

PAINTING AS LANDSCAPE

The conversation on which these pages are based all recorded on magnetic tape. The attempt to transcribe them exactly as they were appeared to result in a falsification. The true discourse was another, and if I aimed to reconstruct it according to the significance it was for me, I could not concern myself with being objective or faithful to the original. All the same, I don't think that I have betrayed Battaglia's thoughts any more than I would have done with a critique of his painting.

GABRIELLA DRUDI

When I'm working on a painting, I keep postponing any emotional participation. I can't go as far as to say that it's extraneous to me. There's not a single painting, not a single shape on earth that you can say that about for the artist that painted it, since in the very act of painting he knew he was compromising himself. Nonetheless, I see the work I am doing today as a clarification of the past of the work I have already done. It's only in the future that today's work will be clarified and thus reach its fulfilment. It's the future that attracts me, the future that will have to tell me what is true and lasting in the work I'm involved in. And that's the reason I never have an emotional involvement with my paintings even though I work with intensity and total devotion. This tension towards tomorrow, this waiting for the future, gives me a detachment from the painting as well as from the destiny of the painting: the shows, the reactions of others. But I want it clear that I'm not and never will be what used to be called a stoic or, today, a Zen monk. I have no aspirations for higher consciousness, and I make no use of the indifference of chance. I live in my work on parallel levels. I am simply a painter in front of a canvas, working and deciding: right, wrong, continue, correct, start over, and that's about it. Then I think about the ideal painting that I might make, an ideal that's an ideal for tomorrow, but that tomorrow may change, just as it always has. The possibility of change doesn't bother me. I have always thought of my works as a continuous process, an uninterrupted development of an interior dialogue that can even ramify in opposite directions, but that can never lose itself. On the other hand, if what I am doing is unimportant for the thing in itself but important, rather, for what I desire it to become, the starts and stops and contradictions make no difference. Something definitive. I'm not sure if I have something definitive in mind. I think that one day I will deserve to what it is. Today the future of my work is an obscure idea that contains everything. There's my present active experience with the paintings and there's my uninterrupted thinking about painting itself, there's the reading of the painting, which is uncertain and the process of rethinking work already done, the constant mutation or thoughts about my own paintings and paintings by others, a mutation that, in this moment, for reason that have nothing to do with reason, upsets many of my certainties of the past. At the first intuition everything seems clear, then there are others and finally a whole series of comparisons, and ideas; just when you should feel on top of

things, it all starts whirling around you, and you end up asking yourself what art really is.

If there is any easy answer to this eternal question, I don't know it: you should give the answer with your work as if no such thing as art already existed. In the uncertainty and complexity of things, there is no choice but to question all judgements, in order, naturally, to readapt them to what is useful to you. For me, at the present stage of the crisis of my work, it's a question of reassessing all judgements on the art of the past.

It may even be true art is an existential act, but I consider that to be a misfortune. I never cease to be amazed that many artists see their paintings as supreme individual affirmation. I think the highest attribute a painting can possess is impersonality. Piero della Francesca is impersonal, so is Vermeer, and so is Fra Angelico at San Marco. I owe Piero di Cosimo the discovery that it is possible to be both impersonal and bizarre at the same time. I knew nothing about this artist, he's rarely cited among the great, and yet when I saw his work he impressed me because his strange subjects unmistakably his own — are imbued with a curious component of impersonality. Art is an event that divests itself of history.

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Modern art was an exaltation of the pure mental act, and from pure mental act it arrived at pure gestural act — an absolutely incomprehensible development. And yet, it seems to me today that it has been useful. I have stopped trusting in sudden gestures, even in those that should reveal a secret ego I prefer patient, long, intense daily work. And so certain works of the past that followed the conventions of craftsmanship — which is no less gestural than any other manual operation on canvas — seem a clearer kind of mental act; a higher one, in a certain sense. Through their anonymous gestural quality, these works attain a high mental level. Looking at the past helps me to resolve the conflicts of the present and to place the present in a reassuring continuum. In painting, the mental act is inevitably an imaginary act, since it is an act that manifests itself manually, and that is the only thing that allows it to exist. Thus we will never be able to know if the act of painting is the physical transcription of a purely mental act — and thus a reduction, as well — or if, on the other hand, the mental operation is realized through the distillation of this daily and tiring labour. What remains, at any rate, is the work, if it's art. The work of art possesses a mysterious quality: it resists time and it changes in time; it loses the meanings that it had, it takes on others and then it may reassume the ones that it lost, but it lives in an uninterrupted variation of meanings. This is why the work of art is alive; it's in constant change. Otherwise the work belongs not to art but to history. The importance that it may have had or the revolution that it may have provoked are not sufficient to free it from history.

