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THE QUALITY PROBLEM

BRUCE BOICE

If you wish to know how difficult it is to judge a work of art, please read three or four critics' judgments of one work of art: you will find three or four standards of appraisal. Because there is only one true judgment, the others are merely partially true, and therefore false. How is one to understand which is true and why it is true?

—Lionello Venturi

Judging art, or the problem of determining quality in art as it is practiced today in formalist and nonformalist criticism carries over from the connoisseurship of Ruskin, Berenson, and Fry. The notion of connoisseurship is founded on the belief that with enough experience one develops taste, the capacity to sense quality in art. Though the art differs, the process of rating Botticelli above Ghiriandaio, Olitski above Lichtenstein, or one Noland above another, such as saying "the best of Noland," is nevertheless the same process, that of evaluation based on intuiting quality. The problem with evaluation is not its ties to the past or its relevancy to contemporary art vis-à-vis art history; the problem in evaluation is that it is meaningless to question the truth of a judgment, as Venturi did, for a statement of value is not a statement of fact and thus can be neither true nor false. It is logically impossible to determine the truth of a judgment, and meaningless to speak of a judgment's being true, accurate, or false. The problem is not so much with the capacity to identify quality, as refuting this mysterious capacity is not vital to the question of what it means to say that an art work has quality. At issue is the relevance of evaluating art work in terms of quality, or in any other terms.

"Quality" is a thought-language conception which refers to no object or condition in the physical world. The word "stone" refers to a certain kind of object in the physical world; "quality" refers only to other thought-language conceptions, but that reference within thought-language is confused. "Quality" refers to nothing outside thought-language, but as an evaluation of art, "quality" suggests the intention of referring directly to the physical world and to a specific physical object. Saying that a painting by Marden, for instance, has quality has the intention of stating a fact about the painting. But if "quality" expresses such a fact, it is one that cannot be perceived, analyzed, or verified; understanding what the word "fact" means is difficult.

Expressing an evaluation, which "quality" connotes, cannot be expressing facts, but can only be interpreting them within the context of a given value structure. The surface of a Marden painting may be of interest, and it or its description can be considered as an expression of fact; but the evaluation of the surface as "good" or having a nature that signifies quality cannot be considered as an expression of fact. It is the evaluation

of a fact, and one that is meaningful only on a subjective level. One may place value on that kind of surface, but that evaluation cannot operate on an objective level because it is based on subjective values or grounds. Arguing the validity of subjective values is pointless, but debating attempts to make these subjective values objective is not. The objectification of subjective values, which is a description of the process of evaluating art, always results in arbitrariness. We can say the subjective placement of value is arbitrary, but saying that isn't particularly meaningful for it is to deny support beyond the subjective. To place value on one kind of painting surface, or on any given element of an art work, has meaning on a subjective level, but not as the basis for evaluation that has intentions or pretensions to objectivity, or as a statement of fact about the physical object.

To say that a Marden painting has quality or is a good painting is not different from saying that a stone has quality or is a good stone; in both cases, quality has been ascribed to a physical object. In one way the evaluation of a stone has meaning whereas there is no sense in which the evaluation, beyond a personal evaluation, of a Marden painting has meaning. The problem for the meaning of "quality" lies in the difference between one stone said to have quality and one said not to have quality, or similarly, in the difference between a good Marden painting and one said to be not so good. As the problem with the stones is given, there is no difference between the stone having quality and not having it, except that they are different by being two stones not one. The two Marden paintings are different because they are two paintings, but that difference does not necessarily constitute a hierarchical one. If the Marden paintings are *Tour II*, two vertical panels 8'x2', and *Tour III*, three vertical panels 8'x3', both of 1972, then clearly the two paintings are different in size, color, and in number of parts; and the experience of looking at each painting is, in spite of their basic similarities, different. In fact, the experience of looking at each painting is so different that they are almost incomparable. The fact of the paintings' differences, however, does not imply a superior-inferior relationship between them; difference means only difference. To say that *Tour III* is a better painting than *Tour II* is equivalent to saying that one stone is better than the other. This raises the question: better for what? This is not questioning why *Tour III* is better or what makes it better, but questioning what it is better for.

Evaluation makes no sense without the context of a purpose. A stone of a given size, shape, and weight might be good for throwing as a weapon or to sharpen one's aim, but the same stone is then not good for anchoring a tarpaulin against the wind. But to say that a stone has quality or is a good stone without the context of a purpose on which to base the evaluation is to say something that has no meaning. To say that a stone is good in itself means only that all stones and all physical objects are in the same way good in themselves, which is to say nothing particular about that stone. If the evaluation of a stone has meaning only within the context of a purpose, then similarly, the evaluation of a painting has meaning only within the context of a purpose. In both cases, what is at issue is the evaluation of physical objects. The word "quality," as an evaluation, refers to the thought-language concept of purpose. What, then, is the

purpose that could be relevant to Marden's paintings, or, if art has a purpose which can support evaluation, what is the nature of that purpose?

Evaluation in art, by its intention of expressing value as a fact, ignores purpose or the absence of purpose in art; for, whatever vague purpose art has, like all purposes and thought-language concepts, it must involve the participant in thought-language, the speaker. If art has a purpose, that purpose is not contained within the art work itself, but within the experience of the art work, that is, within someone's experience of the art work. When a stone is evaluated within the context of a purpose, that purpose is not somehow the stone's purpose; what is meant by the stone's having a purpose is that someone has a purpose for the stone. Similarly, an art work has a purpose only in the sense that someone has a purpose for it. Generally, the purpose that we have, for art work is the enrichment of our experience. But when the quality of an art work is contingent on experience, on someone's experience or response to it, the ascription of quality is no longer an evaluation of the art work as an entity in itself, but an evaluation of the experience of the art work. However, if the purpose of art can be located in the experience of art work, then the experience of the art work and the art work's capacity to enrich experience is what is significant; the evaluation of that experience becomes irrelevant to the experience. The question relevant to Marden's paintings is not whether they have quality or whether *Tour III* is better than *Tour II*; the questions relevant to Marden's paintings are: what it is like to look at Marden's paintings; what is it like to look at *Tour III* and *Tour II*; what is the difference in the experience of the two paintings and what causes it? If the experience of Marden's paintings interests me, it is irrelevant to the experience and to the paintings to evaluate the paintings or my experience of them. Saying that the paintings have quality on the basis of their capacity to interest me says only that the paintings interest me; the word "quality" says nothing about the paintings or my experience of them, and adds nothing to the fact of my interest, which is to say that the ascription of quality is superfluous. My ascription of quality, in this case, indicates only that I feel a need to say that what interests me must be good, which is the need to objectify a subjective situation.

