**PAINTING THE TRUTH**

Circumbendibus on the reasons why painters keep painting

It is possible to assign to Mark Tansey the same designation which has been used regarding Nicolas Poussin[[1]](#footnote-1): *Peintre-Philosophe*. According to Arthur C. Danto[[2]](#footnote-2), his paintings possess the density of texts, despite looking like photographs: in them we can find reflections on the fortune and destiny of painting as well as thought itself at the turn of the 21st century. Looking at his painting *The Innocent Eye Test[[3]](#footnote-3)* for example*,* I cannot help but recall Plinus’s account of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius about which of them was the better painter, or in other words, the most realist. Zeuxis had painted some birds that the fellow birds thought were real, but Parrhasius painted a cloth that fooled even Zeuxis, who took it to be a covered painting. Convincing a human being, and furthermore a skilled painter, that the painting was a three-dimensional object, was an immense accomplishment.

In Mark Tansey’s work, a painting (in reality an existing work by Paulus Potter[[4]](#footnote-4)) representing cattle, is presented by scientists before the expert eyes of a cow. The reaction of the animal faced with the representations of its own species, constitute the ultimate evidence of the efficiency of the painting. In a sense we have here the opposite of the tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasius[[5]](#footnote-5). The eyes of human beings, even scientists and experts, cannot be trusted, as they possess prior conceptions that drive them away from the facts. Jacques Lacan, among others, noted: because humans are enticed by what is hidden[[6]](#footnote-6), this fact might blind them to that which is obvious. The most effective way to understand the truth is to trust the innocent eye of an animal, and watch and notate its reactions. The cow here is therefore what Jacques Rancière describes as an “ignorant schoolmaster” – the best kind of schoolmaster, as we learn from him even what he ignores.[[7]](#footnote-7)

All this brings us to the question of science and art. In his book *La veritè en Peinture*, Jacques Derrida describes painting as being “halfway between theory and practice, not identifiable with the first on the second”[[8]](#footnote-8). Later on he writes that art cannot be understood as science, because it contains the “sans”, which he describes as the invisible and unknown element, inexistent in the artwork, but which transmits its meaning to the materiality of the painting[[9]](#footnote-9).

Michael Baxandall describes a “permanent reformulation of the problem”[[10]](#footnote-10) in Painting, which might prevent the existence of a previously established project.

Pablo Picasso[[11]](#footnote-11) is known for having disagreed with his friend and patron Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler[[12]](#footnote-12) about methodology in Art and Science: “I do not understand the importance conferred to the word research in its application to modern painting. In my opinion, within painting, researching makes no sense. Finding is the real solution. (…) The spirit of research has poisoned the minds of those that have not understood completely the positive and conclusive elements in modern art and made them try to paint the invisible and consequently the un-paintable.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Michelangelo[[14]](#footnote-14) seems to think along similar lines when he writes that: “You should draw more and more, all the rest is flaunt, formality and harm done to the progress of art.” This in fact seems to have been an on-going argument with his predecessors Leonardo (“la pittura è cosa mentale”) and Alberti,[[15]](#footnote-15) despite the fact that this emphasis on practice seems also to contradict Michelangelo’s own assertion in another letter, stating that he works “col cervello e non colla mano” – using the brain and not the hands.

If artists cannot agree upon finding a scientific methodology in painting, will it ever be possible to find all-encompassing ethics which can be used in this field?

Osvaldo Romberg wrote the following[[16]](#footnote-16):

“Being an Argentinean adolescent artist was not easy. As soon as I began to interact with the artistic milieu in Buenos Aires in the 50s I submitted, with obsessive frequency, to the sentence: “ But is he a good painter”? From about 12 to 20 years of age, I desperately tried to understand, in the cafés and the bars where we used to meet, the meaning of being a good painter. The different answers were concerned at times with the quality of the textures on the canvas, at other times with the construction and the form of the figure, the flatness or even the purity of the pigment. So it was very difficult to put together a precise definition. I had available to me only decontextualized particulars, fragments of different discourses. How right Duchamp was in his commentary on the I.Q. of painters, when he proposes the phrase “Stupid as a painter.[…]”

Of course the insulting comparison by Marcel Duchamp, himself a painter, reminiscent of the abuse against sculptors by Leonardo, brings us to another work by Mark Tansey, *The Enunciation[[17]](#footnote-17)*, showing how Duchamp travels in the opposite direction from one of his heteronyms, Rose Selavy. He smokes and stares into the void while she looks back from the window of a train stationed on the opposite railway platform. Tansey paints even those who distrust or mock painting.

