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D A V I D S A L L E

Pinturas y obras sobre papel, 1981-1999

Paintings and Works on Paper, 1981-1999

Introducción / *Introduction*
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Texto / *Text*
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L I M B O

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WHEN LEO STEINBERG delivered his critique of formalism in 1972, he called it simply "Other Criteria."¹ The essay had many points to make. It would rapidly become important for many art critics and not simply for its early, signal use of the term postmodernist. Steinberg was marking a shift in the focus of a culture, a recognition that the quest of art for a perfect object had shifted in the mid-1950s and pulled itself into the preoccupations of capitalism. His essay would chart the capitalization of the New York art market and the resulting strange confusion of attitudes, the difference and lack of difference between the production of paintings in series and lines of cars. Even so, Steinberg explained: "the pervasive character of American artistic culture, whether for good or ill, for sport or for real, derives from an initial posture of repudiation."²

New criteria for art softened this posture. It tried on the white coat of authority and shifted its feet. It claimed to isolate and solve problems, in essence providing a corporate model of development and explanation, Steinberg thought; its results appeared to offer a foolproof recipe for success. Strings of successes taken together were prematurely labeled progress. Steinberg was describing the critical strategy of the formalism which had been devising lines of descent for modern abstract art since the twenties. By the time he was writing, The Museum of Modern Art in New York had given this formalism its institutional authority and the critic Clement Greenberg had commandeered the argument, summarizing the entire problem of abstraction as the progressive distillation of painting's own means. Greenberg would write grandly of this distillation, make it epic, casting it as a continuous process that over centuries had pulled the best out of the Old Master tradition and brought it to America, in so doing producing for painting a self-critical, isolated, even Kantian orientation. Present-day painting, Greenberg felt, had been propelled from all of that to the refined consideration of the flatness of its surface and to the optical effect of actually seeing this surface. It all came down to an abstract pictorial flatness, in other words, and an eye that could see it.³ Nothing was ruptured in this epic, nothing revolutionized, nothing killed coldly for blood.

Steinberg's eye, however, saw modern art from a completely different perspective. He assumed the posture of contempt. All of this could be explained in the complete absence of Kant, Steinberg noted, not a little maliciously. The formalist progress of this painted object could equally well be understood in the market terms of science as an ongoing technical synthesis comparable to the great American engine. Formalism would amount to a form of social engineering, a pitch and a progress ideology taken to the arts. But what is this progress and what is the profit?

When do we stop and have cake?

Steinberg had his own idea of cake. He pushed the idea of flatness forward by pushing it down. He turned to the horizontal picture, the fifties innovation of Robert Rauschenberg, something possessed of what Steinberg called a flatbed picture plane, not a literal horizontality but rather a psychic address that called upon the non-visual experience of the modern world and served it up as much, much more than a flatness. He spoke of Rauschenberg's picture plane as akin to a reservoir of the mind itself, an urban mind that could be a dump, a switching center, a running transformer of impulse. Pillows, parachutes, paint, wire, smudge, clocks, even birds seemed to speak for an utter lack of concern with any one ceiling or plateau, let alone German metaphysics. Rauschenberg himself told a dancer friend, in 1961, that he had the strange visual capacity of seeing everything.⁴

This produced the condition of a wide-open door.

For several decades now art would find itself open too.

Some painters painted wider.

David Salle told an interviewer about how in his circles, in the seventies, when he was a member of the first class of the newest art school in the country, Cal Arts, Jean-Luc Godard was by far and away the most important visual artist in the world, much moreso than Willem de Kooning or Jasper Johns.⁵ When a German asked him, in 1981, to hypothesize a spiritual center for the New York art world, he immediately replied, Hollywood, Hollywood of the forties, because he was looking for a way to express the heroic New York no longer there and its sense of mission for painting. That New York had been given an image by Hollywood, an experienced, grand image built from long pans, its drama drawn out, cut and turned by new perspectives, looming foregrounds, everything large and turning sinister. One looked back periodically, checking. This set a scene Salle wanted to find. "I want the painting to be like a fisherman and a fish, both being pulled out to sea," he announced, "and ideally what accompanies that is a little bit of terror, a feeling of things being a little out of control."⁶ The movie-going city-mind casting itself out to sea nonetheless kept painting in the studio under conditions that were going to be rich and always rather complicated. Many of his friends and peers, like Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine, had turned to photography, but David Salle did not.

