

Object or Project? A Critic's Reflections on the Ontology of Painting

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One and Three Chairs

Our topic is the ontology of painting and I have to begin by admitting that I am somewhat embarrassed by the fact that I am not entirely sure how to go about approaching it. To put it in the simplest possible way, I am concerned about whether the word I should be taking most seriously is 'ontology' or 'painting.' That's not to say that my concern is somehow one about emphasis, about whether I should concentrate more on the ontology aspect of the topic or on the painting aspect. If that were the biggest problem I'm sure I could deal with it, at least in some sort of rough and ready way. No, what worries me is rather that there might be a sort of contradiction between the two terms – that there really is no "ontology of painting" and that therefore it is strictly speaking impossible to talk about it, even though one might separately talk about ontology or about painting.

But how can that be? Why would I think that? Since paintings certainly exist, it ought to be possible to say something about the nature of their being.

Well, yes, of course. But that's not yet sufficient for there to be an ontology of painting. In order for us to be able to talk about such a thing, there would need to be something particular about painting – and nothing else but painting – with regard to being. Painting would have to be a particular category of being. To clarify this, let's go back to a classic

philosophical example that I remember from my freshman year at college. Plato, as we all know, taught that what is real is a 'form' or idea, and to illustrate this he said that when a carpenter makes a chair, he constructs an object out of wood in accordance with its idea. The wooden chair is merely a representation of the idea. Further, he ventured, if a painter were to paint a picture of the chair, the painted chair would be a representation of a representation – something at two removes from real being. In this case, we can see that ideas have a certain ontological status which, according to Plato is, so to speak, fully vested, whereas objects such as chairs, being at one remove from ideas, possess an ontological status that is subordinate; and then images, at two removes from the fully-fledged reality of the ideas, possess an even lesser ontological status than objects.

Obviously we're not concerned here with the possible validity of Plato's ontological rankings, which after a few thousand years may seem rather dubious. And I'm not interested in the arguments of certain Platonists or Neoplatonists who believed they could finesse the master's condemnation of painting on the grounds that the image might in reality be closer to the idea than the object is. Nor does my problem lie mainly in the fact that, after the invention, first of printing, then of photography and – last but not least – of digital technology, the word 'painting' can hardly be equated in any simple way with the words 'picture' or 'image.' Unlike ancient times, there is now a multitude of ways to convey an image, and the implicit synonymy of 'painting' and 'image' has been prized open. Rather, I want to point out simply that in illustrating his theory of being, Plato used chairs and paintings as examples but could hardly be said to have been offering an ontology of painting any more than he was offering an ontology of carpentry. Instead, one can speak of the distinctive ontologies of ideas, objects, and images. That is to say, kinds of being can be differentiated only at a much more general categorical level than that of painting, at least in a philosophical setting like that offered by Plato. That is not to say that painting may not have a character that is distinctive from other modes of artmaking – just that its difference would not reside at this level of generality.

Would this still be the case according to modern and contemporary theories of being? Not being a philosopher, it's hard for me to say for sure, but I suspect something similar would be the case. However, my concern comes not from contemporary debates in philosophy but rather from discussions about art – from qualms about the categorical status of

painting as distinguished from other artistic practices as these are understood by contemporary artists as well as critics, historians, and theorists of art. Simply put, such discussions make it hard to see how – given a desire to speak of ontology at all – one could speak of an ontology of painting rather than, more generally, of an ontology of art.

