



Frank Stella *Hooloomooloo 4* 1994 Acrylic on canvas 4.87 x 4.98 m Photo Steven Sloman
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WHO owns art HISTORY?

It is time for artists
to reassert their claim
thinks Robert Linsley

THIS ARTICLE IS SOMETHING OF A BOOK REVIEW, although it is more than that. It is about the prospects for painting, and its retrospects—about how painting is represented in art history and how those representations can help to get us into the future. So though the books are under review, the practice is definitely under construction.

It might be useful to start with the observation that the first art historians were artists. Art training has always been studio lore—the myths and traditions that give the student a consciousness of history and hence a way of understanding their own ambitions. But it's also hard to differentiate between art history and theory, because talking about what matters in a work involves talking about the artists of the past, and this is what all artists do when they get together. It's not necessary to be formal and write it down, but when Vasari, Joachim von Sandrart and Joshua Reynolds—to cite a few—did just that, they started something that we now know as the autonomous discipline of

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art history. This could be defined as the more-or-less rigorous compilation and comparison of artistic perspectives—in other words, a systematization of the ongoing studio conversation.

Though art historians necessarily have to remain oblivious to the fact, they really are working for artists. They give us the historical information and interpretations that we need and are just one example of the division of labour in art today—along with colour makers, and stretcher builders, and photographers of artworks, and curators, and gallerists, and so on and on, among the noble or ignoble many who make art possible; a list, for that matter, that expands hugely if we leave the purviews of painting. But as academics, art historians have to define their own reason for being, and they can't really see things in the way I've just described, at least not if they want to keep their self-respect. But for artists there is no reason why a strict use-value shouldn't apply—art history is only justified insofar as it helps artists to make their work. To put it better, it is artists who have to make the final judgements, and they will do that in their works.

I'm presenting an artist's perspective on a question that is difficult for art historians today. In fact, it is one that has become ever more awkward over the last 50 years with the appearance of two corollary developments—the enormous expansion of the field and the emergence of social art history as the leading movement within it. The question is one of purpose and function. Scholars formerly assumed that the pursuit of knowledge was valuable in itself, and the study of art a good and humanizing activity. But with the widespread recognition that no scholarship is really disinterested, academic choices become political ones; humanism seems naive and "criticism" becomes a more dynamic

concept. For the engaged scholar, a sense of occasion becomes *the* critical skill. Art-historical studies must be interventions; in other words, they have to be active in the present, issuing from and speaking to a contingent history.

That few art historians have any sense of occasion is neither here nor there. What matters is that the brightest are very aware of the problem they face, a problem that only becomes more acute as contemporary art increasingly receives a historical treatment. Only a hundred years ago "modern" meant Giorgione. As late as the Second World War, Impressionism was considered the latest thing. As the American university system has turned art history from the avocation of a gentleman-scholar into a professional career, ever more art historians in search of material have taken up the art of the recent past. But this development has its own triple occasion—the increasingly discursive nature of art, the critical self-consciousness of the art of the late 1960s and 1970s and the education of artists in the university system. Developments in art history cannot be separated out from changes in artistic practice, but this insight only forces the question of the scholar's role, and foregrounds the embarrassment intrinsic to the relation between historian and artist. This might be summarized as the following imbalance of powers: contemporary art is always made in the light of history, but historical modes of thought are utterly inadequate for the comprehension of the present.

One who has tried to avoid that embarrassment by maintaining a decent historical distance from his object of study is the British art historian T. J. Clark. The title of Clark's 1999 book, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, is itself a confession of failure—the failure of art history to define its place within an ongoing practice. Despite the elegiac tone, Clark really wants modernism to be over—the precision and astuteness of his judgements depend upon it. That's not to claim that Clark's book has no useful or enlightening insights, or that an artist couldn't learn a lot from it, it's just that the rhetoric of endings predetermines what those insights might be. There is no reason why modernism has to be seen in the evening light of its ending rather than the dawn of its beginning or the daylight of its fullest development—the rhetorical *style* of the book obfuscates the very real and important question of what time it is. But, to be fair to Clark, this is not fatal to the book as a whole, and it is, in fact, a legitimate attempt to address an occasion, namely the Millennium. And we can't expect any historian to venture what the next one will bring—it just isn't tactful.

Clark's care protects him from the fate of Thomas Crow, who demonstrates what a hash-up historians sometimes make of it when they talk about contemporary art. This is from his book *Modern Art in the Common Culture*: "...the inheritance of Conceptualism, ignored if not derided by the majority of art



Paolo Veronese *The Adoration of the Kings* 1573 Oil on canvas 3.56 x 3.2 m
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historians, provides the field of art history with its best current resources of theoretical understanding.”

What majority is he talking about? Leftover Berensonians and Panofskyites? This is a classic straw-man argument, to claim opposition where there is none. Social art history now holds the field. Crow and his Canadian colleague, Serge Guilbaut, are generals of the great army of the middle, and the right and left flanks are looking more cut off and demoralized by the day. And social art history, as Crow suggests, is completely committed to conceptualism, probably one of the busiest and fastest-growing areas of contemporary study.

Maybe one doesn't need to be an artist to be sensitive to other nuances of this passage. For Crow, what matters about conceptualism is its usefulness to art history, not to art—the way that conceptualism can provide positions to attack and defend and a lot of distinctions to be drawn; in other words, how it can help art history to grow and prosper. Yet the match between social art history and conceptualism is not perfect, because the contextualizing historical approach is itself an epiphenomenon of a more profound development: the transformation of art history from an activity based on judgement and expertise to one based on research. Social art historians want to make their discipline one of the social sciences. The competition for grants and scholarships plays a larger role than any changes in the object of study; professional research methods and objective results are what count in the competition for academic dollars. And a different conception of expertise, one less concerned with individual judgement and having more to do with arguments supported by research, enables the field to expand—there can be more authorities than before, and more legitimately articulated positions. But no matter how objectifiable, all arguments still turn on matters of principle, and all art history still rests on hoary old aesthetic judgements, now called the canon. The result is that schematic reductions of past aesthetic insights become the common language of art history. Flatness, opticality, commodification, presence, space, objecthood, critique—art history might explain what these words mean, but not what those experiences are.

So if contemporary painting is largely beneath the art world's most sophisticated radar, that is not such a bad thing. If there are no Frieds and Greenbergs to persuade us with their reductions, if ambitious writers are convinced more by historical argument than by museum experience, and if the important curators of the world buy into a historical narrative that moves through conceptualism and out into the expanded field of post-1970s art—I repeat—that is not such a bad thing. It takes some pressure off. Painting can explore its own history unencumbered by the chatterings of the all-too-intelligent. It may be that the market, which still supports painting, is today a space of relative freedom.

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If artists can sell their work, they can live to paint another day; and if artists can talk about painting without having to worry about critical decorum or correctness, they might say something very interesting. And this is exactly what is happening. The relative and probably permanent marginality of painting in the critical and historical discourse has probably helped to produce some very great examples of art history by artists.

Let's take the following passage, written by artist Frank Stella in 1991, concerning two paintings by Correggio, a *Lamentation* and a *Martyrdom of Four Saints*, both originally from the cathedral in Parma:

When I first saw these two paintings they shocked me. Most of the time it's easy to recognize great paintings. They impress you immediately. They have a presence that comes out toward you, and they have a kind of glow surrounding them which floats them off the wall. These paintings had a very different feel to them. There was a polished, yet very soft and painterly intensity that was unique to my experience.

One could stop there and register the first shock for the reader, which is that Stella is about to make a claim for the contemporaneity of Correggio—of all people! Followers of Stella have had a few years to get used to the idea of Caravaggio as a source for recent abstraction, but Correggio?

The only other time I had felt something like it was in Valetta, in Malta, in front of Caravaggio's *St. Jerome*. And both times I felt a kind of ecstasy. The ecstasy was conditioned by pictorial containment. The ecstasy was defined by the painting. It was as though my feelings

were taken out of me and made manifest in the painting as a kind of glowing presence that I could almost touch as I imagined my fingers surrounding its framing edge. Perhaps more important and certainly less mystical was the sense that an overwhelming pictorial intensity was contained within very ordinary boundaries. Something like the idea that a host of sublime moments—Correggio's own cupola at Parma, the Sistine ceiling, and Annibale's Farnese gallery—could all be compressed into a gesture one could reach and cover with outstretched arms. In a way my reaction could be a revelation. Perhaps I was experiencing what might be called Grimm's ecstasy—a state where the effect of immense constructions of genius are contained in an instantly perceived whole.