To see cinema and painting together at once like this, as he did, not as an opposition, not as a cultural non sequitur,

not as pollution, was not yet possible in art criticism, but for many this was simply an existing condition, an air, the ground upon which one lived and worked. Susan Sontag had written about it, in 1965, in a much-admired essay, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," where she spoke of the hierarchical collapses and crossovers coming together with the thrilling paradox that these moves, non-literary in nature, were nonetheless involved with basic texts. It is clear from her list of these texts that this new sensibility was not thoughtless. It was attempting to cross the traditional chasm separating the scientific from the literary-artistic culture. She was citing the writings of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Artaud, Sherrington, Buckminster Fuller, McLuhan, Cage, Breton, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Sigfried Gideon, Norman O. Brown and Gyorgy Kepes.⁷ Reading toward a sensibility and reading mixed into other activities were producing work that made art a new kind of instrument, Sontag remarked, an instrument capable of modifying consciousness and breaking down old distinctions between high culture and low. "If art is understood as a form of discipline of the feelings and a programming of sensations," she said, "then the feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes. The brio and elegance of Budd Boetticher's *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* or the singing style of Dionne Warwick can be appreciated as a complex and pleasurable event. They are experienced without condescension."⁸

Salle had these attitudes and in the seventies had taken them to painting. Painting seemed to him capable of a more expanded, catholic sensibility and he used it as the point of focus for both thinking and seeing. He worked to get that focus to go as wide as he could. "I always had a feeling for the theater of it—or the making-meaning part of it," he told Frederic Tuten recently. "Probably I was in the last generation to be able to romanticize the act of painting, without too heavy a load of irony. When I came along, the making-meaning part of painting occurred primarily within the process of painting; now, making-meaning is a matter of cultural signage. That's a pretty extreme shift."⁹

Shifting was coming with the territory; it dates roughly to the capitalization of the art market that Steinberg had described. But by the end of the seventies the shift itself was being talked about as death. It should not be forgotten that death was a common trope then, fueled by any number of arguments, assassinations, wars, natural causes, personal experiences and rock songs. For some reason, death seemed to help discussion. "To EXPRESS something means you first killed it," Richard Foreman remarked, in 1976, reflecting on the conditions of his theater. "One does not think words, or sentences, or acts, or stories—but only, wherever you are at this minute, waiting to make something—twist, and that twist is, somehow, the unit."¹⁰ When Jean-François Lyotard wrote his critique of knowledge, in 1979 and, adopting the American convention, called it the postmodern condition, he too performed a series of post-mortems on narrative.¹¹

Lyotard was writing about the broad shifts occurring simultaneously in knowledge itself and about the hierarchy of values that was being reset by the rise of the computerization of knowledge, which was to say, and he was clear on this point, the capitalization of knowledge. This led him to describe the ways in which modern societies had set the sciences against what Lyotard called the narrative knowledges and to set out the means by which each are legitimized

or gilded in the eyes of those around them. And some of the best and most cherished of the legitimation strategies, Lyotard concluded, were now obsolete. He pointed to the problem-solving one that Steinberg had invoked and he named another, the political narrative that told of the quest for freedom. In their wake lay the heterogeneous field. He cast the entire situation into an atemporal scene of competing language games, citing Wittgenstein's concept as he did so. To have lost a narrative, Lyotard explained, did not necessarily catapult one into the black hole of barbarism.

In New York this now-authoritative version of the postmodern would take five years to really arrive and be mixed into the talk already going on there.¹² It did not much affect American artists. Roland Barthes had, after all, already published his essay on the death of the author first in English, in 1967, in an experimental art magazine, *Aspen 5+6*, where it had appeared in the context of work by Brian O'Doherty, Tony Smith, Sol Lewitt and Dan Graham, and many others, including Marcel Duchamp, Susan Sontag, and George Kubler. In 1972, Richard Foreman's "Ontological-hysteric Manifesto I" had put the language problem into its first line. Language in the past, Foreman announced, had been used to build; his theater would use language to undercut the pinnings of *there*. Language would float into a general suspension. But there were many other problems to face. He cut to a memory from five years before:

Suddenly the theater seems ridiculous in *all* its manifestations and continues to do so in 1971. I.e., Peter Brook staged *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The actors enter onstage and immediately, the absurdity—both in the orchestrated speech and activity—as Stella, Judd, et al. realized several years ago...one must reject composition in favor of shape (or something else)...Why? Because the resonance must be between the head and the object. The resonance between the elements of the object is now a DEAD THING.¹³

How to act then? Foreman pushed to a sense of fracturing consciousness, to communicate, he said: "a rhythm of mind as something that acts vis-à-vis entering dots: which leave *traces* that other dots bounce off. So mind is input folded over input [sic]. GET THAT!"¹⁴ He ended the manifesto by making a scene. Lamps descended, one after another, over Ben at the writer's table:

BEN: Get that second lamp outa here.

