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Continuous Model: The Paintings of David Row

David Carrier

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The subtitle of Oskar Batschmann's new book, "A Conflict between Market and Self-Expression," is surely misleading. He implies that treating artworks as commodities is somehow at odds with seeking self-expression. Instead, what the massive evidence gathered in this book shows is that the modernist art market has been driven by a fascination with such self-expression. The reason some few artists have achieved fame, and appropriate financial rewards, is precisely that they have identified original forms of self-expression. In that way, great painters are like famous pop musicians or successful filmmakers. Some of Batschmann's materials - his account of the modernist avant-garde in Paris, for example - are familiar. But his discussion of such figures as Asmus Jakob Carstens, Rosa Bonheur, and Anselm Feuerbach was new to me. It is important that this book deals with the German as well as the French side of the nineteenth century. I was a little surprised to find the Abstract Expressionists called "the storm troops of freedom in the Cold War" (203-5), a phrase which in translation from the original German has infelicitous implications; and I was curious about what the author, a professor in Bern, meant in speaking of Felix Vallotton's "cruel Swiss objectivity" (151). But these are minor queries.

What is revelatory about *The Artist in the Modern World* is how much is learned by treating the history of modernism not in stylistic terms, but as the story of an evolving market in novel commodities. Batschmann's Gustave Courbet is not a would-be revolutionary but a clever, gifted hustler; in controlling the audience for installations, his Bruce Nauman is a shrewd, innovative entrepreneur. There is an unfortunate tendency for people interested in the connections between art and commerce to treat art in reductive terms. This is why high auction prices and the vandalizing of expensive masterpieces fascinate both the public and art historians. But unless we understand how art is sold and promoted, how can we properly grasp its purely aesthetic qualities? Much of the effect of most recent U.S. art depends on its being presented in upscale galleries - and that would be impossible without the financial resources of successful dealers. "I hate being called an art dealer," one dealer once said to me. But without several generations of such gifted businesspeople, the U.S. art world could hardly exist. And then our puritanical leftists, writers whom I admire, who denounce the society of the spectacle would have nothing to criticize.

The one serious self-imposed limitation of Batschmann's account is that it says too little about the commercial background of the art market. In discussing Documenta, for example, it would be illuminating if he had explained why it was set in such an out-of-the-way German town. In discussing Joseph Beuys, what certainly would be useful is some explanation of how such a striking personality became a major producer of commodities. Batschmann concludes his book by saying that "installations, more than other exhibition pieces, offer the possibility of realizing the so often propounded community of artists and public" (240). Surely there is more to the story. Installations, more than mere easel paintings or free-standing sculptures,

permit the museum to rival the postmodern spaces outside its walls. Speaking of "the entertainment industry" usually is meant as a put-down, but the museum director who competes for funding with sports teams and other genuinely popular entertainments is likely to think differently.

Nicholas Serota's extremely condensed, nicely illustrated history of the museum of modern art suggestively identifies ways in which curators' choices about how to display art imply how that art is to be interpreted. It is misleading to speak of Experience or Interpretation - for how is the experience of art possible apart from the interpretation of what we see? Serota has shrewd observations about the transfer of art from the studio to the public space of the museum, and the awareness by recent artists of the museum's goals. He uses his knowledge as an administrator in this regard. Director of the Tate Gallery in London, he previously was in charge of the Whitechapel Art Gallery in that city and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. Unlike all too many academic writers, he knows how to get right to the point. He has traveled widely and has observed with care. As he writes, "Our aim must be to generate a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery in looking at particular paintings, sculptures or installations in a particular room at a particular moment, rather than find themselves standing on the conveyor belt of history" (55). How surprising to find allusion to the ideas of Oxford's most distinguished nineteenth-century aesthete, Walter Pater, in this context! - and how apt.

