Does Art Have a Spectator?
Arnold Berleant

In an analysis of the aesthetic situation, painting must surely offer the clearest paradigm. The presence of a specific object that can usually be located with reasonable clarity, of a viewer who attends to it, and both in a setting that encourages focused experiences, would seem to be a model for the conditions under which aesthetic perception takes place. While questions can be raised on all sides about the actions, reactions, and contributions of each element in the situation, its structure seems to shine through with a clarity all the more appealing in discussions of a subject that carries more than its own share of obscurity. The one disconcerting factor in this comfortable equilibrium comes from the uncertain nature of the key relation here, that of the viewer and the object.

In "Art and Its Spectators," (JAAC, XLV/1 (Fall 1886), 5-17), David Carrier offers us a lucid assessment of various ways in which that relation has figured among some recent commentators, most of whom are art historians. He discovers a continuum of four stages, a sequence that ranges on the one end from the classical Albertian account of Gombrich, in which the spectator stands before the work in a one-way perspectival relation to the painting, to Foucault, who denies that the picture is seen. Between these poles he distributes two intermediates: Steinberg, who finds a reciprocal relation between spectator and painting, and Fried, who eliminates an external, separated spectator entirely (p.6). This order elaborates a fundamental opposition which Carrier obtains from Svetlana Alpers between Albertian and non-Albertian art, that is, between art in which space is constructed on the basis of linear perspective that begins at the eye of the spectator, and art that in one fashion or another denies this.

We can be grateful for every effort to detect order in this most puzzling of circumstances, but certainly it should not be at a cost to the subject. One is tempted to think that this is what has occurred here: The acute observations of these commentators have been shaped into an appealing but misleading conceptual order. For not only are the differences among the four not as severe as Carrier (or Alpers) would have them; these critics are attempting in piecemeal
fashion to articulate and support the growing sense that this very aesthetic structure we find so attractive is slowly being undermined by the burrowing of historians, shaken under the assaults of psychologists of perception, and abandoned by whole regiments of artists. Let me show, for the limited purposes of this discussion, how the four commentators Carrier cited in creating his ordered sequence do not fully subscribe to that model and then indicate what this anti-analysis suggests.

Gombrich, to begin, is no true Albertian. He does not regard the painting as an object of the spectator's unidirectional perspectival gaze, of a discriminating but disinterested regard. In fact, one of the major sections of *Art and Illusion* examines "The Beholder's Share" in great detail. There and in other writings Gombrich explores various ways in which the viewer contributes to what he or she sees. Gombrich, in fact, is at pains to point out "the beholder's share in all reading of spatial arrangement" (*Art and Illusion*, p. 246), whereas the art of perspective errs in wanting "the image to appear like the object and the object like the image" (*ibid.*, p. 257). Gombrich's discussion is replete with references to optical illusions, an immediately persuasive type of spectator participation intended to illustrate what often (but not invariably) occurs in painting in less bluntly confrontational forms. Gombrich not only calls on such illusions but turns to a variety of other evidence in visual perception to support the same point, such as caricatures, portraits, and the experimental work of psychologists like Ames and Thouless.

Steinberg's case suggest something different, the misdirection in construing the aesthetic situation as the relation between a viewer and a discrete object. Carrier's example here is a discussion of the Caravaggio's in the Cerasi Chapel, in which Steinberg argues that the placement of the paintings reflects the artist's recognition of the fact that they would be viewed from an angle and that the subsequent transference of *The Death of the Virgin* to the Louvre requires knowledge of its original location in order to appreciate it properly. Carrier interprets Steinberg to be calling attention to the interplay of spectator and painting, where the art object expands to include its historical background and its architectural surroundings. Recognizing the interdependence of painting and spectator acknowledges, however, not just the fact of their physical relation but of their mutuality, their reciprocal interplay. Carrier's reliance of the initial assumption of an aesthetic situation structured of essentially discrete elements tends to obscure the essential point of Steinberg's discussion, namely that there is a fusion of viewer
and painting in the Cerasi Chapel, one which literally incorporates them into a single perceptual ambiance.

Fried's intention is to show that this engagement of the viewer is part of the very design of certain paintings. The absorption of the beholder into the painting is a deliberate occurrence in certain French art of Diderot's time, in the work of Greuze, for example, as it was in that of Courbet and other progressive painters of his day. Carrier has difficulty accepting this claim and tries to show its triviality and impossibility (pp. 9-10), since he seems committed to a viewer who must be standing before the painting as a discrete object, the very presupposition these three art historians are so painstakingly trying to dispel. And when he introduces Foucault's deconstruction of *Las Meninas*, in which the painter's gaze forces the spectator to enter the painting, while the mirror which shows a reflection of the royal couple throws the location of the spectator into confusion an suggests his disappearance, there is interpretive ambiguity here, surely the reason so many commentators have been intrigued by this Velasquez. Part of Carrier's difficulty with Foucault, like his uneasiness with Steinberg and Fried, follows from his apparent commitment to the idea of a separate and discrete art object, which, ironically, is part of the very Albertian heritage these critics are attempting to dispel.

Casting the issue in terms of "art and its spectators" reflects that presupposition. A spectator is not identical with the aesthetic viewer or beholder, as Gombrich, Steinberg, Fried, and Foucault have variously characterized that person. The spectator occupies a special sort of position, a place apart that was so central to the eighteenth century account of aesthetic experience. The classic description was that of Joseph Addison, who characterized Mr. Spectator as a person who lives "in the world rather as a spectator of mankind that as one of the species . . . without ever meddling with any practical part in life." (*The Sir Roger de Coverly Papers*, No. 1 (1711))

For all its clarity and initial plausibility, the traditional model of the aesthetic situation, with its discrete viewer and object, is both inadequate and misleading. Indeed, this model no longer holds, if it ever worked at all. Not only has the viewer entered the painting; the boundaries of the painting have themselves extended both to engage the space in front of the painting, as in the Cerasi Chapel, and to incorporate the viewer into the picture space, as in Courbet. We might even consider Foucault's disappearance of the spectator as a playful rendering of that same point. What these commentators are showing us, carefully and in
convincing detail, is the inadequacy of that classical model, a claim demonstrated in a direct manner ever more insistently by the last century of artists, themselves. These workers in perception have increasingly expanded the boundaries of the art object to incorporate its perceiver. They offer us a realm of experience in which art and object are not separate but equal, but rather one in which both are fully integrated in to a single perceptual field. It is a hard lesson for an eye guided by custom but, then, good painting never did pander convention.

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