

Why Nothing Can Be Accomplished in Painting, And Why It is Important to Keep Trying

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A prominent curator in the U.K. recently said that she thought the 2004 Whitney Biennial was effectively proposing that “painting is back.” The American art historian Richard Shiff, in Ireland to give lectures on modernism in painting, said that he thought the Whitney was designed not to have a clear message, but might nevertheless be implying that “certain older painters are really OK.”

When I visited the Biennial website, the “dialogue” area was full. Reading the tea leaves of postmodern painting can be appealing not least because it seems unpressured: there is no right answer, and if there were, for a short while, a right answer, it would be without consequences for the future. This is the trackless pluralism that Arthur Danto has made his signature claim, and which artists endorse as a way not to worry about what kinds of painting might be more historically interesting than others. The

interest that might briefly focus on one artist or another—Richard Shiff mentioned James Siena among this year’s Biennial painters—is the exception that proves the rule that no larger patterns are significant.

Yet it is interesting to listen closely to the relaxed tone of the current discourses on painting—they drift, they are indulgent in regard to logical argument, they take pleasure in very small occasions and try not to look too far afield or compare things that appear too different—and ask if the tone represses an anxiety about the possibility that there may, in fact, be significant form beneath the scattered surface of the present moment.

If I look over the artists officially listed as painters on the Biennial website, they fall into provisional groups. As I classify them, I am aware that some of my names are widely agreed-upon and others are idiosyncratic. Thus there is comic-book kitsch and camp (Laylah Ali, Amy Cutler, Barnaby Furnas, Raymond Pettibon, Zak Smith), clean landscape and new figuration (Laura Owens, Cameron Martin, Elizabeth Peyton, Amy Sillman), design and neo-cubo-photorealism (Julie Mehretu, Dave Muller), neoexpressionism (Hernan Bas, Cecily Brown), minimalism and constructivism (Dike Blair, Lecia Dole-Recio, Kim Fisher, James Siena), romanticism disguised as video painting (Jeremy Blake), photography disguised as painting (Eve Sussman), painting embedded in film (Stan Brakhage, Sandra Gibson, Bruce

McClure), and many multimedia concoctions (Tam Van Tran, the group called “assume vivid astro focus”). The established artists that Shiff notes already have their categories, which do not need to be listed: Mel Bochner, Jack Goldstein, Alex Hay, David Hockney, Mary Kelly, Robert Mangold, Richard Prince, Fred Tomaselli.

What matters about a list like this is that it is not entirely frivolous: it is a necessary part of every viewer’s response to the Biennial and the contemporary art scene. That is a strange fact which is worth considering carefully: the apparently stakeless game of considering the “state” of painting is a *required response*—but why should that be, given that the field is purportedly open to all, and that criteria of value are seldom openly discussed in curatorial statements (that would be *outré*), and that no one believes a defensible ordering would be either sensible or possible? Because, I think, history still puts pressure on painting, even though we have lost the language or the will to respond. The same lightly repressed anxiety about the possibility of bringing some order to contemporary painting hovers over discourse in many parts of the world, and what I have said about the Whitney’s artists could be repeated, with different names and longer hyphenated neologisms, for current painting from Asunción to Guangxi.

My interest, therefore, is historiographic: in this essay I will not be asking what the most interesting new painting is, or who the most intriguing artists are, or whether painting is dead, or what

painting practice is like in a particular place. I will not be making any discoveries, or reporting from any exotic location, or even writing about painting at all. My subject is the writing itself: I am interested instead in the kinds of writing that are taken to be appropriate for contemporary painting. By understanding why a certain critical approach is considered apposite, it may be possible to come to see why we want to write as we do, rather than seeing, once again, what is best or worst, newest or oldest. The current discourse on contemporary painting can be divided, for these purposes, into five groups:

1. The commonest kind of writing is opportunistic, impressionistic, local, and informal. It is also often done for money. Most writing in exhibition brochures, newspapers, and glossy art magazines is of this type. It is characterized by a cool tone, fabulous allusions, elliptic insights, well-balanced ambiguities, lack of structure, and a paucity of large-scale conclusions. It may be polemical or hortatory, sarcastic or coy, but it will nearly always disappoint readers who are looking for concerted arguments or conclusions based on a range of comparative material. The writing tends to be built bower-bird-fashion out of apparently unrelated objects. (Bowerbirds collect blue things, but they have no idea of the objects' original uses or meanings.) When it works, this kind of writing can produce a mildly dazzling effect.

I will not say anything more about this first kind of writing, even though it accounts for the majority of all writing about contemporary painting. For the present purposes there are two reasons for remaining silent: first, the authors of these texts do not ordinarily hope for anything more than to respond to individual works and exhibitions, so including them in an overview of kinds of writing would do them a disservice; and second, they imply, and occasionally assert, that there is no need to be more serious in writing about painting—a claim that should require justification, if only because of the sheer number of painters worldwide who take their work to be more than play.

