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What Scene, What's Seen, What's in A... Word: Thoughts in and on Artists' Writings

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Abstract: While the humanities have become a multimodal domain in which visual culture is immanent and various new cross-disciplinary perspectives and theories are being employed to investigate the relationship between artistic and literary forms of representation, artists' writings remain understudied and underappreciated. Art/literature studies often proceed by pairing

a specific work of art with a particular literary text or an aesthetic style with a poetics or a narrative technique, but they rarely consider situations when both elements of the chosen pair come from the same source – an artist-writer. But questions related to whether and how an artist's 'natural' visual disposition may impact on how she/he approaches and handles verbal language and vice versa need to be asked to illuminate what is still a shadow zone in word and image studies. Citing examples of major representatives of American modernism in art and literature, the essay addresses some of the problematic issues involved in studying verbal expression by visual artists and the cogency of posited correlations between the painterly and writerly intuitions and competences at play in artworks and texts produced by artist-writers.

Key words: artists' writings, word and image, interart correspondences, American modernism, art history, literary studies

The Problematic Nature of Interartistic Comparisons

Concluding her lecture from 1934 titled *Pictures*, Gertrude Stein declares clearly and unambiguously: "The literary ideas painters have and that they paint are not at all the literary ideas writers have" (Stein, 1975, p. 89). Then, as if to give more substance to the blunt statement, she repeats it in several successive sentences in rehashed form, but the effect is that, rather than being enhanced – made "slowly clear" (Stein, 1975, p. 90) – her argumentation gets progressively more muddled and irresolute. What at first seems simple and intuitively obvious in the end appears tangled and ambiguous. Ironically, the sense of incertitude is engendered here by the dubiousness of the very concept of 'literary idea,' how differently it might be conceived by painters and writers, and how the differences may affect each group's understanding of the relation between word and image

and their ways of bringing it into play. Stein's herself is a good example of the possible consequences of this type of unclearness. That her writing was affected by modern art is an undisputable fact, but the exact nature of that influence is less apparent. She admitted her strongest inspirations were a novelist and a painter: "Everything I have done has been influenced by Flaubert¹ and Cézanne, and this gave me a new feeling about composition" (Haas, 1976, p. 15). But an overwhelming majority of comparative studies devoted to Stein's work tend to explore her connection to Analytical Cubism rather than the post-Impressionist/proto-Cubist stimulus coming from Cézanne and other related artists. As has been argued by Marjorie Perloff (1981), postulating the existence of a direct link between Stein's writing and Cubist painting is not only partial, but is in fact ill-conceived, for their relation is more nuanced and less straightforward than is posited by countless interpretations of her texts as instances of 'literary' Cubism. For one thing, many scholars start from the wrong premise about Cubism itself, ignoring the fact that, as Perloff points out after Robert Rosenblum, "Cubism is part of a larger continuum which includes Vorticism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism" (Perloff, 1981, p. 72). For instance, Perloff exposes affinities between some of Stein's narrative strategies and Cézanne's compositional solutions, such as his "un-definition" of objects and the "intermittency principle" (Leo Steinberg's terms). She also detects in Stein's texts evidence of the presence of "the Dada matrix" and strong Duchampian tones (pp. 99-100) albeit without denying their Cubist flavor. At the same time, in her always precise and unambiguous inquiries into the complex nature of the correspondences between art and literature, Perloff also acknowledges the potential pitfalls of the application of terms and tools from art history and aesthetics to talk about literature. Of the "indeterminacy" entailed in such interpretative strategies, she writes:

¹ Not surprisingly, as is well known, Flaubert's views about narrative and style were largely shaped by his interest in music and the visual arts.

In discussing Stein's Cubism, critics repeatedly speak of "non-representational" or "abstract" art, of "flat surface," "shifting perspective" and "interacting planes." All these are slippery terms: Kandinsky was one of the first non-representational painters of the twentieth century but he was hardly a Cubist. "Flat surface" is one of the central features of Oriental art which is nonetheless illusionist. "Shifts in perspective" are a hallmark of the Baroque, and so on. The paintings of Picasso and Braque are, in fact, "abstractions" only in a very special sense (Perloff, 1981, p. 71).

