

'Painting by Mouth'
by Art & Language
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Painting by Mouth

To index the name of a picture *P* with the phrase 'Painted by Mouth' (hereafter *PBM/I*) is to generate some sort of hiatus. The degree of confusion generated by the indexation will be a function of several considerations. Among these are the character of the painting referred to, the descriptive character of the name and the presuppositions of the onlooker.

It is far too crude an assumption that the phrase *PBM/I*, will go merely to questions of technical competence and their penumbrae. The idea that these questions themselves are uninflected and easily reconstructable is also wrong.

Certain imputations stand as necessities with respect to adequate readings of the products of our culture. Some of these are small presuppositions concerning the 'how' of the production of these products. To put *PBM*, among such presuppositions, insofar as they concern pictures, is not just to raise philosophically intricate questions as to how to adjudicate the expressive, the accidental, the incompetent, etc.; it also does violence to the cultural necessities on adequate reading. *PBM/I*, cuts down the syntagmatic and paradigmatic material by which reference to a given picture is competently made. It also displaces the paradigmatic locality of the picture itself. And this displacement conduces to an absence of canons, canons which condition judgements of competence, of vulgarity, of accidentality, etc.

What follows is extracted from a discussion on some of the problems of *PBM/I*, and some of its possible relatives. This is with reference to two projects of paintings. The first is pictures of women claimed formally to have been the victims of violence (1), the second is in the genre Artist's Studio. (2)

PBM/I, can be strangely vivid. But it isn't just because of the brushwork. (Or rather it goes directly to the brushwork in ways that are readily exhausted – trivial.) The pictures of women are expressionistic (and expressive). They also appear to belong to

certain high (modern) genres. And they evoke a sense of the masculine aggression of the mechanism of their production – but this is castrated by *PBM/I*. The canons of competence and so forth are cast culturally adrift. *PBM/I*, itself impairs a ‘natural’ way of looking for the technical consequences of its truth (or falsity?). (Note also that these pictures are supposed to *depict* the consequences of pathological masculine aggression. They refer to the topicalisation of representation as invitation to rape, etc. This is a further inflection that should (or might) enable the hiatus-generating function of *PBM/I* to be reconstructed.)

The Studio pictures are, *mutatis mutandis*, and to a restricted extent, similarly inflected. Certainly, the arrogance and aggression of the complex geste is transformed by *PBM/I*. But the technical consequences of *PBM/I* are of perhaps more ramified significance. For example, it might be assumed that this sort of project would be realised in descriptive terms – or at least raise expectations of them – *Devinera qui pourra* notwithstanding.

We can entertain the speculation that *PBM/I* signals an extension of our inquiries concerning the relation ‘picture of ...’, and particularly concerning our methodological characterisation of Modernism and its antipodes as Trobriand Islands.

The question of what a picture is *of* is substantial; that is to say it demands that we enquire into the *causes* of its specific appearance, those features of the world, things, people, events, ideas, practices or other works of art, to which the picture is causally connected. A portrait is *of* Keith Joseph by virtue of his having featured somehow in the chain of causes leading to its production, and *not, prima facie*, because it happens to look like him.

Our metaphor of the Trobriand Island is borrowed from the field of Social Anthropology. It was suggested by Alasdair MacIntyre’s essay on ‘The Idea of a Social Science’, which in turn was largely written as a review of Peter Winch’s book by the same name.

Imagine an anthropologist – a structuralist if you like – studying a community of Trobriand Islanders. According to Winch’s view of the aims and practices of social science, the anthropologist studies this community by joining it. It is only by doing so, he asserts, by learning its language, internalising its customs and rules, living its life,

that he can explain it. His aim is to represent the world of the Trobriand Islander by being one himself. The Islander's behaviour is shown to be motivated by what the Islander himself believes. To quote MacIntyre, 'Their rules, not his, define the objects of [the anthropologist's] study'. Inquiry into the independent causes and mechanisms of the Islander's behaviour is not this anthropologist's aim; indeed, the very process of going native prohibits such inquiry, since the consequent forms of self-consciousness are ruled out for the members of the community itself, by definition. To understand the causes of belief in the supernatural, for instance, is to suspend such belief and thus to rule oneself out of the congregation.

