

TRISTAN UNRAU

2017

*All your own possibilities or impossibilities, probabilities and improbabilities are always
interrelated with all the others.*¹

Reassurance should come in the form of possibility.

1.

Picture a scene for a painting. Probably a room and if so a wall. Or maybe the painting has yet to be hung and is resting on blocks so its bottom edge is not scuffed. Or perhaps the owner does not care about scuffing the bottom edge and it is carelessly propped up against a table or a chair. Maybe the painting sits silently in the storage racks of a museum or in a wealthy collector's vault, or maybe it is a small painting by a child tacked to the fridge. Now, the camera slowly aligns itself with the surface of the painting and crops out the world so that we are left with a picture, its context receding into the past. Oddly, the possibilities for speculation do not narrow as we crop and zoom. Here we find both the powerlessness of the picture and its inexorable attraction, the destabilizing plurality of what *might* be pictured. We are reminded that creative activity has the capacity not only to make commodities but to remake a world.

T J Clark has suggested that there is “no more inappropriate, more absurd” word than power when we talk about art today. In *Image of the people*, Clark tries to “reconstruct the conditions in which art was, for a time, a disputed, even an effective, part of the

historical process.”² Today, we acknowledge that there is little opportunity for painting to effect change. We look back wonderingly to that rare moment in history when a painting could be ‘an effective part of the historical process.’ It seems absurd to imagine the Courbets, which are now hanging silently in museums and collections, as once having functioned as political anarchists. Now, through an interlocking series of historical twists and turns - some tragic, some comic - painting remains propped up as a representative of the function of art in general but is no longer allowed entry into rooms where decisions are being made, it has lost its seat at the table and is outside passively looking in. *But what a nice breeze is out there! Full of the promise of summer and the smell of jasmine.*

“After the rise and the fall of the unfettered market, leaders of nations states wonder what to do with each other, as much as a painter keeps searching for the right kind of subject to paint.”³ The multiplicity of options today is a multiplicity that painting is unable to grasp or control. But this failing is advantageous for painting. We remember that “the world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives, not as world view or system but in sharp particularity.”⁴ And when we enter the space we make for ourselves when we think of our own looking we do not find art history or theory ‘but something so particular that it’s aptness to description may have little function for any kind of history or may disfigure history’s potential to be accomplished.”⁵ All this to suggest an ideal: that the painter, by cultivating and following their own interests can offer an object that conserves

and displays its contradictions. Thus, painting remains complicit within the networks of power and consumption while silently establishing a rapport with the uncoded energies of its viewer.

2.

A painting contains its own voice, its own style but why should the painter? A certain image or metaphor may drift into consciousness without our having worked to place it there. It then insists on its reproduction and we are driven to bring it out into the light so to speak, and only then try to tease out its meaning. Here the painting becomes a repository for misunderstanding and here we find the painter, having taken an advance on their rationality, slouched in a chair, absentmindedly calculating how to represent.

We are standing in front of a large not quite square painting of a garden. There are shallow stairs leading up and into the garden in which the carefully planted flora merge into an impenetrable brush. Maybe the garden is scheduled to be pruned in just a few days and we are seeing it at its most unruly. The brush marks are a uniform width and length and it looks as if the painting accumulated them over time. Monet or Pissarro can be felt somewhere in this painting but there are also more contemporary, knowing lines among the thick, short brushwork, lines found in cartoons that connote an intention to mean, in some ways the opposite of an impression. This line work can also be read, beyond illusionism, as fluctuation, contrast, acknowledgement (and therefore aesthetic

allowance) of an uncertainty. We are stuck wondering if this painting could be ironic but finally the lilac brush marks and inviting stairs convince us that the interaction we are having is much more obvious. Is knowing how to interact with the world based primarily on belief, or something much more fundamental? We find comfort in the structuralists that try to convince us our utterances and interpretations are not meaningless or meaningful but simply contained within grammar, held firmly in place by an indifferent logic. What kind of meaning can the gardener ask for when, if their gardening stops for only a little while, the garden turns back to its wild structure?

A painting of a crocodile hangs nearby. The crocodile takes up the center of the painting and is crying or at least shedding a few tears. We can see it is raining out the windows painted behind the reptile, and there is a TV in the bottom left corner. The tears seem genuine, pointing to a sincere sorrow unlike in the idiom, crocodile tears, where a show of emotion is used to manipulate and betray. We are moved by the tears, wondering if they are caused by what has been playing on the television or precipitated by the rain. We feel somehow close to the crocodile but is this really what the painting wants us to feel? Can we so quickly dismiss the meaning of the idiom on which the painting is clearly based? We feel our reaction to this painting is too simple, that it demands more subtlety, but then we think of Wittgenstein's encouraging us not to "feel as if we have to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers."⁶ We should be careful to avoid digging for subtleties when the subjects of our everyday thinking can always be

found right on the surface of paintings, waiting to be taken up, played with, put on.

We turn to find a portrait of a nun. She is biting one corner of her lower lip as she looks up and out of the frame, her eyes fixed on someone or something. Her look suggests the realization of the possibility of desire, the first threads of lust which simply and radically forget the system involved in denying them their fabric and in so doing empty that system of its power. The nun offers us a symbol for what is found elsewhere in the room, a relation to desire and agency - a longing *for* but also, simultaneously, a self realization. Is this found in our looking or in the paintings themselves?

There are more paintings in this room among the crocodile and the nun, all different styles and sizes. The paintings find their precedents somewhere along a history of painting, they seem to want to suggest to us that painting isn't just about painting anymore, that painting is a way of thinking, that to paint is a kind of telling and you can do all sorts of things with that. If we realize that style can't contain painting we have to be willing to let painting be expressive of an act of thinking about painting but not exactly self-consciously. These paintings both reflect and deflect an organizing principle, they accumulate around studied relations and let those relations to grow out of hand, like the garden yet to be pruned.

Bibliography

1 *Correction*, Thomas Bernhard

2 *Image of the People*, T. J. Clark

3 *Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures*, Jesse Mckee

4 *Not Knowing*, Donald Barthelme

5 *Addressing Ekphrasis: A Prolegomenon to the Next*, Adrian Rifkin

6 *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein