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## Liz Magor in discussion with Ian Carr-Harris

Carr-Harris, Ian

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# LIZ MAGOR

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In  
Discussion  
With  
Ian Carr-Harris

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B.C. logging site, circa 1910. Artist's archive.

Liz Magor in discussion with Ian Carr-Harris. June, 1986.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Let's start with an obvious question, Liz. How do you see your position as an artist?

**MAGOR:** Good question. In fact, trick question — because sometimes I can hardly stand being an artist. Artists are so guilty, and they can be paralyzed or repressed by that guilt. Basically, I'm just trying to find a way to work in good faith — to get past the guilt. I would like to be able to work without being ashamed, but also without removing myself from the system by standing outside as a critic. A critic can too easily stand outside and analyze a situation without discussing their own complicity, or without implicating themselves; and I don't want to be in that position. I don't think it's an active position. It's an analytical position as opposed to a practicing position, and ultimately I think that it turns into a formal activity.

**CARR-HARRIS:** You're saying that the position of being a critic is 'merely' formal?

**MAGOR:** I'm saying that all the mucky things that you're involved in when you're making work can't be considered when you're taking that sort of metacritical overview. I actually think artists are best prepared to work in a discursive manner rather than a metacritical one. For myself, I feel best prepared to work somewhere in between a purely sensible response and a critical one. Where it actually becomes an analysis of my own sensibility rather than an analysis of a large organism like a society. I don't see how I can assume I'm prepared to critique capitalism, or assume I'm prepared to critique things that I'm implicated in as though I were in the position of one outside them. I'm more prepared to analyze my own situation within that large organism, and working from that specific point of view maybe — through induction — maybe some general statements could be made.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I see. Criticism is merely formal to the degree that it is not self critical. I agree. It's difficult to know what people

mean unless we know what their condition is.

**MAGOR:** I must say I seem to be becoming more interested in the word 'esthetics' and less comfortable with the word 'meaning'. That makes me a little concerned that I may have given up certain objectives. I would prefer to believe that I'm looking for another route. Maybe, as much as anything, I'm reacting to a very prescriptive or moralistic tone that I find in some criticism of artists. I'm referring to criticism of individual artists. In fact, Ian, I suppose I hold you responsible for this to some degree because you've written a great deal in the last few years. Very often I've agreed with your assessment of a general art approach towards a specific issue. I'm interested in the way you deal with the corruptions of that relationship. But I find it much harder to take when you talk about an individual artist. It's as though they embody those corruptions. I feel you're scapegoating them. Robert Bowers and Noel Harding, for instance. I don't see how you can re-order society by holding individual artists responsible for its ills. Don't you think this is what you've done in some of your writing?

**CARR-HARRIS:** Made artists into scapegoats? I suppose it depends somewhat on what we understand by the term. No, I wouldn't say I've held them responsible for society, in the oversimplification that scapegoating usually implies. And also, let's be clear that it is the work as it stands which is always at issue, not the artist. But I would say I've held them responsible within society. As I hold myself as well. The question of using prescriptive or moral terms is — I would agree — complicated. I would have to be honest, Liz, and say that I have some of the same doubts about their use. Over the larger part of my working practice as an artist I have tended to see the raising of questions as being the way in which moral issues should be addressed. But the constant asking of questions, whether literally or by implication, gets in itself to be boring. Both for me and for others. If you're going to ask questions, then you should also perhaps ask them a bit harder at

certain points, not simply leave them open-ended. I guess I saw the writing of criticism as being a way in which I could maybe make the questions harder than I found was permissible, say two or three years ago. In both Robert's case and in Noel's case I have liked some of their work. But in both cases, in addressing those works, I felt that they didn't really ask questions, or they didn't ask hard questions. To use your term, I felt they were, as a result, highly formalized. Also I suppose you could argue — let me try this — that if you don't address an issue on a specific level it has the real danger of remaining simply an abstraction. I don't disagree with your criticism on a human level. In fact, I'm not at all sure I want to continue writing in the way that I have. But I don't see how you can really address complex concerns if you don't address them on a specific level; and at some point or another it's going to be somewhat messy.

**MAGOR:** Except that what you do is to become part of a contradiction. That would be that the contemporary artist is told that they can't be the avant-garde; that they're constrained and contained within the codes of the system in which they find themselves; they can't transcend that. Then they're attacked for not being exemplary, for not being effectively progressive. If the charge is that they're not sufficiently progressive, or that they're in some way wallowing in nostalgia or whimsy or whatever, then I have to use the terms of the critic — which has something to do with asking 'how effective is your practice?' And I would have to ask the same thing of the critique: 'how effective is the critique in changing things?'. I don't always like to measure things in terms of efficiency or that kind of effectiveness, because it presumes a solution, or it presumes a certain practice. In the kinds of things we're talking about, the only way — I think — that you can presume a correct solution is through a sort of tautology: that you say 'according to the logic of my experience, or according to my reasoning based on this, this would be the logical conclusion; and since you are part of this system that we're calling a problem, a system that is illogical or unreasonable, I don't see

how you can from there come to project a logical, reasonable way to practice.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I think you've sketched out the specific nature of the condition of being critical. To remain tenable, I guess, it seems to me that we must bear in mind that a position is always specific, must be seeable as specific. Whether you are an artist, or a critic. So the conditions that obtain for both are questions of specific location and...

**MAGOR:** Except for this. If you're using a critique based on certain criteria, and you can't flex that to consider the criteria that the artist has assumed, then it seems to me that it's an inflexible — or authoritarian — critique that becomes a corrective rather than an analytical critique. The question turns back on you. If you say, for example, Noel Harding seems unwilling to communicate, or he is unable to communicate using these means, then I would have to ask for a measurement, like a poll or scale of effective communication, both for your work and for his work; because the claim is implicit that your work communicates better, or that there is work that will communicate more clearly. At the same time, there is an assumption that to communicate clearly in artworks is a moral imperative. In your criticism of Robert Bowers, for example, you make a connection between existential transcendentalism and the Cold War. Since you had already connected Robert to transcendental existentialism there is an implied connection of Robert to situations like the Cold War. I think this is unsupportable. I will agree that everything we do, as artists or otherwise, expresses a value system — and that these value systems are not relative, that they should be viewed critically. But I won't agree that everything is of the same ethical importance. Otherwise I would be saying that to squish a bug is the same as to squish a baby or something, and I won't say that.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I doubt if I would either, Liz! But that doesn't mean that there may not be problems or issues connecting the squishing of bugs and babies.

