Summary: Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters”

What is “Action Painting”?

Rosenberg begins his essay with a general observation and disclaimer: Any attempt to define an art movement, in this case “action painting”, inevitably falls short, particularly in capturing the character of the major artists. Nonetheless, it provides a necessary and useful approximation.

He turns next to a question: Is there anything new in recent American painting?

He acknowledges the frequent claim that much of the supposedly “new” work produced in America is derivative—borrowing from, elaborating on, or at best refining the achievements coming out of the first decades of the Twentieth Century by European artists associated with the “School of Paris”. However, among the most advanced American artists today, one finds work that embodies a new “function” and way of thinking about painting.

A new kind of work emerges when a shift in perception occurs and the artist starts seeing the surface of the canvas not so much as a support for a picture or representation of a preconceived idea, but rather as an arena within which an “act of painting” takes place. This shift in interest applies as much to drawing as it does to painting. The question is not about the medium one chooses but the motive for going beyond the mere representation of an object.

This approach to painting, Rosenberg claims, subordinates the artist’s goal of producing an aesthetic object to the existential search for an “encounter” or “revelation”. In order for this to happen, nothing can “get in the way of painting”.

So the shift in approach constitutes a change in both the source and the sensibility of art. The object is no longer the primary focus. And the goal is no longer a painting intended to produce aesthetic pleasure, but to embody the inner psychological state of the artist in the marks made on the canvas—the record of the event of painting. This takes on philosophical significance for Rosenberg.

“The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.”

Such a radical departure from traditional painting demands a shift in critical practice based on a revised set of assumptions. Here, with Greenberg clearly the target, Rosenberg claims that art criticism and the history of art and aesthetics understood in terms of “schools, styles, and forms” are no longer relevant and the critic using these outdated tools is a “stranger” to the avant-garde artist.

Rosenberg is quick to point out that we must not identify the painting with the personal, psychological history of the artist. Instead, we must understand it as something more general.

With traditional aesthetic references discarded as irrelevant, what gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data but rôle, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation. The interest lies in the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena, a dramatic interest.

Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state,
concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked.

That’s the situation for the artist and the critic, as Rosenberg see it.

**How did “Action Painting” come about?**

Although many of the action painters came from a Marxist background, their turn to painting as painting, and away from the representation of social realities or the rehashing of modern abstraction, cannot be explained on political grounds. Rather it has to be seen as an act of liberation—an attempt by artists to free themselves from existing moral, political, and aesthetic values. (This brings to mind Nietzsche’s notion of the “revaluation of values”.)

The lone artist did not want the world to be different, he wanted his canvas to be a world. Liberation from the object meant liberation from the “nature”, society and art already there.

According to Rosenberg, the transformation is experienced by artists as a kind of secular conversion, brought about by the exhaustion of the past, triggering both optimism and exhilaration. It is motivated by a desire to re-enact the moment of liberation from the old values. In the process it contributes to the artist’s self-transformation.

In pursuing this self-transformation, the artist embraces risk, possibilities, and the “anguish of the aesthetic”. This is the measure of the work’s seriousness and authenticity. The challenge for the artist is to sustain it in every gesture and each brushstroke.

**What does this mean for the viewing public?**

The problem for the public is that “modern art”, institutionalized in the art world and promoted solely in terms of its “aesthetic quality” by the bureaucrats of taste, has lost its relevance and fails to reflect contemporary experience. It’s become just another commodity.

Examples in every style are packed side by side in annuals and travelling shows and in the heads of newspaper reviewers like canned meats in a chain store—all standard brands.

To counteract the obtuseness, venality and aimlessness of the Art World, American vanguard art needs a genuine audience—not just a market. It needs understanding—not just publicity.

In the end, according to Rosenberg, the lack of will on the part of writers and critics to acknowledge this fact and foster greater public understanding and appreciation of the new American painting “amounts to a scandal”. And in the context of its original publication, it would have been clear to the reader that Clement Greenberg was being portrayed as the primary culprit.

Timothy Quigley, 2010