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Kirk Varnedoe: Pictures of Nothing

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PREFACE

This book represents transcriptions of the six Mellon Lectures that Kirk Varnedoe gave in the spring of 2003, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, on the subject of abstract art in America since the time of Jackson Pollock. Minimal but immensely skillful editing has been done throughout (by Judy Metro, the National Gallery's editor in chief) essentially to smooth off rough edges, eliminate obvious repetitions, and connect loose ends of the narrative. It is no advertisement, but a plain fact, that this book therefore records what is, if nothing else, an amazing extemporaneous performance, made all the more amazing by the speaker's ravaged physical condition. (Varnedoe died of cancer a scant three months after giving the last of these lectures.) Working only with notes, though of course drawing on a lifetime's reservoir of looking and thinking, the seemingly crafted and pregnant sentences present on these pages really were improvised by the speaker in the course of an hour's talking.

It was not an irresponsible or offhand improvisation—he knew more or less what he wanted to say and had often rehearsed it, in his own mind and at length with listeners. (And, of course, he worked with an outline and a huge number of slides, which played a mnemonic role.) But the words came ringing out, every Sunday, fresh and unplanned, just as the reader meets them here. Much was premeditated

but more was improvised: looking at the images almost always inspired an unexpected thought, instantly blended into the body of the argument, and here preserved. He supposed these lectures to be his last and intended them to be his most important work, his testament of faith. He poured all of himself into them.

Given that truth, it seemed better to take them as they were than to try and guess at what Varnedoe would have done had he been given the time to do it. Perpetually dissatisfied with his own work, he would have doubtless revised, rewritten, and recast many sections; he had barely begun this work when sickness overcame him. His inability to have undertaken these revisions is, for his readers, both a good and bad thing. A bad thing, obviously, because that work would have enabled him to seal off his points and drive home his arguments in the finished text in a way that would have, among other things, made this preface unnecessary. And his characterizations of other critics' and historians' arguments and ways of looking at these pictures, necessarily summary given the constraints of time and the need not to lose his listeners in academic pilpul, would certainly have broadened and deepened.

And yet their unfinished nature is a good thing, or at least not necessarily a bad one, because the work of revision—shutting off exits, italicizing easily missed

points, and giving academic heft to the whole—might have diminished or even eliminated the extraordinary urgency and sense of discovery, and even joy, that still glimmers from these pages. Whatever might have been gained in argumentative conclusiveness might have been lost in improvisational electricity. Varnedoe did not value too much “finish” in a work of art, and the hot-off-the-press quality that he valued in his favorite pictures—preferring rough and ready cubist collage of the first lyric rapture to its later synthetic refinements—is present here. The lectures are, exactly in their *non-finito* form, more exciting, and a better representation of the speaker’s mind and heart, than the more deliberate book he might finally have produced. Varnedoe’s unique quiddity as a lecturer—his contagious excitement in the presence even of reproductions of works of art, his skeptical will to ask questions of received wisdoms, and then to ask questions of the questions, and the sheer love of painting and sculpture that exuded from him almost as a physical aura—is present on these pages as it is perhaps nowhere else in his published work.

Yet this unfinished nature brings challenges too, to both editors and readers. This book as we have it, with its central argument dispersed throughout its pages rather than focused on a few of them, risks being seen as a series of evocations and epiphanies, rather than as a pointed single argument about the nature of abstraction, and its meaning for American experience and modern consciousness. Varnedoe conceived each lecture as a kind of microhistory unto itself, taking a small issue—the relationship between

Bauhaus utopianism and American minimalism, or the parodies of abstract expressionism found in American pop art—and turning it round and round in the light of his mind, while deliberately evading, as often as not, one single conclusive reading. The lack of neat conclusiveness was part of the point—art evades a single or even a double rule. He jokes at the beginning of the third lecture that two listeners came away with diametrically opposed ideas of what he had been arguing for, because he had in fact been arguing for both.

But though refusing to ride any pet theory to the doom of art, he would never have wanted this work to seem simply an “appreciation” or a series of fine point considerations. The lectures were meant to be an argument, and quite a tight, strong, and provocative one; it would be a mistake to take the speaker’s allergy to theoretical hobby horsing for a reluctance to enter his horse into the race. That larger argument—though always alive in suspension in these pages, and often spelled out in summary parts—is never, perhaps, as entirely summed up as he would have wanted it to be in a final draft, and it might be useful to try and at least sketch it out, however inadequately, here.

