'Contemporary', 'Common', 'Context', 'Criticism':
Painting after the End of Postmodernism

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... "I forget whose marble fireplace, there was certainly more than one Zack peed in. He was pathetic when he was drunk. He had no gift for alcohol, not like Ruk, who was always aware, always civil. Zack reverted to infancy, this drastic insecurity and megalomania, burbling, showing his penis, doing what it took to make himself the center of attention, punching somebody. He liked upsetting a table with all the food on it. He did that to me more than once." The Thanksgiving feast with his family from California, the gallery party after the *Life* article had come out and celebrity had turned him ugly: the incessant ornate humiliations of those last Long Island years, all her attempts to make a decent home overturned and rebelled against, have unexpectedly affected Hope's eyes. Old age does that: senility of the ducts. As a young woman, she took pride in never crying, no matter how stung or insulted — in not giving the evil, creaturely, colorful world the satisfaction.


What 'Hope' for Painting, then?

Painting once again, perhaps, as what T.J. Clark called "a practice, a set of possibilities, a dream of freedom"? (Clark 1999b: xxx). Or painting as the opposites of these: a dead end of futile moves 'not adding up to a language'; a set of impossibilities, illusions, and disillusion; a nightmare
of slavishly "ornate humiliations" and overturned tables? And what about commentary; where would (what would) painting be without criticism — without the intervening voices and the difficult essays, all the "typing and the writing," to paraphrase Greenberg? For sure, we have all these things still, now, painting as a practice or set of practices; myriad species of paintings, indeed, in their tens of thousands, like migration time on the Serengetti Plain; critics and rhetorics; analysis and voluble dream work.

The contemporary art world is a boiling, capacious, polyvocal, pluralistic engine of global productivity: Biennial-Station has happened, a kind of mega-cultural fusion spitting and splitting new forms and formations, new funding and support agencies, new intermediaries and professional types, new kinds of celebrity art and artist, locked into capitalist globalization and its shadow statist cultural policy incarnations, swallowing up the radicals, the dissidents, and the discontent, along with the rest — offering them space, place, to create and relate, engage and enrage, to explain and disdain, within a new political-economy of contemporary art.

Painting is in there still, jostling for position, wandering where it stands within the hierarchy of artistic production (wondering if there is a hierarchy at all), and anxious about how it gets its own representations represented. John Updike calls his Lee Krasner Pollock character "Hope" in his 2002 novel Seek My Face — an extract from which I began my essay with. Zack, of course, is make-believe son of Jackson Pollock and several of the other characters in the novel are spun fiction lives close, or not-so-close, to those Abstract Expressionists who themselves entered a mythological realm within art history and its popular representations after the 1950s. Updike suggests strongly that it was Pollock's performance in Hans Namuth's film of 1950 that pushes the poor man back over the edge, robbing him of self-respect and the ability to work relatively sanely again: Pollock is made to portray, prostitute, himself on film, to parody and travesty his own body and psyche — and to produce 'Pollocks' in inverted commas, filmed from below a sheet of glass. A desperate kind of hard-core porn paintings: spurt and posture this way, Jack (or Zack), come onto the glass. Let's do it again and again until you get it right — don't think about it, make the control automatic, for the camera.