LEGEND: "WHY?"

BEN: Nobody has a right to ask me questions who doesn't show himself.

Crew comes and closes curtains on screen on which title is projected.

Why.

Thud, pause.

The minute I formed that word carefully it was an imitation.

The curtain reopens by itself. A slide of an ancient auto is projected on the screen. Pause. Then the same picture is projected on the table-top.

VOICE: One picture must not be allowed to view the other picture.

Music begins. A sign comes down—"Cousins in photography." The music stops. Ben has exited. He returns with a rope, throws it over the screen, with a hook on the end of the rope, and starts to pull.

BEN: Oh well. (Pause.) Make something.

ALL: Can you describe it, Ben?¹⁵

These were general questions not specific to theater or epistemology or art. They weighed heavy on everybody. It was obvious that the relation of language to mind to image was not going to be simply resolved by any one person or any one French philosopher. Sherrie Levine began to use the lines of others to make her statements, in 1981, transposing the end of Barthes' essay on the death of the author into the situation of painting, writing perhaps not so ironically: "The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter."¹⁶ Reading this, one wonders. Was this much different from the final words in Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* with the dead hero and heroine speaking Rimbaud without saying so?:

Elle est retrouvée!
Quoi? l'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

But what is the reference exactly? For the dead could just as easily be quoting Bataille quoting Rimbaud (who had himself misquoted this passage in *Une saison en enfer*). Bataille had ended the introduction to *Erotisme* that way to make the point that poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism, to the blending and then fusion of separate objects. "It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death," Bataille wrote, "and through death to continuity. Poetry is *eternity*. *It is the sea gone to the sun.*"¹⁷ Who speaks? This was the question Michel Foucault had been asking since the mid-sixties as part of his reflection on language. At first he would credit Nietzsche for having opened a floodgate with that question, leaving words to wander in an enigmatic, dispersed state, stone phantoms for a world. Then Foucault wrote an essay on the author question, putting the question forward again as an indirection in the mouth of Samuel Beckett: "What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking?"¹⁸

So many people were speaking.

By 1981, Sherrie Levine's statement could and would be understood as part of a local intellectual field full of American voices intensely considering the various and diverging, and usually translated, arguments of Foucault, Jacques Derrida,

Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord and the members of the Frankfurt School. Some of this would find its way to the pages of *Semiotexte*, *Wedge*, *October*, *Artforum*, *Art in America* and, later, *Zone*. It would be wrong however to understand the situation in New York as being driven or motivated only by new foreign concepts or left cultural politics; the new sensibility was known for internalizing and absorbing formal statements and it was not unusual for concepts to be buried beyond recognition in nonverbal form. David Salle, for example, would take the idea of death directly into his art. If at first he would focus on the forces involved, saying, for example: "I want to drive a wedge between the name and the named," by 1979, death had been driven into the paintings and there had been a tragedy:

The paintings are dead in the sense that to intuit the meaning of something incompletely, but with an idea of what it might mean or involve to know completely, is a kind of premonition of death. The paintings, in their opacity, signal an ultimate clarification. Death is "tragic" because it closes off possibilities of further meaning; art is similarly tragic because it prefigures itself as an ended event of meaning. The paintings do this by appearing to participate in meaninglessness.¹⁹

Salle knew as he wrote this, that Wittgenstein had called attention to the conception of naming as an occult process. "Naming appears as a *queer* connection of a word with an object," Wittgenstein explained. "And you really get such a queer connection when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word 'this' innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday."²⁰ Language was, like work, a social obligation. References were always already performances. Any meaning made would not necessarily be strict, single or linear. Leave it to others to see language as only arbitrary sign. The artist stares at objects too, in silence. Thoughts of death were coming to Salle from Hollywood. There was the *Imitation of Life* (f.1, p. 33).