The question of how best to describe perceived parallelisms and analogies between verbal and visual works in a conceptually cogent and methodologically rigorous manner in order to bring out congruencies among domains that seem at once separate and related has long been a subject of disputes among literary and cultural scholars and art historians and theoreticians of various persuasions, with the latter often expressing concern about the danger of their discipline becoming subjugated by literary scholars with 'imperialistic' inclinations. When Norman Bryson (1983), an art historian, in the 1980s criticized art history for its inertia and refusal to welcome "the extraordinary and fertile change" (p. xi) that had already occurred in the fields of literature, history and anthropology, he was accused of being one of the "mischievous, troublemaking outsiders" representing "the colonizing, consumerist tendencies in English studies, eagerly reducing art to text, turning visual art into linguistic art, vision into sign – in effect arguing the case for Derrida's assertion that 'the collusion between painting... and writing is constant'" (Kuspit, 1987, p. 345).² To be fair, the viability of the "contest for dominion" (Gilman, 1989, p. 5) between traditionally autonomous and separate disciplines had proponents and opponents on both sides. Judith Dundas (1979) was among those literary critics who feared that the revival of the idea

² Kuspit's term "outsider" is in fact a misnomer, for Bryson is a renowned art historian. What the critic more likely meant, but perhaps did not want to say so openly, is that he considered Bryson a kind of renegade because the scholar was at the time the director of English Studies at King's College.

of *ut pictura poesis* in literary criticism led to “the retreat from the word to the image” and to “a certain disregard of the medium of literature and the kind of stylistic analysis appropriate to language” (Dundas, 1979, p. 333).

Referring to the inherently antagonistic implications of interartistic comparisons, for which Leonardo invented the concept of *paragone*, J. W. T. Mitchell (1986) described the ongoing debates on the relations between the visual and verbal arts as an all-out “war of signs.” According to him, the fundamental reason why such discussions repeatedly result in disagreements is that, on the one hand, the belief persists that words and pictures “are not merely *different* kinds of creatures, but *opposite* kinds,” and on the other, both sides “lay claim to the same territory (reference, representation, denotation, meaning)” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 47). The remedy Mitchell proposed as a scholar happily embracing both literature and art history was raising the respective disciplines’ self-understanding and making the word/image conundrum not only a central feature of investigation and analysis on both sides of the divide, but one that can be a subject of “collaboration and dialogue, not defensive reflexes” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 53).

The Benefits and Pitfalls of Studying Artists’ Writings

Yet, while it is certainly true that Mitchell’s plea was heard and has been given respectful recognition in many fields of research, increasing scholars’ openness to hybridity, polysemy and transmediation, phenomena which have played a crucial role in the transformation of the humanities into a multimodal domain where visual culture is immanent, there still exist shadow zones that need to be better illuminated and explored. With new research methods applicable both to the visual arts and to literature developed by semioticians, comparatists and rhetorical studies scholars, various cross-disciplinary perspectives and theories are available today which can be used to this end. One fertile but still uncharted territory that deserves a methodical and comprehensive survey is broadly defined literary creativity of visual artists.

Their writings often and, so to speak, naturally belong to two domains at once and yet they are rarely studied as examples of works that can overcome, bridge, combine and reconcile the differences between the visual and verbal media and the respective sensibilities, skills and practices associated with them. The most common strategy in art-literature studies is to pair a specific work of art with a particular literary text or an aesthetic style with a poetics or a narrative technique (vide the case of Stein vis-à-vis Cubism), but few consider verbal endeavors of visual artists as instances of creations in which a visual disposition may directly impact verbal expression and vice versa. William Blake is probably the best-known example of an artist whose full recognition was delayed by critics' inability, or unwillingness, to accept that in his unified system of signification the verbal and the visual are intertwined to the point of being inextricable. It took over a century and a half before Blake scholars began to acknowledge that some of his works are unique verbal-visual 'composites' and their understanding and appreciation hangs on the recognition of words and images as fully conterminous, all obvious and inconspicuous differences notwithstanding. Yet, Blake is exceptional among those visual artists who were also writers. According to William H. Gass (1997), "in most cases, when the dual muse is present, one shows itself as a gift, the other as an aptitude" (p. 62), but since the publication of Northrop Frye's *Poetry and Design in William Blake* (1951) the consensus among art historians and literary scholars has been that he is not just one of the greatest artists *and* poets English culture has produced, but arguably one of the greatest artist-writers ever.

