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***Art According to Lacan***

In the beginning, in his act of creation, God usurped a position that is properly that of the artist. As Lacan said in 1976: "It is not God who committed this thing we call the universe. One imputes to God something that is properly the artist's affair. The first model of creation, everyone knows, is the potter, about whom one says that he molded the thing that we call, and not by chance, the universe, and which means only one thing, that there is a One" (see *Ornicar?*, no. 8). Certainly not that there is one and only one God, or even that there is one and only one world, but rather that there is a one whose function is not to unify but to begin a count.

It is said that God created out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. But how does God or the potter go about creating something out of nothing. Very simply by attaching a number to it, making it *a* nothing, one nothing. The problem is that before this act it is difficult to see how there could be nothing. Does one create nothing, or does one create out of nothing? Such is the question. Is nothing nowhere or somewhere?

Several centuries ago the idea of God creating nothing was extremely problematical. It was difficult for anyone to imagine that there was anything an omnipotent deity could not do, and yet somehow the creation of a void, of a place where things did not touch each other, seemed to be unworthy of a deity who had created a plenum, a fullness. This, even if the Kabbalah asserted that God had created a void before the world to have a place in which to put said world. Perhaps there were gaps in God's creation, but these were neither the fault or responsibility of God.

Perhaps the potter is exemplary for creating a void out of a mass of clay. This would not have satisfied the interrogations of theologians in the fourteenth century, when this debate took place, because the void

thus created would find itself within the world. Their concern was the creation of a void outside of the universe. To respond to this it would be necessary to introduce Lacan's idea that the creation of a vase does not represent a container but rather something closer to a ring. If the world is a ring the void at its center is both inside and outside.

The idea of mass in which everything is touching everything else, in which all things are connected in a formless whole, has resonances with what the ancients called prime matter. For the moment let us note the name given to this concept by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *The Visible and the Invisible*, (1964; trans. 1968), a book which was the occasion for Lacan's reflections on art and the domain of the visible in the seminar entitled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Book XI, 1964; trans. 1973). Merleau-Ponty called the principle by which everything is touching everything else the "flesh of the world" and he went on to say that the field of the visual is cut out of this flesh. If, in other words, everything is connected, and if you wish to define a field in which different positions, like that of observer and observed, are demarked with clarity, you are obliged to introduce a cut. Otherwise touching and being touched are indistinguishable, as when you clasp your hands together.

We may essay an initial remark to the effect that art is created by cutting something out of the flesh of the world. This is suggested not merely by the theoretical problematic but also, and perhaps especially by contemporary artistic practice. The idea of cutting out points im-

mediately to what is involved in the construction of a collage, but it also may refer to the appropriation of objects from the culture, from department stores, supermarkets, piles of garbage, museum reproductions, even theoretical texts, and making of them art objects. We extend the idea in saying that a sculptor who cuts a block of marble out of some quarry in Italy is also appropriating a concrete object from the world. What does seem consistent in either case is that the artist creates a gap in the flesh of the world, a void, a nothing where previously there had been something. It may be true that what makes us say that there had previously been something is the fact that now there is nothing.

The block of marble, after it has been submitted to the artist's exertions, looks less like its source than does, say, an assemblage of boxes of Kelloggs Corn flakes, but after all, if the boxes of corn flakes make you think of nothing other than opening them and eating what is

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in them, then what the artist is offering to the eye of the spectator is probably not very artistic. Such statements are of course very debatable, so let us articulate them in more theoretical terms.

What is it that induces the spectator to think that what he is seeing is something other than a block of marble or a pile of boxes of corn flakes? What is it, in other words, that holds the material of the art object in its place, that prevents it from returning to where it came from, at least for a certain time. What is it that maintains the gap in the flesh of the world, or better, that creates the gap once it is clear that the object does not simply desire to return to where it was found?