The social anthropologist of a Winchian persuasion is accustomed to defend his interpretation in terms of the amount of time he has spent among the natives, observing their rules and handling their artefacts, and in terms of the coherence of the picture which he can reconstitute by virtue of having learned their language. If you wish to criticise his work, he will tell you, you must first go where he has been and spend longer and become a more complete Trobriand Islander than he. To fail to do this is to be disqualified from any status as a considerable critic of his work.

What if such a characterisation were applied to the community of art, art history and art criticism? Suppose that this community were to be seen as a kind of Trobriand Island, composed of natives and anthropologists, with the latter doing their best to turn themselves into the former? What might we then expect, and how might we tell anthropologists and natives apart?

There will be an attempt to identify the anthropologist's interpretations with the *explicit* meaning expressed by the natives. Indeed, the anthropologist's professional self-image depends on just such an identification. The danger is that the observable effects in the Islanders' behaviour will be confused with the causes of that behaviour. 'Why does he carry a stone in a forked stick?' 'Because it's his soul'. To the Winchian anthropologist the statement that souls are not such as to be carried in forked sticks is neither here nor there. The Islander's statement of his reasons has to be taken as constitutive, and other explanations for his actions are likely to be ruled out as fables. Agents' conceptions and reasons are seen as adequate in explanation precisely because they are constitutive of the anthropologist's view.

‘Why did Kandinsky paint pictures that looked like nothing on earth?’ ‘Because he wished to make art more spiritual’, or ‘Because he was prompted by inner necessity’, or ‘Because by achieving autonomy for the expressive resources of painting he would produce a greater concentration on visual experience’. These are all equivalents to the anthropologist’s reproduction of the Trobriand Islander’s reasons for carrying a stone in a forked stick. They are *not* causal explanations. If we ask, ‘How could Kandinsky have entertained such reasons; how could he have held such plainly irrational beliefs?’ the answer is all too often, like the Winchian anthropologist’s, that it is beyond the art historian’s brief to account for beliefs. He merely represents them as aspects of the structure of the art-historical tableau; and it is the structure he’s interested in, not what it holds up or is held up by. The activities whereby members of the art world produce and manage ‘settings’ for themselves within that world are identical with their procedures for making those activities accountable. Such practices may be widespread, but their effect is to facilitate mystification. (3)

But it is still not quite clear what sort of claim *PBMI* is – what it is like. Can we find any possible equivalents or analogues? Try ‘Painted by an aunt on telephone instructions’, ‘Painted by the blind’, ‘Painted in the dark’, ‘Painted ironically’. Somehow all these seem to leave remainders of some kind, either ‘technical’ or ‘cultural’ or both. One of the most interesting possible equivalents is *Painted by a woman* or *Painted by women*. Certainly this leaves a considerable ‘technical’ remainder. Disanalogies and nonequivalences aside, *PBMI* is an indicator, a second-order symbol for standard presumptions concerning the mechanisms of the production of art.

The discourses of Modern art are characterised by the militancy of their presuppositions. Categorical closure is accomplished as a consequence of the presuppositions, and they are obdurate and heavily defended. And yet the canons and categories of art are necessarily vague and imprecise. One is reminded of bureaucracy: ‘A wife is a man’s dependent relative’; of government: ‘strikes are caused by greedy, lazy workers’. (The discourses of Modern art entail various forms of bureaucracy.) One is also reminded of the causistry of institutions like insurance corporations: ‘A carpet is not furniture ... so we won’t pay’. It is in the interests of the corporation not to pay, so the category of furniture (which happens to be fuzzy) is

firmly fixed in virtue of the power of the corporation to establish the fixing. A constant ratio connects the shakiness of a category to the lack of cognitive argument available in its defence, and to the militancy of that defence.

