Art & Discontent

Theory at the Millennium

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"Thirteen Ways of
Looking at a Blackbird"

Everything we might say about an artwork that is not neutral description of aesthetic properties is an attribution of content. (Even value judgments, insofar as they reflect what Althusserian critics call "visual ideology, are implicit attributions of content.) If there is no such thing as neutral description, then all statements about art works involve attributions of content, whether acknowledged or not. There are many possible ways to sort these things out; one is on the model of geography—what types of content arise from this or that location in the artwork?

1. **Content that arises from the aspect of the artwork that is understood as representational.** This type of content is widely regarded as the least problematical; ironically, this very assumption lies at the heart of a tangled problem. We tend to feel that representation works by a recognizable element of objective resemblance, yet it seems more accurate to say that what we experience as representation is, like aesthetic taste, a culturally conditioned habit response not involving objective resemblance. In fact, it is difficult if not impossible to say what would constitute objective resemblance. And in reverse, the conviction of objective resemblance habituated in our pictorial tradition seems to exercise control over our perception of nature. The pictorial tradition, presented to us as representation of nature, has remade our perception of

nature to conform with the conventions of pictures (as Goodman and others have demonstrated in their critiques of representation and, especially, of the tradition of perspectival drawing). The resemblance we seem to see between pictures and nature does not result from the fact that art imitates nature, but from the fact that our perception of nature imitates our perception of art. Seen thusly, just as it seems we can't think anything that our language can't formulate, so it seems we can't see anything that our pictorial tradition does not include or imply.

Representation, then, especially two-dimensional representation, is not an objective imitation, but a conventional symbolic system which varies from culture to culture. What "looks like" nature to an Australian aborigine looks like symbols to us, and vice versa. Virtually every culture has a tradition of representation which it sincerely regards as based on resemblance. Faced with a painting of the Battle of Waterloo, we seem to recognize horses, weapons, warriors, and so on; what we are in fact recognizing are our conventional ways of representing horses, weapons, warriors, and so on. The fact that it is specifically the Battle of Waterloo must come from the next level of content.

2. **Content arising from verbal supplements supplied by the artist.** Duchamp's famous remark that the most important thing about a painting is its title points to a weakness in the "purely optical" theory of art. Artists frequently issue verbal supplements in an attempt to control the interpretation of their works, and even the most optical of critics cannot help but be influenced by them. In reference to a painting of horses, and weapons, and warriors, for example, the title "The Battle of Waterloo" injects a specific content arising not from optical features but from words. Abstract and reductionist art, as much as representational, has been dependent on content supplied in this way. For example, it would be virtually impossible (as Harold Rosenberg once remarked) to distinguish the Minimal from the Sublime without such verbal supplements as Barnett Newman's cabalistic titles, the published interviews with Frank Stella and Donald Judd, and so on. Robert Smithson's essays have controlled the interpretation of his works, as Yves Klein's essays have of his. This quality goes back, really, to the beginnings of art: to Pheidias' identification of a certain nude male sculpture as Zeus rather than, say, Poseidon or Apollo, to the texts accompanying Egyptian tomb paintings, to the shaman's explanatory song in front of his paintings. It is as important today as it ever was.

3. **Content arising from the genre or medium of the artwork.** This

type of content shifts as ambient cultural forces shift. In the 1960s in America, for example, a contentual dichotomy between painting and sculpture arose. Painting came to imply a lack of direct involvement in experience, an absorption in indirect, distanced preoccupations. Sculpture, on the other hand, was understood, even when representational, as a *real presence of objecthood,* since it occupied the same space the viewer occupied, the space of embodied life. From this ethical dichotomy arose much of the dynamic of the art of the 1960s and 70s. The radical new genres were associated with sculpture, performance being called "living sculpture," installations "environmental sculpture," and so on. Painting was associated with the old values of convention, rather than actuality. For an artist to choose to work in oils on canvas was seen as a reactionary political statement—whereas in the 1950s oil and canvas has signified freedom, individuality, and existentialism. This dynamic was at the root of the great acceleration, in the 1960s and '70s, of the project of sculpturizing the painting, of asserting it as an object in real space rather than as a window into illusionistic space. Three-dimensional objects were added to canvases to link the representational surface to sculptural presence. Shaped canvases were similarly motivated. Explorations of ways to combine colors without producing a figure-ground relationship were another aspect of the effort to produce objects that, while recognizably paintings, were not compromised by suggestions of representation. The content inherent in the media and genres had attained political and cultural significance that asserted itself alongside the significance of the art objects themselves.

