



Jean-Luc Godard. Breathless. 1960.

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The corpus of Annette Michelson's early art criticism is voluminous (by early I mean written while she lived in France, before her definitive return to New York in 1966). By my count she wrote forty-five short columns for the *International Herald Tribune* from August 21, 1957, to March 30, 1960, twenty-five longer pieces for *Arts Magazine* from December 1957 to May–June 1964, most of which were entitled “Paris Letter,” and fifteen similar surveys for *Art International* from December 1962 to April 1965 (plus two “New York Letters” published in this last journal in February and March 1966). The topics were extremely varied—dependent on what Paris museums and galleries had to offer in terms of exhibitions, though it is clear that AM had full discretion with regard to what she'd choose to comment on; she often contrasted one show with another or paired them as unexpected bedfellows. Her choices were idiosyncratic, to be sure, but no matter what the topic, the tone is constant, inimitable—supremely self-confident, often ironic (even sarcastic if need be), and bold. What other critic, for example, would begin the review of a Goya retrospective by focusing on its poor reception and accusing André Malraux of being responsible for it, thanks to his then prevalent view of the painter as a *noir* romantic (in *Saturne*, his much-discussed book on the artist) to the exclusion of his immense talent as a portraitist? Who could utter without blinking something like “I therefore protest against the public reaction to this exhibition”?¹

Writing a weekly column in a daily newspaper, or a monthly “Letter” in a magazine, is demanding. Though she published a lot during her long career, AM was notoriously finicky as a writer during the last five decades of her life, ever reluctant to commit something to print (the dog often ate her homework). As a young writer, however, she willingly submitted to the hectic rhythm of journalism, later recognizing that she had learned from the experience: “As far as working for the *Herald Tribune* was concerned, I fell into it. And I liked it a lot, it's a very good and effective kind of discipline. And for someone like myself who tends to be slightly elliptical, it was a very good kind of training ground.”² She willingly submit-

1. “Goya in Paris,” *Arts Magazine*, April 1962, p. 29.

2. AM quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974*, p. 79. The occasional gaps in the publication of her weekly column in the *Herald Tribune* correspond to her absences from

ted—but with a twist: “I wrote their weekly column which I revised completely in terms of its format, what I felt its function to be and what I felt its intellectual level should be.”

Given the richness of AM’s “French” output, the ideal solution would be to reprint it all, which far exceeds the possibility of this journal (it would make a hefty tome). Short of that, what I offer below is a *flânerie* (festooned by a *florilège* of excerpts) around certain themes or aspects, in order to stress the consistency of her approach (and unearth a few gems in passing). However, I want first to republish at least one article in its entirety, to give the reader a sense of the ebb and flow of her writing. And none seems to me better for that purpose than her very first column for the *Herald Tribune*:

It is the feeling of dizzying acceleration and of climax, of a radical break which meant both an end and a beginning, that lends to almost any exhibition of cubists, major or minor, its singular excitement.

A casual stroll through the 1911–1913 corridor of the School of Paris sets one’s historical sense tingling. Attentive study easily and promptly establishes the line of logical filiation from Cézanne, and yet the body of cubist painting retains its aspect of crisis urgently proclaimed and sumptuously resolved.

For some time now, of course, we have been able to divide the sheep from the goats and accomplishment from effort; on one side the masters, Braque, Gris, Picasso, Mondrian; on the other, the line of minor figures, Metzinger, Gleizes, Le Fauconnier—the first generation of honorable academicians.

It is somewhere between these two that Robert Delaunay now, I think, takes his place. The retrospective exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne, considerably larger than that organized in 1955 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, leads one, nevertheless, to speculate on his very special case.

One’s general impression, as one proceeds from the early “Self Portrait,” with its precocious intimations of cubism, the “Steeple of Notre Dame” (1909) and the “Eiffel Tower” series of the same year through the “Circular Forms” (1913) to the “Cardiff Team” and “Homage to Blériot” (1919), is of genuine if intermittent vivacity.

But Delaunay’s ambition was immense, respectably if not irreproach-

the French capital, often for trips back home.

ably so. He wished to extend that metamorphic process begun by the cubist masters to the domain of color, to exploit it as a disruptive, analytical and eventually re-integrating force. To do this meant, as he thought, to liberate European painting from the tradition of chiaroscuro, to proclaim and consolidate the independence of color from form, to endow it with an absolute fluidity, much as Boccioni, Carrà and their futurist companions were trying to do for mass and volume.

In his attempt to do this, Delaunay was led, as early as 1913, to abandon representation and, though he returned periodically and with success to the object, the late work of the '30s is exclusively non-representational. The "Reliefs" and "The Joy of Living" (1930–1936) are latter-day extensions of experiments with the color-disk paintings begun in 1913.

A large "Still Life" of 1916, one of a series painted in Portugal, where Delaunay spent the war years, is particularly instructive. In this work, the forms of melons, fruit and receptacles on the right-hand side are echoed and reworked in the beautifully related composition on the left, in which large, purely abstract, circular and ovoid forms, composed of brilliantly colored concentric disks, are piled in perilous imbalance. Again, in the later "Football" the heads of sprinting athletes are rhythmically echoed by the beautifully distributed line of balls which races along below them.

The extra dimension of visual wit and allusion evident in these two paintings Delaunay gradually lost as he cut loose from the object. The result was eventually to be little short of catastrophic; his initial vivacity was weakened and another sensibility was "violated by an idea." Another painter might have sustained this loss; another painter, Mondrian, in fact, did. But the works executed in the last years of Delaunay's life, the "Rhythms" and the "Decorations for the Aeronautics Palace," designed for the Paris exposition of 1939, illustrate the inability of his open and militant faith in industry and progress to sustain his formal creative powers. The whirling color disks, the interlacing spirals and intersecting sphere of the "Decorations," conceived, certainly, in a spirit of light, resolute optimism, are disheartening.

To walk through these last rooms is to plunge once again into the spiritual climate of the early '20s and '30s, to meditate again on why the mystique of technology and the furious optimism and doctrinaire faith on which it was postulated no longer commands our wholehearted

assent. One feels uneasy in this climate of uncritical piety, remembering that in the decades that have passed since Delaunay, Léger and the young Le Corbusier, since Severini and the futurists, one has become somewhat more intimately acquainted with the repressive and sinister aspects of their Brave New World.

Yet, to deny the importance of this tradition—for such it has, by now, become—is to deny something very seminal indeed. One walks through this exhibition counting the entirely successful works on the fingers of one's hands, less enjoying than seeking to enjoy, but with a sense, nevertheless, of history being made, of being in on some fabled battle.³

This modest entry is typical.⁴ We get a condensed lesson in art history that starts with a puzzle (something that tingles one's historical sense): Why do Delaunay's late abstract works, after such momentous beginnings, feel so disheartening? This is followed by a brief but precise account of the painter's career (and a reaffirmation of the modernist taxonomy: sheep and goats, inventors and followers, "masters" and "honorable academicians");⁵ the formal analysis of at least one work (they would become more elaborate over the years); the solution of the historical puzzle: We can no longer adhere to the techno-optimism that motivated those late works; and finally, the moral of the story (often a nostalgic one): For all Delaunay's foibles, this exhibition gives us "a sense, nevertheless, of history being made, of being in on some fabled battle." Irony is still gentle in this first piece, but it already affects the syntax ("tradition—for such it has, by now, become").