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Until now, I have attempted only to improve my own behaviour in working — and I don't know how successful I have been. For years now I have been tracking

down an ideal in painting, but I have preferred to prepare myself at length before facing it, rather than run the risk of being taken by surprise. In doing so, I may have brushed against hypotheses that contain something of value, or something precise, but I have not been aware of it. But on the other hand, how could one be aware of it? How is it possible to make the past reveal the alternatives it once offered? Many artists live the drama of believing that they might have been able to take full possession of things they only brushed against. I make no secret of the fact that I dream of pushing back that ineluctable moment in the life of every artist in which he feels that he has discovered something that belongs to him and him alone. I think that all of us are destined to stop at various levels, at various strata; our work is like an excavation. You eat away the surface and proceed from level to level towards the complex roots of things. But it's by no means certain that in proceeding you gain anything. The capacity for art is the capacity to understand the level at which you stop. Still there are paintings that get to you for reasons that go beyond their beauty — paintings that get to the heart because they involve several hypotheses. And this has an even too obvious relationship with the level at which you choose to stop with the level of complexity at which you find yourself. I will never say, of course, that this level implies more art; it implies more experience, a more tidal certainty of things. To go on with this work of excavation means to increase the weight of meaning, of vision, of illusion. To delay and to wait represents the hope of reaching multiple meanings. What I am afraid of is stopping at only one thing. This is something of which I accuse many contemporary artists, and I am talking about the great ones. Nonetheless, I sometimes ask myself if it's not all a dream of my own, or perhaps no more than a refusal to face reality, which is something simple and unique. But no, that's not enough. It is precisely this uncertainty that makes me go back to the museums. Perhaps the work of art doesn't contain this stratification of being, but I continue to search for it because I believe it to be objectively there.

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I almost always work very rapidly and without interruption. In some way, this helps me. The confused anxiety that accompanies the formation of a thought and the inability to carry a line of reasoning to its extreme consequence have convinced me that I have to think by painting. Painting is another world. One day, while discussing my paintings, a person whom I admire refused to believe that the composition — I mean the manner in which these triangles and elongated rhomboids are arranged in their chromatic bands — was not preordained rather than a matter of chance. And yet, when I begin to work, I have nothing planned at all, except perhaps an idea of light. It can always happen that something unexpected comes out of the painting. In that case, it takes many days for a decision. But when I go back to the work, I finish it without stopping.

It was like this even before. I had already learned how to manage a pen or a brush and I would worry because I didn't know what to do. I would have liked to copy

the paintings I love, and at the same time I was afraid to end up imitating them, which is something different. To copy the work of an artist is to attempt to understand it, and a work is always made so that others can appropriate it. Like every object of passion, a painting lives on the image that others make of it. The risk is imitation, which means an interest in the final results that belong to the logic of the painting and not truly to its substance. Imitation is essentially a betrayal. Picasso copied Cézanne, just as Matisse did, but there are many imitators of Picasso and few who have copied him.

But let's get back to me and the impasse that I felt in that period. I felt that I couldn't permit myself any formal problems, in fact no problems at all, but that I had to begin to work. I felt that I had to work for hours and hours, to work every day, to keep working, and always think about painting. I thought that some day painting itself might tell me what to do as a reply to this incessant provocation. I trusted my own hands. I went ahead blindly, and with an empty mind. But not in order to conquer my unconscious, quite the contrary in order to be like the others. To be it without thinking about it.

