

JUDGMENT, RESCUE, AND THE REALIGNMENT OF PAINTING

Judgment, Rescue, and the Realignment of Painting

by H. Aram Veesser

On June 28, 1990, Ken Aptekar stood before his painting. He had just returned to the studio from helping a friend put a lock on a door, a skill acquired during his locksmithing years. Taxis drove by on 30th Street below, spraying puddle water. In his hands was a sheet of glass. On it he had sandblasted a brief narrative. The question now was, How to affix the glass plate to the painted surface? He considered various possibilities. He could just frame the painting and put the glass in front of the image. Or he could drill four holes through the glass, which would necessitate bolting directly through the surface of the painting. He chose the utilitarian bolts, a choice he now describes as aggressive. A nod to the part of himself that has no respect for the Art World enterprise.

Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990–2000, the title of this exhibition, situates Ken Aptekar accurately. His fusion sensibility and his aesthetic of piercing, his search for the gaps in time and institutions that just might afford possibilities of escape and innovation make him a trenchant commentator on our late-Foucauldian moment. Like Foucault, he has an intense concern with framing and other means of making-visible, as well as with the dubious arts that acquire a hold over individuals “not simply by confining them but by opening up and inscribing what is hidden, unknown and inaccessible.”¹ Aptekar opens and inscribes what might otherwise remain closed: Old Master paintings, groups of schoolchildren and museum guards, and his own psyche. The act of opening and inscribing rescues from silence, but it also flirts with power, subjection, and subjugation.

To date it is the rather more abstruse, semiotic aspect of Aptekar’s work that has inspired the most compelling discussion. Semiotics is the science of signs, and Aptekar’s text-and-image work

as measured by art historians Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, and Linda Nochlin has secured his place among the most piercing and inventive semioticians in any field. He can, on the evidence they provide, conjure with the preeminent theorists of the sign, from C. S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure to Umberto Eco and Gerard Genette—all of them linguists of daunting complexity. He has also spearheaded a moment in visual art that parallels reader-response theory in literary circles: not the text, but rather the reader/viewer's response to it seizes his critical attention. From the literary and semiotic point of view, Aptekar is a theorist of the first water.

One cannot help feeling, nonetheless, that tens of pages devoted to iconicity and indexicality scarcely begin to touch the core of so elemental and social a body of work. Insults, threats, class conflict, racism, humility, desperation, voguing, loyalty, pride, and defiance form the narrative content of Aptekar's work, and most viewers will respond to that rather than the intricate play between interpretant, signifier, and signified. Justice remains to be done to the issues of judgment, rescue, and what can provisionally be called Aptekar's new historicism.

In one of the pocket-sized prose poems that garnish Aptekar's paintings, a nightingale complains of being judged by a pig. Coping with bad judgment means confronting the high judge of painting, Art History herself. The painting of an empty frame that opened Aptekar's Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibition [*Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures*] alluded to the "ghosts" that had been deaccessioned from the Corcoran. They stood for paintings that had been judged wanting. Aptekar brings to center stage three aspects of framing that have helped to create our sense of the world: framing creates a distinction between the container and the contained, it makes a fixed distinction between inside and outside, and it establishes a site from which the individual can observe without becoming involved. He paints, too, the long shadows that frames throw. More radically, he challenges the founding distinction between framework and its material fleshing-out, a Cartesian duality between mind and material that he fully rejects. Finally, he relies on the anecdote as an antidote to History, and these small, pregnant stories ally him to cross-disciplinary strategists of every sort, from the New Historicists to Miles Davis.