AM's historical sense is recurrently tingled by the modernist past. She does not depart from the canon on that score, but she likes to revisit the work of the historical avant-garde. Cubism but also Futurism remain high on her agenda. She occasionally deals with a single artist, always providing a brilliant insight. A case in point is her review of a Juan Gris exhibition organized by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. Taking issue with the latter's view (she provides an excellent summary of his 1946 monograph on the artist), she quotes Gris's own exposé of his "deductive method" (geometric armature comes first; the rest is pure ad hoc filling), paying particular attention to an overlooked passage. The painter had written: "I therefore never know in advance what aspect of an object is to be depicted. When I particularize plastic relationships to the point of representing

3. "Delaunay Paintings Recall '20s," *Herald Tribune*, August 21, 1957, p. 5.

4. With the exception of a date mistake, no doubt occasioned by rush; usually AM was scrupulously exact (the Paris Exposition Universelle occurred in 1937, not 1939).

5. In the May–June 1964 issue of *Arts Magazine*, she faults the André Lefèvre donation of Cubist works to the Musée national d'art moderne for containing far more paintings from the "academicians" than from the "masters." A hilarious footnote is appended: "I understand that a Gleizes retrospective is forthcoming at the Guggenheim Museum. This seems unthinkable except as a symptom of doctoral despair" ("Change in the City," p. 90).

objects, I do so in order to avoid the spectator's doing it himself, so that the ensemble of colored forms will not suggest a reality I myself have not foreseen." AM's reaction: "What Mr. Kahnweiler takes, therefore, for a quasi-neo-Platonic Realism is, to Gris, a preventive strategy, a check imposed upon our imaginative or associative powers." This accounts, she ventures, for the weakness of Gris's late works: "It is as though the caution and compromise implicit in the safety device involve an initial dissociation of form and object and a consequent involuntary and irreparable gap between them. The result betrays the timidity of the strategy, the poverty of its economy."⁶

In general, however, when dealing with historical phenomena, she likes above all to set up dialectical oppositions as well as to gauge aftereffects. With regards to Cubism, this yields 1) musings on the advantage of working in an established tradition for a minor artist, and even a not-so-minor one, such as Léger;⁷ 2) the inadequacy of the Cubist model as a means of rehabilitating the human figure in the postwar context (on Ossip Zadkine: "The burden of our time' is crushing figurative sculpture");⁸ 3) the promotion of Raymond Duchamp-Villon's sculpture, in contrast to that of his Cubist contemporaries (notably Lipchitz and Laurens), but also of the Futurist Boccioni. (Why is Duchamp-Villon so much better? Response: "I believe it is because [he] defined, with a precision denied to either Boccioni or the Cubists, the exact limits of visual dynamics within static sculptural form.")⁹

6. "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, January 1958, p. 17.

7. In the March 5, 1958, issue of the *Herald Tribune*, a parallel is traced between the Cubism-derived work of an Argentinian artist and that of a contemporary Japanese painting in the classical Kano style of the sixteenth century. The works of these two artists "demonstrate, very strikingly indeed, the possible advantage, for the minor and modest talent, of the common style, of the opportunity to work within a tradition, of a vision that is sufficiently complex, original and profound to provide capital for more than one generation." There follows a critique of Léger's late work: "The development of Léger from 1923 on, the almost simultaneous evolution of a personal style and the gradual impoverishment of his art, is, probably, one of the more complicated and interesting studies still entirely open to us. One would have, for example, to consider the slow decline of the revolutionary scientific sensibility behind cubism into the doctrinaire piety of Léger's machine worship (far less innocent than Delaunay's, as it persisted into the atomic age), the attempt to compensate for a reduced, if personal vocabulary by insistence and disrespect of scale" ("Questions of Style," p. 5). The trope of the minor figure comes back in a long review of the 1962 Venice Biennale written for *Arts Magazine*. After a comment on the retrospective of Mario Sironi and his relationship to Futurism, AM alludes to the Peggy Guggenheim collection as offering a "supplementary demonstration" of the ability of an established vanguard style to "fecundate second- or third-rate figures": There, "in company with Juan Gris, with Braque and Picasso, Gleizes and Metzinger testify to the seminal force of Cubism, its ability to animate the minor figure, thereby creating the 'school,' a homogeneity of ambition and quality, however transitional and brief. Actually, the relationship between Cubism and Futurism is perhaps to be traced and defined in terms of the development of the minor figures" ("The Venice Biennale," *Arts Magazine*, October 1962, p. 23).

8. "Zadkine and 'The Burden of Our Time,'" *Herald Tribune*, July 16, 1958, p. 4.

9. She insists on this point, repeating it almost verbatim specifically in opposition to Boccioni: "Rather than attempt to render the real complexity and dynamism of objects in the world, Duchamp-Villon concentrated his effort on the creation of an object whose power derives from the tensions created within an admittedly static form." ("Swiss Sculptors at the Rodin Museum, Duchamp-Villon at the Louis Carré Galerie," *Art International*, September 1963, pp. 90–91.)

Before moving on to other topics, I cannot resist pointing at two mini-bombs somewhat buried in the long review just quoted. In the first, she beats Hilton Kramer—who had been her boss at *Arts Magazine*—at his own game and shames him for having “indicted the Futurist movement and its achievement on the basis of its uncritical participation in the cult of technology and the shallowness of its ideology” instead of looking at the art itself. For “the failure of Futurism (and it is localized largely in Boccioni’s sculpture, the most radical of the movement’s enterprises) lay not in its ideology, but rather in its fascinating effort to create a new structural dynamics.” This is followed by a crisp formal analysis of several works by Boccioni and by an unexpected return to Kramer’s argument, but flipped: “None of these sculptures is more than a plastic representation of its idea.” (That is, the shallowness of the Futurists does not primarily reside in their shallow technicist ideology but in defining their job as that of representing it, in thinking of their art as mere illustration.)

The second item of note is perhaps the earliest appearance in AM’s writing of a central theme of her “American” years—that of film as the quintessential modern medium—and of Eisenstein’s name:

The absolutely dynamic articulation of interpenetrating objects, planes and lines of force, the re-creation of motion on the scale of which Boccioni dreamed was never to be realized in sculpture. That complete splintering and re-ordering of reality in movement was to be achieved only in another medium, in film. Compare Boccioni’s sculptural oeuvre with what Eisenstein was to achieve, fifteen years later, in *Ten Days That Shook the World* [the title then often given to *October*], or with one of the great sequences from his later work, *Ivan the Terrible*. In the scene of the poisoning of the Czarina, the vessel containing the deadly brew describes a complex trajectory throughout a long, sustained sequence. The nature of this universe, the court, its very structure, is defined in the slow and sinuous passage of the vessel from one spot, from one plane, to another, ending ineluctably in acceptance and death.¹⁰

Cinema plays a surprisingly limited role in AM’s “French” criticism—and most allusions to it congregate towards the end of her Paris stay.¹¹ This changes abruptly when she arrives in New York: In the penultimate review she writes for *Art International*, in

10. Ibid., p. 92.

11. A brief account of Polish films (Polanski and Kantor) in a review of the 1959 Paris Biennale (“Innocence, Experience,” *Herald Tribune*, October 14, 1959, p. 6); revulsion at the way documentary film is treated in the Biennale des Jeunes, where it has just been introduced as a competing category (“Paris Letter,” *Art International*, December 1963, p. 55); the necessity to address the space and scale of film when discussing Morris Louis’s *Unfurled* canvases (“The 1964 Venice Biennale,” *Art International*, September 1964, p. 39), an argument repeated at greater length, a few months later, in response to Greenberg’s paean to flatness and opacity (“Paris Letter,” *Art International*, March 1965, p. 39); an allusion to the fusion of opposites, “of violence and of refinement, for example,” in Japanese cinema, as a mode of entry into Isamu Noguchi’s world (“Noguchi: Notes on a Theater of the Real,” *Art International*, December 1964, p. 22), and, in the same issue, a brief tribute to Francis Picabia and René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (“Paris Letter,” p. 61). That’s about all.

