

"Under the skin the body is an over-heated factory"

—Antonin Artaud¹



Nancy Grossman:
Opus Volcanus

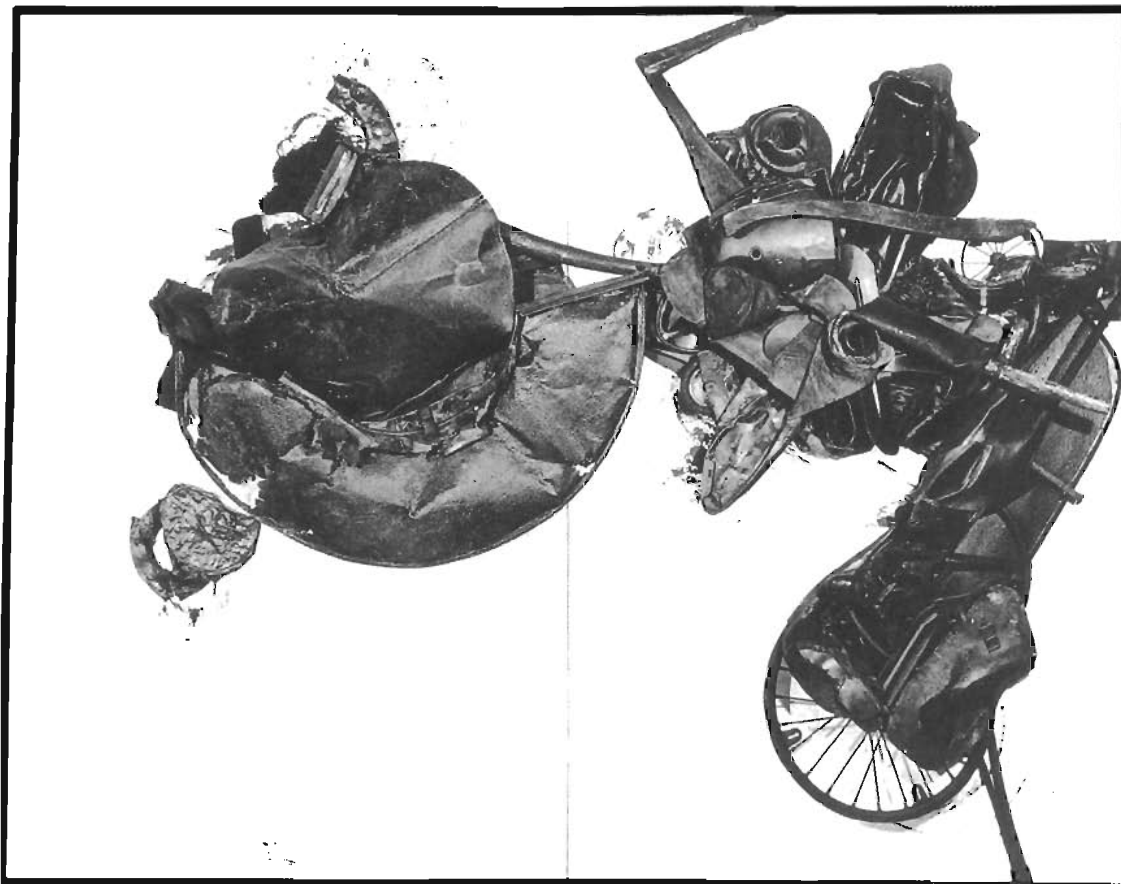
by
Robert C. Morgan

The challenge in coming to terms with the art of Nancy Grossman is an internal one. To see one of her ferocious life-size heads, bound in black leather, zippered-up, with protruding features and gnarled teeth, all exquisitely carved and crafted, or to see one of her recent “black lavascapes” made of twisted leather with slices of cut rubber and metallic parts, is to feel an inner sense of being that goes far beyond the mundane world of external events. Grossman is engaged in the pursuit of her own inner-directed motif, her own concept of the human condition that pulls us back to the sobriety of another emotional reality.

