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David Reed

QUESTIONS FOR ARTHUR

Sometimes when viewing art with someone else, I find that the art can seem different because of the way my companion sees it. It is as if I can see through his or her eyes, instead of mine. This is one reason why I enjoy going to museums with friends so much.

I bring this up, Arthur, because you are my favorite friend to look at art with. *I love the way the art looks back when I am looking with you.* The first time we saw art together was at the Metropolitan Museum. We had seen another show and then went to look at baroque Italian and Northern paintings in the permanent collection. I especially remember the new way that I saw a painting by Rubens—a self-portrait with his wife. I was struck by how much Rubens seemed to enjoy life and I asked you why his life was not the model rather than one of romantic suffering. Following is what you wrote for the *Nation* a few weeks later in a review of a show by John Singer Sargent.

Visiting the Galleries of Baroque painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art one afternoon, some friends and I paused before Rubens's portrait of himself with his family, and reminded one another what a remarkable man he was. A painter of stupefying energy and force, he ran a workshop, listened to music as he painted, did the classical scholarship for cycles of paintings that required erudite references, conversed easily in six languages and discharged ambassadorial missions of great delicacy—his second wife, Helen Fourment, was delivered of his last child nine months after his death. One of my companions,

the painter David Reed, said, meditatively, that most artists he knows strive to emulate Van Gogh: "Maybe we ought to try to be like Rubens instead."¹

I was amazed by how open you were while looking that day, as you tried to figure out what you were seeing visually, rather than applying any theories to the work (even your own). Do you know what a remarkable, even unheard of quality this is for someone interested in art?

I first heard about your writing (*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 1982) from the poet, Annie Lauterbach. So I went to a talk, "The End of Art," that you gave in the library at the Studio School in the early 1980s. When I first heard your argument I almost mistook it for an extension of the death of painting arguments that I had been hearing the whole time that I had been in New York. But towards the end of the talk, I slowly realized that instead you might be giving me freedom (your focus was on the human interaction with art rather than history), but I wasn't sure. I was so used to being told by art writers that I could not do what I wanted to do; it took me a while to read your books and to figure out a bit about what you were saying. How often was your argument on the end of art misunderstood as the death of art? Is it still misunderstood?

The second time you asked me to see art with you, we went to a show of contemporary German painting at the Guggenheim Museum. Again, we had a great time looking, even though we did not like the show very much. A few weeks later I found myself again quoted in the *Nation* in the last paragraph of your review! Do you remember what you wrote?

There is indeed, not a redeeming painting in the show. I went twice, the second time with the painter David Reed, a gifted and generous artist, and a wonderful looker at pictures. We started out as we always do when we see art together, trying to talk some of the life into Sigmar Polke that we have on other occasions not had to work for at all in looking at other works. But it was no use. We walked faster and faster down the ramps, repelled by the arrogance and emptiness, the crudeness and shrillness, the crowing self-congratulations of painter after painter. I remembered as possibly interesting two works by Christa Näher which, subdued in tone, seemed proportional to their content and worth looking at a second time. My companion convinced me otherwise, and we left the Guggenheim in gloom. David brightened at the idea of going down to see, once again before the great show of Siennese art closed at the Met, the Master of the Osservanza. Cheered by the thought of good art, we went our separate ways. Whatever benefit it was that Thomas Krens believed he might have been conferring upon his institution and the city, he was wrong. My colleague Michael Brensen was charitable in calling this a *near* disaster.²

When I read what you had written, all I could imagine was Thomas Krens, the Director of the Guggenheim, pounding on his desk saying, "There's a painter who will never show in my museum!" Arthur, when I asked you about this once you seemed genuinely puzzled.

I bring this up to describe your fearlessness. You follow your thinking wherever it leads. Sometimes I've been drawn along into this brave territory. I like to think of myself, possibly because of you, as a painter with problems (problems being a good thing for painters to have), and you have helped me embrace these problems and possess them. We'll see if I can make some more problems in this conversation.

From what I understand of your interests in philosophy, your perspective is rooted in linguistic philosophy and the philosophy of verificationism (logical positivism). Did this intellectual background make you wary of large, overarching systems? Do you view some theories of art, such as Greenberg's theories of Modernism, with wariness because of this?

When you started writing about art, did you start out wanting a viewpoint that could include so much and that consequently argued for artistic freedom? Where does this openness come from?