If we are following Lacan in seeing pottery as the model for artistic creation, then one reason is that the created object is precisely empty. Even if it were full, the fact that it is a work of art seems to legislate against one's opening it and consuming the contents. So one difference between the box of Brillo that exists in the supermarket and the silk-screened version that is in a gallery is that the latter, I assume, is empty. Of course, the fact that it is empty and that it resembles rather well the box that is full produces an effect of trickery; its purpose is to trick the eye, or as they say, produce an effect that is called *trompe l'oeil*. Another reason of course is that the syntax, the way in which the object is organized in relation to whatever surrounds it, must be different from the syntax of, say, a supermarket. The grouping of boxes of Kelloggs Corn Flakes that presents itself as a work of art ought to look like something other than a bunch of boxes of corn flakes. The effect the work produces ought to be other than the promise of an enjoyment that resides in the consumption of the contents of the box, or even, in the case of fruits and vegetables, in the consumption of the thing itself.

The spectator ought to know that what he is looking at is not just boxes of corn flakes, because their arrangement makes them point to something other than themselves or their contents. And it is to the extent that he knows, not what they are, but what they are not, that he will look at them with a look that differs from the look he offers them in their more customary abode. Any more than he would take Michelangelo's *Pietà* to be just another block of marble.

Let us return to Lacan, for whom art was "beyond the symbolic." In distinction to various other psychoanalytic theorists who have found some solace in the idea that visual art ought to be connected genetically to what they think of as "preverbal stages," Lacan said that art was verbal at a second power. I take him to have meant that visual

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art makes use of the structure of language without, in most cases, making use of language itself. The advantage of such a procedure is that it allows the articulation of truth without having to deal with the requirements of the transmission of knowledge.

To draw the distinction between seeing and looking, Lacan began with the statement that I see from a single point—a fact which makes it very convenient to make the singular subject a seer—but that I am looked at from everywhere. One's subjectivity does not simply depend on what one sees but also on how one is looked at. We may say, to follow the way language is used, that I look at something when I do not see exactly what it is about, or when something seems to escape my sight. When someone pronounces the expression, I see, often that means that he has stopped looking. Looking, then, has the sense of searching for something while seeing has the sense of knowing, if not finding.

The point Lacan wanted to make is that the work of art is not simply looked at by the spectator, but that it is at the same time looking back at him. And what strikes me as even more significant is the assertion that it is not looking back at him with the look of one of the persons represented, but rather that it is looking back at the spectator with a look that he does not see. This look in the painting looking out at the spectator is the spectator's own look. Somehow the spectator has been dispossessed of his own look.

Lacan continued to assert that the recognition that your own look is looking at you, is fixing you, and has stopped you in your tracks before the work of art, produces anxiety. It is as though a part of the spectator's flesh, a function he believes to be intrinsic to a precious organ, has been cut away from his body. Anxiety is produced when you see your look in another space; for that is the moment when you realize your loss.

To demonstrate this point Lacan evoked Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*. He described carefully the experience of seeing this painting in the National Gallery, to show that the two standing figures surrounded by the implements of learning and staring out of the canvas do not represent the point from which the spectator is looked at. We see them but they do not capture our look. What does perform this function is an unrecognizable shape that is floating in the foreground of the scene.

When you are standing in front of the painting you cannot see what this shape is. So you look at it, you stare at it, and as you do so, Lacan

continued, the painting captures your gaze, and you as well, as you attempt to capture the unidentified floating object. Then as you are leaving the room, if you turn and take a last look at the painting, from that angle you can see that this object is a distorted, anamorphized, representation of a skull. From the empty sockets of the death's head the painting has been looking at you, has captured your look and turned it back on you, to make of you a picture. It is not simply that the painting regards you, to use the English equivalent of the French word, but that it sends back to you your own regard for yourself.

Ordinarily one would think that one's look is simply a function of one's eye. If this is so and if the painting captures that look then it must dispossess the eye of its look. It does so by tricking the eye into giving up its look, into laying it down in the interest of seeing. This is not, Lacan said, a universal function because the painting may also solicit the look, as a portion of the Holbein does and as expressionist paintings tend to do. To show how the eye is tricked out of its

look, Lacan invoked the ancient story of a competition between two painters to see who could paint a bunch of grapes so realistic that birds would peck at them. The first painter, Zeuxis, unveils his painting and the birds start pecking at it. Flush with the confidence of sure victory Zeuxis then turns to his colleague, Parrhasios, and asks him to remove the veil covering his painting to see whether the birds find it similarly appetizing. And Zeuxis loses the competition when it turns out that Parrhasios has done nothing more than paint a veil—to trick, not the eye of the birds, but the eye of the artist. And Lacan said that this represents the triumph of the look over the eye.

