

merely wish to point out that this aspect now occupies a lower priority in the hierarchy of painterly concerns. The point of visual flatness has been adequately made. In the opposition of illusion and language, priorities have once again been reversed, for the time being, in favor of the linguistic rather than the illusionistic aspects of painting.

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Postmodernism: A New Language

AS WE LOOK BACK across the history of Western painting, we can see that most painters think of themselves as "realists," though their images may appear drastically different because they hold differing opinions about "what is real," or which aspects of reality are most important. Painters have spent the last six centuries developing, permuting, and reweaving the five major elements of illusion while they probed the aporetic connection between the real world outside the painting and the painting itself. Our concept of space changed as we began to concentrate on the connection between space and time; we measured distance in increments of time, and great distances in increments of how fast light could travel from one point to the other. These changes affected our painted images. Our ideas and images are changing once more as we now perceive space as a psychological entity ("I need my own space," or "give your children space to grow"). But the most significant change in art during these centuries may be another recent tendency to search for how the real world is to be "signified" in painting rather than how it is to be depicted illusionistically.

Painting, as it existed from Giotto through Barnett Newman, was considerably different from the practice of painting now. The discrepancy between the two may be profitably understood as a difference in attitude, an attitude that grows from a simple change in an equation. Renaissance art and modern art rested on a foundation of illusion. Modern art—particularly art since Manet—might be understood as concern with the *aporetic relationship* among three elements: (1) the world outside the painting, (2) the painted illusion of the objects and the space in this world, and (3) the manner in which this illusion came to be reconciled with the flat canvas. Modern painters came to consider the painting itself to be a part of that phe-

nomenological world that exists outside the painting. Here, once again, is the crux of Cézanne's pictorial problem: "finding a new solution that would reconcile his 'sensations' of depth in the three-dimensional space of external reality with an acute awareness of the two-dimensional limits of the painting surface" (Hunter and Jacobus 1976, 18).

Painting in the postmodernist period, however, may come to be perceived as linguistic rather than illusionistic; accordingly, the most interesting areas of investigation may now be the relationships among the reality of the canvas, the sign, and the reality of the sign. Because we live in a world full of pictures, says Carrier, we may have come to doubt the capacity of any pictorial image to define even the appearance of reality. The Cartesian self, "that observer who views the world as if it could be understood as a picture, as if its reality could be captured in a flat image, also seems a fiction" (Carrier 1985, 29). The new "linguistic" painting might be understood, in a similar equation, as the aporetic relationship among three new elements: (1) the world outside the painting, (2) the manner of signification of this world in the painting, and (3) the manner in which this signification might be reconciled with the flat surface of the painting (which, it must be remembered, still remains part of the outside world). Although only one of the three elements of the original equation has changed, the creation of new permutations necessarily changes the relationship of all three elements. Painters are beginning to explore the boundaries and limits of language, not just illusion, in order to create new images.

These new painters, conditioned by the printing process, the "flatbed" surface, are acutely interested in situations wherein the two parts of the sign—the signifier and the signified—are integrated. For them, the painting, like the spoken word, can function as both signifier and signified. Jasper Johns's flag paintings (see fig. 18.3) might serve as one of many transitions between the two styles of painting. Johns's painting is as "realistic" as he could make it. It "looks like" a real flag. Yet he relies upon none of the elements of the illusion: there is no unified light source; there is no shading of volume; there is no separation of planes; there is no linear, atmospheric, or color perspective. Still, his painting "looks like a flag."

It is a perfect reproduction of a flag. But we must remember that the flag is itself always a reproduction (if there can be a reproduction when there is no original); there exists no "original" flag,

though each reproduction maybe treated as if it were an original. Such a conspicuous image makes it difficult to read the painting as nothing but a painting in the sense that a modernist would expect. Is Johns's flag a painting, or another reproduction, or a reproduction of a reproduction? What, then, is a reproduction of Johns's painting? The flag is also a visual metonymy for the United States; it is America.¹ If the flag is such a metonymy, then is Johns's painting also a metonymy? The questions that Johns asks are related to painting as both illusion and language.

