

One Line Labyrinth

The Degree Zero of Painting

In writing on one of Zach Rockhill's earlier exhibitions at Crawl Space Gallery in Seattle, I had no idea that the epigraph I employed by Jorge Luis Borges would only come to bear its truth well after the exhibit had come to a close and the spectators disappeared: "I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line."

In his exhibit at FLUXspace, everything begins with the simplicity of a line, with the return to the degree zero of painting. Yet, Rockhill reverses the traditional relationship between artist and tool by making his body into the very instrument of execution. He also seemingly reverses the traditional relationship between will and artistic practice insofar as the artist becomes the unwilling instrument of a handful of spectators (who, in turn, become the artists). These simple reversals invite us to question the role of the artist as it has been constructed in the modern era as a fountainhead of creative ingenuity who thoughtfully and willfully manipulates materials to construct an autonomous work for independent spectators.



However, Rockhill's simple gesture of inversion is not one of an absolute break with the past. By directing the performance and establishing the minimal rules of its choreography, he still plays the role of the near-invisible Wizard behind his orchestrated Oz (an Oz in stark black and white: a clear inversion of the relation between Kansas and the phantasmagorical land beyond). More importantly, perhaps, his return to the degree zero of painting opens onto one of the labyrinthine themes of "modern" aesthetics: the impersonalization of the artist before the anonymous materiality of his or her resources. Does not the black sprawl against the white wall recall Mallarmé's statement regarding the difference between the universe, which is written *white on black* (stellar bodies against the night sky), and humanity, which advances *black on white* (the materiality of the text qua image against the white page)? Doesn't the artist's disappearance into the black torrent of paint invoke Mallarmé's preoccupation with becoming impersonal before the anonymous body of the text? In short, doesn't Rockhill transform painting into poetry, as an inverted echo of Mallarmé's transformation of poetry into painting?



ion in this endless catalog of simple yet labyrinthine reversals is none other than the famous apex of Rimbaud's short-lived project: *je est un autre* or *I am an other*. And it is here that the true political significance of Rockhill's Borgesian simplicity comes to the fore. "I," his poetic gesture of inversion seems to be saying, "am an other: a black body caught in conflict and violently dragged to its foreordained place against its will." The black froth of paint over his white body recalls, in strict counter-point, the white froth of the firehouses used to propel black bodies straight back to where they came from. "But I am also," Rockhill seems to be saying in yet another reversal, "the body trapped within a gallery intent on making connections with the urban outside, the body destined to simply make a minimal artistic gesture within a predefined place." The political orientation of this gesture can ultimately be interpreted in at least two ways, and it's not clear exactly where Rockhill stands on this issue. Is he aiming to bring the black, inner-city struggle surrounding the gallery *into* the gallery space itself by drawing an unexpected but radical line between the two? Or is he ultimately proclaiming the obsolescence of any direct link between the gallery and its urban outside by consciously staging black bodily conflict within the safe confines of the gallery's white walls? Given the constitutive ambivalence of his acts, perhaps he is simply raising the decisive question of what FLUXspace means: what is the political potential—realized or not—of a *space in flux*?



Rockhill's straight line is ultimately a point of anamorphosis, of transformative re-making, that acts as a simple portal into a labyrinth of inverted relations: simplicity/complexity, artist/instrument, will/action, artist/spectator, mind/body, multimedia artist/painter, painting/poetry, I/other, white/black, inside (gallery)/outside, the political/the apolitical.

- Theodore Tucker