PBMI generates an interpretive hiatus. The critical-progressive self-image of Modernism is a function of the presumed dialectical volatility of its categories. This volatility is mythical. The causal presuppositions of Modernism entail normative closures – barriers to enquiry.

It is the relationship between the psychological/‘cultural’ hiatus produced by *PBMI* and its other aspect – the matter of technique, competence and accident – that generates its particular frisson. But still this attempt at characterisation seems inadequate – inadequate to the strangeness of *PBMI*, the way it stalks the competences of the onlooker through his or her experience of the picture.

The problem-field of *PBMI* may divide into two. For example (1), what do you have to do (what sort of work do you have to do) given the ‘double’ aspect of the hiatus (or the hiatus-plus-contradiction-or-*off*-ishness) generated in virtue of *PBMI* and (2), what is the hiatus like? The formulation of (1) does not answer (2). It may be wrong. But the hiatus exists, albeit incompletely described.

(‘*Off* or *off*-ishness is very colloquial. The following may suggest metaphors or some set of referents:

Bad meat is ‘off’.

Bad behaviour is ‘off’.

Bad taste is ‘off’.

And there’s ‘off the wall’, ‘off his head’, etc.)

PBMI composes a predicate of off-ness. In some sense it seems to be distantly related to a family of operators and modifiers. There are the scandalously named verbs of ‘bitching’, ‘hedging’ and so forth. (4) The world of *off* or *off*-ness is neglected. It’s a pity it only gets aired in the coquetries of Levi-Strauss (etc.) and in the posturings of Genet. Perhaps the world of *off*-ness places convulsions of the soul, spiritual crisis, far too close to convulsions of the diaphragm, laughter, for cultural comfort.

The *off*-ish operation of *PBMI* is still fugitive. To index the name of P with *PBMI* is, it may be argued, to make a claim concerning the ‘technical’ circumstances of the

production of P and to produce a sort of counterfactual puzzle or try-on. (A counterfactual puzzle or try-on is an attempt to get someone to consider the consequences of a counterfactual even though they may not be willing to do this, or conscious of doing this.) *PBMI* is embedded in a projected conditional: 'If P were *PBMI* it wouldn't be what it is/seems to be' etc. Is it the tension between the apparently 'technical' claim – viz. that P is *PBMI* – and the fact that this generates a conditional of this type, that we want to call a hiatus?

Imagine two ideal onlookers: (A) and (B). (A) goes immediately to P, waits until he gets the proper feelings, etc., and then he just might look up the title of P, seek information and confirmation concerning P, etc. (B) goes immediately to the catalogue (or etc.) seeking to discover how to read the picture. (A) and (B) may correspond to some real or possible onlookers. Indeed, we may suggest that this relative ordering of 'reading' of pictures and titles goes to different fragments of culture, social divisions and so on. (A) and (B) would be in different positions vis à vis hiatus. One would expect the hiatuses of (A) and (B) to be at different relative places or to be of different kinds or to occur at different stages of reading. *PBMI* shifts the advantage away from (A) towards (B). In Modernist (and etc.) culture the advantage would be supposed to be the other way round: the possibility of an authentic reading would tend to be favoured by the tendencies of (A). The sensitive (A's) search for unreflected content is more likely to be doomed to remain a convulsion or series of convulsions of his first-order discourse than is (B's) relatively more sober practice.

At the same time, (B) would not be acquiring a positive increment of technical information concerning P. For among the other exotic properties of *PBMI* is that it is a transformational bit of genetic information. But transformational in the sense that the information that Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* was 'painted on the floor' is not. The 'causal'-type information of *PBMI* is such as to turn P into that which it does not (or did not) seem to be. And it stalks the onlooker's antecedent competences like a whiff of scandal. Furthermore, to index P's name with *PBMI* is to colonise a space somewhere between proper names and descriptions. Art titles are often descriptive in metaphorical or contorted ways – not strictly proper names, but they are seldom if ever liable to criticism on the grounds of their literal falsity. If *PBMI* were

false it could be significant. At the same time the potential falsity of *PBM1* would not resolve the hiatuses – or at least not very dramatically.

