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978-0-521-63393-2 - Signifying Art: Essays on Art after 1960

Marjorie Welish

Excerpt

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## Introduction

This is a collection of essays on art which variously engage the aesthetics of responses to Abstract Expressionism and the New York School. The essays were written over a twenty-year span beginning in the late 1970s. Having been published previously as reviews, catalogue essays, and conference papers, they reflect the vicissitudes of the times. Even so, under a rubric of art during the period following Abstract Expressionism, there do coalesce certain givens which these essays respect.

The art criticism gathered in *Signifying Art* does in part investigate the fate of the concept of the brushstroke, which became the focus of sense and significance in painting after 1945 – that is, from the 1950s through the 1980s. The brushstroke as *matière*, a material intuition prior to thought, was the sense conveyed through raw pigment on canvas that was often left unworked. (In sculpture the analogue would be found as materials left “as themselves” in assemblages.) At an opposite extreme the brushstroke, together with other formal elements of painting and sculpture, presented itself as a way to theorize about art within the artwork itself: The brushstroke became a sign of its own conventionality. Yet another sense, one derived from the brushstroke’s being taken for granted as an appropriate instrumentality for expressivities of all kinds, may be said to have revisited Abstract Expressionism. No radical reexamination of the brushstroke, this last variety continued in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, consolidating Abstract Expressionism’s gains.

Although the essays gathered in *Signifying Art* take for granted an art biased toward the brushstroke as the minimal unit of visual and cultural meaning, they also take for granted an art that is self-conscious of compositional structure and the idea of order as such, and they rely on the modern notion that to adopt an order of some kind is to propose a style and mentality. As a result of the profound nonobjective strategies conceived by Wassily Kandinsky, by Kasimir Malevich in Suprematism, by Vladimir Tatlin in Constructivism, and by the competitive partnership of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque

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in Cubism, unprecedented attention came to be paid to the creative organization of the available spatial field. In Analytic Cubism figure and ground conspicuously interpenetrate and disclose an even-handed formal logic wherein insides and outsides, fronts and backs, and far and near constitute a structure of relations. Thanks to these and other investigations into the ordering of space, art after World War II might measure its own achievement against these pioneering paradigms. By the 1950s, kinds of distributed order ranging from scatter to series – whether improvised or totally predetermined – carried the burden of meaning in music, dance, poetry, and visual art.

Indeed, the semantics of syntax that had determined style during the early twentieth century grew into a cultural preoccupation by the 1960s and 1970s, because by then constitutive orders had become identifiably signs of modern art.



The immediate historical touchstone for our present purposes is that of the miraculous year of 1948, when Jackson Pollock, following a longstanding tradition in the arts, declared his stylistic maturity by titling a painting by a kind of opus number: *Number 1*. In that same year Barnett Newman likewise staked his claim to style by naming a work *Onement 1*. These aesthetic declarations put the art world on notice, giving these artists both a form and a style to defend; at the same time, they were inciting others to answer with a style at least as necessary to art history as their own. Under one mode of description, the crux of Pollock's painting is a gesture made endless; under another description, it is a line made to incorporate space. Under either one – the expressive or formal description – Pollock's constitutive synthesis of stroke and all-over organization is seen to be a definitive form of modern art, if not its very signature, and it was soon to become a standard and stereotype. At the same time Newman's rending of space by line – organizing space with a single stroke – also codified a modern form. These stylistic manifestoes by both Pollock and Newman constituted a major aesthetic challenge for artists in the United States after World War II.

Without Europeans and others who had been displaced from their home countries in the 1930s and the 1940s by totalitarian regimes and by World War II, however, so-called American art would not have come about. This is a truism that the term New York School tends to disguise because, after all, the term New York

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School designates a place not where artists crucial to the era were born but where they ended up. Since the 1930s, they had convened in New York as the diaspora of culture in Europe brought cosmopolitan artists from everywhere. A sophisticated intelligentsia – or at least a conspicuous sampling of that culture, one that might have been found in Berlin or Paris or Moscow – concentrated in New York and transformed the scene, so that American art came into maturity thanks to the cultural pressure put on the provincial culture in the United States from abroad. What this development entailed was the education of American artists in the forms of European modern art that developed in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the Soviet Union. But it further entailed educating Americans in fundamental visual literacy: The language of form common to an understanding of abstract art and indeed of art in general – and one presupposed by Russian and Eastern European artists in formalism and structuralism by the second decade of the century – was transmitted from East to West as artists made their way from abroad. At any rate this critical mass of foreign art-world sophistication was indispensable to the creation of American art then and to its presence on the world stage thereafter.