2. Especially in academia there is a kind of text whose principal purpose is to classify. Any concept can be taken as a taxonomic criterion: styles, schools, subject matter, *Kunstwollen* (the old “artistic will”), gender, identity, ethnicity, nationalism. In the opening paragraphs of his essay I was experimenting with style criteria. Classification—in the general sense of arrangement, of putting structure and sense where there did not appear to be any—could be taken as a condition of committed response to the contemporary scene, but it is characteristic of only a few writers. Jerry Saltz (critic for the *Village Voice* in New York) has written several classificatory essays, but they’re lost among the hundreds of his essays that defy classification, and the same could be said of Roberta Smith’s work even though her aversion to classification

comes from different roots. (Saltz and Smith are married; she is a critic for the *New York Times*.) Authors of textbooks are compelled to classify, even if they try to meliorate that duty by adopting unusual categories (as Robert Pincus-Witten does; he has Alfred Barr's penchant for inventing "isms" and schools) or by insisting on the impossibility of classification (as Jonathan Fineberg, H.H. Arnason, and Marlyn Stokstad all do—they are authors of North American college texts).

The most interesting question to be asked of classificatory writing concerns the desire itself, and what need it answers. Classification is an adversarial response to the pluralism of current practice: but for what sense of history is it an adequate response? At the least, for a sense of history in which connections between works, whether temporal or conceptual, are sufficient markers of the significance of modernism or postmodernism. At the most, for a sense of history in which such connections are the essential structure of modernism—as they were, at times, to Alfred Barr.

3. There is also a kind of writing whose primary purpose is to ask if painting is dead—or what it means that painting is already dead, or what will happen when painting finally dies. This literature is naïve in the sense that it is a symptom of a state of discourse about painting, not an inquiry into a possible state of painting. Painting's imminent and repeated death should be

regarded not as a problem, a possibility, or a truth, but as an intermittent accompaniment of painting in the age of modernism.

Modernist painting comprises several conceptual elements at partial odds with one another. One part of painting in modernism is the hope of a social contract for art; another is the desire for an immanent critique of representation. There are others, and among them is the notion that painting itself has somehow died, or is belated, misguided, devoid of historical necessity, exhausted, superannuated, decadent, or otherwise irrelevant. This does not mean that the claim that some practice of painting is dead is itself trivial or simply wrong: it means that the claim should be studied with a dispassionate curiosity, as a naturalist studies the parts of a flower. A history needs to be written of the times painting has been said to be at an end (it would include, for example, Vitebsk in 1920, Yale in 1960, CalArts in 1995, and several biennales). Such a history would illuminate the kind of painting practices that seem to call for the claim, and those that appear to solve it.

Saying once again that painting is dead is a way of writing about art in the twenty-first century: it is not a cause for concern but an opportunity to reflect on the conditions that allow the claim to be made.

4. For some writers the principal interest of contemporary painting is its affinity with, or distance from, modernism. This is perhaps the most important unsolved problem in contemporary

theory of art. There are many non-modernist models for painting: personal invective against Greenberg such as Krauss's; complicated returns to modified modernism such as Lane Relyea's; *October*-style theories that align non-modernist painting with dada, surrealism, and photography; post-historical theories such as Arthur Danto's; attempts to write painting into a conceptual field dominated by minimalism and late Heidegger (Stephen Melville); rejections of postmodernism itself, based on the idea that modernism has always failed to recognize its own incompleteness and even its moments of greatest promise (T.J. Clark) or on a sense of artistic attitudes that blend putatively modernist and postmodernist instances (Richard Shiff); and wholly new models that reject poststructuralism, such as W.J.T. Mitchell's current interest in Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory.

All these approaches share the sense that painting is still important, and that it occupies a particularly problematic place in contemporary discourse. These writers are not naïve about painting's historiography in the way that those who write about painting's death can be: for them, painting's nature and its place are in question even, or especially, for media that define themselves in some measure by the understanding that they are not painting. (The best of these meditations, I think, is Stephen Melville's.)

5. And last, there is a kind of writing that takes contemporary painting as its occasional subject, even though the writer's sustaining interests are elsewhere. The Mexican writer Néstor Canclini is a writer of this kind, and so are Homi Bhabha, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, Cuauhtemoc Medina, Germano Celant, the brilliant Panamanian critic Ticio Escobar, and many others whose differences are greater than their similarities—except that on occasion each has taken paintings as *examples* of concepts that are located in wider cultural contexts. In one respect this is unremarkable, and belongs to the general history of citation, but in another it signals a conviction that painting has lost its central role in modernism or postmodernism, and been dispersed as a subject or discourse.

