

Modus Vivendi, or, The Open Question of Form

Some of those who read this publication or who see the exhibition of which it is a part will recognize that its title is taken from a talk the Dutch-born American artist Willem de Kooning gave at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1951 called "What Abstract Art Means to Me." No one who knows de Kooning's work, with its always slippery, always doubtful relation to such categories as "abstract" or "figurative," would be surprised at the ironic and skeptical tone of the painter's remarks. "Nothing is positive about art except that it is a word," he said. This funny nominalism wound down idiosyncratic discursive pathways that led, eventually, to a surprising dig at Henri Matisse, who many years earlier—in 1908, to be exact—had notoriously compared painting to a "good armchair" in which every "mental worker" could escape fatigue. De Kooning instead insisted, "Some painters, including myself, do not care what chair they are sitting on. It does not even have to be a comfortable one." Painters like himself "are too nervous to find out where they ought to sit. They do not want to 'sit in style.' Rather, they have found that painting—any kind of painting, any style of painting—to be painting at all, in fact—is a way of living today, a style of living, so to speak. That is where the form of it lies."

The dig against Matisse is surprising because the Frenchman, who was devising his glorious paper cutouts at the time, would probably have agreed with most of what de Kooning said. But that's not the only surprising thing in the statement. More puzzling—and to me, more important—is this: What does he mean by calling painting a "way of living" and locating its "form" there? After all, doesn't being a painter mean being the producer of a certain category of objects? It may not be like a nine-to-five job, but still, it doesn't determine where you live, what and how much you eat or drink, your sexual proclivities, your choice of companions, or your political or religious commitments or indifference, does it? So why call it a way of life? And isn't the form of the painting determined primarily by the disposition of colors, lines, and textures on a surface, the evocation of virtual depths and volumes (or their suppression), as well as perhaps the narrative relations among depicted persons and things in the imaginary setting that it bodies forth? If that's so, how can its form be also, let alone essentially, something like the artist's way of life?

Let me confess right away that I am not going to be able to answer these questions here. I intend only to try to convince you that the questions should be asked and left open—that as strange as de Kooning's statement may seem, you should brood on it, perhaps even let it demarcate the horizon of your thinking about art. Remember that de Kooning was not only one of the best painters of the last century but also one of the most intelligent, a thinker of "lucidity and precision," as Rosalind E. Krauss says in her recent book on the artist. It's always a mistake to ignore his words, which are sly, and typically deeper and wiser than they first appear. It's also curious that, on this particular issue, de Kooning was seconded by an artist whom he admired extrava-

gantly but who was a completely different kind of artist, someone whose work was utterly different—though he was likewise a foreigner who found a home in New York. I'm talking about Marcel Duchamp. When asked in a 1966 interview for Belgian television what his "greatest achievement" had been, Duchamp replied:

Using painting, using art, to create a *modus vivendi*, a way of understanding life; that is, for the time being, of trying to make my life into a work of art itself, instead of spending my life creating works of art in the form of paintings or sculptures. I now believe that you can quite readily treat your life, the way you breathe, act, interact with other people, as a picture, a tableau vivant or a film scene, so to speak. These are my conclusions now: I never set out to do this when I was twenty or fifteen, but I realize, after many years, that this was fundamentally what I was aiming to do.

To state the obvious, Duchamp's idea may appear a little clearer than de Kooning's because Duchamp came to the conclusion that the formalization that is proper to artistic activity could be applied somehow to quotidian life. But we should keep in mind that Duchamp's great fiction or artifice at this time was precisely his pretense to have abandoned art making, when all the while he was secretly at work on *Étant donnés*. He couldn't really make his life into art *instead of* producing works of art, but could only live life as art *through* making art. De Kooning, by contrast, never claimed to have found an artistic way of life except by way of making paintings and sculptures. Perhaps making daily life an art was his secret art in the way that making *Étant donnés* was Duchamp's secret. It makes sense: just as every life has its secrets, so does every artwork. For those whose life is art, the two types of secret may well be intertwined.

