THE ARTIST AND THE INSTITUTION

A Thesis

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Scott Short is a painter whose work explores the necessary subjugation of the individual for the establishment of social order and its ever-present dangers. Social institutions have the power of the determination of legitimacy. Art maintains an existence as a social institution. Aesthetics and value are relative and subject to institutional determination. In society, as in art, values and norms are established that many perceive to be objective. This illusion of objectivity is a result of the power of these institutions to manipulate the presentation of their own image through the media. Short's paintings examine the nature of that illusion and the values it constructs.

What follows is a hypothetical interview that the artist has constructed in order to convey his interpretation of the undercurrent of content of his paintings.
THE ARTIST AND THE INSTITUTION

Q  - After Nineteen Eighty-eight, you started painting figuratively; was it out of a positive desire to paint figures or more out of a feeling that you couldn't develop abstraction further at that time?

SS  - Looking back, I can see that everything I've done is figurative in essence. Over the past few years I've undergone a process of distilling what I paint down to that essence. At that particular time it was anything but a positive attitude toward figuration. I felt that the abstractions that I had previously been working on were becoming mannered and empty. My work has always bounced between one extreme and another. The change has never been the result of any positive experience. I felt that those abstractions had no substance, or that any substance that they may have had was trivial. I turned to figuration because it has an immediacy of meaning. It's a recognizable hook to bait the viewer and hold interest. Figures have more tangible associations than abstractions. They have a more universal allure. Frank Stella once said that it was too easy to make friends by painting figures. In many ways he was right even though he was and is antagonistic toward figuration. The immediate recognizability and associative power of the figure is something that pure abstraction will never have.

Q  - So you were attracted to the immediacy of the figure?
SS - Immediacy is the nature of the American mentality. We are impatient. We are the originators of things like Minute Rice and Instant Breakfast. Something that we've seen in recent years is the commodification and legitimation of flash and fashion in art. I see a lot of romantic artists bemoaning the passing of what they consider true ethics in aesthetics. I don't think that there ever were any. We live in a Pop culture: who's in, who's out, who's hot, who's not. It's common knowledge that art isn't above this. Art is a business. Dealers don't become dealers out of altruism. They make money. Value becomes intertwined with price. As artists we are subjugated to the established institutions of art for legitimation. It's always been this way. I was reading the arts section of the local paper the other day and there was this article about a documentary on the art of the Third Reich and it started out making the statement that art was the antithesis of institutionalism. I thought it was terribly naive.

Q - You frequently appropriate images from Christianity and Nazism. That's an odd combination. What is their significance?

SS - I see them as reflecting the powers of selection and legitimation that art institutions have and that I, as an artist, am subjected to. They also reflect the black and white nature of mass value determination. They are institutional manifestations of what our culture has taught us to consider good and evil. Christianity embodies the subjugation of the individual to the objective morality of God as expressed through the institution of the church. Goebbels differentiated Nazism from other "philosophies" in the sense that its starting point was the community - not the individual. That subjection of the individual to a "higher" order determined by social institutions is the undercurrent that runs through everything that I make.
PLATE 1, THE KING OF HEAVAN (sic)
Q - How do you feel subjected to the institutions of art?

SS - It's not that I just feel subjugated; I think that all artists are whether they realize it or not. Nazism was the total control of the individual through social order, much the same as the power that the institution of Christianity has had in the past. It was the power of selection; who was good or bad, what was worthy or unworthy. The institutions of art have that same power, although not on such a total scale, but metaphorically they can determine whether an artist "lives" or "dies". In the political history of art, whether the institution is the state, the church, or the market, it has that power of determination. Good or viable art depends on what gets seen, what gets written about, what gets exposure, and where it gets exposed. When power systems change from one order to another, the determination of aesthetic values changes as well. Viable art has a definite relationship to the determiners of the legitimate.

Q - You don't feel that you have any power in the creative process?

SS - I have the power of making, but I don't feel that I or anyone else have total freedom in regards to aesthetic decisions.

Q - Why not?

