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978-0-521-56569-1 - The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art

Barry Schwabsky

Excerpt

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Abstraction, Representation . . .

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THE WIDENING CIRCLE

Abstraction and Representation in Contemporary Art and Criticism

Once again, at least in the hothouse province of the New York art world, we have been debating the tension between what some of us are embarrassed at still having to call “abstraction” and “representation.”* No longer, however, is this primarily a debate that can be situated within the confines of any one medium; for instance, it is not a question of abstract painting versus representational painting. Instead, there has tended to be a presumption – inaccurate but strong – that this is basically a debate between painting, on the one hand, and conceptual or installation-based work on the other; so that here abstraction is taken to more or less correspond to the practice of painting, whereas representation is carried on through arrangements of texts, objects, and photographs.

*This chapter is a revised version of an essay originally published in *Documentario 2*, ed. Marco Cingolani and Massimo Kaufmann (Milan, 1993), and is based on talks given at roundtable discussions at the John Good Gallery, New York, April, 1992 and at the XII Jornadas Internacionales de le Critica sponsored by CAYC Centro de Arte y Comunicacion and the Asociacion Argentina de Criticos de Arte, Buenos Aires, August 28, 1992. Therefore I owe special thanks to John Good and Jorge Glusberg for their kind invitations to participate in these events.

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In any case, I seem to hear the buzz of a lot of potential questions swirling around the conjunction of the terms abstraction and representation today. Among them are questions of how abstract art is, or can be, or should be, represented. I don't only mean, though I partly mean, how it is to be represented in the medium of criticism, in exhibitions, and so on – though that is interesting and difficult enough. I am also thinking, for instance, of how an abstract artist – a term that makes me very uncomfortable, but never mind – might represent her artistic project to herself as she is in the midst of it, a representation that has a more obvious and direct dialectical impact on that which is to be represented.

In fact, insofar as the term “representation” seems to imply something different in substance from what it represents – as the drawing of a horse is clearly not made of the same flesh as a horse, and there is nothing particularly rosy about the word “rose” – it is singularly misleading with regard to the representation of social and cultural facts which are of necessity always in and of themselves representations.

What do I mean by that? Recently I came across an anecdote regarding one of the events that shook Eastern Europe at the end of the last decade, which can serve to represent my view of the embeddedness of representation within social reality:

A young Romanian librarian described to me how, on December 21, 1989, the last famous compulsory pro-Ceausescu demonstration on Bucharest's Palace Square turned into a counter-demonstration. At first there were only ritual chants of “Ceausescu and the People,” but then suddenly, next to her an inconspicuous little man began to yell, “Ceausescu the Dictator!” There was immediate pandemonium. People shrieked with fear and struggled away from the man, creating a large empty circle. Yet he went on undisturbed, and when it became clear that the

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police were not budging, others, too, took up the chant, at first hesitatingly and then ever louder. Ceausescu turned on his heels and was never again seen in public.¹

I don't think this story needs a close reading to reveal how the mere articulation of a new way of representing the relation of the ruler to the ruled actually succeeded in helping to transform that relationship. It is obviously rare for artistic forms of representation to have the power of direct intervention in political events in this way, though when art engages topical subject matter it is not incapable of doing so: think of the effect in the nineteenth century of such paintings as Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* or Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*. And when Bob Dylan sang "The Times They Are A-Changin'," he helped change the times. But more often, art intervenes within its own sphere. An important work of art is generally such because it has helped change the representation of artistic tasks, artistic values, artistic ambitions.

