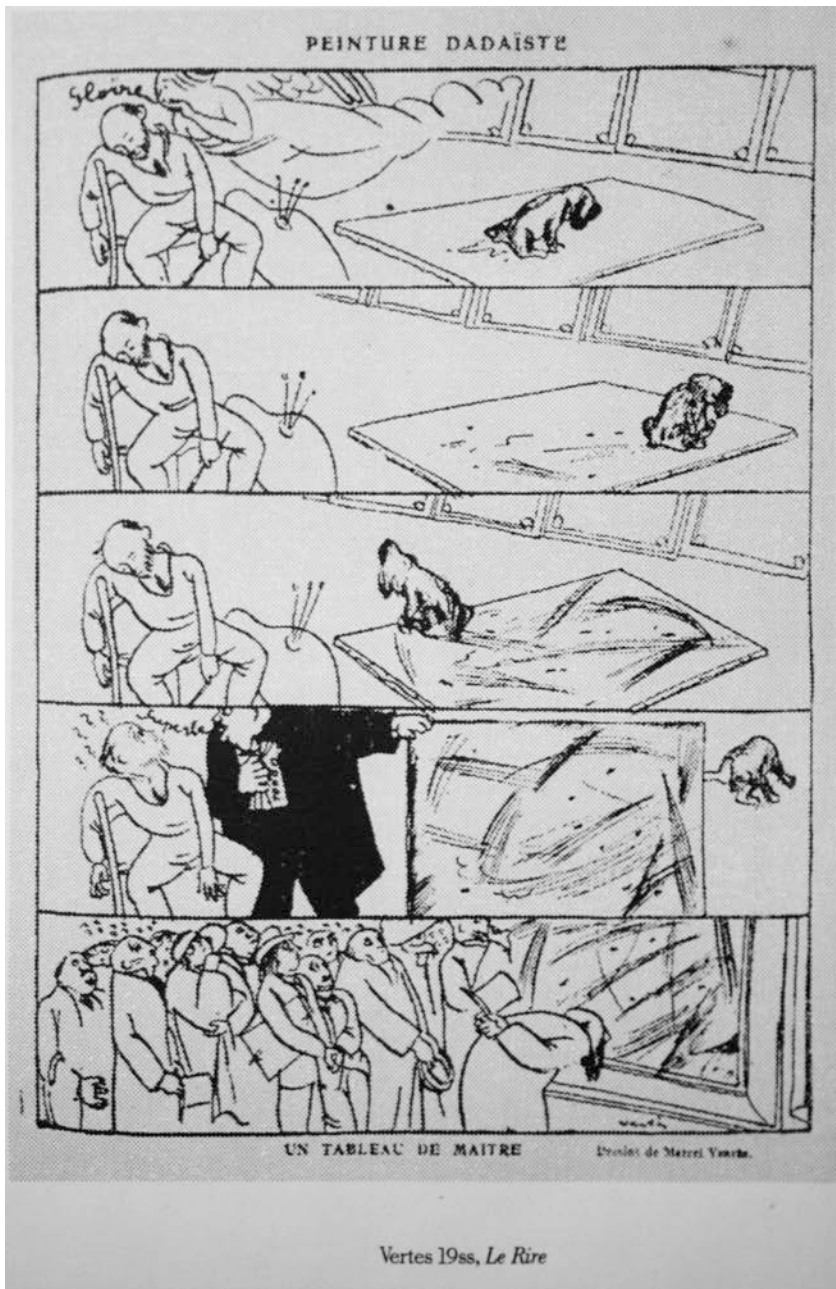


Gestural Painting from the Year Zero (unpublished talk, 2010)

Mark Harris



Early 20th-century cartoon from Le Rire

I'll start by showing two film clips depicting a certain philistinism behind gestural painting. Although it may seem to you that by kicking off with these parodies I want to waste no time in skewering gestural paintings, I will be trying to show the opposite, suggesting instead that they be valued negatively as establishing "a painter from the year zero", as the Dutch might say, from where to jump start a reevaluation of the idiom. The first of these films is very well known, at least in Britain where it had its moment of inspiration for the yBa generation. Made in 1961, Tony Hancock's *The Rebel* is a fairly clumsy comic standard that depicts the adventures of a middle-aged London businessman who quits his city job to become a bohemian artist in Paris. To its credit there is hardly a cliché of contemporary art practice left unearthed.



