

#4 Purpose & its Denial

“I love all men who dive.” Herman Melville

Simon Hantaï, *Meun*, 1968, 94 x 85 ins.

Commerce is now the dominant force in contemporary art. There is an issue as to whether the people who are most directly concerned with art, the artists themselves, in first instance, of course, but also art historians, critics, and also all those who take an active interest and enjoyment in looking at art, will continue to be acquiescent. The issue is not to deny that great art is rare and valuable and that, in the practical world, esthetic value will translate into financial value. This has always been the case. If the social world did not place high monetary value on art, then great art, even if it were to be made, would not survive. The issue is whether we will naively continue to think, as we have over the last five decades, that art is subject to the logic of the economic system, that it is a product determined by demand. It is curious to watch the spectacle of the American contemporary art world's fierce attachment to this fundamentally Marxist premise. I understand that since the Second World War, there has been an inexorable drive to align art with consumer demand. However, it doesn't work. It can, and has been thought of in these terms but, as this tendency has developed, the intrinsic value of contemporary art has declined in inverse proportion to its astronomical escalation in financial value. How can we not be struck by Peter Scheldjahl's concluding remark in his

recent article on the current installation of Abstract Expressionism at New York's Museum of Modern Art, to the effect that, since the 1950's: "it's been pretty much one damn thing after another¹⁴?"

The mind of modern art has always been in an entirely other place: one defined by 'purpose'¹⁵. As with the 'esthetic' and its opposite the 'anesthetic', it is perhaps helpful, when considering what might be meant by the term 'purpose', to consider what it is not, namely 'chance'. This thought once again distinguishes modern art from the New Academy, which has placed chance at the center of its enterprise¹⁶. The leading exponents of modern art have always, in one manner or another, sought to make this distinction. Consideration of two artists in particular, Matisse and Pollock, will serve to confirm this.

Matisse constantly alluded to an independent or external force that guided his hand at work. There is a famous segment of film that recorded him in the process of drawing from the model. His hand is seen to hover, then begin to glide, hesitantly, yet fluidly, taking first the measure of the paper, and then possession of its subject. He spoke of his acute embarrassment, on viewing the film, as if he had been caught in a moment of intimacy. Can we label this independent force, 'chance'? No. Guidance is not capricious. Later, at the culmination of his career, in his comments surrounding the Vence Chapel project, this intuition of guidance is his central preoccupation: "Every time that I had gone as far as my ten fingers would allow, something which did not come from me, but from elsewhere, would arrive to finish the task." And again: "Beyond a certain point, it's no longer me, something reveals itself." This is an experience which may not be allowed to many people in their lives and, as a result, it may be greeted with skepticism. It is, nevertheless, central to modern art. We can deny it, or we can be grateful. One last confirming thought: "How strange it is! One is led, one does not lead. I am only a servant." What an ironic contrast exists between this last statement and the one, above, by Marilyn Minter!

As for Jackson Pollock, he explicitly took up the difference between purpose and chance on numerous occasions. In first instance, we have the celebrated telegram which he sent to Time Magazine. In its Nov. 20th 1950 issue, on the occasion of the 25th Venice Biennial, an article about Pollock had appeared, entitled: "Chaos, Damn it!". To this provocation, the artist had responded by telegram to Time's editorial offices: "No chaos, Damn it!" Again, in several preparatory handwritten notes, which have been preserved, he comes back to an idea which seems to have had great importance for him: "denial of the accident". This concern was publicly registered in the taped radio interview with William Wright, again in 1950. There he formally stated: "I don't use the accident, because I deny the accident¹⁷."

What then did Pollock think was happening in his poured paintings? His commentary is remarkably close to Matisse: "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc. because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is a pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well." So, to recapitulate: there is no accident; art is not a matter of chance; the painting (art) has a life of its own!

¹⁴Big Bang: Abstract Expressionism on full show at MoMA', Peter Schjeldahl, New Yorker, Oct. 18th 2010, p.94.

¹⁵ The mention of 'purpose' summons up the whole history of western metaphysics. Notably it is central to Kant's discussion of aesthetics in *The Critique of Judgment*, where art is characterized as a "purposiveness without purpose". This is particularly notable since Clement Greenberg referred back to Kant as the founding authority for his formulation of 'modernism'. It remains a curiosity that, as the early advocate of Jackson Pollock, a painter whose work, by the artist's own account, stems from 'automatism' and the 'unconscious', Greenberg was to base his thinking about art on the great philosopher of Enlightenment reason.

¹⁶ In *Interviews* with Pierre Cabanne, previously cited, Duchamp emphasizes the notion of "pure chance."

¹⁷ Statements by Pollock are collected in Thaw & O'Connor, catalogue raisonné.

A friend recently said to me: “they didn’t want content, did they¹⁸?” What did ‘they’ not want? How do we define content? It is not the content of the eye looking through the window of an easel painting onto the natural world; we can agree on that. No! It must rather be defined as ‘esthetic and intellectual content’. What should we understand by this formulation?