The label that is often attached to her work is “expressionism.”² But what does this mean in the case of Grossman? Is her work merely an expression of something unknown to the world of rational ideas? Is it trying to communicate an inner drive, a passion, that exceeds how we basically feel towards one another? One cannot deny these issues as possessing a certain content that impacts our attention. There is an undeniable obsession that resides within her work—an obsessiveness that is at the core of much of the great art of the past, from Caravaggio to Goya to Kahlo. As Grossman explains: “You have to be obsessed enough with what you are obsessed with.”³

Yet there is another side to her work, an obverse tendency that is more pragmatic. Grossman’s attitude toward sculpture is directed toward the process—the process of how she works and how she thinks in relation to her materials. It is not based on a desire to mystify the viewer, to instill fear or insult, or to give some hopeless, disparaging view of the future of humankind. In fact, her intentions are quite the opposite. She is unassuming both in her work and in her desire to make art. Grossman has never been a careerist in the trendy, market-driven sense of the word. Whether working in collage, relief, assemblage, or mixed-media sculpture, she has made it clear

Left, above: *Opus Volcanus*, 1994. Leather, wood, metal, rubber, acrylic, 50 x 80.125 in. Photo: Larry Lamay. Opposite, below: *B.S.T.*, 1969. Carved wood, leather, and grommets, 16 in. high.



Left: *Warmongerick*, 1965. Mixed media, 73.5 x 97.5 in.

who was considered eccentric by some of his New York artist colleagues, impressed upon his students the importance of drawing. Through Lindner, Grossman came to believe in her extraordinary capability as a draftswoman. Despite the disturbing content of many of her works, both in two and three dimensions, most critics still cannot argue with the formal quality of her line.

that her work is always about a process. She herself has said, "The materiality of the end result is worth the process." She understands the necessity of "plodding along," as she puts it, in order to make her materials function more physically in their goal towards visual representation.

Despite her high regard for technique and process, Grossman does not deny the psychological, physical, and existential realities that may emanate from her work. In her typically provocative way, Grossman states: "The longer you live, the more the earth gets you. You fall under the spell of gravity." This comment is not only related to her recent collage works, such as the "Volcano Series" (1993), or her sculptural reliefs, such as *Opus Volcanus* (1994), but also to her perception of her own physicality and the limitations she has recently learned to accept.

At the end of 1995, a serious physical impairment inflicted her left hand and crippled her ability to work for over a year. Grossman discovered that the cartilage of her first metacarpal bone was completely worn away. This traumatized her hand movements to

the extent that she virtually lost control of the reflexes she needed to perform the detailed functions required by her work. After years of repetitive and highly concentrated movement related to precision carving, Grossman was forced to take a hiatus from her activity and have her hand surgically rebuilt. After several operations, she has gradually regained movement, but not with the same facility to which she had been accustomed. This accounts for Grossman's inability to carve wood in recent years and her turning instead to making works more related to collage and assemblage. Ironically, this is where her career began in the early '60s—a time when the Neo-Dada spirit of assemblage and Happenings occupied much of the attention of the art world.

One might argue that Grossman is a kind of pictorialist who eventually made her way into sculpture. She had studied with the German émigré artist Richard Lindner at Pratt Institute in the late-'50s. It was here that she grew to understand the importance of figuration in her art and also to come to terms with her need to develop a personal vocabulary of forms.⁴ Lindner,

a drawing such as *Five Figures* (1984) makes the bold and remarkable character of the artist's ability abundantly evident. In this large-scale work, made entirely with charcoal and graphite, Grossman delivers a feminist-inspired allegory of betrayal and guilt. The force of her line, the accuracy of her figurative renderings, and the placement of the light and dark shapes within the compositional space represent a disturbing personal confession, the content of which is conceivably related to her upbringing as one of several children living on a farm in a rural upstate New York community during the late-'40s.⁵

Grossman continued to believe in herself. She recognized at the outset that any artist who has sustaining value must develop a personal language of form, one that can be applied with a diversity of syntax within a chosen field of investigation. Also, under Lindner she came to know the importance of the line not only as a drawing instrument but also as the foundation of formal composition. She was fortunate to discover in Lindner an artist "dedicated to his own integrity."

This integrity became a basic component in her search for her own artistry; it was a lesson that Grossman never forgot.