And even now that I know what I want to do, I never have any ideas at the moment I begin to paint. I said that sometimes I have an idea of light. I realize, though, that even that comes afterwards, when I have already laid in my first color. The choice of this color is always a matter of chance; I consider just a preparation. It's a mistake to say that my paintings deal with composition problems. When I lay out the triangles and rhomboids, I aim to define a rhythm, and that is always conditioned by accidental considerations, like the size and shape of the canvas. There aren't many variations and they don't improve or damage, what I want to do, and this is something that goes beyond any single painting. Every painting is, in a sense, a phase of a much longer work. What turns out different from painting to painting is insignificant. A year's work or a cycle of fifteen, even twenty paintings, counts as an only one painting that includes yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but something I don't carry this out. The completion of a work is no more important than any of its other phases. Sometimes I have worked for a year, even two, with a certain painting in mind, and then at the moment when to do it, it was clear I could do it, it became superfluous. Or perhaps I was only in a hurry to start on the next phase.

I go from one phase of my work to another, almost without realizing it, by reasonably modifying my consciousness. After making a painting I make no attempt to analyse it; I live with it. Thus I'm to stay in the studio all day long. I walk, I smoke, I choose another canvas, and in that moment, I think of other things. I put in the background colour, with tape I plot the concentration of points of light, and something over there that I've just finished comes to mind. I go into the other room to look at it, and after thirty seconds I come back and start to work. It's like that every day. And then finally I realize that something has changed: the work I'm doing doesn't reveal anything to me anymore, it becomes simply the hostile echo of a sequence that I already know and that I want to forget.

What counts in my work is its future, the painting that I will do.

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The last paintings of Mondrian, like *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, are the most difficult ones to grasp since the rhythmic theme alters their dimensions. The same thing happens, in a vaguer kind of way in the group of abstract paintings that he did after his rigorously cubist phase — the prevalently pink paintings of verticals and horizontals. Afterwards there is the dialogue between the large and the small, the square and the line. In the first paintings, as in the last, the dimension no longer corresponds to the objective presence of the canvas. The succession of similar quantities is elusive. What we see is no more than the seal of a spatial equilibrium. I would even say that the painting is unrecognizable as an object. I would defend Scialoja's thesis of a temporal trajectory of distances that reflect themselves rather than the thesis of the mimesis of a dance. For me these paintings are undimensional. They develop on a changing horizon that confuses and excites; the actual painting as an objective quantity no longer exists.

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Even if you've never been to Holland, you will no doubt have seen it in the movies. I remember that once in Paris I knew a girl from Holland, tall, blond, and with long inert arms. Claudel starts his *Introduction à la peinture hollandaise* with an ecstatic description of the Dutch countryside. He points out that the imprecise horizon is a long suture between a deceptive sky and an earth moving out into emptiness in an unending play of gradations. It was during a trip to Holland that I decided to paint landscapes. Then, Pater speaks of the disturbed and disturbing eloquence of nature. «The rain, the first luminous streaks of dawn, the very terseness of the sky has a power that one can only define as moral.» The architecture of spaces and the contrasts of monumental figures have never given me any other impulse than the impulse to run away. I feel a connection with this emptiness in which the forms appear from imaginary distances in regular cadence: the space that the eye can take in fixing upon something new. Claudel, too, observed the slowness with which a tone, held back in stratifications of light, manages finally to achieve definition in line and form. What could be more mysterious than clarity? In the Dutch landscape, I recognized the painting I wanted to make: a never-ending space for the condensation of serene mirages. The landscape is the definability of the indefinable, perhaps the hope of painting this landscape. Or it could perhaps be the dream of one who doubts the individuality of the individual. Laing tells of the case of a woman patient who, as a child, was wont to play at assuming the shapes and colors of the landscape and losing herself in it. She was the futile outline of the hills lost in shadow, the obscure silhouette of the trees and an indeterminate number of pebbles flashing white in the last distillation of daylight. Her game was so successful that she would become frightened and call herself repeatedly by name in order to call herself back. And yet, I don't believe that the will to become invisible within the landscape is an ontological negation. I could contradict Laing with his

