

## GI symposium: Painting as a New Medium. Barry Schwabsky

Unlike Tom and David, I don't have any slides to show you. I'm not an artist so I'll quote my own writings the way they show their paintings. Our topic today has to do with painting as a new medium but to some extent we've all wanted to talk about how important some experiences of old painting have been for us—Tom with his reflections on Picasso, David on the Rauschenberg combines, and I'm following them down their path because my presentation could be called something like, "What Matisse Means to Me." And it's a bit of an autobiographical story, a retrospect on myself, which starts in the middle of things with the essay I wrote for the book *Vitamin P* a number of years ago. As a lot of you probably know, that book was a sort of survey or overview of new painting from around the world, focusing mainly on the work of artist who had emerged in the '90s, with only a few particularly influential figures included who were just a bit older. My essay, "Painting in the Interrogative Mode," was a particularly important effort for me—it was really an attempt to synthesize my thinking about the situation of current painting over the preceding decade or so, a way of bringing together ideas that had been developed over the course of writing a great many essays and reviews on individual artists or very specific trends or groupings, but which I had never had an opportunity to bring together into an overview or synthesis.

In the *Vitamin P* essay, I felt like I'd come to a pretty good provisional formalist account of the situation of painting circa 2000. It seemed to succeed in demoting the distinction between abstract and representational, which seemed to me at the time to be necessary for any adequate account of contemporary painting, which for me meant, essentially, painting since Richter but also since Alex Katz. Because I had come to an appreciation of painting primarily through abstraction—my first loves as a teenager were Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko whose work I first saw on a high school field trip to the Museum of Modern Art in New York—this was essentially, and I don't think paradoxically, a question of derogating all the high modernist claims, such as can easily be found in the writings not only of critics like Clement Greenberg but also of artists such as Ad Reinhardt, that abstraction reveals the essence of art—the idea, as I paraphrased it then,

*abstract art was supposed to lay bare the structures underlying all art—formal structures, to be sure, but more importantly, what might be called structures of desire. Abstract painting made manifest the desire for painting in as general and as "naked" a form as possible. In so doing it revealed that all painting worthy of the name had already been essentially abstract, though unconsciously so. We are used to hearing that Modernism—the period from Impressionism through abstraction to Conceptual Art—was imbued with the idea of progress. If abstract painting represented a kind of progress, it was essentially in the form of consciousness—but consciousness of something that was always inherent in painting. Thus, Clement Greenberg, the theoretician of Abstract Expressionism, once noted that "one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture," whereas "one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first." But what starts out as a simple descriptive difference turns out, with Greenberg's next move, to be something more: The Modernist way of seeing, he says, "is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or*

*Modernist.” In other words, Modernism took what was already implicit in classical painting and made it explicit, that is, brought it to a more articulate point of self-consciousness. An even more aggressive version of this position was taken by Ad Reinhardt, for instance, who asserted that abstract painting, such as his own, was “the first truly unmannered and untrammelled and unentangled, styleless, universal painting.”*

And yet despite my looking awry at such modernist claims for the “universality” of abstraction, it seemed important to me, and still does, to entertain a certain kind of formalism—the idea that, before anything else, an artwork is concerned with questions of art; not that it cannot take on any sort of subject matter whatsoever, but that it does so for specifically artistic reasons.

My solution was to focus on the rhetorical structure of the artwork:

*Contemporary painting retains from its Modernist and Conceptualist background the belief that every artist’s work should stake out a position—that a painting is not only a painting but also the representation of an idea about painting. That is one reason there is so little contradiction now between abstract and representational painting: In both cases, the painting is there not to represent the image; the image exists in order to represent the painting (that is, the painting’s idea of painting). There is something inherently polemical in the nature of contemporary art-making, but not in the sense that it declares other, competing positions invalid. The difference, one might say, is that artistic positions are now themselves received aesthetically more than in terms of some kind of truth-claim—just in the way that Jorge Luis Borges wrote of viewing philosophical systems aesthetically.*

I was particularly taken with my formulation that “the painting is not there to represent the image; the image exists in order to represent the painting.” This was to make every painting, whether abstract or representational, into a kind of allegory of painting.

