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Title: What is an artist? Contemplations of common sense and the objects of art

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Abstract: Donald Trump most consider a villain, not an artist. Yet this thinking is limiting in terms of our own humanity. In this commentary I explore the politics of regionalism, abstract impressionism, and the personal relationships certain works of art (namely painting) contain without explication – with additional thoughts on institutions and the shifting global order.

Keywords: politics; poetry; painting; Grant Wood; Pollock; Rothko

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What is an artist? Contemplations of common sense and the objects of art

In Donald Trump we don't find an artist; however, if we consider the nascent moment of abstract impressionist art we are bound to think it similar. Why? Because novelty captivates us as it is not part – or much part – of common sense. When opposed to abstract impressionism, regionalism becomes easier to understand. It frames the painter's task as that which defines people, places, and culture with a particular aesthetic nuance. For example Grant Wood's art is supposedly Iowa and insofar as Iowa is Middle-America, it is also part of the United States. Thus we can say what 330 million people are to varying degrees. Of course they are not that and have never been. Yet if we are concerned with particulars a painting by Rothko is everyone and no one at the same time.

My grandfather and his Swedish immigrant father would watch Grant Wood and his friends painting and frolicking in a field. My grandfathers called them "kooks" yet they came from the same county and the kooks were most likely the Stone City Colony artists. In the end my great-grandfather cut and lay stone, knew the same land, weather, and food. None of this evident in a painting.

Trump as an artist does not mean he is a good person yet he shares an artist's modality. Setting aside evident pathologies Trump exceeds common sense and order. This is precisely an artist out-of-order who presents the unfamiliar within the terms and conditions of the familiar. Reality is transformed but we cannot say entirely for that man alone, not in the least. Thus there is a particular poetic relation to Trump as artist that concerns the debris of the 20th century (which sit at the margins of common sense) and are attached to whatever it is Trumpism resolves into.

In another way let me ask who at first, liked

Rothko or Pollock? To me Rothko paints cheeseburgers. Today his work looks more like common sense. Pollock painted messes – both works could be considered billboards out of focus or a television screen's snow. Poetry concerns the private life of the mind, the meditative or physical energy behind the image. Which is yet another truth about Trump in terms of grift and unapologetic villainy. Of course the movement Pollock and Rothko are associated with was staunchly fought against by establishment figures. So too was Trump. Conversely regionalists were never American in the sense that the style and objectives associated with such work are or were, European. But so too was abstract impressionism. The point is this: Regionalism is hinged to conservatism and nostalgia. Wood's "American Gothic" defines 3 million people – supposedly – today. Yet regionalism at the end is less a coda on globalization, even if it looks future-present. We can simply reduce this to what comes after this ugly word "glocal."

Grant Wood is particularly interesting. When I look at "American Gothic" I have in mind his stained glass work in the Veteran's Memorial Building in my home town. That he was actually there making the thing. In truth he oversaw its creation in Munich in 1928 near enough to Augsburg, where my grandfather's future wife was then age five. Ironies persist. For Wood lived in the attic of the home which my grandfather had his funeral in the late 1960's. My grandfather the WW2 veteran who landed on the Omaha Beach was memorialized in two ways by this man he called "kook." These are say, regional poetic things of a transcontinental sense. And yet in this series of facts we might understand art and order differently. That is, when I look at "American

Gothic” I see neighbors and, I see provisionally essential things about my childhood in Eastern Iowa.

There is yet another layer to Wood and it concerns institutions. By today’s standards Grant Wood would be considered a closeted gay man. Toward the end of his life he had a younger man, his secretary live with him while working in the Art Department at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City. He nearly lost his job. Today an artist from Iowa is less likely to hold any job at the University which owns a Pollock, one which students used to squeeze ketchup and mustard on – or so it is said. What I mean here is the role of the institution and its artists is not regional at all. The institution is wholly global but will it remain so? Thus order. We live in odd times. AI art is now the token artist in our lives not the fiction writer or artist from a foreign country which the university desires in the name of diversity; eschewing its racism for another form of the same. It is a strange moment which is neither regionalism or some expressionism. It is not realism.

This order concerns algorithms and such; an ordering to life never before had. By this I mean the practice of certain arts holds open an acquiescence to banality. Regionalism is not hot again and never will be. Grant Wood’s gay tokenism won’t be enough to celebrate him over Pollock; to skirt in post-globalization. ‘Was Pollock an asshole to women?’ means nothing, not even rhetorically. None of this matters. I remark here of what it means to paint.

I do not believe painters (or poets for that matter) are made by birth right. I reject the notion that young talents are more potent or matter more than older ones. Younger talents can be easily co-opted. Older talents refuse by principle. Younger artists have principles without practice, older ones have unconsidered practices by virtue of habit. They are only different in terms of experience and time. The

challenge is always present, a conflation of will and nature. One must overcome experience and skill just as much as one discovers they had an experience and developed skill.

What one does not need is art school. That is, one needs artists as much as they need scientists. If we separate the technical side of things from the verve, the spring is perpetually unwinding. I remark here about the pressure within and the pressure without or what Wallace Stevens called a matter of clashing violence. Will therefore, human will, is one which is a concern of explicit consciousness and reflection. Today an echo chamber of consciousness is all that we seem to know. And the problem with it concerns the order we have entered or more generally technic. You could ask if humans are ready for the entire world, if we look at social media one is apt to say no. But I do not agree with this, there is something of the will that gives us hope. Perhaps the links woven into an artist’s work, as with my family, present an order which cannot be coded?

One does not need to go to art school or abide by the institution – its impressions upon us, the cynicism of rejection or want of validation. In my experience painting, I have made it simple. I studied with a very good friend, a best of friends’ friend, who shares my values in terms of society and humanity. I learned a few things and simply painted over and over again. I think the fundamentals are within us all and to discover abstract expressionism with the intention to do it is simply part of lifting the veil to an unknown. The same can be said for making a painting with regionalist features.

Yet the strongest thing in painting concerns time, self, and the pressure which holds common sense together. If it takes uncommon sense to bring it forward the painting captures this and shows it to us successively. Painting reveals a part of poetry which is oft silent. In this sense Pollock’s external and invisible shadow above his substrate is real. More real than Grant Wood’s self-portrait is a gay man almost to

tears, as The New Yorker claimed by some tokenizing exhumation. But see what you will. At base painting concerns thinking. One has to attend to it. Painting may have more editorial demands yet it is still closer to poetry than any other art.

But what I really want to say is that everyone is an artist and should practice art if they mean to live and love. We are feeble bodies next

to the infernal sun yet these bodies summon verve and produce the unfamiliar, an energy of an exponential capacity to build the world yet unseen. Let us recognize the artist is both a destructive and constructive character. The sooner we find this in ourselves, the sooner we can set aside the debris of common sense we no longer need.

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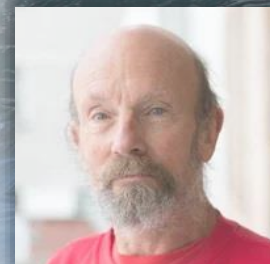
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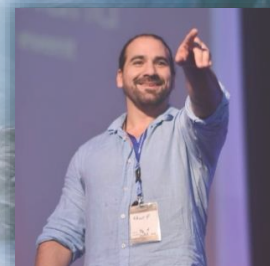
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