

THE CENTER OF ATTENTION, OR, "LUCKY PIERRE"

George Stolz

*"Cada cuadro es un cristal de aristas inequívocas y rígidas separadas de los demás, isla hermética. Y, sin embargo, no sería difícil resucitar el cadáver..."*

*José Ortega y Gasset*

*«Sobre el punto de vista en las artes»*

Ortega y Gasset's essay "Meditación del marco" has a rather charmingly disingenuous structure. It opens with the philosopher presenting himself, as he undertakes to write the essay at hand, as somewhat stumped in his search for a topic with which he might be able to fill the "pliego" that is required of him. Sitting at his desk, he looks around his office in search of possible essay topics, considering each of the three different images hanging on the surrounding walls, discussing but rejecting them in turn, not, as might be expected, because they are insufficiently inspiring or interesting to his intellect as writer, but rather to the contrary, because they are far *too* interesting and inspiring to discuss in such a limited space. (Meanwhile, Ortega has slyly made not inconsiderable progress toward reaching his assigned word-count.) It then occurs to him that the frames around the paintings and photographs in his office are, at least ostensibly, of a lesser degree of interest, and therefore might be discussed properly within the allotted space (or rather what is left of that space after such a protracted preamble.) Ortega then settles into his own "reflection on the frame" — a reflection which, in fact, he has already embarked upon with his own literary "framing device."

Although "Meditacion del marco" is punctuated by further such digressions and asides, over the course of the essay Ortega does in fact arrive at at least one specific conclusion: that the frame is necessary because a work of art (understood to be two-dimensional works of art) and the wall on which it hangs belong to "two separate and antagonistic worlds," one real and one unreal, with no communication between them. The frame thus traces and in tracing bridges an ontological separation that already exists, allowing access to the "island" (a term Ortega uses more than once) of the work of art.

Art work as island, somehow at a remove from and alien to its surroundings: is such a thought, even as metaphor, accurate? Certainly not in perceptual and physical terms. A work of art, any work of art, exists in space and time, and the act of looking at it— i.e., the phenomenological, optical, retinal experience of vision — incorporates, literally and necessarily, that thing's material and temporal context, of which it simultaneously forms an intrinsic part: as far as the eye is concerned, nothing exists in isolation. Things not only gain meaning from context: the eye cannot even see without context.

Beyond the physical, perceptual realm of vision, one might also ask whether the art work *per se* exists without the *experience* of the art work. This may ring of a buddhist koan, but the question is in fact less abstruse than might at first appear. An object may or may not exist without the presence of a perceiver — such is a question for a different discussion. But as far as an *art object* is concerned, the quality that lends it its condition *as art* resides in and can only be obtained through the experience of that object *as art*, thus by necessity entailing the presence and participation of an "experiencer" — in other words, an ambassador from the 'rear world. This "experiencer" may even be — or perhaps at some point *must* be — the artist herself, who at some point during the creative process must step back, literally or figuratively, from the work she has created and consider it from a psychological distance, must experience it from without. The artist herself must at some point or in some degree exercise a kind of psychic splitting and function as observer, as perceiver, as her own "experiencer."

The inextricable correlation of a work of art with its surroundings in a larger sense — the extent to which the ostensible "irreal" is rooted in the ostensible "real" — also resides *within* the work, in its physical existence, its composition, its constituent elements. Here, again, the infamous (and ultimately non-existent) "gap between art

and life" does not so much narrow as simply evanesce. For instance, what of all the very "real" infrastructure that was necessary for the art-making process to be executed? Did the painter fabricate her own paint? Did she string together her own brushes? She may have stretched her own canvases — but did she *make* that canvas? Did she plant, cultivate and harvest its linen? Did she grow and later fell the tree on whose wood that canvas was stretched? Of course not. This list could go on and on, extending to other media. One need only consider photography, for example, to bring to the fore the extent to which the creative process cannot be individualized exclusively and entirely in the figure of a single "author," but is, rather a collaborative process. Moreover, there are many other levels of collaboration embedded within any work of art. For instance, what of influence, positive or negative, acknowledged or unacknowledged, implicit or explicit, conscious or otherwise? What of education? What of contagion? What of emulation? What of competition? What of history? What of lineage? What of desire? The creative psyche is a busy plaza, where no one is every really alone.

Thus there are not two worlds (*pace* Ortega), nor three, nor any greater number: there is only one world, with many, many, many things in it. What any work of art worth its salt aspires to is not to shy away from all those many things, not to isolate itself, but rather to become among them the *center of attention*. It aims to stand out, a condition which can all too easily (and of course understandably) be conflated with standing alone — in other words, of becoming an island. Such, however, would mark its death. And that it cannot ever fully do so, that it cannot obliterate its context, its background, its lineage, is in no way an indication of failure; to the contrary, it is precisely when all surrounding factors, material or immaterial, real or unreal, are harnessed in dynamic support of and in service to that attention-giving process, that the individual work of art can be said to have become, again, the *center of attention*, and thus to have succeeded.

The paintings by Cristina del Campo, Ismael Iglesias Serrano and Vitor Mejuto in the exhibition *Geometric and the Voyeur* embody and manifest this essential being-in-the-world quality — at times contradictory, at times paradoxical, at all times dynamic — that is the art-making impulse. They manifest it in their unkempt geometry, in their porous hybridity, in their juxtapositions and interpositions and superpositions, in their junctions and conjunctions and disjunctions, in their shifting colors and vibrant forms, in their explosive visual information, in their internal and external references, in their abstractions and near-abstractions. All of this (as well as the process of selection and presentation of the work by Ruben Polanco) is what places such art squarely in the world of which it partakes.

And now, like Ortega (and with immense gratitude to him) it seems I too have reached the end of my own *pliego* and must return once again to the world, real or otherwise. that lies beyond the treacherous shores of the island we call the page.

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