Themes of Contemporary Art

VISUAL ART AFTER 1980

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PROFILE: Ken Aptekar

Ken Aptekar's paintings are instantly recognizable, even though they share strategies (such as juxtaposing words and visual imagery within one artwork) utilized by many other artists. Aptekar constructs his work in a consistent format. Typically each oil painting starts as a single square wooden panel (thirty inches by thirty inches, or twenty-four inches by twenty-four inches), or multiple square panels combined (such as two thirty inches by thirty inches squares butted together to form a sixty inches by thirty inches artwork). Aptekar paints an image on the panel or panels and bolts a thick pane of glass approximately an inch in front of the image. Typeset words are sandblasted onto the glass. A viewer reads the words hovering in front of the painting and sees the words cast shadows onto the surface of the image.

The artist derives his imagery from other painters' work. Not striving for an exact copy, he translates the source image into a style of painting that combines his own with the original artist's. Colors may change; the most common alteration is a simplification of colors into a monochrome. Scale is manipulated for emotional control. For example, by creating a close-up of a figure's face (done by enlarging and cropping a detail from the original image), Aptekar creates (or exposes) a feeling of intimacy that did not exist (or did not register) in viewing the earlier painting. After creating a digital scan of the source image, Aptekar often employs a computer software program to experiment with alternate layouts for paintings in progress. He can experiment with various combinations of text and details. The computer also facilitates the testing of such options as flipping the image into a mirror reversal of its original format.

Early in his career, Aptekar appropriated details of imagery from famous artists, such as van Gogh, Rembrandt, Watteau, and Raphael. In selecting old master works as his starting point, Aptekar startled and delighted viewers by demonstrating how the meanings of "masterworks" from the history of art can shift dramatically. In *Pink Frick* [6-10], for instance, Aptekar appropriates a well-known self-portrait by Rembrandt, transforming it into a reddish-tinged monochrome (sort of an equivalent to seeing Rembrandt through rose-colored glasses!). Etched onto the panes of glass positioned directly in front of the four-part painting are a series of reincarnations of the words "pink frick." Some of the spellings are nonsense syllables, while others are actual words, such as "fink" and "prick." Aptekar's word play "invites parallel readings about Rembrandt, the current location of the portrait [in] the Frick Museum, and the [Frick's] philanthropic, union-busting benefactor and namesake."[36] Aptekar's painting serves as a complex and witty critique of power. In Aptekar's view, even a sublime work of art (the Rembrandt) inevitably functions within a network of powerful economic and social forces.

More recently, Aptekar has undertaken commissioned installations involving painted details selected from artworks by lesser-known artists. Aptekar's *Dad is showing me how to develop* (1997) [color plate 17], for example, is based on a seascape

6-10 Ken Aptekar | *Pink Frick*, 1993
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts 60 x 60 inches (4 panels)
Courtesy of Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami

by Willem Van de Velde the Younger, a little known early-eighteenth-century Dutch artist. Aptekar's composition shows close-ups of ships in glowing red colors (the ships are revised versions of those in Van de Velde's painting). Etched on the sheet of glass that hovers in front of the painted imagery, Aptekar's text concerns his own childhood. The narrative focuses on an episode when his father was teaching him photographic darkroom procedures. Aptekar's strategy of combining an autobiographic story with the reworked imagery results in the latter being seen as a photographic negative. In Aptekar's work, the word "negative" takes on a double meaning: the storyline written on the glass pane hints ominously at the young Aptekar's anxiety over the lack of an appropriate level of parental guidance: "Often I am all alone in the dark / while I'm developing."

Dad is showing me is one of thirty artworks created for a 1997 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Aptekar based the entire series of thirty artworks on selections from the Corcoran's permanent collection. Each of Aptekar's artworks incorporates details from an existing work. The texts incised into the glass in front of the paintings are the artist's own writing; many tell stories based on the artist's memories of childhood and adolescence (such as the true tale of an older brother who, tragically, needed to be hospitalized for a nervous breakdown shortly after entering medical school). Other texts quote actual responses to the original paintings that Aptekar elicited from visitors and guards at the Corcoran

Gallery who agreed to participate in focus group discussions about what specific artworks mean to them.

