

Fear and Loathing in Vienna

Rhonda Lieberman on the Indiscreet Charm of Thomas Bernhard

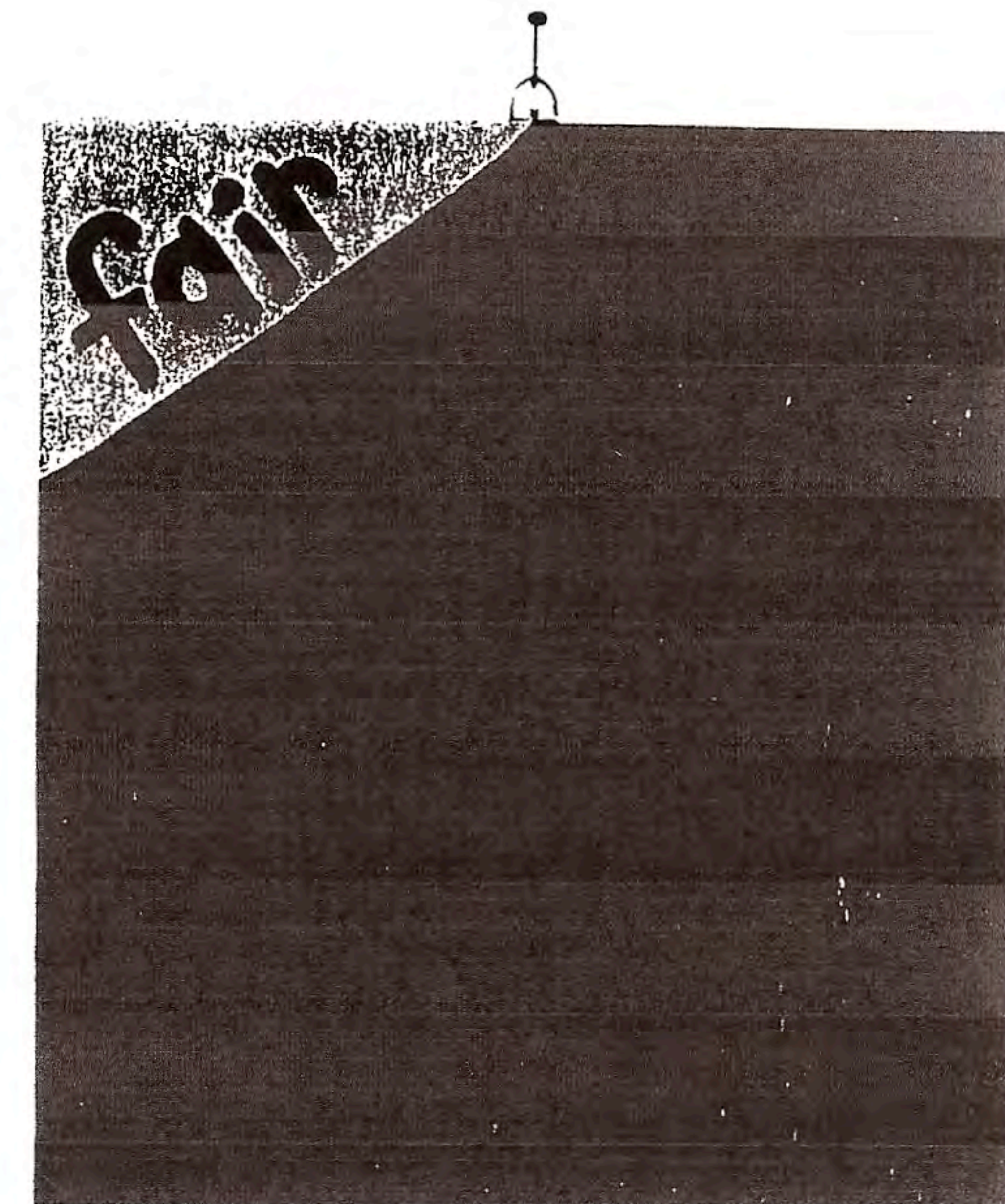
We all want to be good consumers. We don't want to reproduce negativity. So whenever I hear Cindy Crawford aver, "It's really inner beauty that counts," my inability to take things at face value makes me feel unclean. According to Gilles Deleuze, "The world is the set of symptoms of which the illness coincides with man."