**MAGOR:** I don't think artists are irresponsible if they say: 'ethically speaking, on a hierarchical scale, my treatment of material through my art is less important than my treatment of people through my actions'. You see, I worry about the confusion between taking a radical or overt stance in artwork, while neglecting to do so as a citizen. To address various concerns or issues in one's work is not the same as taking care of these politically. It does show that you have concern; but it's a far thing from being active, or being an activist, in terms of effecting real change. I think of real change as being very material and concrete, not philosophical.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Material conditions, yes. But for myself, I don't separate out the consciousness or the reactions and the ideologies that are constructed out of material conditions to the degree that you seem to. I would see the situation as being more dialectical. The danger of ideology is that it can suffocate progression beyond the necessity of the material

conditions themselves. So there is a purely ideological situation constructed, and the value of working philosophically, or of placing work in galleries or wherever to critique certain issues lies in the need to deal with that aspect of the dialectic. It's true that they aren't going to change material conditions as such; they aren't meant to. They mean to deal with ideology on its own ground. But I think this takes us back to something you said at the beginning; something about your own position in trying to find a middle ground between being 'sensible' and being 'critical'. Because I would see that, quite apart from possible disagreements over tactics, to be nevertheless an attempt to deal with ideology critically.

**MAGOR:** Perhaps. What I'm saying isn't that I think work shouldn't be critical, or that it shouldn't operate that way. I'm talking about the *position* one takes critically, not about being critical in itself. Simply put, it's whether to include myself as part of the subject of the critique. If I do that — it seems to me — I'm necessarily going to make subjective work that may be ambiguous or less clear in its point of view than work which critiques a structure which is taken to be outside myself. It gets a bit messy when you are both the critic and the critical subject.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Tell me about it! But how do you see what can take place? Because in this situation it would seem that there is an oppositional structure which has to be dealt with on another level; and part of that opposition would appear to be the difference between a formal concern and a concern of subject.

**MAGOR:** Well, I think — in the first place — that when you talk about these things, you're talking as though we all pose these questions as philosophers would, which is to write them as a thesis or treatise. But the other thing that artists are doing is to organize material to form images that pose these questions. So the questions themselves are necessarily going to be different than philosophical questions because of this material form that they take. I'm not willing to banish formal concerns for concerns of issues or subjects; I would be denying myself a significant engagement with the material world. Sometimes it's hard to remember that when you're reading criticism in magazines. But remembering that the dialectic is between my mind and the material, certain things arise from this which are discursive; the discourse is between me and the things I do to material. Then there is the audience and what they do when they see this material. This material mediation wouldn't happen if I just spoke to the people across the street, or wrote articles, or became a philosopher. Since a substantial part of our lives is concerned with material, outside of art I mean, it seems like a significant thing to deal with *within* art.

**CARR-HARRIS:** There seem to be significant differences between your work now and your work when you were on the West Coast, say five or six years ago. And I would see some of those differences as entailing the question of being critical. But in any case, would you see significant differences?

**MAGOR:** I found the concerns here to be completely different from B.C., or Vancouver to be precise. It's hard for me to know if this is a regional or local thing, or if it just coincides with my own development; or if moving exposed me to different things. It's hard to say. But I could say that there is a concern here that you can see voiced in a number of forums through people's work or through people's writing — not just in Toronto, but in other places as well — that is assuming very strict corrective measure — to correct what we've inherited. Certain things are being stressed without consideration of the consequences. They're being stressed, I think, because — as I said — we're guilty; we're guilty of a bad history. At first you welcome this because you think 'it's an alternative to something that I was not comfortable with'; and then the consequences begin to unfold; and the consequences are an adherence to or discussion of correct politics; which to me is the same thing as saying correct sexuality: it just doesn't exist.

**CARR-HARRIS:** The correction is worse than the error?

**MAGOR:** I think so. What if the consequence is a rejection of art altogether by young bright people? I'm thinking of students now; I know that many are dismayed by the narrowness of the path ahead of them. On the one side they are reluctant to address complex issues that would seem to require a different education than most art departments provide; and on the other side they are bored by the idea of simple material engagement. No student likes to think they aren't 'progressive' or 'advanced', in spite of the fact that there is precious little in terms of what defines 'advanced' contemporary art in the first place. I think it is completely inappropriate to respond to a student's queries about her sculpture by handing her a treatise by Hegel. All that does is teach her that authority is outside herself.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Since Hegel is almost impossible to read, I'd be interested in what kind of authority that would present! However, it seems to me that the problem of being 'bored', as you say, by the idea of simple material engagement is important, and lies in an implicit understanding that the material conditions of the world are not in fact material at all. They're constructed out of our response to those conditions. When we are sensible of something in the world, it's not really the material we are sensible about, it's the historical placement, or historical production, surrounding that material that is at issue. So the question of critique enters effortlessly and logically from the very start. It enters at the moment one becomes sensible; and perhaps the problems raised by pre-scriptiveness — problems, as I say, that I agree exist — arise not from the fact that criticism doesn't exist from the start, but that criticism — to be criticism — must always be a *number of specific notions* about what is right, or what is justice, or what is appropriate; and any *contained* prescription about those notions is consequently inadequate. Criticism proceeds only out of the discourse

of criticism, and not out of an agreement on criticism.

**MAGOR:** So what you're saying, Ian, is that an ideology isn't criticism.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Yes.

