

The Picture—Terra Incognita

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Terra incognita: the space is vibrant with reality and yet, as to its essentials, it eludes, like a hypothesis, all the modes of knowledge that I have at my disposal, and it appears that it ought to remain unaffected by every research procedure, whether intuitive or discursive, indirect or direct, whatever its process of creation, through experience, conscience or reasoning. Moreover, I have to speak without the protection of any critical distance, since the question that has been put to me concerns the status of the unknowable in my own work. This means that we are talking about a testimony that already implies the transgression of several taboos. During a radio interview, Matisse once explained: "I said to my young students: Would you like to paint? First of all, you will have to cut off your tongue, because this decision deprives you of the right to express yourselves in any other way than with brushes."¹ If what the painter wants to say could be expressed in words, he would be a novelist, a poet, or a philosopher rather than a painter. Further, I believe that there is an antinomy today—and perhaps even a kind of open conflict, a permanent tension—between painting and writing. It is partly this conflict on which my research is based. Everything that follows should therefore be taken with caution. These are sketches and random ideas; extracts from reflections haphazardly jotted down during my work, arranged in some order only for the purposes of this article.

Painting involves the project of providing an answer to what we lack the words to *say* about certain aspects of our direct experience of the world—aspects that cannot be formulated, that cannot be communicated, that are even difficult to perceive; experiences for which words and syntax seem to fail, but which, nevertheless, refer to no rare or exceptional phenomena. Painting and sculpture attend to the theater of reality, of nature and of everyday mem-

ory—to matters of fact that have become invisible by dint of their visibility: the depth or the emptiness of a look, the abundance of some foliage, the enigma of sexual identity, the beauty or strangeness of a body, of a face, of walking, of a gesture, the intense blue of the sky, the sand and the soil, the hot air that vibrates over the ruins of a town, the energy of a burst of laughter, the harmony of things bathed in the late afternoon light, etc. For the painter, these questions invariably return to the problem of his own means: what is painting? Well before the modern techniques of *mimesis* (photographic reproduction, for instance) appeared, more consciously since then, to the degree that they appropriated not only form but also color and movement, painting has been led to ask itself about itself, about its relationship to the world, its means and its ends. Several studies have already noted the coincidence between the diffusion of daguerreotype and calotype, as well as the formal ruptures that appeared in the history of painting around 1850. It remains to interpret this reactive evolution up to the present. Ever since Ektachrome made possible the accurate reproduction of colors, what remained for painting? Its “materiality” no doubt, and thereby its pictoriality.

Success or Failure of a Picture

What is it that I do not know about painting; where, precisely, must I risk going to discover what painting is? A strange itinerary where I will try out new techniques for reproducing an object that I do not as yet know or to evoke an emotion that I detect, moving forward like a blind man, without railing, without proof, and at the risk of deceiving myself completely, in search not of the probable that I could deduce and foresee, but of what will impose itself on the eye, mine and others'. Just as the subject of the picture is often as obscure as undeniable, so for the painter the success or failure of a work depends on a kind of evidence impossible to formulate, perhaps even unknowable. How does a painter know that he has succeeded? Through a sense of child-like elation in the face of what he had neither expected nor hoped for: the conviction of a miraculous equilibrium that legitimates and liberates his object;

that produces a sensation of happiness, but what also contains a kind of dread. When the painter finds the right answer to the question that really was unknown to him until then, he feels a kind of “wind-fall;” a fortunate error of calculation that produces the desired result. The successful work displays a hybrid affirmation: as regards the painting, something new or particular in the form that seems to induce a kind of unformulated rule; as regards the vision of the world, the active representation of an emotion, a unique way of sensing that will reveal itself to the viewer. However, for the painter, this affirmation always provokes as well a rather painful new interrogation: what I now see in this object from which I must neither remove nor add anything is nevertheless in no way something acquired, only something that signifies. Moreover, what I just achieved in this picture gives me no certainty for the immediate future of my work. I can and even must reproduce what I know (the gesture of this new technique, this exemplary break with tradition), but I know beforehand that this ritual and this example will not suffice to grant me access once again to what I do not know—to that absolute (or death) intimated by the picture—and that I have achieved, so it seems, in the preceding work as a result of a fortunate mistake. Matisse expressed himself clearly on all this: “There are,” he wrote, “no rules to establish, much less useful recipes, unless one is making industrial art. How, after all, could it be otherwise since, when the artist creates something good, he has involuntarily surpassed himself and no longer understands himself. What matters is less to ask oneself where one is going as to try to live with the material, to fill oneself with all its possibilities. The personal contribution of the artist can always be measured by the way he creates his material and even more by the quality of its ‘interconnections.’”²

The secret of the work is instantly lost; if it remains present in the object, as at its inception, it cannot be retained; it eludes whoever would rework the principle in another object, and the procedure cannot be reproduced. Hence the “trepidation” of which Matisse also speaks: “One day Derain said to me: ‘For you to paint a picture is as if you were risking your life.’ ... I have never started a picture without some trepidation.”³ Whatever led the solid Derain to think of it, this disquiet is fundamental for the painter.

Each time the given adventure has to start again from zero, in a very uncomfortable way, beginning with a sense of dread that has to be conquered: an emptiness, a poverty which, paradoxically, are perhaps most difficult to overcome within oneself and most necessary for the act of painting. There is a kind of ethics or, to put it more modestly, a moral gymnastics that is no doubt peculiar to painting and to the solitude of the studio, but that can also resemble the scenario of a mystic. It is necessary to open that emptiness, to reappropriate for oneself a form of total desire for the visible starting from a neutral point where the passing-by of dozens of mental images of possible works can begin. I know nothing of these images except that some of them, half-perceived, produce inside me, without warning, the idea of an expansion, which seems to correspond physically with a desire for existence that wants to become concrete and to communicate itself. To become aware of this emptiness is not always easy or agreeable, but without that awareness work becomes virtually impossible.

The example of a recently successful picture comes to mind. Knowing full well that it is a dangerous game, I may still want to retrace my steps along the path that I have already covered, in order to find and explore the same secret spot at the end of the path (at the moment of writing imposes itself on me the image of a garden surrounded by old walls whose extraordinary opulence I glimpse through a wrought-iron gate). Unable to reach it, the painter searches at least to explore the main roads and the side roads that lead to it. Hence no doubt the importance in painting of serial work, of the tireless return to that same motif, and the enigma of sketches made *après coup*, subsequent to the work itself. But the risk is great of not finding the little door to this disquieting and familiar Garden of Eden, of circulating instead in its vicinity with a quick enough feeling of disgust at applying old formulas, at plagiarizing oneself, at losing one's time and soul, that is, at diverging irreversibly from the marvel as if this marvel must always remain the effect of a happy coincidence, of an error of direction or of a chance that depended precisely on no prior knowledge and that did not, finally, require any effort. For that is what is so strange: nothing easier than the gesture through which the work, all of a sudden, takes on form and reality; the gesture is self-evident, it shows no

trace of fatigue or hesitation: it may have prepared itself over a long time; one may even have had presentiments of it or have searched for it; but at the moment it happens, it all works out, and then it's done, and that's it. The thing becomes evident, and you come out of it happy and as if relieved of the object.

However, it would be useless trying artificially to reproduce, in another picture, this gesture or that progression that worked so well in the previous picture. Even if it deals with the same subject, the same approach in terms of technique, design and colors, it is no longer the same canvas, I am no longer the same person, the moment of grace will not return or, if it does, it will occur unexpectedly and in a totally different way. It is useless to build upon what might have happened. Now I might well be entirely destitute, and my search might even hasten this denouement. By dint of searching without finding, a definitive, a mortal doubt may insinuate itself *ad nauseam* in work that has now turned inept. However, a miracle of this nervous dialectic, that very distress (the sense of having become a non-entity, no longer capable of doing anything good) may become what will save the picture: the sense of impotence, the complete loss of confidence in oneself can also mark the beginning of something valuable. At the moment when my work disgusts me, when I know that I will only do what I already know, then I may experience such a loathing of what I am making, followed by such a sensation of indifference or void that once again, in the gesture of destroying it all, all at once the image of the little door, luminous and open wide, reappears before my eyes. It was the erasure of the picture, its total rejection, that the picture was waiting for: as if it wished that the painter had no way out, that he was forced, as a last resort, to risk everything. It is at that very moment that the unformed picture, beaten down by a last denial, in an instant finds its balance, as if issuing in a precise cry that ruptures the fabric of time. It requires only the ability to stop the murderous hand at the precise moment when it blindly gives form to its fury at having failed. The trouble is that nothing can be feigned in all this: salvation only comes if I am truly persuaded that there is nothing more to hope for, that there is really nothing to be saved in this picture. It is out of the desire to have done with the unbearable that the hand deceives itself