A recent art piece in *Vogue* juxtaposed two "artful gatherings": a late-19th-century parlor painted by Alfred Stevens, garnished with lady artist and models, and a mod 1965 postcard of a fancy French restaurant in Chicago with mannequinlike patrons, all of

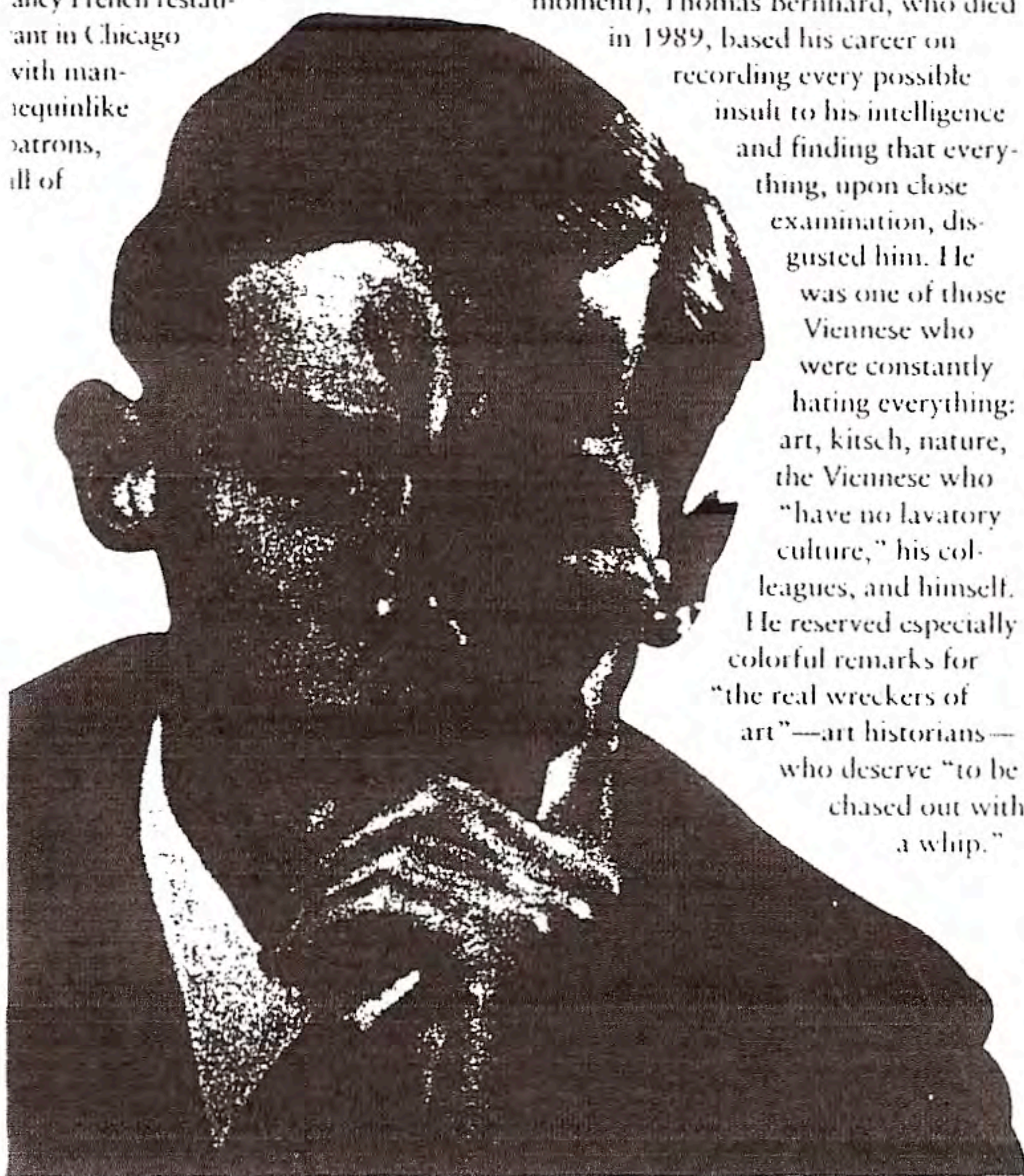
whom looked upscale yet very normal. Both images offered the voyeur attractive poses to identify with—one the pale romantic, two the sporty wast. It has been customary since the 19th century for image-makers to reflect back their bourgeois or bohemian audiences from the place from which they appear likable to themselves; god help the artist who refuses to mirror his consumers back to themselves in idealized form.

