

Cambridge University Press

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

Barry Schwabsky

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In this collection of critical essays, Barry Schwabsky reexamines the art produced since the 1960s, demonstrating how the achievements of “high modernism” remain consequential to it, through tensions between representation, abstraction, and language. Offering close readings of works produced by several generations of European and American artists, he begins with an analysis of the late period of two Abstract Expressionists, Philip Guston and Mark Rothko, who saw their own success as a failure of reception and who came to question radically their own work. With the core of the book focused on Michelangelo Pistoletto and Mel Bochner, major figures of Arte Povera and Conceptual Art whose works in a variety of media demonstrate a deepening critical engagement with modernism, Schwabsky also studies the work of emerging artists, such as L. C. Armstrong and Rainer Ganahl, who continue to examine modernism’s legacies.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As the subtitle of this collection implies, I am less interested in notions of postmodernism than in the idea that the achievements of what has been called “high” modernism, particularly (but not exclusively) abstract art, remain consequential for the art of the past three decades. Among the consequences of those achievements is their inimitability. The art discussed in this book struggles with questions about what to do *after* – even when, as in the case of the late work of Philip Guston and Mark Rothko, it is a question of what to do after one’s own contribution to what has been described as “the triumph of American painting.” Another, related question is the following: What is the situation of the artist in relation to the cultural materials, at once forbiddingly inert and threateningly dynamic, with which and against which she works? One of the reasons abstract art interests me so much is that it seems to present such questions in a particularly naked way. But I have no sense of its having “replaced” or rendered obsolete any art of representation. I am astonished that there still exist critics who can speak, for instance, of “the prohibition on chromatic expressivity that history imposed on painting, which historically followed the prohibition on

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pictorial representation”¹: the history I understand is no god in a machine and hands down no commandments.

THE ESSAYS in Part I of this book focus on the unstable dialectic between abstraction and representation, whereas in Part III the introduction of language as a third term – *il terzo incomodo*, as the Italians say – defers any conceivable synthesis. The “interlude” which is the middle section (Part II) of *The Widening Circle* reflects my special interest in contemporary Italian art. These essays illuminate by resituating many of the issues explored in the sections of the book that concentrate on American art, or on the work of artists whose lives and careers have been closely involved with the American art scene. This middle section also includes the only essay that departs from my chronological focus on the last three decades, but the degree to which the art of Filippo de Pisis, thanks to his ambivalent relation to the *avanguardia storiche*, in which he nonetheless played a small role, anticipates concerns of more recent artists will, I think, be clear.

In our time the artist works without the benefit or limitation of a given or preformed language. There are many languages available, but they may be mutually incomprehensible, and no historical necessity has elected any of them – not abstraction, not art-as-concept, not the discourse of the body – the master language or metalanguage that would assure shared meaning or the certainty of correctness. What continues to drive art is the urgency to make contact. That is the critic’s situation too – at least, it’s been mine. By acknowledging its necessary quantum of arbitrariness, by revaluing the hazardous leap of interpretation in the face of what George Steiner has called the “maximalization of art’s semantic incommen-

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surability in respect of the formal means of expression,"²² criticism has a chance of facing down the corruption, decadence, or just boringly eclectic subjectivism that always threaten to take the field when criteria are vague.

For that marvelous critic Fairfield Porter, really a man of the 1930s, the great subject of art was work – in the first instance that of the making of the art object itself, and through that, work in general.³ It's wonderful to me that no one would imagine this by looking at his paintings – but looking at his paintings after you know it is to see them a bit differently. For me I suppose the great subject is, rather, desire: the aspiration or longing on behalf of which the work is undertaken, or thanks to which the labor of necessity may be transubstantiated into the labor of love. Perhaps this tendency to see art in terms of desire and the embodiment of desire is what has led me to see in it, as Porter saw something like the traces of class struggle, traces of the sort of gender conflicts that feminist critics have brought to our attention (just as my concern with the heretical arbitrariness of interpretation has led me to borrow from studies of the Kabbalah). I agree with Porter that "accurate impressionist criticism is the kind that communicates to the reader of a magazine what the character of a painter's work is," as well as that "criticism creates an analogy, and by examining the analogy you see what the art essentially is."⁴ It transcends its occasion only to the extent that those analogies are self-sustaining, in which case it can continue to illuminate its subject even as history carries them both into transformed contexts.

To speak of analogies may be to say that criticism is a fundamentally *symbolist* genre. In any case it is a genre of peculiarly hybrid specificity, being easily distinguishable from aesthetic theory, art history, or journalism, although nourished by all three and in-

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forming them in turn, but at the price of leaving its most essential judgments unstated and the narrative of its own developing self-consciousness implicit. For that reason, more than the other genres I have named, criticism depends on its readers, who in turn must be criticism's critics.

My most astute critic has been my wife, Carol Szymanski, and to her go my deepest thanks. This book would not have been conceived without the encouragement of David Carrier and might not have been brought to term without that of Paul Mattick, Jr., two philosopher-critics whose insights have often challenged and stimulated me. Particular gratitude – for the chance to talk, over the years, about much of the thinking that has found its way into this book – is also due to Carol Greene, Faye Hirsch, Frances Lansing, Ross Neher, Archie Rand, Susan Wanklyn, and John Yau, as well as many of the artists whose work is discussed here. Editing *Arts Magazine* was the best learning experience a critic could ever have. I would like to thank Paul Shanley, its publisher during my tenure, for giving me the opportunity to do so, and all my colleagues there for their help, but especially Bill Jones, Clair Joy, and Deborah Gardner-Gray. My predecessor as editor of *Arts Magazine* was also the first person to publish my art criticism; I thank Richard Martin for allowing me to educate myself in public. Nor would this book exist without the other magazines in which much of this work first appeared, and whose editors I cite here: Michael McTwigan and Jennifer Ditsler, of *American Ceramics*; Jack Bankowsky and Sheila Glaser, of *Artforum*; Elizabeth Baker and Meyer Raphael Rubinstein, of *Art in America*; Catherine Millet and Myriam Salomon, of *Art Press*; Matthew Collings, of *Artscribe*; Marie-Ange Brayer of *Exposé: Revue d'Esthétique et d'Art Contemporain*; Helena Kontova and Giancarlo Politi, of *Flash Art*; Josefina Ayerza, of *Lacanian Ink*; Jacqueline Brody, of *Print Collectors Newsletter*; and Suzanne Ra-

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mljak, of *Sculpture*. Equally to be thanked are directors of galleries that commissioned some of these essays for their catalogues: Pierre Huber, of Art & Public, Geneva, and Nina Nielsen, of the Nielsen Gallery, Boston, as well as Massimo Kaufmann and Marco Cingolani, who were kind enough to publish the opening essay in what was not a catalogue to “Documentario 2” but rather a book of independent essays accompanying the exhibition of that name. Most of the essays have been revised for this publication. In so doing I have tried to remain true to my frame of mind at the times of their original composition, so far as I can reconstruct it, but my main concern has been for correctness, and in some cases to restore passages cut for reasons of space.