and, in the midst of its destruction, manages to interrupt its work—so at the very instant that it would throw everything into confusion, by that very gesture gives the picture its soul. Is this drama, this farcical tragicomedy, that fortunately plays itself out without witnesses in the solitude of the studio, the only way to attain the form? This is what I do not know as far as the process is concerned. This scenario is provoked by a confused act of memory, perhaps a rhetorical and dramatic rationalization constructed *après coup* and completely illusory. One forgets almost completely one's distress. As it looks to me, this is not always a question of an event in the strict sense. It is often a progressive chain of mistakes, it is "wrong moves," the happy surprises that follow each other as if in a dream, at an accelerated pace, apart from all intellectual control. There remain, by virtue of the exception that proves the rule, the far more numerous examples of dead canvases for which this has not happened, and for these "miracles" there is the confused memory of a kind of disquiet and depression that dissolves suddenly or by jolts, replaced by an irrepressible hilarity (a laugh, a mad laugh, a smile), something like a baroque and compulsive reaction that, viewed from the outside, might perhaps resemble, apart from being comic, the jubilant assumption which Lacan refers to in the mirror stage.

Narcissus and the Mirror of the Real

Painting, no doubt, like all fields of artistic self-realization, has something to do with the self of the artist, with the archaic structures of personality, with that unknowable that constitutes the self. "It is what I am unknown to myself that makes me who I am." (Paul Valéry in *Monsieur Teste*) And that is why, if the work is good, the most banal landscape, the most derivative still life will always be a kind of powerful self-portrait, as is the case, for example, with most of Cezanne's late work. Like a mirror, the successful painting is one in which I observe the reality of my own image in sensing at once its indisputable affirmation (I am, I exist) and its loss: I recognize myself, and nonetheless I am out there, behind that cold and inert surface, forever separated from myself. But if

all the figures in my painting reflect myself, it is according to a formula that, in a successful picture, also allows *others* to undertake the same journey to encounter their own images and with that same affirmation and loss. Unknowable, what creates the work, or the beautiful, and in that enigma the nature of this satisfaction that the spectacle of the picture produces is likewise unknowable. This enigma is all the more troubling because the picture, in its specular force generally presents no visible analogy to the body of the painter or to that of the viewer: it is reality—a sky, a cloud, a landscape, a portrait, a geometric shape, some signs—that take the place of a Narcissistic reflection. Or rather, it is by means of the picture's reality that the world becomes conscious of its visible reality. Speaking of the blue water of Van Gogh's "Pont de Langlois,"⁴ Antonin Artaud remarked: "The bridge from which one would like to dip one's finger into the water, in a movement of violent regression to a state of childhood from which one is constrained by Van Gogh's enormous grip. The water is blue. It is not a blue of water. The suicidal fool passed that way and he returned to nature the water in the painting. But who gave it to him to begin with?"⁵ And about "La Chambre à coucher de Vincent" he said: "It was surely Van Gogh's fault that the color of the comforter was so well executed, and I cannot see what weaver could have transposed there the untellable texture, in the way that Van Gogh succeeded in transposing from the depth of his brain onto his canvas the red of such an untellable glaze." And it is true that we can no longer see a sunflower in nature without viewing it through Van Gogh's eyes. It is the painting that makes this reality visible. Klee said, more calmly, that the goal of painting is not to reproduce reality, but to make the visible visible.