Writing almost fifty years after Frye, Gass echoes his opinion that when the same person has the ability to paint and the ability to write "it is rare to find them equally developed... When the two are combined, one usually predominates" (Frye, 1951, p. 35).³ In the case of recognized visual artists the implication clearly is that, one, their literary endeavors should be seen as products of an activity that is by nature separate from their visual enterprise and, two, that they are secondary and subservient at best and amateurish

³ Fry cites as examples the work of Edward Lear, Dante Rossetti, D.H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis.

and inconsequential at worst. Among such texts it is mostly those which have some identifiably theoretical or pedagogical intent that make it into academic curricula, mainly in art history departments. Manifestos, catalogue statements, memoirs, and correspondence are considered as relevant sources inasmuch as they shed light on the artist's own practice and the nature of craft in general, but little or no attention is given to their value as literature. Even when intended as creative rather than merely utilitarian, many such texts remain confined to the archive or, when published, are classified as supplementary historical documents, useful in explaining artists' aesthetic views, inspirations and techniques, but not as autonomous instances of verbal art worthy of serious scholarly investigation and appreciation on their own terms. While art historians and critics, who are not equipped with the tools necessary for analyzing creative literature, can perhaps be excused for their slackness in the recognition of some artists' exceptional literary talent and craft, it is much less obvious why literary scholars and critics also have a tendency to resist or disregard their literary endeavors. The common assumption that artists' writings are by definition, if not intent, transgressive, perhaps ingenuous but rarely ingenious, has not only negatively affected the critical and popular reception of their literary interests and ambitions, but in quite a few known instances seems to have impaired their self-confidence when they resorted to verbal language to communicate their thoughts and ideas. Here are just a few examples of symptomatic 'disclaimers' from an array of twentieth-century and contemporary American artists recognized both for their visual works and writings:

- Georgia O'Keeffe: "I'm quite illiterate" (1987, p. 222),
- Man Ray: "Words have never been my true fort [sic]" (2016, p. 291),
- Robert Motherwell: "I must beg your pardon for how elementary and simple my discourse has been" (2007, p. 80),
- Romare Bearden: "A lot of the technical things that are no problem to me in paintings are problems to me in writing" (2019, p. 79),
- Jasper Johns: "I find it very hard to say anything" (1996, p. 145),
- Ursula von Rybinsvärd: "I'm not a good writer!" (in a private conversation with the author).

In this connection, Stein's impatience with the idea that an artist might want to pursue a literary career is as legendary as it is puzzling and controversial. Not only was she capable of turning a blind eye to the writings of painters whose art she thought highly of (Marsden Hartley, a prolific poet, essayist and autobiographer, is one example), but she could also vehemently deny them the right to even try their hand at writing, as happened when she learned that Picasso, her favorite artist, had taken up poetry (Stein, 1971, pp. 15–37). It is a fact that, despite her own accomplishments as a literary innovator, her own significance was for a long time seen as principally associated with the achievements of the artists she helped promote as paragons of modernist invention, so there certainly was an element of rivalry for success and recognition there, but the nature of the rivalry, as Perloff (2016) points out, is more complex than it might seem. Recalling Stein's squabble with Picasso, the critic observes that what infuriated Stein was "not just, as is often assumed... Picasso's invasion of her territory," and it was not "her surprisingly traditional insistence on the separation of the arts," either (p. 127). What vexed her was what kind of poetry he wrote – the fact that he did not take her as his literary model (she ignored the fact that he could not read her texts because of the language barrier) and, worse still, that his poetry was in the style of the French Surrealists, whose diction was antithetical to her own poetic. She dismissed them as being *ancien* rather than *avant* by pointing out that they "still see things as everyone sees them, they complicate them in a different way but the vision is that of every one else, in short the complication is the complication of the twentieth century but the vision is that of the nineteenth century" (Stein, 1959, p. 43). But would Stein really have approved of Picasso's poetry had he written, as she did, in a genuinely modernist, avant-garde fashion? Her temperamental and slightly (though perhaps deliberately so) muddled explanation of her irritation with Picasso is symptomatic of the difficulties one is bound to encounter when faced with the question of how visual artists and writers see and think and how they express their perceptions and ideas by means of images and words.

The problem, according to Stein, may be largely conceptual and have to do with different ways in which artists' minds process data, but it all boils

down to the question of awareness – one's understanding of the specificity of the medium chosen. Stein explains:

⋮ A painter's literary idea always consists not in the action but in
⋮ the distortion of the form. This could never be a writer's literary idea.
⋮ Then a painter's idea of action always has to do with something else
⋮ moving rather than the center of the picture. This is just the opposite of
⋮ the writer's idea, everything else can be quiet, except the central thing
⋮ which has to move. And because of all this a painter cannot really write
⋮ and a writer cannot really paint, even fairly badly (Stein, 1975, pp. 89–90).

Yet, while it may seem that both as a writer and an arbiter of taste Stein unreservedly championed the idea of generic fluidity and transgression, her views in this regard are in fact surprisingly middle-of-the-road. On the one hand, they hark back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), where he famously stated that “painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry, – the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time” (Lessing, 1969, p. 91). On the other, they tie her in to the purist aesthetic of Clement Greenberg, who in 1940 would denounce any “attempt to escape from the problems of the medium of one art by taking refuge in the effects of another” as “artistic dishonesty” (Greenberg, 1986, p. 26). Identifying these affinities allows us to correctly understand Stein's rather unseemly conservatism. According to Mitchell (1986), the tendency “to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not a marginal or exceptional practice, but a fundamental impulse in both the theory and practice of the arts, one which is not confined to any particular genre or period” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 98), but the historical significance of the modernist revolution as Stein understood and explained it is that it distinguished between breaching boundaries and confusing them. Stein embodied the avant-garde's awareness of the difference for, while admitting that she derived inspiration from the visual arts and was keenly interested in how painters deal with representing “the problem of the external and the internal” (Stein, 1961, p. 119), she at the same time consistently followed

her essentially literary intuition in her own struggle with and in language, the only medium in which she felt she could effectively challenge and explode the conventions of visual representation by imitation. This is best illustrated by her portraits, in which she employed words to get at the essence of personal identity not by describing her subject's appearance or attitude, but, as Ulla Haselstein (2003) observes about Stein's second portrait of Picasso, by staging "a theatrical struggle" between herself and the portrayed artist in which resemblance is "a formal textual device" (p. 738). What emerges as Stein's verbal brushwork unfolds in the space of the page, where stroke after stroke surging words fall into place *against* the accepted rules of syntax and discursive logic, is in fact a double portrait, one in which the presentation of Stein's subject is an occasion for her to present herself as well – herself caught in the act of transposing an image or an idea in her mind into a verbal likeness.

Alfred Stieglitz may have been one of the first to note the inspirational potential for visual artists of Stein's double-exposure when he published her portraits of Matisse and Picasso in his magazine *Camera Work* (1912). Among those the famous photographer and gallery owner mentored who openly shared his enthusiasm for Stein's "grand writing so effortless so alive" (Stieglitz, 2011, p. 712) was the most committed painter-writer in his circle, Marsden Hartley. He responded to Stieglitz's embracement of Stein by painting, as his colleague Charles Demuth also would, an abstract composition, entitled *One Portrait of One Woman* (c. 1916), which can be seen as an attempt to emulate visually Stein's method of portraiture. Enthralled by her bold experiments with language, he also tried to assimilate her style in his writings in the hope of demonstrating to her that perhaps he could be the one exception to her rule: a good painter who could write well as well. But given the circumstances his predicament was an impossible one. If he could convince Stein that he was capable of writing, he would be undermining her authority or, alternatively, risking losing his status as an important painter, a tradeoff he did not crave at all. Throughout his entire career Hartley (1921) concerned himself with what he called "the business of transmutation" (p. 8), trying to establish if images and words can be reciprocally conjoined and even complementary. Always unsure of his own choices, he could, however, be as categorical and biased

as Stein was when others were concerned. For instance, he criticized Dante Gabriel Rossetti, considered by him a 'great' poet, for attempting, in his opinion ineptly, to also be a painter. His case, Hartley wrote, proved that "if you sing a thing you can't dance it – or if you write it you can't paint it" (2002, p. 139).