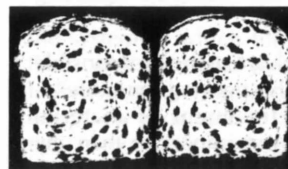
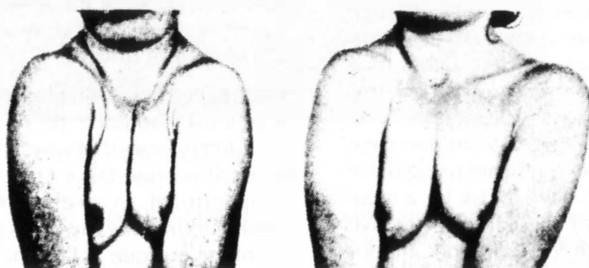
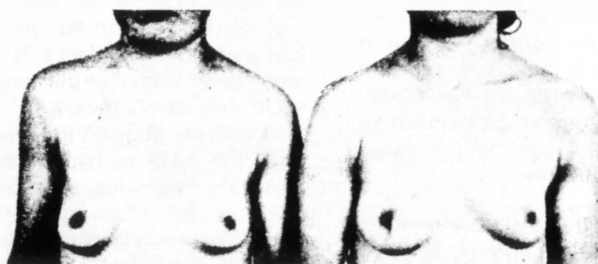
**MAGOR:** You see, here's the other problem I see that develops following from what you say. Criticism becomes tied to critical activity. If we're thinking of art functioning in some way as a critical activity, criticism is sort of art 'squared' — art seems to be the practice, and criticism seems to be the theory; when in fact I think of art as the theory, and the world as the practice. You know, my life is the practice, my art is the theory of my life. If I have theory and criticism acting as the theory making my work the practice, I mistake my art for the real world. If I mistake art for the real world, I may think that I'm doing something about something when I'm not at all; and the whole activity becomes irrelevant. In spite of all the discussion of values, and the 'don't do this' and the 'do that', it becomes irrelevant because it's in a realm that's academic. It's academic because it's dependent on this closed theoretical system — it's an isolated system that has no interaction with the outside.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I would see academic, or closed, as perhaps an inevitable condition. I like what you are saying about art practice being in fact theory.

**MAGOR:** That's why I can say I think art should be critical, but I disagree with critical theory; or with it having such a 'life'.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Something I would agree with is that the whole edifice of intellectual discourse is academic. But it really doesn't exist in isolation from 'life'. The academic aspect of thinking lies not in that it's removed from life, but that it is only one aspect of life's functions. But I'm curious about how any of this would be changed — just thinking about this as a problem that might have some kind of solution — if the artist attempts to, let's say, place more emphasis upon their relationship to materials, or to material conditions. I'm not sure if you did say what that meant, Liz.

**MAGOR:** It does have something to do with material — I have this idea about what the value of that is. Let's see how this sounds: I think that the spectrum of possible relationships in the world has to be visible. There has to be representation and a presence of relationships — to things, to people — in order for us to know that we have choice; in order for us to know that alternatives are possible. So however discredited art is, or however debased and desperate it has become, I think that art reserves a place where a sort of unalienated labour can be imaged, or represented, in a world where there is a lot of alienated labour, and a lot of dichotomy. In this more modest role it may be a peg down from guiding the people to higher aesthetic or moral realms, but it keeps a space open, a place where a less intentional activity can exist. I think that this kind of work has considerable value, and when I began looking at art as work instead of philosophy, it



Liz Magor: from the bookwork, *Four Notable Bakers*; 1984.

began to make a lot more sense. The way it might function made a lot more sense. The way I would do it made a lot more sense. The images I would use, or the images that I would seek analogies for made a lot more sense. Even the way I question what art was became a lot clearer. I stopped questioning it philosophically — not that I had ever really started! I thought less about what does it mean to be, and what does it mean to know, than I thought about what's different about making cars than making clay pots or paintings; which sounds very simplistic. But when you ask that question, certain things are implied, or there are certain implications.

**CARR-HARRIS:** That fall into the area of sensibility?

**MAGOR:** That fall into the area that I want to start calling esthetics. But calling it esthetics and thinking of esthetics as a larger thing than taste or sensibility; or thinking of sensibility as a larger word than a response to beauty or unity or harmony or any of those things. Calling esthetics the area where I have a significant interaction with the material world, or the sensate world. And I would like to use that word and have it include my psycho-social self, my complex self that would be in some way known to me through this interaction. So I say art functions in holding that place. It's just like keeping this door open so that it could be entered by any person at any time. I actually don't think it needs to have mass appeal, or have bigger galleries or museums or anything. I think it's sufficient to have a few rooms in a city where you can go and see it take place.

**CARR-HARRIS:** See it take place?

**MAGOR:** See this unalienated labour take place; or rather, that it can take place — that it has a place.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I certainly like the notion.

**MAGOR:** If it isn't naive.

**CARR-HARRIS:** No. No, actually I don't think it's naive — or at least I don't think you're being naive. I think you've put beautifully what probably all artists really want to do — maybe what all people at certain points want. If I understand you, it's a position of attempting to stand back — rather as if one were on the brow of a high hill — looking at one's entire existence in a moment of curiosity and acceptance, and attempting to delineate that experience, specifically, without falling into the problems that arise in specific encounters. However, this assumes the ability to do that, and assumes the luxury of being in the position to walk away from the dangers that one has, and look at things differently. I have to wonder, though, whether it's really possible, at least as more than a desire.

**MAGOR:** I don't know whether I agree with the way you depicted this, as a sort of hill view, this panoramic view. I'll put it this way. Imagine a situation that obtains for both artists and people who aren't artists. Imagine that our relationship to our production is obscured by our relationship to the products

we purchase. The relationship that we see most images of — that's most visible — is our relationship to the material world as consumers of the material world. Our relationship as producers or transformers of that world is obscured or never imaged; so that we are...

**CARR-HARRIS:** Cheated?

**MAGOR:** Yes; and for a very particular purpose. There's a reason for wanting to cheat us of that; we have lots of Eaton Centers. So the kind of material engagement I'm talking about is an alternative to shopping, an alternative to the exaltation of material as a product to purchase.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I guess I had understood you to be talking about allowing oneself the enjoyment of, let us say, the 'act' of making, or the 're-enactment' of that act.

**MAGOR:** It could be, but I'm not talking about pleasure only. I brought up pleasure because it seemed that artists, who do have this privileged position to have pleasure from material, often won't allow themselves to do that. For some reason we decided we don't deserve it; perhaps it's because we're ashamed of our history — the elitism attached to esthetic appreciation.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Yes, elitism; or at least luxury. But perhaps more than that, a certain irrelevance?