Passion, spontaneous identification with the art, a historical consciousness and a way of looking at older art that is attuned to the historical movement within it, hard-headed formal analysis and intelligent awareness of modern art theory: these are all present in this passage. And they are also mutually reinforcing; in no way does the recognition of “very ordinary boundaries” conflict with the framing modernist desire for wholeness and simultaneity or diminish the subjective elation. But the ordinary boundaries are the painting edges that Stella handles in his day-to-day studio work, and the passage is his own recognition of the possibilities that lie within his grasp. This may lead to a moment of ecstasy, but only a moment; what the painter has to face on a daily basis is the ordinariness of the work that has to be done, and Stella's text keeps turning downward, trying to become more specific and concrete.

Today Correggio's *Lamentation* and *Martyrdom* are as fresh and as potent as the day they were painted.

For me they are paintings of the past which live in the present. They meet all of our instinctual cravings for straightforward pictorial expression, and they do it with genius. One obvious reason these paintings are so accessible is that the action depicted in them moves aggressively to the surface.

Here Stella is explicit as to how we should look at the art of the past, but he also knows that what we see are our own limitations—in this case the primacy of surface in postwar abstraction. Whatever could be called “instinctual” in our responses to art is exactly what renders Correggio's actuality inaccessible to us, and so the moment of ecstasy passes away and we are left with the same old modernist way of seeing. But we are not giving up yet:

What we get...with Correggio is a compressed, compact, surface-oriented, semiprojective pictorial space that could be a wonderful model for abstraction. Such a model might help get around some of the conventional notions

of pictorial organization and wholeness derived from landscape painting that have overtaken and overwhelmed us in the twentieth century.

So the paintings themselves will provide the tools to break down the very categories that structure his, and our, experience of them. Stella makes an accommodation with modernist flatness and the worked surface, the object of critique in his study of Caravaggio, in order to move against more fundamental pictorial norms of wholeness and unity.

He is trying to work his way out of difficult contemporary problems by staring at the art of the past, in today's art world a charmingly eccentric if perhaps quixotic effort. Modern viewers cannot lift themselves bodily by the scruff of their necks out of their own context; yet by constantly folding back into our perceptions the awareness that what we see is always our own pattern of seeing, our understanding can continue to move. This may explain the use we can make of museums, but still, we want to come away from the picture with something more concrete:

Let me put it this way. The better a painting is (here Correggio is a perfect example), the closer it is to ordinary vision. The closer a painting is to artistic vision, the worse it is...What I want to emphasize here is the difference between perceived images and pictorial images. The first difference, and perhaps the most important, is that pictorial images have boundaries and perceptual images do not...The physical and temporal boundaries of a perceived image are difficult to secure. In the case of pictorial images the opposite is true. They are confined and static. They are perpetually apprehensible, the opposite of all of our visual perceptions, which are always fleeting, inexorably slipping away from memory and touch.

The last sentence is so reminiscent of Robert Smithson that we might miss how much of the most challenging thought of both Greenberg and Fried is still alive in the rest of this passage. Stella's position is a kind of compromise. He wants modernist painting to continue, but to continue by learning the lessons of everyday experience, which other art since the 1960s has done well already. Art must absorb avant-gardist anti-art for its own good, but what makes Stella a very unusual art historian is that for him it's already happened—it's there in the museum to see.

Whether the tradition of painting actually has that many resources to offer is an open question; it does have a lot, and another contemporary painter who is doing something to maintain access to them is Bridget Riley. Like Stella, she looks at past art through the problems she is working on in her own studio, and like Stella, she looks at past art abstractly. In a 1989 conversation with Robert Kudielka, she offers the following analysis of how Veronese organizes his colour:

By interlocked diagonals—powerful lines which zigzag

sharply down and across the painting. The restrictions in any spatial movement back and forth imposed by the shallow range of colour are compensated for by twisting the dynamics of recession flat, as it were.