As it happened, David Salle and Sherrie Levine saw Douglas Sirk's film the *Imitation of Life* together at The Museum of Modern Art.²¹ Salle would be marked by it. Sirk had compressed the selfish, conventionally loveless lives of a group of New York strivers into Technicolor surfaces lit to extremes, everything in the grip of overwhelming emotional forces that carried every story forward, through big sleeps, betrayal, and moral decay. For Salle the drama was expressed by the underside of these highly lit, detached color surfaces. He put this form of tragedy together in his mind with what he called the linguistic idea of the obligatory, "that we're only able to say what, in a sense, can be said."²² This would be the new theater of his painting. The drama came simply from the perception of the inside, the underside and the outside of surface sight. Sirk's sea would be taken to Wittgenstein's sun. Except that Salle felt that it would be important to try to go further to find what could not be spoken or broken, to try to get beyond these surfaces; he also worked consciously to step outside himself.

Objects would not be enough. An ashen, airy painting like *Rob Him of Pleasure* (f.2, p.33) was not enough, nor did this woman existing with levels of shadow women and a telephone, all the smoke not ringing, all the nudity gone into

daily occurrence, become an object to be *known* exactly. "What happens when a man suddenly understands?"—The question is badly framed," Wittgenstein had written. For this kind of phrasing is obscuring any clarity and can only be leading to false impressions:

If it is a question about the meaning of the expression "sudden understanding," the answer is not to point to a process that we give this name to.—The question might mean: what are the tokens of sudden understanding, what are its characteristic psychological accompaniments? (There is no ground for assuming that a man feels the facial movements that go with his expression, for example, or the alterations in his breathing that are characteristic of some emotion. Even if he feels them as soon as his attention is directed towards them.) ((Posture.))²³

Understanding, in other words, is something that comes *between* people. Rarely is it cake. Usually it is part of a dynamic that might be retold as a story. A painter like Salle would find his work written into a great narrative of avant-garde abstract art and, during these years, especially as the art market took off again in the early eighties, often did. A painter like Salle might find himself being marketed as a figure of celebrity comparable to Hollywood's stars instead of the intuitive bohemian genius. The terms for the consideration of painting could not have been more narrow. But Salle's sense of surface outstripped the tenaciously formalist expectations that kept greeting painting and kept seeing every reference as a self-reference, whether formalist or narcissistic it did not much matter. He was painting wider. His sense of what could be shown and known was expanding, coming from a self-education that had always been proceeding as much from example as from any book or lesson in class.

In 1972, when he was a student at Cal Arts, David Salle paid a call on Bruce Nauman, whom he had not yet met. He wanted to make a contact, express his admiration, learn something, talk to the man who could take a picture of himself failing to levitate in the studio (f.3, p.35). Nauman received him sitting down reading Wittgenstein. This in itself is not surprising, nor was it surprising to Salle. He too had been reading Wittgenstein and in that they were certainly not alone. Wittgenstein's books had already been circulating for a good ten years in some of the best American artists' studios and were still being found worthy of sustained consideration whether one quoted from them, scripted a performance from them, turned them into a lesson plan for conceptual art, or simply, as was usually the case, absorbed them for their import, letting the philosopher's ideas wash over the face of the work like fresh water.

This way to understanding.

What with the distractions that came with the term postmodernist, it has now been largely forgotten just how beneficial Wittgenstein's writing had been to artists, especially those weary of formalist principle. For Wittgenstein showed his

readers how shaky all first principles were, and that first principles were a human vanity, an arbitrary scaffold, a cramp-inducing shame. And yet everyone, himself included, had to begin somewhere, first, so one did. One agreed to agree upon words and upon techniques for giving orders; Wittgenstein gave orders for red apples and slabs. Salle brought neither back with him from Nauman's studio. When, soon afterward, Nauman came to visit him, he looked at Salle's paintings and gave him the customary brief critique, leaving Salle to ponder the diagnosis: "It's not clear enough what they're about."²⁴

There is a passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein, while discussing a phenomenon he calls "seeing-as," shows the darkness of line, a closed figure of pure confusion where a duck can be made to oscillate and become a rabbit without any change to the outline at all (f.4, p.35).²⁵ He proposed to distinguish between the "continuous seeing" of an aspect and the "dawning" of an aspect. Or, one might say, the setting of another aspect. These compounds fill the *Philosophical Investigations* and put an end to any hope of total formulation. "A rose is red in the dark too." How, Wittgenstein asked, would one paint the correct picture of that?²⁶

David Salle spoke later to the critic Peter Schjeldahl of compound figures, though not of ducks and rabbits, or of colors in the dark. He explained himself differently, for he was speaking of the compound figures that haunted his sight. "I always," he said, "see the picture and the wall the picture is on at the same time, almost as the same thing. And I've had to reconcile this with my desire to make autonomous, self-sufficient art. I remember driving down the street in Venice, California, when I was in school and feeling the façades of buildings separating out from the buildings themselves. I saw that everything in this world is simultaneously itself and a representation of the idea of itself. This was in a sense my big art epiphany."²⁷