SS - I'm free to choose, but only among a limited number of options bounded by the constraints that history and culture have predetermined as valid. All of my ideas, all of my paintings reflect my acceptance or denial of the contemporary discourse of art. My ideas are relative to what is around me, to the controls that I have been subjected to as an artist and an individual. I can't separate my development as an individual from the values that my culture has imposed upon me or those that I have accepted in reaction to that imposition. Foucault said that ideas never operate in isolation from institutions of power. I have yet
PLATE II, ALL YOUNG LOVERS
to experience anything that disapproves this. I am seeking forms of validity within a controlled environment. I've had to learn the parameters of acceptability determined by history and the contemporary discourse. That was the function of art school. Even if I reject those notions and attempt to make paintings that deny that discourse, their relevance is inseparable from the fact that that discourse exists. One aspect of my paintings, for example, is the questioning of the institutions that have attempted to establish a social order based on an objective morality. Without the institutions that have constructed that discourse, that aspect would be meaningless. It's relevance is bound within the existence of those institutions. If I attempt to counter one institution I embrace the institutions of a so-called counter-culture. With the conventionalization of subversion, even individualism has become an institution. The notion of the individual implies an awareness of the larger social group. The view of the artist as somehow separated from or above society is a lie.

Q: As an artist are you totally bound to social constructs?

SS: Art is a social construct. It's a social activity; it's making implies an "other", a perceiver. It's a form of communication, subject to the same implications as any other form of communication. It's no coincidence that communication and community have the same root. The role of the artist is the role of the communal. The artist exists as a social entity. Art is not the sacred domain of the individual. Art making is an interface between the individual and society. As much as it is the expression of an individual, it's about the culture and circumstances that made such expression possible. I'm paraphrasing Kosuth.

Q: It's interesting that you quote Kosuth. Hasn't he maintained an antagonistic attitude toward painting?
SS - I think that more painters should have that kind of attitude. Any artist should question his or her medium. I think that blind faith in the properties of any medium is the kiss of death for an artist.

Q - Your work has taken on many of the characteristics of Pop Art. Is that a result of your questions concerning painting and its relationship to culture?

SS - Definitely, I used to do these paintings that were all caught up in the flow of paint as a substance. The content of the images became mere vehicles for a poetry of materials. The images became aestheticized to the point that their original context was superseded by the paint. I was making pretty pictures and that was fine and good but not what I wanted. I didn't want the viewer to merely apprehend the beauty of an image but actively reflect on its nature. I wanted to make something that was socially relevant but these were more about being beautiful pictures.

Q - Are you saying that beauty can't be socially relevant?

SS - Not at all, I think that the paintings that I'm making now are socially relevant and quite elegant. Beauty has a number of manifestations. Take Francis Bacon as an example. His paintings are a superb combination of beauty and psychological terror. Anything can be beautiful. Anything can be aestheticized. Aesthetics are transitory. It's a question of balance. The aesthetics of those paintings overrode their subject matter. There wasn't a mesh of the depictive and connotative elements that I feel that I've been able to achieve since abandoning more painterly techniques.

Q - What specifically prompted you to change from more painterly methods to a Pop orientation.
SS - Well, I had been working from photocopies creating collages of images to set up compositions much in the manner of preliminary drawings. The thing was that the collages were more powerful than the paintings. They had an immediacy and directness that got obscured by the paint manipulation in the translation. I wanted that power in the paintings. In regards to the Pop orientation, I think that that's just a by-product of appropriation. The origins of direct media image appropriation are in Pop. Anyone who appropriates submits to a greater or lesser degree to the culture that produced what has been appropriated. It manipulates the artist's hand in the process of reconstruction. Appropriation leaves a visible residue of the institutions of representation within the given culture. Western culture is Pop culture, that residue is reminiscent of what Pop began to explore in the 1960's, the objectified, mass-produced image. If I'm to respond to my culture, which is my intention, the paintings need to pack a little culture baggage. Pop is probably the most American form of art that there is.

Q - Who would you cite from this period as influences?

SS - James Rosenquist and Gerhard Richter.

Q - Why those two as opposed to more known painters like Warhol, Johns, or Rauschenberg?