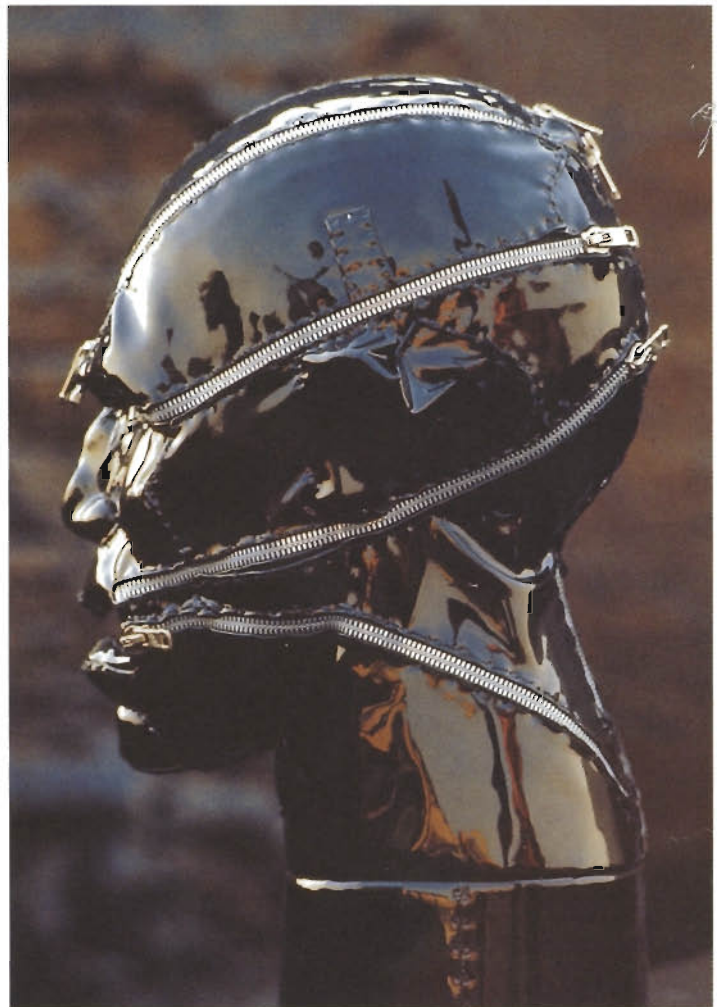
One might say that integrity has been the cornerstone in Grossman's career as she has moved from painting to collage, between assemblage and relief sculpture, and finally, by 1968, to the heads. Her first important exhibition was at the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in 1969 and consisted mainly of the rancorous-looking carved heads wrapped in black leather. Although the gallery was diffident about handling the work at the beginning—perhaps because it was transported to the owner in two large shopping bags—he eventually agreed to show it. There is little doubt that Ekstrom had some difficulties with the straightforward content in Grossman's work.⁶ Reportedly, he was visibly shaking as he looked through the drawings. Yet, in spite of his initial hesitancy, the artist's association with the gallery continued for 12 years and came to be one of the most productive periods in Grossman's career.

It is curious that by far the greater portion of the artist's subjects has been male. The heads and drawings of bound male figures take on a mythological significance, a ritualized aspect, as if they emerged from some dark night of the soul into the presence of stark daylight. In a recent essay on beauty, the artist Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe cites the German philosopher Winckelmann as proposing that the ideal male should be represented as possessing some traces of the feminine.⁷ If these qualities are not present, the representation of the male lends itself to "an aggressive display of brute physical violence" and thus appears "ludicrous and repulsive." With some exceptions, it is curious to note how many of Grossman's collage paintings of male figures appear feminine in their grace and vulnerability, yet how the more visible leather-strapped heads, such as *T.Y.V.L.* (1970) have just the opposite effect.⁸ By appearing removed from their femininity, these severed heads assert an inner violence and a hell-bent absurdity as they confront the world in their aggressive masquerade.

Grossman's vision is not far from that of the French Surrealist poet and

Right: *T.Y.V.L.*, 1970. Patent leather over wood, 15 in. high.

playwright Antonin Artaud. Grossman shares with Artaud the knowledge of an inarticulate space between the masculine and the feminine, between the rational mind that represses desire and the desire of the body to release itself to the forces of an unmediated experience.⁹ When Grossman's heads appear in the light of day, constrained by darkness and bondage, one is compelled to reflect on the profound split between mind and body. Who are these creatures? From what world did they emerge? What is the nature of our civilized environment that imposes a hiatus between the rational and irrational expressions of the human mind? Where is the closure between them? The heads suggest a kind of schizophrenic condition, a division between two states of being, but they rarely give us a simplistic cause-and-effect relationship. The conflict is both greater and more subtle than their



