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"Realism," Embodied Subjects, Projection of Empathy

> "The ultimate stakes of serious art – to attach us to reality."
>
> Michael Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*[1]

The Question of Modernity

A question that is worth a moment of reflection: why does raising the issue of r e a l i s m as a central problem in art (or literature) invariably require a certain gesture of withdrawal, for us to place it in brackets, or quotes? As if we were uncertain what we had in mind when writing this word, as if we did not know what it meant, or were opposing its standard, common-sense meaning. Therefore, when Hilde van Gelder and Jan Baetens open their 2006 anthology of texts devoted to *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art* with the words "20th-Century art […] is at odds with realism, at least with the term," it is this final phrase that seems key. The authors' thesis is that after the adventures of modernism, the avant-garde and postmodernism, realism returned in contemporary artistic practices. It returned as a result of the exhaustion

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[1]   Michael Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 24.

of formalisms (from the end of the 1960s) and the dramatic increase in the "virtual disembodiment" of culture. Furthermore, during its return, the term "realism" acquired a new meaning:

> Realism is no longer restricted to the implicit connotation of "photographic realism": the 19th-Century model of detail realism as the production of a mechanical replica, no longer holds, either in literature, or in the visual arts. On the contrary, for those eager to maintain a realist stance in art today, realism is never simply reproductive (mimesis), but productive: it is the invention of new ways of representing the real, which always takes the risk of appearing utterly unrealistic, until these new styles become hegemonic, then stereotyped, and finally… unrealistic once again.[2]

It seems to me that the time frame of this diagnosis is worth questioning. Is it not the case that "realism" was problematic from the outset, that it is a truly modern problem? The fact that it is historically a 19th-century phenomenon and that it appeared around the same time as photography is very telling. But what it tells us, and what conclusions can be drawn from this proximity, is by no means obvious. The negative reactions to photography, which from the very beginning had ambitions of joining the fray of fine arts, were of the same kind as the arguments against the "realists" (like many other definitions of movements or "styles" in art, realism too had negative connotations): creating a perfectly accurate picture of reality does not necessarily translate to understanding it (and might even make this impossible); it means that we remain on the surface of things. It was for this reason that Charles Baudelaire thought that Gustave Courbet (incidentally his friend) had "in favour of the immediate impact of external material nature"[3] declared war on the imagination, which the poet, as is well known, saw as the "queen of the faculties" and the precondition of art.[4] In *The Salon of 1859*, which contains perhaps the most famous 19th-century critique of photography, he says the following about realism:

> The artist […] who calls himself a r e a l i s t, an ambiguous word whose meaning remains undetermined, and whom we shall call a p o s i t i v i s t

2   *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art. Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, ed. Hilde van Gelder and Jan Baetens (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), 7-8.

3   Charles Baudelaire, "The Universal Exhibition of 1855," in *Baudelaire. Selected Writings on Art & Artists*, trans. Pierre E. Charvet (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1972), 127.

4   Ibid., 126.

to better characterize his error, declares "I wish to depict things as they would be, without me existing." T h e   u n i v e r s e   w i t h o u t   m a n.[5]

The suggestion that is made here is clear: that the painter-realist is somebody who strives for a certain   a u t o m a t i s m, as if he were himself a machine. In the same way, photography, as it is inhuman, can only record reality, but not interpret it. As a mechanical,   a u t o m a t i c   thing (and thus working on its own) it is a representative of the destructive forces of modernisation: progress and industry.[6] Baudelaire sees a gulf emerging between a "perfect" and "true" reproduction of reality, between the world recorded automatically (the world without humans) and that which permeates through the "filter" of imagination. And this is why I would suggest that the question of realism is a truly modern one: this gulf, or divide, is the point at which the place of humans in the modern world, their limits, and the conditions of understanding their constitution, become problematic. (There is no such thing as an objective record *per se*, even in photography). This is also why, in asking about realism, we must realise that problems are likely to ensure when answering the question of what this "reality" to be presented is. Or what remaining faithful to it in the gesture of representation should mean. Owing to this diagnosis, when tackling the question of realism we usually make it clear that what is at stake is not simply creating a faithful copy of reality.

In the light of this, it is hard even to state that there is such a thing as realism   i n   g e n e r a l, and that if only we take a careful look at well selected examples we will be able to extract its secret. The question of the modern condition was examined in the context of realism not only in the 19th century, but also – and perhaps above all – in the 20th: on the one hand within the classical avant-garde movement in Europe, from the time of facturalism up to productivism and factography under the banner of Sergei Tretyakov and Alexander Rodchenko, and on the other as part of the "social realism" of Western Europe and the United States, German "new objectivity" [*Neue Sachlichkeit*] and the Mexican muralists.[7] All these phenomena are like prisms in which "realism" lights up in an extravaganza of various aspects, topics and localities.

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5   Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1859," in *Baudelaire. Selected Writings*, 307. The spacing of the last sentence is mine (K. P.).

6   Ibid., 297.

7   These issues are discussed very well by Benjamin Buchloh; see his "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (1984, Autumn): 102–106; see also Sarah Wilson, "'La Beauté Révolutionnaire'? Réalisme Socialiste and French Painting 1935–1954," *Oxford Art Journal* 3 (2) (2008): 61–69; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

They also suggest that it is to a large extent a phenomenon associated with a certain form of involvement in the shape of the social world around us, with some force of (practical) politicality. I shall be less interested in the immediate relationship between the image and the social reality in which it came about, and more in the philosophical aspect of realism as a problem of representation and as a certain politics of the image as such. What, then, are the stakes of "realism"?