own story by affirming that it was only after recognizing herself in something objectively 'outside of herself' that the child actually knew her name and became capable of pronouncing it. The American action painters gave themselves an identity in the act of painting, and the appropriation of the secret visage that dictated their gestures and received their impressions must surely have manifested itself with more anxiety than was to be found in the evening walks of Laing's little girl. Vision is no more illusory than emotion. And it can't be reasonably affirmed that contemplative fantasies aim at annihilation as their ultimate goal. Sebastian van Storck's descent into the landscape is a premise for action. Having made a *tabula rasa* of everything that is defined, evident, and conditioning, Sebastian moves freely towards the heroic act that identifies him. No phase of the slow conquest of seeing — the flashing of the winter sun, the war chariot that re-emerges from the water, the streak of light that moves across the plains — can be considered a mechanical accumulation of inert moods. It is something both more simple and more magical: it is the progressive tracing of an autobiography. When the man coincides with his surroundings — the furious wind, the tower under the assault of the sea, a child in danger — Sebastian, under the influence of «the waters that are not in their place but 'above the firmament'», concludes his creation.

In the making of art, action is something daily. This apparent inactivity of contemplation is not credible. I have to work every day, I want to work every day. Even the task of suppressing false idols — or of ourselves — takes place in art through a patient craftsmanlike labour. Duchamp boasted that he never worked; he knew that without this painful renunciation his battle for the annihilation of art would have been no more than a simple intellectual mistake. I want my paintings to testify to this real labour, this daily decision to fill the flow of the hours with recuperable acts. The paintings I manage to make are a good anticipation of the future. In this imprecise horizon where the past is contained within the present, where the present has no consistency since it is turned towards the future, and where the future is pure hypothesis since I will never have the certainty of making another painting, painting is the influence under which I must continue to live.

One can think of landscape as the measure of possible times and spaces. The paintings I want to make must have the same illusory dimensions. Separated from faith in an undeniable present, the painting seems to lose its objective impenetrability. The planes of my landscape will not have a dimension that is conditioned by the physical reality of the painting, but a much greater dimension — the ungraspable dimension of the temporal trinity. I think that this is reason I make a great many small-sized paintings.

It's years, now, that I have hated the 'texture' of painting. I remember that as a boy I was sure of being in the presence of great art only when there was no discernible trace of the human hand. That was what I felt about Piero della Francesca. The first time I saw a painting by Mondrian, it was like being struck by lightning. Within the precise web of brush-strokes, and in the relatively thick impasto of the colors, I discovered a

physical presence that I hadn't expected. I attributed this impression to the indirect and falsified knowledge of the paintings that never lost the imaginary. And yet, I have never lost the imaginary ideal of the smooth surface. This is another reason for which I return to the museums. That polished surface is the sign of an illusory and purely mental reality. I do not aspire to leave behind me a document of a present that I do not understand. If the surface is without feeling, the internal dimension unascertainable and the tempo of perception in constant change, the only worthwhile thing is the illusion that the painting affirms.

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A painting by Ad Reinhardt has no definable dimensions, whereas a painting by Barnett Newman does. For Newman, dimension is significant, for Reinhardt it doesn't exist. He proved this by making painting of the same size for ten years. One might say that he represents a paradoxical component of modern art: the more you concentrate on a problem, the freer from it you become, but the more you attempt to escape from it, the more it conditions you. Having eliminated the problem of dimension, Reinhardt created paintings that are pluridimensional. The cross of black squares on black might even suggest an optical illusion. But its dimensions are synchronic with the focusing. They vary with the greater or lesser duration of the apparition. I feel that that I have to clarify that I recognize an emblem in Reinhardt's cross. Or course, it's not an emblem of the cross, but of the ineluctable integration of opposites.