Among the paintings that have become privileged objects of philosophical discourse on art in recent years we must count the *Meninas* of Velasquez. Everyone is aware of the extensive and brilliant analysis of Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966; trans. 1974). According to Foucault the artist is stepping aside from his work to fix his look on his model, model whom we do not see, except as reflected in a mirror behind the artist. There you discover the image of the King and Queen of Spain, the parents of the child in the foreground of the painting, thereby to assume that artist was working on a portrait of these two royal personages. One may even add that the confluence of looks that are directed out of the painting, to create a space in front of it to hold the spectator, is directed not only at the royal couple but also at the spectator.

How does the painting look at the spectator with the spectator's

look if the looks we see in the painting are all conspicuously attached to one person or other? If we wish to know from where the painting is looking at the spectator, let us say that it is from a place the spectator does not notice. As Lacan responded to Foucault, it is certain that the royal couple does not see what is on the front of the painting; they are blind. But he added that we in fact do see what is on the other side of the canvas, and it is not a portrait of the King and Queen; it is the painting we are standing before in the Prado. Velasquez painted himself painting the painting we are seeing. Not only does the size of the back of the canvas in the painting suggest its connection with the *Meninas*, especially when contrasted with the miniaturization of the royal couple, but a close look at the painting shows that the artist is not looking at his supposed models; his look, as many have noted, is absent and even distracted. The mirror image of the royal couple induces us to believe that we are seeing the artist working on a painting that we do not see; might we not call this *trompe l'oeil*. We may even say that the painting we see was produced by an interruption in the painting of another subject, that of the child herself, illuminated, even radiant in the foreground. This interpretation was caused by the appearance of the King and Queen. The child is the point that attracts the light that is entering from the window on the right, but that also may be seen as having her own light source. The look of the man who is in the doorway, about to leave the scene but having been turned around, is not directed at the King and Queen but at the child herself as though she had done something to interrupt the painting, by turning to her parents and saying, Lacan suggests, something like: Come see!

The extent then to which you think you understand that the painter is painting the portrait of the royal couple is the extent to which your look has been taken from you. And this look is staring at you from the one part of the painting that no one, to my knowledge, ever notices. The last thing you would see, especially since you are interested in knowing what is on the face of the canvas, is its back. The last thing that would concern the viewer is the configuration of stains that appear on the back of the canvas. And yet, if you look closely, the pattern of those stains is not

entirely random: there you can see a pair of round dark patches resembling eyes and a longer vertical stain below them that suggests a nose. On the back of the canvas there is a look, a look that is not attached to any human, that appears to be there accidentally, and this is where the painting has appropriated your look, rendering it ghostly.

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This look regards you, concerns you, and we might say that it is the only look in the canvas about which we do not know what it is looking at. The child is looking at her parents, the painter is looking off in the distance, the dog is not looking at anything at all. Only the disembodied look on the back of the canvas is looking at you.

The painting has provided us with an exemplary instance of what Lacan defined as the stain taken to be a look. He said that the stain is something that always escapes from a vision that imagines itself to be consciousness. There are many things to see in the painting and many connections to make between them; it does not however cross too many minds that a stain on the back of a canvas would have anything much to do with the structure of the painting, no less that it is a controlling element in their organization. If I am not a consciousness, a subject that sees from a single place, then what am I as I fall under the power of the look? Lacan declared that I become a picture, not as I am seen, not as I see myself, certainly not as I see myself seeing myself, but rather as I am made into a scene by a look that is outside of me. It is not quite true to say that I am captured by this look, rather that something shows itself to this look that is ordinarily not revealed.