The word "interest" is potentially nothing more than a description of the relationship between an art work and the speaker. "Interest" generally acknowledges the presence of the speaker and indicates a subjective situation. To say that Marden's paintings interest me does not say that they do or should interest anyone else; it says only that the experience of his paintings is one that interests me. Clearly, when I have said that Marden's paintings interest me, I have said almost nothing about the paintings, and certainly I have said nothing specific about them; all that I have said is that the paintings have engaged my thought, that the paintings have challenged and puzzled me, and have presented a situation that I have found difficult to grasp. I have given no indication of the nature of my interest or of the nature of his paintings; giving such indication amounts to my saying what about the paintings interests me. With Marden's paintings, this happens to be the difficult part and a significant aspect of my interest. One of the most interesting aspects of Marden's work is the virtual impossibility of spelling out what the interest is. The same could be said of Ryman's paintings, which,

beyond concerns with process, seem to exist, like Marden's, so blatantly, so bluntly as to become almost instances of brute fact outside of perceptual or cultural associations. Why I should find this experience so interesting is difficult to explain except that the experience is remarkably similar to that of trying to grasp reality or what is the case. My interest in this experience, however, does not necessarily exclude an interest in other kinds of experiences or the experiences of other kinds of work. "Interest," as I have presented an instance of it, is not meant to be equated with that instance. It is only to show that when interest does describe the relationship between the speaker and an art work, that "quality" or evaluation is irrelevant to the relationship and to the experience. When Judd wrote, "All a work needs is to be interesting," what was meant is not so much that interest is enough, but that interest is all that is possible. But, of course, words get used in different ways.

The fifth statement in a recently published set of five statements by Mel Bochner reads: "for me, all a work needs is to be uninteresting. (The condition of my art is its avoidance of attributed meanings.)" In this rather curious set of statements, Bochner seems to equate "uninteresting" with "the avoidance of attributed meanings"¹ and therefore theoretically, "interesting" with "attributed meanings." The problem is not with the parenthetical statement but with the statement without parentheses and with the equation of the terms of both statements. Beyond being an obvious parody of Judd's remark, the statement, "for me, all a work needs is to be uninteresting" is, in terms of a meaning, a contradiction. For what the statement says is that Bochner is interested in the uninteresting; but when this statement is true, the uninteresting is no longer uninteresting, for if one is interested in the uninteresting, then the uninteresting is in fact interesting. The only way in which Bochner's statement makes sense is to interpret "uninteresting" as meaning "that which is normally thought to be uninteresting" or "that which avoids attributed meanings." In the equation of the terms of the two statements, then, it is not that Bochner equates "interesting" with "attributed meanings," as much as he comments on the fact that others seem to have made that equation. It is possible even that Bochner's statements are a direct response to Robert Pincus-Witten's essay on Bruce Nauman published last winter.² Two separate passages from that essay suggest Bochner's response.

Duchamp demonstrates, as no other artist does, that the ultimate basis of meaning in art is linguistic and not formal, whatever the formal properties of his work may possess. . . . he (Nauman) has now abandoned Duchamp and in leaving Duchamp, has abandoned his claim to being interesting, at least for the moment.

What Pincus-Witten says in these two passages is that when Nauman abandons meaning in his art, meaning which ultimately is linguistic, he ceases to be interesting. In

¹ Mel Bochner, "Parenthetical Reflections on Five Earlier Statements," *Arts Magazine*, June, 1972, p. 38.

² Robert Pincus-Witten, "Bruce Nauman: Another Kind of Reasoning," *Artforum*, February, 1972, p. 31.

reference to Pincus-Witten's essay, Bochner's proposition becomes: if meaning or specific meaning is a necessary condition to the interesting, then a work needs to be uninteresting. The Nauman essay in combination with an earlier essay on Bochner, also by Pincus-Witten,³ essentially divides conceptualism into two camps, ontological and epistemological, and puts Nauman in the former and Bochner in the latter. Bochner, by his statements, refutes his membership in the latter camp which is probably partly a refusal to be categorized, but more importantly, he denies the value of attributed meaning in linguistic terms, that is, in specific meaning that can be spelled out, to his art. Bochner's relation to the two camps, if Pincus-Witten's division is meaningful, would then be somewhere between them rather than in one of them.

Pincus-Witten's propositions raise another problem which is the meaning of "interesting." In his usage of "interesting" in reference to Duchamp and Nauman, "interesting" comes very close to objectification or to being simply a substitutional equivalent of "quality." And Bochner's statements hint at this as well by saying in effect, "if this is what interesting means, then I want my work to be uninteresting." For Pincus-Witten has, in this case, given "interesting" a specific meaning — that which can be traced from Duchamp or those works whose meanings are linguistic and therefore can be specifically spelled out. What this amounts to is the establishment of criteria for interest which in turn gives "interest" the same meaning as "quality." The criteria for interest, when "interest" is used in this way, are as arbitrary as are criteria for quality or evaluation in general. By giving a specific meaning to "interesting" — which was accomplished not by saying that work traced from Duchamp is interesting, but by saying that work not traced from Duchamp is not interesting — Pincus-Witten changes the meaning of "interesting" from a description of mental activity or engagement to the specific subject for mental engagement.

When I say that "quality" as an evaluation of art has no meaning, what I am saying is that it is an evaluation based on subjective values without the context of a purpose. The evaluation of a stone has meaning in that I can demonstrate what "good stone" means within the context of a given purpose. For example, when I point to a "good stone," I can demonstrate what that means by throwing it at a target as accurately as my skill allows; a "bad stone" in this context means a stone that by its size, shape, or weight inhibits my throwing it at a target as accurately as my skill allows; the extreme of a "bad stone" in this context is one that I can not even lift. Within the context of the purpose of throwing, this is what an evaluation of a stone means, and meaning here is demonstrable. But to say that "the ultimate basis of meaning in art is linguistic" seems to be stretching the scope of linguistic application. Clearly the ultimate basis of meaning in art that can be expressed in language is linguistic. The only meaning that language can express is linguistic, but this is not to say that what cannot be expressed

³ Robert Pincus-Witten, "Bochner at MOMA: Three Ideas and Seven Procedures," *Artforum*, December, 1971. It should be said that while Pincus-Witten uses these categories, he does not insist on them or even claim that they are viable. He uses them as generalizations and, generally, he makes it clear that that's the way he uses them.

in language does not have meaning. The problem for art work in which the basis of meaning is linguistic is that its meaning can be expressed in language and once this is accomplished, the intellect has lost its challenge and looks elsewhere for adventure. What cannot be expressed in language is the meaning of the existence of linguistic meaning, but now the question has shifted to another linguistic level, that of the meaning of expressing meaning. The meaning of the existence of anything is something that language can never express. This is essentially the problem that Bochner's statements and work seem to aim at, and is generally the problem that must be confronted in the paintings of Marden and Ryman as well as in the work of scores of other artists. The question of quality here is simply irrelevant not to say trivial.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Artforum, Vol. XI, #6, (February, 1973) p. 9.