This new interest in art as language came about, Kristin Olive observes, when the structuralists, reasoning that a systematic approach to language was possible, took "linguistics as a model to lend logic and underlying structure" to their works. Later, the poststructuralists argued that systematic knowledge was impossible and used linguistic models to prove that structuralist texts undermined themselves. The poststructuralists turned fragmented concepts and quotations from these texts back on themselves in order to negate them, for "art no longer claims modernist logic, autonomy, purity, or unity". Postmodernist art relies instead on "outside references, quoted images, and disharmony of its parts": in short, multiplicity and fragmentation (Olive 1985, 82).

One might take David Salle's *Dual Aspect Picture* (fig. 20.1) as a typical postmodern image. His works feature numerous unrelated bits of information that suggest many meanings rather than a single correct meaning and focus on the reverberation of meaning among numerous bits, rather than the meanings between individual fragments (Olive 1985, 83). Salle mixes images from many sources. He avoids the modernist reverence for the unique and the original by painting copies and imitations, and he rejects modernist monolithic logic and unity in favor of the unexpected irrational qualities of contingency and disunity (Olive 1985, 85).

The viewer's response is, therefore, not determined by the artist because "no single interpretation can be devised" (Olive 1985, 83). Salle's strategy is analogous to hurling a bucket of rubber balls into a small room to ricochet off the walls and each other in a complex and unpredictable order and pattern: Salle purposely uses culturally

1. Metonymy is a figure of speech using the name of one thing for that of another that is associated with it or suggested by it, such as "the White House has decided," to mean "the president has decided."



20.1. David Salle. *Dual Aspect Picture*. 1986. Acrylic, oil/canvas; (156" × 117" [2]). Collection, Ludwig Museum, Cologne. Photo: Zindman/Fremont.

charged images and techniques to prolong the resonance of these colliding bits of information (Olive 1985, 84).²

The appearance of the human body in Salle's work "leads back to long-established dualities between soul and body, man and woman, first and third worlds" (Heartney 1988, 129). Such a renewed thrust toward dualism marks another important difference between modern and postmodernist art. One of the major attributes of modern art was its transcendental tendency, and the transcendental experience is a monistic experience of unity, of the "One." On the other hand, postmodernism's more intellectual interest in art as language tends to lead to binary oppositions, mirror categories—in short, dualism. Postmodernism's multiple views might be thought of in literary terms as more fragmented than the monolithic cause-and-effect cohesiveness of modern art.

Salle's "colliding bits of information" and the renewed interest in more dualistic concepts are compatible with the displacement of Newtonian and Einsteinian physics by quantum mechanics (particularly Heisenberg's uncertainty principle).³ Such interests may well have been influenced by the same factors in society that influenced the growth of influence for quantum mechanics.

As quantum mechanics begins to assume a higher priority in the late twentieth century, postmodernism also gains favor over modernist concerns. The relationship between the transcendental, cohesive, monolithic, rational image of modern art and the physicist's pursuit of an objective, relativistic, unified field theory, or "theory of everything," has been well established. This relationship seems to ring as clearly as the relationship between the dualistic, fragmented,

2. Salle himself says, "But for so long there was this art-myth that [flags and targets] were neutral. I've often thought it would be interesting if people could look at my images as neutral as well, instead of assuming that they're charged. I do believe that there will come a time in which this so-called disturbing interest in my work will be seen as a condition of the work, much as the stripes in Stella's early work, for which he was attacked, are now seen as a *condition* of the work, how the work looks, not the thing which determines its quality" (from Schjeldahl 1987, 71).

