

The Painted Word

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PEOPLE DON'T READ THE MORNING NEWSPAPER, Marshall McLuhan once said, they slip into it like a warm bath. Too true, Marshall! Imagine being in New York City on the morning of Sunday, April 28, 1974, like I was, slipping into that great public bath, that vat, that spa, that, regional physiotherapy tank, that White Sulphur Springs, that Marienbad, that Ganges, that River Jordan for a million souls which is the Sunday New York Times. Soon I was submerged, weightless, suspended in the tepid depths of the thing, in Arts & Leisure, Section 2, page 19, in a state of perfect sensory deprivation, when all at once an extraordinary thing happened:

I noticed something!

Yet another clam-broth-colored current had begun to roll over me, as warm and predictable as the Gulf Stream ... a review, it was, by the *Time's* dean of the arts, Hilton Kramer, of an exhibition at Yale University of "Seven Realists," seven realistic painters . . . when I was *jerked alert* by the following:

"Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial—the

means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify.”

Now, you may say, My God, man! You woke up over *that*? You forsook your blissful coma over a mere swell in the sea of words?

But I knew what I was looking at. I realized that without making the slightest effort I had come upon one of those utterances in search of which psychoanalysts and State Department monitors of the Moscow or Belgrade press are willing to endure a lifetime of tedium: namely, the seemingly innocuous *obiter dicta*, the words in passing, that give the game away.

What I saw before me was the critic-in-chief of *The New York Times* saying: In looking at a painting today, “to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something *crucial*.” I read it again. It didn’t say “something helpful” or “enriching” or even “extremely valuable.” No, the word was *crucial*.

In short: frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can’t see a painting.

Then and there I experienced a flash known as the *Aha!* phenomenon, and the buried life of contemporary art was revealed to me for the first time. The fogs lifted! The clouds passed! The motes, scales, conjunctival bloodshots, and Murine agonies fell away!

All these years, along with countless kindred souls, I am certain, I had made my way into the galleries of Upper Madison and Lower Soho and the Art Gildo Midway of

Fifty-seventh Street, and into the museums, into the Modern, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim, the Bastard Bauhaus, the New Brutalist, and the Fountainhead Baroque, into the lowliest storefront churches and grandest Robber Baronial temples of Modernism. All these years I, like so many others, had stood in front of a thousand, two thousand, God-knows-how-many thousand Pollocks, de Koonings, Newmans, Nolands, Rothkos, Rauschenbergs, Judds, Johnses, Olitskis, Louises, Stills, Franz Klines, Frankenthalers, Kellys, and Frank Stellas, now squinting, now popping the eye sockets open, now drawing back, now moving closer—waiting, waiting, forever waiting for . . . *it* . . . for *it* to come into focus, namely, the visual reward (for so much effort) which must be there, which everyone (*tout le monde*) knew to be there—waiting for something to radiate directly from the paintings on these invariably pure white walls, in this room, in this moment, into my own optic chiasma. All these years, in short, I had assumed that in art, if nowhere else, seeing is believing. Well—how very shortsighted! Now, at last, on April 28, 1974, I could see. I had gotten it backward all along. Not “seeing is believing,” you ninny, but “believing is seeing,” *for Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text.*

Like most sudden revelations, this one left me dizzy. How could such a thing be? How could Modern Art be *literary*? As every art-history student is told, the Modern movement began about 1900 with a complete rejection of the *literary* nature of academic art, meaning the sort of realistic art which originated in the Renaissance and which

the various national academies still held up as the last word.

Literary became a code word for all that seemed hopelessly retrograde about realistic art. It probably referred originally to the way nineteenth-century painters liked to paint scenes straight from literature, such as Sir John Everett Millais's rendition of Hamlet's intended, *Ophelia*, floating dead (on her back) with a bouquet of wildflowers in her death grip. In time, literary came to refer to realistic painting in general. The idea was that half the power of a realistic painting comes not from the artist but from the sentiments the viewer hauls along to it, like so much mental baggage. According to this theory, the museum-going public's love of, say, Jean Francois Millet's *The Sower* has little to do with Millet's talent and everything to do with people's sentimental notions about The Sturdy Yeoman. They make up a little story about him.