Strong affinities and antipathies to Abstract Expressionism, in particular, and within the New York School, in general, still gained momentum throughout the 1960s. First, the formal preoccupations of the New York School continued to provide a frame of reference for art strategies. It was not only the brushstroke and its aftermath that were continually at issue. The very definition of the art object and its significant history became the target of self-reference. Then the assumption that modernity is an ongoing project – or at least the topic to which the generations challenging it must refer – was evidenced in the several vivid responses of color-field abstraction, Minimalism, and Pop Art (or, by another description, in assemblages, installations, and events), all emerging at the time. Finally, the New York School set the standard for art that was proposing to overthrow or meet the challenge of significant cultural statement. With styles, modes, and genres of strong definition, the art of the 1960s emerged victorious in the contest against the normative artifacts which the New York School had brought forth.

A retrospective glance at the period underscores the fact that the New York School provoked several compelling antagonistic art strategies that formed in response to its influence. Although other narratives may be told, it may still be argued that throughout the

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1970s, the influence of the New York School continued to develop – as, for instance, both in the fact that the calligraphy designed by Pollock may be said to be reenergized recursively in the drawings of Philip Guston and in the codified style of mark in the paintings of David Reed and (later) of Jonathan Lasker, as well as in the fact that a palpable space optically conveyed gives Newman an heir not only in the light installations of Dan Flavin but also in those liminal environments of James Turrell.

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This book presupposes that the strong challenge to the New York School is met with at least an intuited sense of strong narratives that compel what's at stake for modern art history. For this reason, as well as for the author's own situation (I was a student trained in art history at Columbia University during the late 1960s), the essays found in *Signifying Art* approach the art through issues internal to the discipline. Stylistic analysis, one that presupposes an historical sense of style as embedded cultural expression, is advanced to clarify, interpret, and explain the art being considered.

Despite the postmodern dogma of philosophy without epistemology, in its cultural relativism modern art history also acknowledges its own hypothetical status as knowledge. By advocating the systems of thought, values, and beliefs of proximate and remote cultures, those that provide access to an organically derived cultural relativism, an art historian remains aware of his or her tastes; yet such historians overrule these other systems of belief on behalf of the aesthetics advanced by the inherited culture under discussion. Meanwhile, the fact that pure objectivity is impossible is not a source of disillusionment.

As a critic, what I hope to contribute is the sense that art-historically grounded judgment is an engaged mode of thought rather than a holding pattern in archival practices. Again, because to assert something is to hypothesize knowledge that (at least while it is entertained) has the status of plausibility, art history provides frames of reference that act as a check on an infinite regress of interpretation as much as on the mood swings of opinion. Meanwhile, the hypothetical knowledge proposed by art history to be true allows for much leeway in interpreting facts. A cultural perspective on style, together with ideological analyses of empirical chronicles as well as other objectifying perspectives that are at work in traditional art history, continues to be useful for art criticism; such per-

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spectives remain useful even as experiments in phenomenological, hermeneutic, or (very different) semiotic interpretations render art-historically informed criticism receptive to creative readings of the art object. These are some of the assumptions of my own practice.