It might be suggested that there are fewer disanalogies between a lengthy and detailed account of P having been ‘painted by mouth from an original drawing by hand, transferred to a copy drawn by mouth with subsequent enlargement duplicated by hand etc, etc,’ and an ordinary piece of information to the effect that *Autumn Rhythm* was ‘painted on the floor’. Indeed, this *might* be true in a rather limited way. At the same time, this long technical description, *PBM2*, would still be a generator of off-ishness – of hiatus. Although the manner of indexation might be tuned (and so might it be for ‘painted on the floor’) these considerations are relatively trivial. Indexing the name of P with *PBM2* would modify the hiatus(es) and its (their) practical consequences however. The most obvious is that *PBM2* would invite the judgement that P’s production process is jokily or presumptively closed by the description. This would amount to a restriction on or the obliteration of the unreflected conditions out of which hiatus is generated. Alternatively and just as plausibly, we might say that the indexation of P’s name with *PBM2* does not commit us to a jokey (or etc.) reduction but to an invitation to others to take seriously our taking ourselves seriously; *PBM2* as part of a mechanism of self-ratification: to take away *our* hiatus. But embarrassingly, it can also be argued that insofar as there is a real expressive content to some P, the intractability and the privacy of that expressive content is such as to be misrepresented in the reduction or invitation that *PBM2* might perform. But why does the very vagueness of *PBM1* seem necessary? In some circumstances, ‘Painted by Women’ will be far more to the point than (qualitatively distinct from) ‘Painted by Angela Davis and Rosa Luxemburg’. ‘Painted by Women’ is a *via negativa*: ‘Not Painted by Men’. But this dramatisation is not strictly or rather fully analogous to *PBM1*. It is the important side of the problem field. The apparent necessity of vagueness is orchestrated by the necessity that we do not misrepresent ourselves. But this is not equivalent to the fraudulent necessity that we render private and secret that which we wish to privilege. What we have to do is permit that which is ‘private’ an adequate representation in a second-order discourse.

Our sense of the relative ‘orders’ of discourse is as follows. Within any practice a first-order discourse characterises the normal terms in which discussion, business,

exegesis etc. is conducted. A second-order discourse is conventionally understood as conducted in a type of meta-language by means of which the terms and concepts etc. of the first may be related, analysed etc. and their referents explained. The requirement upon a second-order discourse is that it should be capable of 'including' the first (i.e., describing what it describes and explaining what it explains) but that it should also furnish an explanation of *how* (and perhaps *why*) that describing and explaining is done. A second-order discourse thus presupposes a position somehow 'outside' but engaged with the contexts of the first. It is suggested that a cognitively defensible discourse for the recovery of meaning from art will have a second-order character with respect to the normal and current means of interpretation. To the extent that this is true the second-order discourse might be expected to supersede the first, except insofar as it is prevented from doing so by the agency which invests and maintains the normal order. Attendant upon such a re-ordering of discourses would be a transformation of concepts and categories and of their fields of reference. (5)

The possibility of transforming what in relation to the normal world of presuppositions (the Trobriand Island) would be second-order discourse into a 'new' first-order discourse is also the possibility of a non-Trobriand ratification of P, Pn.

And presumably that is dependent upon the possibility that P, Pn be interpretable without misrepresentation. *But this is barely thinkable – or too easily just 'thinkable'*. On a scaffolding of misrepresentations, 'named' as such or otherwise referred to, we erect what? (A representation of) the margins of our soul contents?

The representation or even the indexation of these margins will not simply depend upon the adequacy of P, Pn to a second-order discourse. It will also depend upon what is sayable in the (antecedently) second-order discourse as a matter of emergence and not in virtue of the reduction of the first to the second.

It should be noted that the indexation of P's name with PBM2 would tend to limit us to a second-order discourse with a consistent series of connections to the first but somehow exhausted in or by it. And this would go to a misrepresentation of our concrete practice.