This goes back to issues I've discussed before, particularly in my introduction to the book *Vitamin P*, which was a survey of recently emerging work in the field of painting. In writing that text I had to wonder "why – above all today – do we need a book about painting and not simply a book about art?" In order to give myself a satisfactory answer to the question – in order to justify my hunch that after all, and despite everything, there was a particularity to painting that did finally justify its being separated out from other kinds of art – I had to examine the notion, quite common in today's art world – really a sort of shibboleth – according to which "contemporary painting – or at least contemporary painting of any significance – is essentially conceptual." After all, I continued, as long ago as the late 1950s certain artists, as Thierry de Duve has put it, felt it necessary "to produce *generic* art, that is, art that has severed its ties with the *specific* crafts and traditions of either painting or sculpture" (de Duve 1996: 203, quoted in Schwabsky 2002: 6). The artists who began producing Happenings and "environments" around the end of the 1950s (Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Robert Whitman, etc.) were among the first of these, soon to be followed by the practitioners of Minimalism and Conceptual Art (Donald Judd and Joseph Kosuth, both of whom have been known to have their own questions about the status of a chair, among others); but today this desire for an art not limited to any particular *métier* or medium has become general. This can be seen, for instance, in the fact that fewer and fewer art schools require their students to enroll in departments of painting, sculpture, or printmaking; in the new "deskilled" academy, there is typically one overarching department of, say, visual arts, whose students are expected to apply ad hoc whichever techniques happen to be most appropriate to a given project.

Four Needful Things

It must be admitted that all works of art do have certain things in common – certain minimal attributes without which an object cannot be (received as) a work of art. It seems to me that these are at least four: In

order to count as an artwork, an object must be endowed with a title, a date, and an enumeration of materials. And of course, above all, it must have the name of an artist associated with it, whose role may in part be to supply the other three. If you go to any museum or gallery in the world, the things you see will have these, or else they will be things that just happen to be there without being artworks – the benches sometimes provided for viewers to sit on while contemplating a painting will not typically have a title, date, list of materials, or artist. The fact that title, date, and materials are unavoidable demands placed on any object that might be considered an artwork means that the provision of these has become as much a part of the artist's job description, so to speak, as anything else. No artist can avoid giving a title to her work, and even 'untitled' counts as a title – often a most informative one, for instance when it clues the viewer in to the formalist underpinnings of the artist's project.

Perhaps more interesting because less noticed is the way certain artists formulate descriptions of the materials they use. One might have expected to read that the materials of Joseph Marioni's monochrome paintings consist of "acrylic on canvas," but his insistence that they be described instead as "acrylic on canvas on stretcher" alerts us to the fact that our materialism will have to go deeper than usual if we are to engage with his work most attentively and rewardingly. Likewise, to realize that Lawrence Weiner's text works are not described as, say, "vinyl lettering on wall," but rather as "language and the materials referred to," is to learn something about, indeed, the work's ontological location (and the specular *mise en abîme* generated by 'materials' being used as a key word in the inventory of materials is altogether to the point). Michelangelo Pistoletto has exhibited works made of "anonymous materials." It has been similarly possible for artists to play with the dating of works, though apparently it takes more daring – or perhaps desperation – on an artist's part to avail oneself of those possibilities. The fact that McDermott and McGough would date paintings and photographs produced in the 1980s and '90s back to the 1890s is perhaps the clearest example. And of course, that the artist's name is part of his or her plastic material is so obvious that it need only be pointed out. Whose mother ever gave her son a name like Assume Vivid Astro Focus?