*Signifying Art* includes the frequent use of a stereoscopic perspective on art: Two or more essays on an artist's work appear in the book to show not only that ongoing engagement with significant work is worthwhile but also that language and thought play a role by subjecting knowledge to the creative process inherent in writing and signification. Instead of being based on an authorized sense of the art object – authorized, indeed, through the artist's intention, told again and again in profiles in magazines and official biographies – an essay that proffers a deviant classification may reveal the cultural codes of the artwork neglected in prior accounts. So when Julia Brown Turrell organized an exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's art and proposed that I write the catalogue essay, what interested me critically was the perversity of her designation "sculpture," particularly since Rauschenberg had all along and without embarrassment advanced the notion of "combines," assemblages that trashed the distinctions between and mixed the categories of painting and sculpture. "What happens to change the meaning of the artifacts we call 'assemblages,' " I wondered, "if they are restored to the type named 'sculpture'?" "Pail for Ganymede" was the result. It appears together with "Texas, Japan, Etc.: Rauschenberg's Sense of Place," criticism written on the occasion of one of Rauschenberg's many mid-career exhibitions. Then again, in thinking about Judd's work, I noticed that the imputed signification altered considerably depending upon whether I considered his work to be "cubic" or "boxy" – to assume, in the first instance, the intention of geometric form and, in the second, the vernacular idiom. Thus, an essay emerged from a meditation on the description "box," one that explored how such a description embeds interpretation. "Box, Aspects of" appears along with "Quality Through Quantity," an essay which evaluates Judd's objects in the face of the presupposition about Minimalist art that whatever remains of content is uniformly present throughout its severely reductive form.

Meaning, then, establishes itself as a convention in part owing to the role language plays in the critical process. The selective, ideologically plotted account known as history is itself a description embedding an interpretation (and explanation) of events, one that relies on the artifacts privileged in such a set of linguistic choices even as the



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critic at the same time advances open-ended “writerly” texts for discussion. Moreover, the critic’s retelling of such a narrative in the reception of cultural history puts into play a narrative from a time distinct from that of the artifact. Whether or not a causal explanation of the state of affairs is forthcoming, the critic’s language may well register cultural codes in the community of his or her contemporaries. There is no telling in advance whether a critic is conscious of this fact and will work the language advantageously.

Catalogue essays may frequently occasion such creative experiment and, ranging from the meditation to the prose poem, may suggest a creative role for criticism that engages the art object under scrutiny. Beyond this is a sociological point to be made concerning professional criticism. Adopting a belletristic style when writing catalogue essays reveals a certain professional constraint; in contrast to independent criticism, criticism in which the art critic is allowed intellectual freedom, the catalogue essay is, with rare exceptions, an occasion for advocacy – art appreciation rather than art criticism is what is mandated.

Critics well known for cultivating a rhetoric of style ranging from the metaphorical activism of Harold Rosenberg and John Berger to the literary structuralist and perpetually self-repudiating poststructuralist Roland Barthes (to name critics brought up for discussion in these pages) propose that language provides a necessarily subversive instrumentality that mediates between art and the viewer in the staged resistance to merchandising. Sometimes seen as an intervention, sometimes as an intrusion, literary discourse has come to lend strategies and tactics to art criticism in the closing decades of this century. In the 1950s the editor Tom Hess conceived *Art News* as a forum in which writing on art comprehended the scholarly and the poetic without slighting either area, and for the most part this was a vision of criticism that worked. From the late 1960s onward and at the expense of formal criticism, writing in art magazines received the imprint of the critic as creative author for whom, as suggested by semiologist Umberto Eco, the labyrinth provides a model for proliferating interpretations that are irreducible to a single explanatory or ideological viewpoint. It was this that I had in mind when publishing the text in the last chapter which was originally written to accompany an exhibition that I organized in a gallery, a text that argued in support of an alternative thesis to the essential definition of modernity. Now the closing piece in this book, “Contextualizing ‘The

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Open Work,'” amalgamates the once parallel account of the exhibition statement after the show had received critical reception.

In any event, reinterpreting artwork over time helps instill the sense that knowledge is hypothetical and in formation, however it may present itself through ideology and culture.

It is this last point I want to stress in relation to the contribution of art criticism to culture now. Rather than submitting to the opportunistic pluralism that passes for progressive thought, art criticism has a role to play in mediating between both sensibility and intellect – and with scruple, not convenience, in investigating the cultural content of style and matters of form, as well as in utilizing speculative instruments worthy of the task. It should be possible for description, interpretation, and evaluation to adjust to a shift in the cultural hierarchy of values and beliefs without imploding altogether. Art criticism may provide a mode of thought whereby speculative instruments – tools that are analytic and empirical, formal and stylistic, linguistic and philosophical – continue to test the received ideas of modern (and postmodern) culture.

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# **Narrating the Hand**

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