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FIVE ESSAYS ON ART & PAINTING

By

Michel Moyse

PREFACE

The introduction and five essays presented here were written in 1992. Subsequently put aside but recently rediscovered while I was doing some studio cleaning, they contain musings on painting and art. I offer them here to the reader in the hope that they provide some insights into this mysterious activity. While I've been drawing and painting since childhood, I'm not much nearer understanding what this activity really is than when I first started out. It remains fluid and opaque, full of wonderful but elusive qualities, movements, sensibilities that make it impossible for me to pin down and define with exactitude. And that may be a good thing – why try to reduce such a unique, complex, rich enterprise to words? I certainly don't need to do this in order to appreciate it. Every time I see a great work of art I'm overcome with a renewed awareness of the mysteries and wonders of life, and I'm content resting there. No need for explications grows out of this encounter. But the doing of art leads to an encounter with self – with personality, with motives, with likes and dislikes, with needs and desires – and this movement is part and parcel of what painting is all about. Even when I paint purely for the joy of moving colors around on canvass, I seem to be

conducting some sort of mysterious intercourse with my world and myself. What is it about painting that seems to offer this potential for self-discovery yet at the same time rejects it? What is the nature of this activity? In the following essays, I try to explore these questions from a personal point of view. As I mention in my introduction, the attempt must be undertaken in the realization that it is ultimately doomed to fail. Yet the ground traveled is interesting even if the goal recedes. And in fact I have arrived at some preliminary conclusions. For one, I now know that I'm not quite at the place where I had hoped to be when I wrote these essays: I wanted to be an artist of 'no consequence', but remain an artist of 'some consequence'.

In the intervening years since these essays were written I've continued to pursue art (and experimental film) but have traded brush and canvass for pen and pad. The transition to computers didn't come easily, however. I believe the computer provides new opportunities for aesthetic exploration and expression, but also eliminates a fundamental component in the creative process; namely, interaction based on sensation (a monkey will get the same result hitting any key that I do). Although this is likely to change in the near future, 'interaction' with the computer (i.e., total engagement) remains rudimentary and crude at best. In my opinion, until it mutates from a tool into an instrument, the process will continue to favor manipulation over creation, mentation over sense. Nonetheless, all of the artwork I've done over the last decade is created with the computer. This is less of a radical departure for me than I first supposed, because in many ways the computer allows me to explore and expand on sensibilities that were in fact implicit in my earlier work (it also gave me with the opportunity of integrating my

personal and professional activities – art making and film work). I conclude here with a still taken from my recent piece (2007) titled "It's Not Time". This work, a three-channel image (9' high by 32' wide) projected from three video projectors and DVD players locked in synchronicity through timecode, is meant for continuous viewing. As all of my work done over the last decade, "It's Not Time" incorporates narrative elements, text, sound, and animation. I call these works 'motionpaintings'. For more examples, please visit http://michelmoyse.com

Still from 'motionpainting' triptych "It's Not Time", 2007. Projected images on studio wall approximately 9 ft. high by 36 ft. wide. Basic loop length is 12:34:16.

Michel Moyse

INTRODUCTION

"The deeper sense of all art is
obviously to hold the mind
in a state of eternal rejuvenescence
in answer to an ever changing world."
Hans Hofmann.

"Experts are as dangerous as a poisonous snake, or walking into a precipice"
Krishnamurti

"...there is an irrevocable difference between a blink and a wink"
Neil Postman, (Technopoly)

Although I've been painting for close to thirty years now and my work has gone through several stages, in some fundamental way the 'problems' of painting remain the same for me as when I first began. I'm still preoccupied with the need to express something that goes beyond myself; to create something 'true' and 'real'. No doubt over the years I've gained a degree of concentration and ease which push me toward greater clarification and freedom of expression, yet the activity holds as much, if not more, mystery for me now than it did when I first began. In many ways I've learned more through a process of discovering what painting is not than what it is. Every discarded direction, every groping attempt at clarity, every bad painting I've done, helps me to reorient myself in some way. I know, in my own work, there's no end to this process - I'll never arrive at whatever it is I seek. And there isn't any one painting I've done that I find fully satisfying. I invariably think I could have improved it - I should have pushed this a little, or pulled that a little, or eliminated this, or added that, etc. If I'm perhaps overly critical of my own work, however, I always enjoy seeing the work of others. Even when I see a painting that's really bad, I usually find something I like about it. Maybe I

sympathize with what the artist was trying to do, even if I think the attempt unsuccessful; or it moves me to try a new approach in my own work, or confirms a direction I'm temporarily exploring. Once in a while, I see an exhibit that's outstanding. Whenever this happens, I feel whole and 'at home', and again profoundly connected to my world. I can't really describe what I feel - nor do I necessarily care to. In my opinion, art involves a mystery that is intellectually inexplicable. Attempts to describe it fall short of the actual experience. To paraphrase Krishnamurti, one of my favorite philosophers, 'the word is not the thing', and perhaps the best we can hope for in any discussion on art is to dispel certain preconceptions which block appreciation, and engage those sensibilities which orient the mind toward an affectionate receptivity.

Although it's not my intention here to undertake a lengthy review of contemporary ideas on aesthetics - nor indeed am I equipped to - there are a few prevailing notions about art that are worth looking at precisely because they're so entrenched in the popular imagination. Arbiters of what constitutes 'taste' and 'knowledge', indeed of what is legitimate domain for exploration and understanding, impose more or less rigid guidelines through their own selective processes. Whereas this was formerly the role, in the West, of the ruling classes (usually the Church), it has now become the primary function of academicians, curators, and moneymakers. This crystallization and secularization of taste has no less a stranglehold on what constitutes 'value' than the narrow religious ideals of the past or the official taste of the French Academicians who rejected the art of Matisse, Picasso, Braque, et. al. at the turn of the century. Today, 'good art' continues to be defined largely by what is placed in museums

and what can be bought and sold at high prices in the marketplace. This is especially true in a culture disseminated primarily through media and the written word and fueled by moneyed interests. The system allows for change so long as it can manipulate, categorize, exploit and, above all, perpetuate itself - anything outside is relegated to obscurity through consensus of opinion or neglect. 'New work' is deemed worthy of assimilation (as some new 'ism' or 'post' or 'neo' this or other) by those eager to increase their capital investments and turn a quick profit (that's when an 'emerging artist' is 'discovered', and the public/media manipulated to ensure that the status of the work becomes accepted and established by the intelligentsia). This is not surprising, to be sure. Art often requires some sort of utilitarian justification for its existence, and one way to determine value is to follow the money trail. But that's one of many valuations possible. Art is not always easy to understand or accept, means different things in different epochs and cultures, and can mean different things to people according to differences in temperament and profession. So it's to be expected, for example, that the investor sees art in one light, the artist in another, the curator yet again in another. If all of these points of view reflect the complexity and variety of aesthetic experience as well as personal purpose, they can also lead to distortions. For example, the fairly recent need to marry art with entertainment (sometimes it seems rather to substitute art for entertainment) often results in vapid, boring 'theme shows' that cater to the latest 'politically correct' whim or 'outré' idea. No doubt, as with classical music, museum attendance is down. But I must admit that I find something disdainful in combining art and commerce. Art should be a calling, don't you think? I find it as offensive to see a rich artist as I do to see a fat priest. Perhaps only

those with requisite stamina and a penchant for sacrifice should be allowed to pursue art. But who would decide? At any rate, nowadays there are too many artists and too much stuff done. Sometimes, half in jest, I think we should impose a moratorium on all art making. Or at the very least make it a capital offense punishable by law (I can hear some conservatives applauding!). This would reduce waste (it's an environmentally sound idea) and weed out those who aren't really committed – and we would guarantee passion in the result, a necessary ingredient in good work in any case. All kidding aside, however, there are a few popular conceptions of art that to my mind need to be challenged and examined in order to gain a clearer understanding and appreciation of art and the artist's place/role in society. If merging art and entertainment produces some distortions, another perhaps less prevalent notion among the general public but more common in academic and intellectual circles - yet equally nefarious - is the notion that art is really a means of communication. Here art is seen essentially as a means or tool to redress societal problems and inequalities; to break down barriers between various groups and affect social change. The need for promoting this narrow utilitarian justification colors the enterprise and makes of art primarily a social or political act. In this context, art takes on a transactional and idolatrical value - it becomes a cultural artifact which can be assessed and valued for its social efficacy and ability to define, challenge, and support aspects of the body politic: The artist as ambassador for a cause or catalyst for change (art to promote 'democracy' or to fight 'aids'; to bring 'peace and goodwill', to redefine gender roles or 'save the environment', etc. etc.). At extreme, art as propaganda. Another notion has it that art is a 'thing in itself; an abstract factum divorced from life. Here art is

separated from all cultural claims and exists outside the pernicious influences of the mind's inventory (by all means to some degree a legitimate aim), until it threatens to be destroyed by its own solipsism or reductio ad absurdum, or becomes yet again another 'idol' in our constellation of objects we worship and use. Still another notion holds art to be a means of self-expression. In this popular view, art and art-making are therapeutic and provide tools for self exploration, psychoanalysis and cathartic experience. Here the result is of secondary importance to the process itself, which is valued as a means for personal growth and its ability to help us rid ourselves of hang-ups. So art is offered in various psychiatric, vocational and educational institutions as yet another means (along with the already extensive assortment of self-help activities that cater to this 'new age' pastime) that might lead to personal growth, peace and happiness.

Yet none of these ideas go very far in clarifying art or the aesthetic experience. They contain elements of truth, no doubt, but I must quarrel with them so long as the actual aesthetic significance of any work is not fundamentally recognized to be, as Philip Guston pointed out, "beyond history and the chains of causality". Failure to keep this in mind reduces art, as Appolinaire points out, to "the state of a pictorial writing designed simply to facilitate communication". And when this happens, the intrinsic value of art and art making are replaced by institutional formulas that unfortunately kill individuality and the creative impulse. It isn't because a painting (say) depicts the anguish of poverty (e.g., Social Realism of the 1930's), or the Sublimity of Nature (e.g., Hudson River School), or a condition of popular culture (e.g. Pop Art), that it's particularly interesting. The question is one of emphasis, of course, and the lines of demarcation are not at all

fixed or rigid. But we're talking about a subtle reality - an ephemeral and illusive reality – just as likely to disappear the more we look for it, like a bit of light in the dark which we can't see because we're looking straight at it. It's not as if we can find 'art' by going into a supermarket and ordering two pounds of our favorite aesthetic experience – notwithstanding that it hangs in galleries and museums, where we know it's 'art' simply because it's there. The fact is that my own experience leads me in different directions, and I think it would be a mistake to consider any of these common notions central to the artist's task. If this ultimately reduces us to dumbly point, in Zen-like manner, to any work in order to find out what it is, we can still discuss certain sensibilities associated with art and hope in the attempt to gain some insight into this mysterious activity. If a nude in life is not a nude in a painting, there's obviously a relationship between the two, and one's knowledge and appreciation of life sustains and enlarges the appreciation of art (and vice versa). So that's, of course, a fair starting place. We need a bridge to go from the known to the unknown, and any assistance here is welcome. But the building of this bridge needs to be done in the recognition of eventual failure, by a mind not too eager to build at any cost, and aware of the potential for harm this enterprise inevitably entails. If this is a recurrent philosophical problem inherent in aesthetic investigation, the problem disappears when we actually look at a work of art. What may be hard to describe and define may be simple and direct to perceive. So of course when I see a work I don't exclude any impressions, no matter where these come from or where they lead. I try to look in a sympathetic mood, staying open to what a work wants to reveal. In fact, I'm constantly reassessing my impressions; I never feel the same thing in just the same way

twice in front of the same painting. A great painting always strikes me as something 'new' no matter how often I see it, and to me it doesn't make sense to try to recapture, much less codify, past impressions (it's 'new', of course, because - among other reasons – I saw the work for the first time after I had eaten a good breakfast, and the second time on a Wednesday afternoon in July, and the wind outside had shifted ever so slightly). So, keeping all this in mind (and realizing that I may be, like the composer asked to conduct his own work, or the film director who undertakes to edit his own film, the least qualified to talk about my work), I have selected a few of my paintings to use as starting points for the exploration of art and art-making.

In the following essays, I look at my work from a very personal point of view. I suggest some of the ideas and feelings that preoccupied me at the time I painted each work (I continue to rewrite my own history, naturally) and from these enlarge the attention to include what I believe are characteristics and conditions of painting per se (at least as I see these as of this moment in time). Occasionally I emphasize psychological aspects; at other times formal aspects; yet again social or historical aspects. Occasionally - and that may be, perhaps, when I come closer to the mark - I try to show what painting is by showing what it isn't. At any rate (and keeping in mind that they are only partially useful), these approaches allow us access, in a roundabout way, into the work and the nature of this activity.

As a student many years ago, I couldn't wait to find my own 'style'. Awed by the consistency and maturity of other artist's work, I couldn't understand why my paintings seemed as if they had been created by several different people. I would see the paintings

of an artist I really admired and immediately try to copy his 'style'. Later on I would be moved by the work of another, and again try to imitate his style. In an attempt to find my own way, I eventually copied dozens of artists (van Gogh, Cezanne, Daumier, Klee, Kandinsky, Dine, De Kooning, Guston, etc.). I did this for many years. Even today, after more than twenty-five years of painting, I sometimes find myself trying to copy artists I really enjoy. The influence is always short-lived - I know the task is impossible - but this doesn't stop me from trying (I don't shy away from this predilection, because I know it's fundamentally harmless and can, indeed, be productive). None of us are born ready-made, as it were, all of one piece. And in any case temperaments vary. Some artists take a long time to find their own 'voices', while others seem able to do this at an early age (neither condition, it seems, has much to do with the quality of the work produced). And it may be that originality is more of a shared phenomenon than we care to admit. Artists sometimes work in 'styles' nearly indistinguishable from one another (Picasso and Braque during their Cubist phase, for example), and many artists copy profusely. Originality comes, at least to me, mingled with sensibilities reflected in the work of many others. It's also important to realize that what appears to be consistency of 'style' in the work of any one artist can be misleading, since very often we don't see all of the artist's work. We usually see the output of a certain period, or the 'best' of that period, or the 'best' from various periods, and on those rare and wonderful occasions when we have the opportunity to see an artist's entire life's work it becomes obvious that there are often many different 'styles' and many 'poor' or 'failed' works. But I've long ago stopped worrying about developing my own 'style'. 'Style' is really something that develops of its

own; as by-product of diligent work resulting from clarity and strength of execution. As a cultural phenomenon, 'style' is an expression of shared characteristics 'discovered' and 'categorized' in hindsight by historians and critics. In any case, most artists go through many changes, and sometimes work in several 'styles' or modes at the same time. The artist is free to experiment, to digress, to make mistakes. Often what seems irrelevant or superfluous later on turns out to be significant. And then there's the proverbial 'block' that may render the artist totally helpless for a while (or longer). Or perhaps the energy to create art just dissipates and finally ceases. Creativity is seldom, if ever, subject to personal volition, but more often than not to a host of forces operating outside normal consciousness. Furthermore, artistic 'development' or 'progression' should be understood with qualification - there's no linear development in art anymore than there is in life – notwithstanding some critics who imply a historical artistic development or progression (is a De Kooning better than a Rembrandt, or the Lascaux cave paintings worse than Jennifer Barttlet's “Rhapsody”?). And when it comes to the work of individuals - leaving aside historical concerns - we need to question the notion of personal growth and development. If there is 'progress', what sort of progress is it? When Theo told van Gogh that his first attempts at drawing were 'not very good', Vincent replied, 'if not good now, then not later.' To quote a harsh but true proverb, ‘you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear’. Genius may be 'ninety percent perspiration and ten percent inspiration', still that 'ten percent', for most of us, makes a great deal of difference. As my Grandfather would say, ‘to be as innovative as Debussy, you have to be Debusssy’. 'Change' or 'growth' seem bound by their own natural limits. Maybe there's a refinement and

clarification of the forms of expression, but the 'heart' and 'mind' of what is 'expressed' remain, in some fundamental way, unchanged. We can sense the mature works of Rembrandt in his early paintings, just as we can sense the mature Mozart in the young Mozart. Perhaps a more appropriate point of view is to say that the artist simply fine-tunes his instrument, so that the energy becomes more and more focused - like water funneled through a small opening so that the stream of energy seems clearer and sharper.

It seems to me, the older I get, the less I can affect or change what I do. If I let things come more of their own accord, or if I make a conscious effort to explore new sensibilities or develop old aspects, still the work retains qualities that have remained virtually unchanged from the very beginning (Guston once said he painted the same painting over and over again). As a student at New York University, one of my teachers suggested I try to paint the worst painting I could. He had seen me standing in exasperation before a canvass I had been working on for over an hour, totally at a loss as to how I should proceed, and dejected at the poor result. It seemed like a strange request at the time, and I remember going about it with little enthusiasm. When I carried out his suggestions, however, I was struck with the realization that my 'worst' painting wasn't too different from my 'best' painting. Of course I was disappointed to discover this. Yet it taught me an important lesson. I had believed, rather naively, that hard work and perseverance would necessarily result in 'good' art. In fact (and obviously not discounting the importance of hard work), I think the quality of what one does is ultimately determined more by one's 'gifts' than by the amount of hard work one puts into it. No matter how hard I try to stretch my own limits, or how hard I try to 'improve',

these native boundaries impose a reality on my work I can't escape. But if that's true, it's also true I can learn to understand and develop the 'gifts' I have - whatever they may be – as fully as possible. And there's a certain freedom and joy in doing this well (1).