still from *The Rebel*, Tony Hancock

The Rebel is a good example of the paradoxes of English populism, skeptical of cultural pretensions and disdainful of any conformism (whether by businessmen or Parisian bohemians), and tolerating entrepreneurialism only if it's the outcome of eccentric or upstart individualism. At no time does it take any of the art seriously. Everything is shunted down to the lowest common denominator of unredeemable, less than average, skill-less practice, where anyone bothered enough could have a go can do just as well as the next person. And that is exactly the quality and value of gestural painting that I want to discuss here, that anyone has the right to enter a realm where it seems ridiculous to claim one gesture is any better than another. The interest (though not too serious an interest) taken in *The Rebel* by some British artists in the 90s reflects the celebration of this bottom-rung position for a new start to making art. The rules and standards of the previous decade disintegrate in the recession of the 90s and almost any joke or prank is now more interesting than once-esteemed artwork from the past.

In many ways this is the same punk rock tactic, born of the previous grim recession of the 70s, taking a decade to work its way into the art world. It is a new generation of young artists figuring out how to survive and not bothering to ask permission for their casual resourcefulness and celebration of adequacy. (Sarah Lucas). One of the explicit references to *The Rebel* came from this BANK installation in one of their many self-curated shows. The chequered floor is quoted from the film and Hancock's theatrical gestures are referenced in the paint-splattered plastic sheets that divide up the space. (BANK)

Wayne Winner's House of Wax
A Presentation
 DDOG 34 Underwood Street London N1 7JX 0171 336 6834
 20th December 1996 - 24 January 1997 Fri - Sun 12 - 4pm
 Private View Sat 15th December 4 - 9pm

House of Wax

The project House of Wax features a group of young artists chosen because of their attractive characteristics. Curated by Wayne Winner, the show is characterised by exhibiting engaging photographs of the invited artists alongside their artwork, their visual appearance being of central importance in the curating process.

The invited artists are young and conventionally visually attractive, they appear as if socially primed for a key role in the world. Their art, which they prioritise regarding their vision, is not considered an issue within Wayne Winner's curating process.

This does not mean that the work in itself is unimportant, but is seen via the artist's face value. Nor does the curating process attack the artists personally, they have fallen into a convention that society has made a commodity.

"It is very important to me that this show is successful and to do that I have utilised valuable assets that these remarkable young people possess. Aside from their work they have a value which is immediately transferable to all sorts of different circumstances. That commodity goes everywhere they go, is present everywhere they are. I think they are all very attractive. I think they are all extremely intelligent artists."

Wayne Winner 1996

Wayne Winner's work utilises a wide range of media, most recently in time based painting, objects and video. He accentuates the qualities of cultural objects and values, "improving" them until they become defunct, or worthless. In his own words he makes things that are "too clever for their own good". These characteristics are manifest in his time based work. In Winner's ongoing "Winner" series the attributes of power, domination and respect are pursued so vigorously the antithesis applies, the values mutating to an abject or pointless state.



BANK, Dog-u-mental, 1996

The second film is more complicated and less well-known, perhaps on account of its lubricious content commingling with decadent connoisseurship and psychological trauma. In an exploration of masculinity, Paul Cox's 1983 *Man of Flowers* mixes visual culture, comedy, murder, mateship, lesbianism, scopophilia, and sexual attraction across age barriers, along the way exaggerating the contrast of bourgeois and bohemian lifestyles. An elderly aesthete, the man of flowers, is being blackmailed by the painter boyfriend of a young woman whom he employs to take off her clothes for his delectation. Memories of a deep childhood attachment to his mother, frustrated by his brutish father, underlay the aesthete's behaviour. The film follows his inventive approach at getting rid of the boyfriend and by implication sparing the world from more dreadful action painting. In this clip we see the painter resuming work on a new piece.



still from *Man of Flowers*, Paul Cox

I'm struck by the role of animals in these scenes, and in the caricature I showed you at the start. As creator or audience, these animals are the hapless sidekick, a Stan Laurel to Oliver Hardy, critically casting the painter as more incompetent than any creature. They nudge the cultural leveling down to a new low, implying that the work could be made better by animals. One aspect of the context for this film is a prevalent Australian masculinity (now diminished, I'd like to think) which would greet anything cultural with a bantering perplexity. Those of you who know your Gutai, the Kyoto-based performance art group of the 50s, won't need reminding how much both film clips draw on working procedures by artists like Shozo Shimamoto, Kazuo Shiraga, and Michio Yoshihara.



