

## Report - The Painted Word by Tom Wolfe

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The thesis of the book is that art, as presented and theorized about in NYC in 1973, has become The Word - no object is needed.

He gives us his history of Modern Art and the shift in relationship between artists and the rest of the art world.

He also gives us the development of the theory behind modern art - up to 1974.

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### Introduction

Sunday New York Times, April 28th, 1974 - the dean of arts, Hilton Kramer, on an exhibition of "Seven Realists" at Yale U:

"Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lacks a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial -- the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify."

TW: "Frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't *see* a painting."

"Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text."

Modern art started around 1900 with a complete rejection of the literary nature of academic art.

What was developed was *art pour art*, form for the sake of form, colour for the sake of colour.

George Braque: "The painter thinks in forms & colours. The aim is not to reconstitute an anecdotal fact but to constitute a pictorial fact."

This has become the orthodoxy of today (1974).

But for Braque, art came first, then theory.

## Chapter 1 - The apache dance

By 1920 the place where an artist sought honour, glory, ease, success had shifted twice.

In the 17th century in Europe they were the house guests of royalty.

In the 18th century their scene shifted to the salons of the wealthy bourgeoisie as well as the aristocrats but the artist was still a Gentleman and not yet a Genius.

After the French Revolution the artists began to leave the salons and shift to the cenacles (fraternities of like-minded souls, often centered around some romantic figure like Victor Hugo or Theophile Gautier).

Thus began the artist as bohemian, ready to spit in the face of the bourgeoisie.

By 1900 the game was set.

But the artist still needed the rich to be successful. He now had to do a psychological double shift where he was part of the world of art but keeping an eye out for being noticed and promote himself among the bourgeoisie.

## Chapter 2 - the public is not invited (and never has been)

The culturati, the non-artist art world, in 1974 consisted of

- 750 in Rome
- 500 in Milan
- 1,750 in Paris
- 1,250 in London
- 2,000 in Berlin, Munich & Dusseldorf
- 3,000 in New York
- and perhaps another 1,000 scattered over the rest of the world

That's it, about 10,000 souls, and the rest of the world, the public, are not invited.

TW: "The notion that the public accepts or rejects anything in Modern Art, the notion that the public scorns, ignores, fails to comprehend, allows to wither, crushes the spirit of, or commits any other crime against ART or any

individual artist is merely a romantic fiction, a bittersweet Trilby sentiment. The game is complete and the trophies distributed long before the public knows what has happened."

Picasso became Picasso after the war when his scenery for the Russian Ballet associated him with rising modernism. He did the double-track successfully when Derain, who also painted for the Ballet, did not and Braque sat back and watched it with disdain. By 1950 Picasso was a name known at all levels around the world while his equally talented contemporaries were almost forgotten. "Truly successful double-tracking requires an artist to be equally successful in both roles - bohemian & darling of the social milieu.

### Chapter 3 - Le Tout New York on a Cubist Horse

Modern Art enjoyed a tremendous social bloom in Europe in the 1920s. It was brought to New York by the rich who were tightly connected to the rich in Europe. The Museum of Modern Art was born in the livingroom of John D. Rockefeller with Goodyears, Blisses and Crowninshields in attendance.

Conservative critics were helpless. Their base had bolted.

By the mid-thirties corporations were embracing modern art.

This acceptance by the rich and powerful put a heavy burden on theory.

But theory was held back for 10 years by the influence of liberal social thought on the arts. The artists themselves suspended Modern Art and became propagandists creating what is now known as Social Realism.

"By 1946 the scene had cleared for the art of our day - an art more truly literary than anything ever roared against in the wildest angers of the Fauvists and Cubists."

### Chapter 4 - Greenberg, Rosenberg and Flat

None of the Abstract Expressionist paintings that remain from 1946 - 1960 are as beautiful as the Theories. We can understand the spellbinding effect of these Theories only by keeping in mind what we have noted previously:

1. The art world is a small town
2. part of the small town, le monde, always look to the other, bohemia, for the new wave and is primed to believe in it

3. bohemia is made up of cenacles, schools, coteries, circles, cliques

Should one school come to dominate bohemia it could well dominate the art world. That is what happened in New York after the 2nd WW - Abstract Expressionism came to dominate. The various holdouts during the age of Social Realism kept the faith alive in bohemia, below 14th street. They came together to form The New York School or Tenth Street School.

"Most of these artists had slogged their way through the depression with great difficulty and their mode tended toward bohemianism of the High Seriousness vein.

Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg spoke as the voice of bohemia and so were listened to.

Greenberg spoke with authority about "clearing the tracks at last of all the remaining rubble of the pre-modern way of painting to get to Flatness!