When Serota argues that "the encyclopedic and dictionary functions of the museum are neither achievable nor desirable" (42), it is natural to ask what indeed is possible now. Even such an encyclopedic museum as the Museum of Modern Art in New York has odd limitations. One finds there very little Max Beckmann, only a small selection of Soviet revolutionary art, and as yet no clear vision of what happens after Abstract Expressionism. No doubt the financial resources of Manhattan collectors will make it possible for that institution to rewrite its narrative of modernism when it constructs its new building. But once we take seriously the posthistorical situation of post-sixties art, it becomes genuinely unclear whether any museum can provide an adequate coverage of the full range of contemporary artistic practice.

Arthur C. Danto, a philosopher and art critic for the Nation, is the aesthete who has provided the most challenging and plausible diagnosis of this posthistorical situation. And for that reason alone, this convenient collection of his art criticism since 1984 is very welcome. Gregg Horowitz and Tom Huhn, the editors, offer a sympathetic but not uncritical reading of Danto's arguments, to which Danto responds in an afterword. "I feel that they know the way my mind works better than I do, and have constructed a piece of prose which in its own right manifests the attributes of clarity, of consequence, and of wit that have always been my values and ideals as a writer" (195).

Insofar as Danto likes a great range of art, the paintings of Sean Scully as well as the photographs of Cindy Sherman and Robert Mapplethorpe, what would seem to follow is that no purely philosophical theory can explain his taste. Danto likes what he likes, without supposing that others necessarily will agree with him. (In this respect, he is like Clement Greenberg, who in the end did not try to justify his taste with philosophical theorizing.) "Were I to go by taste alone, I would be a very conservative little person, disposed to find enjoyment in Chardin and Morandi, Vermeer and Terborch, Matisse and Cezanne, but hardly any pleasure at all in art I know to be important and in urgent need of critical analysis" (201). Speaking for myself, as an art critic I think Danto's attitude exactly right. How tedious are those

writers who, unable to transcend their youthful enthusiasms, cannot sympathetically judge new art. But what remains then for the philosopher to say about taste? My own view, writing now as an aesthete, is that no purely abstract argumentation can provide much guidance. Taste in art, as in life more generally, is not governed by rules. A critic who judged according to some algorithm would be a dull person indeed.

When in the seventies, I walked from the tube stop to the National Gallery in London, I passed a billboard announcing the long-running play, *No Sex Please, We're British*. That scene came back to me when I read Fiona McCarthy's description of the life of Stanley Spencer. Even a critic whose tastes are as catholic as Danto's might have some difficulties with this man, the most British painter imaginable. McCarthy's admirable, indulgent text quotes the artist: "A man raises a woman's dress with the same passionate admiration & love for the woman as the priest raises the host on the altar" (36). Spencer is God's gift to feminist art historians, who can learn much from him about the English male erotic imagination. After a thoroughly repressed childhood, Spencer served in World War I. A very late developer, he had a great desire for erotic satisfaction. His second marriage was to a lesbian, who brought her lover along to the ceremony, which his first wife also attended. Spencer was nuts about sex, and he was religious. He died in 1959, just missing the Swinging London of the sixties.

Nowadays when so much New York art is concerned with personal erotic fantasy, Spencer might yet become fashionable. Franker than Lucian Freud's, his sharply focused scenes are hallucinatory. His serious interest in biblical scenes demonstrates the plausibility of Danto's claim that in our posthistorical age everything is possible. In judging his art, I can only appeal to my taste. Compared, say, with Beckmann, Spencer is a mere illustrator. I don't believe in his visions. Spencer doesn't feel crazy enough to be an authentic religious mystic; he seems to me merely pretending to be crazy. What is wrong with his paintings? Why do they remain, still, outside the realm of serious art? Maybe some aesthete can interestingly answer this question.

