted using tiny airbrush movements, stencils, templates and other compositional methods. Like other contemporary realist painters, Fajans has discovered his own way to use photography as a tool for creating painted images, but it is only another compositional tool. In this mural and all of his figural paintings, photographs are used to inform the drafting of preliminary sketches for each figure. The figures in the first level of this mural were then painted in fine detail requiring seventeen to thirty-five days per person. All twelve were completed during fifteen months of six-day-per-week creative labor spanning from January 2002 to March 2003. They were painted in the order they are now seen, left to right, on sections of a 9-foot by 80-foot rectangular surface comprised of sixty-nine 36-inch by 41-inch wood panels of transparently finished, quarter-sawn cherry veneer plywood. The figures include a man working at a microscope, a court stenographer, a ceramist, an architect, a camera repairman, a cellist, a computer operator, a shoemaker, a bus driver, a heavy equipment operator, a garment worker, and a window washer. One interesting effect of the mural is that the images portrayed by each section seem incomplete. Each level seems to require visual information provided by the other two levels, which argues for

the singular identity of a work made of three parts, even though they can't all be seen at the same time.

Who are these people and why has the artist brought them together? They are not presented in a work commissioned by a seventeenth-century aristocratic family and don't depict the political leadership of a Dutch or Flemish town, but they are painted with a dedication to realistic visual features and facial expressions that is reminiscent of the most sublime works of that era and locale. If you look at the level-one figures of the Fajans mural long enough and openly, if you can overcome residual notions of contemporary photographic imagery, and if you then recognize that this painter, through his figural creations, is capable of informing you about the invisible quality we call "character," a comparison with Hals or Van Dyck or Rembrandt is not farfetched. The expressions are individualized, evoking the uniqueness of twelve people brought together in real life. Though they are not shown at a banquet table or before a seventeenthcentury outdoor city background, they are linked, each touching the next at an elbow, at a shoulder or at a cello against a word processor keyboard. As in works like Frans Hals' celebrated Lady-Governors of the Old Men's Home at Haarlem, just one person in Fajans' levelone courthouse group looks directly back at the viewer, providing a route inward to a community of figures characterized by co-equality and approachability. The gathering of these individuals implies a seriousness of purpose, but the individuality of their expressions suggests that their purpose transcends solemnity or authority. They don't symbolize the authority or explicit dictates of the law so much as the social fabric in general that depends upon it.

During its proposal and composition phases, the working title for the entire three-level mural was "Cross-Sectional Ideal." This offers an important clue toward interpretation. The term is found in a book by Jeffrey Abramson, and refers to the jury selection process as one of the resilient characteristics of the American court system. It is typical of Fajans to become immersed in the details and social implications of the subjects he chooses for his public art. Certainly if American culture and its public art have any depth, a major work hanging in the lobby of a new federal courthouse might be expected to have something to say about how we conceive of, suffer for and reinforce justice. Fajans embraces this construct by offering a particular demographic cross-section, one jury of his own choosing. This jury is not calculated to be the perfect, politically correct proportional representation down to the fractional percentages, but it is diverse and, above all, offers a collection of American people who might plausibly be trusted in this time and place to reach a collective verdict more reliable than one reached by some other means outside our democracy's traditional judicial practice.

Level Two - The Chairs



THREE SETS OF TWELVE: Level Two, (9 feet by 80 feet) acrylic on wood, 2004

From the second floor landing, you see a second large rectangle, again comprised of cherry veneer panels but with an alternating vertical and horizontal (chess board) arrangement of the

wood grain. This entire nine-foot by eighty-foot area depicts chairs, or what appears to be the same chair, in many different aspects: a tiny chair, an upside down chair, a chair out of focus, the left half of a chair, the right half of a chair, a chair comprised of a set of bricks, the space left by a chair removed, a huge chair, a transparent chair, a photo-negative chair, the cast shadow of a chair, and a wheelchair. Because the panel repeats an image that is ordinary or mundane (a leather, metal and plastic courtroom chair) in a style that is highly refined and visually precise, a viewer could easily feel disoriented. Precision in depicting the banal has its precursors among the Dadaists and surrealists. It became a fundamental motif of Pop art. With those precedents in mind, it would be easy to misread this panel as providing a narrowly ironic or a disassociated take on the courtroom setting and its jury. A different, richer conception is involved.

