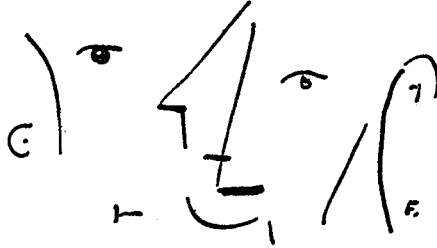


Action In and Out of Painting

GONE ARE THE DAYS when artists were urged to become either fellow travelers of the working class, navigators on the stream of consciousness or opticians in the laboratory of Gestalt psychologists. The *masses*, the *unconscious*, and *form*, worshipped in the pre-war era, are now fallen idols. Painters are committed to an unknown god, but they paint. There arose a new apostle: Harold Rosenberg proclaimed that the unknown god is the painter. A picture is to be recognized in the action of painting: Harold Rosenberg abolishes the distance between the artist and the world: "a painting . . . is the painter himself changed into a ghost inhabiting the art world."¹ Why not add: They are two in one flesh? Painting has become "a space in which to act." Is it because Rosenberg speaks on behalf of the artist that they are not two in one voice? "What goes on the canvas is an event." The canvas has become an arena in which the greens fight against the blues. Art for art's sake is immolated to art for the artist's sake: "The question of the driftwood is, who found it?" Harold Rosenberg claims that the question of identity is more important than the knowledge of whether a painting is good or bad."² The artist visited the wasteland and discovered the driftwood as the kings visited a manger and discovered the virgin's infant to be god; what an-



gel visited the loft that was turned into a studio populated with Rosenberg's "ghosts"?

"Painting that is an action is inseparable from the biography of the artist." This explains why, according to Rosenberg, "art comes back into painting by the way of psychology." He fortunately gives the assurance that this psychology "is the psychology of creation. Not that of the so-called psychological criticism that wants to 'read' a painting for clues to the artist's sexual preferences or debilities." I no more understand the "psychology of creation" than the biology of an incubus. A living creature, and by extension a man-made object, whether a bed or a painting, to be appreciated must be compared to other specimens of its kind. Conformation is a prerequisite of creation. To ascertain the degree to which a living creature or a man-made object conforms or not to a given type it ought to be studied morphologically; its relation to its maker, whether God or man, put in brackets. This is what Harold Rosenberg excludes. When

he says that "painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist" he means to detach painting from aesthetics. The danger is that the action painter who believes that he has been baptized in a Jordan of paint might be drowned in Rosenberg's Heraclitian river.

If the painting is inseparable from the action of the artist it would have to be treated as an event only, and share the fate of all events, which is to fade into the past and give way to new events. The trouble with Rosenberg's theory is not that it is false but that it is becoming true. Today the governments in the Western world view modern paintings as an occasion for a series of international celebrations, held in Venice, Pittsburgh or Sao Paolo, and intended to add prestige and value to this or that event-maker. This Rosenberg has vividly pointed out in a recent article.³ Because of the rapid succession of events the artists find themselves at the mercy of café society and the happenings of a giddy season which is what fashion opposes to world-shaking events. Instead of saying, as does Mary McCarthy in her criticism of action painting, that one cannot hang an event upon a wall,⁴ I would say, *why* hang an event upon a wall?

The doctrine of action painting, which enjoys such an astonishing success, has the merit of offering the artist an alternative to the depressing psychoanalytical diagnosis. Overnight, thanks to Harold Rosenberg, the artist found himself metamorphosed from a sinner into a hero. In Western society where heroes are unknown soldiers, unknown prisoners of concentration camps, what a relief it is to know

that there are still heroes that bear a name! For painters, who according to Rosenberg had been Marxist sympathizers, the doctrine of action has a romantic connotation with action, as understood in the Thirties by left wing intellectuals. It is as if, when viewed in terms of action, there appeared a vacancy in the City of Man which, at the suggestion of Rosenberg, was filled with the gestures of painters. Artists enjoy today the feeling that the only interesting events concern the relation of a blue to black. They have become heroes drunk with the blood of color. The division of labor between them is colorful: "What do you know about black?" says the Master of Ochre to the Master of Porphyry.

WHAT HAROLD ROSENBERG DID for painting Charles Olson did for poetry;⁵ like Rosenberg he speaks of action and process. Action in the new poetry is found in the relation of the breath to the line divided in syllables. It is as if the most breathtaking events depend on the rhetoric of empty gestures and breathless Marathon runners of phonetic particles. But process ought not to be viewed as pure movement. It is for the investigator, through process, to discover the pattern of an unsuspected order. Harold Rosenberg necessarily dismisses patterns when he excludes painting from the realm of aesthetics.