By incorporating the words of viewers into his artwork, Aptekar creates a clever takeoff on Roland Barthes's famous pronouncement in 1967 of the "death of the author." An influential French poststructuralist and semiotician, Barthes theorized that readers and viewers of texts and images necessarily create their own meanings; according to Barthes, no author or artist can dictate fully how others will decode an existing work.[37] Each person unpacks his or her own baggage during the task of constructing an interpretation. Barthes's theory also declares that the artist has no "authentic" voice but creates his work using languages and conventions of writing and image making that are derived from earlier usages. Part of our delight in viewing Aptekar's art is to see how effectively he addresses both sides of a theoretical puzzle: no artist can be totally original, and yet no interpretation can be totally the same as any other.

A study of Aptekar's paintings in the 1990s and today shows his ongoing interest in juxtaposing appropriated visual images with autobiographical texts. He keeps revealing new sides to the question: How is an artwork's meaning altered by the process of interpretation? For an installation of his work in a 2001 exhibition, Give and Take, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Aptekar hung his own paintings alongside the source paintings. Doing so, Aptekar's "spin-off" resonates in a seemingly endless variety of interpretations as the viewer glances back and forth at the Aptekar and the source echoing one another. Aptekar believes, and his art demonstrates, that interpretation is a creative process, too; each viewer completes a new work of art.

From the outset of his career, Aptekar approached other artists' art as an opportunity to remind himself of his *own* life's story. The sandblasted texts attached to paintings include episodes of family strife, the pressures his brother felt growing up in a household where high achievement was expected, and his own childhood anxieties. Aptekar's full range of texts also explores liminal, or border, areas, where his own personality melds with communal identities, including his Jewishness, his male gender, his status as an artist, and his professional career operating within an art world heavily influenced by the politics of museums and the power of critical theorists. Even a Rembrandt self-portrait, as Aptekar revealed in *Pink Frick,* is not evaluated simply on the basis of some neutral scale of artistic value but finds its place shifting within the constantly negotiated and renegotiated arena of art history and institutional practices.

Throughout this book, we approach art in the belief that all artworks are open for interpretation within a context of ideas and issues. Ken Aptekar's work takes this process a step further. Not only do his paintings gain meaning as we consider them *within* a conceptual context, but the artworks themselves embody competing contexts of ideas within their own compositions. What do we mean by this? We mean that taken alone, the visual image in the source painting may imply, to each of us, one set of ideas, whereas Aptekar's copy inserts a different set of ideas and

issues to think about in relationship to the painting. The addition of words adds, literally, another layer of meaning to the entire artwork. Aptekar's paintings address such issues as What artworks are collected by a museum? What do the people who work in and visit a museum think the artworks mean? How are males and females represented in artworks, both masterworks and works that are in the dustbin of art history? How can artworks created by others in earlier times for other purposes retrofit into new compositions that explore the artist's own life story?

The painter Ken Aptekar was born in Detroit in 1950. He received a master of fine arts degree from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He now divides his time primarily between New York City and Paris, maintaining residences and studios in both locations.

Notes

1. Deborah Wye, *Thinking Print: Books to Billboards, 1980–95* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996). An exhibition catalog.

2. John Berger is the author of one of the notable exceptions: a work of criticism in which a sequence of visual images without any accompanying text delivers the "message." See Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and New York: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 36–43, 66–81, 114–27.

3. Gavin Jantjes, introduction to *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998), p. 16.

4. Chang Tsong-zung, "The Character of the Figure," in *Word and Meaning: Six Contemporary Chinese Artists* (Buffalo: University at Buffalo Art Gallery, 2000), p. 13. An exhibition catalog.

5. John Hollander, *Types of Shape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

6. In addition to writers who emphasize the visual qualities of language, a great number of contemporary literary artists have made use of visual art as subject matter. Entire anthologies and critical studies, for instance, have been devoted to poems about paintings. See, for example, Howard Nemerov, "On Poetry and Painting," in J. D. McClatchy, ed., *Poets on Painters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

7. The practice of mixing the visual and the verbal in works of art has a long history, but we note that visual and verbal modes of representation have, at times, been kept strictly separate. For example, in an influential essay "Laocoön, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry," eighteenth-century German aesthetician Gotthold Lessing argued that the domains of the two arts are so distinct—painting based on simultaneous spatial composition and poetry based on the sequential meaning in words—that even the criticism of each art form must necessarily be based on separate principles. In the era immediately prior to the contemporary, influential modernist critics, especially those favoring formalism, tended to emphasize those qualities intrinsic to each art form. In the case of visual art, this resulted in works that avoided literary sources, narrative, and the incorporation of language.