Fajans is as good as any living American artist at creating large public murals, and his murals are typically infused with remarkable depictions of everyday objects. Long *Instant* is a large, two-panel mural in the Olympia, Washington, Fire Department headquarters. The first panel shows a building under a dark sky dramatically lit by a shattering bolt of lightning. In the second panel, the same building appears under a sky that now has become a detailed map of the fire hydrants in the city—a map every fireman in Olympia is required to memorize. The map, as well as a carefully painted collection of neatly laid out fire hoses in the second panel, and a hyper-realistic depiction of a pay phone and its touch-tone pad in the first panel give the work a high degree of authenticity in terms of emergency-related images that articulate the abstract concept of "preparedness." This concept defines the moral core of any fire department.



Long Instant 1, 1991, 176 x 80 in. Acrylic on Wood



Long Instant 2, 1991, 176 x 80 in Acrylic on Wood

Similarly, Fajans most well-known mural, *High Wire*, uses a repeated image to evoke a core concept embodied by the space it inhabits. Displayed along Concourse D of the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, *High Wire* is a one-hundred-eighty foot long explication of a vaudeville magic act that uses multiple appearances and manipulations of a large, decorated box by a magician and his assistant to celebrate our disappearances and reappearances during plane flight.

Fajans could very easily use his mastery of representational technique to churn out pop visual quips or variations on the surrealistic still life, but he has never shown any interest in

manipulating objective reality in this way. His career-long preoccupation has been with humanity and human character made accessible through carefully painted facial expressions and gestures with complementary extensions and backgrounds, sometimes involving very carefully and realistically painted objects, other times employing the techniques of minimalist abstraction. Though he does not paint portraits per se, he almost always paints people, and the figural paintings he has created over the years involving one, two or more figures record a remarkable collection of objects as well: a crushed and smoldering cigarette, a zebra-striped vinyl purse strap, a map laid out on the hood of a car, sunglasses, a bathing suit, an inflatable plastic headrest or, quite richly, an extensive catalogue of beautifully realized and recognizable fabrics and hair styles.



Body Temp, 1994, Acrylic on Canvas, 24 x 72 in

The central importance of the chairs in *Three Sets of Twelve* is announced by their placement at the center of the three-level composition. Fajans is using the same kind of visual dynamic employed in his other major public works: we are being invited by the focus on and permutations of this image to contemplate the totality of our experience in the psychological setting depicted. Based on the earlier murals, we might best approach the new mural with a question/answer construct. *Three Sets of Twelve* seems to invite us to ponder and parse the question: "What is the court system and how do we participate?"

By depicting the same chair (or twelve identical chairs) in twelve different perceptual aspects uninhabited by a jury, the second level of the mural explores the court system with a repeated concrete image in an almost theatrical context. Reality in the justice system depends on differing perspectives--of the jurors, other participants, and those of us observing. Judicial reality is not monolithic or even stable. It can be large, small, upside down, empty, and it can disappear. Here there is perhaps even an implicit negative premonition or an invitation to imagine the court system without anyone in a jury chair.

The second level variations on a jury chair need to be related to the sequential aspects of the figural representations of the first and third levels as well. In this construct, the varying chairs reflect a passage from the work setting of the everyday citizen on level one to a scene of the transformed individual participating in the collective decision making process of the jury on level three. The permutations of the chair on level two disrupt and dissuade us from any

simplistic notion that citizens move easily or without changes in perspective from their role as individuals to their role as jurors or vice versa. Perceptions of the jury members are variable, and sitting in that chair/role in the jury box exposes one to much that is complex and unexpected.