February 1966, she uses Godard's *Alphaville* as a foil to denounce the "poverty and retardataire character" of Nicholas Schoeffler's sci-fi sculptural enterprise (the primary opponent she has Schoeffler face is Jean Tinguely);¹² in her last piece for the journal, she discusses in detail technical and formal aspects of Gianfranco Baruchello and Alberto Grifi's avant-garde film *The Uncertain Verification*. Though she praises the film (in particular for its use of color), she nevertheless concludes that "experiments of this sort, those of Bruce Conner or—in the context of commercial film—that of Samuel Fuller, are by now familiar to us."¹³ As if to say: "I am henceforth venturing into the world of cinema: Hold on tight!"

Incidentally, another big absence from AM's columns is the Russian and Soviet avant-garde. She laments the fact that two Malevich paintings lent by the Stedelijk Museum were whisked back to Amsterdam before the end of the exhibition *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* at the Galerie Denise René—she misses out entirely on that pioneering (and by now legendary) show—but then a year and a half later derides "the doctrinaire limits of [his] white-on-white," to which the "teasing effect of close value color" in Leon Poliakov's canvases is favorably compared.¹⁴ The longest treatment of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde is a paragraph included in a review of the retrospective of Jean Pougny (previously known as Ivan Puni), summarizing his quick backtracking from Constructivism to Suprematism to Cubo-Futurism and then, after his temporary exile to Berlin and definite move to Paris, to colorful still lifes à la Bonnard. ("What had happened since Berlin and Saint Petersburg? It is as though the youthful intellectual debauch had suddenly come to an end in an act of self-perception, a realization of limits, and a decision to forsake company that was a bit too fast for him and settle down.")¹⁵

Slim pickings—but one has to remember that Camilla Gray's *The Great Experiment*, which revealed to the world the scope of avant-garde art in Russia during the 1910s and early '20s, only appeared in 1962; apparently, and uncharacteristically for such an avid reader, AM did not set eyes on this book until her return to America. Furthermore, the reviews are of necessity reactive: With regard to exhibitions of Russian/Soviet avant-garde art, before the '70s there were as few bones to chew on, if any at all, in France as in the US.

12. "New York Letter," *Art International*, February 1966, p. 59.

13. "New York Letter," *Art International*, March 1966, p. 71.

14. The review of the Polish show is in the Paris report for *Arts Magazine* (February 1958, p. 17). AM allows more space to the discussion of the political circumstances of the show than to the exhibits (the fact that it was organized under the auspices of the Polish ambassador, with a patron committee including, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre and Tristan Tzara, "generated an atmosphere of euphoria rare even in the French intellectual Left, provoking a momentary rapprochement of Titoists, Repentant Stalinists, New Leftists and Unreconstructed Oppositionists with M. Aragon." Nothing on the Unist compositions and monochromes of Władysław Strzemiński of the '20s and '30s, and, sadly, a total lack of appreciation of Katarzyna Kobro's sculptures (misspelling her name as Kobor, she deems her work "much less successful" than that of Gabo). "Poliakov's Oils and Gouaches" appeared in the November 11, 1959, issue of the *Herald Tribune* (p. 4).

15. "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, March 1958, p. 23.

As concerns conspicuous absences, or at least limited appearances, the case of Dada is more puzzling. AM alludes to it as, along with Surrealism and Art Brut, providing the “semi-official iconography” that an artist like Enrico Baj and others of his generation can elegantly manipulate “with an ease that almost contradicts its initial source.” (“This source was the breathless and terrified awareness of metamorphosis and change, of the inherent precariousness of the human condition and of the cathartic efficacy of distortion.”)¹⁶ Speaking of the Dadaist ideology (once again with an invocation of Hilton Kramer), she sees it as having had “a certain definition and coherence on a tactical level and within a specific context of historical crisis.”¹⁷ Overall, she treats Dada wistfully, lamenting its lost edge:

The Dadaist exhibition held two years ago at the Galerie de l’Institut had prepared us for the conversion of the ready-made into the official monument; the Man Ray *Gift* (the spiked flatiron), Rose Sélavy’s camera were no longer calls to rebellion, dizzying emblems of absurdity, but reminders of an extraordinary moment in history, of a generation of gilded youth. It was all rather like looking at the toys of the Bourbon children at Versailles: one felt awe and nostalgia—tenderness. . . . One could feel esteem, respect, everything but that reaction of shock or helplessness in the face of an imperious challenge.¹⁸

The most intriguing discussion is that of Francis Picabia, whom she sees as “a sort of souped-up chameleon, genuinely involved . . . with the notion of history as a continual transcendence of the past, and therefore honestly convinced of the eventual unimportance of art and art forms.” The review of two concurrent Picabia shows is worth quoting at length:

There is neither an *oeuvre* nor a logic, but a tactic of subversiveness. . . . Everything refers to a surrounding climate or intention, and one looks for a thread, an image, a core from which to trace a centrifugal action.

In one sense the entire career has rather the aspect of the *Entr’acte* made by Picabia and René Clair, the film intended to constitute “a real intermission, an intermission in the boredom and monotony of existence, in the respectability, hypocrisy and absurdity of convention . . .” and there is another, more literal sense in which that section of the work which claims our interest embodies the image. In his busy life, this gilded career, Dadaism is set, like a glorious interlude, between the early, worldly success of the infinitely respectable Neo-Impressionist and the hack work of the war-time supplier of nudes for the harems of

16. “Baj’s Painting-Objects,” *Herald Tribune*, February 19, 1958, p. 5.

17. “Paris Letter,” *Art International*, November 1964, p. 59.

18. “But Eros Sulks,” *Arts Magazine*, March 1960, p. 38. She did not review the Dada exhibition at the Galerie de l’Institut.

North Africa. In between, for roughly a quarter of a century, the ebullience of Dadaism.

Amidst all that is currently on exhibit [at the Galerie Furstenberg], not a work of central significance, none visually unique or irreplaceable. All the most delightful drawings of the “mechanical” period, for example, were certainly equaled or surpassed by Duchamp or Max Ernst. Richard Huelsenbeck has remarked, however, that dada tended to dissolve the frontiers of personality. Picabia was certainly released into his exceptionalness by emulation and example, after the meeting with Duchamp: he found an identity within a fraternity, and in this he is the Dadaist figure par excellence. . . .

The *Entr’acte* came to an end for everyone, as we know, in the thirties. Cocteau said of Picabia that he had, together with Duchamp, carried out a vacuum-cleaning. In *le Chapeau de Paille?* [the only work on view in the show Galerie Louis Carré, replete with documents], the empty unsized canvas, with title and insulting inscription addressed to the spectator is pure provocation, and criticism is an inadequate, irrelevant response to provocation. So too is pantheonisation. The magical hygiene of the vacuum-cleaning operation is necessarily betrayed—more surely than that of the cult objects in our museums of primitive art—by their admission to the museum, their imprisonment in the glass case of the collection, Little Boy Blue has stolen away, leaving his toys. Sturdy and staunch they stand, but covered with dust. That dust is our nostalgia.¹⁹

AM’s view of Dada markedly changed after her return to New York (Duchamp, notably, became more central), but her take on Surrealism was set early on. In her very first review devoted to it, a column published on October 1, 1958, in the *Herald Tribune*, she compares “the weaknesses of the painting of that first, heroic generation of Surrealists” to “those of the 19th-century romantics—a preoccupation with painting in its predominantly iconographic aspects,” which goes hand in hand with the “theatricalism” of their conception of pictorial space. Moving on to the second generation, she singularizes Matta:

The case of Matta is particularly arresting. From these several canvases, one also gets the feeling of an increasing identification of the tension and release of linear and coloristic elements with the actual subject matter.