There is a sense in which, for the Trobriand Islander, P, Pn are quasi-objects. The hiatus is composed of the idea that (a) P is not what it seems to be in virtue of its

name's being indexed by *PBMI*, and yet (b) that *PBMI* 'implies' some 'technical' questions concerning its competence etc.; is in fact a condition of a succession of quasi-objects. Black snakes. (6)

The black snakes are in a dark room. They have numbers painted on them in luminous paint, but we don't know how many numbers are painted on each snake. The 'pre-*PBMI*' reading of P becomes, 'post-*PBMI*', a reading of a black snake. Judging P as competent or not is without criteria of competence save those associated with what P (is not) may not be. Counting the black snakes is counting with no basis for counting.

Someone of a comforting (and comfortable) disposition might argue that cultural canons are displaced by the indexation of *PBMI*, but that this displacement is just a matter of degree: the cultural canons are based on fuzzy sets, so antecedently competent interpretations of P are modified – bent – to a degree. But this they are built to withstand. The argument doesn't wash. *Off* is *off* not fuzzy. Tallness in men is a fuzzy set. Tallness in people without legs is no doubt fuzzy but it is not the same fuzzy set. *PBMI* does not go to questions of the degree of realisation of 'pre-*PBMI*' cultural canons.

The effects of *PBMI* will differ between P's values and finally between the paintings referred to – in this present case the paintings of women and the *Studio*. The two types of picture – and consequently hiatuses – vary in respect of emphasis in descriptiveness, expressivity and in other ways. The *Studio* picture presents an additional ramification as sundry independent pictures and other expressive significative things (whole art works and bits of art works) are represented.

The foregoing should make it clear that we do not produce these pictures and index them with this symbol – *PBMI* – with the specific objective of assisting the enfranchisement of the artistically disenfranchised. We produce them in order to live with the hiatus and the project of work it encounters. We produce them in order to say that the prevailing discourses of art enshrine arbitrary closures on substantive and open enquiry. The suppression of enquiry by analogous means is the mark of the age, misrepresenting its mechanisms to itself as a necessary condition of its persistence.

The misrepresentations – the contradictions – of modern art are not hereby merely assimilated to those of the economic sphere: what we symbolise are the grounds of

real misrepresentations in an autonomous formation. These are identities of, functions of, or analogues of, or homologues of, the baroque landscape of the contradictions of the present. And there is hereby no inveterate contradiction in the idea that we do express ourselves and this is not a second-order experience.

Notes

↑(1) Titles of the paintings of women are:

Raped and Strangled by the Man who Forced her into Prostitution: a Dead Woman; Drawn and Painted by Mouth, 1981 Attacked by an Unknown Man in a City Park: a Dying Woman; Drawn and Painted by Mouth, 1981 A Man Battering his Daughter to Death as she Sleeps; Drawn and Painted by Mouth, 1981

↑(2) A plain list of some of the things represented in *Index: Studio at 3 Wesley Place:*

On left wall:

Right Hand Third of Courbet's Burial at Ornans Expressing States of Mind that are Obsessive and Compelling ... 1981. Panels from Documenta Index (I), 1972 and Hayward Gallery Index 2 (II), 1972.

Poster for *Fox I*, 1976; *Map To Not Indicate*, 1967; *Atelier V*, 1949 by Georges Braque (exhibited at 'Westkunst', Köln, 1981)

In doorway on left wall:

Part of *Ils Donnent Leur Sang; Donnez Votre Travail*, 1977; plan of a map for *Picasso's 'Guernica' in the Style of Jackson Pollock*, 1980; part of *Picasso's Guernica' in the Style of Jackson Pollock*, 1980.

On Guitar Case:

Manet's *Olympia*, 1863, reproduced as a cover for the libretto of an opera, *Olympia*, 1981-82.

On table:

Reproduction of Courbet's *The Studio of the Painter*, 1855.

On the floor, far left foreground:

Sleeve of *Kangaroo?* LP by Art & Language and The Red Crayola, 1981; sleeve of *Corrected Slogans* LP by Art & Language and The Red Crayola, 1976; Sleeve of *Rattenmensch/Gewichtswächter* single by Art & Language and The Red Crayola, 1981

Under table left:

Xerox Book 1968 by Ian Burn; a copy of *The Fox* (Number 1), 1975

On the floor behind table left:

Alternate Map for Documenta Index, 1972 (with others rolled).