Courbet and Absorption

It will come as no surprise that I begin my argument from the aforementioned Gustave Courbet, who introduced the concept of realism to thinking about art once and for all. (Though he claimed that "the title of Realist was thrust upon me,"[8] this was the banner under which he held his rebellious individual exhibition at the World Exhibition in 1855). I shall base my analysis of Courbet's gesture on Michael Fried's interpretations. Fried, known above all as the arch-modernist 1960s art critic and historian on the art of modernity, is the author of three extensive studies of "realism," whose subjects are, respectively, the American painter Thomas Eakins (regrettably little-known in Europe), Courbet, and perhaps the most important, the German painter of the second half of the 19th century, Adolf Menzel.[9] Fried too begins his reflections by distancing himself from the premise of the "mimeticity" of realism:

> Indeed it's hard not to feel that realist paintings such as Courbet's or Eakins have been looked at less intensively than other kinds of pictures, precisely because their imagined casual dependence on reality – a sort of ontological illusionism – has made close scrutiny of what they offer to be seen to be beside the point.[10]

Fried describes his own approach as "strongly interpretive," and in his reading of pictures endeavours to go beyond what is literally found in the scene of the representation. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière is very

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8   Gustave Courbet, *Exhibition and Sale of Forty Paintings and Four Drawings by Gustave Courbet* ("The Realist Manifesto"), Paris 1855, quoted at http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/courbet-dossier/courbet-speaks.html, accessed August 30, 2015.

9   Michael Fried, *Realism. Writing, and Disfiguration. On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2002).

10   Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 3.

convincing in his criticism of the modernist equation of "realism" with representability (mimesis based on similarity) in literature. He tries to show that:

> the so-called "realistic" novel was not the acme of "representational art" but the first break with it. By rejecting the representational hierarchy between high and low subjects, as well as the representational privilege of action over description and its forms of connection between the visible and the sayable, the realistic novel framed the forms of visibility that would make "abstract art" visible.[11]

The fact that Rancière concentrates on literature in this statement is useful, insofar as it allows me to establish a certain analogy between Courbet's project of painting and the writing strategy of his contemporary Gustave Flaubert. More on that in a moment. The above passage also points to a certain danger related to this "freeing" of realism from the restraints of similarity. This is illustrated extremely well by the interpretation of Courbet's canvases made by Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, who see the historical value of the creator of Realism[12] in the fact that he devalued the subject matter and "insisted on the painted surface as no one had ever done before."[13] They contrast his painting, which was indeed distinguished by thick impasti that sometimes form on the surface of the canvas – shapeless, tonally almost indistinct, and yet remarkably tactile surfaces[14] – with the illusory academic painting of Ernest Meissonier and Jean-Léon Gerôme. These artists treated the picture as a window (in the style of Alberti) and thus strove to make its surface as transparent as possible. For Rosen and Zerner, the fact that the content of the painting in Courbet's work is always subordinate to his way of applying the paint makes him a model representative of the "autonomy of art," which ultimately, in the

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11   Jacques Rancière, "From Politics to Aesthetics?," *Paragraph 28*, 1 (2008): 20. There is no space here to bear out the comparison of Rancière with Fried, against whom – or more precisely against his reflection on contemporary artistic photography – the philosopher wrote on at least one occasion (see Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (2009): 8-15).

12   Courbet insisted that "his" realism be spelt with a capital letter.

13   Charles Rosen, Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking, 1984), 151.

14   For example, Timothy J. Clark notes how in *Burial at Ornans* Courbet "let the mass of congeal into a solid wall of black pigment, against which the face of the mayor's daughter and the handkerchief which covers his sister Zoë's face register as tenuous, almost tragic interruptions." Timothy J. Clark, *Image of the People. Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 82.

20th century, led to the foundation of abstract painting.[15] In this sense, along-side Courbet, Manet and the impressionists also number among the realists.

Fried is decidedly opposed to this verdict, and although Rancière's statement appears analogous to that of Zerner and Rosen, he too would have to disagree with this interpretation. Above all, this is because they confuse the autonomy of aesthetic experience with the autonomy of art. In fact, their interpretation includes Courbet in the "canonical" teleology of Clement Greenberg's modern-ism, according to which "Manet s became the first Modernist pictures by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted,"[16] thus making Courbet de facto the first modernist. As we know from Greenberg, only a literal two-dimensionality is the "guarantee of painting's independence [i.e. autonomy] as an art."[17] For Rancière, this point of view is unacceptable, since the idea of the autonomy of aesthetic experience – unlike that of the autonomy of art – is not built on the premise that each art, searching solely for "the effects exclusive to itself," its "purity" as a medium, would "nar-row its area of competence, but at the same time […] make its possession of that area all the more certain."[18] The autonomy of aesthetic experience was not meant to introduce the now "homeless" art (alienated from religious and courtly ritual) to a field of new certainty, but was "taken as the principle of a new form of collective life, precisely because it was a place where the usual hierarchies which framed everyday life were withdrawn."[19] It is in this sense that "the idea of pure literature and the idea of literature as the expression of a determined social life are two sides of the same coin."[20]

Fried's take on all this is somewhat different, although it does not seem that his vision is irreconcilable with the above. He sees Courbet (together with Édouard Manet) as a figure who crowned the tradition, central to French painting, which he calls a n t i t h e a t r i c a l, a tradition stretching back to the mid-18th century and first theorised by Denis Diderot. It was Diderot, the author of *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*, who framed the requirement for a picture to in some way "establish the metaphysical illusion that the beholder

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15   Rosen, Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism*, 151.