Varnedoe intended these lectures, as he explained, to be a riposte or answer or reply to the Mellon Lectures of Austrian-English art historian E. H. Gombrich almost fifty years earlier, which produced *Art and Illusion*—one of those rare books that deserves the much abused adjective “seminal,” since almost everything that has been made of the philosophy of representation descends from it. In *Art and Illusion*,

Gombrich wanted to show that the history of representational art since the Renaissance was not a history of disciplined acts of copying-from-nature, but one of heroic acts of invention, comparable to, and inseparable from, the parallel growth of science around them in the same historical time frame. For Gombrich the rise of abstract painting, which was in its heyday as he wrote, was a return of the irrational, a romantic rebellion against that rational humanistic tradition of representation—impressive in its achievements at times, but essentially “primitivizing” and limiting in its expressive range and vision of the world. The abstract artist could say only one thing, again and again.

Varnedoe wanted to show something like the opposite: that abstract art was not an undifferentiated wave of negations or calls away from order, but a series of unique inventions—situated in history, but responsive to individual agency, and immensely varied in tone and meaning. He wanted to show that, like the history of representation, the real history of abstract painting shows the continuous evolution of a new language for art that, through the slow growth and accretion of symbolic meaning—so that a splash might come to suggest freedom, and a scrawl the Self—would capture truths about the world, and about modern existence. This language might be coded and “corrected,” changed, in ways very different from the ways that the Renaissance language of art had been changed and corrected, but it was in other ways continuous with that language, or to its underlying assumptions about the role of art, and susceptible to

the same kind of historical criticism and reasoning. Abstract art might be mystical and romantic in many of its achievements, but it was essentially liberal, humane, and rational in its historical sequencing and broader cultural existence—historical and rational in the simple sense that each moment in its history, far from being trapped in a narrow subjectivity, drew like a motif in a symphony on what had gone before and opened possibilities for what might come next. This evolution depended, in turn, on stable but open-minded institutions and audiences in order to do this; a scrawl might suggest freedom *because* a splash had before suggested the Self. The abstract artist might seem to say one thing—reiteration was part of his rhetorical arsenal—but abstract art could say many things. The practice of artists and viewers had for fifty years supplied an artistic language for American art, expressive and world-encompassing, that could register nearly any emotion or idea, from rhapsodic lust to Zen asceticism. What the history of abstraction gave us was not a series of *cri de couers*, pots of paint flung in the face of the bourgeois, or of Big Brother, but a set of responses to life in a self-made language—sly and complicated and varied, and in need of poetic parsing.

What had intervened between Gombrich and Varnedoe to create this radical difference of view was, of course, a developed and more complicated practice of abstract art. But also, and just as important, there had been a series of changes in art history, and these lectures respond to both kinds of change. In fact,

this book represents the culmination of Varnedoe's lifelong attempt to reconcile the sensibility of an unreconstructed aesthete with the consciousness of an unapologetic postmodern historian. Varnedoe's last major lecture series before this one, his still unpublished Slade Lectures at Oxford in 1992, had been entirely devoted to untracking and unraveling the debates on the idea of "postmodern theory" in art history, which had so changed the field since his youth, let alone Gombrich's time. (He left them unpublished because, ironically, those lectures seemed too heavily argumentative and not sufficiently appreciative or art-loving.) These Mellon Lectures are, in a sense, his response to the crisis of postmodernism in art history that he had identified in the Slade Lectures: an example of what he thought art history could do without abandoning its commitment to historical criticism, while still insisting that when we talk about art as a thing unto itself, and the presence of art as an experience irreducible to any other, we are talking about something real.

For Varnedoe wasn't, despite long years as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, a stranger to the tumult in his discipline that had led to so many fundamental alterations in the way that art history is conceived. His original contributions to his field had always belonged to that enterprise. His first important lecture, presented in the late 1970s and repeated many times, "The Ruins of the Tuileries, 1871–1883: The Aesthetics of Shock and Memory" had been a set-piece of social history, taking as its subject a seeming nonsubject—the ruins of the ancient palace of the Kings of France left in the middle of Paris after the

bloody suppression of the Commune in 1870. It was very much a lecture about absences, things evaded and not shown even in advanced painting: seeing this black hole at the center of Paris at the making of the impressionist moment helped us to understand that moment far more fully, as a time of razor-edge uncertainties, violence, destruction, and passionate political quarrels, very different from the hazy bourgeois paradise of conventional thought.

He never abandoned his commitment to this kind of historical criticism. Varnedoe's first question on approaching a work of art was always to ask, Under what circumstances was it made? Rather than, Who made it? Or even, What feelings does it evoke in me? (That question was crucial, but it came last.) But he soon became uneasy with what seemed to him too great or too easy a desire among his contemporaries to use social history to write away art history. That project was not one that he could sympathize with. The presence of the aesthetic—not as a narrow, frightened repetition of a set series of OK forms but as something viscerally thrilling, a frisson, an excitement unlike any in the world—was at the heart of his work and his life. He spent most of his career as a scholar trying to define ways in which you could understand art as history, without looking past the art only to the history around it. "We have no satisfactory account of modern art as a part of modern culture," were the first words of his Slade Lectures. The Mellon Lectures were part of his project to help supply one.

His attempts to do this involved many kinds of inquiry, lit by much reading, an intellectual journey

whose full and complex history will have to be saved for another day. In order better to understand this book, however, it might be helpful to see what had preceded it. His search for a new model of history brought him first, in his revisionist history of modern art, *A Fine Disregard*, and in *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* toward a kind of Darwinian vision of art history. Greatly influenced by the neo-Darwinian ideas of Stephen Jay Gould and Ernst Mayer, of constant creative change through the recycling of existing parts, these ideas seemed to Varnedoe profoundly applicable to the story of art. This neo-Darwinian emphasis on evolution as a means of using the old to make the new and, still more profoundly, on the idea of the individual variation as the only existing thing, illuminated his studies in the nature of innovation: it helped him to understand the cycle of perspective passing from Europe to Japan to be remade by Hiroshige and Hokusai, only to return to Europe crucially reimagined for the advantage of impressionism; or the way that the overhead viewpoint passes from art to photography and back again, each time adapting to new meanings through the inflection of familiar form.

This kind of history made for a thrillingly good big-picture story, but in the 1990s Varnedoe began to feel that it was inadequate to the specific pictures themselves. Artists had agency, in ways that animals didn't. The big picture looked right, but as soon as you got down to the small pictures, you were in a world of a thousand conscious choices that had to be honored on their own. He was therefore increasingly drawn, in

the 1990s, to the work of the neo-pragmatists and the philosopher Richard Rorty. (A conversation with the historian and critic Louis Menand, just as Menand was finishing *The Metaphysical Club*, his history of the origins of pragmatism in American history, played a crucial role in deflecting Varnedoe from the first subject he had considered for these lectures, the history of portraiture, toward this knottier but, in the end, more central one of abstraction: it was easy to see the ground for looking at pictures of faces, but why at pictures of nothing?) In Rorty and pragmatism he found philosophical reinforcement for his belief that just going on was enough, that no foundation, no ground was needed to make art from—art made its own ground—and that all the choices were ours: the artist to choose and make, ours to see and discover. Irony was not limiting if it meant a sense of proportion, an ability to bracket experience. This kind of pragmatism led him back away from mega-history, back toward biography and small stories. (He sketched the barest outlines of a triple life of Johns, Twombly, and Rauschenberg.)

This intellectual arc—from the excitement of discovering ways for material and social history to shed unexpected life on art, through the larger view of the problem of creativity and change, into a final faith in art itself, in lives and objects—was in many ways generational. One sees the same move from a new historicism toward a revived attention to biography and close reading of single forms and episodes in the work of his friend Simon Schama and in that of the Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt: it is not forces

from outside bearing down on the artist that count, but choices made within the picture from a palette of possibilities. And, as much as the Tuileries lecture was the masterpiece of his first “phase,” and the “Fine Disregard” lectures of his second, a lecture Varnedoe gave in 2000 on the Van Gogh portrait of Joseph Roulin, which he had acquired for the MoMA, was the masterpiece and keystone of his final phase of thought. In that lecture he concerned himself with only one image, this single portrait of a man in a uniform with a beard, with each element in the picture squeezed and poked until the last juice of meaning was pressed from it. It was a lecture not about absences but about *presences*, choices. Roulin’s beard, his uniform, the background behind him, the wallpaper, the Socratic nose, the Slavic eyes—every single thing that Van Gogh had registered, every choice that he had made, was assumed to be lit with the light of the time as it had passed through the prism of his mind. Everything depended on looking at what was there and how it happened, and every look at the picture led you back into the world in which it was made. This kind of close looking demanded a lot of specialized knowledge, about the artist and his times, and this meant, in turn, that looking at pictures, and particularly looking at modern pictures, had some of the qualities of a learned game; but then, Varnedoe thought, learned games have *all* of the quality of learned games, and no one thinks our taste for chess or football aberrant or fraudulent or imposed by a conspiracy of taste.

