The New Shadows, Judd, Artin

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At sea in these thunder-clouded days we write out of habit and wishing that we might find some magical, Archimedean fulcrum that would right the ship or allow us to gather the pieces and start building anew. At present we cannot be sure how, or if, these pieces fit together.

In any critic's work, we may find an underlying set of values which inform the critic's assertions that work 'a,' artist 'b,' public policy 'c' is superior or inferior to d, e, f, or g. Sometimes these values are explicitly stated—"A work needs only to be interesting" (from the sculptor and art critic Donald Judd's most influential essay, "Specific Objects"). More rarely are values defined or discussed, or is their legitimacy argued for—what does "interesting" mean? why is interesting good and sufficient?

Such discussion would be welcome and could be thought-provoking, but could also come to seem frustratingly unpromising. Because implicit in the arguments for the now explicitly stated values would be other values. I have suggested that by unpacking "interesting" we can get to thought-provoking, which, I imply, is good. But why is it good? Because it makes use of human beings' highest capacities or because it makes use of neural cells and connections, thus possibility delaying the onset of senility? But why, say, is making use of my putative highest capacities a better use of my limited existence than dying fighting for my country or for human rights, or, alternatively, pursuing sensual pleasures, be this in the bedroom or the kitchen? Last night, with water-soluble pastels, water, and my fingertips, I made a loving drawing of two apples. What could be better than that? The other day, while I was lying in *Savasana* (the corpse pose)—stretched out on a mat, eyes closed—a yoga

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teacher, on her own initiative, gave me the most sensual foot massage I have ever had. To hell with thought provoking, immortality, or art—why did she stop!

I developed those two paragraphs after reading in a collection of Judd's writings. Another line from "Specific Objects":

> Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be.

It began to seem that underlying Judd's criticism were core American assumptions: the old is bad and the new good; progress is good and the United States is progress. (Hard to swallow in 2017.) Judd, writing in 1965, uses the word "new" 21 times, to include: "obviously new things are more." Thomas Jefferson gave such ideas loud voice. E.g.:

> If all the sovereigns of Europe were to set themselves to work, to emancipate the minds of their subjects from their present ignorance and prejudices, . . . a thousand years would not place them on that high ground, on which our common people are now setting out.

Equally hard to swallow in 2017. But . . . If we take some long steps back, we can at least appreciate that, intentionally or unintentionally, underlying Judd's assertions is an ancient Greek value which was revived during the Renaissance: showing it like it is. An opposition to certain kinds of illusions. Wishful thinking and lies unfortunately not included. We might need to say that the illusion in Judd's work revolves around this idea of the new.

And we would not dismiss the extraordinary products of Greek sculptors, of Giotto or Rembrandt, or of Judd. Indeed my sense is that, among other things, we are, for both better and worse, moving backward. If Americans did not appreciate that the Enlightenment project crashed and burned in the twentieth century, with the world wars, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima, we can appreciate it now in the vaunting of ignorance. But there are positives, too. As regards art, our eyes have, for example, been re-opened to the value of Byzantine art. And there are many of us who have found in African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian works qualities that seem sadly lacking in the work of those for whom illusionism came to seem undesirable. A friend who is an art historian uses a more than three-thousand-year-old Egyptian sculpture, the *Fragment of a Queen's Lips* from the MET museum's collection, to argue that there is change—in art (as in life and politics)—but not progress. We might wish to call this recognition progress.

Jefferson was not writing about art, but about politics and social relations. And what with the most recent US presidential election and other phenomena, such as young Americans no longer likely to do better economically than their parents, the Jeffersonian equation—

New World=progress—it feels empty. In view of slavery and the decimation of the Indians, the equation was a kind of fake news even in Jefferson's day. And it certainly now seems silly or worse when contemporary artists or art promoters (or the promoters of technology and other commercial stuff) use, to sell their products, newness or ideas of freedom from old worlds, old constraints, and "Dark Ages"—all our conflicts and prejudices included.

This allows me, segueing, to say a word or two about the real-life-affirming work of the American-Roman painter Wendy Artin. This work—for the most part watercolors and charcoal drawings of classical ruins and of nudes—is not sufficiently known (e.g. she has no New York gallery). It has been proposed that Artin's work "explores the *timeless* interaction of light with surfaces on architecture and the human body." I have italicized "timeless," and would also stress that Artin's best nudes make healthy bodies look themselves like ruins—sex-possessing ruins. She is not likely to use the word "new" 21 times in an essay. One might say, rather, that she is calling our attention to some things essential yet dilapidated, or to now faded glories. In an interview Artin said, "Whether I am painting statues or figures: I look for the shadows and try to capture them with the most simple precision I can muster." I am tempted to, jestingly, call such an approach—focusing on shadows!—un-American, and this while noting that, in addition to studying in Boston, Artin studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. (And, she has subsequently informed me, she "happened to grow up with a beautiful replication of the beautiful Egyptian face" touched on above.)

Since people are now shorter with their reading and understandably overwhelmed by the fact and effects of neo-fascists coming to power in the United States, I am exploring writing shorter pieces. So I will stop here. Or with the closing words of *Gatsby*, which—with the present going to pieces and the future toxic—may seem quaint, a little comforting, and a little questionable. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

References

Wendy Artin: **website**; **interviewed by Konstantin Sterkhov**, February 2012.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*; first published by Scribner's, 1925.

Thomas Jefferson, **letter from Paris to George Wythe**, August 13, 1786.

Donald Judd, **Specific Objects**, first published in *Arts Yearbook* 8, New York, 1965; has been reproduced, inter alia, in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Judd Foundation, 2016). I should stress that Judd's essay is well worth reading, full of thought-provoking ideas. A favorite line: "New work always involves objections to the old, but these objections are really relevant only to the new." This does an excellent job of contextualizing Enlightenment commentary about the "Dark Ages," as well as any number of objections by modern artists to older forms. Of course it also points to a major shortcoming of such commentary. **Click to see images of Judd's work**.

Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostril* (Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects). First published in Florence in 1550.

Image

Wendy Artin, *Tamara on her Side with Foot in Hand*, 2003, watercolor on Fabiano Ingres paper, 12" x 9". **Click to see more images of Artin's work**.

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