Provisional Painting Revisited

Martha Friedman
Mark Manders
Ryan Sullivan
Crystal Bridges
TO REST LIGHTLY ON THE EARTH

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

In a sequel to his 2009 article “Provisional Painting,” the author reflects, via artists oathed and unmailed, on the lure of the unfinished and the uses of doubt.

1. PAINTING IS IMPOSSIBLE

At the opening of his compact memoir A Giacometti Portrait (1985), James Lord is in a 1964 visit to Paris. He agreed to pose for Giacometti, who has proposed a “sketch” on canvas of his young American friend which is expected to require only a single sitting. They set to work in Giacometti’s dilapidated studio, situated in an alleyway in the 14th arrondissement. Things start well, but at the end of the sitting, Giacometti announces his deep dissatisfaction with the results and obliterates most of the image. He asks Lord to pose again the next day, when the process repeats itself. As more days, then weeks, go by, the artist increasingly disparages his task, canceling out each day’s efforts as Lord remains a virtual prisoner in Paris, waiting for his portrait to be finished, changing his travel reservations again and again. Finally, late one afternoon, on the 18th sitting, as the last light is going, he is able to dissuade Giacometti from painting out that day’s work, and the portrait is... “finished.” Isn’t the right word. Let’s say abandoned. Throughout Lord’s little book, which lays out the ground for his subsequent full-scale biography of the artist, published in 1997, we get to hear repeated expressions of Giacometti’s profound self-doubt. “If only I could accomplish something in drawing or painting or sculpture,” he tells Lord on the first day, “it wouldn’t be so bad. If I could just do a head, one head, just once, then maybe I’d have a chance of doing the real, a landscape, a still life. But it’s impossible.”

On the seventh day Giacometti laments: “The painting’s going worse and worse... It’s impossible to do it. Maybe I’d better give up painting forever. But the trouble is if I can’t do a painting, I can’t do a sculpture either.” On day 13: “What I’m doing is negative work... You have to do something by undoing it. Everything is disappearing piece by piece. You have to dare to give the final brush stroke that makes everything disappear.” Some of Giacometti’s artistic pessimism might be put down to a superstitious artist not wanting to jinx his work in progress, but his relentless undoings and restorations suggest that he really did mean it, that he really did feel that at—achieving whatever he desired in a painting or sculpture—was, as he says, “impossible.”

2. I HAVE BEEN “WANTING TO PAINT THIS PAINTING”

In the postwar Parisian milieu Giacometti inhabited, “negative work” was considered impeccable. Its classic expression is Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (Sartre and Giacometti were close friends and the philosopher penned numerous essays about the artist.) At one point in Being and Nothingness, Sartre conjures up a struggling writer to illustrate what he calls “the origin of
THOUGH PARTIALLY SHROUDED BY FAILURES—THE ARTIST’S, THE VIEWER’S, SOCIETY’S—
THE PAINTING IS NONETHELESS THERE, IN ALL ITS OCCLUDED AND SHABBY BEAUTY.

negation." Here's the passage, which I have altered, substituting the act of painting for that of writing:

in order for my freedom to be achieved in connection with the painting that I am painting, this painting must appear in its relation with me. On the one hand, I must discover my essence as what I have been—I have been "wishing to paint this painting," I have conceived it, I have believed that it would be interesting to paint it, and I have constituted myself in such a way that it is not possible to understand me without taking into account the fact that this painting has been my essential possibility. On the other hand, I must discover the nothingness which separates my freedom from this essence: I have been "wishing to paint," but not, nothing even what I have been, can compel me to paint it. Finally, I must discover the nothingness which separates me from what I shall be: I discover that the permanent possibility of abandoning the painting is the very condition of the possibility of painting at any moment.

There's little surprise in the idea that wanting to write a book or to paint a painting can define an individual, can be their "project." What’s important here is Sartre’s insistence that one is only free if one can abandon that project at any moment. But what sort of book is written under such conditions, what sort of painting gets painted? What does it mean to believe that in order to create a work of art one must entertain the "permanent possibility of abandoning it, and to believe that something called "freedom" inheres in this situation? What does it mean to say, with Giacometti, that art is "impossible"? What are the consequences if a work of art is produced under the sign of abandonment, negation, impossibility? Until very recently, these questions sounded very old-fashioned. The existential self-questioning, the doubt, the anguish, all those hallmarks of mid-20th-century art, have long been put aside, superseded, forgotten, laughed out of the room. With the eclipse of Abstract Expressionism circa 1960, new modes of art-making were uncovered in which the kinds of doubts that troubled artists from Cézanne to Giacometti became largely irrelevant. They were replaced by a solid work ethic, by an emphasis on production, by attention to surfaces (in both a material and a psychological sense), by coolness, by social rather than individual identity; in short, Giacometti’s gloomy, double-filled studio was replaced by Warhol’s Factory. Even as James Lord was faithfully recording it, Giacometti’s artistic ingenuity was already obsolete.

