Can Art Survive Theory?

Holt Quentel from E to 3 and Back Again

Beth Wilson

Theory has played a major role in shaping both artistic practice and the dialogue surrounding it over the past twenty years or so, and has been especially noticeable in the art produced during the 1980s. Artists as different as Barbara Kruger, Joseph Kosuth, Jeff Koons, and Jenny Holzer have all made works dependent upon the apparatus of critique and analysis provided by thinkers and writers who themselves are not part of the art community. In the past decade, it has become almost essential in certain circles to quote an idea from an authority such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, or Baudrillard to substantiate an aesthetic strategy.

There are, of course, a number of questions, contradictions,

The chronological reversals inherent in Quentel's paintings call into question the direction of artistic succession.

conundrums, and doubts which arise when artistic production derives so much of its substance from such external sources. This article is an attempt to outline some of these difficulties by placing the relationship between (post-structuralist) theory and art-making in its context. The trouble with much of the critical literature in this area is that the writer, obviously enamored of both art and theory (generally from an academic viewpoint), becomes so wrapped up in the *jouissance* of the mental gymnastics required as to forget the earthy reality and implications of the cultural work at hand. As we seem finally to be moving beyond the modernist ethos of *l'art pour l'art*, let us begin to question, and to feel, the curses and blessings of the place in which we find ourselves, and to envision the future course that may arise from the accumulated wisdom and experience of our artists and thinkers. To do so, we must first turn to the current context.

Holt Quentel, Installation view, Stux Gallery, November 1988.

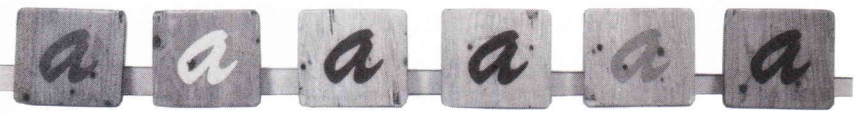
Holt Quentel, a twenty-seven-year-old artist whose work has made a significant impact over the past two years—both in one-person shows at Stux Gallery and in such Collins & Milazzo-curated exhibitions as *Media Post Media* and *Pre-Pop/Post-Appropriation*—provides a fascinating example of the potential pleasures and pitfalls associated with the calculated deployment of the conceptual machinery of postmodern theory in the production of art. She creates large, worn, tarpaulin-like canvases that hang free from nails pounded directly into the gallery wall or which are suspended from heavy frames made of jointed industrial pipes. Across the face of these crumpled, abused surfaces is painted the monumental, iconic image of a letter or number, simultaneously acting as a part of the fleshy, tactile material of the canvas and standing alone as an isolated signifier, implying the rest of the conceptual system from which it has been sundered. This combination of the aesthetic and the intellectual is a powerful statement of the cross-pollination of the traditional idea of artistic influence and more recent postmodern critiques of history and meaning.

As might be deduced from the list of thinkers mentioned earlier, one of the first problems one encounters in the *theory-driven*[1] art of the '80s is the applicability of ideas based on linguistics to the field of the visual. In this encounter, language has a decided advantage as the commonplace voice of the rational, the logical, the spoken and written reality that indelibly places its stamp on the beings it meets. Language defines, classifies, circumlocutes, and explicates. That which exceeds language, on the other hand, tends to be regarded as the unknowable, the irrational, the mystical.

The process of theorizing is itself rooted inextricably in the network of philosophical discourse, which has its own history, "acceptable" procedures, and standard proofs, all arising, in turn, from the analytical aspects of language. When theory is applied to the production of artworks (rather than merely providing a means of accounting for them), the locus of the primary aesthetic experience is wrenched away from the visual or haptic organization of the work and is placed squarely on the shoulders of the artist's (and viewer's) analytical faculty. Such "linguistic coloniza-

tion" of art hazards the loss of the physical, the intuitive, the sensations of the flesh, as they are strangled by the demanding tentacles of theoretical discourse and intellectual consistency. To understand these sets of values at work in the context of the (post-Enlightenment) European colonization of native peoples and their lands is to see the danger implicit in the admixture of linguistic theory and artistic practice.

But the French theorists also provide a way out of this dilemma. Derrida's critique of logocentrism should be read as an appeal to abandon the authoritarian discourse that philosophy has followed ever since Plato. Following Heidegger's writings on the "de-struction" of metaphysics, Derrida sees the hazard of linguistic colonization (within philosophy itself) as something which must be eternally defused, frustrated, subverted from within. For if "language is the house of Being,"[2] there must surely be a door to the outside, and a forest, a lake, or at least a garden beyond. By becoming too entrenched in the jargon of post-structuralism, post-Freudianism, and the other *au courant* post-isms, we risk never letting the sun shine on our faces, never smelling the air scrubbed fresh by a sudden rainstorm, never admitting



Holt Quentel, *6 Colours Small a (Primary/Secondary)*, 1989, Latex on wood, 13" × 15" each. Courtesy Stux Gallery.

that we, too, are engendered by the cycle of life and death stirring constantly beneath our feet. That realization is true *jouissance*.