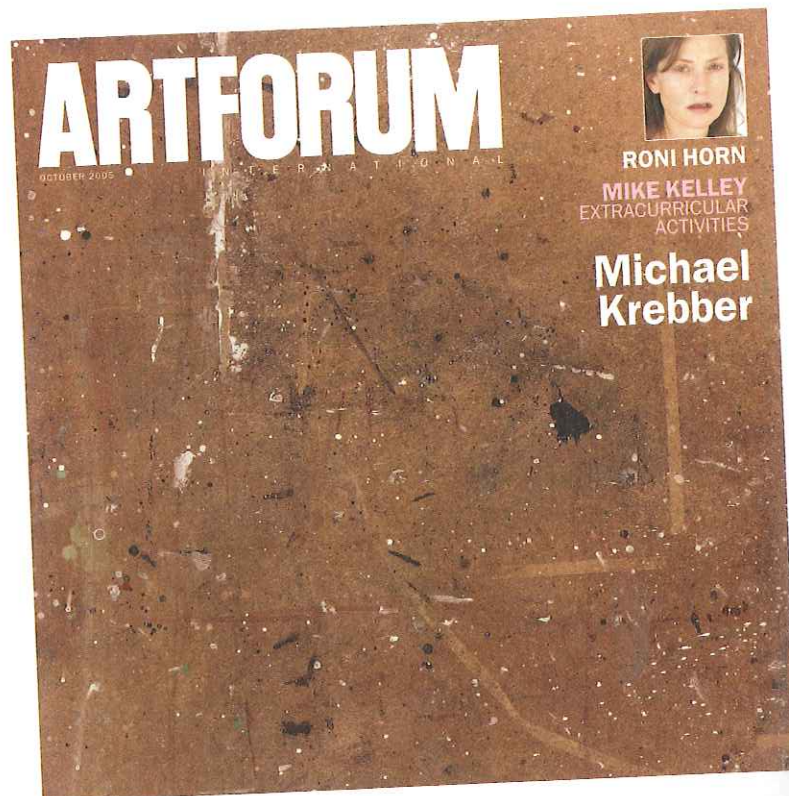
In the Renaissance, artists had to produce works in accordance with iconographic programs laid down by churchmen and humanists. Under the market conditions of modernity, they became required to invent

their own subjects. In contrast to conventional accounts whereby subject matter becomes more and more expendable as the twentieth century approaches and abstraction becomes a possibility, it really becomes more and more crucially a part of the artist's task to arrive at a subject – all the more so if the work is abstract, and that is why, when some of the New York Abstract Expressionists contemplated founding a school, the name they chose for it was, precisely, The Subjects of the Artist. Finally, with postmodernity, the artist has to produce, not so much the work itself (as we'll see, there exist artists whose every effort is to reduce the work to its vanishing point) or even its subject – its 'myth,' as we will see that it can be called – as its catalogability, if there is such a word. But in any case, these minimal attributes of the artwork are so indispensable precisely because they are requisite to any attempt to understand the work's relation to the project that generated it.

"What look like paintings"

The October 2005 issue of *Artforum*, the magazine with which I work closely, devoted no less than three articles to the work of the German painter – but perhaps we should be very tentative in using that word here – Michael Krebber (*Artforum*, 2005). I'd like to take a look at these three essays, to use them as examples, because they represent a certain range and quantity of consensus opinion on the same subject in a concentrated dose, and from an authoritative source. Let's look at how the three critics talk about Krebber's work. I'm not going to try and summarize what each one says – in any case their modes of discourse are not necessarily based on the presentation of structured arguments that can easily be reduced to a precis – but simply to quote certain value-loaded passages and expressions that seem significant and in some way typical.

According to Daniel Birnbaum, director of the Städelschule in Frankfurt, "Krebber's art is a zone of contagion, a space for conversation rather than a mode of producing objects." Birnbaum also relays what he refers to as Krebber's "often-repeated claim that he was working on his myth long before his paintings." Although after some early work based on the readymade, Krebber "has systematically turned to painting," Birnbaum says, "this is not to suggest that he has finally found a technique or subject matter with which he feels authentically at home." Instead, "What look like paintings are often in fact altered readymades,



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[cover].

as in the case of some naively exotic-looking cheetah pictures from 2003, which are actually found pieces of fabric put on a stretcher." (Although Birnbaum dutifully notes Krebber's propensity for making works that resemble or quote other German painters, such as Sigmar Polke, Martin Kippenberger, or Albert Oehlen, he neglects to mention that this appropriation of found textiles is a move that goes back to Blinky Palermo's work in the '70s, with the difference that Palermo never used fabrics with images, only monochromatic fields.)

