Mark Rothko, *White Center*, 1957, o/c, 84" x 72". (Los Angeles County Museum of Art.)

Franz Kline, *The Ballantine*, 1948-1960, o/c, 72" x 72". (Los Angeles County Museum of Art.)

PAINTING AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE WHOLE SELF

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Coming as I do from London, where the sidewalks are called "pavements" and are made of neatly joined, level flagstones, the roughly poured, broken, unpatterned concrete that one walks on in New York is always affecting. My sense of the whole city is colored by that thin, random-seeming covering, a mere temporary shell thrown over the sand and mud which the ancient rocks that jut out of the grass in Central Park seem savagely to ignore. These fissured, pitted sidewalks are treacherous. I keep my eyes down. At the same time I am surrounded by buildings and an ever-changing panorama of reflections. Clouds and sunlight are inverted below the skyline. Roads of light open between the buildings. I am in a state of constant tension between up and down. The juxtaposition throws up a wholly unfamiliar view of man's works. And an unfamiliar view of myself. The city seems open, provisional, the luxurious and ramshackle upshot of certain freedoms which, in my European experience, are nothing but states of mind, or longing, and have no material presence—unless perhaps in childhood memories of treehouses, dammed streams, and im-

provised blockhouses under the kitchen table.

London's pavements seem to impart a sense of thickness and fixity. You walk on them as though the city itself were a building. Cracks and potholes are carefully attended to; surfaces swept. Garbage is less in evidence. Human dereliction is on the whole kept discreetly and perhaps hypocritically out of sight. I find it impossible to dissociate my feelings about the evidence of human misery here from my sense—my taking in—of the sidewalk, and from the ever-present reflections of the sky.

What does any attribute of the outside world mean—what makes it worth commenting upon or isolating or trying to recreate on any level, whether that of art, at one extreme, or merely in fleeting recollection at the end of the day, if not by virtue of one's sense of connectedness with it? What does "whole" or "part" mean, or "open" or "closed," or "hard" or "soft" if such qualities are not cited in truth to our own bodies and our sense of ourselves and our orientation to the world? What would it be like to lose that connecting thread? Indifference, acedia, nausea, boredom, spleen, depression, alienation—they are all names for states characterized first by disjunction, loss of resonance and withdrawal. Of all the textbook signs of depression—cold skin, shallow breathing, slumped posture, weak voice—the crucial one, it seems to me, is lackluster eyes.

Perception functions in the same way for everybody, at least in the mechanical sense. I am not sure that we can do very much with that fact. The achievement of artists who have tried to extend the range of art by addressing themselves to perception at a purely functional level has been extremely limited (I am thinking of artists like Vasarely and Soto). The uses to which perception is put are cultural, and there is abundant material to show how far cultural differences between people shape what they see. Malraux and Gombrich have argued, though from very different angles, that art history is primarily the history of traditions of seeing based on cultural schemata. I suppose that what I am trying to describe—the sense of resonance and reciprocity between my eyes or yours and what we are looking at—lies somewhere between seeing "in the raw" and seeing shaped by culture. It is common experience only in the most general terms.

I can talk about the things I see and about what it feels like to see them, but I can never know what it feels like for you. I cannot get inside your eyes or into the fantasy and interiorization that is the keynote to your singular experience, any more than you can get into mine; yet we can agree on the high importance of firsthand testimony, given and received. Any effort toward a searching, cliché-free account of experience is a cultural increment.

If we could look at a drawing or painting as an object pure and simple (sometimes I think that I can, sometimes not), it must have a quality that I attribute to all objects. It should address me and render itself part of me. But of course other things intervene. The painting plays shifting roles—as representation, as organization—and, above all, as historically defined "work" within the context of art as a whole. Just recognizing a painting as a painting is a cultural action, and as soon as I have done that, everything that is specific in it will start to find a place for itself within the complex that might be termed what-I-know-about-painting. But it will still be there in front of me as an object and will be present for me to take in—with its attributes of size and surface, its open or continuous markings, its textures, pattern and color. And in sum, it will be there as representation.

Representation raises special questions; for whatever a painting alludes to or depicts, the metaphors within it remain unverifiable in their scale and location. I have to take it on its own terms since I cannot verify what it represents, as I can generally verify another kind of object by touching it or maneuvering in front of it or scaling it alongside other things. Nevertheless, as representation, the painting faces me and renders itself up to the reciprocal experience that I have been describing. I am free to refer to its being as object—a rectangle of such and such dimensions, with such and such surface, its open or continuous markings, its pattern and color.