**MAGOR:** Yes, but I don't think you necessarily remove yourself from your anger or from the muck of banality or the complete ordinariness of your material existence. I'm not talking about making transcendental images or supercharged images. I'm actually talking about the very opposite: a place where the material world isn't charged with special significance; where it's almost a pre-commodity; where your production and your consumption are happening at the same time. When they are separated, it seems to me that we are then vulnerable to being attracted to objects that have been charged with significance, and perhaps not through our own means. So our only response is on a transcendental, an 'auratic' level. We're always responding on a metaphysical level — to shoes, to Cuisinarts, to everything. I'm interested in the part before that — almost the raw material, or the primary industry, the state where the stuff is first encountered. That's why I think that critical prescription, in attempting to be 'meaningful' and to be 'communicative,' is inappropriate, or overstressed; because I'm not sure how communicable certain things are — or of the value of communicating at certain stages. Or whether in fact critical prescriptiveness really provides any alternative to the way most material in the world is offered to us — intentionally communicating its desirability.

**CARR-HARRIS:** The value of communicating at certain stages. Yes, I think you're bringing up an important issue — that moral tone is not in itself sufficient; but that it has to seduce, or affect, the rest of us within some term, perhaps, of agreement.

**MAGOR:** I'm hoping that an artist might show material at a stage where anything might have happened — and then this happened. So that in the viewing of it one goes through this active process of seeing where material nearly wasn't meaningful, and how it was processed into meaning; so that the production of meaning is apparent in the work.

**CARR-HARRIS:** You mentioned earlier that in attempting to understand the world, the 'dialectic' is between my mind and the material'. Is there a history to how this dialectic has proceeded in your own experience?

**MAGOR:** An important part of my conscious decisions when I'm working is based on a memory of myself when I was young — a teenager — maybe about 16 or 17, in Vancouver. I was wanting, I was looking for a significant engagement with the materiality of the world — assuming that it was possible. I can't remember why I assumed that, but I felt that there must be something besides 'what I've got now'. I looked very hard for this role, or this place to be, where I might have a fairly intense and constant engagement with this materiality. I looked in a variety of places, including the art school where I took a summer course. Remarkably, I didn't find this 'place to be' there, in spite of my looking right at where it was supposed to be housed. Eventually I found the engagement I wanted through a very roundabout means, and I found it in visual art. But my memory of how invisible art had been to me became a very strong motivation to make my art a certain way, and not to make it the way that it had been presented to me — or not present to me — when I was looking. One of the things I recognize is that the reason I couldn't see it was that the art I saw wasn't truly concerned with the material world; it was in effect engaged with the transcendental or immaterial world.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I had the same experience at art school. It's probably what art schools do best! How did you figure out what the problem was?

**MAGOR:** I can think of two things that helped me. One was seeing Claes Oldenburg's work in New York, where very ordinary objects were presented in an altered context, or in an altered form, so that their *ordinariness* wasn't lost, but their extra-ordinariness was implied or suggested. And the other thing that helped me come to certain conclusions was then returning to B.C. and seeing a physical world that was significant to me; again, an ordinariness that I had overlooked before. Specifically, these were coastal images, images of *primary industry* on the West Coast — like fishing and logging. And I think why I was able to see these as significant visual images was that it was primary industry. So the material was apparent, the processing of material was very close to the source of material; and there was a close relationship between the transformation of material and the existing original material.

**CARR-HARRIS:** And this, I guess, is clear in your piece *Production* — particularly, for me anyway, as you installed and changed it at

"Aurora Borealis" last year in Montreal.

**MAGOR:** Yes. This basic transformation of material, and all the evidence of that transformation, became significant to me — as an analogy, perhaps — for the production of something meaningful, or of something 'from this state to this state'. It wasn't only in industry; there also were images of coastal situations, rural situations, conditions you'd find in any rural place where people are resourceful and they make do with materials at hand. Situations in which the original identity of the material is still apparent after it's gone through a very rudimentary transformation to be used in some other way. And I saw lots of homesteads, coastal homesteads, where people had transformed the material into useful or less useful things. Sometimes their use was obscured by time. Where they had been useful early in the century — a pier, for example, that had been unused for a few decades and was knocked around and was no longer a pier, it was somewhat abstracted; its use was known to me, but its present form was altered. So I began to think of art as analogous to industry; not just industry in the sense of gross national product, but also a more domestic industry, or anything I would call industry — work that transforms material. This gave me the world of images to choose from, and a way to proceed. It also gave me an identity of myself as working in a particular way, which has been invaluable at times when I have more doubt than I need.

**CARR-HARRIS:** 'More doubt than I need'. That's great, Liz! I like that. I know I've always worked as physically as possible because it was physical, and it allows me to spread the doubt over a considerable period of time. I also like hearing you refer to images — such as old logging mills — which have been usually robbed of their power by what we could call a sentimental — and urban — nostalgia. What about that nostalgia? Or what about urban production? Is it more false? Can we talk about *Regal Décor* at this point?

**MAGOR:** Well, let's say I'm looking at two images — one being an image of the West Coast, a very small logging operation on the Coast; and the other being an image from *House and Gardens* magazine: a living room, say, in somebody's house in Italy or Manhattan, or who knows where. I find there is a basic difference between these two images. One shows not only the way the picture was produced, but it is a picture of production. It's a picture of a logging operation. All the signs of what kind of operation, the size of operation, the period — the historical period — when that kind of hand logging was done; the number of people involved in the operation, the location; all this is there. All those things are very specific and *production based on these specifics constructs the image*. In the image from *House and Gardens*, the only thing that unites the objects is the taste or will of the decorator. It's an eclectic assortment, a kind of tentative association that erases all traces of the production of the image. And the photography is made to seem

effortless, just as the decoration of the apartment is made to seem effortless; or the earning of the money to buy the things is made to seem effortless. My response can only be one of sensibility or taste. I would prefer, then to make an image more like the logging operation.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Because, of course, it is exactly this *House and Gardens* condition that, as you say, engenders that sense of guilt so many artists bear?

**MAGOR:** Yes. I find myself completely entranced by the images of this beautiful apartment, and oblivious to the fact that so much is obscured; until I finish the magazine and realize I've been seduced by 6 or 7 different apartments. I begin to sense that esthetics have been used to manipulate me and to create specialness. At the end of one issue — which is only one out of twelve a year — I am nauseated by how prevalent expressions of sensibility are, and how easy it is to create a sense of specialness and uniqueness through the manipulation of esthetics. And this makes me suspicious of my own sensibility, the expression of my sensibility; and maybe as an over-reaction I begin to look for another use of my skills.

**CARR-HARRIS:** But this is not a unique experience. You are explaining why so many artists — including yourself — have decided to be critical. That nausea has been channelled into a determination to make art socially critical.