So we are brought again to the relationship of word and image. It is absolutely essential to see the context for such an inquiry. Far too frequently, postmodern theory has been indicted for its political quietism, accused of either escapism (Barthes) or cynicism (Derrida). This defect lies not so much in the ideas of these particular writers as in the narrow, analytical readings given them by the "idea industry"—the academics and critics who continue to be bound by the presuppositions of propriety, meaning, and logical exposition that such thought frequently seeks to rend.

It is here that the analogy between theory and artistic practice may begin. The contemporary art world is shaped most forcefully by the economic and political forces that create its current ground for operation. The commodification running rampant in the marketplace of the gallery system has itself become fodder for artistic exploitation and ironical comment.[3] Burgeoning prices for old masters and important 20th-century works alike reflect the growing influence of business in the art world, with its vocabulary of "secondary market," investment, profit, and capital gains. The forces of capital reiterate the values and presumptions of the orthodox and the linear-thinking.

In many ways, creativity itself has been under siege in the past decade, both economically by the demands of the market (how few Hans Haackes it takes to saturate the market!) and politically by those who maintain the status quo (most graphically illustrated by the recent posturing in Congress over the NEA). The creation of works of art of vision in such an age requires tremendous courage. Given this situation, the overt political content of works by artists such as Haacke, Alfredo Jaar, Gran Fury, Martha Rosler, and others seems to be the only remedy. While these contributions are in and of themselves invaluable, such singular strategies themselves reveal a certain linearity of thought. A linearity which, if relied upon exclusively, serves to replicate the demands of authoritarian power.

One theoretical discourse which I have not yet mentioned may provide an adequate response to this problem: feminism. No, not "post-feminism," because the feminist struggle rages on without abatement as it has for the past century. This feminism must be understood to be about the spirit, not merely concerning the possessors of the physical structures of penis or vulva, but about the pride of place systematically given the masculine in our culture, the left-brain, logical, reasoned, analytical, objective values in our culture that ride roughshod over any and all other types of experience, including, and especially, the feminine.

Hélène Cixous, in *The Newly Born Woman*, draws an equivalence between logocentrism as she finds it in Derrida's critique and the phallocentrism of Western, white, male culture. She understands that to do justice to the feminine, we will need to understand it, and even more importantly, *experience* it in feminine terms, and avoid doing violence to it by placing it *a priori* into linear, masculine categories. In the phallocentric West, we have become accustomed to privileging certain ways of thinking and speaking, literally writing off the contributions made by others (Others) who represent different modes of thought, feeling, and action. At its base, Cixous contends, all writing is both masculine and feminine, so it is essential not to choke off either aspect from the start, but rather to allow each the freedom to assert itself in the way it best can. It is the artificial suppression of the feminine by the masculine which leads to the dangers manifested in the linguistic colonization of the image.

Cixous characterizes the feminine aspect of writing as it fails to satisfy the masculine rigor of logic:

At the present time, defining *a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue, for this practice will never be able to be* theorized, *enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. But it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallocentric system; it takes place and will take place somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. It will not let itself think except through subjects that break automatic functions, border runners never subjugated by any authority. But one can begin to speak. Begin to point out some effects, some elements of unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine Imaginary to the Real, in writing.*[4]

Not accidentally, many of the artists grappling with this territory are women, using an explicit post-structuralist/deconstructionist theoretical basis to drive their stylistic innovations and creative decisions. Barbara Kruger's repeated forays into the semiotic jungle of the signifier "woman" demonstrate the depth at which these cultural codings operate. Cindy Sherman's photographs show the chameleon-like changes of persona demanded by the gendered spaces of representation, both within the frame of the camera and outside it.

Holt Quentel provides a veritable case study of this new possibility for insinuating meaning into painting in an age dominated by theory. Thoroughly steeped in the continuing discourse(s) of postmodernism, her work exemplifies many of the features that can "save" art from theory, using language as metaphor without enslaving the image, creating a truly *theory-driven* style that escapes the eviscerating effects of arid academicism and the inevitable aporias of masculine logic by allowing the image to exceed the staid categories of reason on all sides, transmuting the picture plane into a flesh of iconic stature.