In any case, what the two artists have in common is the intuition that although their art may well consist in the making of *things*—of paintings, sculpture, whatever—it is also something else besides, something that can only be described as a *modus vivendi*, a way of living. Something I like about Duchamp's use of that Latin phrase is that it makes more evident the distinction between a way of doing things—*modus operandi*—and the broader sense of a way of living. More importantly, though, in comparison with the English phrase "way of living," the Latin one has a much stronger implication that it is not just a question of a self-contained, individual approach to life, but rather a way of living, if not in common, at least in peace with others: a *modus vivendi* often refers to a kind of arrangement by means of which conflicting parties can coexist without their differences breaking into the open by way of outright fighting.

In other words, art as a *modus vivendi* is implicitly political in its implications. These implications are not easy to work out. Nonetheless, if one considers Hannah Arendt's contention in her essay "What Is Freedom?" that politics is action undertaken with "the freedom to call something into

being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known," one might begin to see the implicit connection between the realms of art and politics, since this definition of politics would seem to articulate the aspiration of any artist.

For Arendt, the quality specific to political action is something she calls virtuosity—citing Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*. For her, this is "an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it." Here, I would argue that Arendt's ostensibly reasonable distinction between performing and what she calls "creative" arts is overdrawn. The latter, she says, are those (including painting and sculpture) that "bring forth something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the produced thing possesses an existence of its own," in contrast to political institutions, which never exist independently of the human beings who act in and through them and thus, as it were, perform them. As Arendt explains, "Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action."

As any conservator could have pointed out to Arendt, the supposedly independent existence of works of art is something of an illusion: an ongoing material effort is required to extend the existence of art works into the future. For this reason, the distinction between products of action and products of making is not clear-cut; it is a matter of degree. Arendt imagines that, in what she calls the creative arts, "the creative process is not displayed in public and not destined to appear in the world." In other words, the writer does not write *in public* but presents the results of her writing *to* the public, just as the painter labors in the privacy of the studio to arrive at the works that will later, completed, appear in the gallery. But the distinction is really one of degree rather than of kind. The performing artist will rigorously pursue creative processes that are not made public—not only rehearsals for specific performances, but "practicing," "woodshedding" more generally—and in the modern era will also have the opportunity to produce works with a more independent existence: a musician can make a record, an actor or dancer can be recorded on film or video. By the same token, the creative artist (the painter, the writer) has his or her own ways to manifest the creative process in what appears to be a finished product (the revisions visible in the surface of a painting by Matisse; André Gide publishing the *Journal of the Counterfeiters* as a complement to the novel) and sometimes even makes a performance of the process of creation, as Yves Klein did with his *Anthropometries* or David Antin does with his "talk poems." The actor and the politician are alike, in Arendt's account, in requiring "a space of appearances" in which to display their talents, but this is true of the painter as well, however elusive that personage's appearance there may be.

Moreover, Arendt fails to take into account the viewer's (or the reader's, in the case of a poem or any other literary text) contribution to the work, which would otherwise be unfinished—*active looking*, as it is sometimes called. Here, at the risk of boring a few people who have read me too often, I simply want to repeat a couple of quotations I never tire of reciting. The first is from Walt Whitman, who declared, “The reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does.” And the second, dating from a century later, is from Duchamp: “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.” If Whitman and Duchamp are right, as I believe they are, then Arendt is wrong to overlook how every work of art is a product of *both* what she calls making and action, and therefore, like the state itself, depends on ulterior action to further its existence.

If human endeavor is divided, as Aristotle would have it, into the distinct realms of making, thinking, and action, then the arts—which until modern times were relegated to the realm of making, of artisanship—should instead be thought of as the equivocal or indeterminate realm in which the boundaries between the three realms are rendered porous. Yes, a painter produces an object of a sort, but this object is not in itself complete, because in bringing thought into the space of appearances while reckoning with the effectivity of action in the absence of the actor, it suggests the possibility of a complete mode of life that obviates the division of human activities into separate realms. This life includes, as well, the opposites or absences of making, thinking, and action, however we might name them. It involves floundering, blockage, and waste, unconsciousness, thoughtlessness, and forgetting, passivity, indifference, and hesitation.