While one too many a puff piece on a "down-to-earth" celebrity or pure-hearted artist can throw one into the hands of the devil (at least for a moment), Thomas Bernhard, who died

in 1989, based his career on recording every possible insult to his intelligence and finding that everything, upon close examination, disgusted him. He was one of those Viennese who were constantly hating everything: art, kitsch, nature, the Viennese who "have no lavatory culture," his colleagues, and himself. He reserved especially colorful remarks for "the real wreckers of art"—art historians—who deserve "to be chased out with a whip."



Above: Cary S. Leibowitz/Candyass, *Fair, Unfair*, 1991, latex on wood, 20 x 18"
Left: Glenn Gould. Photo: Bettmann



Heidegger himself appears, unattractively, "pulling on his socks." Especially apt at capturing esthetic urges as they curdle into careerism, jealousy, sterility, and consciousness (where most people prefer to forget these Kodak-unworthy moments—and years), Bernhard has preserved them in his books. Despite his frequent tirades against the Austrian people, when you read him it's hard to remember he's talking about horrible

people in Vienna and not people you know in NYC today.

Woodcutters: a novel, 1984, is a charming account of an "artistic dinner," populated with people mid- to late-career who are past their period of productivity and may or may not know it yet, and of how they prey upon others. The host couple are in fact the real parasites of the evening, a culturally anxious heiress and her husband, a

once promising composer "in the tradition of Webern" who has developed over the years into an alcoholic who scares people at parties, and inflicts atonal entertainments upon them when they would like to go home. The narrator contemplates his long personal history with the guests, all of whom have prostituted themselves in various ways in the name of Art, and who repel him.

The Bernhard world is structured like a Möbius strip on which culture vultures flip into philistines, and vice versa; one relishes every sordid turn with discreet grunts of pleasure, and leaves the book strangely expunged of ego shit one didn't even realize one was busy repressing. His work bears testimony to the fact that prolonged exposure to Beauty does not necessarily do any Good. I was bemused to hear that Susan Sontag has recently conducted a Bernhard reading at a tony Manhattan bookstore.

In *Old Masters: a comedy*, 1985, he provides a portrait of a professional art-consumer, an excruciatingly cultivated geriatric music critic. He goes in for a book-length close-up, observing the geezer as he observes another geezer (this one by Tintoretto, the *White-Bearded Man*), a habit he has committed every other day for 30 years at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. We get into his head for an unsightly portrait of an "old master" internally corroded by his lifelong dependence upon "old masters," "to be saved anew by music every day, from all the atrocities and hideousness," which indeed are plentiful.

Confronted with a staggering masterpiece that taunts us with our limitations, we must bring it down to our level, consume it—do something to it or with it—or be destroyed. The act of caricaturing the masters and having one's way with them emerged, in fact, as the strongest esthetic act left to us in our belated cultural condition. We're moved and horrified at the lengths to which the sick ego must go in order to withstand too much perfection, knowing, in fact, that it must give in to its smallness to survive. While his narra-

tors are distinctly unlikable, they are adequate expressions of egos inadequate to the task of getting over themselves. By relentlessly inhabiting these flawed points of view and refusing to step back from them, Bernhard has produced, in my opinion, distinctly human expression.

"When we observe a picture for any length of time, even the most serious picture, we have to turn it into a caricature in order to bear it. . . . Even the *obese smelly* Bach at the organ of Saint Thomas's Church was only a ridiculous and deeply embarrassing figure, there can be no argument about that."

I first discovered Bernhard when I was drawn to his novel entitled *The Loser*, 1983. It's about three piano virtuosi, all gifted, who go to Salzburg to study with Vladimir Horowitz. One of them is the genius Glenn Gould; when the other two hear him play the *Goldberg Variations*, they decide never to play the instrument again, "because they will never be as perfect." The book is about the rest of their lives, which are sordid: one of them is the "loser," who devotes himself to the "human sciences, without knowing what they are," and alarms the other two by accumulating millions of disorganized notes, which he never turns into anything. The other one is the narrator, "the philosopher."