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Up until now, I have never attempted to take my work to its most extreme consequences. You might consider it an expedient for not believing too deeply in the painting that I may be making. The future demands availability. By keeping my work open, available, to other influences and to new discoveries, I am free to project it into infinite time. When fervor is concentrated upon a single theme, it threatens to drag you towards the void to pure style or simple concept. But I have no illusion that this attitude may hide an intimate uncertainty. In the end, all of this will be clear. I have always been cautious and afraid of being imposed on by my own painting. «To be one thing means inexorably not to be other things.» And let's hope for the permission to indulge ourselves in the illusion of being something more. The modern artist has liberated himself from his ties with the figure, with nature, and with the materials of painting: he invents his painting as he invents himself. And so why should he be paralyzed by his own image? The personage whom he has enriched with dates, manifestos, and photographs will one day turn against both him and his work and impose a reign of silence. I think of the artist as a kind of maniac who hides his name. Others might use it against him and rob him of freedom. The painting by 'anonymous' is invulnerable. It's the paintings by Picasso that hurt me. I don't want to know anything about him, not even his name.

Among the many who have perpetrated a mystification of modern art, the Cubists

are perhaps the most clamorous. It is impossible to find in their paintings so much as a single connection that justifies their theories. To attempt to make what they say coincide with what they do is an act of pure servility. As of today, we can be certain that the words will be forgotten and the works will remain.

I myself am a victim of declarations of principles. A few of the premises of action painting — the identify of the man and the work, the correspondence between gesture and image — seem to still to be trustworthy. Will this prolong the life of my paintings? In complete contrast to the case of Cubism, the paintings of the action painters have lost all meaning for me. The 'unfinished' works of de Kooning, who was at the beginning of an existential drama, turn, with the attainment of maturity, into the theme of his painting, and in the process of transformation, he only subtracts energy from his works. What was a mental and moral gesture — the act of abandoning the painting as a result of not knowing how to conclude it — becomes a physical gesture. Even psychic tension becomes physical and identifies itself with the subject of the painting. I believed in Pollock for years. His dedication to a single gesture seemed to be a moving and heroic enterprise. Today, the abstract fixity of that kind of painting makes me feel dead without past and without future. These two artists went into the very profundity of compromise to define their individual identities. This, partly, is something to which I can attribute my growing uncertainty with respect to their work. It is easier for me to believe in an art that has a collective rather than an individual dimension. The last time I was at the British Museum, I understood the way in which Egyptian art constitutes such a solid labyrinth of forms and conjectures. Probably that's because I see it as the exemplary metaphor of a collective. My secret ambition is still to reach different levels of intelligibility. I hope that one day my paintings will be at least in part — in their more exterior aspects — easily comprehensible. I hope that one day my paintings will succeed in transmitting everyday things and everybody's life. I aspire to strike the imagination of everyone, even of those who know nothing about painting. The idea of landscape that obsesses me now may be the confused intuition of a common need for contemplation. Contemplation is a fundamentally irrational act. I want to follow this gratuitous impulse until I manage to reach the mutable visionary quality of landscape — something that eludes logical control but can be transmitted by virtue of its very obviousness. I see the risks that I run: idolatry for the fogs of emotion, or an unconditional surrender to popular banality. These are both blind alleys for anyone who is tempted to verify the enigma of expression. But I've already made my choice, and I'm beyond the point of no return. I say this without hesitation. Before, I was speaking about the need to remain available, and yet the contradiction seems to be of no importance. The number of human perspectives is not infinite. Day by day, inevitably, something leaves the sphere of the possible and is denied to you forever. The definition that you had postponed actualizes itself on its own, and it permits no truce. One can conclude that a man's life is too fragile a thing to sustain a disoriented proliferation of the future.

On the other hand, there is nothing that assures me that everything I am doing today will not be changed tomorrow. But I admit that there are many probabilities that it will remain the same. To arrive at present certainty is not easy. There has been a whole tumultuous year in which I have felt myself slipping towards this single prospect while knowing myself able to turn back and find substitutions or others. And why not? Why not push oneself to one's own extreme conclusions? Tomorrow, perhaps, everything will change, but today I believe that my work in these past years has followed its own irreversible trajectory. I can recognize the things that I love, and there is no choice but to follow them. Landscape is the reality in which these things converge and it is the only reality that excites me. Nothing excites me as much as that, not even paintings. That's why there's nothing more to say.

Transl. Henry Martin