Perhaps these negative inflections of experience are even more important than the positive ones. Giorgio Agamben has written recently of how the French educator and psychologist Fernand Deligny, in accounting for his experiences with autistic children, “attempted to scrupulously transcribe on tracing paper the routes of their movements and encounters in the form of what he called ‘lines of drift’ (*lignes d’erre*),” revealing in this way unexpected regularities, “the trace of something else that was not *foreseen* or pre-thought by those doing the tracing nor by those being traced.” In art or politics, we attempt to bring into being something that cannot be known in advance, whereas in everyday life—including the everyday life of artists and political actors—we may be tracing unknown patterns without aspiring to do so, or even while believing that we are simply drifting without direction. Agamben suggests that it would be “an instructive exercise to attempt to mark on the map of the cities where we have lived the itineraries of our movements, which prove to be stubbornly and almost obsessively constant. It is in the tracks of that in

which we have lost our life that it is perhaps possible to find our form-of-life.” I’m sure there have been artists who have bent their efforts in just this direction. In any case, Agamben continues, “Deligny seems to attribute to his *lignes d’erre* something like a political meaning that is prelinguistic and yet collective.”

These reflections inspire Agamben to consider the un-thought, trivial, idiosyncratic domain of personal tastes or inclinations and how they seem to harbor unforeseen significance: “The most idiosyncratic aspect of everyone, their tastes, the fact that they like coffee granita, the sea at summertime, this certain shape of lips, this certain smell, but also the paintings of the late Titian so much—all this seems to safeguard its secret in the most impenetrable and insignificant way,” according to the philosopher, and yet “it is necessary to decisively subtract tastes from the aesthetic dimension and rediscover their ontological character, in order to find in them something like a new ethical territory.” This would be, needless to say, the most un- or anti-Kantian ethics imaginable, an ethics of inclinations (*clinamen*, as Agamben says, borrowing a term from Lucretius) rather than of disinterestedness. In this “modal ontology, the ontology of the *how*,” aesthetics and ethics would coincide—keeping in mind that for all the incompatibilities between the two writers’ thinking, Agamben’s ethics and Arendt’s politics share much of the same territory, that of the space of appearance.

Perhaps it would be opportune here to return to de Kooning and to his time and recall the essay published by Harold Rosenberg shortly after de Kooning delivered his address on abstract art. “The American Action Painters” does not mention de Kooning or any other artist by name, but the critic’s thoughts have long been assumed to have been in large part inspired by de Kooning. Rosenberg is concerned with an art that might—to borrow Arendt’s words—“call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known.” Rosenberg calls this, quite simply, “original work demonstrating what art is about to become,” art that does not simply look different but asserts a different “function” from that which came before. This work, he asserts, does not arise from any “linkage of practice with terminology” and—like the patterns discovered by Deligny in the tracings of individual paths of wandering—in the work of the artists Rosenberg was interested in, “what they think in common is represented only by what they do separately.” And what these artists wanted—you know what’s coming because the statement is very famous—is painting “as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event” and therefore inextricable from the biography of the artist.

Rosenberg’s words aroused considerable controversy, even disdain. Mary McCarthy tartly dismissed Rosenberg’s essay with the empirically incontrovertible quip, “You can’t hang an event on the wall, only a picture.” Soon, artists such

as Allan Kaprow would take the same idea in a different direction: Beginning from something like Rosenberg's idea of art as action, and implicitly agreeing with McCarthy that picture and event are incompatible, they would eschew the picture and stage the event. But however critical McCarthy she may have been of Rosenberg, the true target of her retort was the artist—however unnamed—who was losing the distinction between making and acting. In her view, the painter should stick to making pictures and leave action to the men of politics. It may seem strange to put not only de Kooning but even that most politically tacit of artists, Duchamp, in the camp of those who would let art intrude into the realm of politics, but in their shared understanding of art as, not the making of pictures, but the cultivation of a *modus vivendi*, they were among those who would violate McCarthy's canon, which was also that of her friend Arendt.

It's true that, by the time an event gets onto the wall, it has become something like a picture—and yet the painter's art is precisely that of producing a picture that becomes, again, in the eyes of the alert beholder, an event. It would be risky to say that anyone has found his or her *modus vivendi*, but that some of us are seeking it through art is very much part of what de Kooning called its form and what Rosenberg called its function. That's exactly what makes it uncomfortable—why the style of such art is always just the one that makes it so hard to “sit in style.” For the painter, that discomfort, that unease is painting (or at least the material of painting) whenever it is experienced, whether in the studio or elsewhere. The poet John Godfrey once put it this way: “What goes through your brain when you're walking around is like paint. You're going to use it when you do your work.”