An essayist standing outside *Painting Between the Lines* must admit that Aptekar is engaged in a sort of framing. Because a framing essay stands all too much at risk of flattening a determinedly heteroge-

neous body of work, with its bolted-together glass, spoken language, and paint, I have departed from the more invidiously leveling conventions of the catalogue essay. First, I have approached Aptekar's disarmingly accessible project as a series of gestalt shifts. One must confront initially the organs of authoritative judgments, namely the institutions of religion, family, the art world, heterosexuality. One proceeds to the way he transforms criticism from oppression into a gift. One begins, then, to perceive his rescue operations, wherein the unnoticed and defeated suddenly gain eloquent voice, yet are compelled to qualify their limited victories. Art is, here, at best a site of displaced triumph and at worst is pure absence, privation, and loss. One must in any case enjoy the interlinearity, the great chorus of unexpected voices that strive willy-nilly to attain articulate speech. In what follows, Aptekar's words are emphasized and bracketed to my essay. I did it this way to remind the reader that Aptekar everywhere lets the bolts plainly show themselves; in keeping with his project of disenchanting the institutionalized world, I avoid seamless continuities and other ersatz harmonies. And following his lead, I have occasionally slipped into autobiography.

JUDGMENT

Judgment runs across the length and breadth of Aptekar's work, cajoling and hectoring, suggesting and threatening. Bal has discussed at length the omnipresence of the vocative mood, the second-person address (think of Uncle Sam: "I Want YOU"). And consider *Oversensitive*, 1990, the single word sandblasted across Aptekar's oil-paint-on-wood rendition of the polychromed wood statue of a bishop. The bishop has soulful eyes and a delicate mouth, and those are enough to provoke some imagined viewer, maybe a manly man, to conclude: "Oversensitive!"

Or consider the terrors of judgment. The artist's grandfather Abraham collapsed and died "When he had to face a small claims judge." Only the Old Masters themselves seem up to the job of repudiating the judgments of pigs. How about Rembrandt, spitting out at the now-owner of his self-portrait, "Frick. Prick." The sampling officials of the Drapers' Guild curl their lips at the artist whom they have commissioned, but the artist gets in a good one: "What would you say to me if you didn't have to judge me? What would I say to you if I didn't need your money?" And there must have been some implied judgment to make the artist write,

"Who's to say I'm not a good Jew if I don't believe in God?" Parents are always on hand with censure. "If I leave one forkful of brisket on my plate," according to them, "some naked child in the Congo will drop dead." And even way out by the lake, the nosy Klopman in their kosher kitchen sniff disapprovingly as the Aptekars cook their once-a-year bacon. Someone in the barbershop asks, insinuatingly, "Where'd you get that red hair?" And bolted over Rembrandt's red-haired Titus, the Third-Reichish query, "Was für ein Name ist denn eigentlich Aptekar?" ("So what kind of name is that, Aptekar?") "Raphael with another man" (emphasis mine) gasp the words inscribed over *Raphael and Another Man*, ca. 1518, (subtext: Raphael gay!?). Even blameless Harry Fisher, the daring young volunteer who fought on the anti-fascist Spanish front, reacts angrily against judgment: "Some people might call me a coward. But what the hell do they know about war?" Judged by a pig, the nightingale weeps. As a teacher who grades papers and ranks candidates, who judges and misjudges, I feel these works speaking to me. They judge me.

Every artist experiences judgment, has certain people's voices whispering, saying, "That's not really good. Why did you do that? So-and-so did it better." In order for artists to make a living they're dependent on the positive judgments of others, whether people will be willing to spend money to buy their work, willing to exhibit it, or interested in writing about it—those are the three main arenas. Judgment figures both in psychological terms and in real terms; in terms of making a living, it also figures in the process of making one's work. "Is this move successful?" You need a critical faculty if you're going to be a good artist, but this critical faculty exists at the expense of your enjoyment of an aesthetic experience.

The lights dim in Henry Ford Auditorium, 1997, features the artist as a young man enjoying a concert—Debussy's "The Clouds"—until, that is, the oboes come in late, and his censure spoils his pleasure.

I just want to be enjoying this music, but already at age ten the critical faculties start swimming in and prevent my pure enjoyment of what I am listening to.

Several works in this show represent moments when the joyous will to create encounters the demand to do good work.

To the judgmentally minded [1999] for example.

I didn't want the painting to be didactic somehow, that there would be this one-to-one relation between the scene of a coronation of Josephine supposedly, but in fact of Napoleon, and the moral of the story. So what I chose to do—and it was an impulse, really—was to focus in on moments in the story that would be charged and would have their own life. Focusing viewers' attention on those specific moments, I would create an almost cinematic narrative that would coincide on a different plane with the text as it unfolded.

The narrative unspools two identical stories. In each, pompous critics try to rain on a parade. And in each, the figures of merit remain undeterred. Frowning clerics, scowling pope, tune-deaf porker judge in vain. The talented are triumphant. On a different plane, of course.

Yet are they really? Institutions weigh heavy on these works from the Corcoran exhibition—school, synagogue, mental ward.

I would add to the list institutions like heterosexuality, family, the institution of gender, the institution of organized religion even more broadly than the synagogue. The institutional voices are all ringing in my ear and to some extent my work is a big "Shut up" to shake loose the burden of those institutions.

These voices can deafen you.

JUDGMENT AS CURSE

The hard-edged dystopic vision of a totally administered world is, I think, closer to the reality we inhabit. Real wages decline, health care grows more elusive, racism and sexism flourish, alternatives to capitalism fade. But in Aptekar's work, a utopian gap tends to open up, often between two competing, mutually reinforcing discourses that undo each other even as they enable each other. One of Aptekar's finest works is entitled, *I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands*, 1996. A mother

and son make Hanukkah decorations. "I have a knack for it, but my mother seems worried." The mother's anxious words, "Such a surgeon you'll make with those hands, keynahora, and on the weekend you can be artistic," stand ineffectually over Boucher's *Allegory of Painting*, 1765. In that picture, a half-clad woman—Painting in all her glory—points with her brush to a circular canvas, commanding, it would seem, the pursuit of nothing less than Art. This is a double interpellation—two opposing speech acts thrust up against each other.

How confusing. How enabling. For the artist turns confusion to opportunity, so as to slip between the imperatives of Art History and Bourgeois Family. As he says in *Her Father Dragged Her From Shtetl to Shtetl*, 1996, "I escaped when I became an artist."

That is not steely-eyed realism. And to be fair to Aptekar, he knows that escape is not *le mot juste*. The small fulfillments of desire and talent take place within Religion and Family and Art World, not somewhere outside them.

If I thought my work was a rant I'd be quite disturbed. Despite the constraints in the family suggested by the painting, there's also the fact that the mother is encouraging the son to make art. Although, it's a mixed message because there are certain strings attached to that encouragement; nonetheless, here it is, you know, she's teaching him how to make Hanukkah decorations out of beautiful materials and exciting him in that way.

But then in what sense has he escaped?

Aptekar's idea is that artists thrive when institutions, aiming at one goal, are used to achieve another.

I'm a believer in a dialectic. The painting *We went to the tailor together* [1995] ... it wasn't what was intended to be transmitted to the bar mitzvah boy, that he would internalize the message of the Torah, he would feel the authority of a boy becoming a man via this religious ritual. It is rather that he felt sensually elevated into adulthood by the act of wearing a beautiful suit and

creating something beautiful and singing in front of a group. That was equally valid, in my view, but it wasn't what was intended, I suppose (laughter).

The trouble with this explanation is that dialectic is a humanist and enlightenment style of thinking about history. Marx and Hegel were dialecticians. Giambattista Vico, the 18th-century expert on Roman jurisprudence, was a dialectician who believed that human actions were helpless to stop history's unfolding: "this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves ..."² Dialectic proposes that history has its own inevitability, and that nothing is ever lost or done in vain. Dialectic renders a fundamentally upbeat view of history because, as Hayden White observed, in it history always has a happy ending—the worker's paradise, the triumph of Absolute Spirit. It is not, however, a view a Foucauldian could hold.

RE-PRESENTATION AS RESCUE: TACTICAL STRIKE BEHIND THE LINES

Painting Between the Lines is unbelievably optimistic, rich in examples of the aleatory benefit and the unintended manumission. Consider the artist's grandmother, two weeks off the boat, bivouacked with relatives who disapprove of her boyfriend.

Grandmother simply moves out: "got herself a room." Judgment avoided is judgment annulled. Only by escaping the family does she produce Ken's mother and finally Ken, who reciprocates by taking her story to the Kemper Museum. In *I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands*, Painting rescues the speaker from mother's command to become a surgeon. Ken repays Painting by repainting Old Masters. *We went to the tailor together* gives us the boy exposed to judgment—the congregation—but shielded by art, the tailor's finely made suit. Protective, intimate, the art of the tailor swathes you in its graces. And art commemorates. In *I'm in Madrid*, 1999, Harry Fisher objects to being judged ("But what the hell do they know about war?") but in this case refuses to refuse the judgment. The painting renders its own verdict, judges Harry Fisher to be a hero. History looks, on the whole, pretty damn just.

Even unjust judgment, Aptekar's *bête noire*, has saving graces.

Because I'm so schooled in the terrors of judgment, I learned to embrace criticism and really use it to enrich my work. And so any available opportunity for somebody to tell me what they think about what I am doing, I seize, because it can only make my work better, it can only make my understanding of my work richer, it can only enhance what I do because everybody's input is sort of a gift to me. And so whenever anybody comes into my studio when I'm working, I automatically try to get them to respond to what I am doing and tell me what they think. I've gotten great feedback. It's just made my work much better.

But the exhibition is not so utopian as to suggest that anyone or everyone can escape the crushing weight of institutions and bad judgment. Aptekar escaped by painting. His brother did not. *It wasn't my brother*, 1997, and *I drove my brother ...*, 1999, afford powerfully moving articulations of solidarity in the face of hostile judgment. What really drove his brother was the misguided demands of his parents, judgments that drove him to distraction and a condition of pain that is excruciating to read about. But the two paintings also suggest the ultimate futility of hopes for easy rescue. In *I drove my brother ...*, Aptekar looks on as his brother jams in a ghetto jazz bar. The brother is making music but lacks institutional shelter and critical acclaim. His damage, his vulnerability, and his literal institutionalization put us back into the darker world of Foucault and even of the Frankfurt School, with its memories of a damaged life. Which is to say, back to reality.

Aptekar is, as usual, in place to rescue the almost-lost. He figures himself as the subject of Manet's *The Plum*, ca. 1877, an onlooker but by no means a container, aloof outsider, or dispassionate framer.

It was more a psychological circuit. The freedom and excitement that I saw in my brother's playing was thrilling to me. And then when it was squelched by a nervous breakdown, I saw it as tragic. So I think it made me wary of pursuing a creative life, but at the same time it exposed me to it, it made it thrilling and ... "How you going to keep them down on the farm?" What

freedom he had now, what total freedom, but what was going to be, what was going to happen? And there's all that uncertainty in the Manet, you don't know what she is thinking about, but you really sense her intense involvement in her thoughts and it's totally subtextual. Also, there was a wonderful opportunity for cross-gender identification, which I always love to do and do whenever I can.

A crossing of lines then between two brothers, joined at the hip, hipsters forever. "I tried to be cool, sitting down in a booth with my Vernor's ginger ale. My brother unzipped his gig bag, raised his trumpet, and sat in with the best of the be-bop bands." I choke up reading this, and I promise to be true to my own brother. Behind these noble words of solidarity, we see the Moor and the woman in a café, sidelined figures of tragic perception.

Just as institutions can be unintentionally good, so rescue can be ineptly bad. In "*People all over are starving*," 1998, the lip service paid to the starving rings false, the measures taken in its name absurd. You don't save the starving by making Ken eat all his peas.

And something creepy attaches to rescue. In *Got a call from Nick*, 1999, we're reminded that the artist is an undertaker, that museums are mausoleums, and that thanks to them we keep only some of the dead in our midst.

The strange funerary quality of writing does have a peculiarly non-Enlightenment mood, a mood that doubts the efficacy of reason and the availability of justice. It is an insight that was inaugural for deconstruction, the literary and philosophical method that scandalized Lynne Cheney, Allan Bloom, and a legion of cultural conservatives. Deconstruction is about the inherent deceptiveness of language, its failure to perform anything it promises. The words on the gravestone say, "Pause, traveller, and hear my tale."³ The sad delusion fostered here is that someone lives inside the tomb. And it's not only tombic inscriptions that wish you to believe this fallacy. Language everywhere stands in for something that can never actually present itself. Loss and privation infect writing of every sort. From this angle, Aptekar's glass facades are transparent grave-stones. His sandblasted inscriptions subvert these double voices from the

grave, for his glass, unlike a gravestone, reveals the contents of the tomb. Far from impersonating a speaker now sadly absent and enunciating a painting now tragically mute, these works attempt to dispel mournful pretense and outright deception. They challenge the deconstructive view of writing. And they undermine all three pretenses of framing, for Aptekar's glass neither contains, nor stands outside, nor dispassionately observes.

But the deconstructive power of writing and the judgmental aloofness of the frame are not to be so easily disposed of. Despite Aptekar's vital efforts, the exhibition offers some poignant examples of writing-as-privation. Art proves more often than not to mark loss and the flight of authenticity.

Time comes up for me fairly often. I make specific reference to the present. You know, "I'm walking down Broadway, and I see blah blah blah bluh." So if I do that and I put a text that's extremely of the moment, for example, next to an image that's from a long time ago, then I suggest that something specific happened that prompted a painter to make that painting. And so that's one way in which time figures. Another way is retrieval of memory and another aspect has to do with trying to capture the essence of what happened long ago through a contemporary understanding of the past. For example, in one of the paintings that's going to be in the exhibition based on Rembrandt's *Sampling Officials of the Drapers' Guild* [1662], I have a text that says something like "what would you say to me if you didn't have to judge me, and what would I say to you if I didn't need your money?" That's a dilemma that artists have faced forever; ever since the first artist was commissioned to do any kind of work, an artist's work was being bought by a collector who had some say in how the artist was going to make the work.

And yet the anecdotes, the anecdotal method, suggest a larger point, a point of method.

I was trying to tease out a love-hate relationship that an artist has with somebody who is supporting their work;

you know, that goes both ways. It's not just, what would you say if you didn't have to judge me? In other words, couldn't you just respond to my work without judging it? Could you just talk about it? What did it mean to you? Instead of everything that you say to me about what I've done having to do with your position of superiority as the person who decides whether I live or ... whether I can afford to eat or not. And what would I say to you if I didn't need your money? Wouldn't I just be able to talk to you as a normal human being without some ulterior motive?

WRITING RESTORED, MUTENESS AT AN END

The fallacy here is that one may attain to some pure condition that has no ulterior motive. But, of course, when Aptekar begins to scoop in focus groups and interviewees, he has his motives which involve balancing optimism against his own shrewd, better knowledge. At the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, England, the artist set up groups to respond to paintings in the collection. He asked them, for example, which painting he should get rid of, not use at all. Then he used their responses as his sandblasted text. Look closely. The views of museum guards and disabled gardeners and inner-city school children, views shyly offered at his urgings, adorn Aptekar's most recent paintings. He is profoundly inviting, and he makes interlopers surmount their fears.

Yet Aptekar's radical realism is such that his Enlightenment optimism always comes face to face with his deconstructive anarchism. A member of the disabled gardeners' group was especially moved by a painting that included a dead barn fowl.

A chicken with its mouth open on the ground ... and this guy was so disabled, he could barely talk, he had difficulty walking, and he just identified with that chicken. "No. He's not dead, he's struggling, and he's alive and he's going to make it." It was so moving, incredible.

There was another guy from the disabled gardener group. He was from one of the islands, and he could

barely talk. He wanted to answer the question about which painting he didn't like. I told them I had too many paintings to work on at one point; tell me which painting you can't stand and why and convince me to get rid of it. And he picked this beautiful seascape, a storm-tossed sea with the boat in danger, you know, in peril. The mast has been broken off and is floating in the water, and a couple of people are rushing around on deck trying to stay on the boat as it is upended. And he said, "I don't want that painting, get rid of that painting." It took him about ten minutes to say five sentences. I thought I would go crazy, this guy was talking ... at ... this ... speed. Squeeeezing out each word. But, you know, he was trying to communicate, I had to listen. It was really one of the most painful things I've ever experienced.

