ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## ENTERING THE *SPIELRAUM*

*After having remained at the entry [of a grotto] some time, two contrary emotions arose in me, fear and desire – fear of the threatening dark grotto, desire to see whether there were any marvelous thing within it.*

Leonardo da Vinci

Perhaps the best way to begin to understand the grotesque is to consider the rich associations of its namesake: the grotto (Figure 1). The grotto is associated with fertility and the womb, as well as with death and the grave. It is earthy and material, a cave, an open mouth that invites our descent into other worlds. It is a space where the monsters and marvels of our imagination are conceived. While the grotesque pulls us beyond the boundaries of the world we know, it also reminds us of our limits and our own mortality. Confronting the grotto, Leonardo is torn between fascination and dread. The grotesque, too, provokes responses as contradictory as its meanings, fusing humor with horror, wit with transgression, repulsion with desire. Like a minotaur, a mermaid, or a cyborg, the grotesque is not quite one thing or the other, and this boundary creature roams the borderlands of all that is familiar and conventional.

This study seeks to establish a fresh and expansive view of the grotesque in Western art, articulating a theoretical model for understanding what makes an image grotesque and taking a long historical view of the grotesque, from 1500 to the present day. These two aims are interdependent. A workable theory of the grotesque functions as a kind of lens, bringing into sharper focus the variety and richness of grotesque expression in the modern era. Five hundred years of European art is a daunting chronological expanse to traverse, and I am cognizant of the hazards involved in crossing so many period boundaries. It is precisely this long view, however, that reveals the grotesque to be a complex

and continuous image tradition. What is more, it shows that this tradition comprises several distinct strands, all of which emerge as distinct expressions in the fine arts circa 1500. These strands include the witty and urbane ornamental grotesque, the rowdy and subversive carnivalesque, as well as the traumatic grotesque. There are also "noble grotesques," to use John Ruskin's term, images that embody meanings too profound for words.

On the other hand, claiming such a history for the grotesque requires a more comprehensive theory. What ligatures bind these diverse images together? In our own time, the usage of the term has narrowed to describe things that are horrible or disgusting. Many contemporary viewers would be surprised to learn that the element of play is the most pervasive characteristic of the grotesque or that, in its original sixteenth-century usage, the term "grotesque" described fanciful works of extreme artifice and virtuosity. In part, these conflicting identities stem from the fact that the grotesque is notoriously elusive: it cannot be defined through the traditional art-historical categories of style or subject. Even the responses elicited by the grotesque (like those expressed by Leonardo) are contradictory. The following pages set out a working theory of the grotesque, one based on a few key ideas: First, the grotesque is best understood by what it does, not what it is. It is an action, not a thing – more like a verb than a noun. Readers familiar with theories of the carnivalesque body "in the act of becoming," or the abject as a collapse of boundaries, will recognize the similarities, and indeed this study discusses them as subsets of the grotesque. Second, what the grotesque does best is to play or, rather, to put things into play. As visual forms, grotesques are images in flux: they can be aberrant, combinatory, and metamorphic. This visual flux is necessary but not sufficient in itself to define the grotesque because, at its core, the grotesque is culturally generated. Grotesques come into being by rupturing cultural boundaries, compromising and contradicting what is "known" or what is "proper" or "normal." As will become apparent, the grotesque is closely bound to the body and, consequently, to the feminine as it is constructed in Western culture. This is not to say that all grotesques are represented as women, but that the fundamental attributes of the grotesque (bodied, fertile, earth-bound, changeful) align with those ascribed to the feminine. If the boundaries of the normative and conventional are drawn around the cultural attributes of the masculine, it is not difficult to see that grotesque creatures threatening these boundaries, any aberrations from this norm, typically bear the attributes of the feminine. Because the grotesque is a cultural phenomenon, it fuses ethical with aesthetic questions. And most important, the grotesque is best understood as something that creates meaning by prying open a gap, pulling us into unfamiliar, contested terrain. To conceptualize the grotesque in this way is to conjoin cultural anthropology with art history and aesthetics, but it is important to recognize that it was John Ruskin who first identified grotesque expression in terms of a space, or a gap, and insisted on its

1. Hellmouth in the Park of Monsters, 1552–84. Villa Orsini, Bomarzo, Italy. Photo credit: Vanni / Art Resource, NY.

ethical dimension. His startlingly original ideas undergird much of this book. Accordingly, this study builds upon the premise that the deeper workings of the grotesque image are revealed through its changes, in the interstitial moments when the familiar turns strange or shifts unexpectedly into something else.