Updike introduces other half-echoes of American artists after Pollock, but these are 'composites' or 'fictions', confusing amalgamations of the 'real' — but also mythified - artists. After Zack dies, Hope marries an artist Updike calls "Guy Holloway", described as "Pop art's super-successful boy wonder", suggesting aspects of Warhol, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, and Johns. Guy is portrayed as a closet bisexual. The 'reality-fiction' dichotomy is played on, and played up, throughout the novel: artist characters before the 1950s and 1960s are given the names of 'real' artists: so we hear of painters called "Kandinsky" and "Malevich" (good names those!) and the Americans "Grant Wood", "John Stuart Curry" and "the Soyer brothers". Are these names real or fictional? Are the referents for these names the same as the referents for these names when they appear in the art history books? A character called "Clem" is a fictional critic close for a time to "Zack", whose last name, by the way, is "McCoy" — Pollock's mother's maiden name, as well as some kind of joke name I imagine: maybe along the lines of "Pollock was the real McCoy"? A character called "Bernie Nova" sounds like Barnett — "Barney" to his
friends – Newman. "Jarl Anders" may be Franz Kline, "Onno de Genoog" – very confusing one that! – is a figure with something to do with Willem de Kooning (though it's Updike's Guy Holloway who eventually develops Alzheimer's Disease – leaving Hope to marry a third man, not an artist this time, who dies (a bit like "Rabbit" in Updike's eponymous series), respectfully, of a heart attack. "Hermann Hochmann" is a dead ringer for Hans Hofmann. My favourite, though, is a character Updike calls "Roger Merehien": can you guess? Robert Motherwell, of course!

Now: the theme of my essay is the problem of identity encountered as soon as we start to talk about painting, now – that term itself, 'now', is notoriously complicated, having a convoluted relation to both of the terms contemporary and modern. In its predominant sense, contemporary refers to 'now' – in strong opposition to a moment in some recognised past (over) or future (yet to come) time – but the term also contains within it the undertow of a late-nineteenth-century usage meaning 'modern' or 'ultra-modern'. This inheritance is at the root of the difficulty with 'contemporary': it confusingly has come to mean both 'now' and the modern, even though in art history 'the modern' has become, in some important ways, a distinctly historical notion. 'Modern art' usually refers to art from the time of Edouard Manet (the 1860s/’70s/’80s) to the 'end of modernism', a vanishing point usually located in the later 1960s or early 1970s – just before, that is, the rise of post-modernism.

Difficulties, however, equally plague the term 'now': it can not mean simply the 'immediate present' (literally this second) and therefore is ambiguously open and elastic itself – perhaps meaning anything from 'immediately' to 'this year' to 'the last ten years'. Who knows? Several further elements of confusion over contemporary involve significant issues to do with assumptions about the nature of art-historical research and the relations between this activity and the study of art and art institutions in the present. In one way, the resort to this phrase – 'in the present' – valuable indicates that 'contemporary' has no neutral or clear meaning, though it is often used precisely with the intention to appear neutral and clear. For instance, it became common about thirty years ago for new (don't ask!) galleries and museums of art, wishing to show artworks made more or less 'now' or 'in the present', to call themselves museums of 'Contemporary Art' (for example, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles). This usage created a deliberate contrast with 'museums of modern art', whose collections were clearly associated with what was believed now to be an ended or concluded past history: the modernist art, that is, of the twentieth century (roughly, let's say, from Cubism up to the work of the pop artists of the early 1960s). The exemplary institution concerned with this history is, of course, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, whose nickname 'MoMA' indicates its founding – and metaphorically maternal – status as the first such named museum, established in 1929.

Contemporary in this recent usage – since the 1970s – means more or less the same as 'now' or 'in the present'; and, although the contrast with a past (completed, finished) modern moment is clear, the term contemporary remains highly ambiguous. In this ambiguity, contemporary shares a vagueness with that other term mentioned above used to describe art 'after modernism', postmodernism. The 'after' certainly suggests the 'overness' – the 'distinction from' – but also the active, if residual, influence or legacy of that which came before. For example, a painting identified in conventional art-historical terms as 'after' such-and-such an earlier artist demonstrates some observable connection to a work, or works, by that former artist. In the same way, contemporary paintings, though different from modernist paintings, will be, in all cases, shown to bear some relation to artworks that came before them. These two terms, then, contemporary and modern, are tortuously interconnected and confused, almost especially when the attempt is made to rigorously separate them out. Of course the difficulties are partly to do with assumptions about when certain things, events, processes, are supposed to have 'started' and 'finished'. You might think that when we've got beyond modern and contemporary we've reached now, but what about recent and present? Let me assure you that these problems are bound up, too, with context and common, and another term I will focus on here: criticism. Set all these to one side just for a moment, however, and then remember the other term that concerns us all: painting. In a collection of essays I edited in 2003 I suggested that we could usefully consider the fortunes of this word via its relations to three others that I shall invoke: these terms are hybridity, hegemony, and historicism – all with complex, disputed, interconnected histories themselves.