SS - They were atypical. With a few exceptions the others used and made a point of using very known images. They were more along the lines of making statements than asking questions. When I look at one of their works I feel like I'm being told what's going on. When I look at Richter or Rosenquist, I feel more like their asking me what's going on. The images that they used weren't so known that they closed down dialogue. They referred back to their culture
in a more multi-layered manner, more open to various interpretations. I think that Rosenquist did some of the best paintings of the 1980’s in the Sixties. Everything that David Salle has done stems straight from things like "I Love You With My Ford". I think anybody who uses image juxtaposition in painting owes a lot to Rosenquist, but also the history of image combination extends back much further than Rosenquist. In our century we have Eisenstein in film and Beckmann and Bacon among others in painting. Before this we have a wealth of triptychs and altar pieces from Bosch to the Italian crucifix painters all the way to the Egyptians and Assyrians who combined individual images to establish a collective meaning.

Q - What about Gerhard Richter? It's interesting that you speak of Pop as being the most American form of art and you cite one of its German practitioners as an influence.

SS - Richter's paintings weren't typical American Pop. The Pop form was altered through the cultural shift. He exploited the banality of common images in a different way. He made these black and white blurry paintings based on photographs. They were like snapshots. He didn't use universally known products or personalities or if he did it wasn't recognizable, and throughout the body of work there was this subtle death theme. They weren't overemotional. He let his subjects play themselves out. Their power is brought out from the inside rather than being imposed by his hand, or he's imposed it in a way that we would never consciously sense it. They were clean on the surface but implied a gritty underside; plus, I like his sense or lack of sense of composition. He referred to composition as when the subject is in the middle.

Q - Does this relate to the symmetry of your compositions?
SS - Not really, he is doing it for the purpose of being anti-aesthetic. I use symmetry as an imposition of order. Symmetry encompasses the notion of a center. I liken it to the social structures of identity created through separation and compartmentalization, like magazines in our culture. Every profession or interest has its own specialized periodical that deals with that subject and nothing else. The symmetrical separation of images establishes an order and sense of completion or totality. It's like a division of labor. Each image has a separate context, an individual function. When the images are placed in proximity to one another, each individual context combines and is subjected in the totality of the meaning to the larger combined context.

Q - You mentioned that Richter made monochromatic paintings from photographs and you're working along the same lines. What is the attraction of the photographic image?

SS - The photo-image has a power in that as a representational sign, its relationship to its referent is through verisimilitude. It's direct. It's the least abstract of any form of representation because it's a direct reflection of the physical world. Its relationship to reality has a primacy that other forms of representation don't. People perceive photographs as objective when they're really not. They have a false sense of authority and believability. My images, though, aren't photographic per se; they are quite intentionally degenerated through photocopying and painted in that manner. One of the ironies of photocopies, which I find applicable to the content of my paintings, is that we commonly call them "xeroxes", which as you know is derived from the name of a corporate institution. The xerox implies the notions of commodity, mass-production, and mass-media naturally as a by-product of the form. The nature of that particular
form of representation is totally dependent upon the technology of a commercial institution.

Q  -  But you don't always render the image in the xerox form.

SS  -  You're right, I don't. Starting with a perceived objective reality, any degree of distortion or manipulation is available to me. Sometimes I feel like an image needs to be rendered differently and that's what I do. I use the xerox form because it has so many connotations, like its nature as representation. It's self-conscious, self-reflexive. It exudes an awareness of itself as an image, an awareness that it exists to be seen.

Q  -  It's important that the image refer to itself?

SS  -  Definitely, representation is an institutionalized form of communication. Painting is an institution with a long tradition. It's like science. Science doesn't just explain and describe nature. It explains and describes nature as exposed to our senses and machines, our methods of questioning and processing information. Our methods are open for skepticism. This reflects my questioning of the medium I employ. I'm working within the institution of representation, specifically painting. I can't assume that what I do, because it's considered art, is somehow separate or above other institutions of representation within my culture, like the mass-media. If I am going to make statements about or question my culture, it's imperative that I do the same in regards to the processes and methods that I employ, because they are bound within the institutions of that culture. Representation is unreliable. As I said before, the images have a sense of objectivity that is perceived, not actual. That perception of objectivity is culturally relative and subject to question.