19. “Paris Letter,” *Art International*, December 1964, pp. 61–62.

These are difficult paintings as they violate every possible canon of taste. The key to their color (to take only one aspect of the difficulty) lies in the realization that its use is only partly iconographic. The pinks, blues and yellows are used on the one hand for all the resonance that their suggestion of synthetic hideousness can add to these visual parables of dehumanized terror. They act also, however, to organize the movement of the canvas, to block the movement of one steely, aggressive form, to anchor it to the canvas's surface, or to organize its retreat into deep space. The assault on the sensibility is diabolically cold, as if attempting to elevate nausea to the level of an esthetic category.²⁰

Her second brush with Surrealism, a review of the eighth Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, curated by André Breton and Duchamp (December 1959–February 1960), is much more elaborate. Eros was officially the theme, but that is redundant, notes AM: The structural principle of the Surrealist assemblage (as exposed by Max Ernst in his exegesis of Lautréamont's famous "chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella") is that of a mating—it is, per se, erotic. She is not terribly impressed by the installation, which she finds too literal (she does not mention this, but it pales in comparison with that of the first iteration of such a gathering, in 1938) and wonders why a sign is affixed at the entrance of the gallery ("Children under sixteen years are not admitted"): Censure by the police? Provocative tactic? Breton's own parental scruples? It seems that she favors the third possibility, for she underscores the narrowness of the poet's conception of sexuality ("Insofar as it constitutes a prolongation of a tradition of courtly love, Surrealism, in its orthodox, European aspects, is exclusively heterosexual; Lesbianism finds its way into its imagery as a mere spectacle—for the male voyeur"). The paintings included, mainly from the second generation of Surrealists, are only illustrative, a mere "description of the scandalous" that cannot "pretend to any radical radicalism":

The really radical and fully expressive painting required that the artist recognize the formal necessities of revolutionary art, assume the responsibility of "provoking a basic crisis in the object." That crisis could not be restricted to its merely social or erotic aspects, but required a recognition of its plastic nature and a continuous formal renewal and vigilance. The provocation would be, then, extended from the level of imagery to that of spatial organization, texture, the visual dynamics of the brush. Failing this, the erotic image, once absorbed or accepted, declined—in the space of a generation—into academicism,

20. "Surrealism's Heritage," *Herald Tribune*, October 1, 1958, p. 5. AM will reuse this passage in a review published in the June 1959 issue of *Arts Magazine* (p. 16). She wrote often on Matta's work: on his prints ("Paris Letter," *Art International*, December 1962, p. 59), on his sculpture ("Paris Letter," *Art International*, April 1964, p. 70), and again on his painting ("Paris Letter," *Art International*, December 1964, pp. 62–63).

eventually to be consigned, like the literature of observation and analysis, to history.

Not surprisingly, the only works that arrest her (with the exception, again, of Matta's) are sculptures: "Why, stopping before a *Couronne de Bourgeois* by Arp, the *Boule Suspendue* of Giacometti, do we feel for a moment an intensity, a fusion of erotic inspiration and formal mastery that seems out of place? Why the fatigue?" She goes back to reading Breton's *First Surrealist Manifesto* but does not really find an answer there. She does—already then!—in Georges Bataille's writing, whose dark vision of eroticism she opposes to Breton's rosy optimism.²¹

There would be brief remarks on belated Surrealism here and there, but AM's most serious engagement with the production of a Surrealist artist during her Paris years is with that of Max Ernst. Her enthusiasm for a show of his recent paintings, in 1958, came to her "as a shock," she writes: "It revealed a reawakened or quite unexpected plastic sensibility and power, a fusion, in almost every work, of image and idea in what can properly be called painting, and not imagery. . . . Iconography has resigned in favor of plasticity, and I think we are all the happier for it."²² Perhaps less surprisingly, she would praise his collage technique—particularly in the books from the '20s and '30s:

The use of extracts from 19th-century engravings and book illustrations, fragmented and juxtaposed, create a dark and claustal space, and transform each page into a theater of violence, absurdity and scandal. The nude makes her radiant appearance in the drawing room, the rape is performed on a staircase or in a public passageway, the monster intrudes in a sinister epiphany of the curtained bed-chamber. There is a suspension or reversal of natural law. Of gravity, for example. Into these scenes descend figures which have the weightlessness of otherworldly beings—of Tintoretto's saints and angels. The compounding of contradictions intensifies the sense of shock, evokes a shudder of dread and delight. Size and volume shrink and swell.²³

She is equally eloquent on the technique of *frottage*, but then dismisses the artist's claim that it presaged developments in the work of young painters:

Neither the post-cubist *collage* nor *frottage* . . . radically modified or extended the range of painting. . . . If one is going to discuss the importance of any painting technique—including that of the "drip"—one must take account of the manner in which it redefines our notions of

21. "But Eros Sulks," pp. 32–38. AM scoffs in passing at Duchamp's infamous vaginal door and at the boudoir décor. Such is the curio-shop atmosphere that she misses the inclusion of Rauschenberg's *Bed* and Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts* in the exhibition.

22. "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, March 1958, p. 22.

23. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, April 1964, pp. 66–67.

pictorial space. For the paintings of Picasso and Pollock, at their very best, one can make this claim; for Ernst's painting, at its very best, one cannot, and his painting consequently has a marginal character even when it charms and impresses.²⁴

So far, all the stops in my little tour have concerned the historical avant-gardes, but AM had to contend as well with both a more distant past and with the contemporary. In all periods, actually, she has a marked predilection for sculpture. She is particularly persuasive on Daumier's modeled busts (which she sees as the birth of modern sculpture, particularly for their emphasis on process), and, oddly, on the formal "range" of Maillol in his study of the female nude, insisting on his origins as a craftsman (notably as a potter) and eulogizing what critics call his "stupidity" as a form of "organic intelligence."²⁵ She is inspired by the work of then still little-known Otto Freundlich and equally by Matisse's *Petite figure accroupie* of 1949.

On Freundlich:

In a text entitled *Ideas of a Revolutionary Painter* (1932), he analyzes the resistance to abstraction on the part of the middle class as an attempt to force a recognition of its own absolutism and permanence. "Behind the imitation of nature, behind the representation of perspective and the visible, material world, the revolutionary artist recognized the threat of a social dictatorship which had established a precisely determined scale of values, applied, with equal rigor, to social and aesthetic matters." For Freundlich, then, the elimination of the object, the opening of a horizon toward abstraction, corresponded to a destruction of an arbitrary social order and the need to establish new centers of gravity, a new equilibrium.