8. Kristine Stiles, "Language and Concepts," in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 804.

9. Quoted in William Innes Homer, *The Language of Contemporary Criticism Clarified* (Madison, Conn.: Sound View Press, 1999), p. 30. We note that our recapitulation of a complex history is quite simplified, leaving out a discussion of others, such as the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who also developed ideas that bear important relationships to those we are discussing.

10. Brian Wallis, "The Artist's Book and Postmodernism," in Cornelia Lauf and Clive Phillpot, eds., *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books* (New York: American Federation of Arts and Distributed Art Publishers, 1998), p. 95.

11. Howard Singerman, "In the Text," in *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 165.

12. For a brief look at why the competing paradigms of semioticians versus "traditional" art historians can engender contention, see Mieke Bal, "Signs in Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 78 (March 1996): pp. 6–9.

13. Artist's statement quoted in Andreas Hapkemeyer and Peter Weiermair, eds., *photo text text photo: The Synthesis of Photography and Text in Contemporary Art* (Bozen, Italy: Museum für Moderne Kunst; Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1996), p. 139. An exhibition catalog.

14. Russell Bowman, a curator and art historian, identified the first six categories we list in the use of words in art. See Russell Bowman, "Words and Images: A Persistent Paradox," *Art Journal* 45 (Winter 1985): p. 336.

15. Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, "Forward," in *Photoglyphs* (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1993), unpaginated. An exhibition catalog.

16. Claire Oboussier, "Vong Phaophanit," in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999), p. 216. An exhibition catalog.

17. Vito Acconci, "Notes on Language," in *Perverted by Language* (Greenvale, N.Y.: Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University/C. W. Post Campus, 1987), p. 6. An exhibition catalog.

18. See the insightful essay by Hamza Walker, "Don't Throw Out the Shaman with the Bathwater," in Ann Temkin and Hamza Walker, eds., *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader* (Philadelphia: Philadephia Museum of Art, 1998), pp. 217–24.

19. Thelma Golden, "My Brother," in Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), p. 35. An exhibition catalog.

20. Wye, *Thinking Print*, p. 87.

21. Stiles, "Language and Concepts," p. 816.

22. Quoted in an interview with the artist in *A Fruitful Incoherence*, p. 70.

23. Eriko Osaka, "Shigeaki Iwai," in *Beyond the Future*, p. 72.

24. Ibid.

25. Valentin Y. Mudimbe, "The Surreptitious Speech," in Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, 2001), p. 19. An exhibition catalog.

26. For a discussion of how naming operates in the formation of social identity, see Lucy Lippard, "Naming," in Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 19–55.

27. Nicholas Thomas, "The Body's Names: Gordon Bennett's 'Notes to Basquiat,'" in *Beyond the Future*, p. 174. Bennett produced the works for a show in New York and decided to create a link with the place by aligning the imagery and ideas in the paintings with the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

28. Magritte's painting *L'usage de la parole I* (The Use of Words I) (1928–29) shows a simply painted pipe below which are painted the words, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" (This is not a pipe). Suzi Gablik commented, "Normally objects are classified under words like 'tree' and 'shoe', and also under pictures that represent them. The more stereotyped these labels and their uses are, the more likely it is that the represented will be confused with the representation." See Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), p. 137.

29. Quoted in Jan Estep, "Words and Music: Interview with Christian Marclay," in *New Art Examiner* 29, no. 1 (September–October 2001): p. 79.

30. Jonathan Goodman, "Xu Bing," *Sculpture* 20, no. 10 (December 2001): pp. 70–71.

31. Joseph Grigely quoted in Michael Kimmelman, "Bit and Pieces From the Intersection Where a Deaf Man Meets the Hearing," *New York Times*, August 31, 2001, B28.

32. The importance of mass advertising, and the examination of its effect by applying theoretical tools of analysis, has received great attention by various scholars. According to Paul Jobling and David Crowley, Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) is "probably the key text in this kind of enquiry, and in it she contextualizes advertising in a Marxist-feminist framework, with resort to semiological analysis." See Paul Jobling and David Crowley, *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 245–46.

33. Oliver Seifert, "Jeffrey Shaw," in *Mediascape* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), p. 48. An exhibition catalog.

34. Charles Bernstein, "I Don't Take Voice Mail," in Susan Bee and Mira Schor, eds., *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 181.

35. John S. Weber, "Beyond the Saturation Point: The Zeitgeist in the Machine," in *010101: Art in Technological Times* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001), p. 23. An exhibition catalog.

36. Gary Sangster, "Ken Aptekar," in *43rd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1993), p. 34. An exhibition catalog.

37. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Stephen Heath, ed. and trans., *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), pp. 142–48.