Not seeing singly, he went on to paint the proliferation of these images in sight. No thing could be seen singly but more than that, no single image sufficed to express, for example, a wall's or a woman's existence. But Salle was not seeing everything in Rauschenberg's way. It was as if he saw in compounds and then made what was for him the counter-intuitive move of prying the compound apart, pulling the women away from the women, pulling all the ducks, so to speak, away from the rabbits, pulling the friends from the faces. Initially he expressed this by making the figures in his paintings overlap one another, sizing them to inflect one another, balance against one another, as if one once had had something to do with the other or might someday have something to do with the other. The separations between the images would never be complete; connections would be made through color intensities and joint axes and what in the old days was called a marriage of lines. But no two figures would ever meet again, couple and close. The gaps were structural; so was the darkness found gathering at any number of points. The *Drumming Rabbit* (f.5, p.37) pulled rabbits away from rabbits; a white rabbit, a folded drape, a shadow puppet falling on Karole Armitage, the echo of her hand, are dispersed like the lifesaver and the little Giacometti

statue standing straight in a yellow star of raining blood. There is no reason to see Karole Armitage as herself in this painting, any more than the white rabbit necessarily jumps straight out of Lewis Carroll, any more than the rabbit is ever a rabbit or a star a star. All rabbits are puppets, just like the ducks. Painted form performs. These were considerations that from the beginning troubled the painted surface in Salle's work, let the negative stencil of a poet's name shift back and forth between unquoted poetry and the title of a picture by Jasper Johns, let the dull-orange stencil make a peephole word through which to see a black and white nude lying prone on a beach. Let a modeled ear protrude, let turquoise skid. Tennyson comes down over the scene, O over buttock, like a legend (f.6, p.37). It is in effect saying:

WHY?

In 1980, Salle and James Welling made a report from New York back to California speaking of "Images That Understand Us." The title seems optimistic. "Our use of style is so vulnerable," Salle said to Welling. "That's the meaning of this fairly detached use of style, this sort of fatalistic attraction. It's like seeing the blood run out of you. That's all there is and when it's gone it's gone. Something which prefigures its own end. An unintelligent use of style would be to use it in the same way that using words reinforces their literal meaning." Then he skipped to J.D. Salinger's novel, *Franny and Zooey*, to the Jesus prayer that Franny had learned from her older brothers Seymour and Buddy which was a phrase: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me," to be repeated incessantly, turned into a mantra, lifting mind down into body, thought into heartbeat, term into wind.²⁸ It drained organized knowledge back into the world of red hats, shivering dachshunds, Fat Ladies and shoe shines. Seymour had wanted to show them the place of pure consciousness, the Buddhist *satori*, in other words, the place before God had said: "Let there be light." "I use style," Salle said, "like the Jesus prayer. I keep repeating it as if I didn't know where it came from."²⁹ Where was this going?

Salle was also quoting extensively from his own photographs as well as from the images of others. As part of his process he would use an overhead projector to transfer the image onto canvas, both to size the shape and to disorient the traced figure from the painting it was entering, twist it onto another level, trouble the ground.³⁰ Any quoting was usually done through this process of projection. He would grasp his image from within its beam of light, almost wearing it as he looked for the red in its rose. Figures would not so much be quoted as inhabited by paint, understood from a far side, by someone else having come up into them underneath, lit from without and within. An erotic posture was implicit in the technique of transfer; the eroticism of the women's poses that dominated Salle's paintings was apparent to everyone. But it was unfused. To *paint* a figure into a character is to draw a final curtain over it, to deny it the possibility of being changed by speaking or being spoken to, deny it the possibility of moving off the mark on the stage, deny it its spark.

This is not a textual condition.

All figures take their break.

There was only the wide-open door.

