

*This article—a response to an essay by Richard Shiff—is published in German in:
Zwischen Ding und Zeichen. Zur ästhetischen Erfahrung in der Kunst, hrsg. von Gertrud Koch und
Christiane Voss, München 2005, S. 135-138. – Translation by Julia Bernard*

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Retracing Modernist Praxis: Richard Shiff

My emphasis is very much on processes of making—techniques. Accordingly, by *representation* I refer to an act of depiction, both (iconic) figuration and (symbolic) configuration. I do not use the term *representation* to signify the adequation of *re*-presentation, that is, some second presentation bearing the full ‘presence’ of the original. The nineteenth-century sources whom I cite seem very much aware that representations may at times seek to approach *re*-presentation, *but do not attain that end*.¹

This quotation from an early article of Richard Shiff’s delineates his area of research very precisely. The “act of depicting” around which the (in the interim) numerous studies circle is investigated within the time-frame of a Modernism that, beginning in the early nineteenth century, undertook replacing the old conceptions of artistic practice—for example, the theory of mimesis—with new ones. At the center of these revisions stood rather less the relationship between original and copy, as in the case of mimetic theory, but much more the procedure which occurred involving artist, the chosen medium of representation, and the object to be represented—a procedure whose many-layered and process-related nature had occasionally so distinctly advanced that it appeared to become the artwork’s actual content. Shiff devotes his attention, in short, to representation after the end of classical representation.

In this process, two things continually remain in view: artistic *praxis*, that is “making” with its respective techniques; and at the same time the now-anticipated, now-fulfilling theory running parallel, which frames and reflects the *praxis* but is in turn re-oriented by it. Shiff em-

¹ Richard Shiff, “Representation, Copying, and the Technique of Originality”, *New Literary History* 15 (Winter 1984), 333-63, quote 333. This article should be read in parallel with a second one, which illuminates the same area from another direction: Shiff, “The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France”, *Yale French Studies* 66 (1984), 27-54.

phasizes the rhetorical character of both levels: not only the theory, which attempted to shift art into a particular light, but also the praxis, which in Modernism aimed at representing the process of representation at the same time—that is, to display how decisively what is represented is shaped by the medium’s singularity and the specific artistic techniques. Precisely the direct, unmediated, and authentic procedures which artists willingly subscribe to since the anti-academic turning-point of Modernism are rhetorical, to the extent that they stage directness and authenticity as an effect. It has to do in each case, according to Shiff, with the paradox of a represented immediacy.

While the early texts devote themselves rather to the theoretical discourses of especially the nineteenth century, his more recent ones turn increasingly to the inter-relation between artist and medium. In a “close reading” of the material pictorial surface as the trace of making, they delineate the singularity of respective representational acts. It is that “contact” of artist and medium within the artwork that Shiff means with “the physicality of picturing”. Yet the analyses of works also make clear how little theory and practice can be separated in Modernism, which was to be so strongly characterized by programs and concepts. For certain essential terms of Modernist discourse—for example, originality, abstraction, materialization, or embodiment—again and again come into play without fail, in that the works appear to thematize precisely these terms and concepts.

Conversely, that rather discourse-theoretically oriented article from which the opening quote derived develops a central problem of Modernist *praxis*. The artists of Modernism find themselves confronting the difficulty, according to Shiff, of on the one hand generating works that are indebted to authentic and singular expression, but on the other of developing a style that clearly identifies their own works as Monets, Picassos, or Lichtensteins. They confront the task of inventing a handwriting that is immediate, and nonetheless remains repeatable from work to work. Shiff found an exceedingly impressive formulation for this contradiction. What the artists must achieve is a “technique of originality”. In Modernism, this takes the place of the old techniques of representation learned in the course of artistic training—chiaroscuro, the carefully distinct stages in the working process between first sketch and concluding varnish, the calculated reference to earlier masters, and so forth.

In the article under consideration here, this problematic comes to light in the discussion of Georges Seurat's pointillist screen of dots, which Seurat described on the one hand as his personal style and on the other as a mere procedure used. Seurat resolves that problem prepared in advance by Shiff, in that he developed a de-subjectivized neutral painting procedure, whose inventor he praised himself as, to which repeatability was nonetheless ascribed from the beginning. Seurat was not alone in his solution. Many artists of Modernism secured their individual recognizability essentially through the choice of a medium that precisely disavowed the quality of handwriting, in order to permit itself to be all the more multifariously made use of. One might think for example of Yves Klein's "International Klein Blue", with which he covered pictorial surfaces and objects of very diverse natures; of Warhol's silkscreen, which appeared to be suited to everything, and possessed the capacity to transform everything into a "Warhol"; or the white linear cubes of Sol LeWitt, which allow themselves to be organized into ever-new structures. Shiff pursues the psychological basis for efforts in the direction of a simultaneously individual and impersonal "look" in a variety of more recent texts,² and his conjecture has it that the artists are seeking in this way to avoid three things: first, the clichés about artistic self-expression existing since the aesthetic of genius; second, the ideological positional reference compelling them to struggle for the "right" Modernism; and third, the illustration of their own personality, to the extent that it could be considered to be socially and culturally shaped. With the paradoxical effect of an impersonal handwriting, according to Shiff, one tried to save the "actual" personality from societal finish and stylistic pigeonholing.

