

THE PARADOX OF THE PAINTER

"It was like when they wanted to force Galileo to say that the earth did not turn. Yes it was that."

Gertrude Stein

Criticism

One of the traps that criticism avoids least often is without doubt that which consists—a certain amount of work having already been furnished—in supposing not only that this work is known, but also that it authorizes a certain conventional discourse. And, paradox for paradox, I must say that I am always a little astonished to ascertain that very frequently the art critic seems to consider as *sui generis*, &—most paradoxical of all—as *natural*, the fact that art (painting, sculpture, etc.) exists. One sees clearly the interest that the critic has in adopting such an attitude: otherwise he would have a criticism without an object. One would be led to question the objective role of a critical organization based entirely on an imaginary object. However, one frequently has the impression that art criticism often entertains pretexts other than those provided by social conventions that require (one asks Why?) that art exist. I know very well that to pose the problem in these terms leads inevitably to the commonplace question of What is art? A question that is very practically related to a convention of critical discourse from which one can expect almost anything. It seems to me that, to be more precise—since the basic position here consists in questioning the reality of critical discourse—the question must bear first of all on not the metaphysical finality of art, but on its objective position. Let us say then (something that would justify the place of the critic as well as that of the artist) that if art exists, it does so insofar as the term corresponds to a certain type of social activity. It remains to ascertain how this activity is to be defined, something which need not necessarily lead to a definition of art, and which will not necessarily limit the sense or the implications of what we can expect of artistic practices.

Before going further, and since I choose to maintain a rational point of view, I wish to consider several possible misunderstandings that a certain contemporary philistinism exerts itself to develop. This point of view, this rational attitude, obviously accepts as basic a situation in which it attempts to define objectivity in terms of the history which constitutes this situation, or, put another way, by stating at the start a historical proposition. A proposition which has nothing surprising about it, and which is generally accepted where it concerns the art of the past, but which is inevitably contested as soon as it pretends to arrive at an intelligibility of contemporary art. No one thinks of reproaching art historians for the "historicist" character of their work. However, it is curious that it is precisely this that arises as soon as a similar approach manifests itself in contemporary art criticism. The philistines, no matter how historicist they are, cry sacrilege at a sociological reduction at the expense of empirical values, which are, as everyone knows, so easily remunerative. It is indeed impossible to approach contemporary art with a historical concept which is at every point similar to that of the art historians. Limiting oneself to that would be, in the end, to do what is done in the United States today, and, to a certain degree, everywhere in the world where the American Dream survives, that is, the ability to take note of the different movements and schools as they appear and disappear, contenting oneself with simple chronologies. This type of historical approach, with reference only to a sort of formal evolution, which one could qualify as the autonomous history of such and such a discipline, is incapable, admittedly, of responding to the multiplicity of modern art experience, so often ambiguous and contradictory. Thus the philistine finds it completely in his interest to give

the impression that historical approaches to modern art must be identical with the traditional attitude towards the history of art: a historicist formalism; a self-enclosed, specific autonomy of different artistic practices.

This attitude is programmed by the fear of an abandonment those social practices (because, finally, all this happens somewhere, in a world, in a society with its laws and its political and economic organisation) in the historical order, which programs them and which they transform; and a profound fear of ideological prescription of pictorial artistic practices that could make evident the objective reality of the discourse that a certain type of ideology demands of them. The conjuring trick of the philistine consists here of confusing one concept with another, and with the pretext of defending the happy "irrationality" of art, and in denying or feigning ignorance of the evolution of the scientific disciplines and concepts which the critic has at his disposal.