Robert Kushner certainly is a serious artist, who deserves much more attention than he has received recently. Alexandra Anderson-Spivy's biography gives an effortlessly lucid narrative of his career. Interested seriously in Islamic decoration well before multiculturalism became fashionable and postmodern before that term was invented, Kushner is a middle-aged survivor of the era when it was possible to live in Manhattan on \$75 a week. In the seventies, the pattern painting of Kushner and his friends was much written about; in the next decade, this happily hedonistic art was pushed aside. Not interested in political protest, Kushner was (and is) concerned with visual opulence, eroticism, and pleasure in patterns. Anderson-Spivy's extremely useful book provides a sympathetic exposition of his career and a striking selection of his beautiful paintings and installations. A theorist interested in the history of taste can learn much from her account, which is admirably straightforward and seriously sympathetic to its subject. Kushner's recent art illustrates the importance of working forward even when the larger art world is unsympathetic to your concerns. It is too soon to augur the ultimate judgment of history on his art.

David Row is a comparatively fashionable painter. Justly so, for he is terrific. What U.S.-born man of his generation (he graduated from Yale University with an M.F.A. in 1974) is better at extending the traditions of Abstract Expressionism? Were I a resentful person, I would envy John Zinsser, whose brilliantly condensed presentation of tile history of U.S. abstraction since the mid-seventies explains more

in relatively few words than I did in many long essays from the eighties. Himself a highly distinguished artist, Zinsser discusses Row's use of geometry, showing how he builds out the achievement of Frank Stella and Robert Mangold. "Row's work has loosed its formalist moorings and is traveling of its own volition and velocity, constantly relocating itself in relation to the historical continuum" (9). That seems exactly right - these well-chosen words point to the way in which Row, like a few of his contemporaries, has defined a posthistorical tradition of abstraction. Here, as in Anderson-Spivy's account of Kushner, the best art writing is motivated by frank, friendly partisanship.

Greenberg's "Collage" (1959), perhaps his hardest essay, treats Picasso's Cubist art formally, and Rosalind E. Krauss analyzes its content in her new book. Some earlier antiformalist art historians claimed that one "key" to Cubism was the words on the collage materials Picasso used. Borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and Ferdinand de Saussure, Krauss's *The Picasso Papers* more subtly attends to and brackets the content of the artist's Cubist paintings. Picasso is a ventriloquist - borrowing many voices without assuming full authorial authority for any of them. In his Cubism, Krauss suggests, we find a precedent for his later appropriation of neoclassical styles. Greenberg's formalist Picasso was Pollock's precursor; Krauss's semiotic Picasso anticipates Robert Rauschenberg's sixties silkscreens, Sherman's photographs, and much of the art admired by the writers publishing in *October*. Collage is a semiotic art. Quoting words without using them to communicate, Picasso brackets the reference of his collaged words. In the jargon of analytic philosophy, his Cubist collages have a sense without any reference.

As Yve-Alain Bois has correctly noted, Krauss is a wonderful writer. Unlike her many epigones, she has a real gift for visual thinking. She also - and this is rarer - has an amazing capacity to rethink fundamental issues. A full study of her career would amount to a history of art writing from the era of formalism to the present. She has a prodigious capacity to assimilate novel ideas. Her career seemingly illustrates her thesis that modernism advances not, as Greenberg thought, by building on tradition, but by a succession of violent ruptures-by acts of radically undialectical negation. Because Krauss's account is fully worked out, and mostly surprisingly lucid, it provokes questions. What exactly is her general view about autobiographical explanations of visual artworks? If she holds that Picasso's art cannot be reduced to a symptom of his life, then she is surely correct. But if, as she sometimes seems to suggest, Picasso's private life cannot tell us anything significant about his art, then her analysis is obviously counter-intuitive. After discussing his anxieties at some length, she says that she does not "want to probe his private life - indeed, my analysis has nothing to do with it" (110). That is puzzling, for surely discussing his anxious superstitions is to probe his private life.