Today, in the realm of the visual arts, there is very little agreement about what those tasks, those values, those ambitions should be. On the American scene, at the moment, I see a clear tendency toward a polarization between two kinds of art: first, an art that intends to be topical and political in the sense of intervening in struggles over representations of, for instance, the environment, AIDS, race, homelessness, and so on; and second, an art that, while not necessarily "formalist" in the sense of positing an absolute autonomy or self-containment of the aesthetic sphere, can be called "formal" because it sees that its primary means for producing meaning is to work on the elements of artistic form. Incidentally, the residue of utopianism that is common to both these strains in contemporary art, despite all the seductive theories of postmodern passivity, is not something peculiar to art since modernism or the

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age of the avant-garde; it is perennial. The German medievalist Arno Borst has written, for instance, that “it is possible that medieval art in general . . . had always tried to produce a radical alternative to reality, something more than a purified reaction to it” – although, as I think it over, I’m not entirely sure whether the alternative to reality here corresponds to abstraction and the reaction to it corresponds to representation or whether it’s the other way round.²

In any case, it may be that this dichotomy between a topical art and a formal one, too, is part of what my pairing of representation and abstraction might allude to: presumably the first kind of art would be an art of representation while the second would be an art of abstraction. (Here the “confessional” portion of my remarks is about to begin.) Anyone who has read much of my work as an art critic since 1984 knows that my interests have leaned heavily, although far from exclusively, toward the kind of art that is supposed to fall within the second of these categories – the one that corresponds to abstraction, to a concern with the workings of form, to the practice of painting – but I would also hope that anyone who has read me carefully might realize that I am unlikely to take such a rough-and-ready categorization at face value. What does it mean to write criticism of abstract art? For me it has certainly not meant writing about reified formal features as though they were somehow of self-evident value in and of themselves – the kind of writing you can find, for instance, if you look at the reviews Donald Judd was writing in the early 1960s, where he would say of a Barnett Newman painting something like this:

Shining Forth (To George), done in 1961, was shown in New York this year [1964]. It’s nine and a half feet high and fourteen and

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a half feet long. The rectangle is unprimed cotton canvas except for two stripes and the edge of a third. Slightly to the left of the centre there is a vertical black stripe three inches wide. All of the stripes run to the upper and lower edges. Slightly less than a foot in from the left edge there is a black stripe an inch wide. This hasn't been painted directly and evenly like the central stripe, but has been laid between two strips of masking tape. The paint has run under the tape some, making the stripe a little rough. A foot in from the right edge there is another stripe an inch wide, but this one is of reserved canvas, made by scraping black paint across a strip of masking tape and then removing it. There isn't much paint on either side of the white stripe; the two edges are sharp just against the stripe and break into sharp palette knife marks just away from it. Some of the marks have been lightly brushed. The three stripes are fairly sharp but none are perfectly even and straight. It's a complex painting.³

Such writing clearly had a polemical intention: to take abstract art from a mythic realm into a material one. That intention was important in its time – it did manage to create a big empty circle around the “vir heroicus sublimus” who was the Newman of the 1950s, though only temporarily – but it doesn't interest me very much today, because I don't really believe that, as Frank Stella put it at about the same time, what you see is what you see. I think that not only – but especially – when you look at art you see a lot more than what you see, and that criticism is meant to articulate this something more. But it doesn't seem to me that it gets you very far to say that this something more is something that is represented. It is evident that all abstraction represents something, and that all representation abstracts from something. It's just a little less obvious that representation only takes place *in and through* abstraction and vice versa, although familiarity with E. H. Gombrich's dem-

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onstration in *Art and Illusion* that all pictorial images arise through the use of abstract representational schemata is helpful here.

But let me go back to that fable about Romania for a minute – and it is a kind of fable, whether it’s entirely true or not. I said that it was by articulating a new representation of the relation of Ceausescu to the populace that the “inconspicuous little man” helped transform that relationship. What I want to say now is that the term representation is too vague, and that this is why it has, as I said, a tendency to mislead. If I were to emphasize instead that the man was *articulating* Ceausescu’s role, articulating how people actually felt about him in contrast to the inert representations they had allowed themselves to repeat, I think I would be giving a more vivid sense of how his action had to do with an active forming or formulating of the very material with which it is involved rather than some passive mirroring of things.