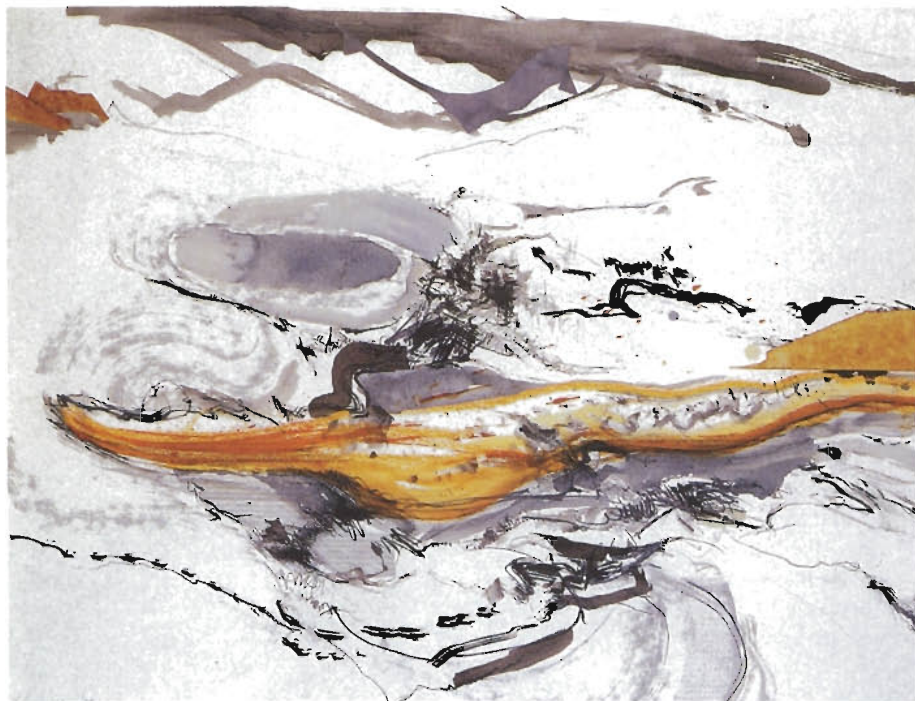
limited creatures wandering in the purgatorial chasm between torment and lucidity.

A few months before her disability, Grossman completed a large scale, three color etching, titled *Apollo the Healer* (1995). This was a time-consuming work not only because of its scale, measuring three by five feet, but because of the amount of crucial dexterity needed in order to gain the

The severed heads confront the world in an aggressive masquerade.

accountability through language. They imply the lost need, at least on a conscious level, for ritual in our society, in our brave new (digital) world. It is as if our culture had gone too far in the direction of the rational, to the zero degree of overdetermination and had left the human race as a species of sub-

effects that she wanted to achieve. This male image offers a spiritual insight more related to illumination than to darkness; it carries the feminine as well as the masculine. Based on an early collage painting (1976), titled *Cloud Figure Seated*, the etched version carries an even greater visual and emotional



Left: *Self-contained Lavascap*, 1993. Collage, 38 x 50 in.
 Below: *Black Lavascap*, 1994–95. Leather, wood, metal, rubber, bristle, and acrylic, 36 x 48 x 8 in.



grandeur. This is due to the method of burnishing used in order to accentuate the blue textural nuances within the head and torso of this imposing mythological diety.

Another side of Grossman's art—the side that is rarely discussed—is the sculptural reliefs made of mixed-media materials in the mid-'60s. In the catalogue essay for the artist's three-part retrospective in 1991, art historian Arlene Raven discusses Grossman's work as "employing leather interchangeably with metal and wood...spirited by quick, graceful movements among their internal forms."¹⁰ This is reminiscent of a statement made by Marcel Duchamp in describing his Cubo-Futurist style of painting, *Nude Descending A Staircase* (1913),¹¹ composed of "mechanical parts and visceral organs." The allusion to Duchamp is not entirely inappropri-

But what was the context exactly? One might state it as follows: a hybrid between Neo-Dada, of course, influenced by Duchamp during the late-'50s and early-'60s, and the mythological figurations of Smith. The Bontecou reference is the most elusive, however, and in some ways the most interesting. Bontecou had a certain presence in the New York art scene of this period and was championed by critic Donald Judd. She had a certain mysterious aspect to her work not far removed from that of Grossman. It was a dark, torrential side, a disturbing aspect, yet one that was always contained and formalized within the context of its self-generating mystery. It is Bontecou's sculpture, which employed canvas and metal parts, that connects most accurately with the gestural reliefs on canvas made by Grossman in 1965. Yet