16   Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*, in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticim. Vol-ume 4. Modernism With a Vengeance - 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86.

17   Ibid., 88.

18   Ibid., 86.

19   Rancière, *From Politics to Aesthetics?*, 21.

20   Ibid., 20.

d o e s   n o t   e x i s t, that there is no one standing before the canvas."[21] From then on, the aim of the most important painters of this tradition – from Greuze, via David to Géricault – was "closing the representation to the beholder, above all by depicting figures wholly engrossed or absorbed in actions or states of mind and who therefore were felt to be unaware of being beheld (as though that apparent unawareness, that perfect absorption of the figures in the world of the representation, were experienced as curtaining off or walling off the representation from the beholder)."[22] Yet in the 1840s and 1850s, this strategy, which artists achieved using ever more dramatic methods,[23] ceased to be effective. Contemporary beholders became more and more aware that the figures on these canvases were in fact not absorbed in what they were doing, but merely wanted to be seen as such – that they were a c t i n g (Millet was one who encountered such reactions from audiences and critics). Courbet was the last painter who managed to achieve an absorptive effect, before Manet opened a whole series of "modernist adventures"[24] in a way that radically acknowledged[25] the fact that the image was exhibited to be viewed by an (anonymous) audience. The way that he accomplished this involved

> the all-but-corporeal merger on the part of the painter-identified now as the painting's first beholder, or painter-beholder-with the painting before

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21   Michael Fried, "Thoughts on Caravaggio," *Critical Inquiry* 24, (1997): 23.

22   Ibid.

23   The culmination of this is Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*; see Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 29-32.

24   I mention this only in passing, but in his book on Manet, Fried abandons the orthodox teleology of the development of modernist art in favour of a series of "modernist adventures." Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press), 410.

25   Fried shares the concept of acknowledging with Stanley Cavell; it forms the basis of their thinking about the tasks of art, as well as our obligations to others: "acknowledgment 'goes beyond' knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession." (Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 428). And: "My harping on acknowledgment is meant to net what is valid in the notion of self-reference and in the facts of self-consciousness in modern art. The explicit form of an acknowledgement is 'I know I [promised; am withdrawn; let you down] …' But that is not the only form it can take; and it is not clear why this form functions as it does. We should not assume that the point of the personal pronoun here is to r e f e r to the self, for an acknowledgment is an act of the self [...]" (Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, (Cambridge, MA–London, 1979), 123).

him, the painting being realized under his brush. At least with respect to that beholder (the painter-beholder) the painting would ideally escape beholding completely; there would be no one before it looking on because the beholder who had been there was now incorporated or disseminated in the work itself.[26]

Courbet did this in various ways. For instance, in his self-portraits from the 1840s, the early period of his work, the presence of the artist on the canvas was guaranteed by the very subject, and further strengthened in various ways. These included a series of operations allegorising the process of painting these images (the returning motif of the arrangement of the hands, right and left respectively, as if they were holding the brush and palette), placing the figure close to the surface of the canvas so that it almost questioned the ontological separation of painted and real space, and finally the presentation of the figure in positions that minimised the sense of confrontation between the subject of the portrait and the beholder (which in this case was one and the same person, Courbet himself). The limits of representation are also placed in doubt by showing the figure from behind. On the one hand, this represents Courbet's situation as a painter-beholder, and on the other it makes the project of a quasi-corporeal union with the picture easier (creating the impression of looking over the figures' shoulders, as in the painting *After Dinner at Ornans*, 1848-1849). Allegories of painter's tools make their return as well – a shotgun, lance etc. as counterparts to the brush, other objects as counterparts to the palette and the positioning of the body corresponding to that of the painter during his work. The signatures are also significant. For example, the poses of the figures in *The Stone Breakers* (1849) not only allegorise the brush (hammer) and palette (basket filled with stones), but their arrangement also repeats the shape of the artists' initials and signature in the bottom-right corner of the picture. One might say that, irrespective of how "realistic" his paintings are, intuitively they always stick stubbornly to the fact that they are a p a i n t e d reality. This is not quite the same as stating that Courbet's painting testifies to the autonomy of art. In other words, we can say that Courbet did not strive for the autonomy of the picture (or declare the irrelevance of the subject matter), but to evoke a certain "experience of corporeality, mobilized around the act of painting, that sought to undo the very distinction between embodied subject and 'objective' world."[27] In the central group in *The Painter's Studio* (1854-1855),

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26   Fried, "Thoughts on Caravaggio," 23-24.

27   Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 266.

one of his most important canvases, we see how the artist literally blends in with the picture emerging under his brush. The most radical manifestations of this strategy are attempts to identify with women (examples being *The Source* from 1869 and *Sleeping Spinner* from 1853) and with still lifes – stones and dead animals (*The Trout*, 1873).