The impossibility of movement is critical to the creation of this meaninglessness shuddering or sleeping in the absence of its script. A pause, a stall, without theater properly speaking. Salle was at the same time involved in actual theatrical productions, designing the sets in 1984 for *Birth of a Poet*, an opera by Kathy Acker, directed by Richard Foreman. And in 1985 he would begin a series of collaborations with Karole Armitage's dance company. But the theater of his paintings existed on its own plane, an entire theatrical apparatus pressed down into itself to make nothing more than a picture. The characters in the painting could only mouth a certain stage in human transformation. It might have been possible to come away from them as Genet had from Giacometti's, where he had seen everything "stained and cryptic, everything fragile and on the verge of collapse, everything about to melt, everything floats: now, all this seems seized by an absolute reality." The world inside was a reality apart. Genet continued on: "When I left the studio, when I was in the street, nothing remained of this truth that had just encircled me. Shall I say it? In that studio a man is slowly dying, wasting away, and beneath our eyes is changing to goddesses."³¹

No critic wanted to see Salle as a goddess. It was rather the opposite. The reactions to his work went to the extremes of praise and blame, usually employing the word postmodern at some point. It is no exaggeration to say that the New York art world divided over them. Sherrie Levine stepped in to write an essay for *Flash Art* defending pictures like *Rob Him of Pleasure* against the charge of misogyny. They seemed to need a woman to speak for them. The women are there in the paintings, she said, in her way, very calmly, as an *other* that has in our culture long been equated with truth. And it is *truth* that is slippery, slipping away, and always outside ourselves. She spoke of the public underbelly of consciousness. A few years later she talked of these women in the paintings as being men looking at a woman looking at a man.³² Salle himself once allowed that there had been a time when he had thought something like that: "thought they were me," was how he put it. But he had come to think differently, less literally, and when he said this he was at work on *Géricault's Arm*.³³

This theater of prayer and rabbit shadow was from the start not interested in its own evolution. Progress under these conditions of certain ignorance would be unthinkable. In 1985, Salle wrote a critique of the situation in which he compared it to the Second Empire and quoted a long passage from a new book, *The Painting of Modern Life*, by T.J. Clark:

This was the essential task of the *courtisane*, or the *joueuse*, the *lionne*, the *impure*, the *amazone*, the *fille de marbre*, the *mangeuse d'hommes*, the *demi-mondaine*, or the *horizontale*—her names were legion, but they all meant much the same thing. The *courtisane* was a category, that is my argument: one which depended not just on a distinction made between *courtisane* and *femme honnête*—though this was the dominant theme of the myth—but also on one between *courtisane* and prostitute proper. The category *courtisane* was what could be represented of prostitution, and for this to take place at all, she had to be extracted from the swarm of mere sexual commodities that could be seen making use of the streets. These humbler tradespeople were shuffled off stage, and the world of sex was divided in two: on the one hand, the dark interior of the *maison close*, where the body escaped outright from the social order, and on the other the glittering, half-public palaces of the *grandes cocottes* on the Champs-Élysées. Money and sex were thus allowed to meet in two places: either apart from imagery altogether, in the private realm, in the brothel's illicit state of nature; or in the open space of the spectacle, the space of representation itself, where both could appear as images pure and simple.³⁴

Manet's *Olympia* was the object of this chapter in Clark's book. The painting had been a formalist set piece for years, many pointing to it as the first modern painting. In 1964, Robert Morris had done a performance piece mocking the idea of its flatness in which he ceremoniously removed a series of grey plywood planes to reveal an actual female nude dressed up as *Olympia*'s tableau vivant and called the entire effort *Site*. Salle did not quote like this (f.7,8,9, p.39). He worked his nudes into studio positions, photographing them in heavy noirish light; women half-undressed would then be dressed with shadow. A painting like *Géricault's Arm* drew two women from one, without suggesting that *she* had moved, but showing a point of view that had gone close, then risen and stepped away. Her fingertips pressed obediently together, her panties were pulled down. Like the black and white sections in Salle's other paintings, these women are painted in acrylic softly, as an atmosphere, the paint in a wet suspension that optically keeps the image hovering on the canvas, just a density, its ground sifting like sand. Lines do not define its edge. The model's life is not a model life.

Paint is imitating projected light. It is much like other Salle paintings, which establish the scale of the movie screen for themselves and send the viewer back from their surfaces to sit, if that were possible, in the middle of the theater, far away. One is far from these figures. They are cut apart from each other by a bright toy, a separately painted panel, its color an oil painted imitation of Technicolor, a token, a figure, an amulet. But references to film are embedded, like the references to thought, like the briefly worn image, in a form taken far from any original. These are not admiring quotations, they are uses in extremis. They are comparable to the drift one finds in Kathy Acker's prose. In 1983, her *Implosion*, a story having the French Revolution as its background, had opened with a scene of people muttering. Politics were presented indirectly:

Kathy, an American visitor: How do you make love?

Father, a Frenchman: I make love with my fingers. My fingers are magic. Are you feeling them now?