When I am looking at a painting I am not usually conscious of being looked at. However, when I encounter people in the world, I am not totally oblivious to this aspect of experience. Therefore I as most people do what we will call masks, representing the way I wish to show myself to the look of others. In the everyday commerce of human affairs, and especially in those affairs that fall within the realm of the erotic, the function of the mask has an irreducible importance. One is not simply subjected to the look of others, to the extent that one wears a mask, one has a say in how one is pictured to their look.

The eye is an organ; vision is the faculty of that organ to the extent that it implies knowledge; looking represents a connection of sight on something specific and particular, but most especially it implies that I do not see something; the look is most clearly deployed when there is something absent, something lacking. But a gap in a painting may also represent an eye, the opening of the pupil, or what Lacan called the eye's appetite. To the extent that it offers something to sight, the painting appeases or pacifies the appetite of the eye of the one who is looking. Here Lacan introduced the true function of the eye as organ, and this is, to be voracious and malevolent, to embody what is called the evil eye. To the eye is attributed many powers to cause ill as well as to cause illness.

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The structure of this activity is most clearly represented in envy. Lacan here reintroduced the incident from Augustine's *Confessions* where a child gazes bitterly at an infant appended to the breast of his mother. The bitterness of the look, its poisonous quality may eventually decompose, to poison the person who is looking in this way. Lacan added that envy is directed towards goods that would be of no use to the person who envies their possession; the child

gazing with envy has long since been weaned. He pales before the image of completeness represented by the infant at the breast, because the object, the breast, from which he has been separated, and which he now desires, has become for someone else a possession bringing satisfaction. In this context the function of art is to dispossess the evil eye of a look that kills. For it is the look of this eye that fixes an object in the sense of arresting its movement and ending its life. At the moment that the subject suspends or stops his gesture, Lacan said, he is mortified. Here is offered the example of dances he had seen at the Peking Opera in which at certain moments the actors stop their movement to assume a pose. Thereby, the dance acts to draw the function of the gaze into itself, actualizing its power, its effect, within a context where the effect is simulated; thereby to disarm it.

We mention in this context a remark Lacan made about the scene taking place in the *Meninas*. There, he said, the personages are not represented, but they are striking a pose, they are in representation, to translate the French expression literally. In striking a pose, they are making themselves into a picture, something like a still life, before the power of the gaze of the royal couple.

If the painting draws you into its space, this is because there is a void within it, like the hole in the potter's creation, and this void exerts an attraction on you. The problem is how do you recognize the existence of a gap or a void; how do you gaze into emptiness, how do you know where it is, what designates it? And here the look as object, the look that is in the field of the painting, marks the place where there is a void in the painting.

This structure can usefully be applied to the question of castration anxiety. It is relevant to a discussion of art to attempt to connect desire to terror because Rilke said that beauty is the edge of a terror and Lacan repeated the point in his seminar on anxiety. Let us take the following example from Freud as extended by Lacan in this same seminar (*Livre X, L'angoisse*, 1962-63). Freud wrote in the case of little Hans about a boy suffering from an infantile phobia. And he, as most

people, assumed that this anxiety derived from a threat addressed to the boy by a parent, a threat whose essence was that he was seriously at risk of having a piece of his flesh cut off. To this Lacan added that it is not the articulation of the threat that causes the anxiety, it is rather when the child looks at his mother and sees in her hand the organ in question. *That* is anxiety; and that is why the appearance of the spectator's look in the painting causes this affective state.

As far as psychic structure is concerned the place to find this little object is in the phantasm, especially to the extent that the subject is not represented in it. Instead of thinking that the phantasm is a visualization of the sort that accompanies self-consciousness, it is better to see it as a phantom image that emerges when you are not expecting it and that vanishes after having produced its effect. The paradigmatic phantasm in Freud is of course "a child is being beaten." Now this object as stand-in is the same as appears in the work of art. Nevertheless it is worthwhile not to confuse art with phantasm, or to say that what the artist does is to picture some phantasm or other. The reason is that the work of art addresses itself to the eye, to the eye's appetite, and this the phantasm simply does not do.

For the purposes of this elaboration let us say that a self-representation is something like a mirror image; it is the way you see yourself when you have an image of yourself in your mind. Following Lacan a representation competes with the world of appearances and this is what art

does not do. