

# “We’re not even sure of carrots (whether they’re what we think they are, how poisonous they are, who grew them and under what circumstances).”

John Cage, *A year from Monday*, p. 9

It is hard to write anymore about representation. The essay form itself, with its unending self-consciousness, seems to drive me to want to talk about myself from the start. Perhaps also it is another form of self-consciousness, which is to say, a nervousness, when the topic of representation is broached. Wasn't it that we were supposed to stop representing *them* a long time ago. Wasn't this the age of the *differend*, when my job was to make space for other voices, make visible new languages in order to efface myself?

Or did it turn out that that was the not-so-subtle modernist/postmodernist project all along? Didn't Schelling want to lose himself in the ecstasies of India? Wasn't that Cage's Zen? Or that great poem with which Tim Clark began his chapter on Pollock: "I shall make a poem out of nothing at all / it will not speak of me or others..." penned by William IX of Aquitaine?

If representation was then to be a more active project, one which Gayatri Spivak has recently considered (implicitly) as "learning to learn from the subaltern," then the question of representation and others remains paramount for contemporary art. The very fact of this foregrounding was the most essential aspect of Slought Foundation's *The Return of Horse: Painting in the Ambivalent Present*, which opened on Nov. 14.

The curatorial essay accompanying the exhibit (indeed hanging at the gallery entrance and tactically framing the art) begins with an interesting parallel: the outmoded means of transportation that is the horse and the outmoded means of representation that is painting. Moreover, by placing the horse as the go between of Philadelphia and New York (between which one could not travel without a horse, or two, not so long ago), it brought to the fore questions of the traffic of objects and people in the art world as we, just south of the center, have come to understand it.

But here some concerns arise. When in the statement curator Osvaldo Romberg writes, for instance, "What is the difference between a Brazilian novella and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? It is the viewer's experience, affected by their relative receptivity to the explicit or implicit meanings of a work," I begin to worry that he is not sufficiently foregrounding the task of learning to learn from the other - in other words, he moves away from the fact that representation in art today is first and foremost about a reconfiguration and not a validation of that experience. (This is not, of course, to rule out validation or empathy as a tool of representation, but it is to argue against a leveling of the field of representation to the terms of validating what is given in experience.)

When it comes to the art itself, these questions remain. One of the show's pieces, by Natalie Frank, is a combination of video testimony about the Rwandan genocide and a few accompanying painted portraits. The work is part of *Voices of Rwanda*, and seeks to bring testimony about the 1994 genocide to the world stage in order to "inspire a global sense of responsibility to prevent human rights atrocities." This is no doubt a noble goal, but it is not one that I am sure lives up to the contemporary demands of representation.

The *Voices of Rwanda*-type message is something that one might take from any number of standard discourses on representation, but it does not live up to the trenchant argument advanced, for example, in Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers*, where he reverses the standard interpretation of events in Rwanda and shows precisely how a misintervention by Western powers was what precipitated and reinforced the genocide in the first place. For him, the question of representing Rwanda is then not to call on a banal response couched in human rights discourse, but rather one which sought to learn from the histories of colonialism and its machinery of inventing and representing Africans (the very Hutu/Tutsi distinction itself) in order to call into question one's own voice in this process. In other words, representation is neither the letting speak nor the making speak, it is the difficult (infinite?) conversation which is the condition of speech itself. Such a conversation is unfortunately absent in Frank's work.

So much of the discourse on representation in modern

art has been haunted by the infamous statement of Theodor Adorno, "To write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." But it is not frequently enough noted the revision Adorno gave this statement in *Negative Dialectics*, where he writes: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems." Indeed, this is crucial for a critic like myself to keep in mind, and to recall that although there is a limiting condition to Frank's work, it does form an important part in the archives of genocide. But Adorno does not let us off the hook here. He continues, "But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living..."

It is tempting to psychologize away this statement, as Adorno himself does, as a matter of the trauma of survivor's guilt. But the question is, I think, much more powerful and necessary as we think through the questions of representation, for they move the domain from the register of the art to the practice - indeed the very possibility - of everyday life itself. How do we live in the face of a world which has abandoned all its values? What forms of representation might help us answer this question?

There was only one horse at the Slought show, and it did not appear in any of the three artists' work. Rather, it was in a simple cartoon on the bathroom wall, where a man playing polo has just rammed the head of his horse through a museum wall. The patron there exclaims, "You're lucky that painting was of a horse!"

The horse in Romberg's curatorial vision seems to raise a few questions. One, what happens to outmoded media - do they just become sports, or romanticized images of a time long gone? (Or) two, do they, like the repressed, ever return, to disrupt the sedimented view of culture that we have collected? The horse's head through the painting in the cartoon does just that by relying on a certain trope: the painting represents a real horse's head. The decidedly anti-Magritte stance of the patron is what gives the joke its humor: of course, the real horse's head is no more a painting than a painting of a pipe is a pipe.

But the humor here is also the subversion. The horse in fact is no longer represented - it is now called upon to represent itself. But like Coco Fusco & Guillermo Gomez-Pena, it is forced into this representation, literally imprisoned. To transcend this situation, the cartoon relies on its implied temporality: the horse will leave the painting and a conversation will ensue about what just happened: the irony of it all, the circulation of damages, the question of the body, the archaic and deprived role of the modern horse (or, dare I say, painting).



Tongue-in-cheek though this may be, the point stands that the important thing about representation today is to raise the question of representation itself. While I have advanced an ethical-aesthetic paradigm that breaks with Romberg's, it does invalidate the fact that the Slought show is able to put on the table a critical series of questions about the possibilities for representation in the modern world. Learning to learn from these questions is itself a primary task of criticism today.

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