Kathy: Oh yes! (He beats her ass while he...) Oh. OH!³⁵

This Sadean moment will pass eventually, like the others, to a stage of discussion set in the offices of *Artforum*, where a crowd, including an Italian Situationist and a Marxist Feminist, has gathered.

Marxist Feminist, not understanding anything: Of what?

Tom: Of the new politics: no politics. Everything. We can and do everything. We are theater.

Murderers: All dark, black. The skin.

Murderer: Why do you keep murdering?

My Grandmother: I have to, my dear.

Murderer: You're a shadow that murders the body that casts it.

My Grandmother: So then I'll be left with shadows....

Murderer: ...different textures of blackness...

My Grandmother: ...my skin. Where's Danton? Fiction. I tell you truly: right now fiction's the method of revolution.

Murderer: All this is talk. (Sharpening his knife.)

My Grandmother: To dream's more violent than to act. (End of my version of art-criticism.)³⁶

Géricault had studied cadavers as part of his preparation for *The Raft of the Medusa*, his Salon picture of a shipwreck.³⁷ Salle accepted this arrangement and masked a woman with it, though not completely, for the surface is not closed, a feathery press of fingers not exactly in prayer flickers there, like an orifice, a displaced sexual interior, a stilled gesture flooded by black, not really a thought or a shadow. What is inside her head remains unknowable. There is no sudden understanding. No aspect can dawn there. Salle, speaking to Robert Pincus-Witten that summer he was painting this picture, spoke of the pictorial wavering in Manet's, not Géricault's, painting as a form of social dislocation.³⁸

What is an arm? What is a sex? Who sees what? What constitutes a transformation? Against what can a transformation be measured? When will there be fusion? What matter who's speaking through the arms and the genitals,

the revolution and the gloom? Salle has chosen to show it all, including the latter-day volatility of money and sex, as fragments of style pronounced in the dark, in painting after painting. Géricault's arm recurs. Several years later Salle painted it into a flounce over a dancer, a German ballet star from the fifties named Peter Van Dijk who had been photographed by Serge Lido in full stage make-up leaping above the Seine (f.10,11, p.41). But no scene will catch him now as he jumps in the painting; like all of Salle's paintings, the background dissolves. Here the arm reinforces an armor of unhinged outside surfaces, an accretion very different from the black vortex. But in neither case are the limits of a person being given. For a person is not to be known either from the outside or from the inside. For a person is not a surface, any more than a person is their language or a flounce or a face.

People are kept outside Salle's paintings. The same will be true for words. The sense of deprivation, of loss, lives in their surfaces and is keen. At this stage in the age of mechanical reproduction, quoting brings nothing closer.³⁹ But these are spaces still susceptible to feeling. Wittgenstein had thought of that; whole sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* kept bringing that problem back. "For how can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression?" Wittgenstein had asked.⁴⁰ Who can say what *crying* means? And yet crying and pain will not be negated. Beyond negation there is more.

Salle's titles often speak for a great literary culture but they only use language to send another form into the mix, another arm on which no weight should be placed. All arms here belong to My Grandmother. No title is anyone's crutch. Language speaks, banished. Sky King for example, the cowboy pilot who saved many a life on children's TV in the late fifties, will never be seen in *Sky King* (f.12, p.42). The painting shows no one flying into the blue guitar outlined in the calmly sleeting sky. *Sky King* is an image for the mind, not the eye, like the blue guitar itself. The blue guitar lives on there thanks to Wallace Stevens, whose long poem from the thirties turns the image over and over again twenty times.⁴¹ Stevens wrote "The Man with the Blue Guitar," from his experience of an early blue period Picasso painting, the guitarist becoming the poet, the guitar the vehicle of the modern Orpheus, the people and the world outside pressing into his song with demands that things as they are be sung. Can poetry get between things and pain and its expression? Stevens would not put it so plainly or plaintively. The poem stood off from the world. Now, its blue guitar stands outside *Sky King* and puts all the questions about objects and painting and the world outside the painting back into play in another way. Nothing seems seized by an absolute reality.

Just after the first World War, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke had gone so far as to put these questions directly to Orpheus: song, he wrote to Orpheus, is not desire, or courtship, it is reality. This would be simple enough for an Orpheus to say, but when, Rilke wanted to know, can we others be real?

A god can do it. But will you tell me how
a man can enter through the lyre's strings?
Our mind is split. And at the shadowed crossing
of heart-roads, there is no temple for Apollo.