[See the Walter Darby Bannard essay referred to in the following texts at the end of this document]

Sirs:

In my essay "Quality, Style and Olitski," *Artforum*, October, 1972, I wrote about a painting I understood to be titled *Larro 17*. The actual title is *Beauty Mouth 5*. The reproduction preceding the essay is titled *Beauty Moth 5*. Whatever the title, the painting reproduced is the one I wrote about.

Following my essay is "The Quality Problem" by Bruce Boice. Mr. Boice writes clearly and has enough nerve to move on the plane of the intellect. These are rare virtues in art writing. But the piece is riddled with faults of logic, and finally he is driven down below his level to discuss, as if it mattered, some aspects of the current epidemic of neo-Dada twaddle. His central thesis is interesting: "quality" as an evaluation of art has no meaning because "it is an evaluation based on subjective values without the context of a purpose." Mr. Boice points out that a thing cannot be good unless it is good for something, and gives as an example a stone which, because it has certain characteristics, is good for and can be shown to be good for throwing.

But when he says that value judgments of art are meaningless because we do not know what is the purpose of art he's in trouble, because he cannot demonstrate that judgments of quality are made "without the context of a purpose" but only that the purpose is unspecified. If art does have a purpose, or use, as I think it does, and as Mr. Boice allows that it does, and if that purpose or use remains unspecified, as I think it will, then judgments of quality are not meaningless but more-or-less unverifiable. That's an important difference. It shows not that judgments of value mean nothing but that they may or may not be right, and that they must be decided in other ways.

Art is very important to us. It has something, does something or stands for something which all civilizations revere. Just as Mr. Boice's stone can be a good stone or a bad stone according to its conformity to a particular use, so art can be good or bad according to the verbally obscure use humanity has for it. The standards may not be written down, but they are "there," in human experience, or wherever. Judgments of quality of new art are based on a larger perception of art's "purpose," and are attempts to say what will persistently "enrich our experience," in Mr. Boice's words. Sooner or later, we separate the good from the mediocre; Giotto, Rembrandt, and Matisse hold up and others fall away, and there is general agreement. Their art has "quality." You can pick your own way to say it, but you cannot avoid it.

The function of art writing is to point to art and put it across, or to make the process of getting what art has for us easier or better or more fun. It would be interesting to see Mr. Boice apply his intelligence in this way, and stay clear of the deadly word games now in vogue.

Boice replied:

Quality ascription is not meaningless in a strict sense, but its meaning is confused, and it does not have meaning on the level for which it is intended. If I write "Darby Bannard is a good person," that statement is not meaningless in that we can understand a meaning for it, i.e., "I like, respect, approve of Darby Bannard," but the statement is meaningless as an assertion of fact about the person Darby Bannard; it has meaning only as an assertion of something about the speaker, in this case, me. In the same way, to ascribe quality to a painting by Olitski, Giotto, or Matisse, is only to signal one's approval of their paintings. However many people also approve of their paintings does not constitute quality as a fact about the paintings by consensus; it only signifies that so many people approve of the same thing. Not being able to demonstrate that something does not exist is not a matter of faulty logic. The problem is not whether we have a purpose for art (we do and it can be specified); the problem is whether art's purpose can support quality ascription and whether such ascriptions are, in fact, made within the context of art's purpose. Bannard acknowledges as much by speaking of the vague conception of art's purpose which must remain unspecified, while in his essay, he only puts off for another time "the ticklish job of pinning down differences of quality," as if such subtle distinctions could be made on the basis of so vague a conception. To come down from the linguistic heights for a moment, I will say that the mythology of quality and a tradition of quality is a lot of bullshit; what interests Bannard therefore has quality, what does not interest Bannard becomes thereby "neo-Dada twaddle." It's as simple as that. Matisse's "holding up" is supported by "general agreement," but if general agreement shows something about Matisse, doesn't so much general agreement as to constitute a "current epidemic" then support what is called "neo-Dada twaddle"?

— Bruce Boice, Hartford, Connecticut

Artforum, Vol. XI, #6, (February, 1973) p. 73 - 75.

AFTER THE QUALITY PROBLEM

BRUCE BOICE

While quality ascriptions are meaningful only as emotive expressions in response to an artwork, they say very little about that response of the speaker to the art work. And this holds as well for expressions, such as "the painting is good," "I like the painting," or "the painting is interesting." Such expressions are no more than signals of approval accomplished just as effectively by the Roman signals "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down"; but except as signals of approval these expressions say nothing, and as such, they hardly constitute discussion about art work or anyone's response to it. To insist that an artwork is interesting is not different from insisting on an art work's quality; for being interesting can no more constitute a characteristic of an artwork than can being quality; and the insistence on either is the confusion of response with the assertion of fact. However, implicit in the expression "the painting is interesting" is the subjective "interesting to me," and the notion that there is something to explore, discuss, and think about. It is by saying what about the art work is interesting that we begin to say something about the art work and our response to it, and what thoughts are entailed by the artwork and our response. Presumably, speaking about art work, the response to art work, and the thoughts entailed by the artwork and response are what criticism and discussing art in general want to accomplish; it is with this in mind that the notion of interest seems a useful one in discussing art.