This could almost be a description of her own recent pictures, based as they are on interlocking diagonal and vertical planes of colour. But again, Riley is not just projecting. She is reinventing the modern colourist tradition as it was passed down through the studios of Delacroix, Cézanne and Mondrian, and she is doing it by looking at the same artists they looked at, a coherent group comprising Titian, Veronese, Rubens and Poussin. But she is also aware that she is seeing something that doesn't fall within the purview of either the old formalists or the new contextualizers. Kudielka comments that "Veronese was the famous painter par excellence: much appraised as long as praise seemed to be the highest form of appreciating art. But he fell somewhat into oblivion when art became subject to methodical interpretation." For Riley:

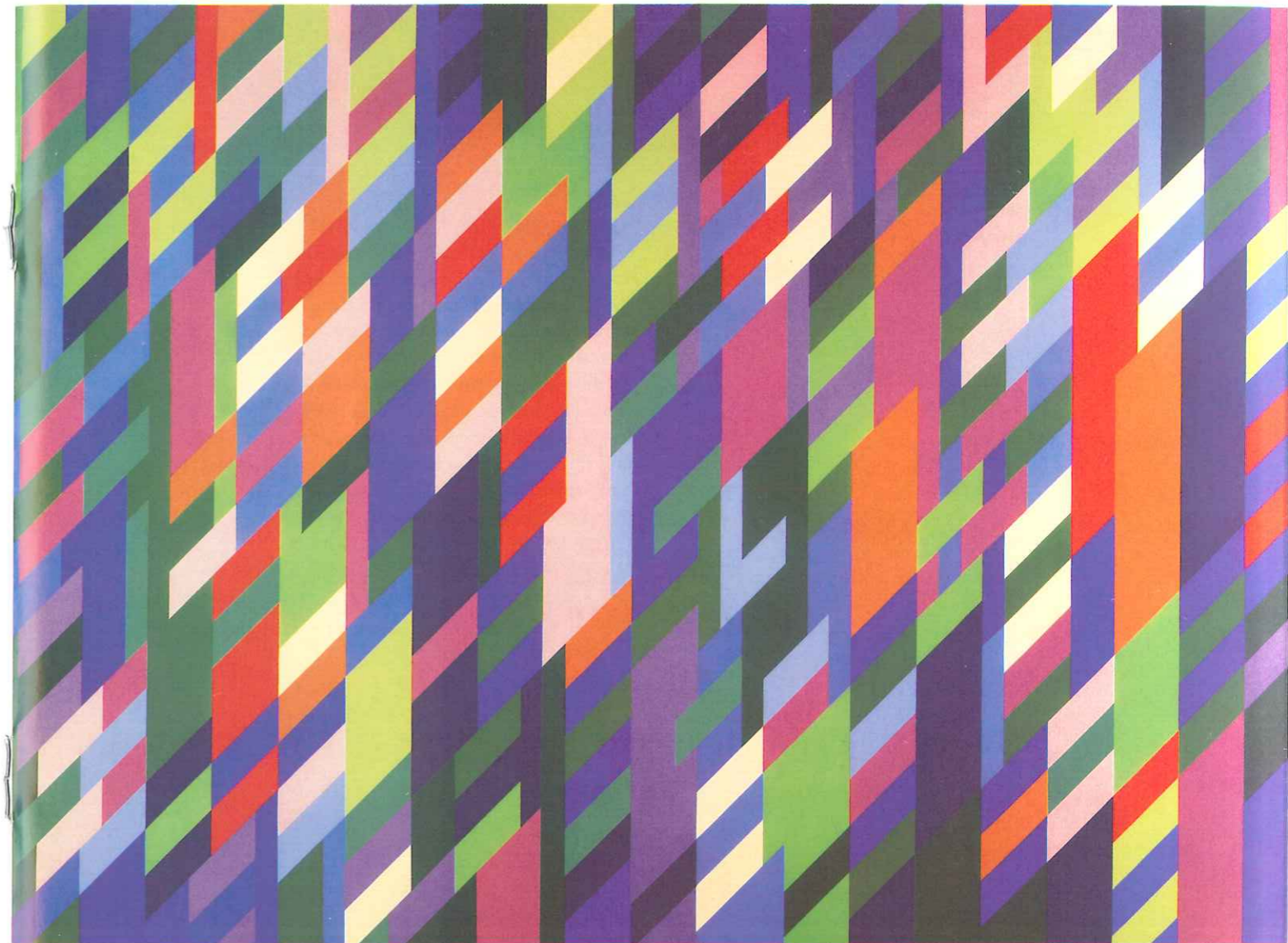
This may have to do with what I termed 'plastic.' Veronese lays bare the web which hangs between perception and cognition more openly than Titian because he doesn't seem to be interested in expression. One can see that this could easily be misunderstood as merely 'decorative'...It is a sort of preferred detachment. A renunciation of what is loosely understood as expressiveness could perhaps have seemed to a sovereign spirit such as Veronese simply the setting aside of a distraction which would allow him greater freedom on a deeper level. His form of expression is purely plastic—that's what makes it so strong and enduring. And, I think, why it has meant so much to other painters over the centuries....Veronese not only dealt with his own problem in painting but provided an insight which has reappeared again and again in canvases of different styles and periods. This insight would seem to be that beyond any identifying of subjects or any isolating of elements—such as, for instance, strong hues—the *whole* is regarded as the most important thing. And it's exactly at that point that colour plays a key role. One of colour's mysteries is that it can do two contradictory things at the same time: each individual hue can contribute to the overall sensation, and yet still can remain itself.