What The Case of Thomas Hart Benton Proves and Disproves

To another early Stieglitz associate, Thomas Hart Benton, who, however, quickly dropped out of the great mentor's aegis and chose an independent and ostentatiously anti-modernist artistic path, such deliberations addressed issues that were completely immaterial. Impatient with the "tortured intelligence" (Benton, 1951, p. 46) and "tiresome, meaningless aesthetic jargon" (p. 274) of the avant-garde's apologists, he would find Stein's ruminations about the equivalence of the literary ideas and egotisms of painters and writers rather spurious and pointless, but that does not mean that his case is not pertinent to these questions. Quite the contrary, it may be one of the clearest examples of dispositions and sensibilities which Stein saw as antithetical co-existing harmoniously and productively in the creative mind of a consummate visual artist endowed with a matching literary talent. In the 1930^s, Benton was a leading exponent of Regionalism, also called American Scene painting, a figurative style in which he created monumental panoptical murals envisioned by him as a wholesomely indigenous alternative to the "bitter emptiness" of abstract art, for him the epitome of cosmopolitan and elitist modernism (as cited in Wolff, 2012, p. 285). He also wrote many "occasional" essays and articles as well as two autobiographical books which met with praise from authority figures associated with both literature and art. For instance, novelist Sinclair Lewis declared after reading his *An Artist in America* (1937): "Here's a rare thing, a painter who can write" (as cited in Wolff, 2012, p. 261). Art critic Hilton Kramer expressed a similar view, calling the book "a splendidly written memoir," though as one of the strongest post-World War II detractors of Benton's art, which he considered backward and provincial, he

qualified his compliment saying: "I think that Benton really missed his vocation. He should have been a writer rather than a painter" (Burns, 1988). But could Benton be as good a writer as both commentators agreed he was if he were not also the kind of painter he was? And wasn't his choice of a straightforward narrative style and determination to rely on the vernacular – when so many of his literary-minded peers sought more sophisticated, poetic rather than prosaic, forms of verbal expression – an indication that his literary ideas were not only as different from dominant modernist notions as his painterly ideas were from those of the avant-garde, but that they were, if not derived from his thinking about painting, then at least strongly influenced by it?

Luckily, Benton's writings share many tangible attributes with his visual works, so positing the existence of a direct correlation between his folksy version of pictorial mannerism and his down-home storytelling style is not merely a matter of common-sense reasoning. The problem is rather that few have bothered to take a closer look at his literary output at all, the main reason probably being the persistence of the view that his staunch anti-modernism and populist idealism resulted in what many consider "simple art for simple people," the kind that offers little beyond what is self-evident and already familiar. Yet, while it is true that Benton wanted his portrayal of "the simple spectacle of American life" (Benton, 1969, p. 67) to first of all appeal to ordinary people, especially rural and small-town Midwesterners he got to know well during his travels around various parts of the country, he was himself a cultivated man and an extraordinary craftsman. In his vocabulary simplicity signified authenticity and candor, but not simple-mindedness, and so to consider his folksy directness of presentation as plain and unremarkable realism is to miss what his narratives truly represent. Like his panoramic mosaics, in which the 'natural' look is achieved by rigorous and skillful execution of a masterful design, the way he tells his stories is far from unsophisticated, both hiding and displaying various refined and deliberate strategies and devices which, while medium specific, not only closely resemble his pictorial solutions but also match their efficacy. In painting, the mural was Benton's favorite format because its grand scale best suited his technique, which he described as "the amalgamation of many subjects having

little or no relationship to one another in such a way that they would function as parts of an overall pictorial form" (Benton, 1969, p. 63). The impression that authentic life unrolled in front of the spectator's eyes was particularly vivid in panels painted on all four walls of a room, where the looker, enveloped by the panorama, tries to slowly absorb the view by pivoting the head horizontally while the eye is every now and then diverted by narrative vectors pointing in other directions. Such viewing is not unlike reading a book, which cannot be 'grasped' all at once but must be taken in sentence after sentence, scene after scene, one story at a time. In both media Benton achieves narrative coherence by "locking the different subjects together" (Benton, 1969, p. 67) arbitrarily splicing and interweaving various sub-narratives – folk legends, myths, tall tales, proverbial anecdotes, vignettes, jokes and recollections – without clearly marking hierarchies of subplots, themes, voices or points of view, but always in full control of the medium and the compositional procedure. As Matthew Baigell (1975) observes in his study of Benton, contrary to what many of his critics allege, in his paintings "underlying diagonals, X patterns, related verticals and horizontals, and fulcrums around which pivot associated shapes" (p. 67) all serve carefully calculated end, the most distinctive being the push-pull effect produced by the alternating convexities and concavities – Benton's famous "bumps and hollows" – whose rhythmic throbbing is perceived by the eyes as a pulsating sensation. In open violation of rules of realistic depiction, he often mixes foreground and background while arbitrarily altering relative proportions and distorting perspective so that figures, objects and natural features seem to encroach on one another. Dispensing with conventional visual syntax, his dynamic configurations of rhythmic structures often rely on wholly artificial forms, such as white sharp-edged moldings and distinct wavy or curly lines, with which self-contained segments are merged into a continuous, unfolding panoramic whole.

