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MAILINGLIST

Art

RAILING OPINION: How to Look at Postmodern Painting and Its Criticism

by Irving Sandler

Preliminary Notes

Entering the avant-garde art world in the 1950s, I was reared on modernist painting and its attitudes. At the end of the following decade, I began to witness a change from modernist to postmodernist painting and began to wonder whether art criticism would also change. A recent review of Eva Lundsager's painting in the *Village Voice* by Martha Schwendener has once again prompted me to reflect on this question.

In her article Schwendener lists the formal elements Lundsager borrowed from other artists. She writes that

Lundsager's paintings dip heavily into the New York School's bag of tricks, using drips of Pollock (et al.); the concentrated frenetic gesture of Joan Mitchell; the post-painterly washes of diluted pigment [and the] Morris-like streaks [which] slide sideways across the canvas. . . . Lundsager quotes oddball visionary painters like Marsden Hartley, mid-century colorist Charles Burchfield, and symbolist Odilon Redon.

In a sense, Lundsager's method is related to the conventional practice of collage, except that it focuses on a mix of signature motifs of artists, not anonymous subjects and materials.

Swendener's identification of pictorial borrowings is related to the common practice of designating influences in academic art history. But her way of viewing a work differs from that of most scholars, in that she is struck first and foremost by its stylistic sources. For her, it is these references and how they are pieced together that become the essential content of the work. Schwendener's kind of perception seems particularly relevant at the moment. Her focus on style is also pertinent, because it emphasizes the visual—what can actually be seen in works of art—in contrast to now-outdated—but still modish in academe—art theoretical approaches, which impose preexisting, extra-aesthetic dogmas.

Swendener has suggested that appropriation in painting is related to "sampling" by rap musicians who borrow "riffs" from different sources and layer them in unexpected ways to add complexity to their songs. Indeed, rap music may be the exemplary postmodernist art. For her part, in lifting formal

elements from other paintings, Lundsager tips her brush to Duchamp's Readymades and Johns's and Warhol's Remades, and to innumerable contemporary followers who have adopted appropriation as their artistic practice. Thus, she draws on a tradition that underlies Postmodernist art and the latter's most characteristic feature.

Schwendener approves of Lundsager's borrowing and eclecticism, writing that "The result of [her] motley mix is a fabulous affront to high modernist ideas of painterly 'purity.'" The value of Lundsager's canvases, Schwendener observes, depends on their display of knowledge and sophistication. She concludes that appropriation enables painting to remain vital in a world of photography, video, environments, and performances. "Painting can now function . . . within the endgame of postmodernism (or post-postmodernism). Its status, like everything else in the art world, could change at any minute. Except, when a medium's weathered everything, literally, from ancient volcanic eruptions to the invention of the Internet, I doubt painting needs to be looking over its shoulder." Indeed, it remains full of potential.

Lundsager actually may not have been influenced by the artists listed by Schwendener, but this does not make the critic's interpretation any less timely, since in the postmodernist era her approach has become second nature. Reading her review, it occurred to me that in the modernist period, avant-garde artists tried to purge or conceal what they may have derived from the paintings of others. Lundsager's paintings do none of this. They are personal and skillful, but not new in the modernist sense of the term; however, they are new in the postmodernist sense. But how can the radical change from the modernist to the postmodernist condition be defined?

The realization that modernism was undergoing a radical change first came to me in 1969. I wrote then that, beginning with abstract expressionism in the 1940s, one or two artistic styles had commanded a disproportionate amount of the modernist art-conscious public's attention. Avant-gardism implied a progression of new and original styles, emerging one after the other, each coming into view, becoming established, and then becoming dated. Clement Greenberg believed that every successive advanced style was more advanced than the last, and that it had rendered



Martin Kippenberger, (Untitled) from the series Fred the Frog (1990). Oil on canvas, 94 1/2 x 78 3/4 in. Collection of Audrey M. Irmas, Los Angeles, © Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.



Eva Lundsager, "Over Whether 10" (2008). Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (40.6 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Greenberg Van Doren Gallery.

all other previous styles obsolete, which led him to proclaim the latest style the modernist “mainstream.” Value in art depended in large measure on originality and novelty. “Make-it-new” was the avant-garde rallying cry; what had been done was not worth redoing.

I suggested in 1969 that this point of view was outdated and that instead, the individuality of an artist’s vision and the artistry with which it is embodied in a work would be prized more than its innovation or up-to-datedness. I declared the avant-garde dead because by the end of the decade, art had pressed to so many of its limits, that is, the edge where it could be taken for non-art. Pressing to the limits had become, as Harold Rosenberg wrote, a “tradition of the new.” Indeed, generations of artists had systematically demolished every notion of what art should be, to the extent that they eliminated what had been accepted generally as the irreducible conventions in art—that it be an object, visible, and differentiated from the everyday environment. By 1970, the year of *Information*, a major survey of Conceptual Art at the Museum of Modern Art, avant-garde styles had become so established and familiar that if artists could still discover limits, their claims to be truly avant-garde would have been dismissed with a raised eyebrow. And finally, the avant-garde ceased to exist because there had developed a large and growing public that no longer responded with anger to difficult art, and while not eager for it, was at least permissive.

I concluded then that because the idea of an avant-garde mainstream had lost credibility, the audience for modernist painting and sculpture would have to change a number of its expectations. It would have to stop considering novelty in art as a primary value. Rather it would have to attach greater importance to the expressiveness and individuality with which artists mixed visual ideas. I wrote that “there are areas of vast potential—scarcely tread by artists who have jumped to extremes—that require fuller exploration.” In fact, this was occurring. Instead of one style being considered mainstream, growing numbers of critics began to think of art as a delta of multiple styles.