In addition to the importance of allowing the work to mature slowly (and notwithstanding the value in copying others), the artist will invariably reflect attitudes and conditions unique to his time. Each epoch imposes complex cultural influences that mold serious work and give it force and integrity. Although great art is an expression of what is timeless; of what is, in some sense, outside historical forces, yet it reflects specific circumstances from which it sprang. These forces need to be more than acknowledged. We like to think we're free to pick and choose from any time and place, but in reality we're anchored to present conditions that stamp the work with a particular character and give it veracity and conviction. Today, 'appropriation' is common enough. It may be a characteristic of our epoch; perhaps as expression of discontent or nostalgia for the past, but in my opinion not much good art has come of it. Although this practice doesn't necessarily reflect mediocre talent (many good artists fool around with it), I don't believe we can transport sensibilities that arose out of unique cultural circumstances without corrupting them. The past is not a continuum we can enter at will, picking and choosing what we want while leaving the rest behind. Good artists who copy the work of others imbue the result with their own originality. It may be an 'interpretation' or even a rigorous copy, but the artist will give it new life through his vision and purpose. But 'appropriation' sanctions more than simple-minded replication or plagiarism; it's an approach that elevates a rather boring and specialized aspect of art making into a bonafide methodology. It does this by leveling artistic expression to a commonality

where uniqueness and originality are subverted or denied. The underlying causes reveal a degree of cultural cynicism and alienation, fostered by a society that devalues individuality and the sacred (in spite of our lip service to the contrary). It can also be viewed as the harbinger of a society more and more dominated by machines and things – a society where mechanical production and reproduction replace human creation (the introduction of the computer will make this easier, and it remains to be seen how pervasive its influence will become. The dangers are serious, and it may be that we'll spend a great deal of time and energy simply reestablishing our claim to originality). Obviously these trends can be found in many aspects of our lives and not simply in the visual arts. A sentimental derivative, for example, is the contemporary practice of interpreting works of art in 'modern' setting or language. A Mozart Opera is set in a Laundromat, or a Shakespeare play recast as a Hollywood extravaganza, or a Beethoven quartet performs in front of video walls, or a recreated New England Colonial village features the display of antiquated living habits and obligatory crafts (not to mention various 'olde shoppes' in which the good-natured tourist can spend a few dollars). The desire to transpose and 'appropriate' the past in these disingenuous ways may 'epater le bourgeois' or result in big bucks, but don't have much to do with art-making. If, as mentioned, great art of any historical period rises above the vagaries of subjective taste and is imbued with qualities that somehow lift it above cultural conditioning, at the same time it rests firmly on them. The enthusiasm with which, for example, the 19th. Century greeted the Age of Machinery - the modern world of glass, concrete, and steel; of electricity and telecommunications – is replaced with our present-day suspicions that science, and the accrutements promulgated by technological advances, have not always

been used for the benefit of mankind. After the devastation of two world wars and the massacre of millions of people, who could feel, with equanimity, that progress depends on more material goods and better tools? When cultural conditions change, formal expression changes. Specific historical circumstances that helped mold the work of past artists no longer exist, and anyone 'appropriating' the art of the past has to deal with this problem.

Perhaps this practice illustrates our pervasive need to interpret all aspects of experience before we can properly digest it. We're accustomed to seeing things through the eyes and ears of others, and conditioned to wait for experience explained and regurgitated, as it were, by someone else before we acknowledge and validate it. The ubiquitous cultural forms of 'good' or 'accepted' taste contribute to a 'loss of consciousness' whether we like it or not, and we should reject these as food premasticated by an overzealous nursemaid. The result not only gives us little nourishment but clutters our minds. Although it may be interesting, for example, to note that Joseph Beuys was saved from a plane crash by wandering Tartar tribesmen who wrapped him in fat and felt, do I really need to know this to appreciate his pieces? The personal doesn't always imply the universal, any more than honest feeling and expression result in good art. If personality molds the work; gives it individuality and power, it does this by expressing something that touches our common humanity. To require the deciphering of personal experience to arrive at the meaning of a work usually means, for me, that the artist is stuck in his own idiosyncratic mannerisms - or that the energy generated by it isn't sufficiently strong or clear enough to reach me. So museum exhibitions are accompanied

by 'de rigueur' fliers and tapes, often full of long-winded 'explanations' assuring (and reassuring) the viewer that he is properly 'oriented' before the art. And of course the experience has to be an 'educational experience', otherwise why bother? The result is a Sesame Street mind-set for the art lover, compliments of our Puritan heritage. Like the gourmet who has lost his capacity to enjoy simple wholesome foods, it seems we're loosing our capacity to appreciate art that is stripped of larger social purpose and politically correct causes. College courses explore the ways in which (say) Flemish artists understood their environment, or study the sociopolitical influences that helped define the 19th. Century's view of women as expressed in the art of Manet or Degas, or study the concept of the 'Sublime' and 'Transcendent' in the paintings of Cole, Beirdstadt, or Church - all these topics are undoubtedly interesting to explore - but the need to invest art with extra-aesthetic content and to sanctify this process through the substitution of derivative matter, unwittingly leads to a devaluation of art. Certainly art acts as symbol through which we can study cultural mores and customs, but to see the 'symbol' is not to see the work of art. Still the best way to appreciate a chair, it seems to me, is to sit in one. And the best way to appreciate a work of art is to look at one. Faced with a plethora of poor art that demands intellectual research and interpretation (sometimes it seems a deliberate attempt on the part of the artist/gallery to give weighty significance to work that is otherwise poor), little wonder the general public is reluctant to appreciate art denuded from all this extraneous stuff. Today, understanding art often entails a sort of quiz game, where the initiated can feel privileged, and those who aren't ignorant or stupid. To mystify and confound have almost become symbols of artistic merit and profundity. We seem stuck on the worn-out idea that art is 'avant garde' (you know all

the nonsense - it's 'on the cutting edge', it's 'revolutionary', it's 'neo' this or 'post' that, etc.); and from this we've somehow extrapolated the strange belief that what is hard to understand must consequently be good art. I'm not, I hope, making a case here for dismissing art that can't be appreciated at first viewing. A lot of art needs prolonged viewing to foster familiarity, and with it, appreciation. But a lot of what passes for art is just crap, and the unwary public is often the victim of good old-fashioned hype. At any rate, the penchant for interpretation is increasing, and it's becoming the exception to witness art without preliminary introduction (2).

The trend for more and more knowledge and the accumulation of more and more information also reflects our unwillingness to value activities that include elements of idleness, of play, of not-doing; of anything, in short, that can't be narrowly exploited by us or used to cover up our boredom and despair (and attendant need for excitement and entertainment). We can't seem to do anything unless we 'profit' by it somehow. So what we do becomes subservient to what we hope to achieve. And what we hope to 'achieve' is always 'more'. We're in sympathy with Ricko (Edward G. Robinson), in the wonderful film Key Largo, who lit up when Bogart pegs him as someone who doesn't want anything specifically, just 'more'. In my town, for example, there's talk of extending the high school curriculum to include summer months. Proponents argue that the rest of the Industrialized world is 'ahead of us' when it comes to educating our kids, and we need to improve our educational system to compete successfully. But 'compete' to achieve what? Can we have a decent 'standard of living' (is that a car in every garage and a chicken in every pot?) at the expense of others around the world? And is quality of life dependent

on more information and faster computers? Is knowledge the same as wisdom? Why reduce the benefits of a 'liberal arts education' to such simple-minded goals? Non-directed play, boredom, idleness, waste - all are implicit in art-making, and implicit in an understanding of life that isn't defined exclusively in terms of commerce or achievement. I believe contentment is only possible in an environment that encourages what is non-utilitarian. Go through a small French village and watch old people sit in the town square for hours on end, or play bocce, or lounge about idly smoking and drinking absinthe. Although this way of life is fast disappearing, these sights, remnants of a bygone era, challenge us to find satisfaction outside our corporate capitalistic-driven attitudes. I think it's very important to become aware of this. More jobs, more entertainment, better laws and regulations, greater environmental control, more education - all these are important, to be sure - but none can bring us fulfillment if we don't understanding, as well, the importance of 'doing nothing', of play without predetermined goals, of freedom not defined as rules of behavior and political 'rights', but as a quality of life enjoyed and manifested in the ordinary moments of life, as a natural expression of personality and vitality. These qualities, reflected in so many ways in the painter's task, are integral to art and art making.

Painting in this respect is an archaic activity. It refuses to take seriously the values society imposes on us in order to exploit and control. If the artist is a threat to society (and keep in mind that this was not always the case - artists in some societies were well integrated into their respective cultures. The artist as 'outcast' or 'renegade' is a relatively recent arrival on the art-scene), this is true not because he provides a radical

anti-social content or message in his art (not that he can't), but because he refuses to play the game of division of labor, of separation and compartmentalization. This, it seems to me (so often misunderstood), doesn't raise the artist above his own society, but places him outside it. When the artist is forced to become quasi-salesman/showman/entrepreneur, he can only enter into a contract with society at the risk of loosing his soul. In this sense, the artist will always find himself at odds with a society that fragments and compartmentalizes; with a society that turns people and what they do into things and products. This trivialization of the human spirit, so pervasive in our culture, seems to me the central and most serious problem of our era. It isn't simply that we're demeaned by it, suffering consequent political, social, personal losses - but that we're also loosing the capacity to make those distinctions that can keep us healthy and independent of mind and heart. The duller we feel, the more we seek escapes - through entertainment, psycho-analysis, religion, art, drugs, politics, causes of one kind or another - and the more we'll need to identify with any activity that makes us feel important. But I think contentment and appreciation are possible only in the recognition of correct value; in paying attention to things as they are, as opposed to what we hope they are - and this implies a sensibility that is not distorted by excess or insufficiency. The artist is in a good position to do this, because he works with sensibilities that spring from, and mirror, his own sensations. But the artist has no special status in this regard (in spite of our 'cult of personality'). Any activity, conscientiously done, offers the same potential (3).

I want to conclude this introduction by relating a chance encounter I had with a woman many years ago that, for me, contains all of the fundamental principles of art and what it means to be an artist:

Michel Moyse

I was sitting in a room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (NYC, 1984) looking at several Impressionists - Van Gogh, Gauguin, Soutine, etc. The room was empty of other visitors, and I was enjoying the solitude when an old woman, elegantly dressed in a long black dress, head covered with a shawl, walked in and sat on the bench next to me. At first she seemed to me almost like some poor derelict who had inadvertently wandered into the museum to get out of the cold wintry weather. A moment later she turned to me and started talking, and my doubts were quickly dispelled by the remarkable force and clarity of her words. I relate the experience here as I wrote it down at the time (I was so struck by this encounter that I wrote down her words on my return to my apartment). I pass these on to the reader here (with no commentary) because it seems to me that the thoughts expressed by this woman reveal profound insights into art and art-making.

The woman turned to me and said, "To be an artist takes intense energy. It's a choice between life and death." I didn't respond to her comments, which seemed offered to no one in particular. But she must have sensed that I was listening, because she went on to explain that, as a young girl, she had lived with her Aunt and had fallen in love with a man who was mean to her. He used to beat her, she told me, and eventually threw her out. But she was still in love with him, and was so unhappy that she resolved to kill herself. But she didn't know how to go about it. "It's not easy to kill oneself", she told me. So, instead, she decided to become an "artist". I didn't know what to make of this unsolicited bit of personal history, so I kept quiet. She elaborated, and told me that her first efforts scared her. She painted "a man's hairy face" and was so frightened by this that she had to run outside for fresh air. "One has to accept one's inclinations", she said.

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She told me she continued to paint people - faces - until two years ago, when she had to stop because of a bad back. But people continued to interest her. She went on, "Style is a gift. Most painters stay in one style because they have worked so hard to attain it, and there's a great tendency in all of us to go to sleep. We are beggars who receive a gift." At this point I told her that it takes a long time to develop a 'style'. She told me I answered her with clichés. She added, "You're like a beggar on the street who, with hands outstretched, receives five dollars and mistakes the gift for the five dollars". She stopped talking and we sat silently for a while. Then she straightened herself and, looking at me, asked me whom I thought she was talking to. When I looked at her in puzzlement, she said she was talking to herself, not to me. And she was really talking to herself in order to 'appreciate' herself. Neither of her parents had appreciated her. Then she went on, "there's a lot of fakery around". She made a sweeping gesture with her hand to include the paintings hanging on the walls. At this moment a man walked into the room and, pointing to him, she added, with a smile on her face, "I could have married a man like that and stayed with him because he would have taken care of me, but this too would be a fake." She went on to tell me that many years ago she had applied to Cooper Union to study art. She had been accepted because she passed an engineering requirement. She laughed over this bit of information, then added, "The opening (to art) is narrow, and not what it seems to be". She asked me if I was a painter. I told her I was. She asked me if I was married and had children. I told her I was married and had one child. She told me I had responsibilities, then added that no one can help me find a style, "not your son, or wife, or anyone else". There was a lull in the conversation, then

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she went on, "You're free to go; you don't have to stay here if you don't want to". I clumsily answered that I knew I was free, and that I wanted to stay and talk with her. She told me that she painted with her finger, very rapidly (she demonstrated by pointing her finger in the air, in front of an invisible canvass, and made quick rapid motions with her hand). "I don't paint with a paintbrush anymore, I paint invisibly, with my finger", she added with a laugh. Then, readying herself to leave, she looked once more around the room and said to me "I'm a painter of no consequence. Not like him (she pointed to a work by van Gogh). He's a painter of some consequence". Then, without saying another word, she got up and left the room. I sat for a while thinking about this strange encounter, then got up and went home.

A few acknowledgments are in order. First, to my wonderful wife, Linda, who has been a constant and loving companion throughout my personal and professional life. Anyone of lesser character and affection would have left me years ago. If the artist usually sacrifices for his work, it takes a unique person to share this pain and privation. I also want to thank my parents, Blanche and Louis, and my Grandparents, Celine and Marcel, who provided me with a home where art was part and parcel of our environment, and where its appreciation was a given. To my In-laws, Betty and Edward Phillips, who opened my eyes to a larger world and who introduced me to the importance of the ordinary. To my college philosophy professor, John Robinson, who was my mentor and friend, and who gave me the encouragement and support I needed to grow intellectually and emotionally. And to my son Josh, who has made me more human, and whom I love very much. And finally, to all artists whose work is true and good, and who continue to ennoble and inspire.

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(1) From the perspective of the one making art, of course, it's in some ways irrelevant whether the result is 'good' or ' bad'. There are other benefits in the activity that aren't defined solely by aesthetic result.

(2) In this there's also an implicit fear of going against majority or accepted opinion - also, of course, of bucking attitudes fostered by a consumer society, where everything needs to be labeled and packaged before we can see it, taste it, smell it, hear it, feel it. Perhaps another cultural force active here is our habit of receiving and feeling experience at least once removed from its source. Lawyers settle our arguments; politicians 'represent' us; flesh comes prepackaged in our supermarkets ready to eat; distant lands and customs arrive in the form of electronic dots on small screens; etc. So we're predisposed to experience indirectly, and predisposed to accept interpretation as normal and valid.

(3) Of course this is a terrible challenge, and history is replete with examples of artists who have been driven mad in the attempt.

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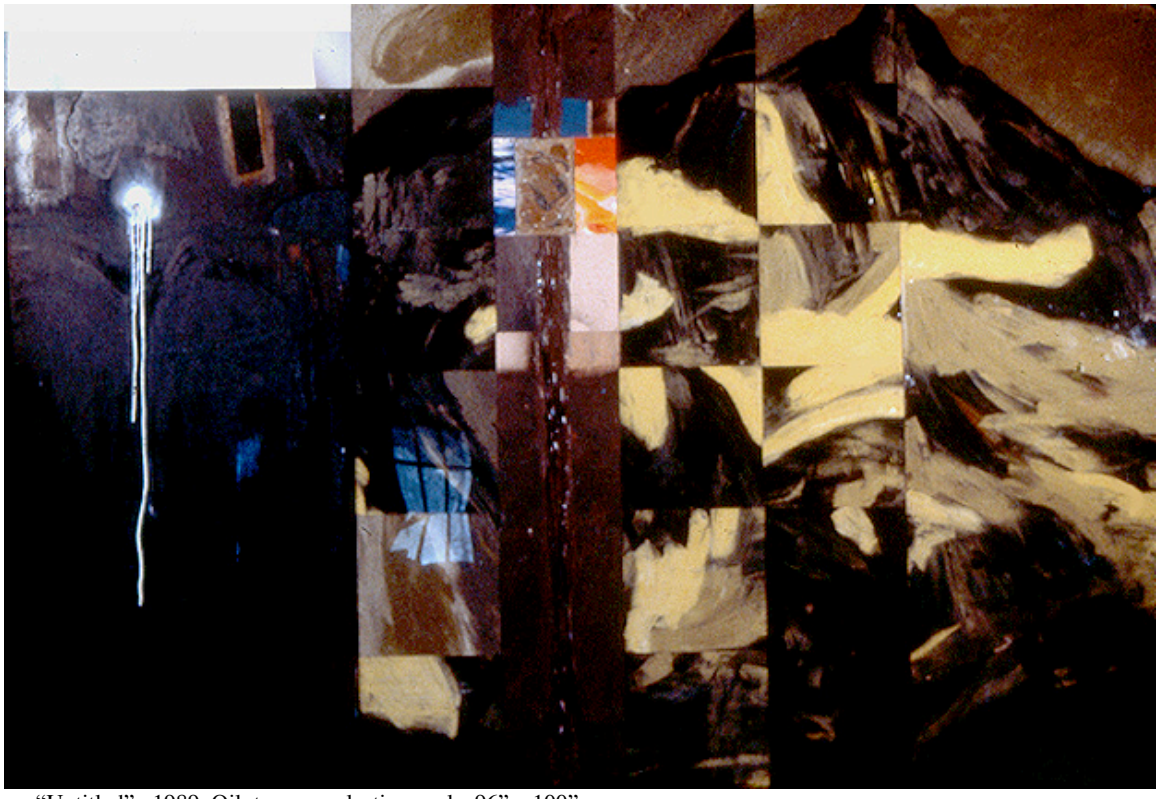
"...reality will never be discovered once and for all. Truth will always be new. Otherwise, it would be nothing but a natural system, more pitiful than nature. In that case, the deplorable truth, more distant, less distinct, and less real every day, would reduce painting to communication between people of the same nationality or community. Our modern technicians would quickly find a machine to reproduce such writing, mindlessly."
Apollinaire, 1908.

PAINTING # 1



"Untitled". 1989. Oil, tape, on plastic panels, 96" x 100"

This painting was completed in 1989. It was inspired by photographs of the Himalayas I had seen after a wonderful dinner at my Aunt and Uncle's home. Some were taken at sunrise or sunset, showing pink, red, orange peaks breaking through the mist; others showed jagged rocks in gloom or twilight surrounded by cloud formations hiding most of the crags, ice and snow (reminiscent of Japanese landscape paintings of the 19th

century, so marvelous in their capacity to create a world with just a few brush strokes). These photographic images made me think back to summers I spent in the Swiss Alps with my family when I was a young child of about seven or eight. I remember in particular an excursion we took in the Valais mountains rising in back of our village. Setting out at dawn, we had climbed for several hours (I was occasionally carried, as were my brother and sister, by a willing member of the family) before reaching a small lake where we stopped for lunch. Before us stretched a panorama of majestic snow-capped mountains shimmering in clear blue sunlight. Behind us rose a steep barren slope whose round top was cut off by a deeper blue sky. Far below, past the tumbling fields dotted with occasional chalets covered with gray slate roofs, the valley lay in deep shadow cast by the twin peaks of the Vis a Vis mountains. I could hear the faint roar of a stream that originated at the foot of the Dent Blanche glacier, interrupted only by an occasional tolling of cow's bells. The weather was ideal for climbing - we were above the tree line but well below snow (it was June or July), and although the sun shone bright, the air was crisp and cool. After our picnic we continued climbing for several more hours and finally reached the top of a mountain range. Beyond this range lay a small valley dotted with rocks and boulders of various sizes and shapes. And beyond this range lay yet another one, higher, and behind it still another, even higher. Happy but tired, we decided to go no further. We had to return to our village before nightfall. My father and mother took their backpacks off and we settled down to enjoy the view. Soon a palpable silence engulfed us. I felt a growing presence of something full, all-encompassing, in this silence; a presence which filled every part of the slope, including the late-afternoon

shadows slowly moving behind the rocks and boulders. I was totally alone yet somehow deeply connected to everything around me. It was a strange, mysterious feeling, as if time had paradoxically stopped yet continued unfolding (I've felt this way on rare occasions since then, but only when I find myself removed from civilization).