**MAGOR:** Of course, and it is an appropriate response. But my concern is that we don't, at the same time, forfeit a whole engagement with the sensible world, the materiality of the world, to those who can afford it; those that can actually financially afford it, by rejecting esthetics simply because it has been misused.

**CARR-HARRIS:** So in opposing against this image from *House and Gardens* the straightforward image of the production of hand logging, for instance, you are hoping here not only to be critical, but also to find some way of recouping this condition you are being cheated of?

**MAGOR:** Yes. If we put ourselves in a position where we're ashamed of our desire for that engagement, and forego it and leave it to others, then esthetics becomes a commodity with no visible alternative. We're left with shopping. Art could be a place to represent an inversion; in other words, the desirable position is not that of being able to acquire goods and materials, but that of being able to produce. To identify ourselves as producers.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I agree that production is probably better than acquisition, though the two terms could use some defining. But just as you pointed out earlier that criticism can exist without art, surely production — in the open sense — also can exist without art; even if art may not be able to exist without production?

**MAGOR:** I suppose I'm assuming that there is some innate need for *esthetic response* and

expression, and that to give it up is a sacrifice. At this point I question whether the self-righteousness that comes with the sacrifice we make as 'guilty' is not our 'payment' for being unsupported by the public; and whether we don't give ourselves this payment in the form of a new myth to occupy: that as artists we are superior in some way, and that we will lead others to the 'good place' to be. Perhaps this is our compensation for being ignored and not supported by anyone other than the government. I question that. I think — if we are really critical — we would criticize that when we see it; and I'm wondering whether we can avoid this new myth without becoming producers of 'stuff' for the pleasure of others; without becoming a service industry. I'm wondering whether a way past this might be found in an area where our production becomes part of the image — the production of our work becomes part of the image of the work; so that self-reflexiveness — self-criticalness — is within the work. Rather than the work being about somebody else's relationship, it becomes about our own relationship as makers of this stuff.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Doesn't this tend to lead us back into philosophy? That level of self-criticism would sound covert to me.

**MAGOR:** I guess I'm counting on a certain resistance in the material to being turned into idea, always into Idea. So that the material has an assertion of its own that resists our manipulation of it through a mental activity.

**CARR-HARRIS:** How does that differ, say, from a high modernist position?

**MAGOR:** I don't know. What's the high modernist position?

**CARR-HARRIS:** Well, that the identity of a particular activity, and also therefore its value, lies simply in that identity, and in the act of making that identity more understood.

**MAGOR:** You mean 'art for art's sake'?

**CARR-HARRIS:** That's what it's been reduced to. That's, I think, what you described as the invisibility of art.

**MAGOR:** The difference would be that the reflexiveness lies in its relationship to the outside world, not to the part-to-part relationships within the work.

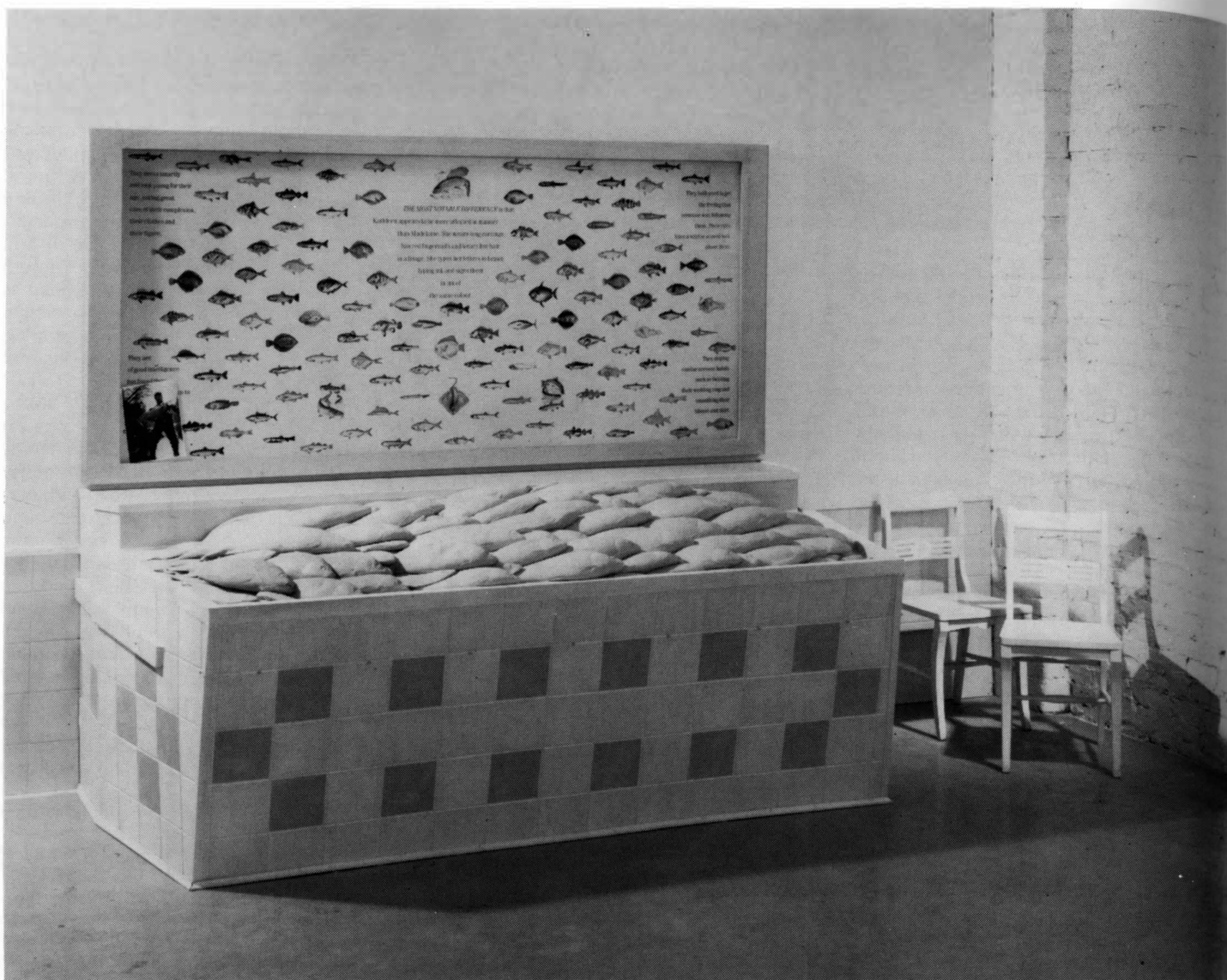
**CARR-HARRIS:** Certainly materiality changes ideas from a state of conception to state of reception. And I won't argue against the innateness of a need for esthetic response and expression. I guess I see that innate need as one stemming from our need to claim attention; or if you like, to claim dignity and authority. I think we both agree that this has to be seen as an act of social responsibility rather than of private indulgence. This can, however, produce some odd misalliances and ironies. There is that irony, of course, of artists being seen by the public as welcome facilitators of transcendentalism, while ourselves in fact view it with deep suspicion.