The New York-based critic John Kelsey begins by contrasting Krebber with other painters based on a difference in the sheer quantity of paint that their practices entail: "All the paint in Krebber's last two shows here" – that is, in New York – "couldn't fill one small canvas by Dana Schutz or John Currin." Thus, "Krebber demonstrated," by contrast, "that the proof is not in the paint job but in the idea that puts it at a fresh

distance." I don't suppose the name of Maynard G. Krebs means anything to anyone in Europe – he was a character in a well-known American television series of the late '50s and early '60s, a bongo-playing beatnik who would run like hell whenever anyone mentioned the word "work" – but (aside from the happy resemblance between their names) Kelsey portrays Krebber as a sort of Maynard G. Krebs of painting, a man motivated by his aversion to labor: "he uses painting as a strategy for extricating himself from the wrong kind of work – both the bad works that surround him and the bad works he, like anybody, is capable of – or from the demands of work, period." This is the typically Duchampian strategic detachment, not so much of art from labor, as it might seem, but rather of intellectual from manual labor. Thus the importance to Kelsey of the phrase "paint job," which he uses more than once: It suggests that merely depositing paint on a surface is a menial, manual task, the toil of a common laborer. And it seems that it is when "work" turns into "works" – when ideas or at least activity become embodied in objects – that the results are liable to turn out "bad". Kelsey suggests that Krebber goes a step further than Duchamp: "Krebber's approach underlines the fact that artists are readymades too, and that readymades can be unmade." As a result of this self-consciousness about the contingent status, not so much of painting, as of being a painter, "Krebber is less a painter than a strategist, and ... his strategy is to repeat and stop painting in order to go to work on the wider system that makes painting what it is today." And as for the objects, the paintings, in quotes, that result from these strategies, they are hardly to be dwelt on for long; as Kelsey says, "It is probably less interesting to interpret the meaning of a readymade checkered bedsheet or one depicting a moonlit, galloping horse than to realize that this throwaway image – in its very meaninglessness – is here being reclaimed as pure means. In other words, such a gesture doesn't care to fulfill any particular end, to succeed in accomplishing some ultimate significance or work." What matters to an art like this – or rather, to an artist like this – is a sort of virtuosity at escaping everyone's grasp.

It is precisely this talent for "diversion and lack of fixity," according to the third contributor to *Artforum's* discussion of Krebber, that has made him an important reference point for younger artists both in Europe and the U.S. For all that, however, this writer, Jessica Morgan, a curator of contemporary art at the Tate Modern in London, is somewhat more measured in her praise for Krebber than are her two colleagues.

She sees his work as a repertoire of endgame maneuvers, and for that reason as a possibly unsuitable model for young artists: "While a consummate knowledge of his immediate cultural context protects him from any accusations of naïveté or misguided notions of originality, the weight of his inheritance leaves room for just the slightest of activities." While Morgan's understated yearning for an art practice that might still be just sufficiently naïve or misguided enough to risk something more than Alexandrian tinkering with the edges of one's context is a desire I'll admit to sharing, it's not exactly something that can be urged on a young artist in so many words: The very act of warning someone to maintain their innocence is a significant step toward taking that innocence away by converting it into a self-conscious strategy.

If I've spent so much time on these readings of Krebber's work, this is not – as you may possibly have gathered already – because he is an artist who evokes any deep sympathy in me. But he and the interpretations his work provokes seem representative to me – not so much of artistic work in general today, as of certain commonly, though not exclusively, held values. I think that what all those accounts of Krebber's work agree on, and what they either praise him for, or else at least see as accounting for his widespread influence, is the way the objects he produces systematically evade definition – they seem to be paintings but they have not been painted or carry very little paint; they present images but the images are essentially insignificant, and so on – and then the way Krebber himself embodies the role of painter by evading identification as such, so that he is said to be a producer of strategies rather than works, conversations rather than objects, legends and rumors more than of anything the viewer can easily grasp. Above all, and despite all talk of the death of the author that continues to echo back to us from the days of Barthes and Foucault, the reception of Krebber's work consists of a constant swerve away from an attention to the character of the things he produces as an artist to his manner of behaviorally manifesting an idea of the artist – a manifestation of which the exhibited works are only a very small part.

