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DAVID SALLE: THE TRIUMPH OF
ARTIFICIALITY, THE SHOCK OF THE COMMONPLACE *

Carla Schulz-Hoffmann

In the past fifteen years there were hardly any American names to be found in the vanguard of internationally leading younger artists—that is to say, not even on the American marketplace. The two exceptions, Julian Schnabel and David Salle, were indeed propagated all the more vehemently, which imbued the two of them with an exotic aura on the extremely European-dominated scene. Today, now that we have a certain historical distance to catchwords like «New Expressionism» or «Transavanguardia», both of these artists are in any case among the established notables; scorned or accepted, but by all means firmly entrenched and not overlooked by the museums.

And from this perspective, we can discern—at least as far as David Salle is concerned—that, like many of his generation in Europe, he was always too much of an individualist to have confirmed to the preordained principles of any group or movement. He is in fact an individualist par excellence, even though, to a greater degree than almost any other painter, his subject-matter is the ordinary, the commonplace, and even though he advocates an eclectic style, lavishly helping himself from the storehouse of classical art, highbrow culture, and subculture. If we take the expression coined by an Italian critic literally, «Transavanguardia» seems to apply particularly well to Salle, who, in a manner of speaking, from a position outside the avant-garde, blithely has the avant-garde at his disposal.

For all that, Salle's «synthetic» art reveals a through-and-through American distinctive pictorial grasp. The equivalence in principle of all styles and themes, the mixture of sophisticated intelligence, naïveté and wit, the lack of respect for the revered great cultural figures of history, the brazen treatment of sacrosanct myths and traditions, the proximity of prudishness and perversion, along with a simultaneous melodramatic undertone, result in a combination almost unthinkable in Europe.

The peculiar discrepancies in Salle's works, the combination of utterly dissimilar stylistic elements, reveal an attitude of mistrust toward all «absolute» truths. Salle's polarities have their formal origin in his roots in the realm of conceptual color-field painting associated with Richard Diebenkorn. The early works clearly give away this affinity and the conceptual point of departure. They are devoid of any artistic personal note¹; they appear to be neutral, often childishly naive, in a way comparable to the early work of Sigmar Polke, with whom Salle is also linked by an intellectual kinship to Dada and the surrealism of a Francis Picabia. That which is surprising and new, as with Picabia before him, does not lie in the style, but in the substance and manner of presentation. The repertoire of images is evidence of the artistic «personal signature»; diversity and incongruity are signs of his individuality.

Styles are used as assets—here too, a similarity to Polke or to Gerhard Richter as well—and serve as collage elements, employed as direct quotations. However, whereas Richter's works are sometimes abstract and sometimes representational, Salle quotes everything lumped together: abstraction and representationalism, photorealism and dripping in a single painting, side by side and inside each other. It is a method that goes beyond the cubists' endeavor to de-

monstrate the artificiality of art: every painted figure, whether abstract or objective, is in a false relation to reality—yet true within the scope of art. Salle applies this theory, which primarily concerns form, to the facet of subject-matter as well, by placing contrary and clashing themes side by side and giving them equal value. He does not provide us with any unequivocal possibility of interpreting the painting's subjects, but dwells in self-contradiction, consciously contravening himself—a method influenced by Picabia and Magritte, and especially by Jasper Johns. A figure may be abstract in form, in content, or in both at the same time, and its meaning may vary.

Neither the diverse visual metaphors nor the fragments of words and banal phrases found in earlier works conjoin to compose a comprehensive whole—not even in connection with the seemingly significance-fraught titles. Only at first glance is this method comparable with Magritte's perplexingly enigmatic paintings, which are open to unriddling with a bit of detective-like mental scrutiny. With Salle, on the contrary, nothing is conclusive; everything remains fragmentary. By means of familiar images such as his overlavish cribbings from European art we are lured into what seems to be clear sailing, only to notice all too soon that the assemblage of specific quotations resists any attempt at interpretation as a continuous narrative. We are presented with pictorial collages whose individual parts in themselves may be quite meaningful indeed, but whose interrelationships remain incomprehensible.