I chose to begin with Updike's novel, however, in order to suggest that his allegory allegorises the situation we are in when we begin to think and talk about painting now. My bold claim is that we have lost painting, and modern art, from an understanding that is anything other than
- for want of some better words! - tendentiously fictionalised, made-up, far-fetched, or what I will call subjunctural. All of these terms have their advantages and their pitfalls and are all usefully thought-of as 'exacerbated' and will, hopefully, productively 'exacerbate'. (This, incidentally, is a historical-materialist talking, and someone committed still to the ideal of forms of objective knowing, of knowing something beyond mere stipulation or subjective predilection!) Let me put some cards on the table, then: we have come terminally beyond the fantasies of modern painting's 'intrinsic purposes and drives', its 'internal regularities' and self-certain 'ontologies', pictured as these were most vividly, most successfully - influentially, hegemonically for the art world, that is - by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried in the 1950s and 1960s. Well might "Clem" be a walk-on part in Updike's novel! Fried, to put it metaphorically, has been fried. He had the good sense to know so, and to have said so himself, in his Introduction to Art and Objecthood, his 1998 collection of essays on abstract art written in the 1960s. But that being true doesn't leave us in some 'post-space' of objective, sober-again, hung-over knowledge, some reflective moment when the rhetorical engine is merely ticking-over again, not racing the metaphoric revs. Criticism, I shall claim, has come to its last station-stop, and become a revealed subjunctive-grammatical construct - akin to science fiction or fantasy fiction writing: criticism is now a rather garish mode, that is, of presenting simply what is imagined or wished or possible. And in a way, of course, it always was. Criticism, especially modernist criticism, was a form of agitated, over-excited day-dreaming, of 'wishing X to be true', or 'desiring Y to be the case', or 'seeing Z as the desirable outcome.' High Modernist' criticism - I'm thinking here of Greenberg in his 1960 essay "Modernist Painting" and Fried in his 1965 essay "Three American Painters" - is as airless and breathless, as painting and delirious, as anything produced by Zack or Devis (or Jackson or Barny), that is, as eccentrically hyper-individuallyistically solipsistic and absurdly hubristic as Modernist Painting itself.

Painting, Metaphorically

We are beyond all that, I'm saying (we know it in our bones), but not delivered, thereby, into some non-figurative, non-metaphoric elucitationary world: the strange creatures in painting since the 1970s (a world of pluralistic tolerance of difference, or is that rather mere indifference?)

demonstrate the zoo of incommensurate language games that painting - that art tout court - has become. And criticism, too. Writings on painting, as much as painting itself, have become a mad kind of incessant coupling and recoupling: electrical, digitalised, hypertextual, and hyped. Fried said it in his Introduction to Art and Objecthood, criticisms since the 1960s has become "cultural commentary, 'oppositional' position taking, exercises in recycled French theory, and so on." He doesn't add that even his own branch - what he calls "evaluative criticism" - didn't disappear either after 1970, but found continuities and legacies in many writers, including, for instance, John Berger and the reverend Peter Fuller in England, and Lacy Lippard and doomsday-monger Donald Kuspit in the USA. Fried, actually, had called his chosen path something a bit more specialised or reductive: that is, being "a formal art critics." Now, whatever else you think of "cultural commentary", "oppositional
position-taking", "exercises in recycled French theory", most of this emphatically _was_ evaluative: only the criteria and contexts and publics for evaluation had shifted, seismically and irreversibly, since Fried's day. Which is to say, apart from anything else, that painting, since the 1960s, has been 'commonized', in its original mid-nineteenth-century English sense: brought, that is, (sometimes rudely pushed) into a realm of shared public values and practices, made a fledgling citizen of the broad, and broadening, republic of contemporary art. Though judgements of 'vulgarization' still hover around the use of the term, painting, stripped of its elite pretensions since the High Modernism of the 1970s, has found a reduced though genuine niche in this contemporary art's 'common culture'.