History can provide countless examples of this type of content, not least the distinction between popular and elitist media (in ancient Greece, for example, the vase painting versus the sculpture) and that between male and female media (for example, in neolithic societies which restricted pottery-making and basket-making, that is, vessel-making in general, to women's groups).

4. **Content arising from the material of which the artwork is made.** Within the category of sculpture in the 1960s and '70s, an artist working marble representationally was at one level making a statement opposed to that of the artist working with industrial I-beams or fire. Traditional art materials, industrial materials, esoteric high-tech materials, absurdist materials (like Ed Ruscha's chocolate), neoprimitive materials (like Eric Orr's bone and blood), pantheistic materials (Klein's fire, and so on), deceptive self-disguising materials (plastic that looks like plaster, wood prepared to look like stone)—all these decisions by the

artist carry content quite as much as form. They are judgment pronouncements that the art viewer picks up automatically without necessarily even thinking of them as content. They are statements of affiliation to, or alienation from, certain areas of cultural tradition; as, say, the use of industrial I-beams represents a celebration, or at least an acceptance, of urban industrial culture, while the use of marble or ceramic suggests nostalgia for the pre-Industrial Revolution world.

5. **Content arising from the scale of the artwork.** The New Kingdom Egyptian custom of sculpting pharaohs and their consorts much larger than life (as at Abu-Simbel) is an obvious assertion of political content, a portrayal of the hereditary monarchy and its representatives as awesomely given, like those parts of nature—sea, sky, desert, mountain—beside which ordinary human power and stature seem trivial. Such channels of content are not objective and absolute but culturally shifting: it is possible to conceive a society that would associate unusual smallness with special power or efficacy. In the Roman empire an emperor was sculpted during his lifetime about life-size; after death and deification, about twice life-size. Obviously, decisions of scale have formal significance; their contentual significances should be equally obvious. John Berger, among others, has pointed out that the portability of the easel painting was a signifier of private property. The increased scale of paintings from Barnett Newman onward suggests a more public arena—a society dominated by large institutions rather than by private individuals. The huge scale of many paintings today functions in part as a denial of transience through an implied reconstitution of the architectural support. Scale always has content, yet we read it so quickly that we hardly notice.

6. **Content arising from the temporal duration of the artwork.** The Platonist view that underlies the masterpiece tradition was stated by the Roman poet Seneca: "Vita brevis est, ars longa": life is short, art long. The artist's work, that is, was expected to outlive him or her. This hope went back at least to Sappho (6th century BC), who said that her poems would bring her immortality. The time-reality in which the artwork lived was not precisely historical time: its proper time dimension was a posterity conceived as a mingling of historical time and eternity—the artwork would survive through historical time *forever,* like Sappho's undying roses. With it something of the artist's Soul (its trace at least) also became immortal. In terms of Greek philosophy, the artwork has crossed a metaphysical boundary like that at the level of the moon, below which things die, above which, not. Great art, in other words, was regarded as having captured something of deity—as Quintilian said of Pheidias' Zeus. That divine spark inside

the artwork is its immortal Soul, which enables it, like the magical ritual, to penetrate through to higher metaphysical realms and to act as a channel to conduct higher powers downward while yet keeping them pure. We are all familiar with this view. Even in comedies, artists seek immortality. One silly poet of the Roman Empire is survived only by a scrap of verse saying that his oeuvre would outlast the ages.

This view of artworks goes back to times when they were sanctified objects made for use in rituals. It is primitive magic plain and simple, which ritually abolishes historical time. It typified Egyptian tomb art, which portrayed the places and things of eternity and was itself magically equivalent to them; it goes back probably to those Magdalenian paintings in the distant depths of caves, beyond the reach of the changes of night and day. Yet despite the extreme primitiveness of its beginnings, this theory of art came into Romantic Europe whole, and has survived to the present day. Goethe quite as much as Propertius—and Dylan Thomas as much as Goethe—expected to be singing his poems in a chariot driven by the Muses toward Heaven.