What was the opposite of literary painting? Why, *l'art pour l'art*, form for the sake of form, color for the sake of color. In Europe before 1914, artists invented Modern styles with fanatic energy—Fauvism, Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism, Orphism, Suprematism, Vorticism—but everybody shared the same premise: henceforth, one doesn't paint "about anything, my dear aunt," to borrow a line from a famous *Punch* cartoon. One just paints. Art should no longer be a mirror held up to man or nature. A painting should compel the viewer to see it for what it is: a certain arrangement of colors and forms on a canvas.

Artists pitched in to help make theory. They loved it, in fact. Georges Braque, the painter for whose work the word *Cubism* was coined, was a great formulator of precepts:

“The painter thinks in forms and colors. The aim is not to reconstitute an anecdotal fact but to constitute a pictorial fact.”

Today this notion, this protest—which it was when Braque said it—has become a piece of orthodoxy. Artists repeat it endlessly, with conviction. As the Minimal Art movement came into its own in 1966, Frank Stella was saying it again:

“My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object... What you see is what you see.”

Such emphasis, such certainty! What a head of steam—what patriotism an idea can build up in three quarters of a century! In any event, so began Modern Art and so began the modern art of Art Theory. Braque, like Frank Stella, loved theory; but for Braque, who was a Montmartre boho* of the primitive sort, art came first. You can be sure the poor fellow never dreamed that during his own lifetime that order would be reversed.

*(Twentieth-century American slang for bohemian; obverse of hobo)

Epilogue

For about six years now, realistic painters of all sorts, real nineteenth-century types included, with 3-D and all the other old forbidden sweets, have been creeping out of their *Stalags*, crawl spaces, DP camps, deserter communes, and other places of exile, other Canadas of the soul—and have begun bravely exhibiting. They have been emboldened by what has looked to them, as one might imagine, as the modern art of Art Theory gone berserk.

The realist school that is attracting the most attention is an offshoot of Pop Art known as Photo-Realism. The Photo-Realists, such as Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes, take color photos of Pop-like scenes and objects—cars, trailers, storefronts, parking lots, motorcycle engines—then reproduce them precisely, in paint, on canvas, usually on a large scale, often by projecting them onto the canvas with a slide projector and then going to work with the paint. One of the things they manage to accomplish in this way, beyond the slightest doubt, is to drive orthodox critics bananas.

Such denunciations! “Return to philistinism” . . . “triumph of mediocrity” . . . “a visual soap opera” . . . “The kind of academic realism Estes practices might well have won him a plaque from the National Academy of Design in 1890” . . . “incredibly dead paintings” . . . “rat-trap compositional formulas” . . . “its subject matter has been taken out of its social context and neutered” . . . “it subjects art itself to ignominy” . . . all quotes taken from reviews of Estes’s

show in New York last year. . . and a still more fascinating note is struck: “This is the moment of the triumph of mediocrity; the views of the silent majority prevail in the galleries as at the polls.”

Marvelous. We are suddenly thrust back fifty years into the mental atmosphere of Royal Cortissoz himself, who saw an insidious connection between the alien hordes from Southern Europe and the alien wave of “Ellis Island art.” Only the carrier of the evil virus has changed: then, the subversive immigrant; today, the *ne kulturny* native of the heartland.

Photo-Realism, indeed! One can almost hear Clement Greenberg mumbling in his sleep: “All profoundly original art looks ugly at first. . . but there is ugly and there is *ugly* !” . . . Leo Steinberg awakes with a start in the dark of night: “Applaud the destruction of values we still cherish! But surely—not this!” And Harold Rosenberg has a dream in which the chairman of the Museum board of directors says: “Modernism is finished! Call the cops!”

