

Bow Wow and the Big Meow

I imagine a futuristic computer program that allows readers to scroll the text of my reviews. You'd be able to place the cursor over any word, sentence, or punctuation mark, click, and see the entire life-history of that part of the text. It might not be that interesting to anyone else but it would make for busy looking. You'd see sentences moved from here to there, jumping around, going back and forth, getting longer and shorter. The times and dates of every change would be included so that you could watch ideas tried out, discarded, tried again, altered, and discarded again. You'd see false starts and blind alleys; whole sections of reviews that were in place but were then deleted or changed at the very last minute. There would be sidebars tracking my arguments with brilliant editors who stopped me from making more a fool of myself than I might already have (thank you Chris Bonanos, Vince Aletti, and Claire Barliant). You'd be able to track commas and dashes darting about. There would be an index and bibliography tracking where every sentence and word came from. You'd see that everything comes from somewhere and that my wife, Roberta Smith, really gave me a lot. You'd notice ideas or phrases derived from other texts by me, or from other authors, advertising giggles, songs, news, poetry, or wherever. There would be a thermometer icon indicating how strong or insecure I was about ideas, and other icons measuring regret, pride, and shame. This imaginary program would show you that "First thought, best thought" is often true, but that "Last thought, best thought," is also true. You'd also see that for me, there is no such thing as writing, there is only re-writing.

Looking back, some of the columns in this book aren't as clear, expansive or as dense as I thought or wish they were. In others, I overdo things or miss major points of the work. I still remember a Pipilotti Rist review where I simply forgot to mention that I had been transported by her work. There are shows I didn't cover because of deadlines, space problems, or free-floating anxiety. I'm sorry I never wrote on Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Jason Rhodes while they were alive. Rhodes was a true Lord of Chaos; Gonzalez-Torres was a Prince of Peace and Revolution. My feelings for Marsden Hartley's work are so overpowering that I've never been able to write about him. All art defies words but I'm still ashamed about this.

In my review of Christopher Wool, I don't know if I made a strong enough case for how optically startling I have found his work. I wish I hadn't called Sarah Sze an "anal-retentive warrior princess." I meant the term as praise but I can see that it's a little iffy, especially coming from a man. Also, that review got pretty off the wall; I decided Sze's huge atomized anti-gravity-machine installation at Boesky was actually a secret sculptural code for predicting the date she imagined she'd give birth to the child she was pregnant with at the time. I'm almost certain I guessed the correct date but no one at the gallery ever let me know—probably because of that "anal-retentive warrior princess" business.

I still think Andreas Gursky's last show was disappointing but I could have given him more credit for being able to make photographs that can buzz your eyeballs. I've written about John Currin several times. He's a complicated artist for me; I like his work, then I don't. I'm still not sure I've got all my thoughts in order about him. After writing a fairly negative review of Sharon Lockhardt's photographs I happened to hear her lecture at The New School and found her intelligent and earnest. I still think the pictures I wrote about were lacking but I see more clearly what she may have been trying to get at. I was right to give Luc Tuymans credit for really building on Richter's ideas about photography and painting; however, I wasn't on-point about a tendency his pictures have of being a bit formulaic and self-satisfied. If I could change one review in this book, I'd be more critical of Neo Rauch. I admire his ambition for painting, and his pictures have a

great opaque look and palette. But I should have said that his paintings start to visually go inert for me if I look at them too long. I knew that when I was writing the review; I just got swept up in the visual scale and tertiary colors.

Berthot Brecht wrote that “What is certain isn’t certain; Things will not stay as they are.” That applies to art criticism, too.

The closest I’ve come to getting a handle on what art may be is an idea painter Eric Fischl has talked about. Imagine calling two pets, one a dog, the other a cat. Asking a dog to do something is an amazing, riveting experience. You say, “Come here Fido;” Fido looks up, pads over, puts his head on your lap, pants, and wags his tale. You’ve had a direct communication with another species; you and Fido are sharing a common, fairly linear language. This is a very special experience.

Now imagine calling the cat. You say, “Come here Snowflake.” Snowflake might glance over, twitch once or twice, possibly circle a nearby table leg, rub it, lie down, flick its tail, and look away from you. There’s nothing direct in this. Yet something gigantic has happened, something very much like art. The cat has placed a third thing between you and itself. In order to understand the cat you have to grasp this non-linear, indirect, circuitous strange mysterious miraculous communication.

In short, art is a cat.

That seemed to clarify things for a while. Now, thanks to a conversation I had with artist Diana Shpunin, I see the rub in the theory. It is still true that to viewers and the outside world, art is a cat. But it turns out that to artists, art is a dog!

It is unruly, weirdly independent and needy. It takes up way too much of your time, energy, and money. You love it or need it but it dominates your life and your inner-life. You think you understand it but you don’t, quite. Worse, you never know exactly what it’s going to do in front of people. It often embarrasses you. Sometimes it’s unmanageable, stupid, tiresome, goofy, or gross. Sometimes you hate it and want to get rid of it; other times it seems to hate you and won’t do anything you want it to. It is

often stupid when you wish it would be serious, and serious when you wish it would be playful. You are in control of it, yet somehow it seems to be weirdly in control of you. Any time you try to describe it, you get it wrong. The more you describe it, the wronger you get.

Jasper Johns said, “you avoid everything you can avoid, then you do what you can’t avoid doing, and you do what is helpless and unavoidable.” Johns makes you understand that on some level, as weird as it sounds, that artist don’t entirely choose what art they make, and that somehow, in some way, the art chooses them to make it.

Jerry Saltz

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