The same observation could be made of scholars in the new field of visual studies, for whom a selection of visual examples may or may not include painting, which then becomes one occasion among many for the enactment of contemporary visibility. Another list of equally disparate writers could be cited as examples: Martin Jay, Philippe Dagen, Nick Mirzoeff, Angela Cartwright, and even the oracular and self-contradictory Daniel Buren. I name these very different writers all together to suggest that they share a sense that painting may no longer be diagnostic of

contemporary visuality, or crucial for the understanding of what modernism has become.

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These five are heuristic categories. I choose them in order to illuminate a decision that faces all current writing about painting, and can distinguish among approaches to writing about painting in a way that no other criterion can: whether or not to take account of painting's history. If painting is an activity that is taken to be informed by its history, then that history, however it is understood, will be experienced as exerting some pressure on current practice. Current painting will then need to respond to its relevant precedents, and locate itself within specific histories. If, on the other hand, painting is conceived as an activity that is effectively free, plural, and experimental (or alternately, as an activity that is inextricably enmeshed in other media, to the point where it cannot be singled out for separate attention), then painting's history becomes a prehistory, and however that prehistory may function for a given artist—as a storehouse of inspiration, a catalog of possibilities, a toolbox for techniques—it will not have a compelling interest for contemporary practice. Of the kinds of writing I have surveyed here, the first is closest to this plural, postmodern or posthistorical perspective. The third and fourth are the most beholden to versions of painting's history: they show, by degrees and incompletely, the effect of historical thinking on

current criticism. The decision about the importance and relevance of history is the most fundamental one in writing about painting even now, long after modernism's particular sense of painting's history has dissolved and dispersed.

The idea that contemporary painting is an open field of possibilities unfettered by its past is supported by readings (in some cases, arguably misreadings) of several theorists. Dave Hickey's work has been taken as a license to make art that does not adhere to any particular stream of history, even though it could be argued that his principal criticism is aimed against academia rather than against the notion that art history might be relevant to current practices. (Hickey admires Jacqueline Lichtenstein, for example, but reviles certain art historians who also value her work.) Hickey's students in Nevada and Los Angeles work in styles almost as diverse as those represented in the Whitney Biennial, and so their terms of allegiance to his doctrines cannot always be located in his writing: it would be more accurate to say that allegiance to Hickey is allegiance to what his writing apparently enables. Arthur Danto's end-of-art-history thesis has also been read as a liberatory gesture, apparently freeing young painters to do as they wish. The contradiction between the claim that historical successions no longer have philosophic weight, and the fact that Danto continues to write art criticism using terms identical to those he employed before his conversion in 1964, apparently does not

strike current artists who take inspiration from his writing. Danto is therefore another instance of a writer whose influence on artists may have more to do with what his texts license than what they actually claim. It may be that some of Mitchell's work also affects practice in this indirect fashion: in an unpublished essay, he sketches some conversations among a group of contemporary American abstract painters and draws the conclusion that abstraction has become, at least in that case, a local matter, detached from debates about historical significance. As different as Danto, Hickey, and Mitchell are, their writings and lectures have been taken as licenses not to worry about what painting was in the past: and in that sense they are among the theorists of the current sense that painting has effectively separated itself from its history.

Against these sources of insouciance are ways of understanding current painting that take its history as its central problematic. (I count myself in this group, which includes some of the writers listed under the fourth heading.) It has been argued, with history in mind, that of all media painting has the least room to maneuver despite its apparent freedom. Painting is annoyingly, and dauntingly, entangled in art history. Nearly every current painting practice can be crushed by the weight of the judgments of generations of historians and critics. As a medium and as a set of practices, painting is practically dismembered, torn to pieces and dispersed among many media. It seems to be faltering,

directionless, indecisive. The apparent freedom granted to painting by writers such as Danto or Hickey can also be read as a burden: it seems nothing cannot be painted, cannot count as a painting—and for that very reason, there is no reason to count anything as a painting. Painting suffers from that unbearable lightness, as Milan Kundera puts it. Surely this situation is more intriguing, more challenging, than the airless freedom posited by impressionistic criticism, or the playful pluralism granted by writers such as Hickey. For me, painting is interesting largely because it can hardly breathe under the weight of its own history.

Painting retains this special relation to the history of art, I think, because the terms of art criticism, the concepts that give sense and direction to discussions of art of all kinds, come nearly exclusively from the language of painting. Other media borrow and adapt them, and are then tempted to defer the moment when their debt comes due. (What terms have entered the critical field exclusively from installation art or video?) This is the lesson that seems so difficult for the art world: despite the fundamental critique launched by minimalism, despite the rise of so many new media, despite the many rumors of its death, despite everything, painting remains the central medium for the articulation and historiography of the visual arts. That is not to say that the most interesting art is not made in video and many other media: usually it is. But painting is crucial for the conceptualization of visual art,

and to art's sense of its own history. In a certain reading of writers such as Danto and Hickey, the message seems to be: Paint whatever you like, because history is over and anything is possible. The opposite is true: history presses down more than it ever has, and almost nothing is possible. That is why both painting and writing about painting are more challenging now than ever before.