Well, the only valid reason, in my view, for attempting to arrive at an overview of this kind is to become self-conscious about one’s suppositions in order to get to know their limits—to criticize them. And in fact, it wasn’t long after I’d written the essay for *Vitamin P* that I began to realize that I wasn’t entirely satisfied with it as an account of the situation of painting today. Having to some extent codified my thoughts, I could better see their limitations. And the more I looked, the more it began to strike me that there was a great deal of new painting around that seemed to be using images somewhat differently than I’d imagined. I was able to try to get a grip on this problem in 2004 when I was invited to write an essay for a book that was published at the beginning of 2005 by the Saatchi Collection in London. I’ll admit to being a bit embarrassed by the book’s title, *The Triumph of Painting*, but that’s neither here nor there. What was important about the book was that it was a large-scale, fairly international compendium documenting the gathering tendency toward a new approach to the image in painting—something that really could not have been done ten or perhaps even five years before. The work shown in the book was of highly variable quality, and some of the most important painters associated with the new image-based painting are

not included in it, but the book still succeeds in showing the mass of work being produced under this new image-regime, if I can put it that way. Anyway, whatever my qualms about the title of the show, I was pretty well satisfied with the one I came up with for my own essay, “An Art that Eats Its Own Head”—a turn of phrase that perhaps does curiously tortuous things to my idea of modernist self-reference—but what is probably more telling, in this context, is the essay’s subtitle: “Painting in the Age of the Image.”

As I think that subtitle indicates pretty directly, I’d had to change my idea about the role of the image in contemporary painting. Not that I wanted to go back to an old-fashioned representationalist view according to which the painting would, after all, exist in order to represent the image—but still, I was now according the image a certain priority I’d been unable to grant it before. And if the stimulus to this re-examination of the status of the image in painting was a change in the way young painters were working, compared to their immediate predecessors, the theoretical device I hit on to start explaining it to myself was a century old. I found it in the philosophical writings of Henri Bergson, which allowed me to understand a fundamental distinction between representation as it was understood before the invention of photography and the image as we know it today. I was able to articulate this distinction through a comparison between Bergson and Kant: “It has often been said that the invention of photography in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century changed the nature of painting by withdrawing from it the task of representation that had so long been at its core, “ I wrote, and by the way I think that phrase about “withdrawing” must have been an allusion to the same Michael Fried essay that David mentioned. Anyway,

*It has often been said that the invention of photography in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century changed the nature of painting by withdrawing from it the task of representation that had so long been at its core, thereby enabling the emergence, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, of a fully abstract art. The initial plausibility of this story, however, should not disguise its falseness. Any mediocre painter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century could depict a person, object, or landscape with greater accuracy and vividness than a photograph. (If nothing else, the painter could show the color of things, hardly a negligible dimension of visual experience.) The real attraction of the photograph—beyond simple economics: a photographic portrait cost a lot less than one in oils—lay not in its capacity for iconic representation but rather in what has been called its indexical quality, that is, the apparent causal connection between object and its image. The image comes from what it shows, a sort of relic.*

*Far from irrational, there may be an important truth lurking in this notion of the image as a detachable constituent of the reality it pictures. In any case, it finds an echo not only in the transformation of art since the advent of photography but even in philosophy. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant taught that we can know, not things in themselves, but rather phenomena, appearances. The “thing in itself” is something whose existence can only be intellectually deduced. The perceiving mind, on this view, is something like an idea of a portrait painter. The subject of the portrait, the sitter, is over there; the painter with his brushes, palette, and easel is over here. There is no direct contact between the two of them. Instead, the painter constructs a set of appearances on the canvas that somehow corresponds to the*

*features of the sitter. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the invention of the camera, a different idea of perception became plausible. Henri Bergson declared that what we are acquainted with the world not through mere appearances that are somehow different in kind from things in themselves, but through what he called, precisely, “images,” which are part and parcel of the real. The mind, for Bergson, is less like a painter than it is like a camera, its sampled images not fundamentally other but simply quantitatively more limited than the “aggregate of ‘images’” that is reality. Our perceptual apparatus is, one might say, touched by the thing it perceives as the photographic plate or film is touched by the light that comes from the object.*