It is precisely this concern with a more organically determined balance which is expressed in his sculpture. The pieces appear as huge accretions of rounded, rocklike forms (cast in bronze), piled up in defiance of traditional structural methods. They seem to hold together not through an inner armature or an imposed and strictly determined structural order, but through an intricate system of weights and counterweights. They have an aspect of freedom, of stability perpetually threatened. There is something true (or valid, or "workable") but non-final about them, as though they each could be rearranged in other, equally satisfactory relationships. By this I do not mean to say that they seem arbitrary, but rather that each

24. Ibid., p. 67.

25. On Daumier, see "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, June 1958, p. 14. On Maillol, see "Paris Report," *Arts Magazine*, September 1961, p. 49. She often uses the term "range," but wishes to question it. Noting that some critics find that of Poliakoff narrow, she writes: "This judgment, however, calls for a re-examination of the concept of 'range,' and of an artist's infinite capacities for variation, modification, reorganization and adjustments within the territory he has staked out for himself" ("Poliakoff's Oils and Gouaches," p. 4).

seems merely to represent one highly satisfactory solution to a problem which contains a range of solutions.²⁶

On Matisse:

At the Berggruen Gallery, [this work] indicated a strength and concentration which far exceed that of the late paintings and collages. One was led to reflect once again on the exact relation of fauvism (and its ultimate results) to Expressionism, led to reflect on their paths, parallel in so many respects, threatening convergence, refraining from it, and reflect on the meaning of Matisse's visual distortion. Visual rather than expressive in its function, it refuses (for all the truncation, for all the roughness of surface) the aspect of mutilation, stopping stubbornly this side of pathos, becoming, consequently, *a-pathetic*, self-contained. The obstinate audacity of a bronze figure seated precariously on a block which is completely out of scale with that figure's size awakens in us a kinetic malaise; its literal improbability, however, is canceled when one absorbs the fact that the block is there, at that disturbingly tangential angle, in that particular size, because it is conceived as a purely visual element, corresponds to a need for that particular degree of concentration at that particular point. The sculpture then comes alive.²⁷

AM is just as fluent on the work of Tinguely, though of her two reviews the best was written in New York (as mentioned above, she contrasts its irony with the lack thereof in Schoeffer's techno-fantasies). The whole text is too intricate for excerpting, except maybe for this passage at the beginning:

Tinguely's skepticism and ambivalence in regard to a machine and its function are evident, not only in the extravagant, Rube Goldberg morphology of his engines and in their humor, but in the range of qualities, rhythms and styles of movement. These develop from the rickety-ness of the early work through the grinding aggressiveness of *M K III*. Their functioning is, in fact, frequently a progress from one *hesitation* to another. Schoeffer's objects, on the contrary, move at a rhythm that is steady, smooth, sometimes dizzying, always implacable. The complexity and ambivalence of the one disconcerts in its succession of contradictory positions and postures; the self-assurance of the other astonishes by its poker-faced exclusion of irony and doubt.²⁸

26. "The Objectionable Object," *Arts Magazine*, May–June 1962, p. 24.

27. "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, November 1958, p. 15.

28. "New York Letter," *Art International*, February 1966, p. 58. The previous review written by AM of a Tinguely show appeared in the same journal in March 1965 ("Paris Letter," p. 40). As for Schoeffer, it is interesting to note that her reproach is similar—though harsher in tone—to the one she addressed earlier to Boccioni.

This said, AM's soft spot for sculpture leads her to rather peculiar assessments, unusually lenient. She is rather inexplicably fascinated by the "animal sculpture" of Pompon, about which she writes effusively several times.²⁹ Her support for "five or six first-rate sculptors, mostly young," whose very existence she deems "the happiest and most interesting thing about French art right now," is even more bizarre. "A revival of sculpture? Rather a generation in flower," she writes. Considering the names she offers, one is forced to admit that the flower wilted pretty fast, if it ever was in bloom (apart from Eduardo Chillida, whose work is far from negligible, the sculptors in question are mostly forgotten today).³⁰

Sculpture is not the only field for which AM occasionally relaxed her critical muscle. With hindsight, her reviews are often far more laudatory of the postwar École de Paris painting (particularly the Cubism-derived abstraction, but not only) than one would have expected from someone who embraced Minimalism as soon as she returned to New York. Once again, the names of many artists she raves about would mean nothing today, not only to an American audience but just as well to a French one.³¹ One of the most confounding essays, written for the journal *Cimaise*, is her apology for the painter Leonardo Cremonini, perhaps the worst she ever wrote; its only noteworthy feature is that it came out several years before Louis Althusser singled out the artist's work as the best example of what a Marxist aesthetic could offer.

Even in her most quirky accolades, AM usually abided by the cardinal rule of giving, as a starting point, a rigorous description of the works at stake. She is relentless in lambasting French art criticism for its lack of rigor: "Either a kind of secondary secretion of the man of letters, a degradation of the tradition of Mallarmé and Baudelaire, or an adjunct of merchandising technique; its range lies between the autonomous lyric and the blurb."³² We need a new Fénéon, she keeps crying out!³³ Critics as diverse as Michel Ragon, Michel Tapié, Pierre

29. Briefly in one of her first pieces for the *Herald Tribune* ("Rodin's Friends, Collaborators," August 28, 1957, p. 6), at much greater length in the same journal two years later ("Homage to Pompon," September 16, 1959, p. 6), and again in the May–June 1962 issue of *Arts Magazine* ("The Objectionable Object," p. 24).

30. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, Summer 1964, p. 84. She names four other artists in this review—Etienne-Martin, Miguel Berrocal, Robert Müller, Jean Ipoustegey. She wrote on the last three every single time their works were exhibited in Paris, even when in group shows. In a long (and, frankly, awful) piece on Ipoustegey published in the same issue of *Art International*, she footnotes an essay she wrote in 1962 on his work as well as Berrocal's and Müller's for the catalogue of an exhibition of the three artists at the Albert Loeb Gallery in New York ("On the Sculpture of Jean Ipoustegey," pp. 52–57). Another Parisian sculptor whom she praises repeatedly is Etienne Hajdu (see "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, June 1959, p. 17, and "Goya in Paris," pp. 30–31).

31. Among AM's French infatuations, let's list several truly mediocre artists on whom she wrote enthusiastically (and several times at that for most of them): Charles Lapicque, Gregory Masurofsky, Jean Pignon, Bernard Dufour, and Jean Piaubert.

32. "Paris: Grande Saison," *Arts Magazine*, May–June 1961, p. 46.

33. "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, June 1959, p. 18; "The 1964 Venice Biennale," *Art International*, September 1964, p. 39.

Restany, Jean-Clarence Lambert, Jose Pierre, Alain Jouffroy, Michel Seuphor, and many more (including James Fitzsimmons, and this just a few months before he became her boss at *Art International*) are mercilessly ridiculed. Quoting a particularly inept sentence from an exhibition catalogue (without naming the author), she exclaims: “If ever I come across a less accurate observation I will eat the paper it is printed upon.”³⁴

Though her writing was not totally exempt—albeit only in her monographic essays, notably for exhibition catalogues—from the flaws she diagnosed in French art literature (often coming off as autonomous lyric or blurb, and sometimes, I would add, both at the same time), she would have been perfectly justified in boasting about her descriptive and evocative powers. Read her on Berthe Morisot, for example:

I was struck by two things: a peculiar inability, even in the most captivating canvases, to relate volumes coherently and on a large scale in deep space, and another, corollary, characteristic, a particularly radical and startling conception of composition in terms of direction on the canvas surface. . . .

These two qualities are abundantly illustrated in the exhibition, in certain early landscapes influenced by Corot and even more so in the *Two Women with Child* of 1872. This painting betrays a hesitancy, an unsureness, a precariousness about the spatial relations obtained between the figured elements: the relationship in space between the two chairs, that of the woman-in-chair to the plants and wall section of the upper right-hand corner, that of the standing woman to the rest of the room. The result is an exquisite failure, rather like certain dishes—a sweet *soufflé*, let us say, which, though it has fallen, still tastes fine because of the ineradicable deliciousness of its ingredients.³⁵

On Jean Fautrier’s retrospective:

The earliest of the seventy-eight paintings is a *Promenade de Dimanche* of 1921 in which six elderly peasant women stand stiffly grouped about four children, all in (Alsatian?) Sunday Best—a dour lot pitilessly portrayed, and with a sobriety, care and solidity that echo those of Le Nain and Courbet. . . .