What must be understood by art, by painting, is a social activity. And without doubt, this is primarily so because this activity has a specific history *which is not without relation* to the rest of activity, more or less specific, which constitutes the social field. Painting constitutes itself by the *dialectical* relation of its specific history to the history of diverse other specificities in the totality of the social field. The history of painting bears witness to the intuition that painters have always had of such a relationship. From Giotto to the present—if one is willing to accept the necessarily ridiculous arbitrariness of such a short-cut—recalling, for example, Piero della Francesca, da Vinci, Seurat, Kandinsky, Mondrian, etc, painters have never ceased in the attempt to recognise the sort of relation that their practice had with the sciences (most often with the physical sciences). As regards philosophy, the painters of the Renaissance and High Renaissance were, of necessity, frequently very much aware of the conflicting relationship that they maintained with politics and religion. One may say that the history of painting, as we've inherited it, is obscurely based on this tissue of frequently unconscious relationships, and of the unequally developed forces to which the scheme of dialectical possibilities corresponds throughout the history of the evolution of the arts as well as the sciences. Of course, all that might appear very abstract, and if one accepts strictly the influence that certain aspects of the physical sciences might have on painting, one accepts with more difficulty the possibility of the same sort of relationship with, for example, with the natural and the exact sciences, and with still more difficulty the chances of the possible reciprocity of such influences. It is much the same thing as regards painting, as regards all other social practices. The knowledge we can have of them is immediately programmed by the fragmentary ideology on the ground where they meet. This is an ideology of autonomy, of unity, of appropriation, of phenomena, of experience; succinctly, a positivism, of which one easily understands all the ambiguities with which it is invested by characters farthest removed from the pictorial practices. What I would like understood here is the form of the modalities of resistance that painting could encounter, no longer only presenting itself as a specular model of the dominant ideology, consequently conveyed in the form of a real object (the painting) which re-presents it; but as the dialectical process (the object) of knowledge. Stated otherwise, of painting as *passage*, evolution, the path of knowledge by way of the objects which are never simply stages. History, then, as instituting an intelligible logic (dialectic) of this evolution, which never simply borrows (and imprints) the forms that it takes.

With this suggestion of interdisciplinary relationships and of the *relative* autonomy of pictorial practice, it would be suitable, of course, to put forward arguments which would not be only intuitive, ostensible, or intentional. But since I haven't the space to develop this problematik here, I shall refer the reader to an article already published where it receives incipient consideration ("Le système de Matisse," dans *L'enseignement de la peinture*), where I emphasize by way of example

the role that painting has played and can play, as far as the placement and displacement of the subject in the organisation of space is concerned (in the latter instance obviously social). Is it necessary to emphasize the fact that which for us constitutes the history of painting, say from the quattrocento to the 19th century academies, does not establish itself as simple perspectival reproduction, but rather as a commentary on the disposition of perspective, an investment, a placement, and a productive evolution of the repressed contradictions of this order and its laws. Then the sudden appearance, progressist and "scientific", during the quattrocento, going from repression to repression, and from contradiction, more or less productive to contradiction, up until the mad summons of Cezanne at the end of the 19th century which should have produced (shortly after Marx and even before the great ideological revolution of freudianism and the introduction of analitical concepts) a new comprehension of the situation of the *subject*, and of *space* and its *reflection*, and of its *cognition* in the *evolution* of a *language*. If, from that moment, the dominant character of modern painting orients itself more and more clearly towards an interrogation of the quality of reflection that is demanded by specularly, is it in order to shut oneself up in delicious delectation of an art for art's sake (of painting in which the subject is nothing more than the painting, as all sorts of philistines pretend)? Or is it, on the contrary, to make evident, on the one hand, the contradictions that the subject represses, focussed on the laws of perspective and their corollary, specular representation; and, on the other hand, as the logic of the discovery of these contradictions, to reflect the multiple processes constituting the intelligence of a subject evolved enough to not believe that reality stops at the simple reproduction of his image; that the universe takes shape around his portrait. Since the beginning of the century, psychoanalysis—among other disciplines—(which itself is only the reflection of more fundamental transformations) has penetrated seriously the murmurs of the natural sciences, and that the definitions, the concepts (of "subject", "reflection", "knowledge", "language", etc) have evolved and been transformed entirely. The question here is not to know which practice has priority in the movement of this evolution; but that no practical activity be left unnoticed. Perhaps, since we are concerned with painting, one should insist that in the light of this evidence the progressist place of man in history is no longer that attributed to him by humanism; rather it is, if I may say so, the place of a subject invested by history, wherein man has his place. Let us say, briefly, that that which is reflected in modern pictorial language is the subject in constant process in the objects of his cognition. No longer the figure as a conventional model of recognition, rather everything that this convention represses and which is at work in cognition. The freudian concepts of "reality principle/pleasure principle", "life instinct", "death instinct", of the "instinctive stage", "splitting of the ego", "sublimation", etc, can briefly illuminate that which concerns certain aspects of this process, and which takes into consideration the conflicting "reality" of the reflected image and not the reflexive illusion of an autonomous human reality. What happens then if one confines oneself—which is all too often the case—to the most indicative manifestations of modern painting? Disappearance of the human figure and the setting it justifies; disappearance of the space that gave sense to that figure; the evocation of a new subject and of another space; and after the disappearance of the specular reference, the disappearance of the role of the canvas as object, and even as the result of the work involved; and a turning towards the series. One might say that for a large part of its production, modern painting more often presents its works as a series of studies ("work in progress") than as complete and objectified demonstrations. The process continues from one work to the next, from one painter to another; passage, development without end of a problematik on the road which cognition constructs of itself. If in the beginning I insisted on the convention that seems to authorize a discourse on art criticism, it is