Quentel is working toward a new definition of style, one which shuttles the locus of experience significantly between the visual and analytical faculties. The transparent word becomes flesh, so to speak, and is then transformed back into mere writing. Last year, in her one-person show at Stux Gallery, Quentel displayed a series of works, all dominated by the single, monumental number "3." The mathematical significance of this figure is as essential to the works as the sheer voluptuousness of its curves. By recognizing the dialectical nature of this signifier and its signified as one which alternates the visual with the analytical, she permits both to work within their respective territories.

The influences mustered for this work are both artistic and intellectual, spanning a broad range of theory and practice. Adopting much of the critique of systems of language and power by Foucault, Baudrillard, and other post-structuralist thinkers, Quentel owes at least as much to specifically artistic predecessors. The monumental quirkiness of her canvases echoes the heroic, expressionistic gestures unleashed by Pollock or Kline, but perhaps the most singularly important source for her work is Jasper Johns.

The relation between Quentel and Johns is a problematic one, complicated by her involvement in postmodern discourses of engagement and identity. While replicating Johns's questioning stance regarding the assumed difference between image and object, Quentel's theoretical influences spin what formerly might have been a simple matter of historical influence into a web of appropriation, the direction of artistic succession, and an ironic attitude toward market capitalism.

Quentel has, in essence, re-created much of Johns's message on a larger scale, in a slightly different medium. Johns, however, has never entirely abandoned the picture plane as such: his works still play against the stretched form of a canvas that acts primarily as a passive receptor of the ideas inherent in the paint and/or objects applied to it. By not allowing the surface of the canvas to rest as a relatively simple support for the larger, more philosophical questions of the work, however, Quentel literally breaks through the very veil of painting that Johns's works have never divested.

It is important that these works, as large, free-hanging sheets of material, do not succumb to the folk-art tradition of quilt-making and domestic craft. Such associations would undermine the critique of masculine language as it stipulates, places, and defines. Rather, this formative language is fundamental to the task of recasting its oppositions, remapping the masculine onto the feminine (and vice versa) in such a way that the two are no longer necessarily at odds. The essentialist arguments of many women artists in the '70s, while well-meaning, failed to engage the continuing, very real structures of patriarchal power. In fact, the powerful poles of masculine/feminine are always already at work (and at play) in any human experience. The subversive power of deconstruction lies in its comprehension of the blind spots in the privileged discourse, the rifts and breaks where it can be turned back on itself, infiltrated, exceeded by the suppressed, colonized elements of speech and experience.

Quentel's work provides a virtual primer of the encounter between language and all that is not found in it. One recent work, *Rubber Stamp Letraset in Frame, #7*, fascinatingly rhymes the Rosetta Stone: a common sheet of Letraset Helvetica letters has been transformed into an odd rubber stamp, encased in an aging frame faced with cracked glass. Yet this is no ordinary rubber stamp, for the letters are immediately legible, not reversed, so that if this impossible rubber stamp ever were to be used, the entire sheet would print backwards, and all but the palindromic letters would contradict the left-to-right flow of normal (English) reading. Reversals such as this are common in Quentel's work, not merely on the level of simple character transpositions, but as conceptual upheavals in the midst of the "painted word."

The chronological reversals inherent in Quentel's paintings also call into question the direction of artistic succession. By adopting and then breaking down the terms of Johns's argument, she is in effect "de-structing" his work. History thus is pursued in reverse order—what comes after is in touch with what logically should have come before.

The primary sources for the images inscribed on these works are industrial. Sign painter's lettering captures the spontaneity of writing methodically, reducing the origin, the singular flow of ink from the hand-held pen or brush to a static, eminently reproducible (and therefore technologically manipulable), empty form. Quentel's appropriation of this dialect subjects this very masculine form to a particular *history*, adding the aura of a sense of place, of experience, to the otherwise impassive, unresponsive figure.

The bulk of the works are done on a large scale, on heavy canvas and/or rubber, grommetted and hung either from large tubular frames of steel or from nails driven directly in the wall. The fabric is abused, soiled, torn, patched and abused again, so that ultimately the works read as idiosyncratic truck tarpaulins which just happen to be hanging up, awaiting their next use. By laboriously working her materials in this way, Quentel invokes the unpredictable, always individualized process of aging and eventual decay. Once again, such experience taps into the feminine as Cixous has sung of it: "Her discourse, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectivized,' universalized; she involves her story in history."[5] We are accustomed to history being legible, chronological, a rational progression from point A to point B. Quentel shrugs off such a linear account, to ask what it would be like if all this were reversed, if history turned on itself and began to flow backward, then forward again, eddying in places and coursing out through others, just as memory of lived experience does. It is the story of "from E to 3 and back again."