But first a caveat: looking at this painting (and all of my work), in some way I'm at a loss as to how I can proceed intelligently in talking about it. I'm entering territory I shouldn't enter, or perhaps that I'm ill equipped to enter. It isn't so much that I'm not critical of my work or that I have no sense of it, but that personal evaluations lead me in a wrong direction - as if, reduced to talking about motives and causal connections, I end up with sensibilities that distort the process. When I did this painting, I didn't set out to do anything at all, in some ways, other than act on the desire to do something that I would find interesting and compelling to look at. Certainly the beautiful photographs of the Himalayas appealed to me, and certainly the early associations of mystery and awe were on my mind at the time. But that's not to suggest, I hope, a causal link between the two. As de Kooning once said to someone who asked him how he started a drawing, 'why not start with a knee?' The question not only reveals the irrelevancy of asking 'why' something was done the way it was, but also the difficulty in answering. It could be a knee, or a tree, or anything else, for that matter. It's usually not the 'how' but the 'what' that is significant. The starting point is unimportant - whatever the impulse, it’s bound to be transformed in the process of putting it down on paper or canvass. As I've mentioned in the introduction, in some ways painting is an exercise in 'not-doing'; in undirected play, and explications that entail personal motives will of necessity miss the mark. I urge the reader to keep this very much in mind throughout these essays.

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There's a resonance about this painting I like. It's almost musical. Some deep sound emanates from its combination of color/forms. Specific reference to sound is of course clearly made with the 1/4 inch recording tape stuck in the middle pink panel 'cascading' down the front. Or seen from another point of view maybe that's not tape; just the entrails of the mountain spilling out into the picture plane, or simply an added vertical accent (echoed by the white streak to the left). It's a rather somber, brooding work, as well. The ocher/yellow and red/pink areas act as counterpoints to an otherwise fairly austere surface. Perhaps the red/pink area is an attempt to turn the surface inside out; to reveal the 'inside' of the mountain/surface - a sort of doorway or passage to gain entrance; or simply an attempt to wrest meaning from inert material. Or perhaps simply a pleasing lighter note against the darker ones - merely a contrast. The pink curved piece, perpendicular to the picture-plane (and hardly visible in this reproduction) offsets and tempers the grid-like pattern of forms in the central panel. It also suggests a connection between flesh and paint - painting then seen as reflection of self, of body (as all painting must of necessity be). The mostly black, shorter left panel, even more somber than the central or right area, provides momentary rest from the busier other areas. Its inertness also helps anchor the work. White paint oozes down and accentuates the verticality of forms - paint as sperm or mother's milk. Or just white paint. It also adds an element of 'incongruous congruity' to the whole – i.e., the introduction of ambiguities that in some way prevent resolution or closure and enrich the whole. Or (perhaps more to the point) something that is and is not what it seems to be, and which helps in creating plastic (thus emotional) tension. This is further accentuated through the deconstruction of the

'representational' image by the imposition of a quasi-geometric grid that creates its own formal energy and redistributes weight. Facets of the mountain; or merely the faint echo of Cubism, or the introduction of simultaneity of spaces. Or merely a 'gimmick' that serves to 'abstract' the image and bring the viewer back to the matter of paint; to the primacy of form (occasionally exploited by Barttlet or Hockney, for example). It also points ahead to my multichannel work with computers (not that I had any inkling of this at the time).

The notion of 'incongruous congruity' (a ponderous phrase, I know, but likable for its vagueness) is fundamental to my understanding of art, but difficult to define because it operates on so many different levels. It can include metonymic (use of the name of one thing for that of another associated with it) and synecdochic elements (a figure of speech, by which the whole of a thing is put for a part, or a part for the whole) both more common in contemporary works of art of the last century than before (e.g. Giacometti, Johns, Salle, Mertz). Part of this implicit search for 'meaning' - a kind of ontological underpinning of much 'modern' art - arises out of our contemporary need to understand and define ourselves in a largely artificial and fragmented world. It's also a recognition of limitations and perhaps an acknowledgment of what is nameless, infinite. I need to be more specific here, because I believe these ideas touch on the real function of art and art making.

To begin with, at some elemental yet profound level, 'incongruous congruity' refers to the difficulty in appreciation where there is undifferentiation. Simply put, it's hard to paint a red flower in a field of red flowers because, under these conditions, the

power and meaning of 'red' and 'flower' are lost. This elemental yet nagging problem is of concern to the artist to the degree to which his attempts to deal with it 'succeed' or 'fail'. Although arising from a very human and understandable desire (if a little red is beautiful, won't a lot of it be more beautiful? Or - as corollary - if one spoon of sugar in your coffee tastes good, won't two spoonfuls taste even better?), dealing with this pictorial 'problem' involves a complex set of perceptions that may seem at first glance simple to deal with, but which are in fact unusually difficult. I would even argue that the 'resolution' of this 'problem' defines the act of painting at its most rudimentary level (Cezanne, at the end of his life, is said to have remarked 'all lies in the contrast'). Of course concomitant physiological and psychological impulses exist, but here I'm referring to the dynamics of painting, to the perceptual processes that are engaged in putting paint on canvass. Hans Hoffman's notion of 'push and pull' is of relevance here, because it argues for plastic or formal tension created through the suggestion of plastic depth and the manipulation of colors and their expressive power, whereas undifferentiation reduces the surface to pictorial dullness. Obviously, undifferentiation can exist within differences if those differences cancel each other out (as two people of equal weight sitting on opposite ends of a see-saw, unable to move). A good example of this dullness can be seen in any supermarket displaying endless rows of multicolored products – the result is anything but colorful. Hence the need to create expressive color/forms based on the recognition that colors do not necessarily generate ‘color’. It's interesting to note, however, that some artistic movements have come close to negating this basic idea. Minimalism, for example, attempted to reduce painting to elemental forms devoid of sign

or symbol. But, for me, the more they succeed, the more they fail. Occasionally I can appreciate a 'color field' painting or 'reductivist' work (e.g., Reinhard, Ryman, Olitski, et. al.), but the more the work is undifferentiated, the more it bores me. Esoteric explanations - pushing the limits of perception, playing with visual subtleties, painting as 'thing in itself', etc. - don't help me very much. I'm more inclined to appreciate the imagination behind the act - as, for example, the intent behind Malevitch's 'white on white' canvass, or the one behind Warhol's 'Empire State Building' film - than the fruits of this imaginative act. Sometimes the idea is more interesting than it's execution. It's important to keep in mind, of course, that 'undifferentiation' here doesn't mean differing or similar colors, but differing or similar meanings or perceptions. Beginners, for example, tend to work with colors in an additive manner, as if bright colors next to each other would multiply the effect of beauty and interest. But here I'm not talking about quantitative differences, necessarily, but about differences in quality; differences brought about through formal development and color complexes (which may or may not parallel quantitative differences).

Another element in 'incongruous congruity' involves freedom and control. As mentioned in the introduction, to some significant degree, preconceptions destroy the creative process. Both freedom and discipline are needed. Freedom implies here the absence of predetermined elements or influences. The artist can then experiment; can accept and reject, and eventually arrive at what he or she has to say. The sort of control, moreover, which interests us is sufficient knowledge of the medium and technique to be able to forget them, so that these don't interfere with whatever potential possibilities exist

at the moment of creation. And discipline isn't the imposition of an idea or order on the work, but a concentration of attention that excludes the irrelevant from what has to be done. In other words, a discipline that presupposes clarity of mind and heart, sensitivity and affection (in passing, it's interesting to note how mistaken some politicians are when they confuse, as they so often do, discipline with 'law and order', and freedom with 'rights'). We can sit behind our computers and design blueprints for houses of various sizes and styles and shapes, but usually the results are mediocre because too mechanical and uniform, or inapplicable because they ignore specific requirements and conditions of site, occupants, etc. The Victorian or Colonial house, with its obligatory porch or verandah, its obligatory lawn and deck or patio, its obligatory living room, dining room, kitchen, etc. is a mold that, unless it becomes lived in and continues to change under the whim and personal stamp of its occupants, becomes a house for robots, not human beings. This problem derives from an unwillingness to pay attention to particulars (hence a generalized and often unjust imposition over the specific) and an excessive desire to manage and control everything around us. It can get pretty weird. I heard recently that a few wealthy Californians are spending fortunes to transform their newly designed homes to make them appear as if they've been around for hundreds of years. New walls are 'stressed' and partially destroyed; vines planted to overgrow terraces and gardens, etc. Unless your landscape architect is 'Capability Brown', the results are likely to be pretty bad. But there are more common and less ostentatious examples: Pizza Hut's fake brick walls exposed behind flaking stucco; new but frayed, torn blue jeans; ready-made canvass board with built-in swirls a la van Gogh; contemporary 'antiqued' furniture; etc.

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An old neglected stone wall, found by chance through a walk in the woods, has beauty, grace, elegance precisely because time has allowed it to change without human intervention. To plan this is impossible, and to simulate it robs you of the genuine article. The 'old French castle' faithfully transported and reassembled, stone by stone, to the fields of Connecticut will necessarily loose its charm and originality. In regards painting, this means paying attention to accidents, to what the materials dictate, and being open and receptive enough to let other forces play in the creation of the work rather than mental projections. It also implies a sensibility that can recognize what is interesting and alive and beautiful without sentimental nostalgia for the past. The "Sheer Weight of History" (see Eric Fischl's painting of that name) is more difficult to carry if your feet aren't firmly planted in today's world. Nostalgia can only occur when there's a degree of disdain for the present.

Another element in 'incongruous congruity' is the 'oddness' of the thing (fine examples are the paintings of Francis Bacon, De Chirico, Magritte, Bourgeois, Philip Guston). This sense of surprise, of novelty, is welcome because it allows for newness of vision. We're accustomed to finishing what we don't see, because habit leads the mind and eye over familiar territory (much of the visual world we take for granted is really a mental supposition or construct). But the pleasure gained from the unexpected is equally important, and has a legitimate place in art/life. Surrealism, for example, elevated this artistic impulse to one of its important principles. The 'cretinous journeys' of the early Surrealists (so-called partly in jest, but also because the underlying attitude implies a disingenuousness of will) were undertaken in the hope of finding what is novel and

interesting by undermining or destroying familiarity. The requisite travels taken by many early 19th. Cent. artists - usually to some exotic and far away land (Rimband to Africa, Cartier-Bresson to India and China, Gauguin and Matisse to Tahiti, etc.) - reflected as much this desire to break routine as it did some sort of Rousseaunian impulse to search for the pure and primitive. This novelty of experience allows us to see things more vibrantly, more intensely, than we do ordinarily. So we enjoy, for example, the portrayal of a villain who is not entirely evil or psychopathic, but who has, contrary to expectations, some good qualities. This fills her out and makes her more human. The extent to which this can be accomplished, artistically, is the extent to which our imagination can be stretched to near disbelief. Cross that boundary and everything falls apart. But stretched to a plausible limit, this element becomes important because it frees the imagination and builds a bridge to the 'unknown'. I don't want to suggest that this quality, in and of itself, suffices in creating something interesting. 'Newness' for it's own sake soon becomes tedious, and we're well past the era (or we should be) where we have to prove to the public that what the artist is doing is 'new' (the only group that hasn't caught on are foundations for the arts, who keep asking for work that 'breaks new ground'). As I mentioned in the introduction, the fact is that all great art is 'new' (from Lascaux cave paintings to good contemporary works), and not much value is added to a work simply because it may be different from anything that has up to now been created (Schnabel's work is undoubtedly 'new', yet I find it generally too sentimental, bombastic, poor in imagination). Perhaps the constant call for what is 'new' may be more a reflection of our political life than an artistic necessity. A Capitalist system that artificially creates

need in order to sell the latest gadgets undoubtedly has some influence over aesthetic taste. So will art dealers who manipulate the market in order to profit from the latest discovered (read 'created') 'genius'.

Still another element in 'incongruous congruity' is recognition of the unknown, of forces usually outside normal consciousness. As mentioned, Surrealists made a conscious effort to play with these sensibilities, often through the use of 'literary' devices. The work of Duchamp or Magritte, for example, often employ ‘incongruous’ devices to suggest suspension of belief and disrupt recognition. Hence the important emphasis on dream states and nonsense, where the laws of physics seem temporarily destroyed or subverted. A wonderful latter day example of this impulse can be found in the beautiful and striking collaborative series of works "Frusta" by Lehndorff and Trlzsch. Because ordinary behavior and thought are subject to so much regulation, we often need to step outside custom and convention to regain our vitality and freedom. Our preoccupation with the anti-hero, or renegade, is a popular acknowledgment of this. If our heroes battle against evil and customarily win, they nonetheless remain outside the system they help recreate, sensing that to join in would somehow abrogate their credibility and power. There's of course the less sophisticated scenario, where the 'good guys' kill the 'bad guys', and ‘everybody lives happily ever after’. To transcend this comic-book mentality means to put these opposing forces aside without rejecting any particular aspect (1). In order to enlarge or break this conventional limitation, the artist needs to step outside of its influences. That's not always easy, and in any case there's no doubt that taking sides here lends some drama and interest to otherwise pretty boring art-making. For example, a

common method is to play with contradictions and polar opposites (see Haake's work, or Joseph Bueys', or Eric Fischl's). Another is to challenge convention through moral or social polemic, as in the well-meaning but somewhat naive movement toward 'socially responsible' art, which attempts to prod and enlighten the viewer in one way or another. There's a plethora of museum and gallery exhibitions that cater to this recent 'genre': 'Art against Aids'; 'Art to save the Whales'; 'Art to help the Homeless', etc. But, in my opinion, this recent trend is, at best, problematic, because a work of art isn't primarily in opposition to, or propaganda for, anything. Art has a moral content but not a moral agenda. Good art is moral in much the same way that good music is moral; i.e., by implication, by inference, as a quality present and manifested through the work's harmony, force and beauty of expression. To make it 'moral' in a political or social sense - as a means to correcting or enlightening behavior (as in Oliver Stone's film "JFK", which is more propaganda than art; albeit perhaps 'good' propaganda - although this seems to me fundamentally an impossibility), is to make of the work an illustration (note that this is often the case with art made in Communist and Totalitarian countries, where the State fosters the subordination of aesthetic concerns for its own sociopolitical ends). In our contemporary society, the lines between art and politics have on occasion become blurred. At bottom I think this reflects not only a growing sense of powerlessness and alienation from the various perverse influences we live under, but also the loss of faith and value in a transcendent reality; in a life not defined solely by the self and our own sense of individuality. And an obvious way of reestablishing 'connections' is to identify ourselves with a larger ideal - a 'good cause' or political movement or ideology. The

artist whose work promotes social or political 'causes' automatically enlarges his world, and finds a certain security in this inclusion. Identification with something 'good' gives purpose and meaning to what may be a rather dull and frightening existence. But this inclusion is gained at the expense of creativity. Art making needs to be done in freedom, and freedom is impossible when it is predetermined, no matter how well intentioned the goals may be.

Because part of this Gestalt includes a dulling of sensibilities, other artists try to reestablish a connection to the 'unknown' through an emphasis or exaggeration of the weird, the strange, the grotesque - art that shocks and disturbs; that challenges accepted mores of 'good taste' and 'decency'. A lot of art does this 'naturally', of course, and I don't want to argue here that it can't or shouldn't. This would simply mean replacing one convention for another. But there's no inherent artistic merit to art that shocks anymore than there is to art that doesn't. If convention needs to be enlarged or eliminated, in an artistic sense (as I believe it does), this needs to be done primarily in recognition of aesthetic concerns, not moral ones. To reiterate, art has a moral content, but not a moral agenda. Manet's 'Dejeuner Sur L'herbe' shocked Parisian bourgeoisie when it was first exhibited at the Salon des Refuses in Paris in 1863. At that time, the public was outraged to view a painting that displayed one nude woman enjoying a picnic lunch surrounded by two fully clothed gentlemen (and another woman, clothed, in the background). But to contemporary viewers, the painting is innocuous and vaguely Victorian. In our 'politically correct' climate, we're more apt to wonder why the woman is the only nude and accuse Manet of chauvinism. In any case, today it takes a Mapplethorpe to arouse

controversy. But if controversy (i.e., 'shock' value) were a proper yardstick with which to judge artistic merit, Mapplethorpe would belong in the ranks of artists such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Hopper. He doesn't. But whether you agree or not, the point is that what is 'shocking' has no intrinsic artistic value save that it upsets the conventional apple-cart, which undoubtedly needs upsetting from time to time (2). Because every great work of art is 'new' - in the sense that it creates something never before seen - and because what is 'shocking' gives the feeling that it too is 'new' (through the introduction of another sensibility in opposition to established mores and customs), the confusion of one with the other is perhaps understandable. The more we feel a need to recognize the 'unknown', to be in touch with the mysteries of life, and the more difficult this becomes, the more we want to destroy established taboos. This seems a natural reaction to stifling convention, not only in art, but in society in general. So reactionary forces develop in opposition to conformity. In extremis, we have the decadence of Hitler's Germany during the twenties and thirties - or, closer to home, the excesses of our own permissive and narcissistic society, with a corresponding rise in social violence and cruelty. Along with this, there's a concomitant increase in sentimentality and righteousness. Although at first glance it may seem strange to link cruelty to sentimentality, in my opinion they're two aspects of the same condition - an inability to assign correct value - and both are partial attempts to redress psychic imbalances. Our popular culture offers many examples, both 'positive' and 'negative', and I won't bore the reader with a list. But it's interesting to see how subtle these forces can be, even when it comes to ‘entertainment’ that is usually regarded as 'documentary' in

spirit. Think of the countless (and often bland) Nature films aired that anthropomorphize violence – one I saw on TV recently suggested that lions kill antelopes in order to weed out the weak and allow the stronger to live so that the herd can stay healthy and propagate. Nature is 'good' after all. Aren't we (and the lions and antelopes) lucky? Such a concept promotes a view of Nature as predictable, controllable, and morally acceptable (3). It also argues in favor of man's dominion over all creatures - political arrogance extended to environmental arrogance. Yet this imposed order is fundamentally an illusion and leads us, in the context of our everyday lives, to stifle our own creative potential by excluding the unknown and substituting what we casually see as a safe and therefore manageable world. For this reason, art needs to break away from convention. To the extent that it succeeds, it reveals levels of existence that are usually ignored. And occasionally it does this with a truthfulness and force that profoundly move us and momentarily enlarge our world.