In other words, these were knowing routines, carefully choreographed to be like what was already out there. You might have noticed The Birthday Party poster on the studio wall behind the telephone. This was Nick Cave's band from 1978-83, with that particular record coming out in 1980. By this inclusion Cox is probably only confounding his signifiers, layering the meritorious with the pernicious to impede easy disentanglement. Yet once made, this link between the rawest kind of punk rock and gestural painting has us viewing this sophomoric abstract expressionism with more empathy as the only place where any individual could start painting.

In essays written in 1979 and 1984 Joseph Kosuth lamented the death of painting, and of gesture specifically, not because he was going to miss it but because in his opinion it was taking too long to expire. Kosuth had succeeded in gaining recognition as a primary spokesperson for American Conceptual Art as it grew in importance in the late 60s and he had also succeeded in getting one of his early pieces, *One and Three Chairs*, to be credited as foundational to that movement. Whatever its liminal status at origin as a somewhat materialized dematerialized body of work, and its subsequent ascent towards what has become the most marketable contemporary practice (known now as International Conceptualism), Conceptual Art had pitched its right to accession as most valued avant-gardist art form on its condition of intellectual rigor, its prioritization of idea over material, and its uncommodifiability. It saw itself as cleaning the temple of contemporary art, long grown polluted by traffic in debased and sybaritic paintings. There was a position then for Kosuth to be defending as leader of the only critically challenging practice in town, yet every time he got the job done the galleries would start to fill up again with paintings that seemed to relish their lack of concept and political engagement, or at best to allow it to become buried by concessions to visual pleasure and interpretability, by including figurative imagery, color, or gesture.

In 1981, right between these two Kosuth essays, Mary Kelly, another celebrated conceptual artist, published a similar attack on painting (it was called "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism") by evaluating post-WWII examples of art criticism whose interpretation of abstract expressionism had, she claimed, established a normative matrix for what subsequently counted as the most valued form of pictorial representation. Kelly's analysis had less of Kosuth's frustration at this stubborn refusal of painting to acknowledge its own redundancy, for she wanted to understand how painting's signature gestures served inveterate conditions by which subjectivity was formed, acclaimed, and marketed. The painted gesture for Kelly signified a ready capitulation by artists to demands by galleries and collectors who, in her narrative, expected a marketplace to be filled with packaged subjectivities delineated and validated by signature gestures. If artists were better

able to understand such rigidifying conditions, then more effective ways for alternative art practices to circumvent them might be discovered. Whether due to Kelly's kind of critical analysis, or artists' smart use of photo-mechanical reproduction, or simply market forces constantly looking around for new product, something like this certainly did occur in the 1980s. When we sobered up from our intoxication with Neo-Expressionism, we eventually realized that the more unusually innovative art of that decade had been made by artists like Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine, whose photo-based work thrived on questioning assumptions of subjectivity, authorship, originality, and expressivity.

But long before this achievement was recognized, both Kosuth and Kelly were alarmed by the return of the same, by the revivals of figurative painting, and the persistence of monochrome painting; old work under new labels like Transavantguardia, Neo-expressionism, and Radical Painting. Both assumed that a role had always, and still, existed for art in the sense of a critical engagement with the discourses, culture, and history of the time. Theirs was an ethical stance presuming a role for art as a progressive, intellectually responsible propulsion towards some kind of better future. This acclaim of the virtue of clear ideas, this assumption of positions of authority regarding the design and delivery of such a future, this display of mastery, is all too familiar from the history of an avant-gardism that presumes a role in social advancement. Eclipsed by this kind of authority has been an equally interesting historical response to social demands on art. The positions of negation, of irresponsibility, have followed a different critical track for not wanting any part in that economy of value and productivity that was historically associated with the bourgeois justification of industry and empire as conducive to universal prosperity.

Inevitably Kosuth's and Kelly's critiques are affected by their self-interest as leading conceptualists. Aristocrats of that world, it's understandable that they would distrust this sudden influx of the less responsible and less rational artists. Beneath their impatience, the intellectualization of their insights, and their ascription of blame to a corrupting marketplace, is a failure to recognize other forms of subversion than the kind of cultural critique, coming out of Frankfurt School thinking, that they particularly value.