The theory of Flatness: a painting is not a window, a painting is paint on a flat surface. Previous Modernists had realized this but had still made lines, forms, contours, shapes. What was needed was purity where these all became united on one surface.

Rosenberg came up with a theory that added an emotional wallop to all this - Action Painting.

Theses were not just theories but came straight from the artists work in the studio.

But the market for Abstract Expressionism was never good. Cubism had some reality in it. People could put them on their walls and see something real. Not so with AE. So it didn't sell and in fact depressed the art market in New York for almost 15 years.

Of the 10,000 souls in the art world, about 2,000 collected and 300 bought the current crop. Only about 90 of these were in the USA

Chapter 5 - Hello Steinberg (Goodbye Greenberg) (You, too, Rosenberg)  
(Joy returns to Cultureburg)

Pop Art - Op Art

The Pop artists did a much better job of bringing bohemia to the culturati.

They participated in the lively social scene at the clubs and cultural institutions while maintaining their artistic distance. Warhol said that "nothing is more bourgeois than being afraid to be bourgeois". They made art FUN!

The art was based on images of real things but the theory about that stated that "they had chosen content that was inherently flat. They were bringing real objects into Modern painting but in a way that neither violated the law of Flatness nor introduced "literary" content. They were bringing objects of ordinary communications into art and thereby de-literizing them.

Steinberg is the only art theorist who bothered to create some theory specifically for the passive role of consumer in culture. What in the world requires more courage than "to applaud the destruction of values which we still cherish"? Modern art always "projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed. It is always born of anxiety." Not only that but it is the function of really valuable new Modern art to "transmit this anxiety to the spectator."

TW: "This filtered down as a kind of Turbulence Theorem. If a work of art or a new style disturbed you it was probably good work. If you hated it - it was probably great!"

## Chapter 6 - Up the fundamental aperture

### Minimalist Art

- a comeback of abstract art while Pop Art was still going strong
- A show at MOMA called "The Responsive Eye" showing optical illusions.

### "Op Art"

- The theory ran thus - Cubism started by freeing the painting from its "window on the world". de Still, Abstract Expressionism and other forms continued this good work. Perceptual Abstraction (OP Art) completed the process by turning this art object into a piece of pure perception.

- Real art is nothing but what happens in your brain.
- Greenberg was back!

TW: "In the beginning we got rid of nineteenth century storybook realism. Then we got rid of representational objects. Then we got rid of the third dimension altogether and got really flat (Abstract Expressionism). Then we got rid of airiness, brushstrokes, most of the paint, and the last viruses of drawing and complicated designs (Hard Edge, Color Field, Washington

School)."

"Enough?"

Not nearly. The Minimalists went on to get rid of sentimental color, any softness in edge and, eventually, frames and then the wall and then the gallery or museum (Land Art).

What about the idea of a permanent work of art at all, or even a visible one?

Wasn't that the most basic of all assumptions of the Old Order -- that art was eternal and composed of objects that could be passed from generation to generation, like Columbus's bones? Out of that object came ...

Conceptual Art!

Two things only are at the heart of ART: genius & the process of creation. Later they decided that genius was unnecessary.

In 1970 an artist named Laerence Weiner published in Arts Magazine - as a work of art:

"

1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership."

TW: And there, at last, it was! No more realism, no more representational objects, no more lines, colors, forms, and contours, no more pigments, no more brush strokes, no more evocations, no more frames, walls, galleries, museums, no more gnawing at the tortured face of the god Flatness, no more audience required, just a "receiver" that may or may not be there at all, no more ego projected, just "the artist," in the third person, who may be anyone or no one at all, for nothing is demanded of him, nothing at all, not even existence, for that got lost in the subjunctive mode -- and in that moment of absolutely dispassionate abdication, of insouciant withering away, Art made its final flight, climbed higher and higher in an ever-decreasing tighter-turning spiral until, with one last erg of freedom, one last dendritic synapse, it disappeared up its own fundamental aperature ... and came out the other side as Art Theory! ... Art Theory pure and simple,

words on a page, literature undefiled by vision, flat, flatter, Flattest, a vision invisible, even ineffable, as ineffable as the Angels and the Universal Souls.

### Epilogue

For the last six years (in, say, 1974) Realistic painting had been gaining ground in NYC. The most successful was Photo-Realism, as an offshoot of Pop-Art.

They defended their plan in the arts (and Art Theory) by saying

- we're not painting real scenes, only camera images and
- we show NO brushstrokes
- we paint only bland scenes, in full daylight, so there is nothing evocative here
- we glory in overall evenness

and on through the checklist of late Modernism, so, they are not heretics, only backsliders.

TW predicts a future where only The Word survives!