(1) 'Good' won't triumph over 'Evil'. To pursue this simple-minded goal is simply to create another conflict, another condition that recreates a new conformity within non-conformity. So revolutions continue, and significant, lasting change eludes us. To become whole, to establish a ground that is conducive to health and well-being, means to synthesize opposition; to create an environment where opposites, and opposition, co-exist harmoniously (not the politics of 'good will', which is simply a prelude to totalitarianism).

(2) To realize how things have changed, consider Vasari's ("Lives of the Artists", 1550) admonition to the artist to "always take care however, that everything is in relation to the work as a whole; so that when the picture is looked at, one can recognize in it a harmonious unity, wherein the passions strike terror, and the pleasing effects shed sweetness, representing directly the intention of the painter, and not the things he had no thought of...thus the art will be associated with the grace of naturalness and of delicate charm of color, and the work be brought to perfection not with the stress of cruel suffering, so that men who look at it have to endure pain on account of the suffering which they see has been borned by the artist in his work..."

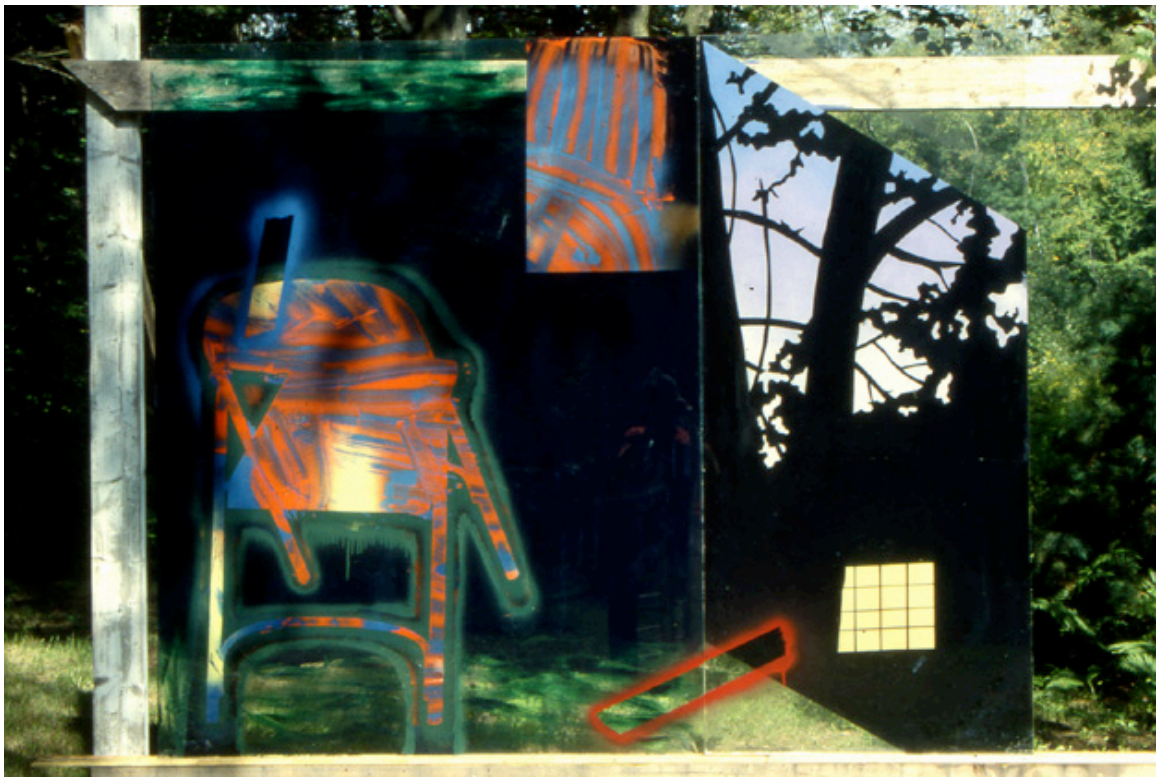
(3) Nature films aren't the only ones to feed us this pabulum; you can find it in many different TV shows – especially in

children's programming, such as 'Sesame Street' and 'Mr. Roger's Neighborhood'.

Michel Moyse

"I realize today that it is the abstract which is reasonable and possible. And that it is the pursuit of reality which is madness, the ideal, the impossible"
Jean Helion (quoted in "Reported Sightings, Art Chronicles 1957-1987" by John Ashbery)

PAINTING # 2



"Chair". 1989. Oil on glass, 86" x 100"

This diptych, painted in oils on two panels of glass, was completed in 1989. With the exception of my more recent work, I've done more painting on glass or plastic than any other material. Although the use of glass has never become widespread among visual artists (notable exceptions are Klee and Kandinsky), it's of course been exploited in crafts and architecture. While on a visit to Paris in 1956, I remember being struck by the elegant beauty of the many stained-glass windows that adorn Notre Dame de Chartres Cathedral. Back-lit by daylight, and rising out of the penumbral spaces of the large interior, these windows are testament, in the words of Henry Adams, to "the struggle of

(man's) own littleness to grasp the infinite" (Le Corbusier, in more secular expression, exploited this sensibility in the design of his church Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp, France). I'm not a religious person - at least not in any institutional sense - so the Catholic narrative didn't mean much to me. But the intensity of color, the pure quality of light that emanates from these colored glasses, made an indelible impression on me. Perhaps I was already predisposed. At the age of five or six, I often played with decals; bright colorful pictures which one places face down on paper and wets with water. The supportive backing is then pulled off, and the image reveals itself as it is transferred to paper. I loved the vivacity of these colors. Later, in my twenties, my first serious creative efforts involved both the use of transparent surfaces and back light. I spent several years making 'light boxes' from sheets of painted plastic that I assembled, one in front of the other, and back-lit with incandescent or fluorescent light. Although sometimes I incorporated motion (I would cut sections and connect them to small electric motors), I never really exploited this possibility (it was going to be another 20 years before I again incorporated motion into my work, this time through computer animation). Although glass also obliterates texture, it makes color more vibrant and alive than any other surface I know. Working with it presented some problems, however. For example, work done on one side is the mirror image of what it is when viewed from the opposite direction. A stroke of paint from top left to bottom right becomes a stroke from top right to bottom left. Again, because glass and plastic scratch easily, it's hard to remove paint from an area without adding scrapes and marks. Moreover, paint applied on top of paint remains invisible seen from the opposite side unless the original coat is first scraped off.

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These were tough problems to deal with at first. But as time went on I got better at it, until I eventually painted 'in reverse', making the mental change directly on the surface.

In this painting, I wanted to emphasize the transparency of the glass in certain areas, especially in the right panel. I enjoyed the thought that the wall or support would contribute to the work. The left panel grew out of a painting I had previously done and put aside. When I took it out again and started to scrape the paint away, I carved out the chair-like form and the window-like form. I didn't do this deliberately, but the 'window' and 'chair' motifs have been recurrent in my work (the 'window' motif has a long history in art-making. It offers numerous possibilities, both as aesthetic structure and symbol). I had an old beat-up chair in my studio, splattered with layers of accumulated dirt and paint. I enjoyed looking at it. The paint/dirt/wear and tear were obviously un-meditated, and so there's a looseness about it that I liked and welcome in my work. This quality can't be deliberately sought - it comes rather by 'chance' or ‘invitation’ (if you’ve set the stage). But when it does, it allows for a stretching or opening up of realities that otherwise are inaccessible (various schools of art-making have been predicated on this observation: Dada, Automatism, Art Povera, Action painting, etc.).

From a psychological point of view, an obvious aspect of the 'chair' is its significance as rest. While working on this painting, I was unhappy with the dislocation in my personal life as a consequence of working in New York City and commuting to my family in Vermont. I had subjected myself to this grinding routine for fifteen years, and hoped to make a change. So at the time the chair symbolized more a future hope than a reality. But if I associate pain and unrest with the left panel, however, the right panel

presents its counterpoise. A 'representation' of our bedroom window (seen at dusk from my studio), it offers resolution to the discomfort implicit in the left panel - the prospect of holding on to both art and family. Painted in flat simple forms, it is clearer and less 'expressionistic' than the left panel. Although it adjoins the left panel it inhabits a different space, and the eye traverses from left panel to right with a corresponding shift in locus. Over the years, I've done several paintings that combine dual movements; reflections or expressions of opposites or opposing directions. From an artistic point of view, this reflects my interest in what I've called, in the previous essay, 'congruous incongruities'. But it also reflects conditions of my personal life (as mentioned before, depending on the artist's personality and his manner of working, these are more or less evidenced in the work). In my case, my own personal growth was also shaped by the fact that I'm a fraternal twin. One aspect of this is that, for many years, I felt I was in some way handicapped; that I could define myself only in relation to my brother. This feeling left me many years ago, but it used to haunt me, and I think I translated this, in artistic terms, by becoming acutely aware of duality: of 'left' and 'right', of 'yes' and 'no', of 'black' and 'white', of 'male' and 'female'; movements that have expressed themselves in various ways throughout my artistic development (I offer this cautiously and as possible yet partial explanation for my tendency to work so often with the diptych and not, obviously, as explanation for the search. This the artist has in common with everyone, and I discuss this aspect of art-making in another essay. I use the word ‘partial’ deliberately here, since there are aesthetic reasons for my proclivity to work with the diptych as well that are more about working in contrast and inviting ‘incongruous’

elements. As I mentioned earlier, taking a psychological approach to discuss artistic expression remains problematic and can easily verge on the ridiculous.).

This painting touches on the difficulty or impossibility of painting. This theme (also recurrent in the history of art) has surfaced more than once in my work. In some subtle sense, painting is an activity that is impossible. I'm not sure exactly why. I'm not referring here to the common feeling that one's work is never as good as one would like it to be (Picasso, when asked which of his paintings was his favorite, replied 'the next one'); rather, the feeling that it can never be really successful or finally done. Perhaps it's an activity that, were it fully understood, would die of its own design (1). Perhaps it's a sense that the end never justifies the means; that the motives to create are never well served by the result, or that the result is incidental to the process. In any case, this painting here touches on these questions - the 'chair' signifies not only the hope of finding rest, but may also refer to the difficulty of finding rest (or resolution) in painting per se. Elements of this are implicit in this work - an unoccupied chair, a window directing the viewer back to the conditions of paint – and also in the three negative imprints of 'tape' (two on the top of the chair and background, respectively; the third to 'hold' the right panel). For me, these illustrate the impossibility of 'holding' onto something, of making permanent what is essentially fleeting. They act as traces of something gone, in the manner of imprints left by a guest who, invited yet unseen, came and went of his own choosing. Or something mysterious yet intimate, like the footprints of "Lucy" found in Arizona, whose impression, along with those of her young child, have been preserved in petrified lava for thousands of years. Painting is also an invitation; a form of prayer, of

supplication. It often grows out of a painful recognition of unsatisfied wants and needs; out of various fears and psychic imbalances. The motives for painting are seldom clear and direct. The sense that painting is a residue or by-product (akin, as Francis Bacon remarked, to a 'snail's trail') suggests that in some manner the result is superfluous; incidental to the 'real' work, which may involve processes not necessarily wholly enclosed in, or derived from, itself. Usually, and to the degree the artist matures, there's a diminution of 'ulterior' motives directing the activity. The work becomes less obsessive, less self-referential, and therefore more capable of being done and enjoyed 'for it's own sake'. This frees the artist to paint 'just for fun' - simply as expression of, and appreciation for, life (this brings us back to the notion of art as a form of 'not-doing', which I briefly discussed in the introduction).

If we can call music the artifice of sound, we can call art the artifice of sight. But to say this is to say, in some fundamental sense, that space is the true province of visual art. That is, the creating of space is its defining activity ('time' is not visible to the eye. We see 'change'; i.e., 'movement', but we do this always in the present. It is memory that introduces the idea of change as past, present and future - we remember the connection between what we saw and what is, and call this ‘change’). So the examination of space, as expressed in art of various cultures, gives us a wonderful tool by which we can understand specific works and their cultural context. For example, the Italian Renaissance introduced the 'geometric' understanding of space. 'Objects' were placed in such a way that the rule of the 'vanishing point' was never violated - every line had to radiate to a single imaginary point on the horizon. Nature became more 'scientific', more 'rational', and, in a development that paved the way for the Industrial Revolution,

inherently measurable and manageable. In earlier art, of course, distance was understood in terms of size and vertical placement, as in Byzantine and early Gothic painting, or Japanese or Islamic art of the 16th, 17th, and 18th, century. Something seen close was placed below something seen far; something far, above something close (this approach led to some wonderfully idiosyncratic spaces, especially in Japanese and Flemish painting). Egyptian hieroglyphics, Greek murals of two thousand year ago, Australian Aboriginal drawing, American Indian painting - all demonstrate a more or less similar concept of space. Of course artists knew that distance meant depth, but this 'verticality' of space (for lack of a better word) served its function as proper 'description' of their world. That is, this delineation of depth was considered 'normal' and 'true' until the Renaissance replaced it with its own three-dimensional space, which in turn became a 'sine qua non' of good artistic expression, copiously studied and drawn with mathematical precision (this change reflected a new concept of 'reality' which, for the artist, held - and holds - no intrinsic advantage). Centuries later, our understanding of 'space' changed again to reflect social, scientific and technological discoveries that facilitated, among other things, ease of travel and awareness of diverse cultures. Inventions such as the airplane (which introduced a hitherto unknown aerial perspective) and radio created a revolution in speed of travel and communications, and brought about the possibility of simultaneity and multiplicity of points of view. Influenced by this expansion of reality, the imagination responded by creating its own inventions. Cubism, of course, expressed this change. Picasso and Braque's Cubist paintings, for example, investigate a space that contains several different but co-existing perspectives. The 'solidity' of the external

world, so much a prior matter of unquestioned faith (reinforced by common sense) before the Industrial Revolution was replaced by a more relative and ephemeral concept. 'Objects' could exist partially; could be seen as aspects of something else, or could move about, without being tied down to a single locus. The Renaissance concept of space, now in some sense seen as a mental construct, was no longer the absolute yardstick by which the real world could be measured. So Juan Gri's multifaceted fluid spaces, for example, were as much a valid expression of reality than Raphael's rigid representation of objects conforming to a three-dimensional perspective. At the same time, this burgeoning concept of space redefined our understanding of Western Man and his relationship to Nature. If the concreteness of the 'external' world was compromised, so was the concreteness of Man. If any point of view was simply one among many others, what made it more truthful, significant, or valid than any other? ‘Truth’ became more 'subjective', arbitrary, personal. These multifarious and complex (specifically Western) historical changes can be broadly traced to the collapse of a feudal agrarian society and the birth of industry; as the end of 'natural man' and the beginning of 'artificial man'. In art, as forces that led the artist to look beyond nature for inspiration; beyond 'externals', beyond social contract, beyond religion, for meaning and identity. This condition signified a loss of 'faith' in the possibility of immutable or transcendent knowledge, of discovering and establishing absolute moral and social truths, with an attendant undermining and gradual disappearance of the spiritual and sacred. But this transition didn't occur before nascent 'Modern Man'; i.e., man at the beginning of the 20th. Century, enjoyed a brief respite from the conditions and consequences of a growing capitalist economy - a sort of balance where opposing forces between man and machine were

check-mated, as it were, before the pendulum swung towards two World Wars, the Age of Anxiety, and our present post-modern era. My Grandfather, who was in his teens living in Paris at the turn of the Century, remembered this period with pleasure and nostalgia. If the streets of Paris started to fill with bicycles, motorcycles, and automobiles; if incandescent lights replaced the oil wick fixtures lit every night, these changes but slightly disrupted the pace and ease of a quotidian life that catered to the Sunday promenade in the Bois de Boulogne, or the afternoon picnic by the Seine. In painting, this temporary balance witnessed the flowering of Impressionism: 'Nature' and 'Man' in harmony, at ease and benefiting from each other's presence and interaction. Monet's garden at Giverney symbolizes the culmination of this symbiosis - Nature, manipulated yet untamed because uncreated, still ordered and friendly, serves as nurturing oasis against the growing noise and bustle of city life, and provides the artist with inspiration and infinite subject-matter. This historical period (roughly from the 1860's to W.W.1) marks a time when Western man, aided by the growing wonders of science and technology, faced the future with hope and confidence. The Great War, of course, shattered this civilized (and civilizing) tranquility with irrevocable force. The mass slaughter, the use of mechanical killing tools that totally destroyed any remnant of Medieval chivalry, left little room for optimism or hope of creating a utopian society. Suddenly, science was seen as a double-edged sword; it could be exploited just as easily to create and promulgate evil. The increasing secularization of Nature and Western Man's emerging alienation, fueled by the displaced and 'abstract' values of a growing Capitalistic and Industrial class, brought with it increasing angst and misery. The works of the German Expressionists (e.g., Nolde, Beckman, Kirchner, Kokoschka, Dix,) and

others of that period (Giacometti, De Chirico, Ernst, Masson, Tanguy, Dali, Magritte, Picasso, et. al) all express, in their own manner, this growing dis-ease and insecurity, and a concomitant 'turning inward' to find, investigate, express, and delineate the proper domain of art. Even in the case of Matisse, whose work floats above the trials and tribulations of social chaos perhaps more than any other artist of his time, art became more 'abstract', and increasingly explored this new landscape. To get a sense of just how changed the concept of space became, take a look, for example, at a van Gogh self-portrait, (say) "Portrait of the Artist with his Ear cut off" (1889) and compare it to (say) Picasso's "Les Demoiselle D'avignon" (1907). The van Gogh expresses a space that is homogeneous, direct and palpable. The figure itself inhabits a space that is as simple and definite as the wall in front of which Vincent stands. If various swirls and strokes delineate an atmosphere around the model, it is nevertheless a flat and monolithic space. That's because van Gogh's formal representation of space on canvass remains essentially 'objective'. The figure, itself an object, is surrounded by other objects (the wall, easel, door, Japanese print, etc.), and all these various 'things' co-exist in the same undifferentiated homogeneous space. The same can't be said, however, for 'Les Demoiselle D'avignon'. These 'damsels of the night' inhabit a space full of sharp angles; full of planes which recede and advance; full of twists and turns; indeed, a space which has no separate identity apart from the nudes, neither homogeneous nor undifferentiated, but as subject to change and transformation as they are. It is, of course, Cubist. But it is, as well, the expression of an imaginary place, a place that allows us to see these women from various points simultaneously; a space, in fact, which is more metaphor for the artist's inner vision - a convoluted, seemingly chaotic, disparate space. To call it 'inward',