It seems to me that there is a major distinction to be made between this response to it as representation and object on the one hand, and my reading of it as a painting among other paintings, an item in a historical sequence on the other. At one pole, I am facing the painting in the absolute given of the senses; at the other, I am facing it out of an awareness of time and culture—that is a present which is more or less relative, a selected position. One position informs the other, no doubt, back and forth; but the contrast between them seems to me tremendous. I have the sense of different parts of myself being called upon or aroused. Here is one way of putting it: what I see and understand of a painting as a historical item could be—indeed has to be—totally altered by the accession of new information; proof, for example, that what I take to be a Rembrandt is a 19th-century fake, or the information that I am looking at a painting upside down, or that what I take to be a recent work by a certain artist is in fact an old one, or not by him at all but by another artist of whom I have never heard.

But there is no need for my response to it as a physical appearance to be shifted at all. Just as the truth of direct historical position *insists* on a modification, so the truth of direct experience insists on a certain constancy. Every fact, every picture that I see and place in time adds a further detail to the network of my understanding of the art of painting as a totality, rendering the mesh finer. And the sweep that I make with that net will, no doubt, be powered and directed by curiosity and intellectual appetite. It will also be affected by physical confrontation, the painting's address, the nameless sensation which both stimulates hunger and offers fulfillment. On that level, no facts, other than those I can take in at the moment, are germane.

Yet always one is up against factors that tend to split awareness: an overweening attention to art as the enactment of art history; to art as the product of artists, and to artists as the exemplars of more or less mythic types. Such attention seems to be powered by a kind of fear, an anxious desire to contain art within its own boundaries. I am thinking of certain episodes within my own experience.

When in the mid-'50s I first saw canvases by Pollock, Still, Kline and de Kooning, it seemed to me that painting had made a totally new definition of freedom. The structures that I was looking at owed nothing, or so it seemed, to the closed, self-contained, self-consistent notions of composition and pictorial syntax that my experience up to then had taught me to regard as mandatory. These canvases, apparently improvisations on a heroic scale, seemed both more rooted as objects in the material facts of paint and canvas than anything that I had seen before, and at the same time paradoxically more inward. Yet this inwardness had nothing of the willed, whimsical quality that I found intolerable in Surrealism. Inwardness in the New Yorkers had something headlong about it. It was passed over directly in the quality of the attack, the frank acceptance of painterly gesture and virtuosity as form-making factors; through open hesitancies and revisions, and the naked exposure of painting itself as a visible argument. It was carried over, too, in the man-sized scale and the invitation to close viewing and envelopment. Above all it was carried in the sense these paintings gave of being *seen*. Each nuance, each final decision was an episode in a dialogue with the canvas—a dialogue in which the eye faced and took in the visible facts of paint and canvas and the spatial readings built into them. The very terms of vision seemed to be recreated here—even in the matted cat's cradle of Pollock, even in de Kooning's reversals of figure and field. For all their abstractness, these canvases seemed nearer to the great figurative traditions than anything that was being done in the name of abstract art in Europe, and for me at least that was not a mark against them, but the opposite. They were nearer to the figurative tradition, not, obviously, in terms of subject or compositional hierarchies, but in terms of spaces filled with seen forms.

Nonetheless, one was confused. The euphoria of this new experience of painting was touched by anxiety. As always when faced with something new and unfamiliar, it became urgent to form connections. I do not want to get sidetracked into an account of the ways in which New York painting was interpreted by European critics, although it is a fascinating story. Most missed the point completely. A few—Lawrence Alloway in particular—were informed about affairs in New York and became the recognized sources of information. A context was urgently needed. Everybody began reading *Art News*; Harold Rosenberg's famous text of 1952 in which he presented the term Action Painting was on everyone's mind. European art was ransacked for connections. Above all, statements from the artists themselves were collected and discussed like holy texts.

Quite quickly critical values began to accrue round the paintings. They began to speak as documents, as symbols of cultural positions, as statements or events in the history of the present.

Robert Rauschenberg, Installation view, 1968.

Central to the picture that was being formed of this new kind of painting was the idea of the destruction of the past, or of the artist freeing himself from the past in a continually renewed act of improvisation. Intentions were defined, or so we supposed, in the act of painting and not in advance. This suggested an exhilarating atmosphere of freedom in which dogma and stylistic consistencies withered away. (I must emphasize, by the way, that this discussion centered on only a few American artists, the ones who had been shown in Europe. The interpretation was as one-sided as it was romanticized.) "Form, color, composition, drawing are auxiliaries, any one of which can be dispensed with. What matters always is the revelation contained in the act." The words are from Rosenberg's Action essay. The hierarchies of art were well lost: " . . . the end of Art marked the beginning of an optimism regarding himself as an artist."

Whether or not the artists discussed by Rosenberg recognized themselves in this account, it is certain that by the end of the '50s there were "artists" all over the world claiming a place within it: during a short period, it seemed that every art magazine one picked up was full of nothing but counterfeit de Koonings.

Compared with doctors, engineers or business executives, artists are marginal figures. Committed to a kind of self-definition which has no necessary counterpart in society, artists have been exposed to myth-making and endowed with a semimagical role which is both their passport in society and their trap. Theoretically "free" to do anything he wants, the artist is just as likely to fall into a stereotyped role as any respectable man-in-the-street. The difference is the huge symbolic value society chooses to place on this role. It seemed toward the end of the '50s that the work being produced in emulation of New York painting was nothing but a token; the badge, if you like, of a particular role.

The subsequent wave of interest in Duchamp here and in Europe can be seen as a response to this state of affairs. Works like Rauschenberg's *White Painting with Five Panels* (where the onlooker's shadow and the time of day worked on expectations aroused by a white canvas) included the literal collaboration of the viewer in the making of the picture. What matters, to repeat Rosenberg, is always the revelation contained in the act. But to whom did it matter, and to whom was it revealed? The involvement of painters with media outside painting during the '60s—Happenings, dance, film, assemblage, mixed media, light and sound electronics—has its roots, it seems to me, in the mythic concepts of action, and in the problems of audience and context raised by these concepts.

With the part of the viewer (audience) now integral to the work,the work itself could only be one factor in a larger relationship. "The better new work," Robert Morris wrote in a seminal statement

Willem de Kooning, *Woman and Bicycle*, 1953, o/c, 76½" x 49". (Whitney Museum of American Art.)

during the mid-'60s, "takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic." It was inevitable that this position should lead toward a reassessment of the way art objects were handled by commerce. The political situation during 1969-70 and the sudden surge of neo-Marxist enthusiasm clinched matters. A huge question mark was placed over the status of pictures and sculptures, the objects of art themselves. That question mark is still there. And under it the quasi-sanctified autonomy of art can easily be seen as a dubious smoke screen.

Scores of possible scenarios could be picked out from the tangled history of modern, self-reflexive art. What they would have in common would be their drift away from or avoidance of meaning in the firsthand; and their denouement in a sense of sickening ambivalence.

Vision locates the outside world for us. In its primitive stage, in the cradle, it is unfocused and undifferentiated. Boundaries between the inner and the outer appear to be unclear. Space is imprecise and frustrating. The sense of self and of the whole self-contained body as its vehicle is a daily goal. As this goal is gradually won, objects, other beings, are granted their freestanding existence. The achievement is hard-won, to be measured against continual rehearsals of earlier stages where the diffuse, undifferentiated environment threatens to overwhelm or to persecute, or to be available for omnipotent manipulation. Kind and harsh aspects of the environment are separated in an anxious denial of wholeness. When this wholeness is accepted—wholeness of the body-as-self, wholeness of the other, the outer world as freestanding and autonomous—then Good and Bad are allowed to join and to interact. The possibility of love exists—a love which is more than invasion or envelopment, taking or being taken—but which can endure in a steady state because the whole object of feeling can be incorporated, good and bad, with a subject which is itself whole.

It is certain that the drive toward making art has a deep connection with these ancient experiences. Art means nothing to me if it is not symbolic in some way of the self and its struggle to define and stabilize itself vis-à-vis the outside world. Painting means nothing to me if it does not symbolize vision and the part vision plays in the definition of a stable body seen at a distance, a stable self-image, and consequently a stable, freestanding view of the outside world.

Those traditional criteria of *wholeness*, *balance* and so on seem to me to have meaning only as qualities won in the face of opposite forces—fragmentation, collapse, chaos. When we say a painting works, it is as if we are acknowledging that the body is intact, whole, energetic, responsive, alive. This can be said irrespective of the cultural shaping that has been given to it—that is, irrespective of whether it is abstract or figurative, stylistically experimental or conservative.