**MAGOR:** No doubt there has always been disparity between how the public identifies



Liz Magor: *Regal Décor* (detail); 1986; rag paper, plywood, photo on canvas, canvas on masonite; 96 x 174 x 20 in. Photo: courtesy The Ydessa Gallery; Robert Keziere.





Liz Magor: *A Notable Difference*; 1984; wood, latex rubber & photograph; 84 x 96 x 42 in. Photo: courtesy The Ydessa Gallery; Robert Keziere.

artists, and how artists do. And that disparity, I think, between how we're viewed, and how we view ourselves, contributes to making our work invisible. Since we produce one kind of thing, and everybody is looking for something else, it falls — it keeps falling-between the cracks. Unfortunately, this state of grace that is thought to be the place of artists; this non-political place that is beyond the muck; it doesn't exist. In fact, as I said, contemporary artists find themselves wholly implicated in the muck in the most extreme way; almost to the point of paralysis. There is an anxious choice we have to make between being leaders of a society, and being reflectors of a society. Neither one of these, I think, we can accept comfortably. On the one hand we admit we are constructed within a society, while on the other — well, being a witness feels so passive.

The further irony of our situation, as I see it is that we are regarded as irresponsible or amoral — the Bohemian care-less person; when in fact we're *consumed* by our morality, we're obsessed by our responsibility; at least, a great number of us are. Perhaps we all are. It would be nice to think that even Julian Schnabel thinks about it. Perhaps he has de-

ecided to proceed anyhow, in spite of the bad press!

**CARR-HARRIS:** And you admire him?

**MAGOR:** No. But I don't think he's as guilty as Benjamin Buchloh thinks he is. I think he's an average guy who is just getting on with life; like people in other occupations. If there's a moral imperative to be active, politically active, it doesn't follow that we look to a person's art for verification of that involvement. It *may* be there; but I wouldn't say it is mandatory that it be there. I think artists today are operating under very contradictory conditions, and I think there are very few places to operate. I don't actually see why artists are on the one hand supposed to be normal people — that's what we're told: we're not geniuses anymore; we're just, you know, guys and girls; but on the other hand are held to be exemplary people who don't need approval, don't need support, don't need to be part of society, don't need to be recognized, don't need to be seen; that we can exist with this kind of isolation, having no social function whatsoever! It's crazy!

**CARR-HARRIS:** Yes. I can't think of a better word for it. Possibly we are even being in-

creasingly invested, as artists, with the contradictory desires and fears that 'ordinary' people feel about professionals of all kinds — about a society that is more and more professionalized and therefore literally incoherent. So our isolation — as artists — is a function of everyone's experience of that isolation. And so identity itself starts to fragment. In fact, you've looked at identity in a lot of your work. In your book piece, for instance, *Four Notable Bakers*, you take us through this question of contradictory pressures, don't you?

**MAGOR:** It's a sort of book of fears; a book of fears of reproduction, or fears of difference and fears of sameness. They are images of contradiction, social contradiction — of putting a high value on individuality while offering a very narrow range within which we can express our difference. In the book I use bread dough as a material that is valued for its ability to be consistently reproduced; while the people in the book are multiplied less successfully. They seem diminished by the comparison to images of mass production; they seem devalued by the attempts to treat them as material. Pushing against this humanism are images of twins who make the

notion of uniqueness seem vain.

**CARR-HARRIS:** And you come back to this matter of twins in another work — the fish piece.

**MAGOR:** The fish piece is a look at how legitimate these fears may be. In the context of this society, I don't actually think these are illegitimate fears. The fear of being distinct for the wrong reasons is legitimate, and so in that piece I use a situation that's very banal, the situation of identifying, choosing, a fish at the market; and I sort of jam that into, or marry it, to something more important — which is the identification of a person for purposes that remain to be seen. The text that goes with the fish piece describes two women.

There are about five pieces of text, just short simple text. In four of the pieces the two women — their sameness — is described: that they wore the same dresses, that they had the same fears, that they had the same disabilities, that they were proud of the same things, and so on. Then, in the middle, it begins: "The most notable difference is that Madelaine seems more affected in manner than Kathleen, she wears her hair in a fringe, and has long red fingernails". It goes on to describe 3 or 4 very trivial features distinguishing one woman from her sister. In her efforts to distinguish herself, I recognize in Madelaine a motivation similar to that of an artist — who is attempting to make a distinguishing statement, or a distinguished image. I recognize in that piece of text both the motivation to do it and the inability to really be original in that sense. I follow that with a picture at the bottom left-hand corner of a man who has been salmon fishing and has caught a big salmon. He is standing, the camera is a bit below his waist, so it's making him look tall. He is standing in the water with his hip waders on, and he has two Canadian flags — one on his breast pocket and one on his hat, and he's got a pink rosy face. I chose him because of his Canadian flags, and also because the pinkness of his cheeks was the same colour as the pinkness of the rubber fish; and he's holding this beautiful salmon which has distinguished itself from the others. In his difference from the school, the fish has delivered himself into a predicament.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I think it's a beautiful work, and I guess I liked a lot the deftness of that particular edge of black humour the postcard inserts! But let's see now. The predicament we're discussing is that by 'making a wrong move', like the salmon, let's say, we get caught in contradiction; or even worse, in social annihilation. And you have suggested that those contradictions are imposed ironically both by the misunderstandings of non-artists, and by the all-too-clear appreciation of those misunderstandings by artists themselves — who then overcompensate for their 'guilt'. Have you ever done a work which addresses the specific condition of restraint imposed by other artists?