I have always thought that 1851 was a momentous year in the development of the modern esthetic. In that year Melville published *Moby Dick* and Flaubert began work on *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert thought long and hard about the birth of the modern esthetic, as his extraordinary correspondence testifies. Like all the great modern artists of the nineteenth century, Flaubert understood that the idealized vision of academic art was a lie. He was above all aware that the changed circumstances of the modern world were calling for a new meaning in art. His response was to recommend the careful examination of form and content: “as long as any given sentence has not been separated into form from content, I will maintain that we have here two words empty of meaning.” However, there is an ambiguity in what has been taken to be this advocacy of ‘form’ over ‘content’. The question was how to create new meaning in art. It did not require the abandonment of meaning, nor the notion that form in itself could constitute meaning. Read him more thoroughly and you will see that he is quite clear on this: “There is no such thing as beautiful thoughts without beautiful form, and reciprocally (...) consider an idea which has no form, it’s impossible; the same goes for a form which does not express an idea¹⁹.” If we follow Flaubert’s thought, form would provide the privileged point of entrance into a significant new world but, ultimately, the challenge would be to lay hold of new meaning attached to form. To the idea that form, in and of itself, might be sufficient, Flaubert was brutal in his rebuttal: “No, what we lack is the intrinsic principle, the soul of the thing, the very idea of the subject. (...) Where do we leave from and where do we go? We do a good job of getting it on. We osculate abundantly. We caress softly. But to fuck! To ejaculate, in order to bring forth the child! That is beyond us!”

Melville understood the enormity of the challenge: “The more I consider this mighty tail [referring to Leviathan], the more do I deplore my inability to express it. (...) Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back part, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say he has no face²⁰.” This is the challenge that every modern artist, in whatever medium, must take up.

In a letter to Gasquet, 29th September 1896, Cézanne noted: “At the moment, I am rereading Flaubert²¹.” This remark serves to underscore that the ‘modernist’ separation of visual art from literature is specious. There is no more moving statement of the joint project of these two great modern artists, Flaubert and Cézanne, literature and painting, joined in the purpose of inventing modern art, than that recorded in Cézanne’s correspondence. Throughout his life, Cézanne ruminated on the birth of a ‘modern esthetic’. In 1903, to Vollard, he makes the celebrated declaration: “I work stubbornly. I can glimpse the Promised Land. Will I be like the great leader of the Hebrews or will I be permitted to enter?” And one month before his death, he returns to the same topic: “Will I arrive at the destination so sought for, and pursued for so long? I hope so (...) I still study after nature, and it seems to me that I make some slow progress (...) But I

¹⁸ John Perreault, in conversation with the writer.

¹⁹ This and preceding remarks, Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondence*, ed. Gallimard.

²⁰ Herman Melville, *The Tail*, Ch. 86, *Moby Dick*.

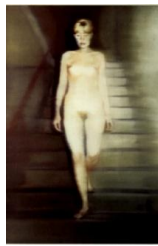
²¹ This and following remarks, *La Correspondence de Paul Cézanne*, ed. Rewald, Grasset, 1978.

am old, sick, and I have sworn to myself that I will die painting (...)" It should never be forgotten that André Breton, that other founding father of the New Academy, considered Cézanne to be an 'imbecile'²².

The great American painters at mid-century took up this question of the purpose of the modern esthetic. Newman unambiguously declared the concern: "In 1940, some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope – to find that painting did not really exist. (...) It was that awakening that inspired the aspiration – the high purpose – quite a different thing from ambition – to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before²³." All of his writings testify to this search for the meaning, the modern meaning, of art. He was clear that painting would have to be reinvented. As for Rothko, he explicitly made the claim that painting was "philosophic expression": "Painting certainly is a result of thinking. It causes thinking. It, therefore, can certainly be a form, or means, of thinking, a means of philosophic thought²⁴."

When Rothko asserts the prerogative of being able to think through painting, an artist is taking back from philosophers the thing that had previously belonged to him. But thought, in the interim, is no longer the same thing. As for most contemporary art, we have to conclude that it does not contain this, or perhaps any, thought or purpose, beyond the clamor to get attention in an effort to trade its chips in for social approval and reward. What kind of thought exactly does Rothko have in mind? Again, the usual run of academic thought, generated in the universities, envisages the application of a theoretical point of view to the phenomenon of art. We can have a Kantian account, or a Freudian, or a 'structuralist' account, or a 'modernist' or 'post-modernist' account. This academic mindset is what led Newman to declare that esthetics is for the artist what ornithology is for the birds. It is highly doubtful that Rothko had any such notion of thinking about painting in mind. In striking contrast, what begins to emerge here is something fundamentally different. Here the viewer does not organize his thinking as an instrument for interpreting art. To the contrary, he engages in an encounter with art in order to find a way towards modern thinking. The viewer does not think in order to understand painting. The viewer looks at the painting in order to understand his thinking. We look at Rothko's painting and thought becomes possible.

This new esthetic thought that modern culture has pursued across the two hundred years of its existence implies a fundamental reordering of objective and subjective experience. In the latter part of his life, Rothko sought to create total environments with his paintings. The viewer would stand surrounded by the paintings. Thinking would lodge in pictorial matter and matter would become thought. The subject and the object would exchange roles as art revealed its purpose, which is to: **THINK THE SUBJECT.**



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²² "Cézanne, for whom I have absolutely no regard and whose personal outlook and artistic ambition, in spite of his panegyrists, I have always judged to be imbecilic ...". From *Les pas perdus*, André Breton, ed. Gallimard, 1949. Cited in the ground-breaking essay on Freud and Surrealism, 'La peinture et le surréalisme et la peinture,' 1971, by Marcelin Pleyne in *Art et Littérature*, Collection Tel Quel, ed. du Seuil, 1977.

²³ Barnett Newman, from 'Jackson Pollock: an Artist's Symposium, part 1' 1967, collected in *Selected Writings and Interviews*.

²⁴ Cited in *Mark Rothko*, by James Breslin, p. 260.