Shiff grouped his early studies of this complex of themes within exemplary investigations of Cézanne's working process, which work their way through what the artist understood with his favorite term "*réalisation*".³ In his pictures, Cézanne attempted at any given time to realize many things at once: first of all, the motif (for example, Mont Sainte-Victoire) in its endless multiplicity; further, the feelings that the motif released in the artist; and finally, the concrete painting itself, whose generation could first bring the other "realizations"—that of the motif, and that of feelings—to light. The "process of making" meant for Cézanne allowing the op-

² See especially Richard Shiff, "Puppet and Test Pattern: Mechanicity and Materiality in Modern Pictorial Representation", *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Stanford, 2002), 327-50 and 420-26.

³ Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago, 1984).

posed movements of recording a sensory impression and the depositing of paint on a canvas, the “impression” and the “expression”, to merge into a single gesture. Cézanne’s patchy non-focus can be grasped as that technique permitting the painter to impress the individual marks on the canvas with that decisive semantic ambivalence between iconic reference to the motif, and indexical reference back to the painter. The tensions within the aesthetic object result from this multi-layered, legible working process. They express themselves as ambivalences of the painted surface—between seeing and touching, flatness and depth, materiality of the paint medium and immateriality of the pictorial effect. Moreover, it is not only the tensions on the subject- or object-side of art that Shiff investigates, but above all the metonymic transfers which take place between them. They make it possible for tensions within the image to stand in for tensions within the working process or in the artist’s subjectivity, for example in that the image is understood as anthropomorphized and the canvas is grasped as a skin, which like human skin possesses the ability to breathe. In this fashion, Shiff distinguishes precisely between what a picture is, and what it is supposed to produce as an effect—a distinction that is immediately connected with that between thing and sign. For as Shiff’s already mentioned remarks about the “technique of originality” demonstrate, an artwork is not simply original or not original; what is much more decisive is whether it is capable of producing originality as an effect, for example by means of a skillful staging of indexicality. The modern artist is, according to Shiff, a master of that metonymic transfer which shifts a sign or an action from one context into another. It is these metonymic transfers that can lead, for example, to the artwork’s materiality standing in for the corporeality of a person, or—to take up the example of Seurat again—that seeing and touching alternately refer to one another. Seurat achieved this in that he transposed seeing into a series of point-like touches on the canvas, which transform themselves back into the viewer’s perception, as if it does not have to do with painted dots but rather on the contrary with flickering light.

A final tension within the artworks discussed by Shiff should be addressed here, namely that between the materiality and the mediality of the image. In this connection, it seems to have to do with a difference that has an historical dimension. In relation to Chuck Close’s portraits, Shiff speaks of their presenting the image as well as at the same time “the things out of which it is made” (in the original, “the stuff”). This sturdy expression—“stuff”—surprises one, for it accentuates the materiality of the image in a very specific way. “Stuff” is, accord-

ing to his interpretation, oppositional, frequently untidy, perhaps even dirty, but nonetheless close and important to oneself, as is apparent in the expression “my stuff”. “Stuff” exhibits precisely not that abstract immateriality of the medium which present-day media theory presupposes, when it emphasizes the media- and sign-based nature of our communication. A specific aspect of artistic Modernism could possibly lie in the significance of “stuff” for the working process, which would have in the interim become a bygone. The mediality of art, ranging from Delacroix up until the Abstract Expressionists—that is, the time-frame Shiff devotes his attention to—is grasped very materially and like a “thing”. That is also still valid for Chuck Close, whom Shiff indeed brings into relation with the phenomenon of digitalization and the generation of new technologies like television or the computer, who nevertheless translates the experience of them back into the old medium of oil painting. With the widespread entry into art of the so-called “media”, which are themselves now employed as a working medium, materiality and mediality appear to increasingly move away from one another. But what, if the diagnosis is correct, does this mean for the metonymic transfer that Shiff elaborates upon, especially for the exchange relationship between the materiality of the artwork and the corporeality of the artist? What happens to the “physicality of picturing” under these different conditions? The answer to this would be studies which continued the line that Shiff draws, extending it from the early nineteenth century through the 1960s, into our present time. They would have to evaluate the still-unclear consequences that the dematerialization and digitalization of media have for the production and experiencing of art. The precision with which Richard Shiff analyzes works and the discourse accompanying them would be desired of the discussion of this just now beginning.