The reason it seems odd to speak of Bochner's pebbles or masking tape in terms of quality is not different from the reason that speaking of Manet's paintings in terms of quality is problematic. If quality ascriptions are emotive expressions, then they cannot assert facts about art work regardless of what art work quality is ascribed to. The quality problem is not peculiar to criticism of contemporary art. It may seem that in arguing against quality ascriptions through linguistic conceptions rather than art concepts, some sort of linguistic trickery has been used to show as false what we all know to be true. But to ascribe quality is to use language, and the expressions in a language have meaning only as they are consistent with the structure of that language. All the argument has attempted to show is that quality ascriptions say nothing about art work and nothing about the speaker's response to artwork beyond signaling approval. This bit of linguistic reality is not in conflict with what might be called "everyday reality," or what we intuitively sense to be the case; for regardless of linguistic analysis, it is obvious that to say an art work is good isn't to say much of anything. When we ask about Larry Poons' new paintings and are told only that all or some of them have quality, we will generally sense that we haven't been told much, and that what we have been told hasn't helped us to understand or think about the paintings; further, we might even suspect that the quality ascription in such a case has been used as a dodge. This sensing that the quality ascription hasn't said much is consistent with the linguistic

analysis. In this light, we can question whether quality ascriptions have contributed anything to the criticism in which they occur. Here we might consider going through art journals and crossing out all quality ascriptions and see what is left of individual essays; if in a given essay nothing remained after this crossing out, we might assume with some justification that the writer had nothing to say beyond signaling approval or disapproval. But certainly this would be a rare case. I think the results of such crossing out would show a surprising amount of thought, analysis, and interesting discussion beneath all the camouflage of quality ascription. Certainly the crossing out procedure is a simplistic approach to the problem. However, it is relevant to consider what possibilities remain open to criticism once it is understood that the quality of an art work cannot be meaningfully established, and once we cross out, metaphorically, the concept of quality ascription as a useful concept of art criticism.

THE END OF QUALITY ASCRIPTION MEANS NEITHER THE END OF ART NOR THE END OF ART CRITICISM

Within the assumption that evaluation is central to art criticism is the presupposition that meaningful evaluation is possible. When it is shown that the quality of an art work cannot be meaningfully established, then the assumption of the central role of evaluation in criticism crumbles. If evaluation is not considered as central to the function of criticism, we might describe criticism's function as explicative, analytic, and speculative rather than judgmental. It should be fairly obvious, even without the linguistic case against evaluation, that the judgmental role which criticism has assumed over artists and art work is both presumptuous and ridiculous. However, in describing criticism's role as explicative, analytic, and speculative, I do not intend a restriction of criticism to what could be said to conform to those rather vague adjectives; nor do I intend a notion of the artist presenting a work which the critic will then explain to a wider public or somehow to the artist. In this conception of it, the point of criticism is not educational, the point of criticism is to stimulate thought about art work and art in general. And in this sense, criticism functions in a way much closer to art's function, the difference being quite simply: the artist acts, the critic reacts. But here, certain words raise confusion that must be cleared up. I am not interested in putting criticism on a level with art or critics on a level with artists in the same way that I have no interest in hierarchal levels of any kind; artists present art and critics write criticism and both can be said to have the same general function, that of stimulating thought. That criticism stands in the relation to art of reaction to action does not imply a political, regressive, or inferior connotation for the word "reaction"; the artist initiates and the critic responds.

This conception of the general common function of art and criticism entails the notion of interest; for in saying that art and criticism function when they stimulate thought, the raising of interesting questions is implied. And here, we encounter a psychological objection to the elimination of quality ascription. There are no rules or criteria for determining interest or for determining when thought has been stimulated; the subjective connotation of the word "interest" prohibits the formation of any such rules in any meaningful sense. What I might find highly interesting, another person might find of

no interest; this holds for criticism, art work, or anything else. The question immediately arises: How does one determine whether what is said is interesting if there can be no criteria for such a determination? But the question is not properly formulated, for one cannot make such a determination. When interest is aroused, we can only determine that something is interesting by noticing that we are interested in it; the questions of how we determine when we are in a state of being interested, such as “what does being interested feel like?”, or “how does one distinguish that feeling from other feelings?” may be interesting questions, but are not answerable. The question is not how interest can be determined, the question is rather “am I interested?” If the art work or criticism does interest us, determining that the work or criticism is somehow officially interesting is irrelevant to the fact of our interest. When by some obscure means, an art work or essay is determined to be interesting in itself, then “interesting” is used as an evaluation, and such a usage has all the problems of quality ascription. The fact that we cannot establish that a given work is interesting seems to be psychologically disturbing or at least, not satisfying; for in this conception, nothing is settled or thought to be final, everything is indefinite. When quality ascription is eliminated, a replacement is sought; but what is often sought is not a new way of discussing art, but a replacement for the apparent definiteness of quality ascription. For the gap left by the removal of quality ascription is just such a psychological gap. And in this light, evaluation can be seen as contributing nothing to the content of criticism and as being unnecessary to it and to the discussion of art in general. Whether quality ascription is psychologically necessary is another kind of question and one outside the scope of this argument; but this question, too, can probably only be answered on a personal basis.

Darby Bannard’s long discussion of quality in art and his justification of Olitski’s paintings in terms of quality are obviously relevant to the whole of what Bannard wants to say in “Quality, Style, and Olitski,” but the discussion of quality in art and in reference to Olitski’s art is unnecessary and irrelevant to the discussion of Olitski’s paintings.¹ Bannard has a strong response to Olitski’s work, and he has a lot to say about the paintings and their relation to painting issues in general and to the work of Louis and Pollock in particular. However, his insistence on how good Olitski’s paintings are contributes nothing to his discussion of the paintings or of painting in general. When quality ascription is eliminated from this essay, what is eliminated is Bannard’s need to say that what he responds strongly to is therefore good, but the discussion of Olitski’s paintings and the articulation of Bannard’s response to them are not thereby eliminated. These psychological questions of need are relevant here only to point out that this is what Bannard’s insistence on Olitski’s being “our best painter” amounts to. This kind of ranking of artists, this deciding that an artist is the best “at least now,” and someone else is perhaps second or third best, cannot be justified; the presenting of such a rating system, while perhaps personally satisfying, is irrelevant to the discussion of art work and art ideas.

¹ Walter D. Bannard, “Quality, Style and Olitski,” *Artforum*, October, 1972.