And some of those writers associated with High Modernism's criticism are still painting, if not painting themselves. Greenberg, half-aware that the bubble had burst too, made what I think was a rather distinguished claim in 1978 that his arguments in his essay "Modernist Painting" were — _at the time of him proposing them_ — self-consciously merely subjunctive. Kant, Greenberg says (shall I say) was a lot of cant: "Many readers", Greenberg writes, "seem to have taken the 'rational' of modernist art outlined ... as representing a position adopted by the writer himself; that is, that what he describes he also advocates. This may be a fault of the writer or the rhetoric... The writer is trying to account in part for how most of the best art of the hundred-odd years came about, but he's not implying that that's how it _had_ to come about, much less that that's how the best art still has to come about." "'Pure art', Greenberg goes on, "was a useful illusion, but this doesn't make it any less an illusion." Well, well, Mereben!

What's the difference in a representation between an illusion and a fiction? It depends, surely, _only_ on the context: as a farground the magic tricks are called illusions, not fictions. In a novel the story is a fiction. In a painting the depiction of a person is achieved illusionistically. In a TV news broadcast the "War on Terror" is part illusion, part fiction, and partly — big part this! — _subjunctual_: that is, the threat may be wished, or imagined, or even possible. All bound up together. Criticism _after_ modernist criticism, and painting _after_ modernist painting, is a similar kind of agglomerate. It would take an _inhuman_ amount of effort to construct what might stand as a plausible _theory_ of painting these days — that is, it would literally have to come from another planet, be foisted upon us in the manner that aliens are supposed to impregnate earthling women taken up into spaceships. No one is likely to believe anyone from this planet that either the painting we have now, or the paintings we have had in the last, say, fifty years, can, or should, make sense within _one_ explanatory rubric, or that the bare bones of such accounts add up to anything now that is much more than a compendium of clichés: that painting is the residue of an authentic human (rather than superhuman) touch; that it is the phenomenal trace of embodied, materialised vision; that it is the sacred relic of some Heideggerian _geworfenheit_ (the 'thrownness' of human 'madness-and-making' in the world), and other sundry hand-me-down neo-Merleau-Pontyisms. However simultaneously strangulating and intoxicating these gushings might remain, they all represent, finally, dying species of discounted, banal humanisms. They might be 'true' in the sense that the statement "President Bush is President" is true, but what of it?

In this post-space _after_ 'painting theory-as-ideology' (since, say, the mid-1970s), these positions and their attendant philosophies, mostly deriving from one or another variant of phenomenology, have been unmasked as subjunctive constructs — one fantasy of seeing, or saying, or showing, with a tiny kernel perhaps of truth dotted with a very small 'x'. But, since Abstract Expressionism — one last gasp of oxygen (pure individualism) Clark called it, before the 'plane went down'4 — painting has been revived again, and again, through an admixture, a hybrid, of gasses. These have cooled and heated, and cooled and heated, again, ever since, into a game of references, rather than constituting what painting was for Baryn (no Bernstein), or Robert (no Roger): that is, an artistic, Gramscian 'war of position' against consumer-capitalist culture; against "Clem's" _kitsch_ and Michael's _theatricality_; against what Peter Fuller called the modern _mega-visual tradition_ subsumed into advertising and spectacle — the horrors of what Donald Kuspit fulminates horrifically against in his horrific book _The End of Art_. Unfortunately, however, there will be no End to books about the End of Art.