It is a relatively simple matter to explain the origins and meaning of the word "grotesque." In the last quarter of the 1400s, the ruins of Nero's Golden Palace, the Domus Aurea, were excavated in Rome, revealing wall decorations with whimsical combinations of plants, figures, mythical creatures, and architectural elements. Because these rooms were below ground level and grotto-like, the fantastic and bizarre inventions found there came to be known as *grottesche*.[1] This Roman ornamentation, which combined fanciful architectural elements with combinatory figures, quickly influenced the decorative and graphic arts of the Renaissance. By 1519, Raphael, with Giovanni da Udine, decorated Vatican loggie in the fashionable grotesque style (Figure 2), and grotesque ornamentation had already found its way into German engraving. Actual grottoes, studded with shells, stalactites, and volcanic rock, and frequently inhabited by sculptures of fanciful creatures, became central features of Renaissance gardens (Figures 1 and 19).[2] By far the most important impact of these grotesques, however, was that they quickly took on the force of an aesthetic principle, seen as emblems of artistic audacity and creative freedom. No less a figure than Giorgio Vasari described the inspired inventions of Michelangelo as grotesque. The sixteenth century marked a critical moment when the grotesque entered the mainstream

of artistic practice and aesthetic debate. In this era, the grotesque was reinvested into a newly modern array of cultural and artistic contexts that continue to our day.

Nevertheless, there is a danger in relying upon such a definitive "creation story," because it feeds the illusion that the grotesque can be fixed to a specific time and meaning. Although the term "*pittura grottesca*" was coined to denote this particular type of fantastic ornament, this brief moment of specificity quickly gave way to an emphasis upon the term's connotative meanings, pointing beyond a specific ornamental type toward a wider array of images that in some way were "of the grotto" or "like the grotto" in their potentiality, their fearfulness, their fertility. For the purposes of this study, I will use the original Italian term "*grottesche*" in reference to these specific ornamental inventions and employ the more general term "grotesque" to describe the broader visual principle and the other kinds of imagery that make up this visual expression. As we shall see, even in their formative period these *grottesche* intermixed with drollery and *diablerie*. Historically, then, relying upon the term itself provides only a partial grasp of this rich visual tradition. Further, the meaning of "grotesque" changed dramatically over time. In little more than a century after the discovery of the Domus Aurea, the connotations of the term already had begun to shift away from ornament and toward the caricatured and carnivalesque. And today, coming full circle, viewers might have great difficulty discerning what is grotesque in the original Renaissance ornamental inventions. In sum, reliance upon terminology provides only the crudest of outlines for the robust and variegated image history of the grotesque.

More important, recounting how the grotesque got its name goes very little distance toward explaining the nature of the grotesque. An especially vexing question centers upon the sheer variety of imagery that can be understood as grotesque. In order to grasp the difficulties this poses, one has to look no farther than the images in this introductory chapter. The grotesque cannot be identified as one particular style or set of formal attributes (although there are styles that embrace the grotesque, including mannerism, expressionism, dada, and surrealism). To a viewer confronted with Adam van Vianen's silver ewer (Figure 3) and Carlee Fernandez's *#7500 Boar* (Figure 4), each indisputably grotesque, there appears to be no common ground whatsoever between these works. As a further complication, the grotesque is culturally relative, and the notion of what constitutes the grotesque can vary from one culture or era to another. At this point it might appear that the grotesque is a completely arbitrary designation, an inconsistent and vague property that exists solely in the eye of the beholder. Suppose, however, that we are asking the wrong questions, so that, much like hunting a nocturnal creature in broad daylight, the grotesque's rich complexities elude us if we impose categories and concepts that are not fitted to it. This is readily suggested by the fact that in the modern fields of aesthetics