Works with exaggeratedly durable materials—such as the granite in which the Egyptians carved pharaohs—participate in this Platonic daydream of transcending the web of cause and effect here below. The idea, of course, is integral to the formalist Modern tradition, which is throughout solidly founded on primitive thoughts and intentions. It is why the artwork is held to have no relation to socio-economic affairs: it has transcended conditionality and, by capturing a spark of the divine, has become an ultimate. Signs of this metaphysic virtually ooze from the works made on its assumption, which can be detected not only by the durability of their materials but also by the pomposity that surrounds their aesthetic displays.

Just as clearly, an opposite metaphysic is asserted by works made in deliberately ephemeral modes or materials—a metaphysic affirming flux and process and the changing sense of selfhood. The obsessive expectation of posterity is linked with the belief in Soul and constitutes, in effect, a claim that one *has* a Soul. Works affirming flux involve the opposite assumption, that the self is a transient situation arising from the web of conditions and subject to its changes.

7. **Content arising from the context of the work.** When the work leaves the artist's studio, what route does it take into what part of the world? This

decision always has political content. Mail Art and other strategies to bypass the channels of commodification are expressions of resistance to the processes of commodity fetishism and are gestures toward the abandonment of exchange value and the regaining of use value. Other kinds of content cling to specific contextual situations. The release of a commodifiable aesthetic object into the marketing network often carries with it an opposite burden of content. It wants to be bought, and like anything that wants to be bought its attempts to ingratiate itself with prospective buyers are obvious, no matter that it may have been made by a monument of integrity such as Jackson Pollock. These are things that one must cock one's head slightly differently to see—and then at once they become obvious. All art is site-specific to that degree. Declaredly site-specific art involves selection of context as a major contentual statement: Is the work protected apart in a distant fenced compound of the New Mexico desert? Or is it thrown down in one section or another of an urban downtown? The contentual aspects of such decisions are as important as their formal aspects are.

8. **Content arising from the work's relationship with art history.** When the historicist drive is greatly exacerbated, as at the height of the Greenberg era, there is also a mythic-millennialist content which carries with it a weight of German metaphysics and residual Neo-Platonic spirituality. The myth of the evolution toward the innocent Eye suggests a drive toward the paradise at the End of History. The opposite of this complete affirmation of art history as a cosmic-spiritual directionality is an iconoclastic approach, sometimes expressed in deliberate primitivism. Yet in a sense this type of movement is an attempt to roll back the tradition of vision to the earlier phase of innocence, the paradise *before* history. These two movements, though opposite, complement one another.

The most common mode of content arising from the work's relationship to art history is in the use of allusions and quotations to assert a special relationship with some other work or tradition of works. James McNeill Whistler's introductions of references to Japanese painting and the Cubist references to African art are examples of such content, commenting, in both cases, on the closedness of the Western tradition and suggesting alternative aesthetic codes beyond it. Lately, the most common type of allusion has been to earlier works in one's own tradition. This level of content is so important to our present moment that I will discuss it in detail later.

9. **Content that accrues to the work as it progressively reveals its destiny through persisting in time.** I mean here much what Walter Benjamin meant when he said that a man who died at age 30 would forever after be regarded as a man who, at whatever stage of his life, *would* die at age 30. Whatever occurs to a work as its history unfolds becomes part of the experience of the work, and part of its meaning, for later generations. Duchamp added content to the *Mona Lisa;* Tony Shafrazi to *Guernica,* and what's-his-name to Michelangelo's Saint Peter's *Pieta.* The fact that Greenberg used Pollock's works as proofs of the idea of contentless painting is now part of the content of those paintings.

10. **Content arising from participation in a specific iconographic tradition.** Iconography is a conventional mode of representing without the supposition that natural resemblance is involved. Thus to Christians blue may be felt as Mary's color without a suggestion that it *looks like* Mary. Through iconographic conventions, identifications and comments are made through conventional signals. A Christian, for example, sees not a human woman talking to a birdwinged man, but the Annunciation. To a Hindu a crowned man on a bird is Vishnu and Garuda, with all the myths and feelings associated with them called instantly into play. At less conscious levels are iconographic messages in movies, from the white and black hats in early Westerns to, say, clothing semiotics in *Scarface.* Context signals us toward one response or another: for example, the ringing telephone in a love film may signal an assignation, while in a gangster film a contract for assassination.

