

Painting/Writing/History

by Martha Schwendener

Painting's recent adversaries are well known. First came photography. "You know exactly what I think of photography," Marcel Duchamp wrote to Alfred Stieglitz. "I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable."¹ But Duchamp's readymades were an equally potent threat. Then came the eclipse of painting by other forms and the sense that a certain narrative of painting couldn't be sustained. Ad Reinhardt declared his black paintings "the last paintings which anyone can make." Robert Ryman's white paintings posed a similar impasse.

Attempts to revive painting within this sphere were framed as pathological: "hysterical"; "a tantrum, shrieking and sputtering that the end of painting *has not come*."² The return of figurative art in the 1980s, painting seemed positively dangerous, highlighting the "intricate connection between aesthetic mastery and authoritarian domination."³ By the millennium, it wasn't just painting that was declared suspect, but all mediums. Pluralism, which disallowed the primacy of any one medium – or one brand of criticism – had morphed into something else. It was declared: "We inhabit a post-medium condition."⁴

Painting never died, of course. But in the 1970s, the innovations were coming from different sources: Women, blacks, lesbians, gays. "It's very strange that the history of painting could be thought to end just as women were beginning to make their contributions," artists commented; or that "'white' people ... to whom art had belonged got to end the narrative before anyone else could get their foot in the door."⁵ But, "if you think that all the important art is made by straight white men in New York—even when that thinking isn't on a conscious level—then that's the work you're going to be drawn to."⁶

Unless, of course, it wasn't so much an argument about painting as an argument over how *to write* about painting: A crisis presenting itself in the form of a discourse, which later bloomed into a full blown "crisis in criticism."⁷ Or, perhaps, following Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" edict, readers were displacing writers, and critics displacing painters. It's also been suggested that this was an argument happening mostly in New York, and that perhaps it had occurred earlier in Europe with the appearance of essays like Jean Clay's "La peinture est finie" in 1967.⁸

The American argument for the death of painting grew out of the formalism of Clement Greenberg, but the argument put forward by his heirs was against Greenberg's "positivist" art criticism. Theory, the one-word figurehead for a cluster of ideas largely imported from Europe, was adopted by younger critics. Although, as more than one writer has pointed out, by the time "theory" reached American shores, a wildly heterogeneous range of thinkers were fused under a single heading. Within this framework, photography and film were privileged; sculpture was seen as ranging into an "expanded field," but painting wasn't granted the same treatment.

And yet, a "teleological criticism" persisted which relied on technological models of progress, so that painting in the late 1970s and early 80s was posed as "regressive and humanist," instead of critical postmodernism.⁹

If painting was used as a pawn in the writing wars, it could also be used for dividing history. Abstract painting was the emblem of modernism. Reinhardt's "last paintings" were built on a linear conception of history, but postmodern theories were bent on breaking historicism. Saying that the end had come meant giving in "to a historicist conception of history as both linear and total (i.e., one cannot paint after Duchamp, Rodchenko, Mondrain; their work has rendered paintings unnecessary)."¹⁰

But did historicism die with modernism? Is it true, as Barthes claimed that, "To be modern is to know *that which is not possible any more*"? Or was modernism simply a Western and Eurocentric notion, and that maybe "another modernism" happened outside of those spheres – or is taking place right now in China, India, and South America.¹¹

Historical categories themselves are under siege: Time itself is under construction as we undergo. What is the present? Is it the "altermodern"¹² or "contemporaneity,"¹³ a notion that acknowledges the "coexistence of very distinct senses of time," of what it is to exist now and to act in relation to imagined histories and possible futures.

Painting's ontology has changed, too. In 1890 Maurice Denis declared, "It is well to remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." The late 60s and 70s exploded painting's "natural limits": the dimensions of the canvas, the oppositions between abstraction and representation (signaled most famously, perhaps, by Philip Guston).

It has been suggested that painting's virtue might be its "impurity," its ease at absorbing multiple belief systems, technologies, and other fields like performance, architecture, film, photography, dance, sculpture, and installation. Mechanical reproduction, which was initially seen to hark the demise of painting has been like "a vampire's kiss that makes painting immortal."¹⁴ (It also drove the development of abstraction.) Painting might be seen as responding to a certain group of ideas that were called "painting" and now are something else.

And yet, two problems remain, inherited from the 70s and 80s when critical discourse took over: One, that painting was absorbed into museums (alternative spaces were the homes for radical art); and two, that painting remains an art-market staple.

In the early 80s, it was suggested that painting was the perfect "camouflage" for critical thinking, a "subversive method" that would allow one "to place critical aesthetic activity at the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble."¹⁵ This position was critiqued more than it was supported. And attempts to suggest that recent painting has escaped the "reification trap" by inventing "forms and structures" similar to digital networks, that "suture spectators to extra-perceptual social networks rather than merely situating them in a phenomenological relationship of individual perception"¹⁶ seem equally problematic - particularly since the "social network" described is still a gallery located within the art market system.