Could you tell me more about your experience at the Artist's Club on 8th Street when you gave your lecture "The Artworld" in 1964? You've told me that you went with the painter John Ferren. How did you know him? Did he invite you to speak? The artists who came that night must have hated your theory, what was later called the "institutional theory of art." How did they react to your talk? And you've told me a little about visiting Robert Motherwell's studio. How did this come about? Was he at the Artist's Club that evening?

You once wrote about seeing a reproduction of Picasso's blue period masterpiece, *La Vie*, while still a soldier. What prompted you to see it in the Cleveland museum? Can you tell us more about this experience?

How did it come about that you became the art critic for the *Nation*?

The kind of painting that interests me began January 29, 1948. That was Barnett Newman's forty-third birthday and the day he painted "One-ment I"—a breakthrough. Before this painting Newman said that he had painted pictures, illustrations; now he made paintings. He said that in the earlier paintings the stripe (later called a "zip") was in a space, in "One-ment I" the "zip" created the space around it. Somehow while making this painting he had radically connected his ideas to the process and physicality of painting until they became one. This new possibility that Newman had discovered in painting is what interests me; it is what made me want to become a painter. How do you understand this particular conversion in Newman's work?

In a review you wrote that the abstract expressionists did minor art before their breakthroughs. What were their breakthroughs about? How could several artists have reached breakthroughs at a similar time?

You've written about seeing Pop Art for the first time in reproduction while you were in Paris. Did seeing the art in another medium and in a foreign country make a difference in your understanding of Pop?

I love the distinction you make in your essay—about Mapplethorpe and Serrano's use of beauty. You say that they use beauty as something separate from the good and the moral. I like the idea of this break between the good or pleasurable and beauty. It's a surprising thought. I remember a panel you were on at the New Museum and how people on the panel were very upset by this separation when you suggested it. Do you find this a common reaction?

On the panel you also argued that it was the feeling of life from the object that constitutes pleasure and you asked whether the feeling of life is always pleasurable. You argued that instead it is better not to make pleasure central to theories of art: Lots of things give us pleasure, not just art. I remember your wonderful example: dogs.

You ended your review of the recent Rothko show at the Whitney with this paragraph: "The concept of beauty plays a very small role in my columns here at the *Nation*, and for good reason: It plays no large role in much of the contemporary art that interests me. It is, however, the meaning of Rothko's works."³ First, it's surprising to read that you think beauty plays a small role in contemporary art. Could you explain this?

I was also moved by Rothko's show at the Whitney. In your review you wrote about seeing clouds that looked like a Rothko, and the misconceptions that such comparisons might promote. When I lived in the desert in the Southwest I painted clouds and sunsets partly in an attempt to understand the paintings of the abstract expressionists. I found to my surprise that I wasn't interested in the beauty of the light but instead in a sense of the uncanny. I was interested in the moment when the sun had just set, when it wasn't there, was missing, but one could still see the light. The importance of the missing is a key element in Rothko's paintings and connects somehow to their sense of beauty. What is this connection? How might absence or lack of the tangible engender beauty?

You write about this in another essay "Beauty and Morality" in the book, *Uncontrollable Beauty*. How does the connection to death, and to loss while living, relate to beauty?

What are the implications of posthistorical art for museums? You discuss these questions in the last chapter of your book "After the End of Art." Does the art that comes after "the end of art" need to be presented in another way? I love your idea of a museum of monochrome art in which the paintings could seem very similar but have very different meanings.

Modernist art is often installed chronologically. Perhaps posthistorical art should not be installed in this way. Do you have any suggestions? You know, for example, how I am fascinated by how a painting in a bedroom looked different when seen in such an intimate setting. Might it be more interesting, for example, to show paintings in the artificial bedrooms of a furniture store than in a traditional museum?

A lot of the problems in talking about painting come from limited definitions of what painting is. I often look for a larger definition. Painting certainly cannot be defined by its literal materials. Have you thought about an expanded definition of painting? In your essay "About Beauty and the Intractable Avant-Garde," I like your term "photographist" instead of photographer for an artist like Cindy Sherman. Could one invent a term like this for some painters? Perhaps "paintist" would be the term. Like a photographist, a paintist would use the medium of painting for various extra-painterly ends. The work of a paintist could be called "paintistry." As beauty is irrelevant to a photographist it would also be irrelevant to a paintist. Are some of the painters that you have written about really paintists?

How does the end of art affect my practice? It gives me courage to experiment, but what are the other effects?

I am an artist who likes art. I enjoy looking at lots of different kinds of art and trying to understand. A posthistorical time is a good time for artists like me. Do you also really love art? Sometimes I think that you have invented the posthistorical position to open up possibilities for artistic freedom, plurality. This is something an art lover like yourself must enjoy.