In all this, we must discern an element of a certain rather fragile dialectic. The signature can be interpreted as an element both of uniting the painter-beholder with the picture and emphasizing the surface nature of representation (or its objectivity). And similarly, an aspect of painting that holds the viewer's gaze and at the same time may be interpreted as taking part in the project of the painter-beholder being united with the picture is the materiality of its surface. Although, as Fried admits, it is hard to pinpoint the exact relationship between the first beholder-painter and subsequent viewers – the audience – one thing remains certain: according to his interpretation, these image structures are a response to the fact of the existence of an audience in the modern sense – an anonymous group of recipients looking at paintings for their own pleasure. This dynamic is described well by Stanley Cavell, with whom Fried engaged in dialogue starting in the late 1960s:

> If modernism's quest for presentness arises with the growing autonomy of art (from religious and political and class service; from altars and halls and walls), then that quest is set by the increasing nakedness of exhibition as the condition for viewing a work of art. The object itself must account for the viewer's presenting of himself to it and for the artist's authorization of his right to such attendance.[28]

In this sense, I would understand the Friedian antitheatrical tradition as the reverse of the "autonomy of aesthetic experience" as seen by Rancière, as its dialectical *pendant*. For the French philosopher, this autonomy involved a break from mimesis, which also meant that

> there was no longer any principle of distinction between what belonged to art and what belonged to everyday life. […] Correspondingly, any artistic production could become part of the framing of a new collective life.[29]

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28   Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 121.

29   Rancière, *From Politics to Aesthetics?*, 21. The chapter on Cubism in Timothy James Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* examines this issue in unparalleled fashion. The author shows how Cubism as performed by Picasso and Braque in fact aspired to create a new kind of (egalitarian) commonality, and how it was ultimately forced to admit defeat. See Timothy James Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1999).

However, Rancière does not take account the fact that in the modern era, art also has other functions: it is e n t e r t a i n m e n t, i.e. a good that can be possessed, objectified, c o n s u m e d. This fact made art an extremely fragile thing, with the audience's desire, and its gaze, demanding a s p e c t a c l e, proving a threat to it. And it is here that a space for thinking of Fried's project in political terms opens up. (This would be one of the ways that I understand the painter's "hyperbolic desire to abolish beholding altogether" in the *The Source*[30]). Fried himself looks at this question from two perspectives: Foucault's reflection on surveillance and modern visuality, and Marx's idea of non-alienated labour. In the former case, he has the following to say:

> For example, the entire effort to defeat the theatrical that I have ascribed to the Diderotian tradition might be understood simultaneously as an attempt to imagine an escape from the coercive visuality of the disciplinary mechanisms whose origin Foucault traces back to the middle of the eighteenth century (*the figures in the painting must appear to be acting freely, as if in the absence of any beholder*) and as a product of those mechanisms and thus a source of coercion in its own right (the demand that the figures be seen in these terms virtually dictating the limits of representability, besides being finally impossible to satisfy).[31]

The issue of Courbet's construction of an effect of embodied subjectivity in his paintings is analogous. Fried interprets Courbet's ability to engage his own body in the production of his paintings to such an extent as an arch-example of the phenomenon that Foucault called practices of r e s i s t a n c e. Courbet's strategy of quasi-corporeal unification also places in doubt, or forces us to reconsider, the dominant understanding of nature and reality as opposing humans, something from which we must keep our distance in order to acquire knowledge.

As for Marx, what Courbet was in a sense striving for in his paintings was that "the production and the consumption [...] exactly coincided"[32] (meaning that, by painting himself onto his canvases, he was not only their creator, but also their first beholder, and thus the consumer, excluding, or at least pushing further away, any others; he "aspired to *leave no world* outside the painting"[33]). This aspect of his work can be linked with the idea of the

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30   Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 271.

31   Ibid., 257.

32   Ibid., 258.

33   Ibid., 263.

perfect correspondence of production and consumption, in Marx designating nonalienated labour.**34** Of course, in the modern situation, nonalienated labour must remain a fantasy, and the idea of paying for "work being squandered," a representation of which T. J. Clark sees in *The Stone Cutters* ("men turned stiff and wooden by routine"**35**), becomes a utopia, rather like the attempt to paint oneself into a picture, to become the same as the representation, closing it to the world and thus making it immune to appropriation. Yet this does not at all mean that being condemned to defeat is a chance characteristic of Courbet's project. On the contrary, argues Fried: "it was precisely the impossibility of literal or corporeal merger that made that project conceivable, or rather pursuable."**36**

This radical instability of Courbet's position regarding his own work, suspended between absolute immanence and equally absolute externality, opens the possibility of looking at an analogy with the writing strategy of Flaubert, which I mentioned above. In Flaubert's letter to George Sand, we read:

> I expressed myself badly when I said to you that "one should not write from the heart." I wanted to say: one should not put one's personality on stage. I believe that great art is scientific and impersonal. One should, by an effort of the spirit, transport oneself into the characters, not draw them to oneself. That is the method at least…**37**

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34   In order to portray this idea, Fried cites an appropriate passage from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "Not only is production immediately consumption and consumption immediately production, not only is production a means of consumption and consumption the aim of production, i.e., each supplies the other with its object (production supplying the external object of consumption, consumption the conceived object of production); but also, each of them, apart from being immediately the other, and apart from mediating the other, in addition to this creates the other in completing itself, and creates itself as the other. Consumption accomplishes the act of production only in completing the product as a product by dissolving it, by devouring its autonomous thing like form, by raising the disposition developed in the first act of production, through the need for repetition, to a state of skilfulness; it is thus not only the concluding act in which the product becomes product, but also that in which the producer becomes producer. On the other side, production produces consumption by creating the specific manner of consumption, the ability to consume, as a need." (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 93 [Translation slightly modified]. Quoted in: Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 354, footnote 61.