3. The uncertainty principle addresses the dualistic problem of determining both position and velocity of quanta. As these quanta diminish in size, the problem becomes more complex. Either the quality of position or of velocity may be specified by itself as accurately as wished, but the two qualities are related inversely. The more accuracy with which one is calculated, the less accuracy with which the other may be fixed. That is, either position or velocity must be prioritized in each new calculation if either is to be fixed accurately. Heisenberg thus corroborates that even a mathematical text is able to offer less than half a truth at any one time.

complex, unpredictable resonance of colliding bits of information in postmodern painting and the complex uncertainty of randomness and "statistical probabilities" inherent in quantum mechanics.

There are similarities between quantum mechanics and Salle's use of images: both reject any univocal meaning or answer, both recognize paradox, and both cast doubt on positive conclusions. Salle's work asserts that language—whether verbal or visual—cannot maintain univocal meaning.⁴

In this sense, the new postmodernist image, with its isolated apostrophes and pluralistic points of view, may be seen as a logical answer, or adaptation, to a new century that promises to be "high tech" rather than industrial. The monolithic industrial society found it more economical to produce its commodities and ideas in a homogeneous, cohesive sameness. It was cheaper to make a million Fords just alike than to make each different car suit the individual's taste. However, in the high tech market, linked by computer networks, the buyer can order a Ford Escort in hundreds of different variations—different motors, different upholstery, different suspension, et cetera. It has become economically feasible to produce items to individual likes and dislikes.

Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* notes that many industries no longer aspire to become giant, city-based corporations. They may again be gradually breaking down into what he calls "cottage industries." This new society does not have the monolithic cohesiveness of the old "melting pot," but is instead hermetically partitioned into a multitude of professional, ethnic, religious, and class points of view. American society no longer sees the world from a single point of view; the Western European world view has begun to break down. Each professional or ethnic pocket is oriented toward a separate illusion on the flatbed picture plane from the point of view of its own separate interests.

Art has never offered solutions or answers, but it has expanded our consciousness by asking the right questions. I suggest that the questions it now asks bring more and more to concern the relation-

4. Salle says that one of the two important themes in his work is "the linguistic idea of 'the obligatory,' that we're only able to say what, in a sense, can be said. We all speak and think and act within what linguists call the obligatory. I would say a real theme of my work has been to get outside of that, or to address the possibility of transcending that, or at least making it so painfully visible that you can think about what the world would be like if that weren't the case, even though ultimately whether it is or is not the case is not even discussable" (from Schjeldahl 1987, 40).

ship between reality and language than the relationship between reality and illusion. When Picasso and Braque transferred "real" things, like theater tickets and portions of newspapers, directly from the world outside the painting to the surface of their collages, it was the first time painters had, in any organized sense, placed anything "real" in their paintings. This direction was advanced further when abstract expressionists chose to let the paint represent nothing other than paint itself; the paint *was* what it appeared to be. Painters now search for other "realities" to be included in the painting. Like a forgetful person, holding a bridle, who wonders whether it signifies a lost horse or a found bridle, painters now seem to ask what parts of their painting function as signifiers and what parts function as signified.

Much current painting concerns itself with semiotic exploration. The human figure now is often signified—sometimes no more elaborately than in a pictograph—rather than depicted photographically. Painting once again approaches writing. The first painted images developed in two directions; one direction became writing and the other, eventually, illusion. Now the two are brought together once again.

In fact, there seems in painting now to be an abundance of actual writing—including the painting of letters. The letters are perhaps chosen because they form a major part of the world outside the painting, the world the artist intends to signify on the canvas. The letters with which we are relentlessly assailed on street and business signs, magazines, posters, billboards, freeways, and license plates are real: and such a letter—for instance, an *M*—is as "real" on the surface of a painting as it is on a billboard, or a freeway sign, in the world around us. Western thought evolved from a representational language that imitated the "reflection of an objective world, to a modernist parallelism of language/world, [then] to a structure of signifiers in which we are hermetically entrapped" (Bloom and Hill 1982, 13). But our society believes this language serves to bring us in contact with this world as often as it seals us away from it (Bloom and Hill 1982, 13).