Is it problematic that I used a century-old philosophical idea to explicate a change in the practice of painting that seemed to me rather recent? I don't think so, because while Bergson had articulated his philosophy around the turn of the last century, it had been ignored for a long time and only recently begun to acquire new currency again. I myself had studied philosophy as an undergraduate and the name of Bergson had never been spoken during the four years of my college education. When I did my brief and unconsummated graduate studies in literature, my reading was dominated by the then rather new approaches of what came to be known as “French theory.” Here too, despite the fact that some of the authors whom I was reading so assiduously might be considered Bergson's successors, his name remained little more than a very distant echo. No one I knew read Bergson. He was, to all appearances, a dead letter.

So when Gilles Deleuze's book *Bergsonism* was published in an English translation in 1988, what registered was not that this was a belated emergence in English of a book that was already twenty years old. If anything, it seemed further evidence of Deleuze's conspicuous eccentricity, his bravura ability to turn the strangest things to account. Little did I realize that within a decade Deleuze's interest in Bergson would spread. When I arrived in London in 2001, I began teaching in the critical studies section of the undergraduate fine arts course at Goldsmiths College, and one of my duties there was supervise the final thesis projects of a certain number of the students. These projects were meant to bridge the theoretical interests they might have developed while studying at Goldsmiths with the studio practice they had developed there, and I was rather taken aback to discover that a number of them were calling upon the writings of Bergson as part of their theoretical armature. So it was really in order to catch up with my students that I began reading Bergson. Perhaps it is for this reason—because he is a philosopher who only came to me by way of people younger than myself, rather than from my elders—that it still seems perfectly reasonable to me to use his writings as a way into the work of artists who are younger than me as well.

At around the same time as I was writing the essay for the Saatchi book, I was asked by Statens Museum for Kunst, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, to write an essay for a book on eight major Matisse paintings in their collections—eight writers, each contributing a close reading of a single painting. Mine was the great *Portrait of Mme Matisse* from 1905—*The Green Line*, as it's better known. In preparation for my visit to Copenhagen to spend some time in front of the painting itself, I naturally began to look up some of the commentary that had already been written on the painting, and of course the first book I turned to was Pierre Schneider's magnum opus—to my mind an inexhaustible work, though

certainly exhausting as well, something unique in the literature of art. What struck my eye right away with the force of a revelation was the fact that Schneider approaches the painting by using the same dichotomy that had been so useful to me in writing about the new painting being shown by the Saatchi Gallery, the dichotomy between representation and image. According to Schneider, “‘*The Green Line*’ is serene because Matisse accepts the substitution of the image for representation. Representation looks back to something, recalls a model; an image invents a presence.” He also says, “To construct through color is to make an image; to destroy through color is to undo representation.” Schneider attributes his special sense of the word “image” to Kandinsky, who used it in this way in describing the art of Cézanne but who added, “The same intention actuates the work of one of the greatest of the young Frenchmen, Henri Matisse. He paints ‘images’ and in the ‘images’ endeavors to reproduce the divine.”

But for all the confirmation I felt in seeing Schneider use the same terminology I had resorted to, I could also see that there was a discrepancy. Because while I had not tried to define the term “image” in any strict fashion, what seemed important to me was that it was in some way a trace of a perception, the imprint, as it were, of a sensation. And for this reason I could not accept the way Schneider’s notion of “image” seemed to be pushed in the direction of a sort of abstraction or, perhaps it would be better to say, of formalism, as when he specifies that “An image functions only insofar as it is an artifact, an object that does not deny its nature as canvas covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” This didn’t seem right, despite the fact that Schneider’s formalist bias was shared by many others among Matisse’s best critics, from Clement Greenberg to Yve-Alain Bois. (It’s not irrelevant that in his essay “Painting as Model” Bois specifically takes up Hubert Damisch’s critique of the concept of image and of what Jean-Paul Sartre called “the imaging attitude.”) Aside from the fact that in this Schneider was not in accord with my reading of either the Bergsonian sense of the image or the sense of the image in contemporary painting, his idea of image seemed at odds with things that Matisse himself often said, from the 1908 “Notes of a Painter” onward. Matisse’s sense of image does not erase the connection to a prior reality, but it reconfigures that connection, and in a certain sense even makes it stronger, because indexical. In any case, Matisse always emphasized the importance of the presence of the model. Even at the end of his life, by which time his art had arguably become much more abstract than it could ever have been in 1905 when he painted *The Green Line*, he would affirm that “The driving force that leads me throughout the execution of a portrait depends on the initial shock of contemplating a face.” Thus the reason why, as Matisse once put it in a letter, “One should not work with elements from nature which have not been subject to feeling”; in such a case that force of shock would be lacking. The portrait would be the record of this striking, almost violent perceptual experience, and not only the portrait, though perhaps exceptionally so: “The almost unconscious transcription of the meaning of the model is the initial act of every work of art.” I found that I could only write about *The Green Line* by seeing it in relation to its revelation of “the essential character” the artist had glimpsed in the presence of his wife, the subject of the portrait.