35   Clark, *Image of the People*, 80.

36   Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 269.

37   *Gustave Flaubert – George Sand Correspondence* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 110. Quoted in Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 358, footnote 85.

Dominick LaCapra sees in this statement a fundamental tension in Flaubert's view of the ideal relationship between the producer and the work: between "objective impersonality and subjective identification," as if there existed a narrative strategy capable of abandoning the opposition between the objective and the subjective.[38] In this radical disconnection of the position – suspended between the impersonal distance of science and the immanence of total identification – it is not hard to perceive a strong analogy to what can be experienced in the paintings of Gustave Courbet. It is tempting, furthermore, to link this division to the aforementioned problem of representation in the time of photography, suspended between automatic recording of the world and the immersion embodied in it. Fried examines the question of the relationship of Courbet's painting with photography, and indeed notes that his works consistently tackle the subject of automatism (though he does not write how exactly, we can assume that he is referring to the ease with which Courbet uses paint to produce similarities and analogies), while at the same time placing in doubt the absolute differentiation between automatism and the act of will. (One might say that in Courbet's practice there is no such thing as "pure" recording).

Fried's "strongly interpretative" strategy therefore has nothing anti- or apolitical about it. Like Clark, he's not interested in interpreting political messages based on the "contents" of a painting (e.g. the non-hierarchical, inclusive composition in works such as *Burial at Ornans* as an expression of Courbet's democratism or egalitarianism), but in finding in works of art moments of "mediation." Clark writes:

> I want to discover what concrete transactions are hidden behind the mechanical image of "reflection," to know *how* "background" becomes "foreground"; instead of analogy between form and content, to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two.[39]

This too is why Fried confesses that the degree to which his interpretation might seem convincing depends not on (establishing) a perfect correspondence between the picture and its artist, but on "an entire network of connections within Courbet's oeuvre," which link more seldomly the closer one gets to the edges.[40] One might say that this refers to the whole field of politicality,

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38   See Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 127.

39   Clark, *Image of the People*, 13.

40   Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 288.

the paintings as his territory; to the various ways in which we make contact with the world and inhabit it.

Menzel and the Vitality of Objects

In an extremely extensive and nuanced study of the work of Adolph Menzel, Fried examines the question of realism in a similar way to that used earlier in the case of Eakins and Courbet. Here too, a central aspect is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the embodied subject and "living perception" that accompanied Fried as a necessary tool of thinking about aesthetic experience ever since his time as a modernist critic. (In this sense he questions the widely held opinion of the pure visuality of not only realism, but modernism as well.) As my reconstruction is no more than an outline, I will not be able to show the complexity of Fried's argument. Menzel is an extremely interesting and important figure particularly because of his singularity; one would struggle to find similar figures in the German-speaking world, and even more so to say that he was part of the anti-theatrical tradition traced by Fried. Yet it is Menzel who helps us to understand why Fried calls his selected "realists" "bodily painters,"[41] since the work of no other artist of the time was based to the same degree on "countless acts of imaginative projection of bodily experience."[42] Menzel did not feel the need to exclude his viewers from the painting, turning it into a separate, closed world; on the contrary, the beholder in the act of perceiving his works is forced to make analogous acts of projection. Innumerable drawings by the German artist (whose motto was "*nulla dies sine linea*" – "no day without a line") contain distinct indications of the changing position of the body and situation of perception while at work, e.g. the inscription of perceiving an object situated close by (almost from above, depicted in a sculpture-like manner) and a landscape (seen from a distance, rendered in a flat way) on one sheet in the drawing *The Schafgraben Flooded* (1842-1843); a mirror reversal of the image in *Partial Self-Portrait* from 1876, not to mention the artist's remarkable ability to convey the material and tactile nature of an object, as with the books in the drawing *Dr Puhlmann's Bookcase* (1844), or the planks in *Cemetery among the Trees, with an Open Grave* (1846-1847). He also frequently depicted the same object from various angles, almost as if he were turning it in his hands, as in the outstanding gouache *Moltke's Binoculars* (1871). We can also find examples of the changing perspective, pulling the viewer deep into the

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41   Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, 109.

42   Ibid., 13.

picture, in his larger oil works, portraying views from windows: *Garden of Prince Albert's Palace* (1846/1876) and *Rear Courtyard and House* (1844), which Fried sees as one of the masterpieces of 19th-century painting.

Owing to the tactile nature of Menzel's painting, and the mobility of his points of view, one might feel tempted to suggest that he did not paint views, but rather created images from within his own (bodily) immersion in the world[43] (which is also why his paintings invite us to look at them from up close). Fried tries to show that, in spite of his isolation, Menzel was not suspended in a vacuum; after all, it was during his lifetime that the a e s t h e t i c o f e m p a t h y (*Einfühlung*) developed in Germany. According to Robert Vischer, Heinrich Wölfflin, August Schmarsow and others, empathy meant that our corporeality determines the forms of seeing the world; it is we that project our own image onto the reality that surrounds us; we are able to create and embody this image in inanimate matter, in still life. (This is an extremely abbreviated look at the matter, but so be it). The remarkable, smallish oil painting *The Artist's Foot* (1876) is probably the best example of this projection mechanism. This all leads to the conclusion that Menzel's art is essentially un- or even anti-photographic, since it does not seem that a photograph could produce such an effect of embodied reception[44]. It is worth adding that Fried himself would struggle to defend this statement, as in various photographs – especially the late landscapes of Stephen Shore[45] – he recognised such possibilities of reception. Also very important to mention are Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs*.[46] Yet the effects have nothing to do with the "photographic" nature of these works, but rather with an appropriate construction of the picture and its s c a l e attuned to the conditions of reception.

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43 In fact one could say the same thing about Courbet, as demonstrated by two anecdotes: the first story took place in summer 1849 during Courbet's stay with Francis Wey and Camille Corot in Louveciennes. One day after lunch, the painters went into the forest to paint, and Corot took a long time finding the right p o i n t o f v i e w. Courbet, on the other hand, put his easel anywhere. "It doesn't matter where I set up," he said, "It's always good as long as I have a view of nature." The second incident took place in Switzerland, after Courbet had gone into exile. One day his assistant, Pata, drew his attention to a favourable point of view. Courbet retorted that Pata reminded him of Baudelaire, who one evening, while staying in Normandy, had led the artist to a picturesque rock overlooking the sea. "'There is what I wanted to show you', Baudelaire said to me, 'there is the point of view.' Wasn't he bourgeois! What are points of view? Do points of view exist?" (quoted in Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 281).

44 Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, 247-258.

45 See *Michael Fried in Conversation with Stephen Shore*, in *Stephen Shore* (London: Phaidon, 2007), 31,34.

46 See Krzysztof Pijarski, *(Po)nowoczesne losy obrazów. Sekula / Struth* (Łódz: Wydawnictwo PWSFTviT, 2013).

Fried admits that there are certain kinds of photographs that can trigger a strongly empathetic effect: pornographic pictures for one, and those depicting bodily wounds and deformations, i.e. medical or war photographs; a similar result can be found in snapshots of people unaware of being photographed (as discussed by Susan Sontag). Yet these are all situations in which this effect is achieved a u t o m a t i c a l l y, and are therefore not of interest to Fried. According to him, the parallel development of the new invention of photography and Menzel's career means that they must be thought of in terms of a strong, but antithetic relationship. Both photography and Menzel's realism are based on the exchange or transfer of traces, yet in the former case this exchange is literal or causal, whereas with Menzel it is only – albeit with exceptional power – suggested and empathically interpreted by the beholder:

> More broadly, I see Menzel and nineteenth-century photography as practicing two antithetical forms of extreme realism, the second predicated on a technology of detachment, according to which the operator is at least relatively speaking mechanically removed or abstracted from the actual production of the image, the first based [...] on empathic projection, which is to say on the heightened imaginative/corporeal involvement of the embodied artist in every aspect of the making of the oil painting, gouache, or drawing. It is tempting to think of the first as a kind of antidote or counterforce to the second, but it would probably be truer, certainly it would be more historical, to say that both the very extremeness and the chiasmus-like inner relation of the two realisms bind them irrevocably together and in the end make each one less than fully intelligible except in the light of the other.[47]

It is this juxtaposition and merging of the two modes of representation that interests me most. Does the way it is formulated not resound with that "fundamental tension" that we can find both in Flaubert and in Courbet? Fried maintains that "the effort of keying a drawn or a painted image to a body that is keyed to the world, neither relationship being one that can be taken for granted, is an exemplary modern effort."[48] An answer to the question about the exact meaning of this argument is given by the shift in Fried's narrative when he discusses Menzel's gouaches – from the aforementioned representation of the artist's foot, as well as two small images of his hand, one holding a container filled with paint and a the other a book (?) from the 1860s, to the

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47   Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, 252.

48   Ibid., 253.

series of remarkable depictions of suits of armour from the same period –
making an uncanny analogy between them. The former evoke a sense of "inner
vitality" in the viewer:

> the closer we look, the more we become aware of an articulated interplay
> of bones, muscles, tendons, veins, the skin itself traversed by capillaries,
> as if the painter were seeking to make actual to the viewer – to render
> accessible as bodily feeling – not just the physical effort of holding the
> paint dish and the book (?) but also, going beyond ordinary sensation,
> the flow of blood and nerve impulses to and from the hands and fingers.[49]

The impression of looking at armour is equally uncanny (and overflowing
with vitality):

> the suits of armor (a kind of clothing, needless to say) are portrayed as at
> once inanimate and animate, empty yet instinct with life; more precisely,
> the artist wished to leave no doubt as to the absence within them of actual
> bodies […] yet at the same time he has deployed and grouped the body-
> like suits, cuirasses, helmets, and so on in postures and arrangements
> that impose themselves on the viewer as incipiently alive and potentially
> menacing.[50]

I hope that the above comparison, which demonstrates the extent to which
Menzel was able to bestow a certain peculiar vitality, autonomous power and
almost bodily being to animate and inanimate things, shall make Fried's next
reference to the writings of Marx distinctly legible, as well as his suggestion
about the modern character of the desire to do something like that. He cites
a passage from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, which
refers to alienation:

> Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is
> o u r s only when we have it […] Therefore a l l the physical and intel-
> lectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of a l l
> these senses, the sense of h a v i n g. So that it might give birth to its in-
> ner wealth, human nature had to be reduced to this absolute poverty.[51]

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49   Ibid., 53-54.