It is also worthwhile to compare the second level panel with Eugene Ionesco's 1952 absurdist play, Les Chaises ("The Chairs"), particularly because of Fajans' own involvement with contemporary theater. He received a Bessie for an off-Broadway stage set he created where objects on stage interacted with and affected the characters in the play. Walls moved to trap characters in closing corners; walls disappeared, leaving actors suddenly in a vast void; painted walls became mirrors. ii In Ionesco's play, two characters in a room atop a tower arrange empty chairs for imaginary guests. This triggers memories, dreams and regrets that spin out of control, forcing the two to jump from the window. The chairs in Fajans' mural are similarly evocative. They represent in their variety the subjective differences of the jury members at the time they serve on the jury and later, as they return to their everyday communities affected by the experience of jurying. Whether moving from the everyday world to jury duty or in the opposite direction from the courtroom to ordinary life, the transition involves passage through a mixture of perspectives. Like Ionesco's tragic farce, Fajans' work offers an analysis of social and psychological reality using a common object, but Three Sets of Twelve uses chairs more succinctly and with a different conclusion. On the third level of the mural, the chairs become inhabited by people who, whatever their differences, have a shared purpose and will walk away intact.

Like the best public art, *Three Sets of Twelve* also has a dynamic capability to refer to past, current and evolving situations and to challenge the public to participate in discovering and extending the work's referential context. Though not as blunt as the well-known recruiting poster with Uncle Sam pointing his finger at us in the Post Office, the second section offers a silent but clear invitation to take a seat. No doubt the second-level of the mural invites many other interpretations, and one of the great joys of public art is that we can return to ponder it again and again.

Level Three - Group Portrait of a Jury



THREE SETS OF TWELVE: Level Three, (9 feet by 80 feet) acrylic on wood, 2004

Figures from the first level reappear on the third level in a very different context. They no longer touch each other, they are not shown in color, and they are not individually identified with meticulously painted objects from their work settings. Seated separately, they now act in concert, within a different psychological context. Their identities are subsumed in mutual observation and deliberation, indicated by their collective gaze. They are all in black and white, adding to the sense of unified purpose. While the direction of the wood grain of the panels on the first level was vertical, suggesting non-intersection, at the third level the horizontal wood

grain in the background suggests interconnection. Now as jurors, the twelve are depicted with shadows leading back from their figures, grouping them together in the foreground under the same light. The jurors are collectively alone, listening and deciding in their own sphere. While their status on the third level can be understood as the culmination of a transforming process, it is also possible to look at this image of the jury and understand that it coexists and coincides with the individualized members identified on level one and the differing perspectives and emotional







THREE SETS OF TWELVE: Detail – Level Three.

overtones evoked by level two. We are presented with the mural's images on three levels, and it is our task to construct its meaning by synthesizing all three into a conception of the accessibility of the judicial system, the diversity of perspectives and purposes it encompasses, and the solemn function of a federal courthouse that depends on the collective deliberations of its citizenry.

Fajans Among His Contemporaries

It is difficult to measure the stature of this mural and its creator against a community of Pacific Northwest artists because almost no one else in the region is doing his kind of work. While Seattle has participated in a national shift of interest back to representational art, Fajans has always painted large representational works focused on the human figure, whatever the national trend. Years ago one of his paintings was chosen best in show at Seattle's Center on Contemporary Art (COCA) by Paula Cooper, a guest curator from a prominent New York gallery. It was the only painting in the competition that offered a highly refined realist depiction of a normal person in an ordinary situation—selecting a dress. The same painting, *It's You* (1988), had earlier that year been displayed in a Seattle corporate lobby but had to be removed because of the hostility it inspired in some of the employees. Art reviews and committee responses to commissions over the years have offered similarly conflicting reactions, from devotion to incomprehension to hostility.