Whether some widely-distributed iconographic conventions are based on innate psychological foundations, such as Jungian archetypes, is an unanswerable question, but it is clear that inherited conventions of this type saturate our responses and are effective in a hidden way in many artworks. One critical approach to 20th-century art that has been very little used, yet is remarkably fruitful, is to subject it to interpretation in terms of the iconographic stream that goes back in both East and West, to the ancient Near East and beyond. Willem de Kooning's "Women," for example, may profitably be compared with goddess-representations from Hindu Kali to Egyptian Isis to the leopard goddess of Catal Huvuk.

11. **Content arising directly from the formal properties of the work.** The formalist idea that abstract art lacks content is rightly seen today as

archaic. It seems the associative and conceptualizing activities of the human mind go on constantly and transpire in an instant. Thus we see everything within some frame of meaning. If perceptions truly had no content whatsoever they would be blank moments in consciousness and would leave no trace in memory. At one level, formal configurations function as ontological propositions. Merely by shaping energy one models the real; every grasping or shaping is a rhetorical persuasion for a view of reality. Critics commonly have asserted that music has no content. But, for example, Beethoven is widely experienced as presenting a view of reality as stormy, turbulent, and full of passionate striving, while Bach presents it as serene, cool hyper-realms of sensuous mathematical order. A Pollock drip painting asserts flux and indefiniteness of identity as qualities that can be found in the world. This tautological interface between form and content is not a mystical attempt to unify opposites. It simply means that a work *demonstrates* a type of reality by embodying it. Thus abstract art, far from being non-representational, is, in effect, a representation of concepts; it is based on a process like that of metaphor, and overlaps somewhat with both iconography and representation.

This level of content is involved in value judgments, since it relates especially closely to the content of visual ideology (though visual ideology arises from all levels of content at once); hence, it confuses aesthetic issues somewhat. The assertion by Althussierian critics that aesthetic feeling is merely and exclusively a response to visual ideology is based on the Lacanian model of how the self constitutes itself from the surrounding cultural codes and then, looking at these codes again, seems to recognize itself in them. Whether a purely aesthetic level of response can ever be isolated from the encroachment of this process is a major question in art today.

12. **Content arising from attitudinal gestures (wit, irony, parody, and so on) that may appear as qualifiers of any of the categories already mentioned.** This level of content usually involves a judgment about the artist's intentions. The desire to persuade, for example, is a form of intentionality that saturates some works and involves itself in all their effects John Keats referred to such a situation when he wrote, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us." Our word "propaganda" means much the same. In irony, wit, and so on, some level of content is presented by the artist with indications that his or her attitude toward it is not direct and asseverative but indirect and perverse. The process is complex. The viewer's mind compares the

statement received with another hypothetical statement which the mind constructs as representing the normal or direct version, and by contrast with which the abnormal and indirect approach can be perceived and measured Thus ironic indirection, entering into any other category of content, criticizes that content at the same time it states it, and alters the charge of meaning.

13. **Content rooted in biological or physiological responses, or in cognitive awareness of them.** Various claims have been made about types of communication that operate on a purely physiological level. (In fact, formalism, with its "purely optical" trend, was a claim of this type, while with its "faculty of taste" it introduced a supernatural ally to the optic nerve.) Sebastiano Timpanaro and others have suggested that some types of subject matter, such as sex and death, appeal to us because we know that we are organisms subject to death and involved in sexual reproduction; these responses, then, are prior to socio-economic acculturation. Contentual readings that may be closer to pure physiological responses would include the stirring of the genitals in response to pictures of sexual subjects, the phenomenon of fainting at the sight of blood, or of becoming nauseous from viewing gory pictures; and so on. This is the level of content that is often denounced as "sensationalism"—sex and violence—with the denunciation presumably based on a sense of how easy it is to construct images that will elicit such responses. Some psychological research has suggested innate responses to colors, blue for example (perhaps contrary to popular notions) arousing feelings of aggression and pink of peacefulness. (There is an odd parody here of what the formalists sometimes called the "feeling" of color.)

