

Edward Ruscha: a distant world

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Painting, in the paintings of Edward Ruscha, is without History, nor does it tell stories: and yet it is invaded by stories of all kinds, by extracts from the most diverse tales, by narrative archetypes without beginning or end, by quotations and slogans. They confront us there, as active elements within the painting, these displaced stories with their obstinately strange banality. But the painting never appropriates these narrative fragments: it hires them, as one hires an object of uncertain or temporary utility. It takes them and leaves them to their own devices, depositing them in a space from which it appears that they will never be able to return.

Severed from both their origin and their continuation, without either past or future, stories are above all words: and words are letters, and letters are forms. In other words, the space of words is that of their arrangement on the page; this is the scene where their destiny is determined, a destiny not of words, nor of letters or forms, but that of their uncertain amalgam at the meeting point of meaning and image.

Pontiac Catalinas testifies to the theatricality to which words are subjected. The emblematic reflection of a window serves as a decor (but where is it projected? Onto a wall or a ceiling, nowhere - not, in any case, where we are - perhaps in the realm that words go to). It is an emblematic decor, and therefore absolute, surface and depth, to which the words react, through which for a spell they turn away from their meaning to operate in a dimension both concrete and abstract. The theorem might run as follows: a thing is concrete only insofar as it is abstract. In reality, meaning and image cut across each other on numerous levels: the ambivalence is constant. Hence it is that this work requires no introduction, no justification.

Pictorial theatricality is characterised by the suspension of all action, thereby emphasising the imaginary and improbable nature of the pose, on the paradoxical eternity of the provisional. It is an understatement to say that the words here take up a pose: it would seem that is their sole destiny - their unique function, even. However, they do not rely on the image (upon which they might be said to rely, and which would render them explicit); on the contrary, it is the image which relies on them, both originating in them and returning to them in an uninterrupted movement. Then, as an effect of the composition, the words finally become a part of the decor.

This is even more clearly manifest in *You And Me*, where the decor (the composition) constitutes the actual syntax of the three words. The decor acts out the remainder of precisely that which the words no longer signify, but without in any way illustrating either the "you" or the "me," which are confined in their abstraction, their symbolic generality, avoiding all possibilities of overdetermination.

Here, the words indicate imprecise positions, together with a minimal relationship between themselves, which is provided by the conjunction "and." All three of them are equally vacant, ready one might say to be identified and referred to. This vacancy however is absolute, and cannot be used by any external agent. The "you" and "me" finally acquire the neutrality of their conjunction and, as archetypes, form a scene from which psychological and iconographic virtualities are evacuated.

If painting has for centuries striven to produce the closest possible image of reality, to the point of illusion, then Ruscha's work in a sense remains faithful to this program but changes its terms. Abstraction is substituted for nature, and mime for imitation. We should say: the abstract model is substituted for the natural model, since the rule of abstract painting is not to carry a reference. The miming of abstraction has the effect of banning all illusion and all illustration, since what is involved is the concretisation of language outside its everyday applications. Hence the tangible and definitive character of mime which these works display.

The mise en scène of words dispenses with a system of stable and defined relationships which would then be subjected to a series of variations. Ruscha rightly prefers to speak of a program rather than of a style: the latter might be defined as the constant adaptation of constraints whereas a program might be defined as the very anticipation of these constraints. The program thus uses different mimetic figures, according to the degree of abstraction or humour required (see *Words at the Window* or *Wolves, Explosions, Disease, Poison – Home*). That is why constraint, always inseparable from its appearance within the work, remains perceptible only up to the point where its contradiction is ruptured, to the point where the different levels functioning within the painting achieve a synthesis and the work finally imposes its independence as a functioning whole.

In reality, words resemble nothing, if not themselves. Meaning, for which they are generally adequate, is here endowed with a dimension normally alien to it, but to which painting in the end adapts it. If asked why he has chosen to paint words, Ruscha can reply that it is because words have no size, nor proportion, in the way a hand or an arm may have proportion. "The word can be immense or minute because it lives in a world of its own." By nature, it can be given all sorts of definitions. Painting denies this possibility and gives the word an object status to which its meaning must remain bound. Hence this ironically nuanced and by no means categorical refusal addressed to semiotic speculation and to interpretation, which in this case are the motive and the privilege of painting.

These word-objects, key elements of the program, are inevitably involved, if not in a world, then in a distance from the world. Here, the world is a distant one,

the image of a world returning to its origin, which offers the doppelganger of both the world and its language, an unresolved reflexivity, where an element is valid only insofar as it is capable of substitution.

The painting then precipitates easily, and nonchalantly, like tea on satin or carrot juice on paper: with a clear and natural sense of measure, avoiding any form of saturation which would make these objects inseparable from their world.

The first works, like *Boulangerie* or *Annie* (1961), treat words as pictograms with an intriguing and troubling simplicity. Held in the place of their inscription, they do not call the painting into question, as Pop Art sometimes did during the same period by taking on the contrast of the two cultures, two ways of doing things – using popular culture as an instrument and sublimating the act of painting. Here, painting is reduced to a pure means involving no finality and continuing to transmit nothing: neither a meaning nor a reference, neither an image nor an art of painting. Transmitting nothing, inducing not the slightest critical dimension, without seeking to ask the slightest question.

BOULANGERIE insists on its character as an object, which is unique: it does not claim to escape from the form of its banality but lays claim instead to its neutrality. An object without a future, with no possible continuation, it is in a real sense incomparable. It carries its own character within it as a proof of its necessity. It would therefore be difficult to claim that this work conveys a gratuitous irony when one can find no object either to confront it with or to turn away from it. At a moment when the exegetes of Duchamp's oeuvre are reworking the fiction of the end of history, this single painting continues not to be answerable to any history of art, not to inscribe itself in any pre-established dimension.

Art, considered as the constant process of its historical and social justification, is absent from this painting in the way that we can be absent from ourselves – without dreaming, but remembering having dreamed, remembering that we have been in contact with the reality of an ancient dream, remembering reality as we remember a dream.

Absent, in the sense that Ed Ruscha's painting could just as well be anterior to all possibility of art as it is so manifestly posterior to the phenomenon of the entropy of art. Absent too in the sense that it goes beyond this inconceivable position: it is neither before nor after the history of painting; it invents its own contemporaneity, defying the laws of novelty by fixing its center of gravity in a distant world.

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