With regard to the ontology of the art object, painted or otherwise, this has to serve as a warning to us: It is not necessarily by looking at the object itself that we are going to learn very much about its ontology. For this reason, most of the contemporary philosophical writing on the subject seems fundamentally misguided. Even those accounts that might at first appear to shift the focus to another level, for instance George

Dickie's institutional theory, do so only in order to account, in the end, for the object – in order to explain why certain objects are "baptized," as it's sometimes put, as artworks while others are not. The title of Arthur Danto's classic essay sums up this entire problematic: "Works of Art and Mere Real Things."

But if we look attentively at how art is discussed within the contemporary art world, it soon becomes clear, as I think I showed with the essays on Krebber, that for all the energy expended on the description and evaluation and interpretation of objects, paintings among others, the object is not considered the ultimate ground of its own justification. Instead, the real point of the artistic enterprise, the thing that one really wants to pinpoint and to construe, is what might be called the artistic *project*. This focus on the project has been intermittently articulated at least since the early days of Romanticism – in 1798 Friedrich von Schlegel wrote, "A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object" – but it is as relevant as ever today, if not more so. If you are an admirer of Michael Krebber's work then what you are admiring is above all his project, his redefinition of artistic activity. If you are an admirer of John Currin, the American painter whom John Kelsey implicitly contrasted to Krebber on the ostensible ground that the former used too much paint (such inefficiency!), and if you believe that Currin "paints well" – a controversial assertion but one that would surely be affirmed by most of Currin's admirers; or rather, if you think that Currin paints well *and* count yourself a sophisticated viewer of contemporary art, then you ought to be able to see how Currin's painterly virtuosity is justified by his project, and not vice versa.

Maybe this is why we think we have a particular ontological problem about painting – an ontological problem that is also a critical problem: because whenever we look at a painting we think we are looking at an object. And if the unit of artistic evaluation and analysis is the project rather than the object, then we might feel that in this painting/object we are facing something of lesser status, like a Platonist looking at a mere chair when what he really wants to do is contemplate an idea. Someone who thinks this way might even suspect, as Kelsey seems to do, that the physical beefing-up of the painting/object (that mass of paint he derides in Schutz's or Currin's work) is a purely compensatory reaction against the object's ontological inadequacy as such – a sort of aesthetic Napoleon Complex.

But there's another way to look at it. Maybe the Platonic idea could be contemplated in its purity – maybe; but if so, that's because it was held to be perfect and eternal. A project, by definition, is nothing like that. Its very nature is to be in progress, in development – to be incomplete and unfolding, and above all to be subject to revision. (A project is not a program, which can simply be executed.) And that, in turn, means that you never get to look at it straight on. Rather, it's something you only catch glimpses of, something you descry by way of its various manifestations. If those manifestations happen to be paintings, they are at no greater (or lesser) remove from the project itself than would be the case if they were texts, or performances, or what have you. With a painting, like any other work of contemporary art, what you really have to ask yourself is, "Does the artist have a project? And if so, what can I learn about it from this particular work?"

"The intention to produce"

In the essay whose paradigmatic title I've already mentioned, "Works of Art and Mere Real Things," Danto seems to point in this direction with his fable of six identical red monochrome paintings, each of which has a different title – *Kierkegaard's Mood* being an abstract psychological portrait, *Nirvana*, "a metaphysical painting based on the artist's knowledge that the Nirvanic and Samsara orders are identical, and that the Samsara world is fondly called the Red Dust by its deprecators," and so on (Danto 1981b: 1). But I don't think that Danto quite arrives at the sense of how the artistic project underlies the diverse practices of titling because all the titles in his story are essentially captions, which function to turn the seemingly nonobjective monochromes into representations of one sort or another. Danto is implicitly cognizant of what I called the importance of 'cataloguability' for contemporary art, but he mistakes the reason for its import – he mistakes it, I mean, when he writes as a philosopher, but not, I think, when he writes as a critic. It is not what the painting represents that counts in the real world of art. What the painting represents, when it does represent, is only one more clue to the all-important sense of the underlying project, and this is the primary focus of our aesthetic attention.