2. Raphael Sanzio and Giovanni da Udine, *Interior, Loggetta*, 1519. Vatican Palace, Vatican State. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

and art history the grotesque is typically described in negative terms, by what it is not: disfigured, disordered, misshapen, deformed, formless.[3]

Entering the lair of the grotesque on its own terms, we discover that its operations are complex and, in their own way, consistent. To apprehend the grotesque, it is essential to understand it as being "in play."[4] It always represents a state of change, breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown. As such, the one consistent visual attribute of the grotesque is that of flux. Whether aberrant, metamorphic, or combinatory, grotesques are all in a transitional, in-between state of being. Blurring categories, the grotesque pulls us into a

3. Adam van Vianen, Ewer, 1614. Silver. © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

liminal state of multiple possibilities. Adam van Vianen's *Ewer* (Figure 3) of 1614 is an exemplar of the unpredictable and fanciful combinations of the grotesque. Fully exploiting the liquidity and reflective instability of silver, van Vianen presents a seemingly stream-of-consciousness composition: a sea dragon rises up from the waves, his tail takes on the shape of a woman washing her hair, but her

4. Carlee Fernandez, *#7500 Boar, from the Carnage II 7000 Series*, 1999. © Courtesy of the artist and Acuna-Hansen Gallery. Collection of Jason Eoff.

hair pours down like water, forming the cup's handle as it goes, and briefly gathers itself into something like the snout of an open-mouthed creature before wriggling, snakelike, down the side, gathering again into a shell-like form, supported by a crouching ape.[5] The ape is more than a physical support: apes and monkeys, simians so very similar to humans, had long been associated with imitation and illusion. Van Vianen exploits this idea of art as the ape of nature. The ewer's seemingly constant flow of forms celebrates the fecundity of the natural world and of the artist's imagination. That the ape serves as an emblem of invention is particularly apt because van Vianen was commissioned to make this work in honor of a gifted artist, recently deceased: his brother, Paulus van Vianen.[6]

Nothing could be further from this elegant object than Carlee Fernandez's boar's head satchel (1999, Figure 4), but it, too, is in a state of change. Fernandez's

creature does not breezily metamorphose from one reality to another, but seems to congeal midway, defying categorization. Where the streaming silver figures surprise and delight, this combinatory, taxidermic invention creates a sense of unease and disgust, generated primarily by the stalled exchange from one realm to another. Fernandez combines distinctly different things (in this case, a satchel and a stuffed boar), their original identities still intact even as both are disfigured. Fernandez uses taxidermy specimens that have been damaged, and therefore rendered useless, and turns them into meditations on our use of animals. The problem for us is that the animal here is not transformed enough. We like our animals either as hyper-illusionistic statuettes or as completely unrecognizable products: meat, gelatin, leather satchel. Fernandez doesn't let us off the hook that easily. It is impossible to hold a single response to this monster: it is absurdly funny, physically repulsive, mortally true.

Aberration, combination, and metamorphosis represent the visual attributes of the grotesque, but they are not sufficient in themselves to make an image grotesque. For example, interference might scramble our television signal, and with it the familiar features of a news anchor, but this moment of ambiguity is not in itself grotesque. It would turn grotesque, however, if this intermittent and partial image of the familiar face suddenly began to bark and snarl, merging with another, alien reality. Nor is an elaborate table decoration, combining all sorts of vegetables, fruits, and flowers, perceived as grotesque. When these elements are composed in such a manner that they form a portrait head just as convincing as a still life (Figure 5), as in Giuseppe Arcimboldo's brilliant inventions, they turn grotesque. Clearly, the grotesque is not simply a formal property, but emerges when this visual flux compromises established realities or categories, jumbling their constituent parts and allowing alien things to stick. In this way Fernandez's living luggage/carry-on animal straddles the discrete categories of animal and product.[7] Van Vianen's ewer, though much more of a frolic, also keeps a constant tension between its being both a functional cup and a shape-shifting animal.