He basically said he didn't want that painting, that I should get rid of that painting because he could hear the sound of the sea; the people are going to drown, the boat is having difficulty—he expressed himself so precisely. The last line is something like, "I don't want to hear the noise." He had translated this visual experience into an aural experience, and in that transformation was this miracle of visceral response. He saw this painting, it meshed with all the fears that must have run rampant in this guy's life because of his disabilities. And I arrive at the opening of the exhibition, and I get to the last gallery where they had put the list of acknowledgments I had drawn up. I wanted to thank certain people, including all of the people in the groups. And I get to the bottom of the list of names of people who are in all the groups and it says, "And John Shoy who sadly died suddenly last month." It didn't say why, but it was of an epileptic seizure.

Aptekar has compelled the museum to incorporate the disabled gardener. How fully incorporated is another question. The museum had neglected to tell him of John Shoy's death.

The museum's forgetfulness suggests why humane and generous motives demand to be subjected to a corrosive critical intelligence. Dialectic is far too hopeful and continuist a word to define Aptekar's edgy, angular, and divided world. Harold Rosenberg once observed that "a contemporary painting or sculpture is but a kind of centaur, half artistic materials, and half words."⁴ That is obviously the case in Aptekar's synaesthetic method.

A serviceable painted surface offers a certain pleasure. There's color, there's movement, there's the embodied hand—all those features that offer viewers of painting, pleasure. Then again, there's the glass over it that reflects things, complicates your view of the painting, prevents your eye from really caressing the surface of the painting uninterrupted; and then there's the text, additionally, to sort of stand in the way of your pure enjoyment of the painted surface. And then there's the dangerous aspect of the glass.

Centaur-like, Aptekar halves criticism into the professional and the populist, judgment into the piggish and the productive, the work into sensuous paint and dangerous glass. He despises institutions and they dominate his project. Even the relations of rescue go both ways. Aptekar enables the disabled gardeners and the Mieke Bals and Norman Brysons. They enable him and—as in the gardeners' case—are incarnate in his work. The *mélange* of opposites forms no cheery dialectic. We might, optimistically, think of it as affirmative deconstruction, an engaging discourse on the failure of its own premises.

CONCLUSION

The discovery of strength within olio and mastery over the Old Masters recapitulates the painter/autobiographer's own formation. Text and image tend to interrupt each other, and the tension between them argues a competitive urge to have the last word. Such contests create some breathing room, such confusions open lines of flight. But escape is by no means assured. The hapless elder brother, wishing to play the jazz trumpet, has no half-nude Painting to annul parental demands and point the way out. He succumbs to their words and heads to medical school, only to land five days later in the mental hospital.

Aptekar acknowledges the oppressive power of family, temple, public opinion, Art World. But he also affirms a logic of unintended effects that impels his mother to make him an artist and his synagogue to make him a man of fashion. Bal makes the seductive claim that Aptekar's reframings link the other to the self "in an act of solidarity that bestows some of the positive feedback—'they love me'—on the other."⁵ And a utopian strand in these works would have us think that the force of authority can be realigned to good ends.

Aptekar is a critical engineer of semiotic reframing. Consistent with his trenchant suspicions about self-generated power, he accepts none of the credit.

I didn't set out to produce a body of work because I thought I would be reproducing my Jewish heritage. Eventually I realized I was doing it, though. It's a product of my Jewish education and culture. It's a product of a couple thousand years of Jewish skepticism—a Jewish response to the world that says why and mistrusts for any number of reasons, and reflects on why things are, and never accepts any explanation as the last word.

There's never a last word.

NOTES

Notes

1. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; reprint, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 46.
2. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, 3d ed., trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 382.
3. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 77–78.
4. Harold Rosenberg, "Arte y palabras," in *La idea como arte: Documentos sobre el arte conceptual*, ed. Gregory Battack (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1977), pp. 117–126.
5. Mieke Bal, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 185.