To get a better sense of the force of the project, we might turn, not to a philosopher, but to a creative artist, albeit a literary artist. In his famous story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," as I hope you all know,

Jorge Luis Borges presents the idea that a late Symbolist poet in France, a friend and contemporary of Paul Valéry, had set himself the project of writing the great novel of the Spanish Golden Age. "Pierre Menard did not want to compose *another* Quixote," Borges' narrator specifies, "he wanted to compose *the* Quixote. Nor, surely, need one have to say that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original." He did not propose to copy Cervantes – unlike the appropriation artists of the '80s, though like them, Menard's inventor was fascinated by the theme of the copy and the original, which has been inseparable from any discourse on art since Plato. Instead, Menard's "admirable intention was to produce a number of pages which coincides – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (Borges 1998: 91).

This is the essence of the issue: The artist, above all, has the "intention to produce" something. Normally, the desideratum is that this something produced should not resemble a work already existing, or at least not too closely, because this nonresemblance might be seen as a sort of indirect sign that the work is not a copy (whatever that is) but really a production. Menard, anomalously, had elected to take on a more formidable challenge. Yet, "The task I have undertaken is not *in essence* difficult," Menard is said to have explained, "If I could just be immortal, I could do it" (Borges 1998: 91-92). (His project would therefore be, perhaps, less demanding than that of Constantin Brancusi, who said of the art of which he dreamed that "one must be a god to conceive it, a king to commission it, and a slave to make it" – assuming that to be immortal is not necessarily to be a god.) In the end, Menard does manage to produce a few fragments of the novel he has in mind. These lead the tale's narrator to declare that while "The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical ... the second" – that is, Menard's – "is almost infinitely richer" (Borges 1998: 94). Of course, it is the nature of Menard's project, not the "visible" features of his text, which makes it so.

Curiously, Danto himself cites Menard, but in a different essay, and he draws different conclusions from the story than I do, although we agree that "Borges' contribution to the ontology of art is stupendous" (Danto 1981a: 36). If we were to imagine a project similar to Menard's in the domain of painting, it would presumably be an artist of today attempting to paint – not to copy but somehow to "produce" – a masterpiece by Velázquez. Of course, after Borges, that might still be a form of copying – copying an idea rather than an image. Naturally, there

exist today painters who self-consciously employ antiquated styles, and sometimes their works are of genuine interest, yet their projects never seem quite as ambitious as we can imagine Menard's to have been, or as that of Borges in reaching the point of being able to imagine a Menard. And while the work of appropriationists like Elaine Sturtevant or Sherrie Levine serves to show how tenuous the distinction between copying and production may become, insofar as the act of copying itself can at least in some instances produce differences sufficient to distance the original, their projects as well seem narrow enough to give some of us a sort of aesthetic claustrophobia. But in any case, as always, the distinction lies in the act and not in the copy – in the project, not the object.

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Painting: Ontology and Experience

Stephen Melville

A Problem

Let me begin with two remarks by Michael Fried about the work of two very different artists:

It is as though Caro's sculptures essentialize meaning *as such*—as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do *alone* makes his sculpture possible.

(Fried 1998: 162)

[P]erhaps the best that can be said is that Demand seeks to make pictures that *thematize or indeed allegorize intendedness as such*, not simply assert the intendedness of the representation ...

(Fried 2005: 203)

The first of these will be familiar since it figures importantly in one of the most read pieces of post-war American art criticism, Fried's controversial 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood." The second may be less familiar; it appears in a recent essay for *Artforum* on the work of the photographer Thomas Demand. I take the strong echo of the first in the second to be entirely deliberate and indeed to be underlined by the inclusion of the first in a footnote to the article in which the remark about Demand appears.

My sense – for what it's worth – is that the remark about Caro is fully at home in the closely carpentered and tightly jointed text of "Art and Objecthood," which is to say it strikes most readers as fully secure – at