To achieve similar effects in his prose, *An Artist in America* being the example considered here, Benton uses several surprisingly 'modern' methods of driving the narrative to convey life's fluidity, multifariousness and open-endedness. For instance, just as his paintings do not just show series of arrested moments of the rich spectacle of life but also display how the artist

sets the stage for the unfolding drama, his autobiography employs the frame narrative technique, a device otherwise known as a “story within a story,” to achieve a similar effect. Surrendering his narrative authority to others allows Benton to present and amalgamate many different voices, registers, points of view, perceptions and insights. The authentic spoken utterances he registered on paper during his travels using his own transcription system are usually quoted by him word for word, demonstrating how remarkably attuned he was to sound and speech idiosyncrasies. What kind of person a character is often encapsulated in just a few words he or she says, revealed in inflection and phrasing. But this is just one example of how individual words and their composites, what he called “patterns of words,” are used both as construction material and as signposts which point to the seams and stitchings that hold words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs together. One of the rarely noticed marks of Benton’s genuinely modernist mindset, his dexterity as a conscious and deliberate manipulator of the medium at hand also shows in how with just a few word strokes (often humorous one-liners) he can briskly draw a vibrant form, whether a human figure, an object or a landmark, or convey perceptual relativity by slowing down or quickening the story’s unfolding by thoughtful and selective application of different parts of speech. Another important device in Benton’s literary palette is the technique of metanarration, which takes the form of interjected self-referential remarks that have the effect of raising readers awareness that reading, like viewing an art work or listening to music, can be an enchanting participatory experience made possible thanks to the mediation of an object that is a record of the creative process of writing which transforms thought into text via imagination and physical manipulation of ink and paper in ways akin to drawing or painting an image.

Benton’s skilled use of advanced narrative strategies as described here briefly disproves the view held by many in the Stieglitz circle and outside of it that, because he reneged on his art schooling and affiliations and degenerated into, as Leo Mazow (2012) puts it, “an arbiter of kitsch” (p. 2), he was ignorant of and did not care about the modernization of American art. More importantly, a close reading of his books and articles gives credibility to the common-sense assumption that how a painter writes is determined by and reflects how he

paints, and the other way around; or, to put it in Steinian terms, it shows that a painter's literary ideas are (the same as) a writer's literary ideas if the painter and the writer are the same person. By the same token, evidence is provided that the affinity between painting and writing has a strong generic component and that is why a painter who chooses figurative realism is most likely, if not certain, to choose for verbal expression a literary genre closest in character and capacity to this style of painting. But such constataions about the work of one artist-writer do not really resolve Stein's quandary, for the question of boundaries, relations and interactions is infinitely more complex than Benton's case suggests and certainly requires deeper more systematic investigation. My own research so far indicates that every instance is unique in more than one way and even if a close reading of particular artists' writings against their visual works reveals the existence of discernible lines of separation and contact, they rarely form a grid or pattern. When that occurs, the perceived regularities still raise interpretative problems, as is also true about Benton, allegedly a simple-minded regressive realist whose work, however, has a clear modernist edge, with all the attendant consequences as far the handling of the medium and compositional strategies are concerned. Several other major early and high modernist artist-writers I have studied – Georgia O'Keeffe, Man Ray, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Motherwell – exemplify even more patently the problematic nature of analogies and relationships across the broad spectrum of literary genres and visual forms and styles represented. At the polar opposite of Benton's realistic pictures and prose are Ad Reinhardt's "purist" abstractions, which he contextualized in several different voices – from academic lecturer and pungent polemicist to author of calligraphed poem-like manifestos that both in terms of visual and verbal form and content approximate his black squares. Somewhere between the extremities of the spectrum is O'Keeffe with her quintessentially modernist paintings that mix abstraction and figuration and her autobiographical and epistolary prose that seems ordinary but is informed by a poetic sensibility. Then there is Man Ray, a natural-born iconoclast who as a visual artist tried his hand, though with the least impressive results in painting, at every kind of modernist style, figurative and non-representational, from Cubism and Expressionism to

Surrealism and Abstractionism, and who as a writer effortlessly moved from poetry to expository and autobiographical prose, attempted to write a novel but really distinguished himself as the author of verbal contraptions disguised as proverbs, aphorisms and platitudes which challenge routine thinking and language use. Finally, there is Robert Motherwell (2007), a leading Abstract Expressionist who, describing himself as “a lyrical artist, a ‘poet’” (p. 76), was a master of essayistic prose in which he achieved discursive cohesiveness by means of collage, one of the preeminent techniques of avant-garde art. Examples of many other configurations of correlatable styles and genres of painting and writing could be readily provided, but it seems the situation would only be further compounded rather than clarified.