then, is to say that this new understanding of space represents a new emphasis on the 'subject' in the old Cartesian 'subject-object' paradigm. Needless to say, other artists expressed this inward turn in many different ways: for example, as a striving for the pure and sublime (de Stijl), or the creation of a new Industrial utopia (Bauhaus), or the delineation of the mind and dream world (Surrealism). But, in the case of these (and other) movements, the earlier faith in the validity of the 'external' world was crumbling, and with it the concept of 'space' as something 'out there'. Yet this development didn't stop with the transformation of Impressionistic space into Cubist space. If the growing Metropolis became more impersonal and hostile; if Nature was slowly destroyed by Artifice - if the natural cycles of agrarian life were replaced with the artificial cycles of conveyor belts, radio, and light bulbs - then at least what existed inside us; what we felt, sensed, smelled, tasted, could remain inviolate, safe, sacred - or so it seemed at first. But the 'inward turn' continued to push toward the elimination of the 'external world' as a 'thing in itself' and, prompted by the fear of violence and chaos (as well as the need to find solutions to this violence), Modern Man became more and more defined as a being whose real nature is hidden somewhere 'inside'. A new discipline - psychoanalysis - was born, which posited the existence of a sub-conscious and unconscious to explain this change. As these changes took hold, Man became more fully defined through identity with his 'unconscious', rather than 'conscious', self. If in earlier times we possessed an 'inner self', this at least was accessible through apparent and transcendental knowledge (Man in the image of God, etc.). We know he was born in 'Original Sin' and could be saved through Faith. There was, prima facia, nothing overly obscure about this. Although the workings of God were mysterious, at least Man's workings were not - he

was inherently sinful and in need of salvation. But in the 'modern' period Man is introduced without a face; or, more properly speaking, with a face but no personal identity. To our surprise, we looked in the mirror and saw no one - we had become less real, less defined, than ever before. Psychology had 'discovered' the existence of the unconscious at the expense of the conscious. Meaning, significance, truth, now had to be reinterpreted, brought from darkness to light, from the subconscious to the conscious, for personal validation. This lead to a sort of individual solipsism that made relationship and communication more difficult. Because 'psychological man' looked inward, the terrain he expressed had no necessary relationship to one which others experienced. One consequence of this condition, seen in a larger cultural context, was an increasing dichotomy between action and idea, between what we believed and who we were, between experience and understanding. The result was, and continues to be, a greater polarization between the personal and the social, the 'subjective' and 'objective' (2). Abstract Expression, of course, represents an attempt to sanctify this transformation to a degree that nearly destroyed it. In this, however, it behaved no differently than any other artistic movement or school. Created by various energies coalescing with enough force to become expressive and representative of a particular culture, movements in art (as in other spheres of society) are nascent with the seeds of their own destruction. This seems, perhaps, more a question of natural law than willful deliberation or chance. At any rate, Abstract Expressionism intensified and finally repudiated the division between 'object' and 'subject' that had begun to transform art, as we have seen, from the Impressionists onwards. At its peak (1950s), it posited a world where 'art for it's own sake' became the only acceptable rule and example. Artists weren't painting 'things', or 'portraits', or

'landscapes'; they were simply moving paint around. Colors, their expressive and optical qualities, their formal play and manipulation, was what interested the artist. And what was emphasized was color/form as 'things-in-themselves', as well as the process of painting. The spirit behind this movement combined various influences, but chief amongst them, perhaps, was a largely Protestant Puritanism mingled with the Romantic search for the Sublime or Eternal. The space this new painting created, unlike Cubist space that had retained vestiges of the 'external' world, was now purely 'internal'. That is, 'space' was defined exclusively within its own pictorial dimensions, by its own 'optical' qualities and characteristics, by its own process and result. Any hint of 'representation' was considered sacrilegious. No 'illusionism' of any kind was to remain in this rigid reductive approach to art-making. Loosely categorized adherents to this school of thought were many (Pollock, Gorky, Kline, Motherwell, Rothko, Newman, Still, Gotllieb, Reinhardt, Stella, - to name just a few), and were well represented by their own high priests (Clement Greenberg, Henry Geldzahler, et. al) who proselytized this new art with the zeal of religious converts. Needless to say that, at the same time, other artists worked in different 'styles'. The Surrealist tradition and Social Realism, for example, were very much alive and flourishing. But the Abstract Expressionists undoubtedly represent this historical period better than any other group. The decade after them saw a plethora of diverse styles prosper again - some had gone 'underground', unwittingly suppressed during Abstraction's heyday by official 'keepers of the flame'; others developed as a result of new forces and changes in society. Minimalism, Pop Art, Photo Realism, Neo-Abstract, New Realism, Neo Modern, etc. - all flourished after Abstract Expressionism. However, no single artistic movement reflects contemporary society

today as Abstract Expressionism once did. Our society, more pluralistic yet centralized than at any other time in its history, now boast a multitude of artistic styles and schools which all vie for national attention. If the post-modern period means anything at all, it means just this expanding diversity. Although centers of artistic power (In fact only New York and L.A.) continue to grind their own agenda as if they still fairly represented the artistic developments in this country, the fact is that today these centers often reflect, in taste and selection, the sensibilities of a bygone era (it seems even major museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art keep playing catch-up with current trends) and an ever growing management class whose primary interests lies in art as commodity. Be that as it may, this 'inward turn' in painting, paralleling the growth of psychology, led to an artistic 'cul de sac', a place from which it became impossible to progress without seeing the absurdity of the task. Abstract Expressionism may have freed itself from representation and illustration, but in the process entered a space that few could inhabit. Nearly devoid of personal content, painting came close to loosing all meaning. The paintings of Reihnardt, for example, invented a space so 'pure' and 'abstract' that few could comprehend his work. Obviously, it isn't because a painting is difficult to comprehend or appreciate that it's necessarily bad. But in the search for an aesthetic that no longer depended on the 'outside' for stimulation, that sought ideal and pure 'forms' devoid of 'illusion' and reduced to essences, the division between reality and art became practically non-existent. So Reihnardt's search for the "breathless, timeless, styleless, lifeless, deathless, endless" led him to the peculiarly strange endeavor of making art into a 'thing-in-itself'. His large seemingly single-colored canvasses of the 1950's, with their oh-so-subtle coloration, come dangerously close to

being objects (unlike Jasper John's "Flags", which reinvests the 'art' in art through sign and figuration). In short, dangerously close to being non-art. If there is no visible difference between a black canvass hanging in a museum and a black wall on a street corner, how are we to differentiate between art and non-art? Or are they both art? If the answer to this question is 'yes', than what constitutes 'bad' art? Of course, Reihnardt's work is not identical to the painted black wall. It's much more subtle; it's purposefully made and speaks of a keen intelligence and sensibility. But it's close enough, I think, to reveal the aesthetic problems inherent in this approach. What had happened? If we put ourselves in the shoes of the early Abstractionists, we'll find, I believe, some of the reasons for this. We have to remember that Picasso, who exerted such an influence in Europe and America, had come close to Abstraction but rejected it on the grounds that, as he said, it contained 'no drama'. What he meant is that it left human feelings, wishes, desires, passions, outside of art-making. This, for a hot blooded Spaniard accustomed to egocentricism and brought up squarely in the Humanism of 19th. Cent. Europe, was anathema. So, if Picasso came close to Abstraction (which I believe he really understood as 'decoration', taking his cue, perhaps, more from Matisse than anyone else), he recoiled from it and continued to explore his own personal, yet largely Cubist, space. But, as I mentioned earlier, this was the start of the Age of Psychology, and the gaze was turned inwards. The early Abstractionists, (many who were, as Jackson Pollock, influenced by Surrealism), saw something else when they looked 'inside' - they saw the potential for artistic expression unhindered by incidental influences. That this was, as well, a search for the 'sublime', the 'transcendent', has already been mentioned. Of course seeds of this development already existed in Europe with such artists as, for example, Mondrian and

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Kandinsky. But the space defined by these artists was qualitatively different than that created by the Abstractionists. Mondrian's mature work delineated a space expressed through the language of architectonic forms - of vertical and horizontal grid lines crisscrossing each other with dogmatic regularity. Yet the 'space' created feels somehow like a flattened cubist space - a sort of geometric space not radically dissimilar from the space created by a Van Doesburg or Aleksandr Rodchenko. In fact, it was not only 'geometric' but 'mechanical', metaphorically echoing, as it did, the new aesthetic sensibilities of the Industrial revolution. But the spirit moving the Abstract Expressionists was quite different. If Mondrian looked 'inward' to find 'nature' transformed through artifice, Pollock looked 'inward' with no such support. Anxious to avoid 'representation', he discarded elements of figuration that surfaced, as well, from his inward gaze. Sensing that any such influence would inevitably detract from his quest, he tried ultimately to eliminate 'nature' (3) by bridging the interval between 'subject' and 'object' – by eliminating, indeed, the concept of self as 'subject' and 'other' as 'object'. As he himself said, he was 'in his painting'. But this search for the Sublime and Transcendent also led him to sublimate his personality - the personality was 'in the way' because consciousness was in the way. The need to 'merge' with a higher reality (not unlike the 'sublimation' of consciousness which occurs in a drunk state) meant a paradoxical state where the self is absent, yet present, from the aesthetic impulse - a state that can only exist in contradiction by maintaining an uneasy truce between the discipline necessary to create art and the 'forgetfulness' necessary to get rid of the superfluous, shallow, and work through to where important stuff/energies can be discovered and engaged (a common enough impulse). So in some sense this 'inward' turn led to a region

that ultimately presented a void; a sort of bottomless pit that trapped Pollock without the necessary boundaries to react from and against. This aesthetic impulse toward the Transcendent was shared by other Abstract Expressionists, to be sure. And cognizant, at some profound level, of the dangers inherent in their tasks and of the impossibility of total transcendence, various artists arrived at their own compromises and solutions. It's important to note that Pollock, in the last paintings (done in the years just before he was killed in a car crash) abandoned the overall 'drip' paintings and returned to 'figuration'. If the last paintings lack the force, clarity, and cohesion evident in the famous drip series, yet they may, as well, indicate an underlying sense that Pollock felt he had reached an impasse from which he could not extricate himself without reassessing and perhaps changing direction. As I mentioned earlier, movements contain the seeds of their own destruction, and the growth of Pop Art (of an art, in the words of Claus Oldenberg, which "spits, fizzles, contains the kitchen sink, and then some") was a legitimate, if partial, reaction against the asceticism of the early Abstractionists.

(1) Many legends express this feeling. In his wonderful book "The Transformations of Nature In Art" (which I've quoted), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy tells the story of the Chinese painter Wu Tao-tz who "painted on a palace wall a glorious landscape, with mountains, forests, clouds, birds, men, and all things in Nature, a veritable world-picture; while the Emperor his patron was admiring this painting, Wu Tao-tz pointed to a doorway on the side of a mountain, inviting the Emperor to enter and behold the marvels within. Wu Tao-tz himself entered first, beckoning the Emperor to follow; but the door closed, and the painter was never seen again".

(2) A good example of this can be found in the social sciences. In an attempt to reassert an 'objective' validity, their methodology sometimes caricatures human knowledge by quantifying what we see and feel in narrowly absurd ways. The desire for a quantifiable reality propelled a nut like B. F. Skinner, for example, to treat his own children as bundles of predictable and manageable patterns with devastating results.

(3) When Hans Hoffman suggested he paint from nature, Pollock replied "I am nature".

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"Nos sensations esthetique sont sous l'influence de courants magnetiques"
Marie Jaell

PAINTING # 3

"Untitled". 1985. Oil, plastic, paper, felt paper on board, 96" x 96"

This painting, completed in 1985, reflects my more or less conscious desire to enter 'into' the picture plane and engage in some sort of 'intercourse' with paint and subject-matter. I like to feel a certain amount of 'heat' when I start work on a painting. Even if there's not much emotional involvement at first - I might put a few colors down

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and wait for something interesting to happen, or draw a bunch of lines that seem to lead nowhere - as I continue working, I go through a series of actions/reactions until what's there begins to engage me and elicits greater involvement and interest. After a while, and if the work is progressing well, the painting will begin to take on a life of its own, and I become more aware of what it wants to be. Obviously this 'heat' can grow out of any engagement or interaction: from paint or material used; from what is perceived, from a mental projection or abstract thought, memory, etc. etc. In the case of this painting, it seems I had sex on my mind, and traces of the impulses that informed the work remain blunt and visible (1).

For me, the most interesting element in this painting is the tension created by the bulging form in the center and the sense of 'opening' or 'passage' it defines. Because I used thin 1/4 inch board, I could easily cut and alter the surface. The middle section, pulled out forcefully by acrylic cylinders inserted on top and bottom, protrudes outwards from the rest of the two-dimensional plane and creates an 'interior' area; a dark, formless opening or 'slit' surrounded by the more or less uniform blue/green background (2). To the left of this central form and paralleling it, I painted a 35-mm. filmstrip over the background - I wanted to echo the verticality of the central area with something, and the image seemed to work well with the rest. To the right emerged a simple elemental drawing of a vagina, red stripes floating in space (an obvious reference to sexual pleasure). For emphasis, I stuck sheets of paper randomly torn from a dictionary on the paint/board, reinforcing the verticality of the central form, and perhaps as well an oblique reference to the association of pain with knowledge. I've used 'words' and 'sentences' (literary or narrative elements) more extensively in my recent work, and this practice

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started with fragments like these - words painted or pages torn from various books or magazines stuck onto the painting. Seen as a whole, the painting is formally simple and direct: vertical lines, film-strip and interior area, bordering pages, strip of tar paper, sexual sign on the lower right, in an otherwise amorphous space. The impulses that inform this painting are, if psychologically complex, aesthetically simple. Perhaps this painting has more in common with X-ray drawings of the Australian Aborigines or the elegant Lascaux cave paintings than contemporary works that explore plastic invention. A sort of iconographic map of elemental attractions, it works its own magic in recreating the world according to likes and dislikes (perhaps, at bottom, painting is simply another means of possessing).

I think painting is much more of a sensing activity - more concerned with the body's movement - than we might at first suppose. It obviously involves sensation, and sensation involves the body. The artist is working here with forces that rearrange organisms, that influence and change matter, and that finally rearranges his own sensibilities. Resolution (rest) is then possible only when the artist has achieved his aim; i.e., when the forces that initiated the work have been, not only spent, but resolved more or less satisfactorily. Not unlike, in some ways, sex. And as in life, attraction and repulsion are fundamental in art. Although DeKooning may ‘start with a knee’, what he chooses to start with is still a matter of preference, and what is a matter of preference is a matter of desire; of likes and dislikes. What 'catches' the eye and imagination is what we imbue with reality, with meaning and existence; what bores us becomes paler, less present, and consequently less real. This is part of the reason why the act of selecting is already giving or recognizing value (and why 'objectivity' is difficult, if not impossible:

to look is already to choose). In any case, whether the starting point is deliberately chosen or not won't make much difference, because ultimately the artist will paint what has to be done (what he is), not what he himself starts out to paint (who he is). This distinction, subtle yet important, often marks the difference between work that's convincing and work that isn't. If the painting is a statement of pictorial likes and dislikes; of attractions and repulsions, it evolves from this original focus into a universal language to the degree that it is capable of 'relationship' (intercourse) with the world we live in; of reflecting, appreciating, and enlarging the human condition. If, in its early stages, the process resembles more a masturbatory activity (after finishing his "Woman with Slit Throat" piece and hearing that Sartre had lavished praise on it, Giacometti exclaimed "You haven't seen anything yet; up to now I've only been masturbating"), it will finally develop its true potential when it transforms the narrow personal gaze (through concentration and attention) to shared experience (the opposite of being 'in' one's mind - i.e., insane). This doesn't imply a renunciation of individuality; on the contrary, its clear recognition. The 'personality' is very much present, but so absorbed in work that it can be said to be 'absent'. In short, unaware of itself, therefore free to play and create. Renoir is a good example of this. He paints (as he himself joked) with his cock. But the affective powers extend to whatever he perceived: a woman's dress, a soft pink breast, onions, a dance at the Moulin de la Gallete, lunch on a houseboat, etc. In great painting the attention is unfolded and directed outwards and becomes a sort of intercourse with the 'external' world. As with Cezanne or Kokoshka, for example (the former with his 'petite sensation', the latter with his emphasis on 'seeing'), the reliance on personal stimulation finally gets boring or uninteresting, and changes to a stage where

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there's the need for discipline and concentrated attention in order to enlarge experience – in order, in short, to appreciate. For example, Cezanne's early canvasses are romantic, very personal, the result of an 'introverted' imagination. But after years of work he turned away from the excesses of a passionate but youthful nature to a more ordered perception; to a more structured use of paint. Hence his emphasis on 'touch', on the brush stroke, and on devotion to a rigorous development of formal rhythms. It was with this in mind that he urged the study of nature as the study of geometric forms. Behind this quasi-architectural approach lies a profound reverence for everything he sees. His mature work is testimony to the degree to which he was able to 'objectify' his sensibilities; that is, to the extent to which he was able to see with clarity and attention. This is what really makes his work so beautiful and meaningful - his apples and oranges, for instance, resonate with a timeless presence that goes well beyond the purely formal innovations of paint on canvass. Cezanne's artistic development, in this regard, was no different than it is for most of us (artists and non-artists alike): We learn (after some time) that only through turning our attention away from ourselves can we find any real satisfaction, because we realize we can't, fundamentally, create enjoyment out of our own personal fabric (unlike the magician who can pull a rabbit out of thin air). To experience we need to relate. Our 'personality', our sense of 'self', leads us at first on a wild goose chase - it insists that we're the center of our Universe. Later on we feel we're not (perhaps we feel insignificant, small, inadequate, etc. etc.). Still, later on, we feel we're once again the center of our Universe. But we're not back to our original starting point (in the words of T.S. Elliot, "…the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time"). Now we've expanded our sense of 'self' to encompass more

and more, until finally we realize there's no limit to 'self' - that in some ways it's infinite. We've gone from a soliptical 'self' to a cosmic 'Self'. The artist's growth naturally reflects these developments. Cezanne, through the concentrated attention of the particular, shows us the universal. All great art does the same. And all great artists realize (if their ego doesn't get in the way) that, in this sense, they're just vehicles for the work. Again, in this context, it's interesting to examine De Kooning's desire to 'rid his work of his personality'. I think he understood this not only because he knew the artist needs to step out of his own way, but because he realized that concentration and clarity bring you eventually to the other side of the artist's original starting position - instead of 'self-expression' there's simply 'expression' (3). His last works are elegant examples of a subtle and profound personality leaving barely a trace on canvass. The same can be said to some extent of van Gogh. It is his magnanimity; his intensity of feeling for the individual, and his pathos for the human condition that is so beautiful and inspiring. If Picasso found van Gogh's 'anxiety' interesting, I would rather say it is his 'heart' that is interesting. Any idiot can feel anxiety, but how many can turn this anxiety into 'The Postman', or 'Sunflowers'? Not only his many canvasses express this magnanimity, but his wonderful 'letters' as well. Another interesting artist worth considering once again in this context is Jackson Pollock, who (as mentioned in a previous essay) in my opinion tried - but failed - to achieve this expressive power. There's no doubt that by attempting to 'loose himself' in his painting he tried to 'fuse' or 'unite' with his work. As he himself stated, he 'entered' the pictorial space and, in Zen-like fashion, 'became' the painting. Lot's of typewriter ribbons have been used to explain what this really means, but anyone who has been lost in thought only to discover they've driven several miles in their car, or