As witness to the genius, they are traumatized; nothing happened but their consciousness that Gould is a genius. The consciousness is the trauma; and Bernhard's books are like objectified traumas, trauma objects, receptacles for the horrid experience of those who must suffer (or survive) the genius of others. Gould is the catastrophe (from their point of view), and they are his survivors. Only a depraved ego could have permitted himself to undergo the feelings necessary to produce such a sacred horror of a book.

I devoured it, of course, to recognize what I have been doing wrong—to possibly avoid future disasters, as if one could. The loser had "an artistic attitude," the genius "didn't need one." The loser "detested artists . . .

who destroyed their personalities to be geniuses," the genius wants "to wake up one day and be Steinway and Glenn in one . . . Glenn Steinway, Steinway Glenn, all for Bach." The loser blames everyone else for his catastrophe: "I told Glenn that he had destroyed Wertheimer [the loser]," said the narrator, "but Glenn had no idea what I meant." The loser "would have liked to be Glenn Gould, would have liked to be Horowitz . . . wasn't capable of seeing *himself as a unique and autonomous being*, as people can and must if they don't want to despair; no matter what kind of person, one is always a unique and autonomous being, I say to myself over and over and am rescued."

The loser is more interesting to read about, though ultimately, like Gould, he winds up erasing himself from his "work," changing and deleting his hellishly overinvested manuscript, his life's alibi, until finally "nothing remained except the title *The Loser*." The narrator, too, renounces his musical ambition, and retreats to "occupy himself with a writer's inanities," to witness this pathological display. To be destroyed rather than enriched by the achievements of others is a little bit of hell more frequent in the art world than people care to admit. The book is about being friends with a genius artist, and how horrible it is, especially for the merely talented. It's esthetic porn for overachievers, capturing the foul juices in which the ego simmers, unable to give itself over to a wholly hygienic admiration of the more gifted friend, or to the Universal. A persistent theme in Bernhard is art appreciation in its grotesque aspect, how it festers in "creative" milieux swarming with ex-aspiring artists, whose once esthetic strivings are now long buried, inhibited in their aim, deflected onto people, fashion, pol-



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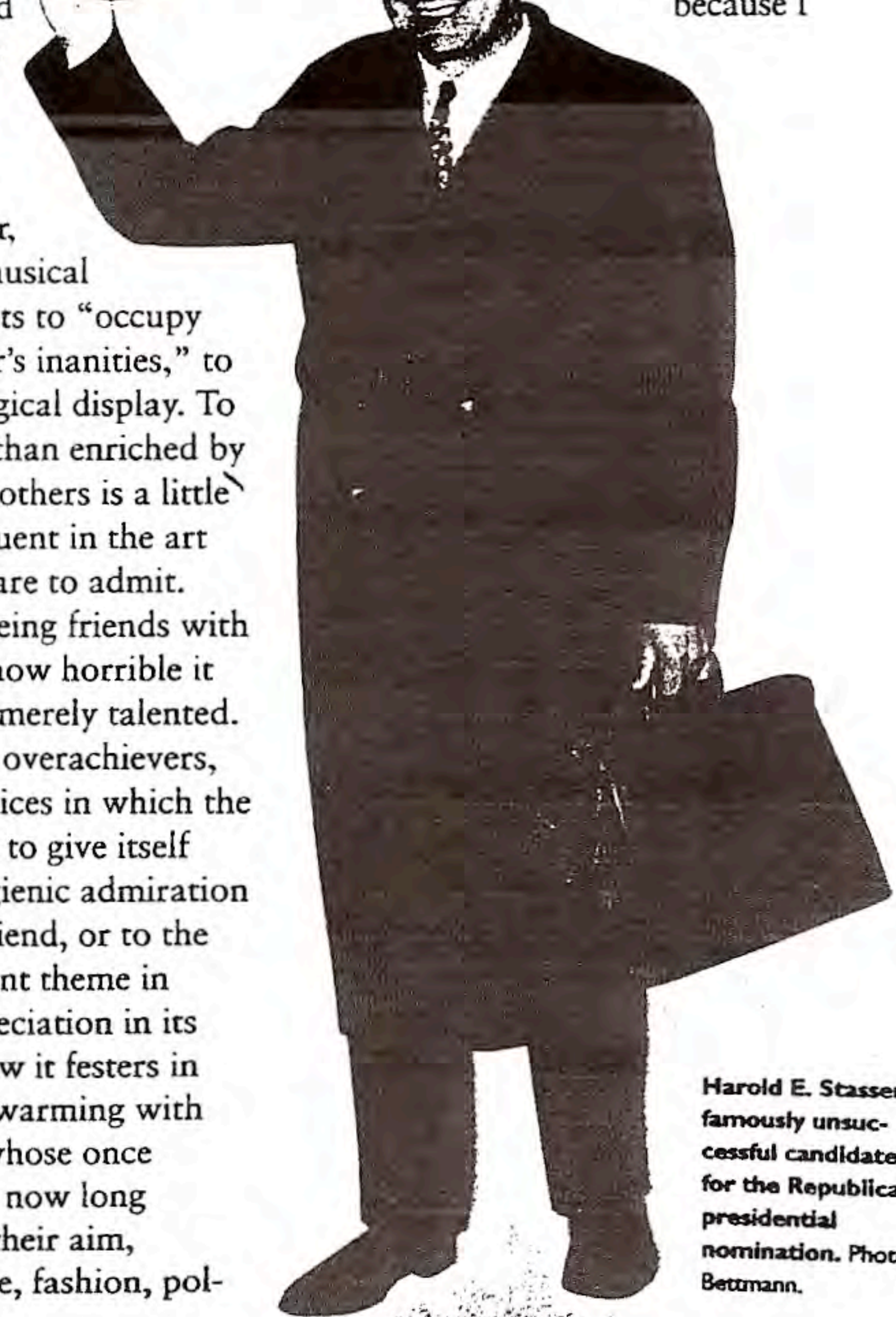
itics, and other people's work.
 Ironically, the "worklessness" of
 these people is mirrored back by the
 real "work" (as articulated by
 Maurice Blanchot), the "workless
 work" that stands not for the gods,
 nor for their absence, but, rather, for
 the absence of their absence—the
 congenitally belated object that can
 only bear witness to its own absurd
 urgency. . . and mock it.