Is this stupidity the presence of a different intelligence, distant, as we have seen, from the ‘pure intelligence’ of scientific and philosophical texts? Derrida quotes Kant when pointing out the existence of a ‘great difficulty’ in the “principle (subjective and objective) called the aesthetic. The ‘difficulty’ resided in the fact that the ‘judgement of taste’, connected to the aesthetic, was subjective and consequently not ‘logic’: it relates to the affection (aisthesis)”[[18]](#footnote-18). The painter may therefore and quite rightly be called ‘stupid’, in the ‘illogical’ sense.

If painting is disconnected from this intelligence, can it be seen as being closer to beauty? We all know the treaty *On Ugliness*[[19]](#footnote-19), where Umberto Eco writes and reproduces a lot of very ugly art. Even before reading this book, in a research centre at the University of Évora where I currently work, we started a think-tank called ‘Anatomy of Inaesthetics’, the idea of which was to study how ‘the ugly’ behaved in contemporary society. However, an international evaluation panel that visited us in 2008 strongly objected to our use of those words: “Why associate ‘inaesthetics’ with the ‘ugly’? The history of Aesthetics teaches us that, at least since the 18th century, the ‘ugly’ is included in the ‘beautiful’; the ‘beautiful’ being the abstract entity and the ‘ugly’ a mere accident, one of the infinite forms in which it can surface…” An ‘ugly painting’, according to common sense a badly crafted specimen, can therefore be considered a mere manifestation of beauty in painting. We can recall here that several artists throughout the last century accepted and even demanded the label of ‘bad’ for their own work. Among them of course were Douanier Rousseau, Dubuffet and the ‘Art Brut’, the ‘Bad Painting’ from the 80s, and in a way also the ‘Arte Povera’[[20]](#footnote-20).

Hans Haacke[[21]](#footnote-21) commented on Cézanne’s early paintings: “The application of paint is so outrageous for its time, with really dirty colours. Paint is applied, to put it in fancy terms, to be a signifier for distress. Compared to the late, mature Cézannes (they are great paintings, no question), this one has more energy behind it. It is painted with passion.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The aim of painting is not necessarily the search for beauty. As Derrida also wrote, there is a circular path that leads us from beauty to art[[23]](#footnote-23). Painting does not seek beauty as beauty is painting, regardless of which specific paintings we are considering… There would be no intrinsic value called ‘beauty’. Only philosophy can ask the question: ‘what is beauty?’ to which the best answer would be: ‘beauty is the production of art’[[24]](#footnote-24).

Without embarking on a purely aesthetic debate, I cannot help but quote the content of the ‘aesthetic experience’ which, according to Derrida, can be obtained through art: “The feelings of beauty, attraction without anything attracting, fascination without desire, have to do with this ‘experience’ of an oriented, finalised movement, harmoniously organised in view of an end which is never in view, seen, an end which is missing, or a *but en blanc*.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Chris Martin[[26]](#footnote-26) is an accomplished artist and art professor. When interviewed in 2008 by Brooklyn Rail newspaper on the subject of painting, he answered one of the questions as follows: “Oh yes, and the language is always calcifying, getting corrupted, breaking down, it’s quite hopeless really. It’s a huge struggle to find freedom and make painting real. There is no intrinsic value in painting. It’s never valuable because it’s well made, or because it’s beautiful like fine furniture. The only true value is communication. If it transmits energy then it serves its purpose”.[[27]](#footnote-27) There is therefore no such thing as good or bad Painting, but only Painting that communicates…

Jacques Derrida mentions the value of texts when referring to painting: “As for painting, any discourse on it, beside it or above, always strikes me as silly, both didactic and incantatory, programmatic, worked by the compulsion of mastery, be it poetical or philosophical, always, and the more so when it is pertinent, in the position of chitchat, unequal and unproductive in the sight of what, at a stroke [d'un trait] does without or goes beyond this language, remaining heterogeneous to it or denying any overview.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Painting is, after all, a synecdoche: we name it after the material, the surface… And even metonymy and synecdoche, as Derrida mentions, “are no longer simply what they are”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

On the advantages and dangers of using words to discuss painting, I frequently recall Kandinsky’s seminal text “Uber Künstverstehen”:

Advantages: 1. New ideas are awakened;

2. The artwork is experienced – spiritual forces are created.

Dangers: 1. Words serve as analgesic for the Ego, instead of originating new ideas;

2. No spiritual force is awakened by the words, and the artwork is replaced by the label.

The fact however, is that through the centuries painters have been fascinated by words. This fascination is present in a work of Tansey’s, *The Wheel[[30]](#footnote-30),* a circular system of combining different words that can then re-assemble themselves, creating numerous different combinations and concepts. This work is a continuation of memory systems that have been developed through the centuries, with the hope of encapsulating knowledge in a holistic way, thus organising and dominating the whole creation in a perceptible fashion.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Paul Cézanne[[32]](#footnote-32) seemed to believe in words when he wrote in his most commented-on letter to Emile Bernard, that Jacques Derrida gave his book the title: *I owe you the truth in painting and I will give it to you.* Is ‘good painting’ the one that communicates the truth?