DAVID REED

REEDSTUDIO
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NOTES

1. Arthur C. Danto, "John Singer Sargent," in *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 50.

2. Arthur C. Danto "Refigured Painting: The German Image 1960–88," *Nation* (April 17, 1989): 533–34.

3. Arthur C. Danto, "Rothko's Material Beauty," *Nation* (Dec. 21, 1998): 31.

REPLY TO DAVID REED

I was so remote from art-world polemics in 1984, when I wrote my essay on the end of art, that I was simply unfamiliar with the thesis with which David Reed initially confused it—the death of painting—when he attended a lecture I gave on my actual thesis at the Studio School. The confusion was understandable enough, since mine was the target essay in a book titled *The Death of Art*, which a number of writers had been invited to comment on. The death of painting meant, in the writings of those who believed in it, long life to some other medium—photography perhaps. But what would one propose long life to if the thesis were the death of art in general? Art is dead—long live *what*? I never thought that “the end” meant death, and I had no special axe to grind on the tyranny of paint. Mine was a thesis about history—the history of art, narratively conceived, which had, I thought, come to an end the way a story comes to an end. There would go on being art, but its story was over with. The history of art had ended—long live the posthistorical condition into which we had entered! That was my message, more or less.

The death of painting was by and large a politically driven position, with a history that went back at least to the Russian Revolution, when the artists' union actually voted that easel painting was no longer suitable for a supposedly classless society. This must have been received by advanced Soviet artists as a liberating plebiscite. I cite in evidence the palpable excitement in Llyuba Popova's thrilling stage set for Meyerhold's 1920 production of *The Magnificent Cuckold*. It was a kind of scaffolding made to order for biomechanical actors to climb up, slide down, and tumble across, wearing the marvelous production clothing Popova also designed. She had been an avant-gardist who went dutifully from Cubism to Futurism to Cubo-Futurism through a series of dry pictorial exercises, until the slogan “Art into Life” released the powers of her imagination. The easel painting was independently stigmatized by the Mexican muralists, who painted on walls the revolutionary lessons they felt it was important for their largely

illiterate viewers to understand. They held no brief against painting, but condemned art as private property.

It is less easy to understand how this radical posture should have surfaced in the 1980s, despite the actual resurgence of what was called neo-expressionist painting, which caused many in the art world to feel that the good times were back. It was a curious moment, in which, as I wrote in a 2003 symposium for *ARTFORUM*, while the “art world [was] swimming in pigment, some theorists standing on the shore believed they were witnessing the death throes of a drowning art.”¹ What could they have been thinking of? It was a pastiche of critico-political injunctions—that ours was an age of mechanical reproduction; that the much cherished “artist's touch and artist's eye” were passé; that painting lent itself to the machismo of Abstract Expressionism, thus alienating women; that the museum, which the economics of painting presupposed, was a dying institution; and that photography was the defining art of our time. Douglas Crimp, one of the chief death-of-painting theorists wrote “It is but a matter of time before painting will be understood as the ‘pure idiocy’ that it is.”²

The end-of-art thesis was in no obvious sense an ideological position at all. If anything, it entailed the *end* of artistic ideology. There were to be no more of the “You can't do that any more!” sorts of injunctions that had played so central a role in late Modernism. It had been independently advanced by the German art historian Hans Belting, by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, and by me, as a conceptual assessment of our historical moment. Belting, struck by the extreme heterogeneity of the art that was being made, saw no way in which a coherent narrative could any longer be written, and wondered if art history, accordingly, could any longer be practiced. My own view was that since it was now clear anything could be a work of art, one could never be certain any longer whether one was in the presence of art. The accepted view was that there was always a correct direction that would reveal itself as art wormed its historical way into the future, and that it, and only it, was now the historically correct way to make art. I felt that Modernism was a search for the true definition of art, but that I had a pretty good idea of what a definition of art looked like—a work of art is an embodied meaning. That definition had to be true of art everywhere and always—so that the definition, having to be compatible with everything, could not rule out anything. Enthusiasts had identified art with one or another of its nonessential properties, and hectored others into dismissing anything that lacked it as not—as not really—art. I felt that we had entered a period of radical pluralism, which in the freedom that went with it, was very like the end of history that Marx and Engels had written of. Though I was not yet an art critic when “The End of Art” was published, I knew, intuitively, that I would not be the kind of critic that would tell artists what

they must and must not do. With the end of art, I felt, artists were liberated from the tyranny of art history.