collage-drawings that were influenced by a trip to Hawaii. What struck Grossman about the volcanic sites in Hawaii was the sheer physicality and unbridled force that was beyond rational comprehension. It was the experience of confronting these sites that moved the artist to try and deal with opposing forces in her recent work. One can see a direct linkage between one of the later sculptural reliefs, using these same materials, entitled *Ali-Stoker* (1967) and the more recent *Black Lavascap* (1994–95). The folds and turns and placements and juxtapositions of the winding, bending shapes and lines have a certain elastic resonance, a quick pulsation, as though they were under the command of some extraterrestrial biological time, moving through space of their own accord. Yet there is a sense of a disturbing absence of closure seething with opaque mysteries, comparable to filmmaker Ridley Scott's *Alien*.¹³ One never knows for certain whether the beast is dormant or deposited. Looking at Grossman's *Opus Volcanus* is like staring into the pit of lava, the larynx of the earth's encrustation where perception can no longer detect its limits.

The forces at work (and play) in

Grossman is on the side of creation. She faces the human reality of today.

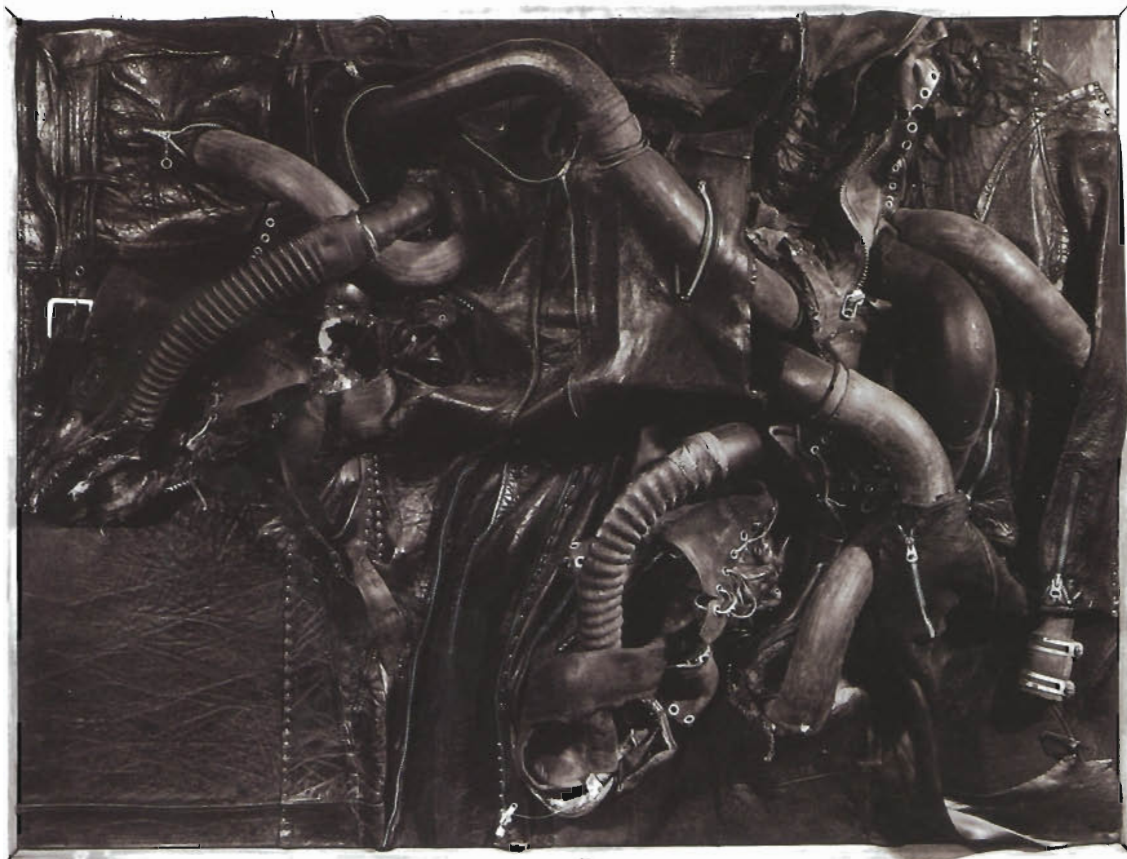
ate to Grossman's work at the time. Neither are comparisons to the mixed-media reliefs of Lee Bontecou or the welded sculpture of David Smith, an artist whom Grossman knew personally.¹² Although rarely mentioned, the work of sculptor Robert Mallary should also be noted in this context.

there is also a connection with the more recent sculptural reliefs, completed by Grossman 30 years later in 1994 and 1995, such as *Black Lavascap* (1994–95) and *Opus Volcanus* (1994).