Fajans has been viewed for three decades in his own community as an iconoclast, committed to his own program and style and unaffected by local aesthetic upheavals. Grouping him with west coast photorealists like Richard McLean, Don Eddy, or Ralph Goings is inappropriate since his subject matter has always been completely different (he doesn't paint vintage automobiles and cityscapes) and his use of photography is much less programmatic. Fajans does not share their obsession with verisimilitude and, as we have seen, he synthesizes elements freely from the conventions of nonrepresentational art. Much closer to Fajans' figural paintings are the works of two artists trained at Yale and active in New York from the 1960's forward: Philip Pearlstein and Chuck Close. Pearlstein explained his aesthetic in a 1962 essay titled "Figure Paintings Today Are Not Made In Heaven" which emphasized depicting observed reality rather than striving for fractal effects descended from Cezanne. Pearlstein achieved early recognition for his coldly realistic studio nudes depicted in bony, unglamorous detail. iii Reviewers of Fajans' work have likewise commented on his unflattering, realistic depictions of the sagging skin, crows-feet or prominent veins of his subjects. Former Washington governor Mike Lowry selected Fajans to paint his formal portrait for the state portrait gallery. Fajans explained that he did not paint conventional, idealized portraits but instead could only offer his realist depiction of the figure before him. The result was a gubernatorial painting completely out of character with the staid portraits in the capitol's gallery. Governor Lowry reportedly said, "I love this painting, the only problem with it is that it looks too much like me."

Comparison of Fajans with Chuck Close is interesting. Close is from Monroe, Washington, studied art at the University of Washington in Seattle, then studied at Yale as a graduate student and has painted for his entire career among an active community of fellow artists in New York. Yale encouraged young artists to form their artistic identity in relation to other artists through exposure to the widest range of artistic styles and ideas. This process involved not only experiencing the works of others but



It's You, 1988, 55 x 31 in., Acrylic on Canvas



Mike Lowry, 1997, 29 x 40 in., Acrylic on Canvas

also participating in intense theoretical discussions. As Close has remarked, "At Yale we all learned to talk about art before we could make it." Others have noted that Close is his own best critic, at least in his ability to describe his objectives and how they relate to other art. Although

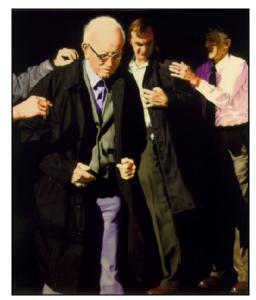
he experimented with abstract expressionism, Close, like Pearlstein and Alex Katz (also from Yale) opted for figural painting—his breakthrough coming in 1967 with the creation of a 21-foot long nude based on a photograph. From that point he determined to paint only the head of his subjects, full-face and on a large scale—as large as 11-feet high and 7-feet wide.

Fajans, on the other hand, was born in Philadelphia, grew up in New York, studied dance at Antioch, then moved to Seattle where he has spent his entire career painting, mainly in isolation. Like Close, Fajans embraced photography as a tool, using photographs to capture his visual subject. Instead of a wire grid, he develops drawings and stencils based on a photographic source before painting his large canvases with airbrush techniques. A very strong similarity between the early work of these painters is the highly detailed and refined physical surface of their paintings—the faces painted by Close and the figures painted by Fajans "look real" in the vernacular sense of camera-derived images. This similarity is epitomized by the fact that both have mistakenly been identified as photorealists. A strong difference is the decision of Close to constrain his efforts to representing the face only, using the same set of faces repeatedly. For Close, the "heads" are only an



Perched, 1989, 65 x 30 in., Acrylic on Canvas

objective form to be used again and again for his evolving experiments in technique, an early aesthetic decision that he has sustained throughout all phases of his career. Fajans, on the other hand, has not established so concise a conceptual territory for himself; his is a less restricted artistic program. While he is disciplined in his technique and deliberate in choosing his subject, throughout his career he has allowed himself to paint situations of varied psychological complexity.





Above: Ukiyo-e, 1989, 22 x 35 in., Acrylic on Canvas Left: Fitting, 1988, 72 x 60 in., Acrylic on Canvas

For Fajans, minimalism affected his choice of subject along the naturalist, non-theatrical lines, but his paintings are still richly concerned with subjective human content, offering explorations of psychological dynamics in individual works, or of social abstractions in his public art.

One other comparable but very different contemporary painter within this American milieu comes to mind. James Rosenquist, a pop art icon and muralist, refined his craft and aesthetic as a billboard painter, then created very large canvases filled with American consumer product flotsam. His huge mural for a major airport in Florida was prevented from being displayed through the efforts of a former astronaut and airline executive because the work was viewed as inappropriate. It mixed high-tech imagery from inside a spacecraft with the form of a woman and mundane images, such as extensive strips of bacon drifting into space. It is a remarkable creative eruption that defines a territory rare in public art but shared by Fajans in terms of confident originality, the combination of carefully delineated visual details with large scale figures, and the willingness to risk a mixed reception.