This mutability of the seen and known is essential to how the grotesque works. The response to something as grotesque is triggered when it ruptures the boundaries of what we "know." One way to understand the grotesque is to conceive of it as a boundary creature,[8] existing only in the tension between distinct realities. While most descriptions of the grotesque situate it in direct opposition to the norm (disfigured, deformed, etc.), it is more like a catalyst, opening the boundaries of two disparate entities, and setting a reaction in motion. To take an example from basic chemistry, a sugar cube held to a lit match will not burn. If a bit of ash is smudged on the edge of the cube, however, it creates a catalytic interaction, destabilizing the sugar molecules to the point that the fire can take hold and burn until both are consumed. The two parts of Fernandez's piece are not grotesque in themselves: the boar is ugly, perhaps, and the satchel merely

5. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Vertumnus*, circa 1590. Oil on panel. © Skokloster Castle, Balsta, Sweden. Photo credit: Samuel Uhrdin.

banal. The grotesque is that smudge, intermixing discrete identities and boundaries, making a veritable creative bonfire. The grotesque, in Ronald Paulsen's elegant designation, is "an aesthetic of eliding difference."[9]

The grotesque burns just as fiercely in René Magritte's stunning image (Figure 6). This painting of a young girl in a pastoral setting, surrounded by exotic birds, lures us in to gaze upon its beauty and lulls us with its easy sentiment. Without warning, it wounds our eyes with the strange and bloody act quite literally at the heart of the painting. The collision of the girl's prim, middle-class innocence with the raw and impulsive act of eating the heart of a bird, spattering dark red blood on her lace collar, sets off powerful and

contradictory responses. There is an appalling beauty here that abruptly throws a switch and sends our expectations careening off the track without warning. Magritte's title, *Pleasure*, seems almost scandalous, perhaps mocking the aesthetic enjoyment we anticipate, while pointing to a more visceral desire suppressed by it. Here again, the response to the grotesque is triggered by the fusion of irreconcilable realities. The images of the violated bird and the pleasant girl simultaneously attract and repel each other, holding us in thrall. The grotesque elicits contradictory and conflicting responses as it binds together the unexpected and disparate.

The deliberate and sustained ambiguity of these diverse images suggests that describing the grotesque as transgressive is not quite correct. To transgress suggests that one breaks free of a boundary or explodes the constraints of a social convention. As we have seen thus far, the grotesque does not transgress so much as it ruptures boundaries, compromising them to the point where they admit the contradiction and ambiguity of a contrasting reality. In their studied ambivalence, they propose one response even as they thwart it with another. This is critical to discerning what makes an image grotesque. The representation of something horribly disfigured might readily be characterized as grotesque; but in other images, such as van Vianen's ewer, it is not so simple to identify what pushes the boundaries of its embellishment from ornament into grotesque. There are any number of heavily ornamented objects and images that are simply gaudy and do not trigger the kind of mixed response associated with the grotesque. Van Vianen's ornament spills over into the grotesque because it is excessive to the point that it subverts its own identity and purpose. The ornamentation on van Vianen's cup goes so far beyond its role of enhancement that it undercuts the function of the cup itself. This erstwhile vessel seems to have become as liquid as the libation it is supposed to hold and constantly threatens to become something else. In fact, van Vianen left a final trump to the presumptions of those who insist on using this simply as a functional cup: the pleasure of the unsuspecting drinker, savoring the last delicious drop, evaporates with the discovery of two salamanders at the bottom of the cup!

The same rule of excess holds true for other types of grotesques. Ordinary caricature exaggerates to make its humorous and satirical observations, but it can reel off into the grotesque when its distortions become so extreme that they strangle laughter. For example, Francisco Goya's *Caprichos* often push caricature into nightmarish fantasy (Figure 37). Caricature can also turn grotesque when its satire merges with contradictory realities. Otto Dix was a master of expressing the horrible realities of World War I through caricature. Images like *The Skat Players* (Figure 39) insist upon our laughter just as vehemently as they insist upon showing us these mutilated veterans.

Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of the French ambassadors, painted in 1533, exemplifies the fused contradictions that make the grotesque buzz and