For example, *Coral Made* (1985) consists of two large sections, clearly disparate in form as well as in content. At the left, painted in hues of green, grey and black, we have a group of figures based on a photograph by Magritte². They stand in a curious relationship to each other. The man at the left in disputation; the woman in the middle points at him aggressively with her index finger as if with a weapon; the woman in the foreground turns away defensively, fearfully. In front of that we see a target done in the style of Frank Stella. At the right, an irregular abstract color form overlays silk-screen prints of photos of nudes; supplementing this section we have a childlike precisely drawn portrait sketch and a pasted-on picture of a dog. An interrelationship between the individual elements is hardly discernible. Not even the title offers us any clue. «Coral made»—Peter Schjedaahl suggests a reference to Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *Tempest*³—might possibly imply «fragility» or «vulnerability» and could therefore be associated with the frailty of the relations between the persons portrayed, relations obviously ridden by tensions. Scarcely any further correlations can be extrapolated and even the compositional structure remains strangely disparate.

This skepticism toward established truths along with his probable fear of revealing his innermost self leads to a method of unmitigated artificiality, and, in a second step, to an apotheosis of painting-for-painting's-sake, whether it be conceptual or depictive. The only clear and distinct thing about these paintings is the technical execution, the conceptual lucidity, or the artistic gesture.

This becomes particularly evident in the manner of depicting the nude figure, the leading motive in Salle's entire

œuvre. Although they are borrowed from the usual clichés of pornographic portrayals and are often seen from the perspective of the voyeur or the peep-show, these nudes have an effect that is totally devoid of stimulating eroticism. Instead of that, they turn into abstract pictorial forms, such as in *Pure Difference* or cold demonstration objects, as in *Saltimbanques* or *Gericault's Arm*. In any case, they are without exception reduced to pure artificiality, abstract quotations that only retain a secondary trace of their erotic radiance.

On a second level, this unquestionably applies to the message as well, as the postulation of a slick and perfectly styled eroticism that is marketed as a product, just like those on the cram-filled shelves of the supermarkets, and thereby –like the can of Campbell's soup in pop art a while back– attains the status of art. Nevertheless, the factor that is more decisive is the role the figures play as abstract pictorial elements only suggestive of bearers of meaning, but which in the final run only mean emptiness.

It is ironic that this thereby revives the traditional form of academic nude painting with its self-complacent indulgence in the most artificial contortions possible and eccentric perspectives (e.g. *Fooling with Your Hair* and, just as formerly in the case of the academicians, oversteps the bounds and becomes comical.

In addition, the scenery in Salle's paintings, as frigid as it is manneristic, has much to do with his fondness of the 1950s, expressed not only in the furniture and design elements, but also in the often garish color schemes and the parts illuminated by cold neon lighting. The American middle-class ideal of «nice and clean», the sleek form, the perfect surfaces, all take on something monstrous and oppressive in Salle's works. The most hidden desires, secret longings, sexual obsessions, are deprived of any intimacy, are dragged into the light and thereby enlarged into an overdimensional format to such an extent that they become objects of public display. For example, the five-meter wide painting *The Tulip Mania of Holland* by its hugeness alone transfers the peep-show into the sphere of general availability. Simultaneously however, the distorted perspectives, the placement of the nudes as on a dissecting table, generates distance anew and an atmosphere of melancholy and despair that encircles the observer.

The degradation of women to objects of lust, their debasement to commodities proffered downright to voyeurs –this massive reproach made to Salle by feminist circles is only justified if one abstracts the ambiance of these paintings and presents nothing but the superficial description as evidence. These nudes can only be called pornographic in respect to their surface portrayal. Their «message», if we insist upon one, nevertheless lies in an entirely different area: their expressions of resignation, mute surrender and abysmal sadness, are also directed at the observer. They expose his desire as an unfulfillable utopia and degrade his most clandestine longings to public show-pieces devoid of any intimacy. Gigantic –almost violently so– is the external dimension, behind which the vacuity and desperation shine through all the more clearly.

On the one hand we have the gaudiness and design of the 50s in the upper section of the painting, where at the left the American's nonchalant playing around with quotations from the European tradition is exemplified in the two Giacometti sculptures and the hazy paraphrase of a Watteau painting. And in the lower part, this artistic scenery is contrasted with the manneristic artificiality of the contorted nudes in grisaille technique. Both sections present artificial attitudes, be it the quotations in the upper part or the unnatural poses in the lower part. Everything becomes hollow, untrue, empty shells devoid of life, derivative imitation reality which has taken the place of real life. If we want to take this as a point of departure for an interpretation, we could call it an incapacity for hale and vital sensuality –whether it be in the creative work of the artist, or, on a general plane, in sexuality. The former is no longer anything more than repetition, quotations from what has gone before; the latter is artificial manneristic posing, without even a vestige of vitality.