This first canvas is striking and, to myself at least, significant, not only for its early excellence but for the manner in which the image—those peasants—is “material-ised,” reconverted by the artist’s will and style

34. “Swiss Sculptors at the Rodin Museum,” p. 87.

35. “Paris,” *Arts Magazine*, May–June 1961, p. 17.



Jean Fautrier. *La promenade du dimanche au Tyrol*. 1921–22.
 © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

from the level of an articulated reality to that of brute state. Imagine *American Gothic* or *Daughters of the American Revolution* conceived by someone to whom the element of a rich *facture*, naturally assimilated as part of his birthright, serves both to establish the articulate, the human, the social and, at the same time, by a process of inversion or reconversion, to abolish them, restoring to pictorial reality and social contingency the vision of the brute matter in which their remote origins lie.

There are frequent suggestions in the early Fautrier [in *Les Poires* (1927), *Le Lapin Ecorché* (1926), *Le Paysage Jaune et Gris* (1928), *Le Lac Bleu* (1926)] of another, related duality which later becomes fundamental, characteristic: that of an expressionist intention (the influence of Soutine is visible, not only in *Le Lapin Ecorché* but in the landscapes as well) and a Latin style. This tension increases, assumes multiple form in the later work, expressing itself with a paroxysmic intensity through the

development of a palette, the *hautes pâtes*, finally absorbing or informing the entire *oeuvre*, its form, scale, texture and themes.

The *Hostages* of 1945, in which identity is established between the torn and bleeding martyrs' flesh and the heavy, aggressive quality of the paintings' *matière*, are followed eventually by *Objects* (circa 1955) and *Nudes* in which the duality of life and matter, substance and quality, figuration and abstraction, form a central thematic constellation. This theme (developed in an almost Aristotelian mode throughout Fautrier's *oeuvre*) is present in much of the significant art of the last hundred years. It is expressed in Daumier's sculpture, stated on another, more explicitly symbolic level in that of Rodin, and more recently, by that entire current, within which Fautrier's role is now established, that of *l'art informel*.

If, as it seems to me, Fautrier's painting reached its height in the 1955 exhibition of *Objects* organized at the Galerie de la Rive Droite, this was due to a working out of this theme, an "exposition" of great precision animated by the solution of technical, formal problems. The "objects" (coffee-grinder, match-box, tin can) were both formal armature and images of emergent reality forming through thick paste or substance. The intense pathos of the conception was fully rendered, yet qualified, held, as if in suspension, by the steely precision of a suggested contour, smallness of scale and characteristically sweet, delicate colour. Of the scale and the use of colour, much remains to be said. ("Michelangelo reminds me of Cinerama.") The small format acted to check pathos, and so did the colour. Those sweet pinks, creamy whites and off-whites, tender greens and dulcet blues qualify the anguish and cruelty of flesh and/or *matière*, create a register of ironic comment upon that anguish or cruelty.³⁶

But also on younger artists—Martin Barré, for example:

Martin Barré has been showing recent canvases at the Galerie Arnaud. Barré, to my mind the most dynamic man of the Arnaud group, is now at a turning point. He has always been concerned with making the white of the canvas articulate in and of itself. Thus, in earlier paintings, a contrapuntal play of horizontals and verticals was inserted with what amounted to insidiousness into the canvas surface, rather in the manner of musical sound reinforcing a silence. Experiments in other for-

36. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, May 1964, p. 46. This is the third review AM wrote on Fautrier's work, always with the same sagacity. The first appeared as early as January 1958 ("Paris," *Arts Magazine*, pp. 16–17), followed by a shorter one in the *Herald Tribune* ("Origins of Non-Formal Art," September 24, 1958, p. 6).

mats—the canvas swiveled about into a lozenge form, for instance—represented, among other things, still another attempt to make the canvas speak, not merely an impatience with the convention of the square itself.

For the last year or so, Barré has been simply modifying the white surface with lines of black paint, applied with a spray gun. This produces rectangles traversed by single lines—some slightly curved, two thirds



Martin Barré. 63-H. 1963.

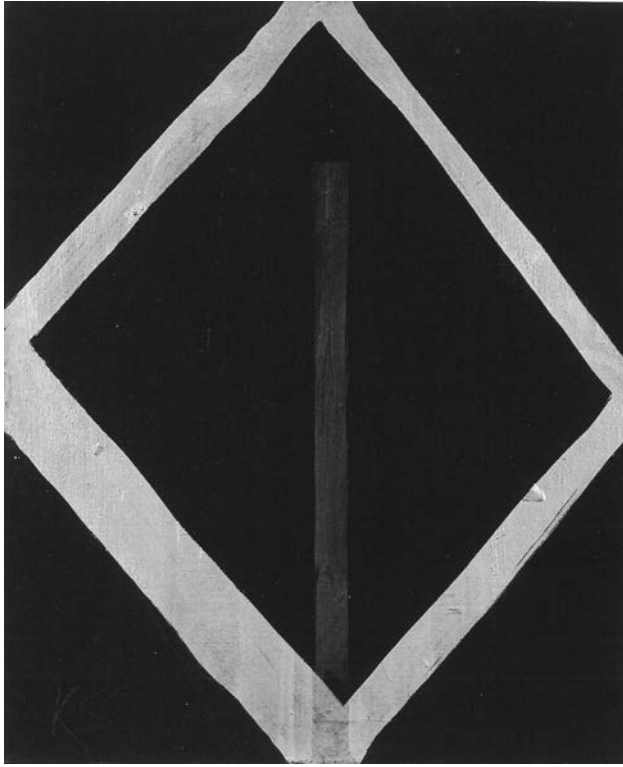
from bottom or top of canvas. Or two lines (curved or not) will almost but not quite meet in the middle of the canvas. An arrow shoots across and slightly upwards from left to right, leaving the seven-eighths of the canvas below to speak for itself. There is also a series which present a line crossing from left to right with one other line which is broken toward the center. Something basic but arresting is established here: a tension between a closed and an open structure. The tension is strong and sufficient to engage one's complete attention and to hold it, if not for long.

Obviously, canvases such as these raise problems for the viewer, to say nothing of the dealer and the painter himself. It is my experience that the power and impact of these works are dependent upon their being seen together; they constitute a range of variables (proportion, speed and tension) subjected to intense analysis and experimentation; yet none, perhaps, is intended to receive the close and prolonged scrutiny of the picture as conventionally defined and experienced. It is rare and salutary to see this kind of intensive effort being made in Paris today. Given the particular context of aesthetic equivocation here, Barré's fundamentalism arouses sympathy and esteem. More than anything else, it arouses curiosity about his future work.³⁷

Or Kimber Smith and James Bishop:

Of the younger Americans working in Paris, I feel Kimber Smith and James Bishop to be the most gifted, the most serious and consequential. Smith's painting, as I have already had occasion to remark, derives its particular interest from its relation to the pathos and dynamics of "abstract expressionism" which have dominated the image of American painting and of America through her painting. This image is partially predicated on a somewhat willful forgetfulness of that long and important development in quite another register and which extends, let us say, from the influences of Orphism through the importation of a Bauhaus aesthetic, the emigration of Mondrian and its consequences. Smith's painting represents, as none other to my knowledge does, an exact and fruitful fusion of these two tones, traditions, modes of sensibility. It had seemed to me for some time that the speed and strongly rhythmical freedom of gesture common to Americans of this generation were particularly well served, in his case, by the vocabulary, syntax and strategies of abstraction. The vocabulary has become increasingly

37. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, April 1964, p. 68. AM is the first American critic to have shown interest in Barré's work. She had already reviewed it, just as perceptively, in January 1958 ("Paris," *Arts Magazine*, p. 17).