The picture stages neither reality nor the self, but a state of absolute tension between the two: a moment of attention that ties the one to the other in the uniqueness of an exchange. At that moment, the impression of being outpaced and dispossessed takes shape in the painter who has succeeded in figuring this experience, such that his canvas no longer presents the image of the thing observed, nor the trace of a personal gaze on it, but instead the structure by which the very secret of the thing is rendered visible. The space of the painting is the unknowable or all that can be

known, the unity of object-subject captured in the most radical form of its singularity, something like the knowledge of the third category that Spinoza evoked. Unity, oneness, and lacuna—the process of expansion and of longing that is in the picture would be like a mirror in which I recognize myself through the things and through the postulate of an infinity of gazes in which I erase myself. Narcissus in painting is impersonal, just as Flaubert wanted to be impersonal in literature: not deprived of his personality, but open to the experience of fusion by which the self empties itself, universalizes itself, and becomes capable of letting itself be completely traversed by the singularity of light, of matter and of forms that captured the eyes. The process of this fusion no doubt belongs to a limit experience in its original relation that unites the consciousness of being in the world with its visual horizon, and in this sense probably belongs to a phenomenological unknown; but it also brings into play the most secret resources of the unconscious, the grammar of drives: among other things, the modalities of that exchange between figurability and enunciation which allows, in dreams and in the imaginary, a permanent and reciprocal see-saw effect between acoustic or written signifiers of a language and spontaneous visual fantasms.

The Illegible as a Work of Art

“Art moves through things; it traverses the real as well as the imaginary. Without hesitation, art plays with the last realities and nevertheless surpasses them in a stroke. Just as a child imitates us in his games, so in the game of art we imitate the forces that created and that create the world. ... The genesis, as a formal movement, constitutes the work’s essence. ... *To write* and *to design* are identical in their foundation.”⁶ The essence of my work in painting and sculpture bears on the problematic resemblance and on the archaic dimension of this “foundation.” For abstract thought, the substance of the sign is invisible or unimportant. For the painter the sign contains a powerful coefficient of opacity inherent to its substance, in the energy of its tracing and its material props. It is the unknowable dimension of what leads to the known, the

forgotten secret of all the monuments of memory: something that cannot be formulated, that testifies and that recounts, from the beginning, the improbable human obstinacy to designate the real. The memory of borders, inscriptions that cannot be deciphered, codes that are lost, the gigantic shipwreck of cultures—the painting of the sign wants to give voice to those billions of dead without whom we would not exist. The sign cut into stone, traced on parchment codices, inscribed in the palimpsest of cities constitutes a kind of second-degree nature, a supernature that is nothing other than written civilization, the history of humans on this planet. Long memory, short memory: ten thousand years, four hundred generations at the most. On closer inspection, painting and sculpture have always given considerable place to signs and inscriptions, but it is a place that until quite recently has been forgotten by art history and criticism.⁷

At the beginning of the 1970s, under the influence of that semi-real and semi-imaginary Japan of which he had dreamed in the *Empire des signes*, Roland Barthes thought he discerned a semiotic violence in the West. Where a civilization of ideograms or of calligraphy fully preserves the gestural part of the sign and adds to its meaning that useless and sensual physical excess, Western culture testifies that it is “in our interest to believe, to affirm, to maintain scientifically that writing is only the ‘transcription’ of articulated language, the instrument of an instrument. It is a chain along which the body disappears.”⁸ On the one hand, ours is a civilization that takes account of the individual and of differences, respectful of the body, coded, yet infatuated with the superfluous; on the other hand, it is a civilization that is coldly instrumental, that leaves nothing behind, and founded on the rigors of a merciless struggle to master significance; one understands how fanciful this opposition may be. But it allowed Barthes to turn our view of the sign upside down: “The semiography of Masson has told us what is crucial in the actual theory of the Text: that writing cannot be reduced to a simple function of communication (of *transcription*), as the historians of language claim. ... the painter helps us to understand that the truth of writing lies neither in its messages nor in the system of transmission that it constitutes for signification, ... but in the hand that presses down, traces, and moves, that

