

Antinomies (c. 1991)

1. As an artist my first commitment has been to painting. I have often wondered, as a result, whether my collage/paintings were an enrichment of my work as a painter, or a betrayal. Many impulses drive me to reach for the three-dimensional and ready-made and add them to the two-dimensional contrived surface which is called a painting. These include love, exuberance, generosity and wonder. But I am aware that desperation, anger, anxiety and impatience also play a role. I examine my particular case in part by availing myself of the example of others.

2. All painting is construction, the application of a layer of material upon some surface which is the base or armature. Cave artists had quite a delectable surface to work on. They felt along its bridges and hollows, elaborating images. We don't know if they thought they were destroying the surface or whether they believed it to be indestructible. Were they amazed that they could make walls vanish through their images, or did the walls' ubiquitous support amaze and confront them?

Today's painting surface is normally a more neutral one: bounded, flat, uniformly white, man-made. But the questions remained, complicated and augmented by the history of painters. Still, it is possible to point to some sets of relations which will not overly simplify, trivialize, or falsify this rich variety of painting experiences.

3. There seems to be a relationship between notions of reality, space and time and the insistence upon surface. Renaissance artists discovered a way to dissolve the surface for the sake of a world of comprehensible space, a world felt to miraculously correspond to our real world. On the other hand, the insistence on the surface went along with an interest in non-spatial and timeless reality. Thus, if the world we live in was considered real, the artist's imperative was to create illusions. And if the world was considered illusory, artists felt bound to renounce illusion, to adhere to the reality of their material. So surface somehow functions as the fulcrum balancing matter and spirit. Matisse called this polarity "the Occidental" or "the Dutch" and "the Oriental." De Kooning used similar terms. Matisse fully engaged the polarity; de Kooning proclaimed his allegiance to the West. "Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented."¹

Yet, when de Kooning was struggling with his Woman series, when the Mythic seemed about to outweigh the Flesh, he slapped a magazine photo of a mouth onto his painting. "It helped me immensely to have this real thing," he said.² "This real thing" helped restore the balance in the painting that had become too unreal, abstract, spiritual, or even meaningless. For a painter who believes that the meaning of painting consists in its very ability to strike a balance between matter and spirit may simply despair when that desired balance can no longer be achieved or maintained. The reach outside of painting itself, then, is impelled by a loss of faith

¹ In de Kooning's statement, "The Renaissance and Order," on p. 142 in Thomas Hess' *Willem de Kooning*, MOMA, 1968.

² In de Kooning's statement, "Content is a Glimpse," in Hess, *ibid.*, p. 149.

in the cogency of painted reality, in the ability of paint to create a convincing presence.

This loss of faith may be personal or general, final or fleeting. Certainly de Kooning did not end up erasing his own drawings or making combine paintings. It seems to have been a temporary crisis for him. For de Kooning that dose of reality, the magazine cutout, restored power to painting, like a much-needed slap in the face.

4. For other artists the crisis of faith is not so unambiguously resolved. Kurt Schwitters gained renown for his collages and painted constructions, yet throughout his life he remained devoted to painting from nature. He defended his activity as a painter:

This is possibly a purely private diversion; in any case I should not like to lose the connection with the earlier stages of my development. For I consider it important that at the end of one's life nothing should be lost, even if it is false and dull; regardless, one's aspirations should stand forth *entire*. For with our thousand weaknesses and the tiny spark of the ideal, we human beings can at best merrily give *ourselves* openly and honestly, and work, in the ideal sense, towards ourselves. We cannot make ourselves into an ideal being. That ambition usually ends in hypocrisy. I have nothing to hide, not even the fact that today I cling to the sentimental pleasure of painting from nature, without any artistic aims, merely for orientation.³

Schwitters makes three claims for painting: It is for Schwitters a personal foible, a piece of himself he cannot relinquish, and a means of orientation. Each claim pushes beyond the one previous. As a "private diversion" Schwitters' painting is nobody else's business. But then Schwitters argues not merely for indulgence for a harmless quirk, but for preservation of the artist's every aspiration. The self, given over "openly and honestly" in its entirety merits respectful consideration. Painting is a fragment of his life as much to be preserved as a torn train ticket, as his own urine. The final defense, though presented perhaps a bit disingenuously, is his biggest claim. Painting is the means Schwitters uses to find his way - to give his life and work direction. Without it the *merzbilder* would be impossible.

As Schwitters claims for painting escalate, we begin to wonder at the nonetheless marginal place painting occupies in his identity as an artist. But Schwitters' insistence on making room for painting in his work also functions to put painting in its proper place. For when Schwitters calls painting a "private diversion" his apparent dismissal of it was also a very peculiar endearment. The phrase carries

³ Quoted in John Elderfield's *Kurt Schwitters*, Thames and Hudson, 1985, p. 216. Elderfield has a good but all too brief discussion of the relation of Schwitters' painting to the rest of his work.

that special Schwitters blend of the bourgeois and the erotic, camouflaged yet celebrated.

Schwitters believed absolutely in the value of one's private life. He saw it as the arena where one was permanently confronted by one's imperfection and weakness. So he continued to paint out of the love of it. It was almost a kind of vice. But it would be insufficient to merely acknowledge it and abandon it. Schwitters felt *obliged* to continue painting, for by painting he was connecting himself to an earlier stage of his development. Painting unified his present and his past work into an aspiration that could "stand forth entire." He could then say he painted "without any artistic aims." He had to continue painting so as not to become disoriented. It was like a much-needed slap in the face.

5. What can I believe about painting itself if, unlike de Kooning, I want to continue to make collage/paintings, and, unlike Schwitters, I yet aspire to approach painting alone "with artistic aims"? If I wish my aspirations to "stand forth entire," then my practice of making works employing construction with paint must condition what I can say about my practice of making works employing paint alone.

To continue to use construction *in painting* is to employ means other than painting to break the surface. It is, then, a repudiation, relative or absolute, of the ability of paint to alter the flatness of the surface, a flatness which, depending on one's point of view, signifies nothing or Nothing, a significance to be rejected.

But to use paint *in construction* is to say that objects alone will not cohere, that there are no means other than painting to connect their disparate identities, identities which subsist in each object's isolation from all the others in the world, an isolation that must be overcome. Within or over this turbulent surface, punctuated by the banal and the surprising, painting is the binder, the bridge.

It is up to me when I paint to determine what anchorages hold that bridge and what is the chasm beneath.