In this sense I would say that as a critic I have tried to talk about the way in which abstract art articulates its content – keeping in mind what Willem de Kooning said, that “content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash,”⁴ which means to me that you need to use some delicacy in trying to get at it, a little stealth – but that then at the right moment you just have to jump out and grab it, somewhat ruthlessly or recklessly, if it’s not going to slip away. This is very different from what I once called the “allegorical lamination of meaning” onto an abstract form. The problem is that it leaves you with suggestions of meaning that may be indefensible, because it puts criticism in the position of likewise having to articulate meanings that – like a pre-1989 Romania’s perception of Ceausescu as a dictator, for that matter – both are and are not there. Although it strikes me that the most significant form of abstraction there is may be typified by precisely the “large empty circle” widening around that little man by all the people withdrawing in dis-

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may from the infection of his unspeakable words, unless it is rather the ulterior withdrawal, that of the “representative” of the people whose claim on representation has suddenly been put into question – since, etymologically, “abstraction” is nothing other than a drawing away from something. While I am hardly as brave as that “inconspicuous little man,” and I would never want to imply that anything one could do as an art critic involves that kind of moral heroism, I do tend to think that if I haven’t somehow, in writing about abstract art, allowed my argument to lead into some statement that’s foolhardy or ill-founded or that might even make me feel as though people will cringe away from the page in embarrassment, then I haven’t been quite honest with myself in doing my job. So I’ve written about Carl Ostendarp’s work as equivalent to hallucinogenic drug experiences, compared the three-panel paintings of David Row to the narrative structure of “triangular desire” as explicated by Renè Girard, talked about Suzanne McClelland’s “stuttering of sense in the face of its own indeterminacy” as a rebuke to the implicit Gnosticism of American conceptual art.⁵ Not claims that put me at any particular physical risk, obviously, but still, all of these things are highly debatable, and none is represented “in” the work. They are all effects, articulated by me as having been articulated for me by the works in question, that emerge in the temporality of viewing them, either through the relations among parts of the works or in the relation between the work and its embodied viewer. Which is another reason why I prefer the word “articulation” to the word “representation”: because representation seems to be a static relationship, whereas articulation takes place in time – since I am in accord with neither the old or new Laocoons that would have it, as Clement Greenberg wrote in one of his last published essays, that “visual art is instantaneous, or almost so, in its proper experiencing, which is of its unity above and before any-

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thing else.”⁶ I completely disagree with that. When asked, “How long would you like people to look at one of your paintings,” Agnes Martin replied, “Well, I’d like them to give it a minute, anyway.”⁷ Visual art is ultimately neither abstract nor representational just because it comes to us in time and in pieces, and what unity or structure or meaning it has must be reconstructed by us in the empty space left by another unity, another structure, another meaning, that has been withdrawn.

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**“THE REAL
SITUATION”****Philip Guston and Mark Rothko at
the End of the 1960s**

Philip Guston once recalled a 1957 studio visit in which Mark Rothko told him, “Phil, You’re the best story-teller and I’m the best organ player.”¹ As a piece of comparative criticism, this remark sums up a good deal of what one might want to say about these two painters. But not quite all.* In April 1985 we were given the opportunity to see Rothko’s “dark paintings” of 1969 and 1970 (at Pace) and Guston’s small paintings of 1968 and 1969 (at David McKee), two nearly concurrent bodies of work which document a crisis that could hardly have been foreseen in 1957.

This conjunction opened a window onto the end of a decade in which the New York art world had changed drastically. If the 1930s was the decade in which an advanced artistic community began to form in New York, and the 1940s was the one in which that community began to fulfill itself (the Abstract Expressionist breakthrough), it was in the 1950s that, in the face of cultural acceptance and worldly success, this community began to seem less possible and began to fragment into a collection of Olympian individuals

*This chapter is a revised version of an essay originally published in *Arts Magazine*, December 1986.