In the poem Orpheus himself seems to answer. It is not a philosophical reply, not the human way to understanding. The sonnet ends:

True singing is a different breath, about
nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.⁴²

As is poetry so is painting? The time for *ut pictura poiesis* has passed. But the wedge of groundlessness that Salle has driven into his paintings does bring them close to the old business of the poet. And yet the painting presents something from our present to see. The painting, like the others, has recognized a *bourgeois* fact: things break and fall apart. Perhaps it is only right that it falls to paintings to show knowledge that breaking brings feelings, and silence.

Frederic Tuten: What are you looking for?

David Salle: I practice my own kind of transcendentalism. It may surprise you, but my work is full of love.

Tuten: You mean it ironically?

Salle: Not at all.⁴³



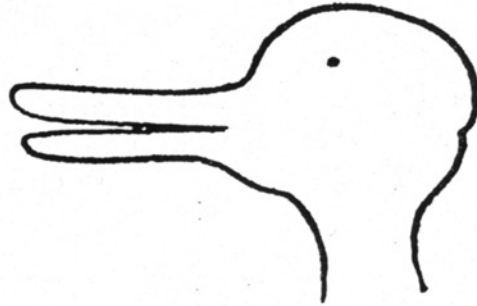
1. Imagen congelada [still] de la película *Imitation of Life*, Douglas Sirk, 1959



2. Rob Him of His Pleasure, 1979



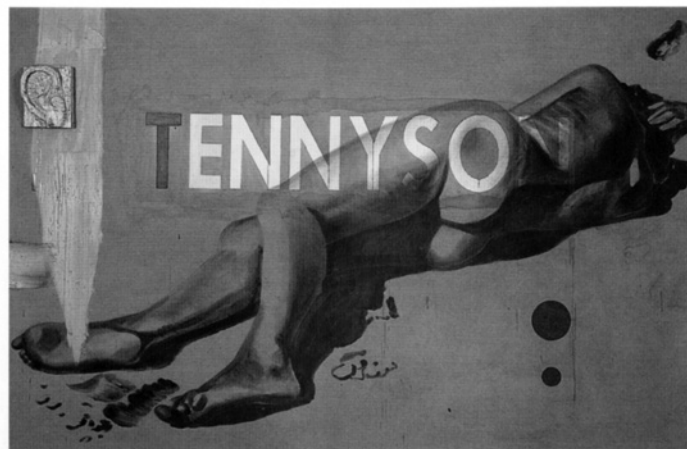
3. Failing to Levitate in the Studio, 1966



4. Ilustración en *Philosophical Investigations*



5. *The Drumming Rabbit*, 1997



6. *Tennyson*, 1983



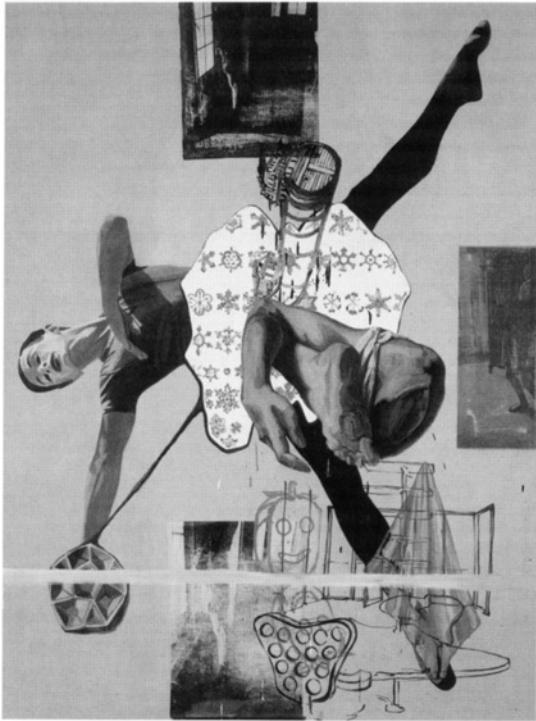
7. *Géricault's Arm*, 1985, óleo y polímero sintético sobre tela, 197.8 x 244.5 cm, colección The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President; Agnes Gund; Jerry I. Speyer Fund; and purchase.



8. *Géricault, Study of Feet and Hands*, 1818-1819. Musée Fabre, Montpellier



9. Imagen para *Géricault's Arm*



11. *Self Made Labyrinth*, 1992



10. *Serge Lido*, Peter Van Dijk



12. *Sky King*, 1998

Portada / Cover: *Indian Figure with Pear*, 1997, cat. 24

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