Saussure's most basic statement of the relationship between word and image was the *signifier*. This signifier exists simultaneously with what it signifies, as the two sides of a sheet of paper

Holt Quentel, *Target Disc*, 1987, Latex, canvas, and rope, 120″ diameter. Courtesy Stux Gallery.

are both distinct and inseparable. In Quentel's work, this sheet of paper is worn through in spots, crumpled, flattened out, used, just as language itself is made to evolve, disintegrate, and rebirth itself with each new speaker, each new voice. Through the network of patches and tears, something of the world beyond language shines through, just as the iconic power of the single graphic image reasserts and eventually wins over the battlefield of the work.

Language is made possible by the very existence of silence. Simultaneously, silence is made possible by the existence of speech. This fundamental relationship is trampled, undermined, when logical thinking forges a path that is forgetful of the origin of the language that it uses merely to its own advantage. The silence is lost as the speech asserts itself as rightful heir to everything within its dominion—*everything within sight*. Vision, when it is reduced to sheer clarity, to lucidity, to the razor's-edge geometry of perspective that holds open some small chink of reality in perpetuity, against its will, ultimately does violence to that which will not be seen, at least not with the naked eye. The necessity of an inner vision becomes even more inescapable when the forces of domination and exploitation have upped the ante to threaten not only the death of the Other, but also (as a result) the death of all parties concerned.

The social and economic hegemony currently at work in the art world calls for a response couched in terms that will engage the power structure, perhaps without changing it immediately, but in ways that cause an eventual epiphany, literally an *ecstasy* (a standing outside of oneself) in those who encounter the work. This ecstasy is nothing but the feminine as it can be found in the very materiality of Quentel's work. As "all that is not language" shines through the gaps and salvaged strands of cloth, so (literally) does the generic white of the gallery wall. This ironical economic stance is heightened by the close relationship between this oeuvre and that of Jasper Johns, whose work has almost obscenely broken all records at auction, finding prices higher than for any other living artist. With a Johns-enhanced pedigree, Quentel's work relies, in part, on the marketability of this predecessor to appeal to collectors. Her earlier paintings, in fact, were packaged, for the buyer's convenience, in small duffel bags with the relevant information (title, artist's name, date) typed on a cardboard baggage tag attached to the drawstring. Such a gesture does not, of itself, provide any real alternative to the commodification process of the art market—but perhaps it *does* reveal a calculated sort of resistance, reflected in a moment of discomfort, the prospective buyer's temporary incomprehension at the idea that a valuable work of art ought to be found in such a homely, anticlimactic, unheroic container.

I am not arguing here that Quentel's work needs a much broader audience (she is already quite successful for such a young artist), or that her stylistic decisions and aesthetic dialect ought to be emulated or held up as a template for artistic practice. To do so would be to surrender to the mystique of authority, of originality. What I am saying is that Quentel has found for herself an artistic voice, one which deserves our attention and from which certain things may be learned. No appeal to authority can make such a voice any more or less truthful—here I have tried to provide some pointers along the way, to initiate a dialogue with the work that does not end with a mere logical proof of its merits or significance. Such absolute intellectual consistency is not found in nature, nor in the succession of moods, memories, intentions and paradoxes in which we find ourselves enmeshed on a daily basis.

There is a hidden desire, for most of us, that "theory," if it is pursued correctly, will create an intellectual apparatus to answer the bothersome questions for us: "What is art," "Why am I here," and so on. This hope for easy solutions further manifests itself as a need to perpetually fine-tune existing structures, just as astronomers continued to add exceptions and corollary rules to Ptolemy's system until Kepler saw that it no longer responded to the scientist's need for explanatory elegance. The significance of post-structuralism lies not so much in its systematic dismantling of the presumptions of modern philosophy or its critical "archeology" of the structures of knowledge and culture, as in the realization that the "perfect" system is no longer the solution.

No, neither Foucault nor Derrida nor Lyotard nor Cixous will save us from the many-headed hydra spawned by modern, Western, capitalist, technological society. Holt Quentel's work will not save the rain forests nor halt the economic disenfranchisement of minorities and women. But such art may be a significant cultural manifestation of our attempts to find *sorties*, as Cixous puts it: ways out. □

1. I am using this term in preference to the usual *theory-laden* to avoid the onerous connotations of that term. There are enough real difficulties to confront in the relationship between art and theory without adding the burden of prejudicial language.
2. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 193.
3. For example, a piece by Ashley Bickerton exhibited last year included both the decal insignia of his "corporate sponsors" and an LED panel registering the "current market value" of the work itself.
4. Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (trans. by Betsy Wing). (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), 92.
5. *Ibid.*

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