Questions to Ask, Challenges to Answer

In my monograph *Painter’s Word: Thomas Hart Benton, Marsden Hartley and Ad Reinhardt as Writers* (Frelik, 2016), as part of the concluding remarks about the challenges that studying interartistic correspondences poses, I cite a rare and noteworthy attempt to address the matter by applying a methodology developed for the scientific study of how language relates to things outside language which, however, seems to have been insufficiently thought-out and as a result some of the inferences made in conclusion are open to question, making the ambitious project more of a cautionary tale than an applicable solution. The project’s author, cognitive linguist Karen Sullivan (2009), selected 160 short statements by painters representing a broad spectrum of painterly styles, for the purpose of the study divided into three groups: purely representational, partly representational, and nonrepresentational. She then analyzed the authors’ conceptualizations of their own art by applying the cognitive theory of conceptual blending to identify the correlation between their works and the metaphors they use to describe them. The main conclusion of the analysis is as welcome as it is predictable: a clear pattern is identified which shows that artists belonging to each group may use the same metaphoric words (*language* being the key concept) to tell their “stories,”

but they “exhibit different conceptual processes” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 517), with representational ones tending to focus on the subject matter and their paintings’ effect on the viewer, nonrepresentational painters applying similar vocabulary to talk about colors, shapes, and the artistic process, and those in between using a mixture of both. These differences, Sullivan writes, translate directly into generic consequences: representational artists privilege “genres of writing that represent real-world people, and events, such as ‘journalism,’ ‘biography,’ ‘autobiography,’ or ‘diary’” (2009, p. 552) and nonrepresentational ones choose “‘poetry’ rather than ‘journalism’” as better suited for the “aesthetic” and “affective” “impact” they aim at (p. 557).

The biggest weakness of Sullivan’s project stems from her corpus consisting of ekphrastic (a limitation in its own right) statements by mostly young, aspiring artists preselected for presentation in *New American Painting*, a “juried exhibition-in-print,” that is, texts that by definition lack the authoritativeness similar declarations by historically significant artists would have, which the author acknowledges by citing Paul Cézanne as an example that contravenes her findings. It is not so much the dubiousness of the method applied that is the problem here, though, but rather the absence of clear selection and categorization criteria needed for designing a comprehensive analysis of such material. Surprisingly but symptomatically, there are very few instances of critical literature about artists’ writings that recognize the significance of this fact by acknowledging that, as Stein would say, “this is very important because it is important” (1975, p. 90). One notable exception is an essay by Richard Hobbs (2002) titled *Reading Artists’ Words*, in which the scholar highlights the correspondences between artists’ visual and verbal works that reveal “patterns of meaning” and “reliable ideological and cultural grids” (p. 173). In an effort to identify the exact reasons why artists’ texts are rarely studied as literature despite their being so often referred to in monographs, exhibition catalogs, and cultural histories, he points to the “widespread distrust, notably within the French semiotic tradition, of the notion of a synergetic relationship between visual images and artists’ words, on the grounds that the specificity of each medium separates them fundamentally” (p. 173). As the title of the present article also suggests,

the key to answering the nagging questions that interpose themselves in all discussions of this subject, is, first of all, to formulate them correctly and comprehensively. Hobbs offers a list of such questions to which I fully subscribe, so I want to close these remarks by quoting it in full:

[H]ow can we define [artists' writings] as a mode of expression? How, indeed, do we read them? Do they have common features that combine to give a distinct category of cultural activity or are they simply a confused jumble of various types of verbal creation? How do they relate to the visual creativity that is their author's main activity? Do we read them in the same way as any text that we encounter, or by assuming that a form of hybridity is at stake in which the artist's creativity becomes dual, verbal as well as visual? Would such hybridity demand an analogous hybridity of reading practice in which we shift the horizons of our expectation to a word and image dynamic? Are we right, above all, to give artists' writings special status and authority in attempts at exegesis of visual works of art? (Hobbs, 2002, p. 175)

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