because it seems to me that this convention that wants art to exist and wants there to be an object of art criticism, only manages all too often to perpetuate a traditional ideology of art, such that, in effect, a discourse on such a criticism is completely removed from its object; and all too often without object. With this paradoxical consequence, that modern painting, no longer proposing finished objects, but states and stages of a passage, of a process, this criticism finds itself with the obligation to "objectify" art in order to be able to deal with its essence.

The Paradox of the Painter

This situation which, as we have just seen, is not without consequence for criticism, is also not without effect on the practice of the painter. Indeed, one must not forget that that which I have attempted to explain and describe above, is absolutely not experienced by the artist of its exposition; nevertheless, he does reproduce it. As Gertrude Stein wrote: "The literary ideas of a painter are not at all the same ideas as the literary of a writer. The egotism of a painter is entirely different than the egotism of a writer." (In *Picasso*, Beacon Hill Press, Boston, 1959, p.4.). Stated in another way, the ideas and the forces which transmit them and which they transmit, have a completely different manner of manifesting themselves in theory and in practice. And the painter suffers these transformations, which it is possible to point out, in a way incontestably more subjective—some would say more sensitively—than the critic, whose objective is to grasp the sense and develop it in another medium. Because, for the painter, these transformations borrow the ways and means pertinent to his practice, and that it is in this form that the critic comprehends them. Being understood that this "form" is not without history, or without contradictions. The most flagrant and paradoxical of these contradictions in the theoretical field, which subtends modern (contemporary) pictorial production, being the intersection, the meeting of a diction essentially related, manifestly, to the materials which constitute it, with and by a process of cognition denying, as such, the finality and objectivity of these materials. And as one can easily imagine, if there is resistance to thought in the order of the theories of cognition, the disappearance of the representations of the human figure and its accessories for reasons of purely phenomenological verification, then the resistance is still greater where it concerns thinking on the organisation of pictorial materials as a state, as a passage towards something else. The latter manifests itself among painters in different ways: reconsiderations of the surface/ reconsideration of the chassis/ "objectification" of different sorts/ conceptualisation/ gestuality, etc; all able to be explained by a certain confusion that the very practice of the painter fosters between his materials and subject-matter. That being given, the theoretical bases of the historical representation of modern painting involves the non-resolution of a conflict of such brutality that one should not be astonished that it could produce the eclectic precipitation of multiple schools of avant-gardism, that have been born and died in the course of the last thirty years.

For several years, certain young French artists have been particularly aware of this conflict, which I have presented as the paradox of the painter. The questions posed by the most recent developments of the natural sciences have impelled these artists to attempt to establish between their pictorial practices and the knowledge that must, today, invest their practice, a reconsideration of the order of their materials more in accord with the revolution of a specific awareness, which they understand is related to all the diversities of social activity. I think that it is much too early to draw any conclusions regarding this work. What I would like to do here, is to attempt to reveal through