Somehow a style to which they have given no support at all (“lacks a persuasive theory”) is *selling*. “The New York galleries fairly groan at the moment under the weight of one sort of realism or another” . . . “the incredible prices” . . . Estes is reported to be selling at \$80,000 a crack . . . Bechtle for 20,000 pounds at auction in London. . . Can this sort of madness really continue “in an intellectual void”?

Have the collectors and artists themselves abandoned the very flower of twentieth-century art: i.e., Art Theory? Not yet. The Photo-Realists assure the collectors that everything is okay, all is kosher. They swear: we're not painting real scenes but, rather, camera images ("not realism, *photo systems*"). What is more, we don't show you a brush stroke in an acre of it. We're painting only scenes of midday, in bland sunlight—so as not to be "evocative." We've got all over "evenness" such as you wouldn't believe—we put as much paint on that postcard sky as on that Airstream Silver Bullet trailer in the middle. And so on, through the checklist of Late Modernism. The Photo-Realists are backsliders, yes; but not true heretics.

In all of Cultureburg, in fact, there are still no heretics of any importance, no one attacking Late Modernism in its very foundation—not even at this late hour when Modern Art has reached the vanishing point and our old standby, Hilton Kramer, lets slip the admission: Frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting.

"LETS SLIP," AS I SAY. WE NOW KNOW, OF COURSE, that his words describe the actual state of affairs for *tout le monde* in Cultureburg; but it is not the sort of thing that one states openly. Any orthodox critic, such as Kramer, is bound to defend the idea that a work of art can speak for itself. Thus in December 1974 he attacked the curators of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition "The Impressionist Epoch" for putting big historical notes up on the wall beside the great masterworks of the Impressionists. But why? What an opportunity he missed! If only he could

have drawn upon the wisdom of his unconscious! Have the courage of your secret heart, Hilton! Tell them they should have made the copy blocks bigger!—and reduced all those Manets, Monets, and Renoirs to the size of wildlife stamps!

Twenty-five years from now, that will not seem like such a facetious idea. I am willing (now that so much has been revealed!) to predict that in the year 2000, when the Metropolitan or the Museum of Modern Art puts on the great retrospective exhibition of American Art 1945-75, the three artists who will be featured, the three seminal figures of the era, will be not Pollock, de Kooning, and Johns—but Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Steinberg. Up on the walls will be huge copy blocks, eight and a half by eleven feet each, presenting the protean passages of the period . . . a little “fuliginous flatness” here . . . a little “action painting” there . . . and some of that “all great art is about art” just beyond. Beside them will be small reproductions of the work of leading illustrators of the Word from that period, such as Johns, Louis, Noland, Stella, and Olitski. (Pollock and de Kooning will have a somewhat higher status, although by no means a major one, because of the more symbiotic relationship they were fortunate enough to enjoy with the great Artists of the Word.)

Every art student will marvel over the fact that a whole generation of artists devoted their careers to getting the Word (and to internalizing it) and to the extraordinary task of divesting themselves of whatever there was in their

imagination and technical ability that did not fit the Word. They will listen to art historians say, with the sort of smile now reserved for the study of Phrygian astrology: “That’s how it was then!”—as they describe how, on the one hand, the scientists of the mid-twentieth century proceeded by building upon the discoveries of their predecessors and thereby lit up the sky . . . while the artists proceeded by averting their eyes from whatever their predecessors, from Da Vinci on, had discovered, shrinking from it, terrified, or disintegrating it with the universal solvent of the Word. The more industrious scholars will derive considerable pleasure from describing how the art-history professors and journalists of the period 1945-75, along with so many students, intellectuals, and art tourists of every sort, actually struggled to see the paintings directly, in the old pre-World War II way, like Plato’s cave dwellers watching the shadows, without knowing what had projected them, which was the Word.

What happy hours await them all! With what sniggers, laughter, and good-humored amazement they will look back upon the era of the Painted Word!