Other art critics have also recognized the change in art and criticism from modernism to postmodernism. For example, in a recent review of the Martin Kippenberger show at the Museum of Modern Art, Holland Cotter wrote, “By the time [Kippenberger] arrived, the defining impulses of late-20th-century art—Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Neo-Expressionism—were old. . . . Seemingly all that remained were leftover styles and ideas; bit parts and walk-ons.” But Kippenberger “knew that he had to take what was there, including the diminished role of the artist, and make something different, and large, and loud from it, and he did. He turned his work into a late modernist clearinghouse in which familiar styles, careers and ideas could be reevaluated, pulled apart, rejected or recombined.”

The change from modernism to postmodernism also influenced museum practices in that it gave rise to an increased number of thematic shows, early examples of which were three cycles of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the first of which, titled *Modernstarts* was curated by John Elderfield in 1999. In a kind of sampling of art history, these shows rehabilitated artists left out of the modernist canon. In presenting a rationale for thematic installations, John Elderfield contrasted them with historical shows, which were based on a linear account of modern art history, of the kind formulated by Alfred Barr, the founding director of MoMA. The latter, according to Elderfield, was “not necessarily the best way to aid

visual enquiry.” This approach enraged Frank Stella, who condemned it as “disgraceful and disagreeable,” because it debased MoMA’s collection and demeaned Barr’s “heroic accomplishment.” As I view it, the problem was, if the avant-garde was dead, how could it be replaced by another avant-garde? The Elderfield solution was to create a pluralistic art history for the postmodernist condition.

During the modernist period, art critics had been able to take positions for or against then current avant-garde styles, such as gestural or color-field painting, assemblage, environments and happenings, pop, minimal, earth, conceptual art, and so on. The arguments were focused and art critics could command attention because their timely, engagé polemical stands attracted art world interest. What sharpened the debates were markedly different art-critical approaches, for example, Greenberg’s formalism versus Rosenberg’s existentialism (the theme of a recent show at the Jewish Museum), Michael Fried’s embrace of color-field abstraction versus Robert Morris’s or Robert Rauschenberg’s advocacy of minimalism, etc.

The situation has changed during the postmodernist era. Now, there are no riveting polemics, and on the whole critics are reduced to choosing artists they like (and in rare cases, dislike) and dealing with each individually. Art world discourse has become unfocused and undramatic, and in the minds of many, irrelevant, particularly as the market has grown in taste-making power. This is the situation we’re still in, despite the meltdown of the economy, and the issue is: how are we to think about the state of criticism? If the “make-it-new” imperative of the avant-garde is inoperative, then what?

I suggest that a new art-critical model may provide one answer and that historian of pre-Columbian art George Kubler has shown the way. He wrote that it was common for art historians, in referring to style change, to “speak [of] the ‘birth of an art,’ of the ‘life of a style,’ and the ‘death of a school,’ of ‘flowering,’ ‘maturity,’ and ‘fading’ . . . The customary mode of arranging the evidence is biographical, as if the single biographical unit were the true unit of study.” Kubler went on to say that these units are grouped regionally or by style or place “in a manner vaguely patterned upon biological classifications by typology, morphology, and distribution.”

Kubler proposed a different art historical model whose metaphor is drawn from physical science. It involves “the transmission of some kind of energy; with impulses, generating centers, and relay points; with increments and losses in transit; with resistances and transformers in the circuit. In short the language of electrodynamics [rather] than the language of botany.” To be sure, the biographical model can be informative when applied to the bodies of work of individual artists, but, on the whole, the electrodynamic model seems more suited to the discourse of postmodernist art.

Kubler’s model of an electrodynamic field is not necessarily finite. It can be expanded as new circuits are added. Hence, it can be thought of as a multidimensional space opening up to the future. This idea finds an echo in the writings of the postmodernist theoretician Roland Barthes. He attacked literary criticism that was “tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions. [The] *explanation* of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it.” Instead, Barthes conceived of literature as a melange of texts, “a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them

original, blend and clash.” The function of the writer was to enter that space, appropriate what had already been written, and provide individual glosses on it. Art theoreticians then applied this approach in their writing, particularly because it seemed relevant in dealing with postmodernist art.

I do not think that Barthes’s conception applies to modernist art, but if it did, then the immersion of modernist painting in a multidimensional space is different from that of postmodernist painting. Modernist artists were able to make squalls and tempests that radically altered the nature of the space. Postmodern painters make smaller winds. Their work can be individual and accomplished, even inspired. However, if they can not “make-it-new” by combining preexisting stylistic borrowings, they can “remake-it-new.”

Painting in the pluralist era, in which everything is possible and anything goes, has an upside in that artists are freer than ever before to paint with the expectation that every style will get more or less its fair share of recognition. Its downside, however, is that artists, even the most individual and accomplished, find it more difficult now to claim the attention of the art world and be recognized by it. The same applies to art critics confronted with the waning of polemics, the enormous growth in the number of new artists, and the welter of new styles. In response to this pluralistic situation, Schwendener has called for art writers to push out “in new directions, trying hybrid forms, and blurring the distinction between art writing and art making.” And, I would add, between art writing and literature. Indeed, what has begun to count increasingly is the distinction of the critic’s sensitivity to language and literary style. Perhaps, the future of art criticism is as a literary genre. To be continued.

As part of our interest in revitalizing art criticism and theory, in giving them both sharp edge and broad, encompassing vision, the *Rail* has initiated this column.

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