*The only thing more superficial than
 me is my work.*

—Cary S. Leibowitz/Candyass

When I met Cary, he was installed
 in the gallery personally handing out
 cookies to his spectators from a toast-
 er oven. He gave me his card— "Here
 I am, please don't be mean"—and I
 was both liberated and devastated.

Liberated because I couldn't believe
 someone was getting
 away with what he
 was doing in a
 gallery context;
 devastated
 because I



Harold E. Stassen,
 famously unsuc-
 cessful candidate
 for the Republican
 presidential
 nomination. Photo:
 Bettmann.

felt, by the very coherence of his loser
 vision, that he had somehow anticipa-
 torily plagiarized all of my subsequent
 wretchedness as part of *his* material.
 Since he's a good friend, I feel doomed
 for life. While the Gould-genius was
 characterized by his paradoxically
 titanic egolessness, Cary has turned his
 whining, his self-consciousness, his
 willingness to admit he wants to be
 fashionable, into *his* form of discipline.
 By combining both genius and loser in
 one, I feel like he has squeezed me out
 into this nonspace, as his witness, like
 a kind of double loser. Maybe that's
 why he has a weight problem! Cary's
 achievement of masterful misery chal-
 lenges the concept of Loserliness itself,
 introducing the distinction, in fact,
 between strong and weak losers, strong
 losers being the ones who can work
 their misery, affirmatively becoming—
 losers; weak ones those who haven't
 yet figured out how to occupy *them-*
selves, to tap the Giant Loser within
 for Personal Power. Admiring his sure
 loserly instincts, I find myself reading
 all of his traits, even his hatred of
 houseplants, as potential components
 to the integral genius of his vision.
 I realize that this is sick.

I don't like things that suck.

—Beavis and Butt-head

One is shocked to discover that
 Bernhard won "many of the most
 prestigious literary prizes of Europe"
 when he thoroughly skewered preten-
 tious windbags, institutional prosti-
 tutes, puffed-up cultural pimps, and
 scary people who traded in their early
 promise for marriages to money, posi-
 tions, or, in the case of the women,
 garden-variety ingrates. One has to
 presume that the very people who gave
 Bernhard these prestigious awards
 were the soul-destroyers and murder-
 ers he was talking about, produced
 and circulated by the very "*hospices*
for terminal dilettantes" that sickened
 him. Ever biting the hand that fed him,
 in the end Bernhard won, as usual, by
 never underestimating human vanity.
 One has to presume they thought that
 he was talking about *someone else*. □

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 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.