Here, as in her earlier books, Krauss does not avoid the obvious problems involved in presenting her own relatively clear conceptions with reference to, or with the aid of, more obscure theorizing. (She has dropped the pseudo-scientific Greimas structuralist diagrams that disfigured her previous book, *The Optical Unconscious*.) When her visual analysis of Cubism is relatively clear, what is gained by an appeal to Theodor Adorno's obscure account of Igor Stravinsky? I am also puzzled by her interpretation of Jean-Joseph Goux's discussion of counterfeiting. According to her summary, he says: "it is the very onset of token money that paradoxically carries fraudulence to the heart of the system" (20). But surely there is nothing inherently fraudulent about paper money. Her claim, borrowed with acknowledgment from Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, that photography is like abstract painting because both are

concerned with "the grids, the nested squares, the monochromes, the color fields . . . submitted to the mark of the multiple" (128) mystifies me. Buchloh seems to describe the abstractions of Piet Mondrian and Ad Reinhardt, but not those of Pollock, Brice Marden, or Roy Lichtenstein. When the real target of her critique of autobiographical art history is presumably the best and fullest account, John Richardson's *A Life of Picasso*, why waste time discussing Norman Mailer's amateurish book or John Berger's merely journalistic analysis? (I critically discuss her earlier accounts of autobiographical interpretation in my forthcoming essay "Painting as a Performance Art: The Case of Picasso," to be published in the catalogue for an exhibition at the Stanford Art Museum.) Krauss speaks of Picasso as inventing "the sense of an author behind the work, an author with all the unplumbable depth and resonance of his or her personality and thus the indelible individuality of that subject ground from which the work is drawn" (203). Picasso uses pastiche to create works that no one would confuse with any other artist's. Should not his art then be understood by analyzing his personality? We want to understand what kind of man chose to combine premade materials in this fashion.

Krauss's close studies of individual paintings are exemplary. *Female Nude: "J'aime Eva" (1912)*, she writes,

combines the use of large, flattened, overlapping rectangles with the appearance of intense color, as the various planes of the figure's head and body are filled in with nearly unmodulated stretches of red, blue, yellow, and green. The extreme arbitrariness of this color in relation to the "real" colors of the human figure indicates that Picasso's initial analysis turned on a redesignation of the idea of local color, displacing it from the surfaces of the natural world to the wholly factitious veneers in the world of cultural artifacts (172).

Many such descriptions could be cited. Feeling the intensity of her close observation, watching her search to articulate her observations, I learned much. Who else has written at such length about these Cubist artworks with such sustained, close, loving attention?

At the beginning, and the end, of *The Picasso Papers*, Krauss has a tendency to back into her own account by argument with opponents who seem not to deserve much attention. And she sometimes has a tendency to posit intellectual connections that are more suggestive than satisfying. What exactly is the relationship she presents between Andre Gide's *The Counterfeiters* and Picasso's collage? Insofar as the concern with the play of truth and illusion is a concern of much traditional painting and literature, it is hard to know what Gide's novel can teach us about Picasso's art. Her last sentence reads: "Pastiche is not necessarily the destiny of modernism, but it is its guilty conscience" (241). A fine phrase, but what does it mean? Modernism need not always involve pastiche, but does Picasso's use of collage materials imply that there is something problematic about all modernist art? Picasso's Cubist paintings, she perhaps is suggesting, anticipate some works - Carl Andre's floor sculptures, Robert Rauschenberg's paintings, and Andy Warhol's Brillo Box, for example - that are challenging for the public. If "the newly liberated circulation of the token-sign always carries as its potential reverse an utterly devalued and empty currency" (241), is that because postmodernism is concerned with using banal materials and subjects for aesthetic ends?

In this review, I have only been able to do very partial justice to the subtlety and range of Krauss's argument. Her book is certain to inspire broader revisionist study

of Picasso and to influence how recent postmodernist art is interpreted. Hers is a magisterial narrative, magnificently inventive and extraordinarily resourceful.

David Carrier is a professor of philosophy at Carnegie Mellon University. His forthcoming books include *The Philosophy of Comics* and *Garner Tullis: The Art of Collaboration*.

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