one of these artists, Alain Kirili, how the treatment of materials can respond to such preoccupations. It will soon be more than two years that Alain Kirili has been obstinately (almost obsessively) working on a graphic model which he treats in a most curious fashion. This model was at first selected in a most arbitrary way. It is a segment, considerably enlarged, of a cartographic drawing, and, having lost all possible reference to its original function, this pretextual model has been subjected by Kirili to many metamorphoses. Chosen for its anonymous character, this model was confronted with the peculiarities of various techniques. Thus, in the first stage, a photograph of the cartographic segment, more or less arbitrary, was chosen. At the second stage a photographic enlargement of the same section was used, which lost all reference to its first function. Then followed a mechanically printed reproduction in white on a square black ground, or black on a square white ground, of the enlargement, the size of which, from that point on, could be varied indefinitely, insistently repeating the spatial variant, which, paradoxically, does not cease to assume the anonymity of the graphic model, which, on the contrary, becomes more and more encroaching. All this happens up to this point as if Kirili, confining himself to techniques of mechanical production (reproduction) tended to systematically question all the peculiarities of the materials destined to convey his work. Here we have, it seems to me, in its primary stage, what I would call the tactical intervention of Kirili. The works that he presents then are most often of a small format. For the most part, they can be held in the hand. At times, they are folded (see the booklet realized with the collaboration of Philippe Sollers and published by Emmanuelle Bresson). On the whole, the contradiction and conflict that the artist intuitively is, at this point, held at bay, that is to say, at a distance; and it is a distance that all the *means* utilized by Kirili allow him to reproduce. The conception prevails over the realization (it is well known the success that this sort of technique had and still has in the United States), and the contradiction (between, for example, subject-matter and material) is repressed by the negation of one of the two terms.

The second stage of his work is significant from this point of view. It parts from his decision to transform the means of production: in making a tampon that he can ink and stamp on a chosen surface — a tampon shaped after the original model, but enlarged this time to the length of about a meter. The immediate consequence is obviously the enlarged size of Kirili's pieces, and curiously (?) the appearance of the stretcher-frame. Which leads, in the inking of the tampon and its application to the canvas, to all sorts of more or less intentional accidents; the repetition of the model that, carried to this dimension, ceases to be the simple graphic play of surfaces. This second stage, the stage of a return to practice and the progressive investment of the materials involved, confronts that which is no longer an arbitrary path, but a model, apparently infinite, of spatial organisation; on the one hand, of the logic of the history of this language (painting); and, on the other hand, of a manner very effectively conflictual of the petition and the repetition of the principle of the anonymous model. It is not at all by chance, in my opinion, that in choosing this path, Alain Kirili first selected black ink, and has now come to use colored inks; which was in turn followed by the accentuation and diffusion (with the aid of a brush) of the accidents found at the interior of the colored shapes. It is also not by chance that Kirili has a tendency to range his canvasses in series; that he tears certain paper-forms on which he has already organised his space in terms of the imprints transferred to their surface in order to produce a new organisation that no longer depends on the right-angles of the sheets of paper. The material is (one sees this clearly in the second stage) assailed by multiple propositions to which he lends and opens himself; to which fact bears witness the large canvassed that Kirili produces today, and of which the productive prolongation is noteworthy in the quality of the two recent metal pieces realized by the artist. Are we here

concerned with a third stage? I think not. With these two metal pieces, we are concerned with the immediate prolongation of that which was set before us with the canvasses: the conflict between conception and material: application. These two pieces retain only the material which supports them, its quality and thinness. And it is not the material, but its (tractable) quality that becomes significant. The thinness of the material produces the shape of a long and narrow covering on the surface that is the ground (a square design blends with the ground and the material constituting it); for nearly the entire length, a cut out band makes it appear like a design that is part of the piece of the ground. (If the band were cut along its entire length, we would have two metal bands separated on the ground; the ground would no longer act as part of the design; and the ground upon which posed the two metal bands would in turn no longer play the part of the material.) Finally, the metal area cut from the middle of the piece is set accross the piece in such a way that it presents a long sinuous design; one which produces, on the vertical axis the shape that appears on the vertical axis or on the ground. The insistence of the theoretical success here is due to the manner in which the information that the piece provides us of the space that it occupies is the dialectical product of the tractable qualities of the material and the formal possibilities that it offers historically. Finally, one must state that it is nothing more than the process evolving; and that the paradox of the painter is that it is just that which permits the process to continue.

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