Kimber Smith. *Lugano V.* 1961.

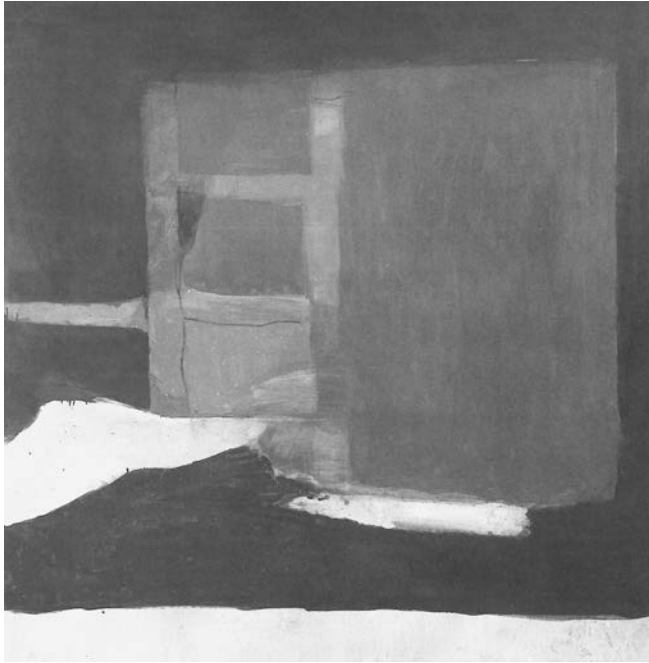
restricted these last three years or so: its linear configurations have been narrowed down to circle, square and triangle. The colours, primary for the most part plus silver—used for its stubbornly anti-natural and radically structural quality—now include black, used in increasingly larger zones and with some bravado as an active, aggressive animating element. The strategies involve the relentlessly inventive exploitation of figure-ground relationships which seem, paradoxically enough, to grow richer and more compelling as the vocabulary shrinks. Paradox, by the way, is characteristic of Smith’s art. One could have claimed a few years ago that this painting was entirely one of paradox, almost painting *en creux*, a painting of “absence” in a Mallarméan sense, its structure defining, in an almost precise inversion, the “good” painting that was not there but was rendered all the more “conspicuous” (present) by its absence. A painting, then, of ironic absence. With the narrowing, focus-

ing, more direct engagement in formal preoccupations, with a tightening of form and structure, the irony has faded and the painting is less a totality of possibilities seen backwards as in a mirror than the sum—and more, of course—of all those possibilities. It no longer suggests, it is: it returns from absence to presence.

The first general effect is that of frugality which is almost immediately qualified by the series of changes and shifts released within a prolonged, single instant of vision. These are set off by the alternating roles and functions of this triangle, that series of parallel strips, those two squares which support each other in a precariously maintained tension, the scroll forms which dance a hesitation waltz before fusing into the lozenge forms, the small, yellow, or blue areas surrounding a vertical bar and which assume, alternately, the aspect of that bar's limits or its emanation.

Last year it seemed to me that this painting was almost wholly accessible to analysis, based as it was upon conscious strategies of very deliberate order. Its power and charm derived, however, from the personal tact, irony and playfulness of a master improviser using his skill with a seeming nonchalance which was baffling. The lack of concern with *facture*, the proud unconcern with exactness of contour, are themselves, however, a canny way of relaxing our overattentive and analytical response to the sweeping clarity of design. More than ever one thinks of Jazz and of Matisse and of Matisse's *Jazz*. More than ever this seems the work of a young man at the height of his power, combining the tension and joy of youth and maturity in a stunning athleticism.

James Bishop's exhibition at the Galerie Lucien Durand is his first here in three years. The most general and deep-rooted characteristic of his painting is a care and refinement independent of secondary considerations of surface texture and cuisine in general. An exactness of relationships in space which will provide range for ambiguity and multiplicity works contrapuntally against an increasing simplification of form. The rhythms, unlike Smith's, are slow, gentle, hesitant, have the inexorability of glacial displacement. Underpainting produces a luminosity which is utterly subjacent to colour, enclosed within a potential discharge only. There is everywhere a concern with the minimal animation of the coloured area, a fluidity which disturbs, modifies a stillness and gravity, never breaking them. A Bishop canvas will frequently have a lightly drawn frame within the frame, corresponding to a gently stubborn



James Bishop. *A Sweet Tale*. 1962.

refusal to accept any of the *données* of the pictorial situation on their own terms and a respectful insistence upon calling attention, nevertheless, to their existence: thus, in certain recent paintings, a tiny corner or strip of white canvas is left bare.

John Ashbery, in an excellent text, has remarked that these canvases are rather like conversations, the point of which will be realized later. I should say, rather, that their prime quality is an exactness which is non-definitive. I mean by this that they convey the impression of exploration, of working out problems, and that the nature of the beholder's experience is indissolubly linked to its hesitancy, so that the painting, finally, rather than imposing itself, unfolds before us. A sharpening of focus, a quickening of rhythm are evident in *Tale*; the reconciliation and balance of difficult colours (cold blue, green, white) is obtained through an organization which is purely structural and not dependent—as in earlier canvases, *Sweet Tale*, for example—upon variation in tonality and saturation. This canvas and a very small one (three touches of sienna, distributed horizontally on a reddish ground, framed again in

sienna), which offer an exquisite refinement of rhythmic and tonal intervals, convey a notion of Bishop's seriousness and range.³⁸

Needless to say, AM can be as inspired in attack as in praise. She obsesses about certain topics. One to which she often returns at great length is the mediocrity of French postwar architecture and design, with the notable exception of Jean Prouvé's work.³⁹ She is repeatedly scathing with regard to Zoltán Kemény, for example, to the point that when he receives the first prize for sculpture at the 1964 Venice Biennale, she simply refers to her previous detailed assessments of his work, which "maintains sculptural pretensions while refusing to assume sculptural responsibilities": no need to spill ink again on "these reliefs . . . still so tightly bound to a conservative graphic aesthetic as to invite dismissal."⁴⁰ She is indefatigable in her detestation of Gustave Moreau, who "seems irrepressibly, infallibly to have debased every source upon which he drew: Mantegna, Ingres, Delacroix, Chassériau, and even Thomas Couture. All are plundered and violated with the brutality of incompetence." She mocks in passing the pusillanimous silence of critics, curators, and historians about the "misogynous quality of the imagery" and the "idealized, androgynous treatment of the male nude," but most of all she condemns the artist for his "peculiar lovelessness as a painter": "The work abounds in ambitious, unfinished *machines*, abandoned once the 'inspiration,' sustained only by a compulsion to *work out* the image, had spent itself. Moreover, the ugliness of the painted surface, the vulgarity and carelessness of the *facture*, testify to an impatience, a lack of respect—or love—for painting as a medium."⁴¹

On the whole, however, brevity is her favorite weapon of spurning. Soulages's gouaches and lithographs: "straightforward and handsome, but certainly no more than that."⁴² Georges Mathieu, "that immeasurably over-estimated figure": "The insufferable emptiness and repetitiveness of Mathieu's design-school chic, its reduction of a supposedly dynamic potential to the convention of the signature, correspond, undoubtedly, to the unresolved contradictions between a libertarian aesthetic and a reactionary nostalgia."⁴³ Alfred Manessier, whose winning

38. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, January 1964, p. 57. AM's previous review of Kimber Smith's work, to which she refers, appeared in the March 23, 1960, issue of the *Herald Tribune* ("American Painting and Sculpture," p. 6). She will write again on Bishop's work in the March 1965 issue of *Art International* ("Paris Letter," p. 39).