3. DRIVEN INTO A CORNER

Although his career has been the subject matter and urged away from it after less than two decades, Philip Guston was able to articulate better than anyone the central experience of Abstract Expressionism. He summed up his attitude in the 1965 statement "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility," in which he describes his studio situation in terms that sound like they were taken right out of Being and Nothingness: "You begin to feel as you go on working that unless painting proves its right to exist by being critical and self-judging, it has no reason to exist at all—or is not even possible."

As we well know, within two years of saying this Guston concluded that no abstract painting he might attempt had a "reason to exist."

The year after he wrote "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility," Guston spoke about his work in a public forum at Boston University. The transcript is full of his characteristic brilliance and self-analyses. One of the most interesting passages is one in which he discusses what he feels is still important about Abstract Expressionism. Guston insists that the issues Abstract Expressionism raised regarding painting were "the most revolutionary problems posed and still are," despite the fact that so many people (artists, critics, curators) had tried to kill the movement off. The error of these would-be murderers is to mistake Abstract Expressionism as a mere "style," as a certain way of painting. It's a cinch to get rid of a style, as Guston says, "After 10 years or 15 years, you're bored sick of it. Younger painters come along and farm it against it."
The revolution of Abstract Expressionism, however, was not a matter of any stylistic innovation; instead, Guston says, it "revolves around the issue of whether it's possible to create

ate in our society at all." He immediately draws a distinction between creating and simply producing art:

Everybody can make pictures, thousands of people go to school, thousands go to galleries, museums, it becomes not only a way of life now, it becomes a way to make a living. In our kind of democracy this is going to proliferate like mad. In the next ten years there will be even much more than there is now. There'll be the whole costume and galleries and pictures. Everybody will be making pictures.

Guston is being impressively prophetic here, even if the present level of picture-making (and every other kind of art-making) is beyond anything he could have imagined. Guston's main point at Boston University was that the state of things in 1960 was very different from the original experience of the Abstract Expressionists around 1960 when, in his words, you felt as if you were driven into a corner against the wall with no piece to stand, just the place you occupied, as if the act of painting itself was not making a picture, there are plenty of pictures in the world—why clutter up the world with pictures?—it was as if you had to prove to yourself that truly the act of creation was still possible. Whether it was just possible.

INTERLUDI: The artist has chosen not to let us see the entirety of any of the paintings in the show. One has an old artmore jammed up against it, leaving only the margins of the painted canvas visible (broad gestures, drips, areas of scumbling and glimpses of rolling de Kooning-esque light). Another is barely visible through a much-cressed and torn piece of plastic sheeting. Multiple layers of plastic sheeting, black or transparent, are draped over another painting, though one of the bottom corners has been left uncovered and a tear in the black plastic reveals an area of painted canvas, but visible only dimly through the underlayer of transparent plastic; onto the surface of a third painting the artist has glued a fray-d带上k, colored dab brown like a piece of army surplus. Rather than being smoothed out into, the brown fabric has been irregularly gathered and tied to resemble both classical drapery and an armadillo bed.

Having previously avoided the medium of painting throughout his lengthy career as a maker of sculptures, performances and conceptual provocations, the artist has now insured that there will always be something between the viewer and the painting; the painting will never give all of itself, nor will the artist ever give all of himself; something will always escape us, and maybe even something is that is at the center of the work. But though it remains partially shrouded by failur — the artist’s, the viewer’s, society’s—the painting is nonetheless there, in all its occluded and shabbily beauty.

4. FINISHED/UNFINISHED

Once upon a time, New York painters tore themselves apart trying to determine what constituted a "finished" painting. During the famous Studio 54 conference of Abstract Expressionists, William Baziotes tied himself into verbal knots trying to classify what he and his fellow painters thought about the subject: "In talking about the necessity to "finish" a thing, we then said American painters 'finish' a thing that looks "unfin-
When the artist exhibits his work, he generally leaves the gallery or museum lighting exactly as it had been arranged for whatever show was previously in the space. But for all the desultoriness that seems to go into their making and presentation, his paintings have a remarkably consistent focus. His compositions resemble remnants salvaged from the shipwreck of modernist abstraction: melancholy, vulnerable, absolutely convinced of their own necessity, lying in quiet wait for viewers willing to give a place of their lives to a rectangle of barely-theness.

6. IT JUST HAPPENED . . .

Provisional paintings can show signs of struggle and can also look "too easy," in the case of easy-looking provisionality, we encounter a paradox: the struggle with the problematicas of painting results in a painting that shows no signs of struggle in the sense that the finished place displays a minimum amount of work (Michael Knepper, for instance). But in other cases we can see the record of the artist's struggles, though not necessarily accompanied by Giacometti-style anguish (Rausu De Kyster). But whether it looks easy or arduous, the provisional work is always opposed to the monumental, the official, the permanent. It closes the door on the era of the high-production-value art market (Hirst-Koons-Murakami-Currin), it wants to hover at the edge of nonexistence. It wants to rest lightly on the earth.