More important, what does it mean when the primary indicator of a work's value is its ability to challenge or outwit institutions and market structures – when the conditions surrounding the work are often more sophisticated than the work itself? In the early 80s, concern over art's rise in marketability produced this kind of pessimism and concern: "If the workings of the art marketplace demonstrate anything at all, it is its capacity to assimilate, absorb, neutralize and commodify virtually any practice at all."¹⁷ Now these ideas have ossified into a nihilist orthodoxy where "the ultimate master of

détournement turns out to be capitalism itself, which can appropriate and reprogram anything to serve its own ends.”¹⁸

We could follow the claim of Hegelian exhaustion in which painting – and art itself – has collapsed into a form of philosophy, or succumbed to market irrelevance. Recent writers have suggested that Hegel did *not* predict an end to art, however, but rather an end to “the dream of its purity” and autonomy.¹⁹ Even political theorists who offer sobering analyses of globalization and the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape do not foreclose on art’s ability to give us the conceptual means to invent other possibilities, making what had once seemed “utterly impossibly entirely realistic.”²⁰

A more radical question than immanent foreclosure might be to challenge the assumption at the center of much postmodern criticism: Does capitalism *really* invade all areas of consciousness? Or is it an inherently conservative claim, that the *only* possibility for art’s relevance is to resist to commodification?

Similarly, is critical practice the only option for art, or just an extension of modernism’s demand for self-reflexive objects? Rather than adhering to old versions of artistic critique – say, nineteenth-century denunciation of bourgeois morality or, later, resisting reification – some have suggested that art could work to reformulate issues of “liberation and authenticity,”²¹ or that we extend the “post-” that has been appended to practically every art term to criticism itself, so that we might enter a “post-critique” era of art.²²

Painting allows for a complex material reworking and rethinking. Even the most basic, traditional rendition, the “plane surface covered with colors,” allows us – especially those of us who spend our days gazing at flat, illuminated screens – to reorient ourselves in time and space. Painting remains “impure;” it resists, as Reinhardt demonstrated, truly accurate reproduction. It can be photographed, but unlike photography or film in the digital era, it is effectively, materially altered. It has physical components; in a decentralized, virtually-characterized world, it still has a location, a body. It can exploit Duchamp’s detested “retinal” effects. But “retinal” itself has changed radically in recent years, as neuroscience has redefined the realm – the brain – to which the eye connects. Retinality itself is a new topology.

For those still clinging to criticality, painting might serve as a particular seat of resistance. Because, in a world – let’s say the relatively wealthy art world – defined by movement and speed – fast hard drives, global migrations - slowing down might be the most radical act of all. Painting offers the opportunity for prolonged looking.²³ Or even the recuperation of pleasure; Barthes’ destabilizing *jouissance*, or bliss, which somehow got stripped away as his writing made its way into the Anglo-criticism world.

The critical gesture might be to resist the “negative theology” outlining what’s permissible in painting and what’s not.²⁴ To treat criticism itself as a sort of *informe*. To register eruptions, from modernism to “bad painting” to Henry Darger and “Thrift Store Paintings.” In this contested historical age, to let painting be an act of sustained and engaged viewing or, at least, presence.

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 2. Crimp, 82.
 3. Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting." *October* 16. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1981. 46 .
 4. Krauss, Rosalind. *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999. 32.
 5. David Reed quoted in "The Mourning After – Panel Discussion." *Artforum*, March 2003; Monique Prieto quoted in "Thick and Thin – Painters and curators discuss the state of painting in the last two decades," *Artforum*, April 2003.
 6. Marcia Tucker quoted in *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975*. Edited by Katy Siegel. New York: Independent Curators International, 2006. 147.
 7. Miles, Christopher. "The Death of Painting and The Writing of Painting's Post-Crisis, Post-Critique Future." *Art Lies*. Summer 2005.
 8. Isabelle Graw and Yve-Alain Bois quoted in "The Mourning After."
 9. Siegel, Katy. *High Times, Hard Times*, 86-87.
 10. Bois, Yve-Alain. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990. 241.
 11. Negri, Antonio. "Contemporaneity between Modernity and Postmodernity." In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. 24.
 12. Bourriaud, Nicolas, Ed. *Altermodern : Tate Triennial*. London: Tate Publications/New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009.
 13. Smith, Terry. *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. xv. Also see *October* 130. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.
 14. Reed, "The Mourning After."
 15. Lawson, Thomas. "Last Exit: Painting." *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. Edited by Brian Wallis. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. 163-64. (Originally published in *Artforum*, October 1981.)
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 17. Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Photography After Art Photography." *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. 81.
 18. Krauss, 33.
 19. Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. London; New York: Verso, 2007. 89.
 20. Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Artforum*. October 2009, 178.
 21. Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London; New York: Verso, 2005, 469.
 22. Miles, "The Death of Painting and The Writing of Painting's Post-Crisis, Post-Critique Future."
 23. Lane Relyea quoted in "Thick and Thin," *Artforum*, April 2003.
 24. Terry Winters, *Ibid*.
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