Q  -  Is this why you appropriate images?
SS - Yes, in part. It reflects the emphasis our culture places on the image and how truth or our perception of the truth is relative to the manipulation of the image's context. As a culture we love pictures; pictures that show us what we are, what we're not, and what we may think we want to be. We're bombarded with images every day. The images that I use exist simultaneously as and as reflections of the world around me. They are literally manifestations of the institutions of representation in our culture. I also like appropriation because I'm manipulating something outside myself. I don't have and don't like absolute control. The images maintain an existence and origin that is separate from myself, and I have a dialogue with them. There is a relationship of controls to which we must both submit in order to work. Neither maintains total control over the other at any time.

Q - Don't you, however, maintain the ultimate control of which images you use and the contexts you create through juxtaposition?

SS - When I choose to paint a specific image or a specific combination of images, I don't set out thinking that I'm going to paint about this or that particular idea. I have this constantly growing bank of images that I shuffle around and combine and consider the associations and recombine until it strikes me as right. I can't say exactly what that is either; I just know it when I see it. I am sensitive to the undercurrent of general content that runs through everything that I do, but in terms of specific content of any given painting, the dialogue between the images themselves determines as much as my decision making. Most of the time I begin to more fully understand them in the process of painting them.

Q - Do you perceive these paintings as narrative in any way?
SS  - I think that people automatically associate some form of narrative with any recognizable image. It has to do with the knowledge that the photo is just a remnant of one instant in a stream of time and that its subject has a past and future that extend beyond that instant. I've never consciously intended to create specific narratives or logical sequences that you can follow in a linear progression, but I think that there will always be someone who will read them that way. The paintings operate in a more abstract manner for me. I think of them more as tones and ideas and attitudes rather than stories. I like the sense that something important or something disturbing is going on, but you're not exactly sure what it is.

Q  - Your paintings, though, seem very logical.

SS  - Well, I consider them more analytical than logical. Every form or analysis has its inherent logic. There's a certain logic in regards to their arrangements and the relationships between the images, but I don't think the paintings have logical narratives. The nature of their representation has a logic to it in the sense of the perceived objectivity of the photographic form. They're not emotional. That for me reflects a bureaucratization of the spirit that's prevalent in our society. In our social relations, we're expected to give perfectly homogeneous performances at any given time. We're taught from a young age to put on false fronts; be polite, don't show your feelings. We're not supposed to cry or laugh too loud in public because it's not "normal". We subjugate ourselves to what we consider to be a "higher" social order. Subjugation of the individual is the basis of any form of social organization. The concept of social order in general has an affinity for uniforms. They serve to subvert the identity of the individual and bind him or her to an identifiable corporation, profession, economic class, or
PLATE IV, THINGS THAT BEGIN WITH P
attitude. The Punk movement, for all of its opposition to the "mainstream", merely created another uniform with which its adherents could identify themselves. The logic that you immediately perceive in the paintings is the subjugation of the traditional sense of the "artist's hand" to a more recognizably institutional form. The mechanical representation of the image links it to institutional sensibilities.

Q - In the meticulous nature of the images, the care of their rendering, one might almost sense a passionate commitment to that subjugation or those sensibilities.

SS - There's an ironic relationship between the images and the time and effort, and commitment it takes to make them. Am I committed to my own subjugation? I don't have a yes or no answer. As a painter, I'm committed to commenting upon institutions and determinations of society and culture and I choose to do so using forms that reflect them. I feel that the forms I use demand the precision that maintains their illusion of objectivity. It's ironic that creating an institutional image requires so much personal commitment, but then the creation of institutions requires the commitment of individuals.

Q - You speak of the determination of value by social institutions. How do the paintings reflect that?

SS - Institutional values have a tendency to be black and white: good and bad, us and them, center and margin, victim and victimizer; here is power - there is exploitation and resistance. Things are not more than they are portrayed to be in the media. It's easily digestible by a mass audience. I use media images and render them in black and white, or grey, or a basically monochromatic color scheme. Our culture has a tendency to see things in easily identifiable polarities. Through their power to disseminate these black and white "pictures", 
social institutions and their leaders are able to define themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture. Their values become objective, the norms by which all things are judged. Objective morality implies the existence of an ultimate truth that is known or knowable. In my paintings, the mode of representation and the institutional scale create a sense of monumental authority. The illusion of factuality of the images parallels the illusion of objectivity of the institutions.