In saying that evaluation is irrelevant to the discussion of art work or art ideas, I do not want to say that evaluation should be declared illegitimate or necessarily actually eliminated from criticism. My interest in speaking of a metaphorical elimination of quality ascription is only to show that evaluation is not only not central to criticism, but is totally unnecessary to it. It is interesting to notice that Leo Steinberg in a recent lengthy essay on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*² never ascribes quality to the painting or bothers to suggest that it is a good painting. Steinberg analyzes the painting not as an early example of form over content which turned into formalism nor as the painting through which Cubism became a fact in art; he discusses it as a painting and speculates on its evolution from conception through drawings to the finished product. Steinberg does compare the Picasso to other brothel paintings and to Cézanne's bather paintings, but the comparison is never evaluative. What can be inferred from the fact of Steinberg's analysis is not that he becomes an authority on my side of the argument, but that quality ascriptions and evaluation in general are not necessary to critical or historical writing about art.

When the meaning of quality ascription is questioned, the conventional concepts of art history and those artists singled out as "great" come into question as well. The question is not so much with what has been singled out as "great" from the huge inventory of art work, as with how it got singled out; that is, I don't question the status of the famous names of art history, but I question whether the method by which they have been accorded that status has been properly described. If one questions the meaning of quality ascriptions, then one questions whether Manet, for instance, was singled out because his paintings inherently have quality or are better in themselves than Couture's or Cabanel's, or whether Manet's paintings have been singled out on some other basis. The Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf provides a curious illustration for these questions. For this museum exhibits not so much the history of German art, but the history of Western painting as painted by German painters, mostly local Düsseldorfers. Many of the famous names of art history are represented in the museum, but only by proxy. One sees Rembrandts, Cézannes, Van Goghs, Manets, of course Monets, Matisses, and even a Berthe Morisot, all by Düsseldorfers more or less contemporary with the artists they followed. But it seems odd to say that these paintings in themselves have less quality than the paintings from which they derived. It's not that a Manet painting is somehow better in itself than the Düsseldorfer Manet, but that the Düsseldorfer artist didn't invent anything or contribute anything significantly different from what already existed as art art, but adopted someone else's ideas completely. Here we can think of a hypothetical problem: as Darby Bannard evaluates all the recent Olitski paintings to be of equally high quality, putting off "the ticklish job of pinning down differences in quality," we can use Olitski's *Radical Love 2* as an example; suppose an artist X made a copy of *Radical Love 2* so like the original that Olitski himself could not distinguish his own painting from the copy. Surely, then, if the Olitski is of high quality, its exact duplicate is of high quality also; since we weren't sure which was which, it would be utter nonsense to say whichever painting is really the Olitski has more quality,

² Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel, Part 1," Art News, September, 1972.

for this is to ascribe quality to a name rather than a painting. We could not admit a difference in quality between the two paintings, but we would want to say there was a difference between what Olitski accomplished and what X accomplished in making the paintings; Olitski, after all, developed the ideas and came up with the painting regardless of its quality, while X only copied or repeated what Olitski had already accomplished. But we are now no longer talking about quality, we are talking about innovation.

The general historical interest in artists normally thought to be minor or obscure, which is undoubtedly the result of historians having exhausted what can be said of the famous names, raises these same questions of quality as a singling-out methodology, perhaps unintentionally. But questions raised unintentionally are questions raised nevertheless. And the question is essentially: on what basis can Courbet be said to have more quality than Bierstadt or Böcklin? In looking at the Bierstadt exhibition at the Whitney, one can question Bierstadt's conception of painting as a Romantic depiction of an exotic paradise peopled with noble savages, but one can also question Courbet's conception of Realism which depicts naked women strolling through the forests and the palette-knifed grandeur of nature which is not less Romantic in a different way. But how is one to compare these painters in terms of quality without lapsing into fiction or arbitrariness? There are basically two ways of looking at a painting by Courbet or Bierstadt: one can look at the painting as it stands within a historical context, or one can try to look at the painting as a painting without reference to its historical context. To look at a painting in terms of its standing in a historical context is to consider what is not in the painting as well as what is in the painting; it is to consider the painting in terms of what preceded, occurred contemporaneously, and followed it. What I am suggesting is that the famous names of art history have been singled out on the basis of this historical contextual relation rather than on a basis of quality. The artists singled out as important made art which is seen to be different in some significant respect from what preceded and occurred contemporaneously with their own work; and often the respect in which the artist's work was different affected what followed. The artists considered to be historically important either deflected the course of art history, in Geldzahler's often discredited terms, or their innovation took the form of going further with an existent set of ideas than had anyone else. This is not necessarily to replace quality with innovation as the value that "counts," and it is certainly not to say that what has quality has quality by being innovative; it is only to suggest a different description for the basis on which the famous names of art history have been singled out.

The notion of deflecting the course of art through innovation does not necessarily entail the existence of followers or that an artist's importance is signified by the number of followers he or she has; but significant innovation does often mean the opening of possibilities for new art, which entails followers only in a broad sense, i.e., Leger and Mondrian as followers of Cubism. But Leger and Mondrian do not stand in the same relation to the Cubism of Picasso as the Düsseldorf Manet stands to Manet. The innovation of Cubism opened so many possibilities for new art that what followed was not simply the eventual modifications of Leger and Mondrian, but a swarm of

movements exploring different aspects of the possibilities. What is meant by “freeing form from content” or freeing any aspect of art from traditional usage is that possibilities for new usages and new art are thrown open. To say that *Les Femmes d’Alger* was an early example of “freeing form from content” is not to come into conflict with Steinberg’s analysis; for saying the Picasso painting was an instance of “freeing form from content” says that people other than Picasso saw that as the painting’s significance whether Picasso saw it that way or not; Steinberg’s assertion is that “freeing form from content” was not the significance of the painting for Picasso. The importance of the painting in a historical context is its significance in terms of opening the possibilities for new art, and not in some inherent quality the painting mysteriously possesses.

Related to the quality problem is the common assumption that, “time will tell”; implicit in this assumption is the notion that we, in 1973, are better able to “judge” Manet’s paintings than were the people of 100 years ago. As the assumption goes, we have a distance, a detachment from the problems and anxieties contemporary with Manet which renders our “judgment” more meaningful, valid, and somehow final. And the “time will tell” assumption is used on our own time and art, propagating the myth that people 50 years hence will have a clearer view of our art than we do ourselves and will therefore be in a better position to “judge” it. Certainly a retrospective position has an advantage in placing art work in a historical context; and certainly we cannot in these terms say what of our art will be the source of the art ten years from now without knowing what the art of ten years from now will be. But placing art work in a historical context is not judging it, and it makes no sense to say that what is thought of our art 50 years from now will “tell” anything about our art except that people will think about it in that way. Judgments made at a later time are not somehow more accurate than those made at an earlier time, they are only different. If in 50 years everyone agrees with this essay, it won’t mean that I am right, it will only mean that in 50 years people will be thinking a certain way. Similarly, what we think of Manet’s art today only indicates that we think a certain way, but it does not indicate that the way we think about Manet is somehow more valid than the way his contemporaries thought about his work.