Robert Ryman is often cited as a maker of "last paintings," but read this quote from him and ask yourself if he doesn't sound more like Matisses than Reinhart: "The one quality I look for and I think is in all good painting, is that it has to look as if no struggle was involved. It has to look as if it was the most natural thing—it just happened and you don't have to think about how it happened. It has to look very easy even though it wasn't." In a 1970 interview, Martin Barr, a French painter whose work was often fiercely provisional, approvingly quotes Jean Cocteau: "The work must erase the work; people must be able to say, I could have done that."
7. AUTO-ICONOCLASM

Provisionally annihilates the painting, conveys to us the dis-
sidence of the painter from a prevailing style. Once, not all
that long ago, artists could establish their dissonance through the
innovative originality of their work, but the avant-garde
strategy of rupture, the creation of an Iconoclastic artwork,
have become so thoroughly assimilated as to no longer serve
as proof of anything more than that the artist is a good stu-
dent. Perhaps the only time that Iconoclasms retains its power
is when the icon that is broken is the artist’s own work.
This is what a provisional work can do: demolish its own iconic
status before it ever attains any such thing. The provisional
is born in the moment when the painter hesitates between paint-
ing and not-painting—and then begins to paint nonetheless.

INTERLUDE III: The scene is Paris in the early 1960s. An
art critic remarks to a young expatriate American painter
enjoying his gallery debut of thinly painted abstractions,
"I see you're not very interested in malarde." The artist
replies, with a deceptively nonchalance, "Well, I'm inter-
ested enough that I try to eliminate it." Within a few years
the materiality of oil paint takes on a more central role in his
work when he begins to make paintings by depositing
small amounts of liquid paint onto his canvases and
tilting them this way and that to direct the paint toward
the edges of some faint pencil markings. He never knows
exactly what will happen, how a painting will look when it
is finished; it often seems to be "doing" itself. Thin
color has flooded the canvas or, as he increasingly turns
to smaller formats, sheets of paper, and reeded, leave-
ing visible a residue of barely emerged imagery: hirute
structures, wobbly Roman numerals, luminous grids that
suggest an archeological dig seen through patchy fog.
Rather than minimalism, they are subliminalist. For a 1987
show of small gray paintings he has a passage from the
French writer Maurice Blanchot typed up and affixed to a
wall of the gallery. "Speech," the quotation ends, "is the
replacement of a presence by an absence and the pursuit,
through presences ever more fragile, of an absence ever
more all-sufficing."

8. AND WHAT IF?

And what if provisional painting is an implicit critique of
human ambition, a kind of vanity?
What if provisional painting is a response to the
renewed dematerialization of art that has accompanied the
rise of digital mobility, a way for painting to say "I, too, am
just a momentary image on a screen?"

But what if provisionality is nothing more than a stylistic
trick, rather than a matter of profound artistic conviction
and philosophical reflection? I keep rewriting a sentence
I came across in one of Frank O'Hara's art reviews: "It is
simply a property of Bonnard's mature work, and one of its
most fragrant charms, to look slightly washed-out, to look
what every sophisticated person left alone artist wants to
look: a little 'down,' a little effortless and helpless." Could
provisional painting, or at least some of it, be merely the
medium on a casual Friday?

9. FAILING BETTER

How does one respond, as a critic, to a provisional work
of art? Can one practice provisional criticism? What would
this look like? Given the way that every judgment, evaluation
and interpretation is subject to revision—if not total rejec-
tion—by the passage of time, isn't every piece of criticism
provisional? Maybe. But at the same time, doesn't
criticism also try to offer something that will be completely
irreproducible, i.e., durable and confident? After a long
period when painting was frequently dismissed as a com-
placent, indulgent, narcissistic medium in contrast to other
modes (conceptual art, relational esthetics, etc.) that were
supposed to be more faithful to the skeptical, oppositional
character of historic avant-gardes, some painters have been
rediscovvered (done this as an aspect of their medium, nomi-
nating Cezanne as an ancestor and nominating as their tutelary
spirit Samuel Beckett, a writer who favored paintings where
he found "no trace of one-upmanship, either in excess or
deficiency. But the acceptance, as little satisfied as bitter,
of all that is immaterial and paltriy, as among shadows, in the
shock from which a work emerges."

INTERLUDE IV: Words painted quickly over other words,
some of which have been obscured by equally speedy
painterly gestures. The letters, always uppercase, are
neither crude nor graceful. They can be thick or thin, but
always look like the artist was in a hurry to get from one
edge of the canvas to the other. Along the way, spaces
are opened and closed, flipped and flapped; color is
summarized but with no more ceremony than when you
switch on a light. The paintings contain ordinary words or
phrases that, because they seem to point to no obvious
external referent, sometimes ask to be read as descrip-
tions of the painting in which they appear: "CUTE AND
USELESS" or "DISASTER." Others might be admoni-
tions to the viewer—"THINK"—and some could be both
self-referential and the artist talking to herself—"PAINT!"
If the painterly side of this work looks back to de Konin-
co's practice of 'hanging abstract compositions on letter
shapes, and the linguistic aspect engages conceptual
art, it's the apparent nonchalance of the paintings, their
complete lack of pretense or fussiness, that marks them
as belonging to NOW.

Raphael Rubinstein is a New York-based art critic and poet who teaches critical studies
at the University of Houston.