Painting since the 1980s had promiscuously reinvented itself in virtually every possible position, including trying to pass itself off as hot and expressive again. (This intervening phase — now over I'd say — used to be called 'postmodernist'. Remember that?) Those artists and critics involved in the early 1980s 'hot' re-inventions, such as 'neo-expressionism', may well have genuinely deluded themselves — so what? Is that necessarily any
better than being simply mendacious or working with an eye to the market? Painting has become experientially, rather than simply theoretically, ineffable: it can be found virtually everywhere else in the material fabric of contemporary art: in what used to be called ‘sculpture’, or ‘installation’, or ‘video’, or all, or none of these – all with inverted commas. And in none of these hybrids does it have any kind of necessary home any more, or meaning, or value. The same goes for ‘criticism’ – now as grossly inadequate and mis-representational a term as painting itself – meaning a vast range of kinds of writing and talking, much of it sponsored by, contextualised within, jargonized and depoliticized courtesy of, our academic institutions. No new problem this – can art be meaningfully public without a parallel public critical discourse intelligible and meaningful outside of academia? Cambridge-man William Empson told a Princeton audience many years ago that what was wrong with what he called the “horrible new American academic prose ... was its failure to keep the normal living connection between the written language and the spoken one” (Empson, in Haffenden 2005: 265).

Discourse on art has grown so monstrously huge now that academics themselves find it hard to recognise specialisms nominally belonging within a single field. A visit to the bookshop at Tate Modern in London depressingly confirms this: they simply don’t know what to call a lot of the types of books they sell: ‘Visual theories’ used to be my favourite, absolutely subjunctural to the core! Hoping! Wishing! So the situation exists now where there is no possible meaningful (that is, adequate or compelling) definition of painting and no consensus either about how people have been trying to make sense of this situation for ten years or so. The courses that we teach in universities entertain numerous titular fictions about this, for the sake of attracting students: dinosaurs like ‘fine art’ and ‘art history’ persist, with entertaining implied distinctions from notions such as ‘applied’ or ‘commercial art’, or, for that matter, ‘social history’ or ‘cultural studies’. We are, then, to begin to sum up, living now within a heightened context of what could be called a ‘subjunctural supposition’; bathed – as doomed Louis Althusser once had it – in the very dirty bathwater of ideological deformations, aware of them as such, but unable to escape out into some realm beyond this particular art world polluted goldfish bowl (to mix my metaphors!). To paraphrase Clark on Cubism, we are able to point to the figures and deictics in representation – able even to simulate a language that appears to lie outside this structure of smoke and mirrors – but are finally not in a space or place outside of these inversions and mere tricks of appearance. What at least could be said in favour of this situation, I suppose, is that we are aware insomniacally of being in it. But are we happy? Does the insomniac not yearn to drop off, finally, into sweet, dreamless oblivion?

To recap: In the later 1960s the emergence of Minimalism and Conceptualism evidenced the arrival of diverse ideas and practices dialectically related to philosophical, political, and social analyses of a wide variety of kinds, many of them ‘counter-cultural’, connected to socialist, feminist, ‘postcolonial’, and ecological currents – pushing art and criticism into a new phase of existence and leading to these central terms themselves coming under serious and continuous strain. Painting lost out. But could the discourses of ‘art’ and ‘criticism’, so tied to the history of painting over many centuries, ever adequately offer to describe these new practices of making and thinking, representing and analyzing? When Painting returned (though it never really went away), its primary ideological and institutional place had vanished. Like the fairy tale character off to seek his fortune, Dick Whittington, it had to seek a new life, with his bag of tricks cheerfully wrapped in a handkerchief on the end of a stick, and find a way of living with the other hungry creatures of the contemporary art world.

**Painting in ‘Post-criticism’: from Work to Text**

As Cindy Sherman’s photographs suggest, artists ‘after modernism’ continued using traditional, new, and combined media, an investigation into the conventions of visual representation that Greenberg, Fried, and Clark all saw as a core element of the enterprise of modernist painting. Art writing, too, began reviews of its procedures of composition in so wide a variety of contexts and with aims so diverse that ‘criticism’, in any unitary or narrow sense, simply became an inadequate term for the activity. But evaluation in Fried’s sense remained a key concern: what changed, as I’ve said, were the objects evaluated, the criteria of evaluation, and the purposes of judgement. Think of Sherman’s photographs, then, as one attempt among many to encourage you to deliberate on conventions: in art (that is, on the history of painting and photography), on film and in film’s relation to painting and photography in contemporary society, and on society as a whole. Images, narratives, and conventions-as-rituals...
have come to constitute, one might conclude, a large part now of ‘spectacularized’ social and political life. They are the mobile and ubiquitous components of ‘drama’, as Raymond Williams once put it:

