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Oskar Kokoschka

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There are plenty of contemporary sources for the sentimental esthetic of Oskar Kokoschka. I look at him now mostly as a curiosity, or as a source of clues toward a reading of the new wave of expressionist painters gaining favor in Europe and America. Kokoschka has always found champions among those critics who love to croon magic words like “evocative,” “expressive,” “emotionality,” and “experiential,” but the sad truth is that, despite intentions, he never was much of a painter. His early work is little more than an emaciated pastiche of Art Nouveau, while his later years were given over to a rather uninspired realism given a veneer of modernist respectability through the manipulation of thickish paint. He did manage to produce a few acceptable paintings, but nothing in his output even begins to suggest why he was reviled by some as a monster of modernity, and hailed by others as a wild hero of advanced culture.

So how did someone whose work now looks safe and convention bound become so successful as an avant-garde artist? Mostly as a result of a sophisticated manipulation of attitude. Kokoschka grasped early on that the modern artist’s great gift is his own self, and that a carefully presented image of that self will guarantee a following among the small public that enjoys the frisson of dangerous-seeming ideas but does not want to be bothered to actually think about them.

Kokoschka’s act was hugely successful. He came on as a confused soul—unable to cope with daily reality, terrified of female sexuality, but somehow in touch with a higher truth. He suffered nobly, and as a result was certified a great artist. The presentation was confrontational; a direct, unmediated attack on conventions of behavior, an emptying of distance, a transgression of custom. But this was a rebellion kept safely within bounds, expressed in unsurprising, conventional modes.

Of course this kind of manipulation can be interesting, if done consciously. But Kokoschka believed in what he was doing, and believed with a passion; he was utterly sincere in his banal egocentrism. As a result, the bulk of his paintings are indistinguishable from one another. The subjects of his portraits are reduced to tortured look-alikes, wriggling uncomfortably under the constraints of his feverishly mannered line. The landscapes are uniform, almost regimented in their similarities; Kokoschka traveled all over the place, yet managed to make everywhere look the same, since he simply had no interest in representing anything but his own feelings.



Oskar Kokoschka, *Morning and Evening*, 1966, oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 51 1/2"



Salomé, *Two Fighters and Disappearing Queen*, 1979, oil on cotton, 94 1/2 x 79"



Luciano Castelli, *Fairytale #1*, 1961, paint on cotton, 79 x 115"

pre-modern: it is figural, thematic, on pedestals. And like much post-modern architecture, it seeks to re-connect The Tradition—to remember Rodin so as to forget (or at least get past) Carl Andre and Robert Smithson. Hunt's airships, sleek zeppelins supported, it seemed, by elegance, interested me more: above us, without support, they dislocated our notion of sculpture. These arches, etc., seem more like throwbacks—intelligent, impressive, but throwbacks nonetheless.

—HAL FOSTER

OSKAR KOKOSCHKA, Marlborough Gallery; SALOMÉ and LUCIANO CASTELLI, Annina Nosei Gallery; ERIC BOGOSIAN, American Theatre Laboratory; THORNTON WILLIS, Oscarsson Hood Gallery:

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SALOMÉ LUCIANO CASTELLI

The quarrel with expressionist art is at base a political one: art that places supreme value on individual enterprise is, ultimately, reactionary. While the expressionist stance is confrontational, it is as often based on an effete snobbism as on real understanding of or sympathy with the oppressed classes. And, moreover, whether of the right or the left, it can too easily be characterized as merely rebellious—as safely contained, easily explained, and therefore in complicity with the standards that it seeks to overthrow, be they moral, political, or esthetic. It is art that sets out to eradicate the idea of distance, and in doing so insures that it cannot exercise a truly critical function. The latest expressionist manifestation to surface in New York comes from Berlin—four artists so far: Luciano Castelli, Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf, and Salomé. Their work shares several characteristics with similar work being done in Italy and America, notably an impulse to borrow images and motifs from art of the past, particularly a national past. It is not yet clear if they also share an extremely fashion-conscious, anti-intellectual elitism.

What is unusual about this new group is that they are students of an already existing German school of neo-expressionists—Georg Baselitz, K. H. Hö-

dicke, Markus Lüpertz, et al. Thus their mannerisms are to be understood as being at a further remove from the original expressionist impulse. It is this enforced distance which allows their work the chance of being more interesting than a simple return to self-expression would be, insinuating the possibility that it is profoundly anti-expressionist. Since it also appears to have a sense of critical distance, the work of Salomé and Castelli seems substantially different from that of other neo-expressionists such as Sandro Chia, Rainer Fetting, and Julian Schnabel. They all revel in the use of clichés of one sort or another, but while the latter group enjoys them with what amounts to a camp sensibility, Salomé and Castelli appear to be doing something beyond that. Two factors serve to warn the viewer that all may not be as it seems: Salomé and Castelli often paint together, as equal partners; and they are fascinated by transvestism. Possessed of this preliminary information, with hints of unexpected levels of duplicity, one is obliged to confront the obviously mannered style of these paintings as something more than bad art.

The paintings are deceitful. Dressed to kill they ultimately cannot, or will not, deliver what they promise. They set up expectations of expressionist verities—bright, angry color; frenzied brushwork; raunchy, indecorous subject matter. But it is all calculated to look that way. The angst is deliberated; not even personal, but shared. These paintings acknowledge, with a wry humor, that the most liberated, individual utterance is nevertheless bound by the conventions that articulate it. They thrive on conven-

Salomé and Luciano Castelli

ANNINA NOSEI GALLERY

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The issue is authenticity, that touchstone of modern art since the Romantics. Put simply: is it still possible to make an authentic statement, when the means at hand are hopelessly implicated in a history and an ideology to which one may feel only the weakest attachment? Salomé and Castelli seem willing to try, making the most of the dusty old hand-me-downs that are the crutches of the painter's trade, bravely facing off the problem by working sincerely in a by-now suspect, and therefore insincere mode.

It is an attention to the workings of received ideas and methods, and to their ability to stop intelligent discourse cold, that marks the best art being done currently.

Eric Bogosian

AMERICAN THEATRE LABORATORY

Eric Bogosian's performance work participates in this genre. In both his solo performances and his plays he isolates and re-presents media clichés, especially those that come to us from television, using theatrical conventions as a framing device. *The New World* was presented as a play, but it was really a grouping of some fifteen scenes of what could instantly be recognized as "American life," structured by means of association rather than by a narrative. The evening was introduced by a host, eerily reminiscent of Rod Serling, who creepily insinuated an easy familiarity as he offered his viewers a privileged preview of what he was pleased to call reality.

The scenes themselves were varied. Some depicted domestic life, some public; a few showed instantly recognizable aspects of a clandestine life known more from movies than from experience. All had the feel of soap opera—a heightened emotional tone, acted in a broad, theatrical style. Each scene was

presented as a tableau, a figure grouping pared down to essentials, isolated against a blank expanse of colored light.

One of Bogosian's more interesting breaks with the conventions of performance art, in fact, a break that indicates his position more succinctly than anything else, is his use of professional actors. The stylized performances of these actors, with their vocal tricks and mannerisms, their stagy postures and movements, run counter to the current wisdom, which has it that the greater directness made possible by using untrained performers is somehow more truthful. But Bogosian is after a different sort of truth, one which can only be approached by being kept at a distance. And everything about *The New World* confirms this, from the placement of the tableaux toward the back of the very wide stage, to the arbitrary-seeming lighting, which kept the stage fairly dim while throwing walls of saturated pinks and pale blues against an empty background, to the insistently rhythmic guitar music of Glen Branca that fed through the sound system.

Thornton Willis

OSCARSSON HOOD GALLERY

In true modernist spirit, Thornton Willis is content to return to basics. With a panache that is astonishing, he brings the practice of abstract painting right up-to-date by reminding us of the original meaning of *cliché*: a template used by printers for often-used formulations. Taking a device he has been using for quite a few years to give direction to the paint on his canvases—a wedge shape—he has developed a series of works on paper from which lithographs have been made. The conceit is superb, a witty reconciliation of the reproducibility of prints with the singularity of painting—although I must confess the joke was spoiled somewhat when I remembered that Jasper Johns has devoted a fair amount of attention to the same problem over the years. In fact the joke turns sourer the longer one considers Johns' achievement. Willis just doesn't seem to have grasped the complexity of options open to him. And I thought I had discovered a new humorist.

I should have known better. Willis' work illustrates precisely what went wrong with modernist abstraction this past decade: it turned into a decorative commodity, worked to rote, produced by pattern book, and done without any sense of irony. Critics are searching through Popism and Conceptualism for clues to current developments, but they would do better to turn their attention to the likes of Thornton Willis. Only then will they understand the despair that feeds the best new art.

—Thomas Lawson



Eric Bogosian. *The New World*, 1981, performance views. Photos: Paula Court.



Russ Warren. *The Conformist*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 65".

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RUSS WARREN, Phyllis Kind Gallery; **WILLIAM SCHWEDLER**, The Clocktower; **LAURIE ANDERSON**, "O Superman/Walk the Dog," One Ten Records;

RUSS WARREN

The protagonist of Russ Warren's new paintings is a potato-faced poppet who is sometimes bald and sometimes sports a little patch of hair atop his pink head. Wandering in asexual, "New Image" nudity through a landscape that simultaneously manages to evoke Braque and Louisa Chase, he gets caught up in a series of allegorical encounters. Imagine a Balthus coloring book based on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and you have it.

Pushed out from the ground by shadows which, regardless of the landscape's undulations, break in severe right angles, this character floats in and out of tableaux with titles like *Lust* and *St. Sebastian*. The former portrays him kneeling before a female with individually delineated strands of red hair à la Morris Hirshfield; the latter has him pierced by arrows, the butts of which are decorated with pasta strands masquerading as feathers.

What baffles me about these paintings are their classical allusions. I miss the point of tackling subjects like "Lust" and "St. Sebastian" when the last word was pretty much spoken five centuries ago by painters whom Bernard Berenson, rather generously by his rarified standards, referred to as "illustrators." Why is Warren dragging his cartoony characters into such heady Renaissance climes?

There is no passion in his depiction of