POTENTIAL IMAGES: AMBIGUITY AND INDETERMINACY IN MODERN ART

DARIO GAMBONI

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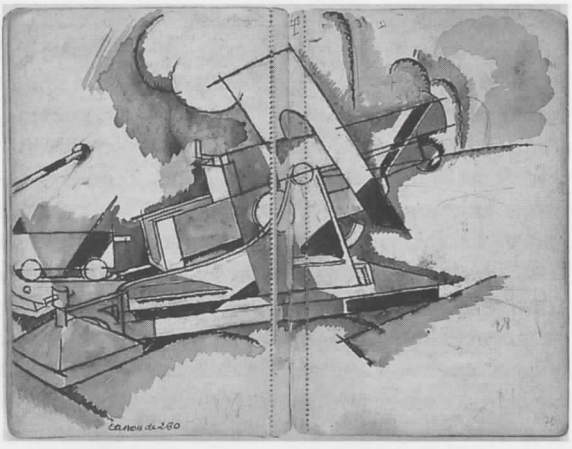
It is difficult for an artist working now to conceive of a time when a picture that admitted of multiple interpretations, depending upon the viewer's biases and baggage, was the exception rather than the rule. It is by now a commonplace that ambiguity regarding the artist's intent is accepted, expected and even cultivated; to the modern eye, that's what makes the art-viewing experience interesting. While the tradition of multiple readings, hidden imagery and other forms of visual play is centuries old, however, Dario Gamboni argues that the most subtle and subversive forms of polysemy come out of the Symbolist milieu, beginning particularly with Redon; that they are at their most conspicuous in the last decade of the nineteenth century; and by the time of the earliest experiments in Analytical Cubism, have become a regularly employed working method. Through this particular lens, Duchamp is the key twentieth-century practitioner; Kandinsky also looms large. Picasso relates to the analysis to the extent that he cedes some degree of autonomy to the viewer (which is rarely) but Matisse is of little consequence.

Leonardo, radical thinker, is unsurprisingly a pioneer here, in regard to both his well-known statement on the imaginative value of cloud formations and the stains found on walls, as well as the form many of his drawings take, overloaded as they often are with such a haze of reiteration, revision, and refinement of line as to resemble clouds or stains themselves. Certainly these effects are prevalent in informal works rather than finished oils, but as Gamboni points out, something of their spirit is present in the *sfumato* technique the artist perfected. (Indeed, the small number of oils Leonardo brought to finish suggests his real interest was in the inchoate.) Turner and Whistler are also key antecedents, as the effects of mist, dusk, reflection and watery shadow are among the conditions under which imaginative perception is encouraged.

Gamboni distinguishes among a taxonomy of visual ambiguity but the 'potential images' in which he is most keenly interested are those which, through a conscious effort by the artist, elude resolution by the viewer and thereby impart an independence to the work itself, promoting a collaboration, even complicity, between artist and viewer. For this interchange to occur, the viewer's capacity for imaginative perception and response must equal the artist's ability to construct an image that suggests a number of interpretive leads while remaining neutral. (The focus in the book is on pictorial forms, though other disciplines are dealt with.) Realist motifs such as foliage, bunches of flowers, rock formations and wallpaper become in the hands of the Nabis – or the Pont-Aven School – naturalistic props for potential images. The author observes the proliferation in late nineteenth-century France of various types of humorous popular imagery, all involving some form of visual ambiguity – puzzle – pictures with hidden images, invertible pictures, anthropomorphic landscapes, composite images and other forms of visual punning – and suggests that such a visually nimble culture would naturally enough be the one in or through which indeterminate visual meaning might be developed in painting.

Humour is closely allied with pleasure, and while Gamboni acknowledges the painful aspect of irresolution, the theme of pleasure in the same situation is more broadly developed. August Strindberg (whose amazingly prescient paintings

André Mare, *A Camouflaged 28 cm Gun*, 1917, watercolour sketch on a double spread from a notebook (Carnet 2), Private Collection.



and photographic work are now receiving their due appreciation) may provide the most vivid example of artist as functional equivalent of viewer. His engagement in what he is looking at, even if it happens to be one of his own paintings in progress, ceases at the point of its clarification. Metamorphosis and dematerialisation are everywhere in the discussion, but oddly scant mention is made of the use of intoxicants and narcotics among the Symbolists. It is established that among these artists and writers are some whose surrender of ego and authority is at times chemically assisted, but Michaux's experiments with mescaline in the 1950s are Gamboni's only reference.

In fairness, I must suppose the author is well-read on the subject and decided to leave it out for reasons of space. The book is overflowing with ideas as it is and, finding analogous developments, draws parallels in the fields of philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, literature, history and physics. (Gamboni may reject 'virtual' images as his book's title on the basis of the term's having been co-opted by the technology industry, but 'links' abound in his text. This befits his topic.) The subjective nature of reality is galvanised with the 'uncertainty principle' of Walter Heisenberg (1927), which acknowledges that the very observation of submicroscopic phenomena influences them to some extent, so that rather than recording objective reality the scientist records the results of experimental procedures. Even the genre of art criticism itself is transformed. Oscar Wilde, in his *Critic as Artist* of 1891, declares that the critic may use the art object as his own point of departure, elaborating and extending upon it at his whim.

Art history, like any other, is full of great anecdotes called into service. That confusion and disorientation are wellsprings of advancement in painting is here demonstrated by Kandinsky's account of his failure to recognise, in the half-light of evening, one of his expressionist 'improvisations' leaning on its side against the studio wall; it is a turning point in the artist's courting of visual fantasy and in the development of abstraction. Gamboni concludes his section on the 'illusion of presence' provided by photography and early cinema, and the potential of even those 'recording' media to obscure the objective image, with the less familiar story that camouflage ('the illusion of absence') was invented by a Cubist painter, André Mare, in the employ of the French artillery in the First World War. (The Royal Navy used Vorticists.) The page from Mare's notebook reproduced here is strikingly like a dissolving Cézanne landscape.

Robert Berlind has noted the suggestion of outward pressure in the huge bronze turds of William Tucker, which suggest to me an elaboration of Medardo Rosso's blurred, veiled forms. The works of both artists possess physically irrefutable boundaries which nevertheless suggest mutability. Paradoxically perhaps, whereas ambiguity is associated in painting with complexity, the illusion of boundlessness and the 'open' forms of Wolfflin's dichotomy, in sculpture it seems that less is more. Duchamp's 'readymades' engage the viewer in an almost unbearably intimate triangulation (with artist and object) and Brancusi and even Rodin become more allusive and indeterminate the more economical their formal means.

The argument is not abstract versus representational art, and the author prefers that his observations should not be interpreted as supporting the view of modernism as progressing inexorably toward abstraction. In fact, it is all about iconography – to the argument's detriment. Gamboni diminishes his own work by citing the writer who claims that among the brushy lumps in a Rothko painting of the late 1940s, an attentive observer should pick out a Madonna and Child motif and an Entombment. As to Pollock's use of a shorthand figuration to initiate the great canvases of the early 1950s, those motifs are buried, visually non-existent. The argument is engaging but the lack of visual support fails to clinch. Elsewhere, however, the author refutes this kind of analysis, as in Sidney Geist's dubious interpretation of Cézanne, wherein breasts and buttocks emerge from rocks and trees, and bathers spell out rebuses. Gamboni also doubts that in van Gogh's clouds and fields lurk buried images 'more or less conscious'. What is attractive about the argument is that it is rooted in the conscious attempt of the artist to appeal to the viewer's unconscious.

Until the publication of *Potential Images*, readers of English have had translations of only two of Gamboni's several published texts: *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (Reaktion Books and Yale University Press, 1997), which explores perhaps the most extreme form of viewer involvement, and 'Image to destroy, indestructable image', included in last year's *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (MIT Press). The references in the present volume run to 55 pages; the index of names lists 704. The author has adopted the helpful practice of incorporating citations of other commentator's texts into the body of his own. Mention must be made of Mark Treharne's excellent translation, which preserves shades of meaning from descending into murk. In the end, we are left with the appealing prospect that this important, accessible scholar's best work is yet to come. Others have discussed the radical jettisoning of the verbal in favour of the almost completely visual in the development of modern painting. Between the crystallised and the evaporated is Gamboni's territory: the endlessly, evocatively fluid.

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Walking from London's Waterloo Station towards Tate Modern the subject traverses a route that is itself an agenda of visual events and visual invitations to further immersion. The first underpass is painted in a vanilla-without-sunshine colour, smooth over the concrete; this is stencilled with a poetic text. In a hurry the subject does not read the words but registers the gist from the dappled colours of the letters. Emerging from here s/he faces the Imax, showing its own programme of bespoke films, such as *T-Rex: Back to the Cretaceous 3D* and *Pulse: A Stomp Odyssey*, enticing the subject to go deeper with generic actionadventuremys-