Looking at the international community for similar art, it is possible to identify other painters among whom Fajans might ultimately be classed, compared and valued. They do not represent a "school" but do share strong pictorial and technical resemblances. Swiss painter Franz Gertsch, for example, uses photographic transparencies to create large, refined, hyper-realistic oil portraits and group scenes. Jaques Monory, a Parisian writer and painter has created figures on canvas that resemble film sequences based on photographic sources. German painter Gerhard Richter started a long career of diverse experimentation by creating realist pictures based on magazine photos and snapshots. Collectively they are recognized in a sub-category of "New Realism," and are sometimes referred to as "European Photorealists" to distinguish them from the American kind. If Harald Szeemann is correct in his characterization of a dichotomy between "exaggerated American realism" and a "more humane European" realism, Fajans perhaps is most comfortably located somewhere between the two—between, say, Richter and Close. Without wishing to digress into a dissertation on terminology, a reasonable generalization is that Fajans, like the Europeans mentioned, is more of an "Idealist/Realist" because his work uses a devoted objective focus to explore character, emotion and social abstractions.

However, his American nature is revealed in the way he embraces technical innovation in connection with setting the conceptual bar very high and in his almost baffling determination to accept and overcome extreme physical challenges in his large public works. One feature of the courthouse mural which is quintessentially Fajans is his decision not to place it on an open wall but to place it behind a predetermined elevator shaft and incorporate the mechanical imperatives into the experience and meaning of the work.

The yet unwritten comprehensive and authoritative account of painting in our era will explore not only the pioneers of the American expressionist avant-garde and their obvious, immediate and more distant aesthetic offspring, but also the survival and influence of abstraction in subsequent figural art. Though relatively unknown today, Fajans will be recognized by posterity as one of the distinctive figural painters of his generation, because of his mastery of realistic

representation and because his work is so intelligently and consistently informed by the technical, emotive and intellectual idiom of painters and non-painters whose explorations of abstraction preceded him.

Fajans, at fifty-six, is the youngest painter among those named. It is difficult to imagine who among them could create public art comparable to his in terms of the level of technical accomplishment, the sheer scale of the undertaking, and the depth of his analytical commitment to social issues. Perhaps a handful of painters could create images on this scale with this level of realistic refinement, but there just aren't any other works with twenty-four life-sized "new-realist" figures such as are painted in *Three Sets of Twelve*. In a similar vein, only the long mural at the SeaTac Airport offers realist depictions of the same full-sized figures (the magician and his assistant) painted eleven times in different contexts.





High Wire, 1993, 83 x 2124 inches (7 feet by 177 feet), acrylic on plywood Seattle Tacoma International Airport, Concourse D (only two of eleven panels shown here)

Put another way, given the refinement and compositional sophistication of the multiple-level courthouse mural, Fajans has put himself in the running to create whatever twenty-first century equivalent comes along to rival the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The courthouse mural is a rare demonstration in our time of the intellectual comprehension, artistic skill, stamina, and the technical and logistical mastery required to succeed with figural public art on a large scale.

NOTES

ⁱ Jeffrey Abramson, We, the Jury: The Jury System and the Ideal of Democracy (New York: Basic Books).

ⁱⁱ 1988 Bessie awarded to Michael Fajans for his stage set for Brain Café by Roger Babb performed at LaMama ETC, New York, 1987.

iii Karl Ruhrberg, Manfred Schneckenburger, Christiane Fricke, Klause Honnef, ART of the 20th Century, ed. Ingo F. Walther (Cologne: Taschen, 2000).

^{iv} Chuck Close, Robert Storr, Kirk Varnedo, Deborah Wye, Glenn D. Lowry, *Chuck Close*, ed. Robert Storr (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1998) 87.

^vRuhrberg, 341.

viRuhrberg, 340.