

Whose picture is it now?

The artist's choice

To be a pervading, guiding and prophetic presence
To reference and withdraw, leaving only a 'field' of signs and traces
To make mechanical reproductions for a mass audience
To arrange signs, establish references and move on

Before modern art could come into its own, declared Andre Malraux, the art of historical fiction with its stories and its politics had to pass away.ⁱ It had to pass away because a new subject was ready to come onto the scene, and this new subject was the presence of the artist. Malraux was making way for a new technology also, in the form of photography. This was going to create not only a new art form, but also to give 'voice' and visibility to many old ones. Historical works could be seen alongside contemporary ones, and history would no longer know which was which, or if it was going backwards or forwards.

Walter Benjamin had pondered on these events. He knew that mechanical reproduction would detach the artwork from its 'domain of tradition', and that detachment would endanger the uniqueness of the work and its authenticity as bestowed by an acknowledged author. Detachment from tradition could, however, be an 'emancipation'.ⁱⁱ It could bring art to the 'masses', who would respond with their own versions of history. Viewers could 'reactivate' the original according to their own significations.

Roland Barthes argued that photography could be left to the advertisers and the purveyors of popular culture. Art was still the province of artists, but it was a deserted province. The presence of a single artist to produce art was not required. A single presence was never going to create a new, post-modern speaking place for art.ⁱⁱⁱ That would have to come from transactions with history – transactions carried out with the help of photography perhaps! The artist could make some referential remarks, arrange a few signs and then walk away, sit back, drink coffee and leave history to itself. Transaction between art and artists could be mediated through the viewer.

Foucault was not going to abandon art completely to history, or to the masses. He proposed that the author be permitted at least a 'function'. There had to be a 'source' of artistic expression, and not just a random scattering of signs and traces. The author/artist was no longer a prophetic presence speaking in transcendent tongues, but at least there could be someone to arrange the signs, and to take some sort of ownership and responsibility for the outcome.

In *Tilleules* the artistic presence – in negative form - dresses in an artist's coat, makes references to figure-in-landscape genres, to originating, subjective, expressionistic authorship - and walks away. Is she walking away? Walking forwards? Just walking in the woods. Walking to introduce her new painting to the viewer, or walking on to her next work – leaving the current one to history, to viewer and Kirchner.
regards 1 - creates separate spaces - separates art from artist and viewer. Who looks, and at whom? Artist or viewer. In the 'painting', figures ride bicycles over torn, collaged, cubist newspaper. Pre-existing texts speak of their own 'unauthored' history – signs to be brought together in the future – and the past – leave it to history, but leave some space and subjectivity for Kandinsky.

regards 2 - more torn newspapers, with figures floating and dancing on them in their own disconnected, reconnected space-time frame, with Matisse. Torn signs for them, for us, for the Fauves, for now and for later. The artist-viewer disconnects, looks sideways, and defers.

The artist begins one of several coffee breaks in *Sydney Grancey*. In her imagined frame, two figures contemplate their isolation. They stare into space – painted figures in search of a painter. The author-artist has written, but the text is unreadable. It references to Abstract Expressionism and to Pop Art, but the artistic presence has lost contact.

Pop and cubist-collage continue into *robe rouge a fleurs*. The figure of a child is lost and confused, surrounded by more signs and traces than she can make sense of. Where to start connecting them? The artist has left completely, abandoning her and the viewer to Modernism, Post-modernism, Cubism and Abstraction.

In *Drinking coffee Fridays* the coffee ritual returns. The artist sits in front of a work that makes reference to Bridget Riley's ribbons of vibrating colours. The figure of the artist is in photographic negative, but exercising a presence in the picture space. But still, she looks away. Behind her is a figure, contained in another space trying to attract the attention of the artist – to establish a connection. But she is left to her own private space, and to the visual deceptions and receptions of Optical Art.

The artist reappears, but as a contour drawing in *Gotham Fridays*. This time she is in her studio, acknowledging that artist and work can occupy the same creative space. There is at least the suggestion of an ownership connection between the artist and the work on the wall. The signifying references are to Tachisme and Abstract Expressionism – with their emphasis on gestural strokes and the physical actions of the artist. Physical presence at last? Only in signifying form.

In *Shoes, Forrest Place* two children ride their tricycle through a painted assemblage of shoes. Genres and histories are all in the same space together. The shoes have histories as shoes, as an assemblage, and now as a painting and an electronic image at the same time. No wonder the children are looking for the right ones to wear. The artist has moved on, leaving histories to refer only to other histories, and for questions about ownership of the work to continue as questions. Whose picture is it now?

ⁱ Malraux, A.,(1953). *The Voices of Silence*. (trans. S. Gilbert). Reissued 1978 by Princeton University Press, p.100.

ⁱⁱ Benjamin, W. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. (trans. H. Zhon in Benjamin, *Illuminations*). Reproduced in *art in modern culture*, Francis Frascina, & Jonathan Harris (eds.). Phaidon Press in association with the Open University, pp.297-307.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barthes, R. (1968). The Death of the Author, in *Image Music Text*. (trans. S. Heath). London: Fontana, pp. 142-148.

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