On facing wall left:

Secret Painting 1967-8; *Singing Man*, 1975 (text is 'Scab Shaman's Scab Rejuvenation'); *Axe of American Surrealism* from 'Illustrations for Art-Language', 1977.

Centre left of facing wall:

Portrait of V. I. Lenin in July 1917 disguised by a Wig and Working Man's Clothes in the Style of Jackson Pollock, 1980.

Centre floor:

Attacked by an Unknown Man in a City Park: a Dying Woman; Drawn and Painted by Mouth, 1981.

On Windowsill:

File cabinets from *Index 2 (II)*, 1972.

Above window and facing wall right:

10 Postcards, 1977; (and on right wall) *Dialectical Materialism*, 1975.

Below window:

Untitled Painting (mirror), 1965.

On door in right wall:

Flags for Organisations, 1978.

Right wall:

Welcome to Venice, banner for Venice Biennale, 1976; *Left-Hand Third of Courbet's Burial at Ornans Expressing a Sensuous Affection ...* 1981; part of *Ways of Seeing*, 1978 (made for reproduction on the cover of *Art-Language* Volume IV Number 3, 1978).

On floor far right:

The Teachings of Karl Marx by V. I. Lenin, New York, 1930; Poster with quotation from *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights* by Joseph Salmon, 1651; Part of *Index 04*, 1973; *Art-Language* Volume IV Number 1, 1977.

Under table far right:

Art-Language Volume II Number 4, 1974 and Volume III Number 2, 1975; Catalogue for *Documenta 5*, 1972; Part of *Index 002 (Bxal)*; File Cabinet from *Index (I)* ('Documenta Index'), 1972.

Far right foreground against table:

Dialectical Materialism (Ernie Wise) 002, 1975; an ingot from *Ingot*, 1968; a version of Kandinsky's *Pink Sweet*, 1980, made for reproduction on the cover of *Art-Language* Volume IV Number 4, 1980.

On the far right table:

Studio International, July-August, 1970 showing a reproduction (?) of a work by Daniel Buren; *Ratcatcher* Number 4, 1976; *Art & Language* (catalogue) Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 1980; *A Realist Theory of Science* by Roy Bhaskar, Hassocks, 1976; *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, London 1972; *Art-Language* Volume IV Number 2, 1977; *Critique of the Gotha Programme* by Karl Marx, Moscow, 1960; *Art -Language* Volume III Number I 1974; *English Art and Modernism: 1900-1939* by Charles Harrison, London and Indiana, 1981; *The Fox* (Number 2) 1975; Poster for *School* (an art student political organisation or myth) 1976; *Issue* Number 3, 1979; *Art-Language* Volume IV Number 3, 1978; *Elements of Semiology* by Roland Barthes, London 1967; open copy of *Art History* Volume IV Number 4, London 1981; File boxes associated with *Air Show*, etc., 1966-68.

Figures left to right:

Mayo Thompson

Michael Baldwin

Weeping female figure (from an engraving by William Blake)

Victorine Meurand (1841-1901)

Mel Ramsden

Charles Harrison

Hands from a figure in Picasso's *Minotaur and Dead Mare before a Grotto*, 1936

Fred Orton

↑(3) This material on ‘the Trobriand Islander problem’ is excerpted from ‘Art History, Art Criticism and Explanation’, by Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden, *Art History* Volume IV Number 4, 1981.

↑(4) See (e.g.) George Lakoff, ‘Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts’ in Hockney et al. (eds) *Contemporary Research in Philosophical Logic and Linguistic Semantics*, Reidel 1975, pp 221-271.

↑(5) The material on the relative orders of discourse is excerpted from ‘Manet’s Olympia and Contradiction’, by Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden, *Block* 5, September 1981.

↑(6) See Rescher and Brandom, *The Logic of Inconsistency*, Blackwell, 1980, pp 133-134.