50   Ibid., 56-57.

51   Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin
Books, 1975), 351-352. Quoted after Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, 297, footnote 21.

And further on:

> In everyday, material industry ... we find ourselves confront-
> ed with the objectified powers of the human essence,
> in the form of sensuous, alien, useful objects, in the form of
> estrangement.**52**

Interestingly, the former passage is used – twice – by Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*. For him, there emerges from the text a "positive countertype to the collector – which also, insofar as it entails the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful, represents the consummation of the collector."**53** In the case of Menzel it is even more – he gives them almost their own, au-tonomous life. Fried suggests that Menzel's pictorial practice produces just this counter-type of relations to things, not based on alienation, arguing that to an extent he realises Marx's "vision of the everyday world of manufactured things as saturated with vital feeling, his assumption, in Elaine Scarry's words, «that the made world is the human being's body»."**54**

Crary and Modern Subjectivity

The above attempts to define the realisms of Courbet and Menzel in catego-ries of practices resistance may still seem unconvincing or unclear, as I am yet to provide the most important reasons for such considerations. I speak of the reconfiguration of understanding of modern subjectivity, the "emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810–1840,"**55** which Jonathan Crary described in his groundbreaking study *Techniques of the Observer* (and to whose further fortunes he devoted his book *Suspensions of Perception*). This topic permits us to see the tension present in realism – between a distant ("automatic") record and identification, absorp-tion – in a clearer light.

Crary calls this process the a u t o n o m i s a t i o n   o f   s i g h t, which can be summed up in two points. The first aspect of the new understanding of subjectivity is, as Iwona Kurz writes,

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52   Ibid., 354. Quoted after Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, 297, footnote 22.

53   Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA–London: Belknap Press), 209 [The Collector; H3a, 1].

54   Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, 255.

55   Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cam-bridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 11.

the revival and embodiment of the subject, acknowledging sight as an active, dynamic practice, a process subject to human physiology, constituted in the "denseness and materiality" of the human body, yet also innate in its fragility and uncertainty, no longer able conform either to the sterile model in which images are formed like precise casts of reality, or to the objective scheme of the all-seeing Eye.[56]

Second, and more importantly in this context, this process also entails a separation of the senses, their gradual "purification." In the case of sight, it is especially important to separate it from the sense of touch, which

had been an integral part of classical theories of vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The subsequent dissociation of touch from sight occurs within a pervasive "separation of the senses" and industrial remapping of the body in the nineteenth century. The loss of touch as a conceptual component of vision meant the unloosening of the eye from the network of referentiality incarnated in tactility and its subjective relation to perceived space. This autonomization of sight, occurring in many different domains, was a historical condition for the rebuilding of an observer fitted for the tasks of "spectacular" consumption.[57]

According to Crary, the discovery of the embodiment of the subject opened two paths. The first of these led to the affirmation of the sovereignty of sight in modernism, and the second to the standardisation and regulation of the observer, and thus forms of power dependent on the abstraction of seeing. According to this very critical understanding, the appearance of modernism, and with it the society of the spectacle, were linked to the suppressing of the embodied aspect of visual perception. It is not hard to gather that the role played by photography in this process was considerable.

In this context, realism as understood by Fried becomes one of the main tools of resistance to the autonomisation of the senses, one whose existence – if we deem Fried's interpretation to be convincing – was not perceived by Crary. The latter put forward the alternative between the reduction of

56 Iwona Kurz, "Między szokiem a rozproszeniem. Przygody obserwatora w nowoczesnym świecie," in *Zawieszenia percepcji* (afterword in the Polish edition of *Suspensions of Perception*; Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2009), 463-464.

57 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA–London: MIT Press, 1990), 19.

experience in the universalist aspirations of modernism and its enslavement in the visual regime of the modern society of the spectacle.[58]

If we are to believe Fried, then, his examples seem to suggest that there are several ways in which this non-illusory "transgression" can take place. Firstly, thanks to a strategy based on a kind of visual violence that involves blinding, that is to say on showing something the sight of which seems painful, seems to threaten the gaze, and indirectly also the looking subject. (This is both the simplest and the most difficult strategy; the most difficult because a "productive" blinding seems to be no small feat). The second strategy entails engaging the viewer corporeally in the picture – in various ways, but never directly, and above all not exclusively through the sense of sight. The third would be the allegorical principle, i.e. when we make things that appear obvious form complex webs of connections and analogies.