Painting is irrevocably linked to perception for Matisse and this is because “To see is itself a creative operation, which requires effort.” *Art, in this view, is not other than but more than perception, just as perception is not other than but simply less than its object.* For Matisse, the effort of perception involved a certain kind of distillation: “Everything that we

see in our daily life is more or less distorted by acquired habits, and this is perhaps more evident in an age like ours when cinema posters and magazines present us every day with a flood of ready-made images which are to the eye what prejudices are to the mind.” The main difference between today’s painters and Matisse is their feeling about these ready-made images; for many contemporary artists, such images are not what need to be cleared away in order to see other things more clearly, but on the contrary, they are precisely what need to be seen more clearly. This is why I wrote in the Saatchi book of today’s painters as working “in the age of the image.” But Matisse already had a glimpse of it. Speaking of the landscape around Collioure, where he often painted in the Fauve days, Matisse told Ernst Goldschmidt, “There were more paintings in what I was seeing than in what I was painting.” He saw the reality of the perceptible world as an image reality. The world is already full of images and the point is to succeed in transcribing or as it may be, translating them onto canvas. Likewise, a few years ago, the painter Gary Hume, who often works with images from the media—those cinema posters and magazines that horrified Matisse—told me “Everything’s found. I recognize it as my painting and then I paint it.” How close the two of them are, in using the images that come to them as the source of their own paintings, and I would also add that I don’t think they’re so different from Frank Stella saying that the paint has to be as good on the canvas as it was in the can. In each case, there is the sense that the painting already somehow exists out there in the world. For Matisse it was in nature. For Stella it was in the industrial materials he used to make his paintings, and for Gary Hume and a lot of other painters today it’s in the image reality that surrounds us. But in any case, the painting is part and parcel of reality, which in Bergson’s terms, the aggregate of images.

The inflection toward formalism that we find in Schneider, as in Greenberg or Bois responds to one important strand in Matisse’s art and thereby helps us see how artists like Ellsworth Kelly or Barnett Newman might have been influenced by him, but they leave us at a loss to understand why today, when image-based painting is in the ascendance, Matisse remains by far the most influential modernist painter. In order to understand his connection with painters like Hume or any of the other outstanding contemporary painters of the image, we will have to turn again see how Matisse was a painter of the “paintings in what I was seeing.” They are not practitioners of traditional representation, nor of Pop art (even when using media images), nor are they expressionists, despite their work’s typically loose and spontaneous facture. They’re something different, and this something, whatever one might call it, finds a progenitor in Matisse more than in any other modernist painter. And we might even see how contemporary abstract painting, which is intertwined with sensations from the image-world in different ways than some of its predecessors, is likewise in accord with Matisse’s sense of the image, which was so influenced by Bergson’s. The Bergsonian image, after all, is not necessarily a whole “picture” but any simple or complex sensation, so that the pictorial elements—the colors, shapes, and textures of which an abstract painting might be composed—are also already images. In a sense, I’ve turned Greenberg upside down or inside out: It’s not that even a classical painting is already abstract, or already to be seen as abstract, but on the contrary, even an abstract painting is already image, or to be seen as image.