I'm going to use what's left of my time here to ask whether one or two other perspectives on gesture in painting could afford a more productive appraisal. Perhaps we can see if these gestural signifiers of expression and subjectivity might be read against the grain to show other aspects of what is achieved in these kinds of paintings. The assumption by Kosuth and Kelly that where painted gestures signify an expression of difference, a subjectivity seeking to be differentiated and failing through sameness (failing through the morphological similarity of gestures and paintings) oversimplifies what has always seemed to me to be a complicated set of procedures in painting. It's likely that there are other kinds of intellectual engagements in play in painting, gestural or otherwise, than the little conceded by those two writers. But more important for our focus is the possibility that gesture serves to make paintings similar to one another rather than different, that painters use gesture to surrender their individuality and not to assert it. If this is the case, then the enunciation by gesture cannot be subsumed under the same categories of expressionist naivety or capitulation to market demand for individuality as Kelly and Kosuth maintain. There may be naivety and economic interests in play, but they will have to be defined in a less monolithic way.

There are several ways that I see this desire for sameness happening. Detached from any representation of the world, gestures aspire to resemble one another. The idea that they "represent" other gestures is appealing, but hard to substantiate outside of the kind of representation shown by Roy Lichtenstein's brushstrokes or Fabian Marcaccio's and David Reed's. In the end those kinds of examples have to be described as images representing themselves, that is they are designed to represent a very particular sign.



Roy Lichtenstein



Fabian Marcaccio



David Reed

But in the way that more inadvertent gestures also aspire to the indifferent alignment of natural matter in the world, to the way that matter disports itself, haphazardly or orderly, suggests a wish for disappearance into the fabric of things. The various ways that drips, pours, and splashes of paint mimic natural processes of flow, erosion, or entropy reveal the desire to be like other things, rather than to stand out from them.



Rosy Keyser

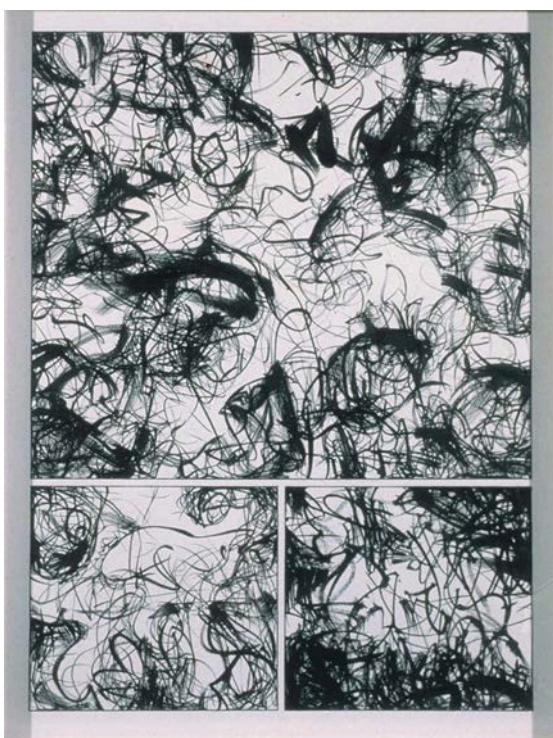
Such thoughts are strengthened by revisiting two early-twentieth century ideas: Sigmund Freud's Pleasure Principle and André Breton's Automatic Writing. With an incisive pessimism felt in the wake of the Great War, Freud's 1919 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* proposes that we are no different from other organisms in desiring perfectly unchanging circumstances, or quiescence, as he put it. Our cultural and social endeavors have come about in response to the pressure of irritating external pressures which we would be happier without. The instincts of self-preservation only serve to ensure that we will live long enough to die in the way most appropriate to us—"What we are left with," he says "is the fact that the organism wishes to die in its own fashion." This extraordinary idea of Freud's gains interest for me in relation to recent painting. Can it be applied to explain repetitive cultural practices? The recurrence of gestural painting that so upsets Kosuth and Kelly, and which continues unabated in our time, may indeed be dying, but only in its own fashion, by a prolonged determination of the best way to secure absolute stasis. In such a story the whirling brushstrokes and gestures of individual paintings might be imagined as microcosms of a larger centripetal force in which all the gestures of all the paintings participate, as if in a grand dance of death, like the petri dish protozoa whose equilibrium had inspired Freud's speculations about morbid quiescence in the first place.

