

Leo Steinberg: Studium Generale, Utrecht, 7 March 1994

An ancient Jewish commentary on the Bible distinguishes between two types of great scholar. First are the scholars who are mountains. They are repositories of learning, embodying the tradition they inherit and interpreting it for their generation. They are living encyclopedias, to which one can refer for the answer to any and all questions.

Those are the mountains. The second type of great scholar are those who move mountains. They question the tradition itself, criticize its interpretation and needle its practitioners. They are the ones who put their fingers on the sore spots in the scholarly conscience and then press hard. All the certainty and seeming here-to-stayness of the mountains is challenged by them. With pinpricks they bring continents into motion. This evening's speaker, Leo Steinberg, is a mover of mountains.

Because of the way he works, Steinberg's effect on the western tradition of scholarship has been not so much electrifying, in the way of some movers of mountains, as a slow roast. He has been publishing for more than forty years now, and the effect of his work - even of his earliest essays - has been building up slowly all that time.

A glance at his list of publications might mislead you to characterize Steinberg as a generalist. His doctoral dissertation at New York University was on the minuscule church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane by the seventeenth-century architect Federico Borromini. If any of you have had the good fortune to stumble upon one of Borromini's creations unprepared, you will know that this is a truly magical subject. (Those of you who are not yet familiar with him are strongly advised to store in your unconscious the names S. Ivo della Sapienza and S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, in order to stumble unawares on these jewels of architecture next time you are in Rome.) In his dissertation, subtitled "A study in multiple form," Steinberg analyzes Borromini's building for patterns of sacred and esoteric geometry. He shows how the groundplan of the church, its elevations and spatial effects can impress on the mind of the visitor religious and cosmic truths that are not part of standard Catholic iconography. Steinberg finds in S. Carlo an underlying unity between all its elements: social environment, spiritual universe, intellectual codification, geometric symbolism, stylistic tradition, artistic formulation, stone and brick and light. All combine to serve the ends of what might be called "mathematical mysticism." (I speak from my memory of reading the dissertation thirty years ago; the speaker will forgive or correct my mistakes.)

While he was working on the dissertation and in the years after its completion,

Steinberg also wrote articles on the art of his own time for popular magazines like Life and Harper's, cultural journals like Partisan Review, art magazines like ArtNews and Arts as well as in the catalogues of art galleries. This was even more unusual at the time than it is now. The articles have been gathered in a volume entitled Other criteria: confrontations with twentieth-century art. Most unusual of all was the critical stance of the writer. The earliest of the articles, dating from 1953, has the manifesto-like title "The Eye is a Part of the Mind." Steinberg was writing during the decade that saw the triumph of Abstract Expressionist art and formalist criticism. It was a period when the work of art was seen as an autonomous existence, to which we could establish visual contact only. Critics were nearly unanimous in proclaiming the final liberation of art from what they called the "baggage" of content, representation, subject matter. The task of the connoisseur was to empty his own mind as completely as possible of its intellectual content.

In "The Eye is a Part of the Mind" and other essays of the time, Steinberg laid down a heavy, indeed irrefutable claim for the importance of representation and subject matter in art. By way of comparison, it is interesting to note that another historian of European art, Ernst Gombrich, took a superficially similar stand in the 1950s, in his books The Story of Art and Art and Illusion. There is however a vital difference between the two. To Gombrich, abstract art was a disastrous mistake. It was a detour from the king's road of the western tradition in art. He writes of "the collapse of representation in twentieth-century art" as the result of "the self-contradictory nature of the impressionist programme." The tradition was bound to reassert itself in the end.

Steinberg's attitude could not be more different. While he too insists on the central importance of subject and representation, he does not castigate abstract artists (let alone Impressionists) for having sacrificed it. (That would be out of character at any rate. Steinberg always writes of artists with deep respect.) His standpoint, coming forty years after Malevich's black and white squares, is astounding. At first reading, you think it is a sheer provocation, not intended to be taken literally. Steinberg denies that the sacrifice of subject matter was complete. "Modern art," he writes, "has not, after all, abandoned the imitation of nature.... In its most powerful expressions, representation is still an essential condition, not an expendable freight." I will not recapitulate his argument here, but urge you to read it. When you do, you will find that far from being a mere provocation, it is a powerful statement of some home truths. It shifts the burden of proof from the challengers to the defenders. While exonerating twentieth-century artists of the blame that Gombrich lays at their feet, Steinberg

does take critics to task - even if they are the same person as the artist, as in the case of Jasper Johns. "The formalist esthetic," he writes, "designed to champion the new abstract trend, was largely based on a misunderstanding and an underestimation of the art it set out to defend."

Therefore, whereas Gombrich expected modernism to be followed by a return to pre-modernism, Steinberg looked for signs of what he in 1968 called post-Modernism. In the conclusion of his essay "Other criteria," he related the art of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol to "changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories. The deepening inroads of art into non-art continue to alienate the connoisseur as art defects and departs into strange territories leaving the old stand-by criteria to rule an eroding plane." Twenty-four years later, we can only acknowledge in wonderment the accuracy of Steinberg's observation. Even though he himself wrote that "the course of art [was] once again ... unpredictable," his characterization of post-Modernism at its cradle has held remarkably true for the fully-grown phenomenon. To my mind, Steinberg had already defined the essence of Postmodernism six years earlier, in 1962, when he wrote this about Jasper Johns: "A crucial problem of twentieth-century art - how to make the painting a firsthand reality - resolves itself when the subject matter shifts from nature to culture." This daringly simple insight is still the idea to beat in 1994.

Being a major player in the criticism of contemporary art should be more than enough to satisfy any normal art historian. But Leo Steinberg is not a normal art historian. Nor is he, as I hinted above, a generalist spreading himself thin over a vast field. On the contrary, Steinberg is - not a multi-specialist - but something I would call, with excuses for the ugliness of the word, a concentrationist. He works on a limited number of themes and personalities, worrying them constantly in all their aspects. Picasso is one of his lifelong projects, Michelangelo another. I will not go into his work on these masters. His lecture is devoted to Picasso, and anyone interested in Michelangelo has already discovered Steinberg by himself.

A fourth leitmotiv in his work is divine love in its most physical form. Concentrating his gaze on the contact between Christ and Mary, Steinberg discovered that their relationship had an erotic dimension that is not acknowledged in the writings of art historians. His best known but not his sole contribution to the study of this phenomenon is a book with the eloquent title The sexuality of Christ in Renaissance art and in modern oblivion. Since its appearance in 1983, the book has proved, through the reactions it has provoked, that the taboo is alive and well in the Age of Postmodernism. No matter how sophisticated new

traditions may think they are, there are always thankful tasks at hand for the mover of mountains.

Being specialized, as an art historian, in Dutch art of the seventeenth century, I myself have never had occasion to work on the masters or subjects Steinberg writes about. Nonetheless, Steinberg's "confrontations with twentieth-century art" have affected my own work as well. The "alienation of the connoisseur" that he noted in 1968, and the erosion of old criteria for the judgment of quality in art, are relevant not only to the art of today. They also have fargoing implications for the suppositions at the heart of art history and of the humanities at large. No one in the humanities can ignore them any longer. The mountains Steinberg moved in the 1950s and '60s were larger than anyone could know at the time.

In The sexuality of Christ, Steinberg amasses an overwhelming amount of visual evidence for an iconography whose very existence had not previously been suspected. This is a shaking experience for those of us - and that includes every single art historian alive - who were trained to see "subject matter" in terms of iconographic codes and canonical texts. If you accept his findings - and despite desperate attempts by critics to deny them, they still stand - you also accept the obligation to look again at the subjects in the art of whatever period you happen to be studying, in search of the kind of oblique or transverse or implied or subversive or never verbalized meanings that Steinberg found in Renaissance Madonnas. Going by the past history of the reception of Steinberg's writings, it may take another quarter of a century before this happens, before art historians get over their shock and indignation and skepticism. No matter. Steinberg's insights are out there, and they will carry the century if not the day.

How has Steinberg done it? How has he single-handedly, single-mindedly undermined our received ideas about what art is and what it means? Considering the period in which he works, and the consistency of his achievement, you would be justified in suspecting that he was applying some system or other. Say, carrying to its extremes one or another of our dogmas: Marxism or psychoanalysis or semiotics or structuralism or post-structuralism or critical theory or what have you. However, this is not the case. He sometimes employs concepts from one or another of these fields, but always inserted into a framework of his own making.

Yet Steinberg does have a system, which to my knowledge has never before been

identified as such. As the discoverer, I have the privilege of naming it, and I hereby dub Steinberg's system Radical Integrity. He applies it in three stages: Radical Looking, Radical Thinking and Radical Writing.

When Leo Steinberg, as I have experienced in museum visits with him, stops in front of a work of art, time stops with him. He will not budge again until he has taken in everything about the work that is of conceivable interest. He looks at the composition and the colors, the space and the design, the style and the quality, the figures and the objects, the story and the symbolism. He judges the artist's relative success in capturing anatomies, physiognomies and other physical properties by the laws of gravity, perspective and whatever other parts of optics or physics or biology or theology may be applicable. No detail escapes his notice. There will always be one or two difficult passages in the work, and he will end up by staring at them for just as long as necessary until he either understands them or concludes that they are ununderstandable. And there will always be passages that do not fit the expected pattern. Steinberg will devote even more attention to these, attempting to account for them in terms of the artist's intentions. When he is finished, that work of art has yielded to him all its visual secrets. His knowledge concerning the work is not vague or general. He can change his mind about it, of course, but only after returning to it and correcting his perception of whatever feature he mis-saw the first time around.

On the basis of this kind of viewing of thousands of works of art, Steinberg then proceeds to Radical Thinking. This is a process of years or more usually decades, during which Steinberg ponders the properties and interrelationships between the group of works concerned. He does not rest - or let his friends rest - until he has accounted to his own complete satisfaction for everything his Radical Looking has turned up. Naturally, he performs profound literature research in this stage, in the hope that others can provide him with adequate explanations. When they do, he acknowledges this gratefully. When they do not, he moves on politely to other texts and sources and comparisons until he has found the key to a solution. He is mercilessly honest with himself, not allowing even the scantest remain of doubt, the most far-fetched possible objection, to go unanswered. If doubts or objections remain, they are brought to the surface and verbalized in the final stage of the Steinberg system, Radical Writing.

Now that you know about Radical Looking and Radical Thinking, I can be short about Radical Writing. It is carried out with the same uncompromising respect for evidence and argument, to which is added uncompromising respect for the reader. No recourse is taken

to the usual shortcuts of scholarly writing, and even the conventions are dispensed with if they stand in the way of precise demonstration and precise qualification. The resulting prose - perfectly personal and perfectly zakelijk at one and the same time - is a compliment to the taste and intelligence of the reader. I am pleased to be able to report that Steinberg is the first art historian to have received the Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a distinction that was given to him a mere thirty years after he began publishing.

Why do I call the sum of Radical Looking and Thinking and Writing Radical Integrity? For three reasons. One is that Steinberg assumes that the works of art he studies, like Borromini's church, are completely integrated - internally, in terms of inner coherence, and externally, in their environment. This aspect of Radical Integrity is to my mind dispensable. I can imagine the system being applied by someone who assumes that art is disjunctive and incoherent. Second, I call it Radical Integrity because of the wholeness of Steinberg's commitment to each of its stages. This cannot be dispensed with, but it can be diluted. Not all of us are temperamentally or financially capable of investing as much time in each aspect of each of our publications as Steinberg, and I would not like to see anyone's good work disqualified on that account.

The third reason is however indispensable and not to be diluted or abbreviated in any way. And that is simply integrity in the sense of honesty. Radical intellectual honesty demands that you take sufficient measures to protect yourself against self-deceit, and your readers against misunderstanding. It demands that you never use received opinions or methodologies without first testing their value and applicability to your case. It requires you to measure the reliability of every statement you make, and to let the reader know if there are hidden weaknesses under the surface.

That's all there is to it. Needless to say, applying Steinberg's technique is not going to turn you automatically into a mover of mountains. He has other gifts which cannot be learned.

Before you rush off to try your hand at Radical Integrity, please remain seated for a demonstration of its results in the hands of its originator. At the end of Prof. Steinberg's lecture there will be time for questions. Now it is a great pleasure to invite Leo Steinberg to speak on "Picasso's Decision."

Gary Schwartz