I see in the clearer recognition of this fundamental life of painting, a possible route out from the tyranny of art history—not art history as a discipline, but as a pseudo subject matter for new art based on the idea that it has (or has not) been done before. Painting has found itself increasingly dependent on critical elaboration from the point of view of instant art history, whether from a social or a formalist position. It has arrived at a point where the content of a work is described only in terms of how one artist relates to another. A maze of such connections is woven into the background of every artist, important or insignificant. It increases the capacity of his pictures to function as cultural messages: messages, that is, issued and received within the corridors of the institutions of art. It elaborates the code but it does little to open up their sensuous presences or their possibilities in the world at large. It is a hopeless position leading to narrower and narrower horizons, and the hopelessness is compounded because criticism has not yet begun to master a language adequate for the real issues: if we are stirred by a painting and attribute values to it as a result, how do we then connect these values to the world outside painting? For to have to choose between the carnal presence of a painting and its cultural status, to look at body and meaning as exclusive alternatives, is absurd, a grotesque dualism. And I do not see how the values that we attribute to art can ever be seriously endorsed until that dualism is overcome.

The language of a criticism such as I imagine

would have to return to the art object again and again, and be ready to accord it its presence in the world of objects. It would need to open itself to visual experience at large and continually reflect upon that experience as upon a highly ramified aspect of life. I am tempted to say that painting would have to fend for itself as a part of that aspect of life, a ramification of it.

The canvas, surely, is present in front of us as a surface. The object and the viewer reciprocally address themselves. Just to do that, to face an empty canvas, opens up vast areas of feeling that go back and back into ourselves, into that which has been internalized from the outside world. And of course, the experience opens up paths which go out and out into culture. The starting point for these resonances is the canvas's frontality, its rectangular nature, its symmetry, confronting our own torsos, addressing our shoulders or our knees, our chests, bellies or foreheads with its flat surface. It has an outward direction, which we match, plunge into or break away from. But it is also surfaces outside us—the skin, the front of another body— a face perhaps, a breast, a presence which we know in ourselves as well as out there. It is a wall, the essential unit of architecture as it is experienced. So it is a sheltering, dividing, containing, ordering boundary. But it is open too, a field, like the sky, like what I see when I close my eyes, like what I see when I open my eyes and there is nothing there. The canvas is both open and closed; infinite yet with precise dimensions; out there, exterior, fixed in space, yet in me and summoning up an array of presences which are interior to me.

Finally, it is recognizably a support for a painting, with all that that implies. That is to say, the moment I face it I am locating it and myself within a grid in which my lifeline crosses, so to speak, with the history of art. Whatever happens on the canvas, given we are dealing with an adult artist, not a child or a primitive, will, of course, be shaped by the possibilities given by the art of the time—even if that shaping takes the form of rejection. This shaping can be described.

What still eludes us is the inner dynamic. One way of describing body feeling and emotion (it has been touched upon by Erikson, Gardiner and others), is by relating them to the libidinal centers defined by Freud: the oral, the anal and the genital. In this way, specific qualities can be described by pairing: the mouth swallows quickly or slowly, sucks or bites, explores inward or outward and so on. The sphincter retains or expels, the genitals intrude or receive. But these are crude and inadequate terms. One has only to try to find words for the experience of, say, holding something between one's teeth to realize how limited words are in their ability to describe physical sensations. And of course, what happens in the area I am talking about is that these primary sensations quickly take on qualities which are experienced in a general way, either all through the body or by displacement to other centers, and the emotions that attend them are spread and transformed. I do not want to leave the impression that I am interested only in the tactile, or that the problems of criticism and the awareness of painting must necessarily concentrate there. In the struggle for the whole self and for the freedom that this entails, the starting point must be the body itself. But freestandingness can only be achieved reciprocally. It is the hallmark of vision that it outstrips the reach of the body. It is the eye which acknowledges distance, separateness, while yet making contact and taking in and incorporating that which is distant. Painting, which is the language of the eye, has the same capacities on a high symbolic level. Color shape, the self-contained interactions, their challenges and resolutions— they happen out there, at a distance, within the space of the canvas. Yet that space is finite, the surface of a particular canvas, and although I can scale myself to it in any way I please, look at it from any range, its dimensions are precise. I can measure it with my hands. It faces me by itself. Yet it answers my body—*is*, in a mysterious way, my body.

Somehow, through these paths, and in ways that I do not pretend to understand fully, painting deals with the only issues that seem to me to count in our benighted time—freedom, autonomy, fairness, love.■

Clyfford Still, *1949 F (PH373)*, 1949, o/c, 80" x 65".

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