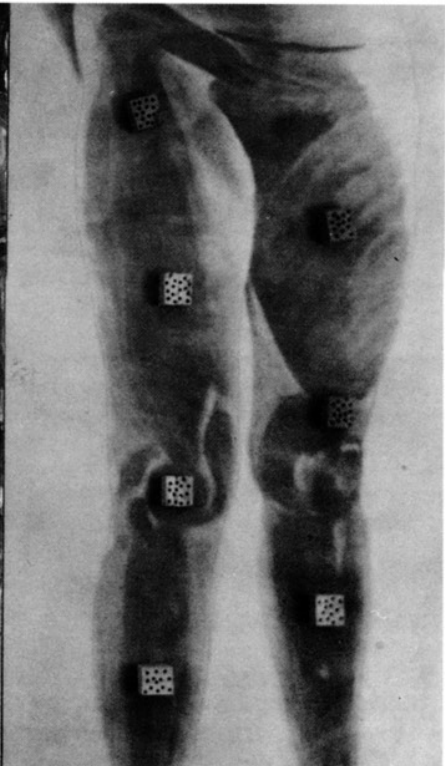
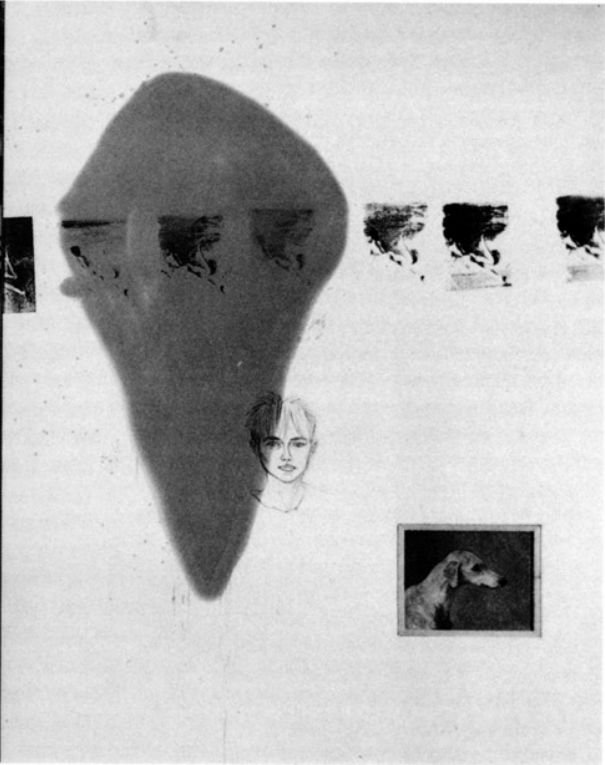
In the watercolors, sketchily delineated faces are often combined with nudes spread over the entire surface area in lascivious sensuousness. Conversations between males, their discussions and rounds of drinks in taverns, apathetic and melancholy human relations, and banal everyday situations –they all turn into lifeless and unreal stage settings upon which the reality of imagination is superimposed. Things that take place inside the brain and remain secret underneath the blanket of middle-class propriety are revealed here under the glare of the spotlights and become more real than everyday actuality.

This intermeshing of space and time, of different levels of reality, of imagination and actuality, is a general characteristic of Salle's pictorial method, the intention of which is to disconcert by means of destroying all certainties and giving the lie to every absolute statement. Nothing remains beyond doubt, nothing can lay claim to general validity, neither any style nor any technique nor any content nor even the slightest detail. The one assertion discredits the other. Everything is true, nothing jibes. A modern attitude toward life? That too, without a doubt, but Salle remains consistent in not giving himself away and presenting the viewer with impeccable stagings derived from the preformulated repertoire of familiar paintings from classical art and the subculture, behind which he himself disappears as an individual. What remains behind are irritating paintings whose conceptual and technical quality only make up a minor part of their significance within the contemporary art scene.

21 DAVID SALLE. «CORAL MADE», 1985
Aus Korallen gemacht



22 DAVID SALLE. «PURE DIFFERENCE», 1982
Reiner Unterschied



R. MARSH. -PICKNICK AM STRAND-, 1939
«Picnic at the beach»



9 R. MARSH MACHT SKIZZEN AUF CONEY ISLAND, CA. 1950
R. Marsh taking sketches at Coney Island