Mark Tansey’s very large painting *Mont Sainte Victoire*[[33]](#footnote-33), and the numerous studies that preceded it, alludes to the obsessive theme of Cézanne’s latest period. In it the artist has set a conglomeration of different philosophers near a lake under the famous mountain, in which their images are reflected and transmuted by the deep waters. The lake, as something which at the same time is transparent and deceptive, may work as a metaphor for Painting as a source of knowledge, and that which philosophers and other word-users look for.

What makes Cézanne’s aim even more difficult is ambiguity, as described by Francis Bacon in his interviews with David Sylvester:

*“David Sylvester: Could you try and define the difference between an illustrational and non-illustrational form?*

*Francis Bacon: Well, I think that the difference is that an illustrational form tells you through the intelligence immediately what the form is about, whereas a non-illustrational form works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into the fact. Now why this should be, we don’t know. This may have to do with how facts themselves are ambiguous, how appearances are ambiguous, and therefore this way of recording form is nearer to the fact by its ambiguity of recording.”[[34]](#footnote-34)*

So the difficulty is not merely to discover the whereabouts of truth in painting as mentioned by Derrida and Paul Cézanne, but also where this truth resides even in everyday life, as Bacon points out. Is the truth in the themes, the associations of ideas and emotions that we are lead to, as observers? Or does it lie in the brushstrokes, the patches of colour, the art project as declared by the artist, the documentation that art theory can assemble about the artwork? These are all questions that find their answers only in the apparently thin surface of the paint. Hence why this surface is so deep…

Osvaldo Romberg, mentioned earlier, seems disappointed with the status of painting. In fact one of his latest art shows was an installation using mostly digital art at ZKM – Karlsruhe in Germany, in addition to other showrooms in Europe that specialise in what has been labelled virtual or media art.

In the text previously quoted, Romberg added the following opinions on painting:

“Painting has become almost an aristocratic activity, something like riding horses. But this is not where the similarity ends. Let us remember that some centuries ago it was impossible to go from New York to Philadelphia without a good horse, just as it was impossible to show somebody’s features without a good portrait painting.

Without doubt, the similarities do not end here. Both underwent mutations, which made them in a way anachronistic to their original functions. Today, transportation is not reliant upon the horse, and contemporary art, in turn, has enormously reduced the activity of painting as the primary mode of expression. It is now a secondary, anachronistic form. If what was once transport is, today, almost a sport, the question remains if and when the function of the horse will return to transportation. Will painting become the central issue in contemporary art again? If so, when?

Questions appropriate to our debate: When does a special situation allow for the return of an old form of expression? Sometimes, a geographical situation like mountains with special terrain or a military strategy like in Afghanistan requires horses. Thus, does the horse return to original function, or is it replaced with artificial horses in specific situations. Does painting return to its original function or will video, hologram or other media replace it?

Where is the future of painting? In this moment, it seems that unless it is “retro” the field of painting is reduced to commentary, or paintings which try to explore the limited possibilities of the subject. What is possible to do with painting that can’t be done with anything else?”

I shall not elaborate further on the decadence and possible death of painting, one of the multiple apparently fatal accidents proceeding from Hegel, and continuing all through the 20th century. I will show only Tansey’s painted reaction to this announced death: *The* *End of Painting[[35]](#footnote-35)*, an image that reminds me of Lucky Luke, created by Belgian cartoonist Morris, showing a cowboy that is faster than his own shadow and consequently beats it in a duel. Knowing that the mirror and other rectangular surfaces usually stand for painting in Tansey’s lexicon, we have here a painter that, using Painting, kills Painting. The duel is appropriately staged (painted) on the surface of an audiovisual screen.

Why do painters keep painting, if it is supposedly dead? Are there qualities in Painting which are so specific, that other technologies do not possess them? Is it irreplaceable? Let us return to Romberg’s question: What is it possible to do with Painting that cannot be done with anything else?

Looking for definitions of Painting by painters, we find this statement of Delacroix’s in his Journals[[36]](#footnote-36): “The most important is not to have new ideas but the obsession with the fact that what has already been said is not enough”. In a way, this is a rephrasing of Milton’s objective: ‘The non-attempted in prose or verse.”

Lucian Freud, in an interview with Kimmelman, confessed: “I’m only trying to do what I can’t do”.[[37]](#footnote-37) We could conclude that the focus on the past, and at the same time dissatisfaction, is one of the sources of renovation in Painting.