ONCE WE ARE RID OF THE QUALITY PROBLEM, WE CANNOT EXPECT TO LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

The problem for art now is not that there has been a lapse in quality or that the art made now is somehow not as good as art used to be; the problem now is that the possibilities for new art seem limited; and “seem” is an important word here, for it is not that possibilities are necessarily limited, but that seeing what the significant possibilities are is difficult; it is always difficult, and it is always the basic problem. The possibilities opened by Cubism which generally evolved into formalism are by now more or less sealed off. The so-called avant-garde artists of the last few years didn’t cause this scaling off of the possibilities for painting and sculpture, they only saw that it had occurred before other people saw it. In this light, the move away from formalist objects toward a concentration on art concepts can be seen in much the same way as Cubism

is seen, as an opening of possibilities from a closed situation; there was, and is, no room for significant innovation within formalist convention; and if this is understood, it is reasonable to infer that if significant innovation is to occur, it must occur outside of formalism, which at this time means outside painting and sculpture.

The quality problem is not a problem at all in a strict sense; it is not the kind of problem that has an answer or solution. The quality problem is but a confusion which can be cleared up, and in this sense, it is not solved; it is clarified out of existence. But when this confusion is clarified, all the problems of making art and writing criticism remain.

[What follows here is the Walter Darby Bannard essay referred to in the previous texts]

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Quality, Style and Olitski

WALTER DARBY BANNARD

All art, good or bad, is outwardly just stuff. As an inventory of materials it is like anything else similarly composed. It becomes art when it is made up and presented as art. Then it comes before a special set of apperceptions we call taste. The function of taste is to find out the value the work of art has for us, and that judgment is expressed in terms of quality. Quality is carried by the materials as they reflect the activity of the artist as he made the work. A great work of art holds up a high standard of human excellence brought into mundane material, perhaps "captured" by the material, as if the quality built its house and then moved in. For this, or some related reasons, art is the most valuable thing in our culture. I don't mean just expensive, although the great expensiveness of what is considered good art has to do with its human value. It has something which we find vitally and spiritually necessary, not as a foundation but as a fulfillment, as the flower is to the root.

Quality is the great constant in art, but it is also the great deceiver, for our culture, anyway, and for the last hundred years or more. It tends to come up where it is not expected, and often where it is not wanted. This is because we have a broad and tolerant society which lacks a tight, cohesive culture and traditional, specifiable, and continuous ground rules for art forms and art quality, and because part of the process of making very good art is innovation. Innovation, by its nature, generates dissimilarity. This will be more acceptable if the goals are understood by the public which receives it. Such a public has traditionally been small, self-consistent, and hierarchical, whether Goya's Spanish court or Louis Armstrong's Sunset Cafe. We have nothing of the sort for our new art; this is not bad thing generally, but it does pull art, which is very special anyway, away from the public (really it's the interested public growing beyond good art's capacity to satisfy). In the narrow art-making environments of the past, innovation

was well-received, often as not, especially when it advanced realism. But in recent times seriousness, which is the attribute persisting at the origin of quality in art, has been set against the forms of the medium, producing formal change, which is conspicuous and usually perplexing. In this way stylistic evolution has become the historic pattern, always associated with the best new art, always leaving behind a generally disgruntled art public. We all know the story.

Art history is the succession of styles produced by innovation as part of artistic creation and the stylistic succession of high art has concurrent types of continuity and discontinuity. Innovation in the service of quality has its own pace and appearance. Usually, especially in modern times, discontinuity is more distinct, but very close knowledge of the art reveals an underlying continuity which will be seen in the clear distance of time. That is why the best art writing reveals continuousness. Conversely, inferior criticism, naturally predominant, tends to react to what is new, and most of the trouble the art public has with new art seems to be on account of innovation.

But recently the general art public has caught on. Now everyone knows that quality comes in company with innovation, and innovation has become deliberate in the hope that quality will follow, and has become excessive in the hope of matching by plotted extremes the felt extremes of great art. This is a false hope. Quality, stubborn and perverse as always, now comes in sober guise, its strength is showing not at the limits of newness but in the careful, consolidating invention of painters and sculptors who seem more and more retrograde as the art world hurtles on. There is a lot of extremely good painting being made right now; as always, it is passed over and misunderstood. The medium is being put down as worked-out, exhausted, and outmoded by an attitude toward art, which we can call neo-Dada, which is *itself* all of these things, and always has been. It's an irony. Newness is a fact, not a virtue. The only thing that counts is what's good. The avant-garde, or the *attitude* of avant-garde — avant-gardism — has run itself out. More and more, the best new art will seem slow and conservative, even bland, uninteresting. Stylistic change will no longer have the ring of revolution, and it will not until it bends under newer burdens. The cycle rolls on and on. Read about it in two essays as brilliant as they are hard to find: "Avant-garde Attitudes," University of Sydney, 1969, and "Necessity of 'Formalism'," *New Literary History*, Vol.111, 1971-72, by Clement Greenberg.

Though the stylistic changes of very good art seem to have the character of progressive evolution this must be an illusion as long as we can look back and see that past art is more or less as good as present art, and vice versa. Apparently the "soul" of art does not change as long as a similar high quality is maintained, as it has been maintained in western culture since the mediums of painting and sculpture became clearly established. But because stylistic change persistently comes with new art of the highest quality we may assume that innovation is part of the process of maintaining high quality in art, not because something new is something better, but because the circumstances under which an artist can create a work of high quality are always changing. Any new serious artist enters his professional life face to face with great art

of the past; it shows him what has been done and what can be done. Whereupon he will ask himself only one question: how can I do as well? A style follows as an evolved answer, worked out in paint, over many years. Innovation is always part of the answer, because great art is not replication of beautiful objects but evidence of accomplishment. It must come through discovery and invention, the ingredients of creation. That creation naturally subsumes the best art of the recent past, not to improve — though it will seem like improvement — but to *maintain*. The great art which comes down to him is the new artist's measure. Like an athlete going after a record he carefully works over the methods of the recent best, pulls them in, ingests them, and comes into his own.