Both of these reliefs—employing black leather, rubber, metal parts, wood, and acrylic—are extensions of the 1993

Right: *Ali-Stoker*, 1967. Leather, rubber, wood, grommets, and zippers, 37.5 x 49.5 in.

Grossman's *Opus Volcanus* are comparable, on the structural level, to her 1984 drawing of *Five Figures*. What is important here is not the surface representation so much as the strident elements opposing one another in the dark penumbra between virtual and fictive space. There is a formal tactic in operation here but there is also the fear and trepidation



of the viewing subject being caught up in this drama of emotion, of being carried away by the nearly hallucinogenic atmosphere, the hysteria of the earth's crust, spewing forth its defiance, its hidden, unspeakable detritus, bellowing forth the industrial (and postindustrial) waste of the last 100 years. What is remarkable about Grossman's achievement is how the structure of these forms is so ineluctably consistent that the contrasting elements seem to coalesce and discover their own consummation.

Like any significant art of this century, Grossman's work deals with abstract forces that have become formalized as properties within a given perceivable space, an environment that has been transposed and possessed with the process of its own making. In *Opus Volcanus*, there is the trace of the human hand, yet there is the assertive form of the triptych. There is also an absence, a deep longing, perhaps, the longing for hope and a better world amid the chaos and trepidations of the present. Was it Erich Fromm who once described the human imagination as a volcano with the potential to both create and destroy?¹⁴

Grossman is on the side of creation. She maintains an indefatigable courage to face the human reality of the present. Her art is an art that captures the conflict of transition, or being within the moment of a heightened transition, between the old and the new world, where the analogs are slowly being replaced by rapid systems of information transport. And within all of this invisibility, Grossman's figures and industrial entrails come together as a sign of how we must restore our sensibility to the tactile experience of being aware in a world that is changing before our eyes.

Robert C. Morgan is an art critic, artist, poet, curator, and art historian. He is professor of the history and theory of art at the Rochester Institute of Technology and adjunct professor of art at Pratt Institute. His recent books include Between Modernism and Conceptual Art (McFarland, 1997).

Notes

- ¹ Antonin Artaud, "Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society" (trans. Mary Beach and Lawrence Ferlinghetti) in *Artaud Anthology* (Second Edition), edited by Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights, 1965), 158.
- ² I refer to an exhibition and curatorial essay by Townsend Wolfe, titled "Powerful Expressions," in which Nancy Grossman was prominently

included, at the National Academy of Design in New York, 1996-97.

³ This and other quotations in this essay, attributed to Nancy Grossman, were taken from a telephone interview with the artist, February 18, 1998.

⁴ Hillwood Art Museum, C.W. Post Campus, Long Island University, Brookville, New York. Nancy Grossman catalogue text by Arlene Raven. Exhibition curated by Judy Colischan. (September 27-November 10, 1991), 78.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38. When the family moved from New York City to Oneonta in 1945, two of her mother's sisters followed along with their respective families. Nancy grew up with eight adults and as one of sixteen children. Grossman's father was a devout Jew, while her mother enforced Roman Catholicism on the children, thus creating a conflict.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolle, "Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime" in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro. (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), 40.

⁸ There is an earlier sculptural figure of a male torso, also wrapped in leather, that is the single exception to the rule. On the other hand, many of the male figures in the drawings could be interpreted as equivocating between sexual identities.

⁹ In "Fragments of a Journal in Hell," Artaud states: "I hunger less for food than some kind of elementary consciousness." Artaud, *op. cit.*, 40.

¹⁰ Raven, *op. cit.*, 98.

¹¹ Interview from the film, *Marcel Duchamp: In His Own Words*, edited and produced by Lewis Jacobs, 1976.

¹² Raven, *op. cit.*, 102.

¹³ The affinity between Grossman's heads and science fiction film would be a fascinating topic to pursue, especially in light of the current academic rage for "visual culture." In addition to Ridley Scott's *Alien* (the original version), I would suggest that the character Darth Vader in the George Lucas *Star Wars* trilogy has an affinity with Grossman's work. On the other hand, Grossman might have to share the source of the Vader image with the face on Boccioni's *Continuity of Forms in Motion* (1912), otherwise known as the "Walking Man," in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹⁴ I recall this statement by Fromm as cited in a book by New Zealand educator Silvia Ashton-Warner, *Teacher*, published in 1965. In the book, she discusses her rationale in teaching unacculturated Maori children.