Perhaps the psychoanalytic content associated with the theories of D.W. Winnicott belongs in this category, on the grounds that it arises from memories of primordial phases in the development of the organism. In relation to painting, Winnicott's work suggests (not for the first time) an equation between the figure-ground relationship on the one hand and the ego-world relationship on the other. Work that emphasizes the ground, or an ambiguous condition in which figure is almost completely merged into ground, expresses the ego's desire to dissolve itself into a more generalized type of being, on the remembered model of the infant's sleep on its mother's breast. Work that emphasizes figure, or clear separation of figure and ground, expresses a sense of egoclarity, and a fear of ego-loss or of the loss of the clear boundaries between ego and world. (In more traditional terms, these are, respectively, the Dionysian and the Apollonian.) All

artworks, I think (perhaps all human actions of any type), express an attitude on this question, no matter what else they express. In some cases this question is brought into the foreground as a primary artistic content; Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and others have all portrayed the moment when ego begins to differentiate itself for the dual-unity (as Geza Roheim called it) with the mother's body. These artists saw in their own work a metaphysical moment that is a correlate of this psychoanalytic moment: the subject of "Creation," "Beginning," "Day One," "The Deep," and so on—the first emergence of differentiated things from the primal abyss of potentiality (compare Winnicott's term "potential space," which also correlates metaphysically with prime matter). Seen in these metaphysical terms this content can also be placed in the category of content arising from the formal properties of the work by a process like that of metaphor.

This list of thirteen categories is like a series of sample sightings of some great beast (Meaning) whose behavior is too complex to be fully formulated. As long as we chose to look for different ways to sort these things out we would find them. The categories I have presented overlap and interpenetrate at various places. (It would be foolish to expect a crisp set of categories from an activity of mammals.) Furthermore, as long as we choose to look for more ways in which the mind reads meaning out of an artwork, we would find them, too. Each possible network of relations between categories is itself another means of conveying a precise, if complex, content, and the possible networks and meta-networks of relations among the thirteen listed above proceed toward infinity.

The relation between content arising from representation and content arising from formal properties is a prominent example of this type of interaction. To show Wellington at Waterloo with Goyaesque grotesquerie, or with expressionistically fraying edges denying the integrity of ego, would add to the subject matter a thematic content involving denial of heroic integrity, or some such. Similarly, grandiosity of scale can conflict with triviality of subject matter, as in much Pop art. Indeed, conflicts between all levels can occur, and in infinite regresses of complexity which cannot be individually defined here. A work *that features* contradictions among its levels of content thereby gains yet another level involving concepts like paradox, inner struggle, tension, and negation of meaning-processes. On the other hand, works that exhibit a high degree of harmony or mutual confirmation among the various levels of content tacitly model the real as integrated, whole, and rich in meaning, somewhat in the manner of

the traditional masterpiece.

Not all works, of course, have all levels of content. Abstract art, for example, has eliminated naive realist representationalism. The number of levels that are in fact discernibly present (or absent) provides us with yet another level of content. Works in both the Minimalist and the Sublime directions, for example, exhibit an attempt to eliminate content or at least to reduce the number of contentual levels present in the work. This attempt in itself declares or acts out a new level of content; no work ever attains the zero degree of content, since the concept of a zero-degree of content is itself a content. In combination with other levels (primarily verbal supplements by the artist) this content may express the Minimalist ethic, or the Sublimist, or an impersonalist ethic, as in much International-style architecture. In 20th-century painting this anti-contentual content has been of enormous importance. From Malevich to Klein to Newman, attempts were made to represent concepts like void, emptiness, prime matter, and the absolute by plastic analogues of the characteristics of solitary grandeur, nondifferentiation, and potentiality. In contrast, works of the traditional masterpiece type—from the Sistine ceiling to *Guernica*—tend to articulate as many levels of content as possible in their portrayal of a full-bodied sense of rich, meaningful involvement in life.

This list of contents that arise among categories could be extended indefinitely. What is essential is that we begin to appreciate the complexity of what we do when we relate to an artwork. Far from being a "purely optical" and unmediated reflex, the art event is an infinitely complex semiotic Bead Game involving many different levels and directions of meaning, and infinite regresses of relations among them. Let's forget for a moment the Eye of the Soul and think of the marvelous mammalian brain which instantly reads out these many different codes, keeps them separate while balancing and relating them, and produces a sense of the work in which all these factors are represented, however transformed through interplay with the particular receiving sensibility. Far from a simplistic philistinism, content is a complex and demanding event without which no artwork could transpire. It demands our attention since without awareness of these distinctions and levels we do not really know what has happened already in art, and what is happening now for the first time.