Is there something somewhat masochistic in Painting? Kimmelman noted[[38]](#footnote-38): “The artists are like critics in the old Bloomsbury sense: people who treat Old Masters with the same urgency or disdain that they feel towards new art, because old art is also alive to them.”

Artists that express themselves using Painting are conscious of using a technology that possesses an extensive tradition behind it, using the ability of reflecting upon it, but at the same time abdicating from the *aura* of novelty or modernity that *high tech* brings to art.

Does the specificity of Painting rely on its technique? As Siegfried Zielinsky points out[[39]](#footnote-39), no technology can be described as neutral. So what is the role of pictorial practice, or studio skills, in Painting? The millenary techniques and diverse approaches to painting have been described in numerous treaties, sometimes by the artists themselves, other times by other scholars. Authors such as Heraclitus, Cennino Cennini, Michelangelo Biondo, Albrecht Durer, Alberti, the Portuguese authors Francisco de Holanda and Filipe Nunes, and in the 20th century Giorgio de Chirico[[40]](#footnote-40) (among others) performed memorable attempts to condense the art of painting in book-form.

In the same way as with riding a bicycle or swimming, it seems common sense that it is necessary to ‘know how to paint’, to be able to paint. However it is also an undisputed fact that technical perfectionism does not guarantee ‘good Painting’ or artistic merit. While most of the time vague and almost non-existent, the knowledge of technological practices of the great artists of the past is mere curiosity, and in practice mostly useful for purposes of restoration.

The continuing existence of Painting also relies on the persistence and support of a large public of museum visitors and patrons. Aside from the biographical interest of those important painters that are the object of dissemination by mass media, the spectacle of Painting can only be fully witnessed live, as with theatre. What we call Painting exists only in the contemplation of the two-dimensional static surface, mere millimetres thick and usually of a permanent nature, even if colours change in the lapse of just a few minutes in accordance with the environmental light. This moment of observation is exactly what we call Painting.

Michael Fried wrote in *Art and Objecthood*, in sequence with Greenberg’s[[41]](#footnote-41) concept of *presence*: “At every moment the work itself *is* wholly manifest”[[42]](#footnote-42). And again Paul Cézanne: “One can only speak properly about Painting in front of paintings”. [[43]](#footnote-43)

Throughout the millennia, Painting has assumed a wide diversity of form and technique. When considering the Palaeolithic rock paintings and drawings from the Foz Côa region in the north of Portugal for instance, we can say that these paintings exist only today in their dialogue with nature. In the realm of Western painting we might consider that, up until the Renaissance we witness the connection of Painting to an environmental context, firstly natural then architectural, as in the great Catholic temples.

Mannerism shows us what happened to Painting in the 16th century, when the rule of the frame established the pictorial space as independent: form and colour became much more playful.

A Short History of Modernist Painting*[[44]](#footnote-44)* by Mark Tansey metaphorically describes some of the effects of 20th century art, on the rectangular surface of a painting. Through the actions of most of its relevant artists, this century has radically changed the traditional Renaissance frame and rectangular format used by occidental painting, in every possible way. Yet even this process can be referred to by a painting that is technologically traditional, such as Tansey’s. Painting is still able to function as a criticism of Painting; it can also be Metapainting.

During the first decade of this century we also witness the emergence of works of art which are optical and technologically totally different from traditionally-known paintings, such as the Gioconda series of Devorah Sperber’s. Like Duchamp however, these works still celebrate the most well-known and reproduced Painting across the globe.

Finally, let us consider what is really irreplaceable in Painting: as mentioned before, Painting can only be fully apprehended in presence; the media can evoke and copy it, but never replace or recreate it. Other technologies like Painting are also not neutral. The disappointment of tourists who visit the Louvre upon realising that the Gioconda is in fact a very small work, is one Painting’s great contributions to the advancement of contemporary society.

The metaphor of Painting exists in the fact that the enormous creations, fundamental to our culture, are in the end only modest individual gestures, handmade by a human being, possibly uncomfortably installed in a dirty and rundown building which he calls a studio. There is probably nothing more heroic than the alchemical miracle of building everything from nothing…

“There is no escape from medium” states James Elkins in What Painting Is[[45]](#footnote-45). Painter Chuck Close then adds: “And I think one reason painting continues to have urgency, when so many so-called experts like to say it is dead, is that there is something about the smearing of coloured dirt on a flat surface and denying the flatness through the illusion of depth which retains its original magic from the days of the cave painters and which can never be denied.” [[46]](#footnote-46) Here is the reason why so many of us continue to paint, or continue to look at painting when searching for contemporary answers, while the media keeps on renovating itself every day.

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