Though invented and discovered method cannot be abstracted from actual paintings, it can be seen as a skeleton or armature, an "allowing" esthetic situation, a stage set up for the play. The artist perfects his part and then shows his stuff, or perhaps provides its definition, as the shroud defines the features of the invisible man. The creation of a successful working style shows that the tremendous pressure it takes to come to high quality in art has overcome the tremendous inertia against it. And the inertia is tremendous; our best artists seldom hit their stride before they are 35 or 40 years old. It is as if the better part of talent must be persistence, as they crack painfully from one level to the next. There's the frustration of art writers. We cannot account for quality, or demonstrate it; we can only experience it and describe the path it takes. But that in itself is enough. If art does have an effect, or serve a purpose, as I know it does, it's worth the effort to help put it over, and it's fun to trace the hidden lines between the styles and methods which have borne the highest quality. I see the linking of close evolution from Pollock to Louis to Olitski, and that Olitski is presently moving in on Clyfford Still's territory, that of the best paintings, of the late '40s, by his inspired use of dense, thickened paint. Greenberg has shown us how modern painting has come to an explicit concern with its natural materials, particularly surface and the flatness of surface. Covering surface is the act of painting. To leave a record of achievement the painted surface must show variety, some amount of differentiation. Apparently it is necessary to assure integration for the elements thus derived. This is expressed as relationship. Abstract painting, lacking the automatic illusion of depth and the "empty" space of realist painting and faced with the primary problem of relating elements across the resistance of a visually flat surface, has had to invent its own vehicles of relationship. The various styles of abstraction of this century are essentially varieties of methods of relating, and the development of such a method has been the first job for inspiration since Impressionism, or at least since Cubism. (Of course the converse does not hold: an integrated painting need not be inspired.)

The basis of most recent successful methods of establishing a picture for internal relationship has been openness, space between. This may be actual empty canvas or clear painted areas, or an abstract illusion of depth. From this root other techniques have grown: limiting and simplifying pictorial elements, for example, or making the surface uniform in some way. Pollock wanted a large, very dense painting which clearly reflected the work that went into it. He did this by eliminating Cubism's planar capacity

and by establishing a relatively even attack across the surface of the canvas; the open linear tangle covered without concealing and showed strong interconnection within the netlike pattern. Morris Louis was affected by Pollock's painting, taking from it the idea of uniform, symmetrical density (as opposed to placing and balancing), and Frankenthaler's *Mountains and the Sea*, or some pictures like it, showed him that when broad, side by side color areas are let out on the canvas, areas which naturally impede interconnective relationship, pictorial integration can be maintained by uniform value. This led to the *Veils* — very large expanses of paint soaked into the canvas, relatively uniform in value and clearly unified into a coherent image: forms within a single form.

Louis's great problem, as a natural colorist, was to expose and relate hue. Pure or strong hue was kept from the *Veils* because running different colors together grays them, and the use of similar colors, which would allow greater hue saturation, would have limited color variety and would have exaggerated the one image, single element aspect of the *Veils*, and that was not what Louis was after. He found a partial solution in the *Florals*; the centralized design is very coherent, and hue was unobscured at least around the perimeter. Before coming to the *Unfurleds*, Louis tried several methods of placing pure hue. Most successful was the formation of many separated vertical hue areas in a "veil" configuration. But this hue-varying veil lacked the interconnection which gave coherence to the first *Veils* and to the *Florals*, and, lacking accentuation, it also lacked the fine pictorial tension which has always sustained the "simple" abstract painting — the kind of tension which carries a Mondrian, or the best of Kelly's work.

The great discovery revealed by the *Unfurleds* was that pictorial coherence could be established, and strongly established, by reversing the centripetal bias natural to image-making and inter-connection, by *dispersing* rather than converging pictorial elements. All at once, so it seems, Louis found, for painting, the terrific binding power of the rectangle itself, turned it into *part* of the picture, and swept away all the nagging, picayune problems of compression and interconnection. By letting banked streamers of pure hue down opposite ends of a large horizontal canvas, and by leaving the center blank, Louis forced the canvas itself to keep things together. The huge rectangle, as it hangs before us, hauls in the flowing, separating colors, and is visually covered with the tense relationship of angling, falling elements mutually pulling away, like a kaleidoscope catching the tumbling bits of glass, reflecting them across the mirror. And like any real breakthrough, Louis's "painted" painting carried everything along with it, brushing aside the anxious fixing and adjusting all painters know. With overall separation, element to element separation became a virtue instead of a liability. The overlapping of hue areas, so necessary to the *Veils* and *Florals*, and so ruinous to pure hue, was left behind, and the rivers of color were set free to flow and spread, relaxed, random, slightly meandering, splendidly casual, charged with the seeming ease of genius.

The stylistic relationship between Louis and Olitski illustrates the pressures of a shared time on two artists of very different artistic temperament and shows that levels of style will be shared precisely according to level of ambition. Olitski's mature paintings —

since he began using a spray gun in the middle '60s — do not look much like Louis's; they are less extreme, less "abstract," more traditionally painterly, even more conservative. Olitski fills and enriches what Louis established and refined, and his paintings of the last six or eight years can be seen as bringing Louis's restructured picture back into usefulness. He alone of recent painters understood the *Unfurleds*, and saw their simple power as paintings and how to take them in and use them. Olitski, heir by virtue of sheer intensity of purpose, inherited a new kind of pictorial structure from Louis, a picture established not by the coherence of an image or set of relationships *within* four edges, but by forcing the edges to accommodate enough pictorial incident to rationalize the empty interior space as *pictorial space*, *receptive space*, which the left-out area around any centralized image could never be.

Olitski's picture, set up at the edge, needs no conspicuous internal structure; the insides, once declared as pictorial, give in to the most careless play of paint. The spray gun let him lay colored paint all over the surface without actually covering or closing it; no matter how *much* paint is put on a certain level of "seeing through" is kept, as long as the technique is maintained. The slight illusion of depth is necessary less to enhance combination than to maintain the appearance of insubstantiality, openness, airiness, and to avoid the deadly trap of blank opacity which could close up the surface, butt insides and edges against each other, and vandalize the picture at its foundation.