39. On Prouvé, see "Change in the City," pp. 89–90. For a hilarious diatribe against French design as compared to Scandinavian, see "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, January 1959, p. 19.

40. "The 1964 Venice Biennale," *Art International*, September 1964, p. 39. On Kemény, see "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, February 1958, p. 17; and "Swiss Sculptors at the Rodin Museum," p. 87.

41. "Moreau and Maillol," *Arts Magazine*, September 1961, pp. 47–48.

42. "Paris," *Arts Magazine*, December 1957, p. 12.

43. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, April 1965, p. 73. Previously, she had made fun of the "royalist" bed—but a royalism à la Cecil B. DeMille—that Mathieu sent as his contribution to a catastrophic exhibition at the Musée des arts décoratifs ("The Objectionable Object," pp. 22–23).

of the first prize in painting at the 1962 Venice Biennale is met with quasi-universal scorn: “[his] painting is of a mediocrity almost universally recognized (in so far as it is known at all outside France), except in precisely those official and catholic circles whose approval can be counted a kiss of death; some honors are difficult to survive.”⁴⁴ Some of her comparisons must have stung her targets, as when she, unpersuaded by Dubuffet’s populism, equated him with Ruskin, or when, commenting upon the nationalist impetus behind Malraux’s institution of the Biennale de Paris, she saw the writer as the reincarnation of the right-wing Maurice Barrès, who in 1921 had been sentenced to death-in-effigy during a mock trial staged by the Surrealists.⁴⁵

One of the issues in which AM is extraordinarily conversant—far more than any American art critic subsequently parked in France—is the intricacy of French cultural policy. She deciphers its absurd twists and turns with the accuracy but also ironic distance of an old-timer. Malraux’s campaign of restoration of the national monuments; his nomination of Balthus as director of the Villa Medici; the architecture students’ strike at the École des beaux-arts, against the “deliciously Balzacian” corruption of the Prix de Rome competition, and many other affairs.⁴⁶ None of the articles in question are easily excerptable: Though they are remarkably well-informed pieces of journalism, they are commenting on situations that are now entirely forgotten and would require too many explanatory footnotes to be fully comprehensible by any of today’s readers, even a French one.

One has the feeling, however, that it is more out of a sense of duty than of real appetite that AM deals with institutional crises and cultural policy: Her passion is for the interpretation of historical facts, not their mere uncovering and condemnation. Her sense of history is best “tingled,” to look back to the beginning of our junket, when she wonders about conditions of possibility or of impossibility. “Why did Sargent,” she asks, “with his inordinate brilliance and security, his air of being a born painter with fabulous *métier*, the sense of quality visible in his emulation of Velasquez and Hals, not develop into a really great painter”? Response:

I cannot but suspect . . . that an *oeuvre* which depended for its ultimate success upon that heightened sensitivity to *milieu* and attitude which underlay Sargent’s sense of observation (which did, for him, the work of a vision) required ultimately a degree of detachment from its subjects and the world which they mirrored.

44. “The Venice Biennale,” *Arts Magazine*, October 1962, p. 22.

45. For Dubuffet, see “Paris Letter,” *Art International*, April 1965, p. 73; for Malraux/Barrès, see “Paris,” *Arts Magazine*, November 1959, p. 15.

46. On the restoration campaign, see “Change in the City,” p. 88; on Balthus’s nomination, see “Paris,” *Arts Magazine*, April 1961, pp. 22–23; on the Beaux-Arts strike, see “Paris,” *Arts Magazine*, June 1959, p. 17.

Sargent's ties with that class which constituted "an astute aristocracy of finance rather than the more complacent aristocracy of blood" were perhaps too strong, and the swagger of his style corresponds not only to a painter's security, but to that sense of identification which precluded critical detachment. That critical detachment is responsible for the quality of the late, great works of Hals in Harlem and Velasquez in Madrid: there, the sense of observation is transformed into a vision which Sargent, for all his gifts and discernment, never quite attained.⁴⁷

One of her most perceptive intuitions, with which I'll conclude our tour, concerns the conditions of possibility of Pop Art, as well as the impossibility of a European audience's understanding it. This comes in a long and blistering review of the 1964 Venice Biennale, an institution she blasts, as she had done before, as "nothing more than an enormously effective market mechanism." After having addressed, as was mandatory, the outrage following the awarding of the painting first prize to Robert Rauschenberg (even the Vatican intervened!), she writes:

Criticism everywhere, of course, is having a really difficult time with Pop Art. The work has not, could not, satisfy existing aesthetic criteria; yet it has generated no new ones, and critics however sympathetic are unable to adjust to the situation; adjustment, for the critic, means, after all, the ability to formulate judgement! Then, of course, the artists—and Rauschenberg is obviously the most sophisticated and graceful public performer—have encouraged the critics' intellectual insecurity by refusing to take "intellectual responsibility" for their work—refusing, that is, to define their aims or their role, refusing the burden of social comment or criticism. Rauschenberg's positively Franciscan verbal celebration of the interest and beauty inherent in all things, his colonization of the "gap between art and life," is disturbing to even the most sympathetic and flexible of critics. Mr. Alloway, for example, in his introduction to the Pop show at the Guggenheim, was concerned with finding respectable historical sources or precedents, of however marginal interest, for his exhibiting artists.

Still, the artists are probably correct in refusing to assume responsibility. For the generating force of their work is ambivalence. Social criticism can never be more than latent in their work. The distance between the Pop Artist and middle-class prosperity has been qualified by his access to the general affluence, and the ambivalence of his particular attitude expresses itself in the register of "camp" and irony which constitute the entire expressive range of Pop Art. After all, it has emerged in a society whose aspiration to material well-being is on its way to general fulfillment. It seems to postulate a high level of consumption and, I'd say, of

47. "Paris Letter," *Art International*, April 1963, p. 72.

waste. It expresses the somewhat byzantine detachment of the highly prosperous. Spanish painting, although cosmopolitan indeed, has, thus far, not turned Pop. And possibly the inadequate industrialization, low level of consumption, relative inaccessibility of standard manufactured commodities, plain poverty, are responsible for an essentially “serious” or straightforward attitude to consumption itself and to its imagery, the source of Pop style. In an economy of scarcity, reinforced by the constraints of an authoritarian political structure, the margin for detachment, for moral and intellectual ambivalence, is narrow. The younger Spanish painters are still predominantly abstract or engaged in a figurative, straightforward art of protest. The extraordinarily prosperous and permissive climate of the '50s and '60s in urban America seems to have produced an art of satiety.

There are many other themes one could bring up from this vast corpus of writing of nearly a decade. One could trace in it the embryos of what was to come forth later, in a more elaborate form, in AM's work after her return to New York (her early fascination with prehistoric art, for example, or her interest in Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropology). Or trace the arc of her gradual disenchantment with the Greenbergian model of art criticism. I chose the opposite route: that of trying to capture the specificity of her “French” discourse. But this a bountiful mine, awaiting other explorers.