TWENTIETH CENTURY ART : THE ESCAPE FROM DEFINITION

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In September, 1951, Sydney Freedberg (who later became chief curator of the National Gallery in Washington) defined the scope of the introductory survey course in art history in which I was enrolled at Wellesley College. Beginning with Egyptian temples, he moved gracefully through an abbreviated history of western European art up to World War II. This, he told us, is what we would be studying. Then, with a black and white slide up on the screen in front of us, he declared, "We will not be studying this : this is not art". "This" was a painting by Jackson Pollock.

Freedberg's statement was unequivocal but not at all astonishing. At the time, most art historians cut off the study of modern art (the term "contemporary art" was not yet in use), at about 1935. The fact that Pollock had recently been featured in Life magazine only confirmed their belief that his work was not serious. I was confused. I had read the Life article (which, to my 17-year-old mind, established him as an up-and-coming artist) and I had grown up in New York where contemporary art was alive, if not omnipresent. Yet if a serious art historian pronounced Pollock's work non-art, I had to wonder. Was Pollock's work art ? What was art, and how could it be defined ?

"Modern art" then meant what it does now : art made during the early years of the 20th century, following along in a tradition. Contemporary art was a little like sex, something nice people didn't mention, something to be enjoyed furtively, something definitly not studied. It dared to break with tradition.

But 1951 was already the midpoint of the century. The break with tradition was several generations old. Since the manifestos of early 20th century art, new definitions of what was and was not art had been evolving.

When, ten years later, I began as an art critic for a small magazine, the post-war art movements were in full swing. But critics still viewed new art within the context of an art historical past. Though not all critics were art historians, most came to the art they wrote about from a traditional point of view. Art was still invariably hung, held, walked around, bought and sold. It came in frames or on pedestals. And we talked about composition, impasto, and subject matter -- elements earlier critics would have recognized. The vision of the past was instilled in us. We had to learn to substitute process for subject matter (but we'd long been accustomed to abstract art).

It might have been harder to use a traditional approach to describe environments and happenings, but art magazines seldom covered such work. Traditional analysis worked for Pop Art. We could talk about the iconography of Johns's ale cans ; Lichtenstein became a sort of modern-day Carpaccio, narrating a story ; Rosenquist's "F-111" covered three walls of a room like a frescoed stanza. "Op" art too was easy : shapes and colors and patterns, safely abstract.

For me, the first time I realized I was on my own and couldn't use a ready-made vocabulary came when I walked into the Stable Gallery and saw a room full of boxes. The show isn't here yet, I thought uneasily. But I knew that wasn't true. The Brillo boxes scattered about the floor weren't supermarket cartons : Warhol's show was open. And I had to come up with a way to describe it and to revise my ideas of what was "art".

Because now art was refusing to stay within traditionally defined boundaries. It had escaped all definitions and was running away, without the help of rules, manifestos, patrons, museums, or even art schools. And it's been running ever since.

Now, at the end of the century, we almost take art's insolence for granted. We no longer look for support in traditional terminology. Composition ? Impasto ? Subject matter ? "Composition" has

become more elusive, especially in works which can be arranged and rearranged. Try to find "impasto" in art which is incorporal, conceptual. For that matter, would anyone try to apply Wolfflin's "linear" versus "painterly" distinctions today ? And "subject matter" now includes almost anything, or nothing. Art is not just about traditional "subjects" or even about the nature of art itself. It includes political statements, rhetoric, private expression, quasi-conscious thought. It doesn't even guarantee to stay around. Performance art goes away when the performance is over. Video art goes away when the power is turned off. Some Fluxus events didn't even have to take place.

For thirty years, we have been taking impermanence for granted. Works appear and disappear. Or are temporary. Or change. Allan Kaprow's happening, "Record", for example, involved building a rock pile and photographing it, later to remove all traces of what had been built, even the photographic images. Nothing left, except, of course, in the minds of the participants. I once reviewed a show where bacteria multiplied and changed color and eventually died. Richard Serra's large works oxidize over time. Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty will wholly disappear. Newer artists use natural materials meant to decay : Meg Webster uses leaves and grass and Patrick Dougherty works with freshly cut maple saplings, which last about two years.

Short-term art. No frames. No pedestals. Mutability isn't new, of course. Art wasn't always meant for museums or collectors. Pageant art was created for single-occasion use. African wall paintings last until the next rainy season. Woodhenge preceded Stonehenge, but, being made of wood, rotted away. But in a world where art and money are closely tied, we are aware that these works won't come up for auction in twenty years' time. Yet they're definitely "art".

Definitions don't work. Manifestos will no longer do. Nor is it so simple as "art" and "non-art". Because art has gone beyond definition and has escaped from art history. It has even moved so far from aesthetics that visual considerations can seem to matter less than philosophical ones. "Beauty" can sound almost frivolous and today may be less valued than "meaning".

Message art has a noble history (think of medieval tympani), but "beautiful" has never been a derisive term - until now. But should messages matter in art criticism ? Is a work of art "better" if we agree with its message ? Has art escaped so completely from definition that it has abandoned aesthetics for polemics ?

In the past, when critics could not accept art within existing definitions, they have resorted to exclusion, denial and ridicule. In 1913, Art News magazine offered $10 to anyone who could explain in fifty words, Duchamp's title, Nude Descending the Stairway. We like to think that we are more open today. If so, we need either to come up with new definitions or to abandon the idea of definition. Or to recognize that perhaps openness and critical acumen conflict.

Gauguin, almost exactly 100 years ago (in 1897), titled his monumental painting, now in Boston, "D'où venons-nous ? Où sommes-nous ? Où allons-nous ?" (Where do we come from ? Where are we ? Where are we going ?). We think we know we came from. And we have a pretty good sense of where we are. But we're not required to be clairvoyant, and we don't really know where we're going. We don't have to know. We don't have to define it, or tell the taxi driver the address. We just have to be willing to go there.

Part of what we, as art critics, do is to look at the new and put it into perspective with the old. Another part of our job is to communicate. It is not the job of critics to proclaim, nor to advance an agenda. We have to look and sort, make sense of what we see, validate, and choose. Finally, it is up to us to sort out "art" and "non-art".

By so-doing, we will have a profound effect on future memory.