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forgotten what time it was because the basketball game went into overtime, knows what Pollock was saying. Yet, in Pollock's case, I think fundamentally he cheated. He achieved only part of his ambition - he achieved 'union' at the expense of really integrating his 'personality' in his art (not unlike, perhaps, the proverbial hippie of the mid-sixties who found God only under the influence of LSD). It wasn't totally real or authentic in pictorial terms - although it gave the semblance of being real and authentic – and to me his 'drip' paintings somehow reveal a lack of substance (sometimes I feel they verge on mannerism, though an unusually idiosyncratic and powerful one at that). As already mentioned, I don't think Pollock was quite comfortable with this development. My hunch is that, once again, he had come up against an aesthetic 'dead end' that demanded a 'breakthrough' (no doubt Picasso's legacy was not the only monkey on his back). But with the customary penchant of critics and historians to categorize and define (and America's need to establish its own heroes independently of European influence), Pollock quickly became a cult figure crystallized in the public imagination; an 'artist/cowboy' who almost single-handedly defined the 'new modernism'. There was no dislodging this myth once it started. The fact that he was erratic, alcoholic, suffered bouts of despair and anxiety, only added to his media image. And with this absurd mythologizing came equally absurd new aesthetic dogmas. We entered an era (the '50s and '60s) where the artist, to be accepted seriously, had to rid his work of all representation/figuration. Anyone who painted in a 'representational' manner (and there were a few, though not many - at least not many recognized by the museums and galleries) was simply bad or out of touch with the 'modern' movement. Critics and artists alike argued that art was now finally free to carry out its real promise - to play in pictorial

space defined by color/form complexes existing as pure entities (reminiscent of Plato's 'ideal forms'). As with most oversimplifications, this view of art is both true and false. To the extent that it's false, we came close to throwing out the baby with the bath water. 'Abstraction' became as codified a form as any historical mannerism, and just as dead and uninteresting (historically, what was left was the form, not what had informed, the movement). It was a strange renunciation of 'life', a renunciation promulgated by adherents who echoed and complimented the largely White Anglo-Saxon Protestant sensibilities opposed to what was seen as 'improper' or 'impure' artistic expression. Did this reductivist approach to art-making belie a renunciation of sensuality, of sex, of intercourse, of, finally, appreciation enlarged through a healthy relationship with the world? Perhaps. At any rate - and to return to my thesis - when I describe the early activity of painting as 'masturbatory', I don't mean by this that all artistic connections, to be weighty and significant, leave the introverted gaze and turn outwards. This is to mistakenly define painting as a mere duplication of experience or simple representation of an 'external' reality. Art doesn't copy anything seen or felt, but creates a new experience. And it's this creation (or recreation) that is interesting to us. So I'm not talking here about a perception that is directed 'outward' or 'inward', because both are undeveloped so long as the connections between each (i.e., understanding which is aware of connections, therefore of relationships) are not explored - in other words, so long as these perceptions are not transformed and integrated through artistic creation. But doing this implies the ability to see relationships that can be used or manipulated, and indeed assimilated, through the artist's affective capabilities. In the evolution of a great artist there's not only an evolution in technical skill, formal play, and a clarification and

strengthening of means of expression, but a concomitant evolution of affective powers. These parallel, naturally, an evolution in personality (so, although the work of a good young artist is already significant, the work increases in beauty and powers of expression as the artist matures). This is an aspect of art that is often ignored by those who consider this evolution outside the proper domain of art making. But this is, to me, a mistake of considerable consequence, because it contributes to the dehumanization of art by insisting on a fictive separation of art from life. If it's true that art has no special claim in this process (any activity intelligently done yields the same results - in this sense, 'all roads lead to Rome'), it's true that it seems to receive little recognition in critical or historical circles. Yet to me this establishes, if comprehensively understood, the 'raison d'etre' of art making. Take a look, once again, at the art of van Gogh. The early drawings, compared to the later works, will show the sort of evolutionary progress that illustrates my point. Putting aside the considerable technical and formal advances of the later works with the earlier ones, the early drawings often express van Gogh's personal anguish over the (his) human condition (e.g., the old man in a chair, the potato eaters, laborers and field workers, etc.). This introverted 'gaze' becomes, as he matures, slowly outward directed to encompass fields of sunflowers, villages in the countryside, boats at the seashore, a starry night, etc. These choices (of 'subjects') reflect an enlarging of affective sensibilities through an 'intercourse' with his world now defined not merely by his earlier feelings of alienation, but through an extended interaction. At the same time, there is an increasing clarity of vision, clarity of color, and clarity of expression. Note that the expression has subtly yet forcefully changed from self-expression (I'm sad) to expression pure and simple (beautiful flowers). And to what extent this growth of affective powers

contributes to artistic excellence is hard, if not impossible, to measure, but it undoubtedly plays a major role. Nor can this growth or development be viewed simply as a movement of perception from 'in' to 'out' without sensing at the same time a discarding of crutches, of personal pettiness, of selfish references, that are active so long as the personality is not full grown and replete. That this coincides with a sense of mellowing, of honing in on skills, of refinement, is not really surprising. If Picasso's last works define a pictorial space that is more compact, more cohesive, freer, and less strictly personal or idiosyncratic (consequently more 'abstract'; i.e., more painting than personal expression, more fact than illustration or representation), than to me this is using different language to express the same phenomenon. What the artist paints is, as I mentioned in the beginning, a matter of preference. Some may be predisposed to start by looking 'in'; others looking 'out'. I don't think this really matters. The important point to remember is that behind this there's also the predisposition to paint, first and foremost, oneself - then, after some time, to enlarge this to include the rest of the world (i.e., the movement is from self to the matter of paint - to the expressive powers of the medium). So, for example, Stella's early works may seem at first glance to involve nothing but paint and form ('what you see is what you get'). That is, his early works made, if not an entirely successful effort, at least a fairly good effort at painting the painter/artist out of the picture plane. But the early works (abstract qualities notwithstanding) were in fact expressions of this inward gaze just as much, indeed perhaps even more so, than Picasso's earlier works. As Stella's work evolved, it became more gestural, more complex, more playful. Perhaps he recoiled from his earlier devotion to what he saw as aesthetic purity or absolutism - or more likely he got tired and bored with an aesthetic that effectively

alienated him from a more complete intercourse with his art. At any rate, the later works became more and more gestural, more complex, full of wonderful formal rhythms, bright colors, revealing a tremendous intelligence and virtuosity. But the emphasis here is on the word "gesture", because the gestural is eminently human. The 'gestural' defines a language that can be equally used to describe human feelings, sensibilities, likes, dislikes, idiosyncrasies. It's in fact descriptive; and a lot closer to 'representation', to 'realism', than first meets the eye. Perhaps another way of understanding the importance of 'gesture' - of understanding the 'humanity' of art - is to see it as a conduit which allows us to travel back and forth between ourselves and the work in an ever growing appreciation of both. If I find much of the 'abstract' work of the sixties and seventies boring, it's because for me it lacks this resonance and, under the guise of pushing formal pictorial innovations along, dropped 'gesture' (what is human) by the way side. As Hans Hoffman used to point out, 'Pure must not mean poor'. Unfortunately (like a boat without a rudder) the results lack grounding and depth.

(1) I need to point out here once more that I feel a sense of impropriety in talking about a painting in this way - as if, on the one hand, I deliberately ignore artistic activity by substituting concerns that are non-pictorial and therefore properly outside art-making (i.e., the artist's interest in color, form, etc.), and, on the other hand, a consequent vulgarization of comprehension. To re-iterate, it's not how or why a painting was made that is of special interest, but rather what it is that is made. My 'explications' seem to put the shoe on the wrong foot. Yet I think the connection is justifiable when seen in a broader perspective - a perspective that acknowledges the humanity of making art, and that acknowledges art's cultural and civilizing influence. For me to speak about certain aspects of my paintings as depicting or reflecting this or that is to give the impression that analysis of this kind is inclusive. It isn't. But it can't be (nor, in my opinion, should it be) divorced from the purely formal and gestural elements in art. It's really this 'geography of the imagination' that, finally, is so interesting. A work of art that has lasting value will be firmly rooted in this terrain, notwithstanding its purely 'abstract' sensibilities, because no matter how 'abstract' a work may be at first glance, its value will derive in part from its ability to explore and reveal the human condition.

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(2) Many of the paintings I did in the mid-eighties had various breaks, distortions, manipulations of surface. Sometimes, when I worked on acrylic sheets, I would cut these up into various forms, then assemble them in different ways. I would do the same to wood or board. In part I was looking for ways of making the surface more malleable, more receptive. I remember once, with more than one too many drinks in me, shooting at one of my paintings with a revolver. I was disgusted with the work, and wanted to radically change it. The bullet hit it and broke the large sheet of plastic in two, thus providing me with a new beginning. The next day, with a splitting headache but sober, I sold the gun to a local gun dealer. I don't recommend this approach.

(3) Virginia Woolf expressed the same idea when she talked about her fictive writer who 'made some progress from the days of old' (to wit): "She may be beginning to use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression".

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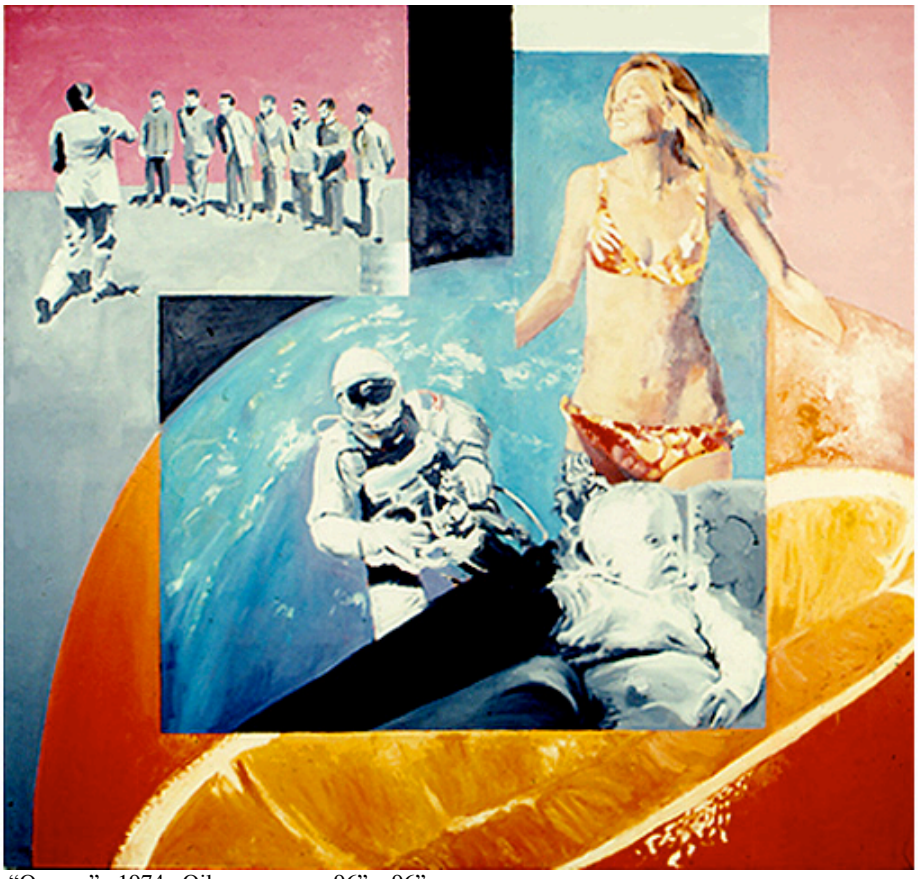
"Shall I say it again? In order
To arrive there, to arrive where
you are, to get from where you
are not, you must go by a way
wherein there is no ecstasy"
T.S. Elliot, "East Coker"

PAINTING # 4



"Orange". 1974. Oil on canvass, 96" x 96"

From the mid sixties to about 1971, I devoted most of my efforts to exploring colors and their relationships. My 'manner' of painting was 'abstract', confining itself to simple geometric forms, with a limited color palette, and a very clean and precise look. Eventually this bored me, and I stopped doing it. I looked around for interesting sights and images, and started drawing from 'nature' again. I was also intrigued by two popular

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movements of the time - 'Photo Realism' and 'Pop Art'. I didn't care much for popular culture, even less for a methodology based on exact photographic replication, but I welcomed the enlarging of potential 'subject-matter' and a return to 'representation'. I hoped these new directions would help me find a framework over which I could stretch, as it were, my thoughts and feelings. The painting reproduced here, finished in 1971, exemplifies this change. With the exemption of a black and white photograph of my son, all of the other images are copies of photographs culled from various magazines, assembled as an ersatz ‘family’ portrait. The astronaut (with whom I identified) is connected to his temporary dwelling by a mechanical umbilical chord. An 'alien' both figuratively and literally, his precarious position is sustained through a flimsy lifeline with the orange/cum/world. I painted him in blacks, grays, and whites not only to make the image starker, but because I felt at that time (rather naively) that these colors connoted a lack of vitality (1). By contrast, the woman (my wife) is varicolored. On the beach, hair blowing in the wind, insouciant and happy, she is more alive and capable of fun than I. It may be no coincidence, moreover, that I painted her without hands - my wife has some trouble initiating action, and this image perhaps unconsciously evokes this personality trait (2). Our son (located roughly where the model's vagina would be) is also painted in blacks and whites (I was evidently eager to generalize my feelings). On the top left corner of the canvass, former President Nixon greets the Chinese delegation: all more or less prostrate before him, their posture illustrates some of the anxieties I felt as a child growing up in a family that catered to a famous and authoritarian Grandfather.

Formally, this painting lacks plastic cohesion - its Pop art space is poorly

integrated, the handling of paint somewhat inconsistent, and the whole needs more expressive power and energy to be very interesting. I like it, but there's an awkwardness about it that belies a shift in perception I had not completely assimilated, and that I could not therefore fully claim as my own. In fact, I was never to claim it. I dropped the habit of 'copying' from photographs a few years after I started, because I felt this approach distanced me too much from the paint/canvass - I wasn't getting or feeling much heat from the paint and it became a mechanical, repetitive act that gave me a ready-made image at the expense of personal involvement. Perhaps this approach to painting, predicated as it was on an aloofness and distancing from everyday life (both Photo Realism and Pop-art worked with ready-made images which are fundamentally 'artificial' - what Richard Hamilton called "a new landscape of secondary, filtered material") could only exist in an environment that saw life/art as something 'cool', as something essentially to be manipulated and reproduced. Because it reveled in, and celebrated, the mass-produced media generated excesses of a consumer society, I felt it unwittingly undermined art's capacity for probing and revealing the human condition as it exists at a deeper level. And for me this level, more physiological than psychological, full of rhythms more or less impervious to the fluctuations of our cultural patina, is where art needs to make its home. Parenthetically, it's interesting to note that 'Photo Realism', hailed at first as a significant new movement, has generally failed to live up to it's promise (there are, of course, outstanding exceptions). However, it did help spawn the notion that art could use another art form as legitimate subject matter. This led to "appropriation art", a practice that flourished during the 70's and 80's, and that today sometimes culminates in blatant plagiarism and boring self-referential art (it also

fostered, circuitously, the indulgent practice of some artists to employ others to do their own creative work - a sort of art done by committee, with, not surprisingly, poor results).

Metaphorically, this painting (and several others of the same period) contains both the 'solution' and ‘problem’ that it posits. The 'solution' to any 'problem', expressed here in the choice and treatment of 'subject-matter', really doesn't derive so much from this choice, per se, as it does from the process of painting. That is, if painting for me somehow sets the world right ('art brings order out of chaos'), it does this not by illustrating conditions for this attainment in the work itself, but by transforming those conditions through the creative process and powers of artistic work. The 'problem' may be 'personal'; the 'solution' must be 'aesthetic'. That I confused these two-tiered movements in this painting indicates an underlying desire to, so to speak, cross the "t's" and dot the "i's" - in other words, to make sure a 'solution' would be found no matter what vantage point I chose to view the work (i.e., as 'representation' or as 'aesthetic' fact). This need is further expressed through the use of a small mirror I stuck onto the canvass, an obvious symbol for self-knowledge and the recognition that art, as any activity, can be a means to that end ("The path men take from every side is Mine": Krishna).

The above primarily 'psychological interpretation' - offered in the context of my introductory remarks concerning the propriety of such 'interpretation' (otherwise bordering as it does on caricature) - reveals the extent to which I was preoccupied with finding satisfaction and peace in my work, and the extent to which these forces influenced the outcome. I want to explore this avenue a little further, since painting, as an activity that seeks to accomplish some sort of task, involves psychological motives

that may or may not be conducive to the creative act. Here I'm referring not only to the need and search for satisfaction or contentment, but to the nature of the need and search.