is to say *in the body that strikes* (that enjoys) ... This is what Masson's work tells us: that for writing to manifest itself in its truthfulness (rather than its instrumentality), it must be illegible."⁹ What Barthes discovers in illegible writing and what he alone until now has defined with such clarity, is that there is no question whatsoever of any plastic "anomaly," of haphazard artistic "distraction," but on the contrary, that here is a fundamental way of painting, "already practiced by Klee, Ernst, Michaux and Picasso," not to mention Schwitters, and whose disturbing logic, according to Masson, stubbornly haunts the work of Réquichot, Steinberg, and Twombly, but also of Jasper Johns, Tápies, and many others. It is the logic in which my own work is embedded. What passed unnoticed was the paradoxically desiring and erotic aspect in this work of scriptive jamming that deconstructs the better to explore the sensual immanence of the sign. Contrary to appearances, that question raised by illegible literature finds itself at the antipodes of so-called "conceptual" art where Barthes merely saw an impasse, according to an analysis about which one might have various reservations, but which nonetheless permits, by way of antiphrase, to elucidate this tension between painting and language which I (pro)posed as constitutive to me for the act of painting: "In so-called conceptual art (reflexive art), there is in principle no place for enjoyment. ... That is the consequence of such purification: art is no longer phantasmic; there remains a scenario (because something gets shown), but that scenario lacks a subject: operator and reader can no more put themselves into a conceptual composition than the speaker of a language can place himself in a dictionary. All of a sudden, all criticism collapses, for there is nothing more to thematize, to turn into poetry, to interpret; *literature is foreclosed at the same moment when there is no more painting*. Art comes to take up its own theory; ... desire having been expelled, discourse returns in full force; art becomes *chatty* the very moment it stops being erotic. Ideology and its error are removed, to be sure; but the price that has to be paid is that of *aphanisis*, the loss of desire—in a word, castration ..."¹⁰

In other words, there is certainly a conflict between painting and language; but that confrontation is one of desire and seduction. Literature, lively writing, coincides with the emergence of

the desire to say something: it is the textualization of this drive. So too, painting appears only in the desire to give shape to an enigma offered to the language which will interpret it. What is called writing, for example writing on painting, starts at the moment the object that provoked the drive to speak succeeds in expressing itself in a first verbal phantasm that resembles it in the singular inflexion of a language that gives birth to it again in the guise—at once intellectual, sensual, and transmittable—of the desire for/to desire. This is what Roland Barthes meant on the subject of painting, on this physical connection between painting and language. Now, what was true twenty years ago, is perhaps even more so today. With hand-writing progressively disappearing from our daily habits, replaced by text, keyboard and scriptural activities that are entirely mediated by machines and networks, a painter's sketch may soon be the only space for acting out the ancient gestures of writing: a space of pure graphic pleasure and of the hand's performance along the borders of the legible and the visible, where the sacred meaning of the sign may be recovered—a new kind of hieroglyph, carrying the memory of the ancient world, a memory for tomorrow.

Notes

1. Henri Matisse, *Ecrits et propos sur l'art*, Paris, 1972.
2. Quoted by Gaston Diehl in *Peintres d'aujourd'hui*, Coll. Comoedia-Charpentier, June 1943.
3. Quoted by Florent Fels, *Henri Matisse*, Paris, 1929.
4. Van Gogh, *Le Pont de Langlois*, March 1888, oil on canvas, Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.
5. Antonin Artaud, *Van Gogh ou le suicidé de la société*, Kra, 1948, new ed. Gallimard.
6. Paul Klee, "Philosophie de la création", in: *Théorie de l'art moderne*, Paris, 1964; orig. publ. as *Das Bildnerische Denken*.
7. Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture*, Geneva, 1969.
8. Roland Barthes, "Réquichot et son corps," preface to *Oeuvre de Bernard Réquichot*, Ed. de la Connaissance, Brussels, 1973; (*L'Obvie et l'Obtus*).
9. Idem, "Sémiographie d'André Masson," preface to the catalogue of the exhibition "André Masson", Tours, Galerie Jacques Davidson, 1973 (*L'Obvie et l'Obtus*).
10. Idem, "Réquichot et son corps," see above n. 8.