**MAGOR:** There is a small piece. It's based on the Brancusi *Sleeping Muse* — which is an image I like a lot; but I also have some dis-

comfort with it. I was wondering whether my discomfort was because this person, or this image, had been stylized to a degree that an identity had been abstracted, or a specific had been made general. So I thought: what if I took this back to a specific identity? Who might that be? A model? It might be a woman who is the model; who might she be? She might have been an artist. She might have only been able to be a model, and she might have been an artist who was sleeping, not working; dreaming of a Brancusi — dreaming of a Brancusi sculpture. On the side of the copy of the Brancusi plaster head I made, it says: *The sleeping artist 1924*, which was the date that the *Sleeping Muse* was produced. The muse becomes a person, but the person can only dream of working. So there are two responses to this constraint. One is to copy, as I copied the Brancusi sculpture, to do over and over again what's already been valued; the other is to do nothing: to sleep, to dream of working. In a way, they are the same. One is hibernation, and the other is anorexia, and I see the appeal of both of those things. I see them as a way to relax, a way not to be anxious anymore; but I also see how destructive that would be. So I did the little Brancusi head. Then I thought I'd like to do a work that was more specific in referring to the pressure on both sides that I was feeling. I also wanted the sleeping artist to wake up. If some 50 years later the artist were to wake up, would she find herself as constrained as in 1924? Socially, morally, economically? Reflecting on the fact that at this time I'm constrained both by the expectations of the public as well as by my own, my image would have to be something that could include the production and the reception of art.

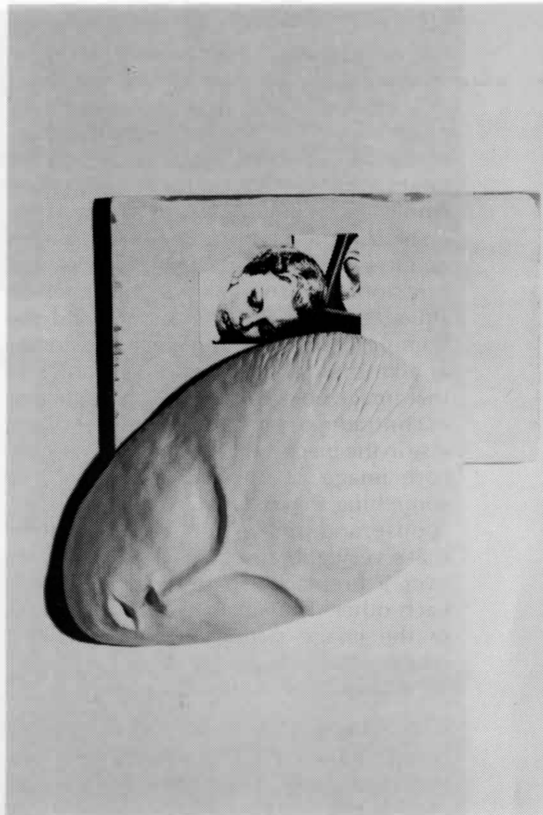
**CARR-HARRIS:** That's interesting, Liz. Because when I think of your sleeping artist, I think also of the woman in *Regal Décor*. What does she wake up to?

**MAGOR:** That's my question too. If one were to wake up now, to the conditions of art or object-making now, what is one waking up to?

In *Regal Décor* I wanted a factory — where things are made; and I wanted a home — where things are cherished. In a way, I matched them — these two things I wanted — to the two images I talked about earlier: the logging site and the *House and Gardens* magazine. In fact, the home is still in the magazine — in the work, I mean; the logging site has turned into a linoleum plant. Linoleum of course has a visual dependence on ceramic tile. It presents a vinyl image of ceramic tile; and our memory of tile carries us into the acceptance of the falseness of the linoleum, and makes it seem perfectly satisfactory.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Legitimizes it.

**MAGOR:** Yes. Also I simply liked it as a form, because this flooring that normally you think of as a horizontal plane is stored in tall vertical rolls. Formally there is a contradiction. So I was thinking of this linoleum as the production of sort of a synthetic art, the production of the material world for pleasures that are



Liz Magor: *Sleeping Artist* — 1924; 1985; plaster, wood, photograph; 10 x 11 in. Collection Ydessa Hendeles.

based on memory and nostalgia.

**CARR-HARRIS:** It's a kind of dreaming of pleasure.

**MAGOR:** Yes — it's made possible through a kind of forgetfulness; through, I guess, the forgetting that the original ever existed.

**CARR-HARRIS:** The work divides neatly into two kinds of illusionary production, then. What about the 'home'?

**MAGOR:** In the second part of the work I used a domestic image. I bypassed the store, which is to me just a transition phase to the home. Home is where we really celebrate our belongings. When we take the thing 'home', we can really forget that it was mass produced. It's harder to forget that in a store. Also, the home interests me because it's the place where you may have your most intense material involvement. It's where your relationships with people take place — in and among all this stuff. I started in a vague way thinking of that: thinking of relationships existing in the midst of domestic objects; and the intimacy and intensity — or lack of intensity — in some way having something to do with the environment that contains the thing. It seems sometimes that the material world asserts itself on the interpersonal world, as though it is part of the human relationship. And so I decided to take one item, one object of the domestic situation, and give it a character — which is a standard art thing to do. I chose a fireplace because it worked so well. On so many levels it worked well.

**CARR-HARRIS:** What do you mean, exactly, Liz, when you say 'many levels'? Are you speaking of ambiguities, or ambivalence? Or contradictions?

**MAGOR:** There is a contradiction right within the work: that it is done with sort of an exuberance, both materially and in terms of scale, and seems never-ending. It kind of goes from the beginning of the gallery to the end. In every material way it seems not to limit itself; but at the same time it's wholly about limitation and wholly about — at least its subject matter is wholly about — the anxiety of constraints, of suppression. It presents an image of a person squeezed between the factory and the home. Her image in the magazine comes at a kind of junction; and the choice of that image comes from the same degree of contradictory motivation as everything else in the piece. I think of her as a very sincere image of anxiety or anguish, or something that seems a very intense response; and yet I've put her in a situation that's very glib and cynical — in a frame over a fireplace. So they struggle with each other. The sincerity or authenticity of the image struggles with a context which is very insincere; and I don't resolve that.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I like that. I think artworks have to acknowledge contradiction and ambivalence. Ambiguity, it seems to me, is another matter. Since ambiguity is a given condition of communication, of language that is, I am concerned about the problem of gilding the lily. Let me ask a question that arises, I think, from the problem — common to almost all artworks — of interpretation. You talk about the image of the woman as being 'sincere'. This would seem a 'clue', let us say, to an understanding of the work's play in contradictions. If the small space that an artwork can find for itself — between a kind of simplistic sensibility on the one hand, and an overly anxious desire to be critical on the other — depends on clues and an ability to track through clues, is there not a certain gamesmanship involved? Is that not to make artworks into a game of detection, and to make fairly specific — and even unfair, or unreasonable — intellectual and cultural assumptions about the position of the viewer?