Obviously, people bring to any activity their own temperamental inclinations. In my case, I pursued painting with single-minded obsession. Compensating for unmet childhood needs for pleasure and satisfaction by developing an over-abundance of will and determination, painting became my hope for 'salvation'. I had found solace in this activity as far back as I can remember, and choosing it as a career was a natural development for me. In examining motives, I don't want to suggest here, of course, that motives for artistic activity need to be selectively culled for approval or rejection - artists have worked for a variety of reasons, and all reasons have their own validity and usefulness. Even reasons considered 'bad' or 'improper' can lead to the recognition of conditions that then can be understood for what they are. That is, after all, how we learn through our mistakes. Art offers the possibility of fulfillment if it is seen in proper light. It also offers the possibility of fulfillment if it is seen in improper light, because of the potential consequent movement away from what is false to what is true. This implies, of course, a recognition of what is false - otherwise the search is endless, and the goals elusive. Pleasure and satisfaction can be viewed as movements that align psychic forces in certain directions and lead to certain actions, so act as signs along which we organize our activities. If this movement is hindered or suppressed, for whatever reasons, the organism then compensates for this through projected ideals and hopes. The nature of these hopes gain their strength to the degree they are unmet. This results in compensatory conditions that make the search more difficult. The difficulty arises when the 'find' is not

commensurate with the 'search'; when what we are looking for can't be found in what we're seeking, or can only partially be found in what we're seeking. In the words of Benoit, author of a book titled "Letting Go", "an adjusted man, or one who is well-compensated, has a 'real' compensation. The convergence of his inner world is realized around an image which does not represent himself and the perception of which produces in him a resonance which is positive and authentic. This man loves something other than himself...The man badly compensated, on the other hand, who is not adjusted, has an 'illusory' compensation. This man has suffered affective traumas, most often during the course of his infancy, at the moment at which the idea of Self was forming...This man, who has not come to love himself - for lack of feeling himself 'to be' with certainty – cannot yet love anything other than himself. The image center in this case, around which the inner world is going to try to arrange itself, is an image of himself succeeding at such and such a thing in his life, an image of himself realizing such and such a relation with the outside world. This relation does, obviously, admit of an outer object in such a way that the subject appears to love something other than himself, but this object is only a means. The true object, towards which the subject is orientated, is an image of himself succeeding in something. This man does not love what he appears to love; he loves the image of himself attaining what he appears to love" (3). This sort of satisfaction was hard for me to acknowledge. I was obsessed with painting because I perceived it as my only significant avenue to satisfaction and contentment. It gave me a feeling of self-worth and identity. I was an artist, and that was a good and noble calling - most everyone agrees, after all, that the artist does something 'significant' and 'important'. Feeling so often alienated and insignificant as an adolescent, it was a coat ready-made for me to

wear. And I wore it with panache. I loved to paint, no doubt, but I was seldom content doing it. The momentary and fleeting pleasures it afforded reinforced my determination to pursue my goals with greater conviction. But because obsession rearranges the individual's affective life along projected hopes, the inherent potential any activity offers for satisfaction becomes corrupted. Paradoxically, the very thing I sought - a sense of fulfillment and well being - became unattainable. Of course, the obsessive pursuit of anything can also lead to its eventual dissolution. Often this occurs though a combination of sheer weariness and the gradual realization that the sort of satisfaction we're seeking can't be had in this way. No amount of painting, good or bad, is going to bring with it self-love and contentment. Pursuing an activity for the sake of an ulterior goal not wholly original to itself (such as affirmation of self, social recognition, fame) is to misunderstand the nature of the activity and what it has to offer. Of course we do things for a variety of reasons, and our motives are often unclear - but in fact, as I've mentioned, this is in some ways irrelevant. Whatever the nature of the need to create - obsessive or not - the creative process offers the potential for self-discovery and fulfillment through its transformative powers. And our Romantic tradition, emphasizing the value of artistic angst, dovetails pretty well with the popular notion that the artist needs to be tormented to be really creative. The need to create may be fueled by torment, but creativity comes from freedom and spontaneity. Or, to be precise, it can only be done in freedom; and it may be that torment (fears, insecurities, etc.) simply set the stage for this to happen by inviting psychic reactions that clear the way for creativity.

In this respect, art making has no special status among the myriad activities we

enjoy. In the words of Ananda Coomaraswamy, a wonderful writer on art, "the basic error in what we have called the illusion of culture is the assumption that art is something to be done by a special kind of man, and particularly that kind of man whom we call a genius. In direct opposition to this is the normal and human view that art is simply the right way of making things, whether symphonies or aeroplanes. The normal view assumes, in other words, not that the artist is a special kind of man, but that every man...is necessarily some kind of artist, skilled and well contented in the making or arranging of some one thing or another according to his constitution and training".

Painting includes a dual movement - a 'search' and a 'find' (Picasso was fond of saying that he did not 'search', he 'found'). If we take this dual movement and view it in a broader cultural context, we get two different and often antagonistic contemporary approaches to art making: art as a means to and end, and art for its own sake. The former emphasizes the usefulness of art for everyone, pointing out the dangers inherent in divorcing any activity from its ground; the latter wants to maintain a comprehension of art that is not corrupted by a narrow or gross pragmatism. These two antagonistic points of view concerning the proper role of art are, I believe, in fact complementary, and a look at what Picasso had in mind when he said he 'found', but did not 'search', may be helpful here. Picasso's 'bon mot' is undoubtedly clever - expressing perhaps a desire to be seen as an artist who possessed clarity or vision - but not entirely accurate. There's no finding without already knowing to some extent what one is looking for. 'Finding' implies recognition, and recognition implies cognition. But the opposite is true as well. If we had already 'found' what we wanted, there would be no need to 'search'. It's because the

goal is ill defined, or partly hidden, ('unconscious', as we say), that we look for it. This 'shift' expresses a new stance - a new 'modern' attitude toward art-making - and we need to remember that this 'shift' came about largely with the development of psycho-analytical disciplines and in a cultural climate that changed the emphasis from expressing ideals of beauty to self-expression. Picasso's quote reflects not only his vanity, but also a renunciation of this new 'modern' attitude (in fact, as anyone who has seen Renoir's film on Picasso can attest, he did his fair share of 'searching'). Today, we accept it as appropriate that the artist stands before his blank canvass without predetermined idea. We view the painting as an actualization of potentialities that the artist is largely ignorant of until he sets brush to canvass. We sometimes liken the artist to a visionary who undertakes a grand and mythic journey, risking health and sanity to bring revelation to the rest of us. But in the past - at least until the Renaissance - the artist was seen rather as a craftsman who accomplished his work with skill, dutifully following the dictates of convention and actualizing 'his' potential only in the sense of doing the best he could within preexisting and fairly strict canons of iconographic taste. That is, the artist obeyed rules governing image making, not to satisfy or 'actualize' himself or 'express himself', but to 'actualize' or render visible something ideal or spiritual. For example, the Sukranitisara of Sukracarya, a medieval Indian treatise on (among other things) aesthetic principles, gives elaborate instruction on the correct proportion of angels, facial expression, thickness of limb, etc. etc. The artist was expected to follow these guidelines with as much skill as he could (4). A somewhat similar tradition existed in Medieval Europe, with its religious iconography and canons of correct and good taste. The artist, on risk of excommunication (if not worse), painted religious subjects according to

prescribed conventions established by the Church. These tenets lasted well into the Renaissance (nor, incidentally, were they relinquished without a fight - for example, at the beginning of the counter-Reformation, in 1573, Paolo Veronese was summoned and questioned by the Inquisition for including in his "Last Supper" 'jesters, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs and such-like scurrility'. To assuage his accusers, he simply renamed his painting "The Feast in the House of Levi"). Again, in the case of Medieval Indian art, the artist arrived at 'subject-matter' manifested through a trance-vision (yoga), and only then did he paint. The artwork was a rendition of this vision - spirit concretized - not so much actualization of the artist's personal potential. The differences in approaches are interesting to note, since we so often take it for granted that artists need to go through a process of 'discovery' or 'search' to arrive at something profound and meaningful. But here is art-making that starts with a 'find' (in the sense that the 'searching' process is in some way incidental to the result), and so rejoins "art for art's sake's" philosophy by emphasizing the aesthetic value of art, yet all the while maintaining it's pragmatic value as religious icon, or object of devotion; as, in short, a means to spiritual awakening (today we prefer a more secular expression, as Hofmann's 'rejuvenescence of the human spirit'). I think this more generous view combines "art as a means" and "art for its own sake" and makes the separation chimerical, in itself more indicative of cultural changes than what actually takes place when the artist works. In fact, this 'search' and 'find' signify movements that are more or less integrated in the act of painting. Artists emphasize one or the other according to their own temperaments. Some work easily, seemingly 'finding' what they want more or less 'effortlessly' (Mozart, Matisse, Klee, Raphael); others

'search', working out their needs with difficulty, haltingly, anxiously (Beethoven, Pollock, Munch, Bacon).

As the artist works, complexes of psychic forces are set into play. These forces, active not only on a superficial level of mind and will, activate rhythms that are physiological in nature (dance epitomizes this movement 'par excellence'). In this sense, the activity of painting can be regarded as a form of sensing. When de Kooning was asked how much space he needed to paint, he stretched his arms and said 'as far as I can reach'. It was, interestingly and appropriately enough, his body that determined his 'space'. The word 'emotion', in fact, comes from the Latin word 'emovere', which means literally to move out, to agitate. Without movement, or with the suppression of movement, there can be no emotion. We understand this intuitively. We say that people who are emotionally upset are 'up tight' or 'depressed'; that is, restricted in movement. Bodily movement is intrinsic to the artist's work (5). From the start the activity involves a union, more or less coherent and integrated, of sensibilities that the artist tries to 'objectify'. Upon conclusion, the energies are spent, and the artist comes to a state, more or less, of rest. The result of this - i.e., the 'art' - is merely a by-product of this work. In this sense art making has no intrinsic value for the artist (beyond perhaps as memory of something once lived, or potential trigger to rekindle those experiences that caused it into existence). Although obviously art, in a larger sense, is also a means of communication, of social intercourse, its function for the artist is to provide a vehicle for the realization or objectification of subjective forces that need to be expressed. That this involves physiological rhythms is not very surprising. But it suggests that the artist's task, in this sense, is indeed very personal, and that the result; that is, the art, is of secondary

importance. Recognition of this fact of course doesn't absolve the artist of social responsibility. To argue that modernism has 'failed', as does Suzi Gablik in her interesting and provocative book "Has Modernism Failed", because the artist has lost any sense of social responsibility in defining art as a personal quest, or because modernism has thrown out tradition and substituted unconditional freedom, is to confuse the inner task of art-making with its consequence; to confuse its primary function (personal) with the result of that function (social). These two movements are intertwined, but different in import and significance. To pit the purely 'personal' against the purely 'communal' or 'social' by arguing that "insistence upon absolute freedom for each individual leads to a negative attitude toward society, and the sense of a culture deeply alienated from its surroundings" is not only to misunderstand the nature of art-making and personal freedom - tied, as they necessarily are, to complex sensibilities that fundamentally reflect the social being as much as individual tastes and preferences - but to substitute the effect for the cause. Insistence upon absolute freedom is a sine qua non of creativity. And freedom, in any case, implies an internal discipline and awareness that doesn't mean doing anything one likes, but doing what needs to be done. That's freedom; the other is indulgence. 'Social responsibility', seen in opposition to 'personal freedom', merely pits the means against the end, and turns the artist who aspires to these goals into a charlatan. And under these conditions the art, such as it may be, is likely to be felt as an imposition. I of course have no quarrel with art that is political or 'socially responsible' in nature. Sometimes good art is, and sometimes it isn't. The point is not to predetermine this before the fact, because to do so, for the artist, is to impose certain restrictions on the activity that limit his freedom, and to impose on the viewer a need to take a moral

position towards the work in order to judge it. Moreover, in this context, the work is 'successful' if it has accomplished its purpose; that is, if the complex energies that initiated it have been correctly and intelligently spent. That this results in aesthetically great or mediocre work is of no consequence whatsoever. In this regard, the process is important, not the result. For the artist, the activity remains the same - if diligently done, it entails the same complex 'problems' that need addressing. In this sense, it's just as hard to be a bad artist as it is to be a good one.

At least a part of this activity involves working in a state where the mind is so focused, so attentive to its own requirements, that it is in some ways absent. Not absent because it is inactive, but absent because the customary dichotomy between thinking and doing is obliterated (Japanese brush and ink works epitomize this understanding, especially in the Zen 'sumi-e' paintings). It is a doing that destroys, through concentration, the usual temporal interval between idea and action. We might properly call it acting, instead of reacting. Although reacting occurs all the time (e.g., the artist stands back from his work momentarily to assess what he's done), as soon as the artist resumes working with sufficient concentration, the entire personality becomes so engrossed in the work that the usual separation between the thinker and the thought disappears. As soon as the separation is reintroduced (through an interruption or lessening of concentration), the nature of the activity starts to change, and the more this happens, the less energy, the less integrity, the less force, the work has, and the more it resembles something manufactured, contrived (to quote Hans Hoffman again, 'art starts where construction ends'). This is because thinking, in this reactive mode, prevents experiencing, feeling, doing. You can experiment for yourself to see if this is true. When

you're walking, you usually don't think of where each foot is going to fall. As soon as you become conscious of the position of each foot, you loose a certain ease in walking. The same happens in any activity where the body is involved. To avoid this, we train ourselves to the point where it becomes 'second nature' (that is, we no longer have to think). By contrast, where the body is not involved; i.e., where movement is not involved, it would seem no work can be successfully undertaken, because the fuel necessary to work with is absent (6). The less the making of art depends on movement, the more it seems to depend on the remembrance of movement (as in, for example, writing, where the writer needs to remember past experiences to do his work).

In this psycho-aesthetic interpretation, painting is for me an expression and appreciation of life; occasionally, in great painting, an affirmation and love of life. A Rembrandt (or Da Vinci or Fra Filipo Lippi) will often glow with love and serenity. This isn't some illustrative quality that can be read into the work, but a profound expression of the work itself. Rembrandt is exemplary, but there are obviously many others. I experience the same feelings looking at Cezannes 'apples', or Hopper's landscapes, or Giaccomite's sculptures (e.g., see his 'Bust of Lotar', which for me touches on the eternal mystery of life and death), or Francis Bacon's 'grotesque' yet profound work, or Louise Bourgeoi's potent 'objects'. Another painter who comes to mind here is Philip Guston. I remember the awe and wonder I felt the first time I saw his last huge, somber, mysterious canvasses (exhibited at the Whitney Museum). The paintings were so simple, so blunt, so present and solid, and so profoundly human, that they stand out in my mind as some of the most expressive and powerful works I've ever seen (if more and more people feel the

absence of the Sacred in our mass-produced society (7), I recommend taking a look at Guston's later works). Other artists come to mind - Salle's paintings, which I've seen on several occasions, contain hints of these feelings, although also often tinged with a sense of something about to disappear, or in the process of decay or dissolution - a slight putrefaction of spirit. Anselm Kiefer is another painter who touches on these sensibilities (but the list is long, and I'm sure the reader won't have trouble making up his own).

(1) That black and white are occasionally considered non-colors is obviously a convention. There's the story of the artist who, painting bamboo shoots in red ink, was asked by his patron to use instead the habitual black. He replied, 'have you ever seen a black bamboo shoot?'

(2) Cause and effect here are almost impossible to disentangle. Why did I select this particular model (among so many options)? Perhaps (from a psychological point of view) the image better expressed those qualities that interested me at the time - qualities that, when I reflect on the painting, I associate with my wife: she looked good in her bathing suit; obviously enjoyed the beach; loved the sun on her face and also, as a matter of fact, had some difficulty initiating action. Coincidence? I doubt it. So although I didn't choose this image solely because the model reminded me of my wife, there's little doubt in my mind that the image chose me because I reminded her of her husband.

(3) Stanislavski (to acting students): “Are you in love with the art in yourself or yourself in the art”?

(4) It's interesting to see how the idea of 'skill' in art has been relegated to an unimportant, if not ostracized, position. It used to be considered a necessary ingredient in art making. Skill as dexterity, grace of line and brush, fidelity in rendering what was seen, etc., is now more likely to be regarded as an impediment to powerful or creative expression – as if the artist, somehow brimful of inspiration which demands immediate expression, has no choice but to spill his emotions out pell-mell.

(5) Even in the case of music, which may seem exempt from this condition, the movement of the body is phenomenologically very important. We speak of notes going 'up' or 'down', of chords which lead to 'resolution', of rhythm related to heart beat, walking and running, etc. For an in depth study of the relationship between movement and visual art, I recommend Jane Robert's book "The World View of Paul Cezanne". Whatever the source of the material, its contents are fascinating. Another interesting artist who comes to mind here is Mary Jaell, and her study of fingering/hand positions for the piano.

(6) 'Conceptual Art' is a unique movement in this respect, and I don't know - or for that matter enjoy - much of it, so I

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won't comment on it. But I believe it could only exist in a cultural environment that dichotomizes the self into mind and body. At any rate, that this intimate connection between art and body exists is not surprising, but perhaps – especially with our emphasis on will and intellection (the advent of computer technologies and our dependence on them is a prime consequence) - we need to state this more forcefully. This trend may just reflect a general shying away from feeling, from the 'subjective'; a sense that (as I've argued in another essay) only what is quantifiable and capable of 'objective proof' has real value. But we need to remember, as Alexander Lowen ("Denial of The True Self") eloquently argues, "...the ego is not the self - only the conscious aspect of the self. Nor is it separate from the self. The accuracy of its perception depends on its connection, as part of the self...The greater part of the self consists of the body and its functions, most of which operate below the level of consciousness".

(7) Some contemporary writers have argued that we've lost our capacity to understand the Sacred, to feel connected to anything bigger than, or outside of, ourselves. I guess it depends on each person's sense of the 'Sacred'. My hunch is that these feelings continue to be felt, expressed, and lived, but that we have lost, to some extent, the capacity to recognize them, because we have lost the capacity to name them. As St. Exupery pointed out long ago, most of what is real is invisible (Paul Klee defined art as 'rendering the invisible visible'). All feelings are invisible, all sensing is invisible, and most of what we think remains invisible. Unfortunately, having lost most of the forms that render these 'sacred' sensibilities recognizable, their expression continues to exist in unusual places, where they occasionally assume distasteful aspects (as in many Religious movements) or become appropriated by New Age quacks and gurus who cater to our fears and ignorance.

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"The horrifying - almost widespread - mobilization of minds in favor of politics and good citizenship has shifted everyone's perspective in all matters - ethical, esthetic, etc. - to the social side of things considered, its social impact, its social implication. It was to be expected that what, at the individual level, bears the name of artistic production or of thought, would, on the social level, be transformed into its counterpart (its ridiculous counterpart) that bears the name of culture...In order to approach a gyrating world, we need pivoting notions".
Jean Dubuffet, (Asphyxiating Culture)

PAINTING #5

"West Brattleboro Post Office". 1986. Oil on plastic with video monitor and acorns, 76" x 96"

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The West Brattleboro branch of our town's post office is a square, dull-looking building constructed out of uniform red bricks with large thermo-pane windows in front. One early evening, while parking my car in the lot, I noticed the reflection of my headlights in the windows. Contrasting with the bright cool fluorescent lights inside and the clear dusk light outside, an interesting mix of various light/moods were evoked. Although I couldn't see the sunset from where I was, the partially clouded sky over the flat roof had turned a pale whitish green. Inside, the lights illumined the acid yellow and green interior. In front, the somber grays of pavement helped silhouette the building against a limpid sky. The red bricks hovered in that twilight where color disappears into grays and blacks (1). What I had seen countless times before without much attention was suddenly transformed into something mysterious and beautiful. I did a quick sketch of it and returned to my studio, determined to transfer my memory of this scene without manipulation (although now I hardly ever set about painting something I see without changing it somehow, in this case I just wanted to paint what I saw without interpretation (2). I set two sheets of plastic together and, in methodical manner, transferred the sketch to the plastic. Plastic comes protected by a thin sheet of paper glued on by the manufacturer. This allowed me to cut, with ruler and razor blade in hand, areas I wanted to paint. This quasi-methodical approach, I reasoned, would enhance the 'matter-of-factness' feel of the result.