With action painting and poetry the artist ceases to be a maker and becomes an actor; the beholder is asked to admire a performance. When the emphasis is on the artist's role the tacit implication is that acting is more important than making beautiful things or expressing one's deepest feelings. Once

again our neighbor will be exposed to the danger of being condemned not for what he is but for the role he plays, for our judges will be Pharisees whom Jesus accused of caring for the outward appearances of the cup rather than for its inner cleanliness. Am I perhaps reading into Harold Rosenberg's texts ideas that are not his? Evidence to the contrary is provided by his article on another subject than art, his challenge of the Eichmann trial.

In the beginning of this undoubtedly brilliant essay the writer explains the compulsion to present Eichmann before the Israeli court to "the irresistible demand for a tragic retelling by multitudes inconceivably brought into psychic unity of an antique folk by an inconceivable blow, their not to be denied poetic passion to hear related and before the whole of humanity, the terrible fate of their stricken relatives and ancestors." The tragic character of a need to retell is, as Rosenberg most astutely points out, well perceived by Shakespeare when he makes his dying Hamlet say to Horatio "draw thy breath in pain to tell my story." Since Aristotle, poets and philosophers know that it is the function of tragedy, and of tragedy only, to retell a shocking story so that the soul of the spectator could be cleansed through catharsis. Unlike tragedy, justice does not cleanse but frees the spectator from any suspicion of guilt by imposing penalty upon another. In the Western world, whose most enlightened tradition is based on a respect for the individual, the accused is not condemned for murder unless his soul is stained with criminal intentions. The only authority competent to determine this intention is the tribunal. Because our sense of jus-

tice does not require that the accused cooperate with his judges, it is not necessary that he should confess his guilt. The judge is not a pastor preoccupied with the salvation of the soul of his lost sheep. Harold Rosenberg thinks otherwise and claims that once Eichmann's inner viciousness could not be satisfactorily demonstrated because the defendant clung with tenacity to his allegation that he had been but a cog in the Nazi machine, the Prosecutor should have requested the death penalty on the grounds that the defendant had assumed the role of the head of IV B4 of RSHA—the administrative section responsible for the extermination of the Jews.

Were this principle adopted by the Courts it would be sufficient for a totalitarian state to nominate certain men as heads of genocide departments to save the actual leaders from the danger of ever having to account for their crimes. It would also imply that any national or class enemy might eventually be condemned in the name of a partisan justice. *Vae Victis!* War would be confused with justice and man would sink again to the level of the Pharisees who condemned Mary Magdalen for the role she assumed in life without consideration of her as a human being.

I have introduced Rosenberg's article on the Eichmann trial to present his thinking. Whether he writes on justice or on art he implies a "cast." His lowliest cast consists of those who play vicious political roles, his princely cast is composed of artists who are beyond good and evil.

Rosenberg says that "the new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life," and that "an action is not a matter of

taste." If this is so, action painting cannot be, as he claims, a process of the personality of the artist. Process is elaborated when thinking is pursued for an investigation—otherwise the term becomes meaningless. Freed from the worries of making, both the pure artist and the pure scientist investigate unexplored aspects of a given field in the belief that they will discover order there where before there was only chaos. While the maker *forms*, the investigator, through process, *discovers* the pattern of an unsuspected order. What counts in an investigation is the discovery of a significant pattern, and what counts in art is the creation of variations

on a pattern. As for the critic his principle role is, on the one hand, to proclaim to the world the new discovery and to assess its aesthetic significance, and, on the other, to denounce frauds.

Footnotes

1. Harold Rosenberg's now famous article *The American Action Painters* first appeared in 1952 in *Art News*. It has been included in his book *The Tradition of the New*; see Evergreen Edition, Grove Press, New York, 1960, pp. 23-39. When not stated otherwise, all my quotations are from this article.
2. "Critic within the Act" in *Art News*, Oct. 1960.
3. *Art News*, Oct. 1961.
4. As quoted by Harold Rosenberg, *op cit*.
5. See *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, edited by Donald Allen; Grove Press, Inc., 1960, pp. 386-400.
6. See *Commentary*, 1961, pp. 360-381.

NICOLAS CALAS has written a book of surrealist essays, *Confound The Wise*. He has also published, in collaboration with Margaret Mead, *Primitive Heritage*. More recently, he has been writing a series of articles on vanguard painters that have appeared in various art magazines, especially *Art News*.

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