**MAGOR:** Perhaps. But something that I've always thought was curious was that, while dealing with objects in the normal world people will operate on a metonymic level, when they enter the art gallery they immediately jump into a metaphoric mode. It's training, I suppose, but they expect works to 'work' on a metaphoric level; and when they don't, they don't see anything. And so, 5 or 6 years ago, I made quite a few works that were very literal on purpose; to see how invisible they could go. In fact, this work with the waves — *18 Books* — was meant to be about looking for something else and not seeing what was being offered to you; it was about missed signals — literally. But now, accepting how complex the conditions for reception are, I'm not so interested in playing games with the audience — because I really am more interested in making an image of something that's important to me. So I hedge my bets.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Accepting, in other words,



*Linoleum plant, source photo for 'Regal Décor'. Artist's archive.*

this metaphoric reception.

**MAGOR:** Yes, though I still find metaphor to be unreliable on its own. I depend on the context to control it. I mean that I provide the context in which the metaphor exists, hoping that I can find images and materials and conjunctions that are able to operate on a number of levels. In choosing the fireplace, for example, it physically has a hole and a funnel shape. So given no experience with fireplaces, given no metaphoric expectation, the form itself has a shape that is significant to me — which is a sucking in and a funneling down, or a narrowing down. Then it might operate also on a metaphoric level as the 'hearth' of the home, or something.

**CARR-HARRIS:** I understand; but I'm not sure that metaphor can be avoided by an appealing to a primary level of form. I suspect most people are too sophisticated, as it were, to allow themselves to penetrate to that level. Children — young children — perhaps.

**MAGOR:** True, but I'm not trying to avoid it, I'm trying to aid it with form. I hope they act in consort. Another example could be the choice of how to express the anxiety of the person in the photograph — what kind of

situation to put that person in. It's both an image from personal experience — of finding that 5 o'clock in the morning is the most anxious period of the day, where you physically feel the anxiety as you kind of roll out of sleep into an awakened anxiety — and also it's an image of hibernation, an image representing a theoretical position or strategy. And I've found that it was this second imaging which people connected to.

**CARR-HARRIS:** Because in operating as clues, they beg ambiguity; and don't necessarily signal our intention?

**MAGOR:** Well, I have no idea whether people are going to respond to the evidence of the code, or the evidence of the fact, or the evidence of their projections. But what I can say is that this work is ambivalent; it is contradictory. My position is ambivalent, but it's still a position I'm occupying over here. I'm not all over the map! Within a certain area of investigation, let us say, I have doubt. My question is 'how to proceed critically, without being authoritarian'; it isn't 'what is of value?'; I think engaged work is of value. So I'm very energetically making this very critical piece which to me is the significant difference from me in a very miserly way making a



Liz Magor: *Regal Décor* (detail); 1986; pillars of linoleum, cardboard & paper; machine of plywood, masonite, metallic paint & plastic sheet; pillars (from left) 120 x 27, 25, 21, 19, 15; machine, 48 x 72 x 138 in. Photo: courtesy The Ydesa Gallery; Robert Keziere.

critical 'statement'. I'm investing everything I've got — I don't want to sound hyperbolic; but I'm investing a good deal in making this critical statement which almost negates the critical statement. Let's say, I'm very, very enthusiastically making art in a statement that very, very critically condemns art. But I also want to say that I'm aware of the danger of affirming the conventions I despise by engaging the conventions of art as my means of speaking. I know this is problematic. But considering the alternatives — I guess I'll take my chances with convention. In each work, of course, I hope to find a way to undermine the conventions; in *Regal Décor* I take the scale, the range of material, and what I would say is its obvious subjectivity as constituting some kind of significant assertion of value. I think of the piece as asserting the value of making art — for various reasons; one of which is its ability to function critically. But I don't see why anyone would listen to a critic who is so uptight as to not allow themselves to criticize with gusto. Do you know what I mean?

CARR-HARRIS: Of course! Any more than pay

attention to artworks that are too timid to address us — how did you call it — 'exuberantly'. I couldn't agree more. I guess that my intention, in presenting certain demands, let's say, in the writing I have done was precisely to 'criticize with gusto'. I certainly attempt to approach my own work in this way. I guess making art is different, and for me, anyway, a bit more real. More real, perhaps, than even a conversation like this. I wonder — would you say, Liz — that in the making of artworks, because things are slowed down, artists have a chance to think more fully about the range of interconnections taking place in a given situation; more fully than, say, in talking like this, or in viewing artworks?

MAGOR: I guess I go back to myself at 16, when conversation had no meaning. I couldn't understand it. I needed something so slow that I could just — take my time. Reading was good, but looking was better. Do you remember that — almost everything being incomprehensible? Things were so fast.

CARR-HARRIS: Yeah. At one point, they

thought I was retarded at school. I began to think so too — I used to read the comics over five times!

MAGOR: So I think of that as still being necessary at different times in my life. To slow down. I guess I feel more comfortable carrying on a conversation through material in a certain way since it has the slowness; it's so slow to produce that I have more time to consider my options. In terms of material, I do think about things besides art objects: things, places, hunks of land or various objects — they made me want to make art in the first place. The first time I saw a shingle factory I wanted to make that shingle factory. In a way, art to me is a formalized attempt to consume the world by remaking it. That's why I think its value lies in maintaining the presence of that kind of activity — where you produce and consume at the same time. It's in the remaking that I invest all kinds of left over feelings that I can find no other outlet for, or no other way to satisfy. I'm sure that takes place all the time in the imagination, but art to me is a public place to do that. A place where I can exhibit the process of making and re-making.