

Marcus Steinweg

Notes on Paintings

“In art it is hard to say anything as good as: saying nothing.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

Let us not speak of the futility of those obituaries invoking the death or end of painting. They endlessly repeat themselves and this repetition becomes the repeated admission of their futility. And yet perhaps there is no painting – no painting at eye level with the present – that does not touch on its own death, once and again rubbing shoulders with its impossibility.

Perhaps painting means to touch “the void in being and in the present.”² Perhaps painting today is, more than anything, opening to the crack in the continuum of being, affirmation of the inconsistency of reality. At the heart of every interation, affirmation affirms itself by once and again negating its futility. There is a negative power of repetition – the power of negation – that draws its insistence from the affirmation of the impossible: of the impossible or the nothing, which is to say the void or the absence of meaning.

Marguerite Duras said the same of writing, that it is probing the void. In writing, the subject circles the primordial loss of meaning.³ That is what makes a document of futility out of every reiteration: the necessity of nearing the limit of manifest evidences as a means of opening the space of non-evidence, the zero-point of reality. Jacques Lacan called this zero-point the *real*, Jean-Paul Sartre addressed it as the *hole of being*.⁴ What keeps painting alive beyond its death is the opening to a void that, rather than describe the non-existence of God, looks to the condition of its own possibility.

To touch on the boundaries of painting with its own means is something like continuing to live by not ceasing to survive – in other words, the process by which a person, as Derrida

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. P. Winch, Chicago: 1984, p. 23.

² Michel Foucault, in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol 1, 1954-1969, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. James D. Faubion, New York: 2001, p. ???

³ Cf. Marcus Steinweg & Rosemarie Trockel, *Duras*, Berlin: 2008.

⁴ Art is always about wresting the consistency of the work from a universal inconsistency, establishing a visibility devoid of any implicitness. It is because of this that the appearance of the work – its presence – comes as a surprise; because its evidence comes from the order of the non-evident. Art exists at the moment when this appearance tears a hole in the web of facts in order to darken the evidence of instituted realities, not through obscurantism or obscurisation, but through clarity, through a surfeit of evidence.

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once put it, allows for the “complication of the opposition [of] everyday life.”⁵ Painting could be the practice of this complication or complicating, while it enters the scene of the debatable compossibility of death and life. In a conversation with Donald Kuspit, Louise Bourgeois said that “art is about life,” which also means that it has to do with “survival in everyday life.”⁶ To survive in everyday life is to survive in the indifference of reality, in what Albert Camus describes as the “benign indifference of the world.”⁷ This indifference is evidently nothing other than the same ontological void as a synonym for the absence of meaning. In the space left by this absence, painting arises as the index of its impossibility, as long as impossible means that everything always remains to be done, so that, in other words, to paint means to do without absolute meaning, inventing signs and techniques of a life form that can integrate the unliveable into itself.

Painting at eye level with today can only be painting on par with this ontological void, the emptiness indicating the fundamental feature of all realities. The opening to this void implies a certain resistance to facts. Facts are nothing but facts, certainties only certainties: art knows that knowledge isn't everything, that the responsibility of the artist begins with building up an affirmative resistance against all vulgar materialisms and positivisms, simultaneously suspending all idealisms that promise it a reality beyond this one (only to eventually completely de-historicize it later). Realism and idealism are pseudoalternatives – of the history of philosophy, of the philosophical aesthetic, and of art.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Living On“ in *Parages*, trans. Tom Conley, Stanford: 2011, p. 19-116.

⁶ Donald Kuspit, “A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois“ in *Bourgeois* New York: 1988, p. ??

⁷ Albert Camus, *L'Étranger*, Paris: 1942, p. 171f. [author's trans.].