The TV image originated from a different impulse. Some time before I had seen several watercolors by Frederick Church at 'Olana', a mansion he had built for himself and his family on the Hudson River (now refurbished as a museum to commemorate his

works and life). Unlike his oil paintings, which for me are occasionally a bit melodramatic, these late watercolors are simple and beautiful. Here there's no hint of the Romantic disposition towards the grandiose and sentimental; just a keen appreciation of the scenery along the river and the various moods nature presents. Many of these small watercolors are studies of skies, of sunsets, of seasons. I loved their simplicity and wanted, in this painting, to pay homage to them. After various trials, I finally settled on the image of a sunset I painted then videotaped and played back on a video monitor. This immediately added something that made the whole more interesting. Perhaps it emphasized elements I unconsciously wanted but couldn't find until I included this electronic image (it wasn't until some time later I realized the painting is, in part, about nature versus artifice, and the video image makes this more explicit.) It also introduced a sense of death and decay – sensibilities inherent in the Romantic imagination (often associated with 'longing' and 'love') and implicit in our perception of sunsets. Because this image is seen static (the moment frozen in time), this contributes to its negation (artifice). Of course, in some sense, painting, by its very nature, does this automatically. It's interesting to remember that, to the extent the visual content of a work is presented all at once, it presents this information 'outside of time'. We take time to see it, but the painting itself negates this temporal dimension. And if the work negates time, it also negates memory. If memory is a condition of time (or perhaps time a condition of memory?), then what the painting shows us is something fixed, outside of memory. So the static video image contributes significantly, I think, to the sense that the work plays with natural and artificial sensibilities. Perhaps that's the reason, as well, why I added acorns on the floor in front of it (the acorns – symbol of growth, change, time – play with

'congruous sensibilities, the screen/image – static – with 'incongruous sensibilities'). Although I like the result, were it not for the inclusion of the video monitor, the bowl of paint on the right (a glimpse of the 'inside' as well as 'before') and the acorns, I don't think it would 'work' nearly as well as it does. But these elements add to the formal play and help integrate the whole.

Gauguin once said he wanted his paintings to express the same dull sound his wooden 'sabots' made as he walked on cobble stone streets. I can sympathize with this. He was looking for a sense of weight, of solidity, in his work, but also expressing a hope of finding something real, 'factual', true. Such ideas concerning the province and meaning of art are common enough among artists. Da Vinci thought of it as 'imitation' (as example or analogue of spirit in nature, not as a 'copy' of nature). Paul Klee, as 'rendering the invisible visible'. Philip Guston called it 'fact' or 'evidence'. Edward Hopper defined it as 'that special uniqueness of the ordinary'. Frank Auerbach as 'something both unforeseen and true to a specific fact'. Mario Merz tried to coax it in what because known as 'Art Povera' (a movement that developed in opposition to the excessive commercialization of art, emphasizing the discarded, valueless, throw-away, what was found 'by accident'). The Surrealists, as mentioned, played with these sensibilities through paradox and distortion (usually in opposition to convention; i.e., pre or sub-conscious). Minimalists attempted to arrive at an irreducible 'thing-in-itself'. Pop Art as expression created by popular culture (mostly artificial; often media generated; the impulse here towards inclusion, as opposed to Minimalism, which is towards exclusion or reduction). Those more in the Romantic tradition as a search for the 'sublime' or 'timeless' (i.e., the Transcendent). Abstract Expressionism as 'power' or 'meaning' of

expression (as I've already mentioned, in some ways defined by the language of gesture).

Is the 'search for the real' a tradition that is still alive today? How do we, as a society, view art? Our Postmodern period reflects a cultural pluralism that seemingly allows for a multiplicity of purpose and aims. Flourishing in environments that encourage cross-fertilization of ideas and mixing of traditions, artistic output today contains a plethora of styles apparently devoid of common purpose (3). Furthermore, more art is made by people today than at any other time in history. At last count, over 25,000 artists live in New York City alone. And if it's true that, overall, museums and galleries have done a lousy job of presenting minorities to the general public (especially Afro-Americans), they're now finally getting some recognition. Again, although traditionally excluded from serious consideration as artists, women are also beginning to find the recognition they deserve (4). In short, the last fifty years has witnessed a phenomenal increase in art-making and concomitant acceptance of the artist as valued member of society. Part of this trend is no doubt due to the hope that we're not going to repeat mistakes of the past – today's bourgeoisie is damn well not going to ignore its "Impressionists". On the contrary: many artists, good and bad, are publicly recognized and rewarded and living comfortably in society, becoming as rich and famous as rock stars and fashion designers. On the whole, it's obvious art making is more popular than it has ever been (5). Yet notwithstanding these more or less happy developments, what sort of value do we, as a society, place on art? What is in fact our concern with it? In one respect, of course, the answer is obvious: art as commodity; as investment (and status symbol) for the moneyed class. This is in part an inevitable consequence of corporate Capitalism and its emphasis on economic value; both real and perceived. This

assigned ‘value’ can lead to some pretty ridiculous extravaganzas. Is a Van Gogh worth 35 million or 53 million dollars? Does the question make any sense? Finding an answer to this question isn’t simply a matter of determining correct market value, because behind the assumption that the value of art can be represented by money, there’s also the assumption that this approach is in principle (if not always in application) intrinsically sound. Although the value of money is arbitrary – it is, after all, a piece of paper to which we assign value – this process implies a separation and compartmentalization of life’s activities that is, to my mind, misleading and, more importantly, ultimately anathema to art. Like the American Indian (in the movie ‘Treasure of Sierra Madre’) who tells Humphrey Bogart he doesn’t want the gold because he’s surrounded by everything he needs to live well – beautiful mountains, food, water, etc. – we had to learn to disassociate our need from it’s object in order to ‘abstract’ value and arrive at the concept of ‘private ownership’. This ‘disassociation’ – the result of complex historical changes not solely linked to political or economic forces, but to philosophical and cultural developments as well – has not always been for the good. For example, in Eastern art, until recently, the notion of privately owning a work of art didn’t exist. Thought to manifest aspects of God, art could not be owned because to do so would be to blaspheme against God (how could a human being own God?). Private ownership is predicated on the cultural belief that ‘things’ and ‘services’ can become ‘products’. And this not simply in regard to what we have created, but to what we have laid claim to – as in land we have ‘discovered’ or ‘conquered’; or indeed extended to people we know, as exemplified in the common usage of the words ‘my husband’ or ‘my wife’ or ‘my children’. Yet this sense of ownership would not be possible were we to see life more as

process rather than series of 'things' linked by 'cause' and 'effect'. I don't want, here, to get into all of the complex forces that brought this situation about. I'm interested primarily in aesthetic appreciation, and the ways in which this condition affects our notion of art and art making.

To begin to understand this condition, let's return and examine some of the ideas previously quoted. Examined 'en mass', it becomes apparent that, in some obscure yet very real sense, art seeks to engender a union of sorts, or re-establish a rapport with, or 'express' something, not normally recognized. It does this for the artist, as we have seen, in its function defined as a means towards self-knowledge. But self-knowledge, as we have also noted, implies not only the knowledge brought about through personal self-expression, but also knowledge inviting an enlarging of sensibility, an enlarging of appreciation. In this regard, I've already argued that to understand art as 'self-expression' is fundamentally to confuse and distort its real meaning and substitute instead notions predicated on a rather simple-minded definition of self – a self defined as a bundle of interior forces remaining 'subconscious' or 'unconscious' until 'brought out' through the process of introspection and analysis. But, as I've argued, this posits a duality (the self which is full of 'interior forces' and the self that 'introspects' or 'analyzes' those forces) that runs counter to the actual process of art making. In reality art making unites these dual 'opposites' (object/subject; interior/exterior; self/other) into a movement that integrates our experiencing with that which engenders the experience, and which, when successful, bestows the activity with character and integrity. If, as we have seen, the artist is an 'actor' rather than a 'reactor', the extent to which this is possible is the extent to which 'self-expression' becomes not the end but the by-product of an activity now

understood simply as a doing with no future purpose in mind beyond the immediate task of doing whatever it is the artist is doing as well as possible. And this, for me, is to put the notion of 'self-expression' in art back where it belongs; namely, as at once a by-product of art making and as something that, notwithstanding its subordinate role, becomes a means towards self-realization only in the sense that the activity contributes to a manifestation of union or synthesis between self and 'other' (i.e., not a mere display of personality or individuality). So, on the one hand, it can be argue that 'self-expression' is incidental to making art, because the goal of art is not analytical, but aesthetic; that is, to create something beautiful, meaningful, well done, perfect (however we define it) and, on the other hand, a means to self actualization where the activity is a perfecting of sensibilities that bring the artist 'nearer' to this 'union'. Notice, however, that the nature of what we usually mean by 'art' has now changed dramatically. 'Art' is now example or idea, not 'thing', because a work of art implicitly presents values sustained only through relationships that are reflected through the work, not contained in the work. It cannot, therefore, be understood as 'thing', much less 'product'. Consequently it cannot be 'owned' by anyone, because its real value is no more possessed by the owner than could anyone possess the truth or beauty of what he or she expresses. Nor, for the same reason, can the artist lay personal claim to his work, since the work itself is a 'gift' bestowed, and not the result solely of personal labor. In passing, it's instructive to note that, during the Middle Ages, for instance, art was understood in much the same way that it was understood in the East; i.e., as manifestation or gift of God (or, as Meister Eckhart has it, "God's purpose in the union of contemplation is fruitfulness in works"). Private ownership therefore would not have been officially entertained or sanctioned. Needless

to say, this didn't stop the Catholic Church from hoarding huge numbers of works. But at least, in spirit, art was thought to belong to all. That's why, for example, so many medieval works were painted anonymously. It really didn't matter who painted them, only that they were created, in their turn, as 'gifts' to all. Indeed, to put one's own personal stamp on the work was to invite hubris, because this assumes the artist is the absolute creator of the work rather than vehicle for forces in which he is but participant. But our cultural mores are pervasive and, accustomed as we are to abstract concepts of ownership, we tend to ignore other realities that mitigate their usefulness (6). At any rate, this concept of art as 'thing' or 'product' is fairly recent. Although elements that led to this development already existed in the early Greek mind, it wasn't until the Industrial Revolution that they really took hold and flourished. We need to remember that the modern concept of 'thing' as data for investigation and management, or separate reality 'out there' waiting for discovery and extrapolation, is a recent development in opposition to the entire Medieval Scholastic view of life which inexorably linked 'thing' to 'spirit'; i.e. to that which necessarily made it intelligible and comprehensible as manifestation in which we participate. To suppose we don't participate in the reality of 'things' is to reduce experience to what Owen Barfield, in his book "Saving the Appearances", calls idolatry. That is, the worship of 'things' devoid of our participation (what he also calls 'literalness'), or experiencing phenomena "as objects in their own right, existing independently of human consciousness. This later experience, in its extreme form, I have called idolatry". The serious danger in this is that ultimately we reduce all reality to meaningless 'data', closing ourselves off to the full capacity to experience. We are, as Owen Barfield argues, pretty close to this stage already. But he also offers some hope.

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Arguing that consciousness has evolved from one of 'original participation'; i.e. one in which no conscious separation was made between self and Other, to a stage of consciousness which participated in the construction of "recognizable and nameable objects we call 'things'" (a process he also calls 'figuration') to a consciousness which divorced self from the Other ('idolatry'), he sees a potential evolutionary stage which results from renewed participation, but this time in a "'directionally creator relation' to the appearances". Barfield calls this 'final participation'. This change is not to be taken casually: "as men approach nearer and nearer to conscious figuration and realize that it is something which may be affected by their choices, the final participation which is being thrust upon them is exercised with the profoundest sense of responsibility, with the deepest thankfulness and piety towards the world as it was originally given to them in original participation, and with a full understanding of the momentous process of history, as it brings about the emergence of the one from the other". In other words, discovering and creating meaning and coherence in life, in experience, by re-investing phenomena with intelligence, with sense, with beauty. Sounds very much like what the artist is attempting to do, doesn't it? And this doesn't imply a return to a time in which we made no distinction between experience and fact, between 'I' and 'Other' (which would merely be a return to a nascent stage of consciousness); but rather a full participation in the creating of appearances (7). I argued, in another essay, that the artist in our time has come to an 'inward' turn', a position which leads in some ways to a dead end, or madness, if it is not seen as mirror of the 'outside', and thereby transformed into an enlarged appreciation. In this context, it might be expressed as recognition of the need for 'final participation'; as a realization of our contribution to meaning and intelligence

not standing alone or apart, but as participants in, appearance. The artist has primary responsibility in delineating this 'imagery' because, after all, that is his chief work – to get to the heart of the matter, to the truth of it. As Philip Guston wrote, "certain artists do something and a new emotion is brought into the world; its real meaning lies outside of history and the chains of causality" (XXX1 Art News Annual 1966). Far from an activity that caters to the whim and fancy of individual tastes and personalities, making art requires that the artist submit to the influence of 'appearances' and the process of 'participation' in order to render something true. Or, in theological terminology, to the Will of God ("Do with me what You Will"); to the 'union' of artist and nature. The Postmodern era, seen from a broad perspective, seems lacking in sense and substance, and in part I believe this is a condition of 'idolatry', for 'idolatry' has reduced man to the same status that it has reduced nature; i.e., to 'things', with consequent estrangement, loss of value, of connection, of 'participation'.

If this whole problem suggests a pretty bleak cultural condition in which the process of depersonalization and loss of meaning continues, there's nonetheless a growing recognition that 'idolatry' has led us to a 'cul de sac' from which we need to extricate ourselves. In the case of art making, many artists, in various degrees, are wrestling with these questions and engaging these sensibilities. Because these processes are often not understood or stated in no way diminishes their force and capacity for change. As always, it's important to look at individual cases in order to see what's going on. And there are many good artists who contribute, in their individual ways, to a significant 'shift' in perception, to a recognition of 'something unforeseen but true to a specific fact'. But I don't take this change for granted. I see too many instances of

continued ‘idolatry’ to rest easy. It’s capacity for guise is inexhaustible, often camouflaged as political ‘correctness’, or other social currents that result in strange paradoxes and ambiguities (8). Occasionally, in an attempt to re-establish links with our past, there’s a call to return to an ‘original participation’ which at the same time entails a discarding or invalidation of scientific knowledge and technological advances. This nostalgia not only reflects, perhaps, our growing need for ‘connections’ and ‘meaning’, but also a desire to return to a preconscious developmental stage where experience is not screened or validated by the mind before it is taken in. It may be a natural reaction against a society that overemphasizes the value of ‘rationality’ and ‘intellect’, or an awareness that we need other sensibilities to nourish ourselves in an age dominated by consumerism and commerce. At any rate, ‘idolatry’ remains at the core of our contemporary mind-set. Supported by a long historical development originating with the early Greeks (especially Aristotle), remaining to some extent dormant during the Middle Ages, it reappears again with the Renaissance and gains strength during the Scientific and Industrial revolutions (consider here the early 19th Century proponents of behaviorism and the social sciences), and finally flourishes unchecked in the new corporate bureaucratic and technocratic mind (exponents of ‘global management’, or, as some would have it, ‘new world order’). Now that’s a sobering thought!

(1) Several Hopper paintings invoke this dual light. This condition suggests artifice superimposed on the natural; a condition that can sometimes create appealing ambiguities exploited by artists such as (say) Magritte and de Chirico.

(2) I knew, of course, that there’s no such thing as painting ‘what one sees’ without ‘interpretation’. ‘What one sees’ is just as much a result of ‘what one feels’ as it is a ‘copy’ of anything. Two people drawing the same model will invariably present two different results, and that’s a wonderful condition of art making. But here I’m referring to a desire to simply draw or paint what is presented to the eyes, because the simple act of doing this still retains wonder and magic.

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(3) I'm referring here to art made largely in the West, and specifically to art made in America, with which I am more familiar. After Abstract Expressionism, American hegemony in the West waned considerably. But the hype surrounding art and the art markets continues - every so often a new wave of media generated 'great art' is discovered and presented to the public to sustain the excitement and generate big bucks. Some years ago it was the German and Italian Neo-Expressionists who took the limelight (Clemente, Chia, Cucchi, Kiefer, Polke, Bazelitz, et. al. American/Canadian artists such as Schnabel, Fischl, Salle, Longo, were thrown in for good measure). Others, since then, have taken their turn. Of course, there are good artists among them, as well as bad ones. But, in my opinion, some of the best art made in the last twenty years is made by British artists such as Kitaj, Frued, Auerback, Hodgkin, and Walker.

(4) Until fairly recently women were excluded from the art scene. Generally this is no longer true, although the prejudice against women and women's art continues in more subtle ways – as, for example, in the significantly lower prices women's art commands.

(5) There's also greater tolerance and appreciation for art made by other people and cultures. A wonderful exhibit of Mexican art was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC a few years ago. I remember several very beautiful paintings, including some extraordinary sculptures. I also remember thinking that, with the influence of Western art introduced through various periods of conquest, the 'native' characteristics had suffered, and in some cases almost been lost. Only in the works of some strong personalities did a sense of national consciousness survive intact. It's fascinating to observe, as well, the differences in (say) Mexican or Hispanic art with American art. In American art, until fairly recently, of course, 'figuration' was not accepted – a homegrown prejudice the Mexicans did not necessarily share. Mexican art emphasized history, allegory, narrative – characteristics that made it somehow more accessible, more involved in 'life', yet conversely more difficult to appreciate for viewers used to more 'abstract' qualities. As American art reflects greater ethnic and cultural diversity, and influences move about globally, these marked differences are liable to change and/or disappear.

(6) Remember the quip the American Indian made when confronting the Colonist who claimed ownership of land: "how far down do you own the land, and how far up in the air?"

(7) 'Appearance' here does not mean something opposed to 'reality', but that which we apprehend as reality; what Barfield calls 'representation' as opposed to the 'unrepresented'.

(8) As in our growing interest in 'saving the environment', which combines the belief that it is something we can effectively control and manage, and also argues our moral right to do so. Of course we should stop polluting the environment. But to undertake the management of people, of animals, of plants, of waters, of trees, of the air, etc., is to

assume that we not only have the wisdom and the means to do this (which I doubt), but also that we rid ourselves of our conception of nature as 'thing' – which, in fact, is partly what got us into trouble to begin with. Unless this form of 'idolatry' changes, no amount of management is likely to succeed. Another development that worries me is increased genetic engineering which offers us the same, if not more, drastic possibilities for harm.