A current painting of a figure is often no closer to illusion than a painting of a letter. The world in the painting is signified in a consistent manner, so the sign *man* approaches the same "reality" as the *M*. That is, if the *M* in the painting is as "real" as the *M* on the freeway sign, or as the *M* on the billboard, then the written word *man* is also real in the painting. Indeed, so is the same sign when it exists in the

rest of the world, outside the painting. If this word *man* is as real as the *M*, then a pictograph of *man* must also be a "real" sign. A pictograph has an advantage over a written sign. It exhibits a more obvious reference to that which it signifies, thus avoiding the arbitrary quality of the written sign that has bothered so many thinkers in the past. Svetlana Alpers notes that there was an attempt as early as the seventeenth century, by such thinkers as Bacon, Leibniz, John Wilkins, and Comenius, to invent a new universal language that might avoid the arbitrary quality of written and spoken signs. Sir Francis Bacon had even experimented with the "Characters Real" of China, and his followers tried to invent a pictographic system of writing, called "real characters," that would use a system of simple signs with an obvious pictorial reference to the signified objects and concepts (Alpers 1983, 96).⁵

Just as literature is beginning to be analyzed in terms of spatial form, says W. J. T. Mitchell, so also are the visual arts being explored as language systems. Such a concern amounts to more than just talking about the arts. It seems to be a new attempt at integrating both art theory and practice with our constructs for understanding the real world. The ancient fragmentation into separate fields of study—i.e., painting and writing—is now yielding to an integration of these fields. (Mitchell 1980, 295–96).

Critical theory has turned from describing the function of art to defining its structure as being similar to that of language, Jane Tompkins comments. Late twentieth-century assessments of art concern themselves with the kind of knowledge that art furnishes. The basis for this concern can be found in the new attitude toward lan-

5. It was such attempts to find signifiers that were visually related to the signified that Jonathan Swift satirized at the end of the fifth chapter in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels*, when he wrote of a method of conversing invented by the people in Balnibarbi: "An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. . . . However, many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things; which hath only this inconvenience attending it; that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him" (Swift 1984, 163). Swift goes on to explain that "another great advantage proposed by this invention was that it would serve as an universal language to be understood in all civilized nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their uses might easily be comprehended" (Swift 1984, 164).

guage, one that considers language a thing with "no power of its own," a tool that "cannot do anything but mirror the image of a preexistent reality." Language can only transmit knowledge that has been accessed through other disciplines. The particular knowledge that art "transmits, moreover, lies in areas that are not well-suited to scientific measurement—human attitudes, feelings, and values" (Tompkins 1980, 221–22). Many new artists are interested in exploring the possibilities of the sign as an aesthetic manifestation.

Perhaps this new interest in language sheds some light on the reason why many postmodernist painters are prone to use quotations, allusions, and other references to outside sources—that is often referred to as "appropriating" images from artists of the past. Once painting is thought of in conjunction with verbal language, then it makes sense that some painters would choose to create scholarly texts and arguments. They may then wish to document their assertions with quoted precedents and the opinions of their peers.

I do not mean to suggest that all painting will henceforth ask only those questions that concern language. There are still questions about illusion that stimulate the curiosity of painters, and many are interested in exploring the thin line between illusion and language. Though the hegemony of illusion and the Cartesian viewer is ebbing, painting as visual semiotics is at about the same state that painting as illusion was before Giotto. We are looking for a new Giotto, or "Giotta." And the possibilities in painting are unlimited at this time. There is so much to come. Young painters work at the beginning of an exciting new period of discovery and advancement. There are as yet few academic shibboleths—no artificial means to determine the authenticity of a new image.

Any historical examination of painting indicates that the life of form and structure are eternally renewed and invigorated. The search for new images creates new geometries, new languages, and new structures. The adventurous thinker and painter will never stand still. He or she will never, ever, be caught defending the status quo. As "the moving finger writes," the painter paints, and having painted, moves on.