For me, the most interesting "realistic" works are those which simply (though of course there is nothing simple to it) test sight as the privileged sense of access to the world – they seek to transgress the inevitable flatness and objectivity of representation, to create a "stage," where in the least theatrical and thus most "natural" way possible (whatever that might mean) its object can manifest itself in such a way, as if it became the object of our examination by itself. (We thus return to the idea of a w o r l d   w i t h o u t   h u m a n s).

Gordon and Empathetic Projection

To conclude, please allow me a short diversion to open this analysis to the present day. In his book *Four Honest Outlaws*, Michael Fried examines four contemporary artists: the video artist and filmmaker Anri Sala, the sculptor Charles Ray, the painter Joseph Marioni and another creator of moving pictures, Douglas Gordon. According to Fried, at least three of Gordon's works – *Play Dead; Real Time* (2003), *B-Movie* (1995) and *10ms-1* (1994), and one of Sala's – *Time After Time* (2003) – raise the question of embodied experience as a contemporary one, albeit shifting the emphasis somewhat. *Play Dead* – a video installation composed of two screens suspended in the gallery space and one video monitor – is paradigmatic here. On the two screens we see a female elephant (named Minnie) who "plays dead" in an unspecific, vast, clean room, from time to time struggling up off the concrete floor. To do this, she has to go through a whole set of laborious tasks: getting her huge, lumbering

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58 As we read further on, "The prehistory of the spectacle and the 'pure perception' of modernism are lodged in the newly discovered territory of a fully embodied viewer, but the eventual triumph of both depends on the denial of the body, its pulsings and phantasms, as the ground of vision" (Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 136).

body swinging, putting her front legs on the floor (as Fried rightly notes, from close up they look like a costume, as if the elephant were not real, but played by a person), before finally standing on all four legs. All this time, the camera moves at a slow, steady tempo around Minnie – on one screen clockwise, and on the other counterclockwise. (This relationship is reversed if we go to the other side of the screens). At the same time, the elephant is framed in such a way that we never see her in full – it is always a framed part of her body that we are watching. The monitor shows a series of close-ups of the animal's eye. The effect of the whole is such that the viewer empathetically projects her own "unavoidably anthropomorphising feelings" on (the moving image of) Minnie, or, in the case of *B-Movie*, on a fly lying on its back and defencelessly kicking its legs.[59] This arouses ambivalent feelings over the appropriateness of the elephant performing these laborious "exercises" for our "amusement" (the title of the work suggests an imperative, that Minnie is doing this all on command). On the one hand we have a monstrous and unshapely being in comparison with the human body, which, it would seem, makes it impossible to identify with the animal. On the other hand, though, the beast's awkward-ness, the strange "artificiality" of her appearance, and especially the close-up of her eye, seeming to express some "subjectivity" after all, initiate a funda-mental mental mechanism that Stanley Cavell called "empathic projection," which according to him constitutes "the ultimate basis for knowing of your existence as a human being."[60] Where, Cavell asks, does the assumption that a person must recognise someone else as a human being come from?

> From some such fact as that my identification of you as a human being is not merely an identification o f you but w i t h you. This is something more than merely seeing you. Call it empathic projection.[61]

According to Fried, the works of Gordon and Sala, referring to the "absorp-tive tradition" stretching back to the work of Caravaggio – and thus to the tendency to create images of beings who are entirely absorbed in their ac-tivities, to the extent that they seem to exclude the presence of the beholder at the scene of the representation – lay bare[62], and thus make problematic,

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59 Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordoni* (London: Yale University Press, New Ha-ven–London 2011), 205.

60 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 422.

61 Ibid., 421.

62 Another of Cavell's concepts: "To say that the modern 'lays bare' may suggest that there was something concealed in traditional art which hadn't, for some reason, been noticed, or that

the empathically projective mechanism on which this tradition was based.[63] It is this suggestion that the question of empathy (or rather of the viewer projecting his empathy) was from the very beginning key to the traditions of absorptive portrayal that is a measure of their importance as works of art.[64] Problematizing the issue of empathic projection brings with it the question of the limits of this empathy: what or whom found opposite us will we be able to call a "being," or even a "person"? What do we consider "natural," and what "artificial"? Where does "performance" end or begin? Is it at all possible for the object of (or in) a representation to appear to us a s   s u c h?

What we have called realism here essentially describes an attempt to abandon – even for a moment, never more than for a moment – the status of representation as a screen separating us from the world, to project such a way of access to the image that will allow us to touch something more than just reality's dummy, to transgress the level of knowledge towards (corporeal) experience. To be sure, there is no metaphysics, no epiphany involved here – no ecstatic unification of the subject with the world, (Courbet knew better than anyone that this is impossible) but rather a certain way of harmonising with its matter, a sharper, more sensitive mode of an everyday form of attention. Can such an aspiration of an image be called a "politics of realism"?

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka

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what the modern throws over – tonality, perspective, narration, the absent fourth wall, etc. – was something inessential to music, painting, poetry, and theatre in earlier periods. These would be false suggestions. For it is not that now we finally know the true condition of art; it is only that someone who does not question that condition has nothing, or not the essential thing, to go on in addressing the art of our period. And far from implying that we now know, for example, that music does not require tonality, nor painting figuration nor theatre an audience of spectators, etc., exactly what I want to have accomplished is to make all such notions problematic […]."
Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 220.

63   Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 209.

64   Ibid., 215.