It is Peter Bürger's interpretation of Breton's principles of Automatic Writing that strike me as relevant here. Bürger argues that the Surrealist achievement of enabling all to become creators, as either dreamers or automatic writers, collapsed cultural recipients into producers. By de-differentiating artist from audience, this particular avant-garde achieved the brief integration of art into life. Bürger writes "...instructions for the making of a Dadaist poem and Breton's for the writing of automatic texts have the character of recipes....the recipe is to be taken quite literally as suggesting a possible activity on the part of the recipient....All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one's life as best one can." (p53) Prioritizing instinct, routine, repetition, and abstraction, gesture enacts this democratization of art making. With patrician intolerance, Kosuth and Kelly question gestural painting for the very reasons it is important, in that it enables access to the multitude. In the wonderful 1933 essay "The Automatic Message," Breton invites this kind of creative participation from the midst of everyday actions, contemplating the smoke from a cigar or the congealing food on the dinner plate. He writes "Surrealism's distinctive feature is to have proclaimed the total equality of all normal human beings before the subliminal

message, to have constantly maintained that this message constitutes a common patrimony, of which everyone is entitled to a share, and which must very soon, and at all costs, stop being seen as the prerogative of the chosen few.” (p138 Break of Day) Through their parody, sophomoric humor, and possible contempt, these fictional films of paintings being made, and these cartoons of gestural work show how far this democratization of access is achieved at different moments in the last century. It is either fear or enthusiasm for what could not be stopped—the empowerment of anyone bothered enough to pick up a brush—that led to these kinds of representations.

Returning to Freud’s models, the imposing manipulation of materials in classic gestural paintings, the masculinity of the approaches shown to comic effect in these films, can be taken as a kind of manifest representation concealing a latent desire for sameness and stasis. The gestures do not display a domination of nature but describe a surrender to tranquility. Material in these paintings largely falls where it will. Things are allowed to be. The paintings seek a kind of ineffectualness, the gestures become trace material, the result of actions autonomous of external worldly demands. The gestures are directed at no typical modernist goal like economic advancement or usable knowledge, nor can they become a resource. It is in their passivity and sameness that they resist the pressure to be meritorious and meaningful.

There is an insightful series of drawings by Jim Shaw titled Dream Object (A Comic Story I was Working on that was Entirely Abstract Brushmarks) which plays, in a kind of indeterminate postmodern fashion, with Breton’s and Freud’s categories. Shaw would routinely write down and depict his dreams until, hundreds of drawings later the rigour of the task exhausted him and he stopped. From these dream investigations came another series of pieces he called “Dream Objects,” generally one-off bizarre things or images that had surfaced in his unconscious during the night. Remember that for Breton and the Surrealists, the dream democratizes creativity. Shaw’s drawings flatten some of Freud’s categories of the Dream Work where the latent repressed or unconscious material, towards which the manifest narrative of the dream normally points, here consists of no more than what we encounter on the surface. The dreamt comic book consists of nothing but abstract brushmarks which themselves reveal no deeper reality. They resemble nothing so much as cigarette smoke. As part of a comic they have to be narrative material, which is of course not a very appropriate reduction for abstract expressionism, given that it has provided us with the quintessential narrative of manifest and latent content in painting. Think of the passionate psyche supposedly revealed by Jackson Pollock’s gestures or the latent melancholy manifested by Mark Rothko’s evanescent hovering rectangles. By contrast, this narrative of Shaw’s goes nowhere, only repeating, in panel after panel, the non-signifying mist of gestures.



Jim Shaw

The first job I had after leaving school was in a small furniture painting factory in West London. Two guys on one side made the raw furniture and two of us on the other side painted it, stained it, and gilded it to pass as pseudo-antique, for customers who couldn't afford the real thing or didn't want to ask too many questions about authenticity. The rigors of the painting process sublimated a primal battle over the single factory radio, with us two painters tuning into jazz while the furniture makers kept switching it to reggae and pop. Using only oil paint, we had to apply two layers of primer, and two of undercoat, sanding between coats to remove any tooth. Then we would finish off with three coats of gloss, sanding again each time, and most importantly, brushing the paint perpendicular to the previous layer to weave the layers together and hide the strokes. The entire objective was to hide any trace of the brush so that the final coat would be as smooth as ice. Although this was almost forty years ago I can easily summon up the smell of the paint dust that always filled the air, I liked it so much. I also remember the feel of applying the paint and the impossibility of totally concealing the gesture that constituted each brushstroke, if only as somatic memory. I tell this story as a reminder that the extremely wide gamut of painted gestures calls for a versatile and subtle attunement by maker or receiver, and will finish by suggesting that the generosity of this idiom is to continue to assert that the hand behind the painted furniture, as with these paintings of these films and images, can be anyone's hand.