These last Mellon Lectures, the book before us, represent an extension and final achievement that

flowed from that project. It is based on a fanatically close and microscopically detailed study of a period, yet is rooted in the simple-seeming belief that social life already has an artistic structure. It is not simply that culture has its politics, but that all social and political life has its culture—that our social life is inherently artistic, shaped by a set of rhetorical devices and symbols and ways of speaking and showing and seeing that exist already, and that artists articulate. Minimal art takes place within a broader social dialogue about the uses of simplicity; this doesn’t put it in its place, but it does place it. The artist is positioned among codes and conventions common to her time—but she is positioned within them, and they operate as perplexing and demanding choices rather than as high-pressure systems, raining down whether she has an umbrella or not. The artist is a permanent Hercules at a perpetual crossroads, forever forced to make choices in pairs of meaning that are not of his own making. But he *is* a kind of Hercules, and it is he or she who does the heavy lifting. In these lectures, in this book, Varnedoe attempts to practice this kind of history in the most resistant of contexts, taking this matter of abstract art in America, which had none of the easy crannies and nooks—the “hooks” of familiar imagery and icons—that allow the climber to find his way easily up the mountains of meanings. This was sheer blank rock face, and to climb it required a delicate touch and an unmechanical sensibility.

It could be objected that what Varnedoe set out to achieve here—a map of choices within circumstances, gestures within social givens—is simply what

inspired traditional scholars have always done, and that a cultural poetics is just another name for good art criticism. And, in a funny way, what Varnedoe ended up doing in these lectures resembles what Kenneth Clark did in *The Nude*, another set of earlier Mellon Lectures that Varnedoe keenly admired, as much as it does what Gombrich did in his study of representation: a study of seemingly set-piece forms evolving radically different meanings through subtly differing inflections and changing communities of “readers.” Exactly so. (Or as Varnedoe would have said, “That’s right! That’s right!”) Among his favorite lines on art, or anything else, were those of Matisse in his *Notes of a Painter*, pointing out that all the great discoveries in art and life were simple, familiar truths seen new. In a sense, that was and became the point of these lectures—that abstract art was *art*, resistant to any procrustean explanation, and requiring the same patient work of re-creation, sympathetic summary, interpretation, and historical reasoning, as any other art had ever done.

To see the long chain of events of which one is merely another link, but to be acutely aware of that chain, and to see all of the ways in which creative originality involves forging a new link within it; to grasp the pressure of the past neither as a limiting boundary nor as a fixed inheritance; to re-create old value through new arguments and use old arguments to make new values—that was, for Varnedoe, exactly the project of modern abstraction, and the place where art touches life and reaffirms its connection to our experience. His was, above all, an optimistic view of art and its

possibilities, one that saw hope, change, and even a kind of progress where others saw only pessimism, individual repression, and constant negation. In this sense, the key argumentative passage in these lectures occurs at the beginning, rather than the end of the book, because it is meant to be an opening onto description rather than a closing down on a single view.

Abstract art, while seeming insistently to reject and destroy representation, in fact steadily expands its possibilities. It adds new words and phrases to the language by colonizing the lead slugs and blank spaces in the type tray. Seeming nihilism becomes productive, or, to put it another way, one tradition’s killer virus becomes another tradition’s seed. Stressing abstract art’s position within an evolving social system of knowledge directly belies the old notion that abstraction is what we call an Adamic language, a bedrock form of expression at a timeless point prior to the accretion of conventions. If anything, the development of abstraction in the last fifty years suggests something more Alexandrian than Adamic, that is, a tradition of invention and interpretation that has become exceptionally refined and intricate, encompassing a mind-boggling range of drips, stains, blobs, blocks, bricks, and blank canvases. The woven web of abstraction is now so dense that, for its adepts, it can snare and cradle vanishingly subtle, evanescent, and slender forms of life and meaning. ... Abstraction is a remarkable system

of productive reductions and destructions that expands our potential for expression and communication.

These lectures were his testament of faith—he ends the last one by the iteration of the words “I believe”—but since the faith was explicitly not dogmatic, the faith it demands from us in turn is one of, well, asking more questions. We might ask, for instance, if Varnedoe here comes perilously close to asserting that the proof of the value of modern art is that it makes more modern art—a notion that seems to invest a lot in pure production, and reminds one of the cartoon cat who runs across empty air through sheer belief and pedal-power (an image of art’s power he might have liked). In another way, we might ask if the search for an abstract art that can rival more obviously figural art for power and dignity leads inevitably to a concentration on that side of abstract art

that borrows most heavily from the familiar dignities of architecture and theater. The number of questions that arise is proof of the fertility of the thinking.

Which leads to one last, more personal, reflection. Though I wish with all my heart that Varnedoe could have lived to polish these lectures, I would not have them other than they are. They feel *free*. For, in an irony that even a writer as keenly aware of the power of irony as he was could not have anticipated, their necessarily unfinished nature—their existence *as* lectures, still-breathing sketches toward a final work, drafts and researches not yet fully closed—may allow readers more room for exactly the kind of open-ended responses, the inventive reinterpretations, the structured but uncoerced freedom to use another’s thought to think again for ourselves, that Kirk Varnedoe thought was at the heart of all creative endeavors. An irony as happy, in its way, for new-arriving readers as it is tragic for those of us who knew him.

Adam Gopnik