The paint-at-a-distance attack of the spray and the atomized surface bring Pollock to mind, Pollock of the years around 1950, and there is reason to suppose that Olitski was pleased to take Pollock on as soon as his style could handle it. There is a manifest similarity in the dense, flickering, shattered surfaces of each. Pollock's is rougher, more explicitly open, more linear, in line with his need to keep up structural coherence. Olitski needs no connections, no linking-up or carrying over; as long as he keeps it light and easy the painting is his playground, and his freedom is absolute. But like any pioneer, he has been straining his privilege, and in recent years, as he evolves away from Louis and Pollock, clotted masses of gel-thickened pigment have displaced the gentle waves of colored spray. Olitski is getting around the restrictions of surface by forcing his genius to make room for an abundance of paint the *Unfurleds* seemed to disallow.

This brings us to Olitski's show at the Lawrence Rubin Gallery last May. He has been the best painter around for some time, but this time he outdid himself. My immediate impression on seeing the paintings was one of absolute authority, which I do not associate with first viewings of new art. As this feeling held on and grew it was joined by an odd sense of conservatism. I was very moved, and a little baffled. Except for a few shows which affected me strongly as I was learning to paint and to know art, I have never had such an impression of *forcefulness* from any group of paintings. Please note: this was not an "intellectual" reaction. "Intellectually" the paintings are still a puzzle; feeling and experience only told me I was up against very superior art, and that Olitski had consolidated and moved ahead, adding weight to inspiration, substance to intuition. To boot, they affected me as a painter. This has made it very hard to draw

lines of quality. And all of the paintings were so good I could hardly pick one over the other.

The 11 paintings in the show were all painted in 1972. Each was vertical and relatively small; the largest about six by eight feet, the smallest about three by five. Each surface was roughened by gel either as expressed paint or formed up beneath it as a surface conditioner. Colors were grayed and relatively monotone across the surface. The newest, most interesting, and perhaps the best of the paintings were those made by drawing skins of thickly gelled paint across either bare canvas or roughened sheets of another color (another value, really) with a squeegee, so that the top skin, thick here and thin there, forms patches and skeins of more and less opacity showing more and less of the underlying layer. Illustrating the show fairly here is impossible. Black and white is useless. The two paintings reproduced in color are as representative as possible — one is a “spray” and one a “squeegee” — but I am neglecting one of the most interesting and difficult paintings in the show, *Other Flesh 8*, and I am avoiding the ticklish job of pinning down differences in quality. It’s probably just as well, at this time, anyway.

Larro 17 is visually and essentially a spray painting, even though on close inspection it seems to have been made with a nubby paint roller. There are three discernable “parts”: the gel-roughened reddish, yellowish, and bluish-gray expanse of surface; the colored lines and patches along the edges; and the sharp, jagged breaks in the surface along the edges to the canvas below. These three elements are wholly interdependent but function more by mutual support than visual interaction. There is no hint of anxious composing; everything hangs loose and swings casually into place. The ragged breaks along the edges declare the canvas, which in turn declares the surface, advertising it for what it is, and they have a brilliant strength of effect, for example, the way the more diagonal break in the lower right corner seems to stretch the field out and down. Some of Hofmann’s late paintings, which hang a few bright rectangles against a grayed field, use the same device — there was one hanging in the stairwell of the Museum of Modern Art last summer. The painted lines define the rectangle and add color; unlike Louis’s bright dispersing banks they slap lazily up against the edge like ropes hanging off the side of a building, coming in on top of the surface just as the breaks slice beneath, sandwiching the surface layer to squeeze out just a bit more ambiguity of depth. The surface strains their support, loading the grayed colors to imminent opacity. It’s a delicate balance and the hand of a master.

Radical Love 2 is the “new” Olitski, made by scraping batches of gel-thickened paint across the surface with a squeegee. This painting, with one other in the show, was the most extreme of the squeegee paintings, relying almost completely on that technique and its consequent effects. Except for the usual marginal thickly brushed lines *Radical Love 2* seems to be just one color-grayish-orange, perhaps a whitened Indian red — thick with gel, pulled or stretched across the canvas, leaving a path of paint patches of varying thickness and opacity. Several incised lines hang across the painting like tiers of slack clothesline behind a tenement. Breaks and lines come in to help just as they

do in *Larro 17*. Traditional composition is nowhere to be seen; the total randomness of the casually scraped and plowed surface gives away the clear strength of the compositional method, even throws it at us. The painting has an *esthetic* weight, density and authority which stands in plain contrast to its thin, pale, easygoing appearance. The squeegee and the gelatinous, semi-transparent paint are agents of a step forward for Olitski; perhaps it would be better to say a step *into* his style, toward an even finer consistency, for the squeegee paintings cast away the remaining artificiality — the slight illusion of depth supporting the fragile, indefinite interior of the spray paintings — and put in place the real transparency of transparent paint. Not that this is better as such, but better paintings will come of it; it is more natural, more flexible, more firmly set to hold the graceful final finish laid on by hand and eye.

Though there is probably no line of influence from Clyfford Still to Olitski there is a comparison to be made between them. Each artist worked directly against the problems of surface inherent in abstract painting, and now, in the squeegee paintings, Olitski has begun to work over the surface entirely in terms of surface just as Still did in his great paintings of the '40s. Each artist, in his own way, saw that surface can't be fooled, and found an entirely natural way to take it in as a friend. Still crept the paint across with a palette knife, interweaving fingers, inlets, and thick, opaque seams of paint, tearing and breaking openings from one color to another; Olitski "makes" the painting at the edge and scrapes out more or less transparent colored clots and patches. Each artist reaped the benefits of playing it straight with the inexorable demands of the flat abstract picture, earning the license to push paint into the lush, sensual conformations so natural to it, delivering the fine, sparkling, painterly finish we can see all the way back to Watteau or Rembrandt — perhaps even farther — which comes down to us through Constable, Manet, Matisse, turns up in Morandi, the early Hopper, and others, and can be seen today in some of the better realists, such as Fairfield Porter, in good painting perhaps unsupported by inspiration. We might call it natural painting, or pure painting. It is painting without "ideas," without alien schemes or desperate measures, painting devoted only to paint and the things paint can do best. That odd authority with the conservative flavor that hit me so hard when I walked into the Rubin Gallery last May was simply the tough conservatism of absolute high quality, of the highest standards in art, of the baffling, sustaining innovation which sets its pace only by the deliberate schedule of good art, less revolution than consolidation, less far out than dead center, less declared, self-conscious invention than the ripened, ready fruit of invention. Olitski kept to the tough central line undistracted. Now, to borrow a phrase from Greenberg, he has preempted serious new painting. He is, for the time being, our best painter.