And that is what David Reed grasped when he listened to one or another version of what became "The End of Art." He had run the gauntlet of demanding critics who forbade abstraction, or forbade the figure, or insisted on the grid, or stained canvas, which must have been hell for artists who were searching for their own meaning. And here was a philosopher of art who declared a moratorium, grounded in the historical end of artistic ideology, on that whole practice. That was the message I felt was entailed by my speculative conceptual history of art. Everything was permitted. The idea of pluralism, on the other hand, had a hard time establishing itself. Art-world intellectuals wanted orthodoxies and interdictions, wanted to direct the making of art. But I felt that *that* went counter to the history of art as it had unfolded in our time. Everyone was still anxiously watching for the "next big thing." And I was the prophet of the teaching that the age of next things was over.

In the 1950s, the options for ideological confrontations were more or less two—a painter could be abstract or figural. In the autobiography that is part of this volume, I write about having seen a reproduction in *ARTnews* in 1962 of Roy Lichtenstein's *The Kiss*, which showed what looked like a panel from an adventure comic strip like *Terry and the Pirates*, in which a pilot and a girl are kissing. I was living in France, and had gone to the American Library on a trip to Paris to check out what was happening in the galleries back home. The shock of seeing that work in that venue was like reading that St. John the Divine—the Episcopal cathedral in New York—had appointed a horse as deacon. I use the analogy deliberately, to convey the sense of sacrilege that that painting in that magazine created in my mind.

In 1959, the Museum of Modern Art had put on a show called *New Images of Man*. The almost ecclesiastical invective with which that show was reviewed by apostles of abstraction demonstrates that the New York art world at that time was deeply sectarian, like Europe in the sixteenth century. When MoMA thought there might still be some energy left in doing "the figure," it had in mind Giacometti, Bacon, Golub, and Pollock, who had vehemently attacked de Kooning for his *Women*, shown in 1953 at the Sidney Janis Gallery. But nobody could have imagined Pop in 1959! Everyone knew *Terry and the Pirates*. What nobody could imagine was that a panel from that strip could in fact be art. Or that an artwork could be made by greatly enlarging one of Milton Caniff's distinctive panels. Andy Warhol had done exactly that in his first serious exhibition which was up for exactly two weeks in April, 1961, in New York. It was made up of enlarged panels of comic strips, like *Superman* and *Popeye* and *The Little King*, together with paintings, enlarged on the same scale, of coarse

black-and-white images from advertisements in the back pages of blue-collar magazines. These were installed in the windows of Bonwit Teller on Fifth Avenue, interspersed with mannequins wearing fluttery garments and wide-brimmed sun-hats for shore wear. I wonder how many who passed those windows thought they were looking at art? They thought they were looking at womens' wear, with some vernacular images taken from the culture by some imaginative window-dresser, in all likelihood gay.

MoMA wanted to show that it was possible to do the figure and still be contemporary. They were right. But no one at MoMA would have had an idea of Pop in 1959. No one would have thought, since the comics are figurative, why not show some paintings by Chick Young of Blondie and Dagwood? Even when Kurt Varnedoe put comics in his *High and Low* show in the 1980s, there was an uproar from the critics, who felt the temple had been desecrated. It took a while for me to digest *The Kiss*, but within months my feeling was that if *it* was possible as art, everything was now possible as art, and the difference between abstraction and the figure was like the difference between the American and the National Leagues in baseball. All the high virtues vehemently contested in art by Dada were suddenly out the window. The art history of the 1960s consisted in filling out some of the possibilities Pop opened up. But the floodgates were now open. An ad for some remedy for baldness could be art. A row of firebricks could be art. A trench dug in the ground in Skowhegen could be art. What could not be art? It became transparent sometime in the 1970s that the answer was: Nothing.

David asks where my openness comes from, and people often raise that question. I spent most of my life as an academic, and academics are not legendarily open. It certainly does not come from a theory, for in 1962, I really had no theory of art, and certainly no theory of pluralism. As I discuss in my autobiography, I did not welcome Roy Lichtenstein's painting *The Kiss* with open arms when I saw it reproduced in *ARTnews*. I was stunned by it. But neither in the end did I say well, there is that kind of art too. I am not a pluralist by nature, the way I think Richard Rorty was. I felt that the appearance of *The Kiss* was a communication from history, a sign that some deep change had occurred, that there was something cataclysmic about to happen, as indeed there was. It was as if social perturbations began with art, and then one thing after another began to change as well—until everything exploded in 1968. I knew one could only go forward. In some way, it has since occurred to me, it might have begun with the revolution in philosophy that I had found so exciting. I felt, when I later encountered the writing of Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s, that it was an old story, and I think most philosophers who had lived through the first heady years of the analytical movement felt the same. We were putting things back together when he was inviting us to deconstruct.