in a dramatized society: these images and narratives challenged and engaged us, for once avant-garde paintings ... were images of dissent, of conscious dissent from fixed forms. But that other miming, the public dramatization, is so continuous, so insistent, that dissent, alone, has proved quite powerless against it ... A man I knew from France, a man who had learned, none better, the modes of perception that are critical dissent, said to me once, rather happily: 'France, you know, is a bad bourgeois novel.' I could see how far he was right: the modes of dramatization, of fictionalization, which are active as social and cultural conventions, as ways not only of seeing but of organizing reality, are as he said: a bourgeois novel, its human types still fixed but losing some of their conviction; its human actions, its struggles for property and position, for careers and careering relationships, still as limited as ever but still bitterly holding the field, in an interactive public reality and public consciousness. 'Well, yes,' I said politely, 'England's a bad bourgeois novel too. And New York is a bad metropolitan novel. But there's one difficulty, at least I find it's a difficulty. You can't send them back to the library. You're stuck with them. You have to read them over and over.' 'But critically,' he said, with an engaging alertness. 'Still reading them,' I said. (Williams 1987: 19)

Over the past twenty years, since the term ‘postmodernism’ achieved a relatively wide currency – though mainly still inside academic debate and publishing – it was used rather more to refer to cultural and artistic artefacts, practices, events, and developments than to explain the character of broader contemporary economic and social structures or transformations. Since the mid-1990s, however, the term has had to compete with at least two others – ‘globalization’ and ‘the postcolonial’ – that have been used to designate wholesale change within the organization of societies and relations between nation-states, regions, and continents. On the whole, changes in artistic forms and practices deemed to be ‘postmodernist’ were welcomed and celebrated in the 1980s and ’90s as evidence of a release from previously constraining ‘modernist’ codes

and conventions, and held to be demonstrative of continuing innovation and creativity in the cultural sphere. This contrasts sharply with the connotations of both 'globalization' and 'postcolonial' which, although still suggesting liberation from inherited forms of social order and political oppression – restrictive or imposed national identities and direct forms of imperial domination – now also imply a generalization across the world of new insecurities based on, for example, the threat of terrorist attack or ecological disaster, and subtler, more insidious forms of economic and cultural subordination to predominant international forces and organizations.

Whatever painting’s future – as ‘theory’, as ‘practice’, as ‘artefact’, as ‘expressive trace’ of its maker or makers’ natures – it exists now within what appears to me to be an entirely novel discursive situation. This could be called the ‘ideological’ or ‘apocalyptic subjunctive’: our world of promised ‘real threats’ that bombard us daily: bird flu contagion, ecological catastrophe, terrorism, asteroid collision. The media seems addicted now to spreading these dark tales, episodes, of likely or less-than-likely deadly futures. Painting might, in this morbid regime, simply be re-invented as the kind of utopian ‘dream of freedom’ it represented to the Abstract Expressionists: this might be called, in contrast, the ‘imaginative subjunctive’. Barney Newman – though it could be “Bernie Nova” – saying, to sum it all up, that if people could understand his paintings properly they would “mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism”?

That paintings could bring that about?
That understanding could in itself mean transformation?

But as such, this re-invention of painting – as known or unwitting pastiche or parody – would simply, merely, be one more short story, an ‘as-if’ subjunctive, next to another and another and another, on a very long shelf (as long at least as the bookshelf in the Tate Modern bookshop) devoted to what painting ‘might mean now’... And: “‘You’re stuck with them. You have to read the titles over and over.’ But critically,” said the Frenchman, with his engaging alertness. But still only reading them.
Notes

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