It's also exactly at this point that Riley's ideas meet Stella's in a common concern with the wholeness of the artwork, and also

with its capacity to break open and break up, which is, in fact, the modern concept of expression. And, also like Stella, her choice of artist seems far from current interests. In general, Riley's expositions of the pictures she loves don't lend themselves to pithy quote; they are mostly made up of detailed descriptions of colour placements. She is talking about things that today's art historians can get no purchase on, but that have always been important to artists—and this is where abstraction seeks its future.

So while art historians, especially younger ones, are increasingly writing about recent and even contemporary art, two artists who take it as their responsibility to ensure the future viability of modernism are giving a lot of attention to the Renaissance and Baroque. This is not so paradoxical as it seems: in fact it has something to do with the complementary and mutually informing relationship between practice and art history.

Much of the important work done by the new social art history has been on 19th-century France; in fact, it might be legitimate to say that Clark on Manet and Courbet and Griselda Pollock on Morisot and Degas are the founding studies in that mode. Guilbaut opened things further in his work on postwar American modernism, which took its lead from the politically engaged writing of Max Kozloff and Eva Cockroft. But it is the studies of the early modern period that demonstrate social art history methods in their most characteristic form, and these studies give us a new way of talking about the imagery and content of pictures. This was a significant break with the formalism of American art history since the Second World War, and one could say that it rediscovered the iconography of modernism, which might be called the painting of modern life. (Jeff Wall, to mention only one example, has said that his own work would be inconceivable without the new art history, but the complex dialogue between art practice and academic history in the 1980s and 1990s is a story yet to be written.) And though the painting of modern life could be traced back to earlier origins in Baroque realism—in Annibale Carracci, Velázquez, Caravaggio and Dutch landscape and genre—this is not the kind of work that Riley is looking at, and it's not the way that Stella approaches Caravaggio. It would be hard to make a connection between modern experience and the religious narratives or classical allegories of Poussin or Titian or Correggio. However, Riley and Stella, for the benefit of all of us, are discovering the modernity of the Renaissance and Baroque artists not in their subjects but in their sophisticated colour and space constructions. This is not a return to the old formalisms of Wölfflin or Greenberg. It is a development complementary to the new art history because it makes the past vivid in a newly dynamic way. The past is no longer the object of academic contemplation—a treasure house of cultural goods and a record of achievements done and gone—but a functional aspect of our own present, accessible to our own needs and ambitions. ■



Bridget Riley *In Attendance* 1994 Oil on linen 1.65 x 2.26 m
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