I share David Reed's pleasure in seeing art in one another's company. Our first such experience was standing in a largely empty gallery at the Metropolitan Museum, discussing Guercino's *The Capture of Samson*, in which the thrashing subject is no longer able to fight off even a woman, since Delilah binds his arms with impunity. We discussed it formally, wondering at the skill with which Guercino created a kind of whirlpool of action, and then we turned to the great Rubens family scene that David describes in his essay, where a very different sense of an artist's life is portrayed than would have been the commonplace view in the art world of our time. But I think we were both hasty in our negative response to the show of German figural artists at the Guggenheim which he also describes. I remember once hearing an irate and indignant Englishman complain to his wife about Turner at the Tate—"Whoever told him he could paint!" I think the Germans were really ahead of us. We were looking for the kind of virtuoso brushwork we knew from de Kooning or Kline, and what was there looked instead like merely bad painting—messy, crude, ugly. I think neither of us knew enough of the German scene to form an opinion of what figuration meant to German artists at that time. I have since written about Jorge Immendorf with an understanding I could not muster when we saw that show. I know that David is very sympathetic with the work of Sigmar Polke, as am I. Critics leap to judgment, and are almost always wrong when they are negative.

A good example is the reception of one of David Reed's most interesting pieces. It was based on the idea of what he termed "bedroom paintings"—paintings that people move into their bedrooms, where they can live with them in a more intimate way than if they hang in the living room over the fireplace. He connected that concept with a favorite movie—Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. He built an installation, consisting of a bed and a television set, and hung one of his paintings over the bed in Judy's hotel room. He then modified a clip from the scene in the bedroom in which Judy approaches Scottie, and spliced in a picture of that painting, to replace whatever piece of hotel art that hung over the bed in Hitchcock's original set. I discussed this installation in the essay I wrote for David's show at the Kolnische Kunstverein in 1995, as well as in the preface to my book, *After the End of Art*. I even put that scene on the book's jacket, with Kim Novak, as in the film, alongside—in full color—David's painting, #328. I remember how angry people were at David's installation. A critic I know, and mostly respect, said that Reed was making a shameless bid to be up-to-date by making an installation—that he should stick to what he knew, namely painting. But David was using the installation to make a point about painting, and what the place of a painting in the owner's household should be. It was, I felt and feel, a brilliant way of advancing a thesis about loving a painting. It was a visual metaphor worthy of one of the great Mannerists of sixteenth-century Ferrara.

I have the feeling, in a complicated art world, that critics have a great responsibility to get things right, to explain what an artist as thoughtful as David Reed is really doing with a work as unprecedented as one of his bedroom installations, full of allusions and references—a kind of cognitive frame for the picture over the bed. I am deeply suspicious of negative reviews—a classic case is Hilton Kramer's dismissal of Eva Hesse's *Metro-nomic Irregularity* as "secondhand"—an attempt to translate Pollock into three dimensions. In fairness, it would have been difficult to get at what Hesse was attempting, without actually sitting down and talking about things with her. This would probably have gone against Kramer's code as a critic, fraternizing with an artist, and using information other than what meets the critic's eye, which is all that should have been needed. My practice as a critic is very different. I believe the critic needs all the help he—or she—can get. As a philosopher, I know that some of the deepest information about works of art is in the nature of the case invisible. And in getting to know the artist, I usually enrich my experience and my writing deeply. As a philosopher, I took it for granted that when another philosopher wrote something that engaged me, I should start a correspondence, ask some questions, before writing anything about it. Why should one not do this with artists?

This has been the case, certainly, with David Reed. As I was writing this, he and I went together to work through an exhibition I had had great difficulty with—the paintings of the French romantic, Girodet—a student of Jacques-Louis David's. We walked through the show on a Monday, when the Met is closed, with a curator, Faith Pleasanton. It was the kind of museum experience that brings art to life, and makes me grateful to have such great artists as David Reed for friends. As for my vaunted openness, all I can say is that I try. I am not going to shift the blame to the artist and write a negative review unless I have gone as far as I can in getting to understand what I am looking at. Even then, I would probably just not write a review in preference to a negative one.

A.C.D.

NOTES

1. Arthur C. Danto, "The Mourning After—Panel Discussion," *ArtForum International* (March 2003): 208.

2. See Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *Art World Follies* 16 (Spring 1981): 69–86.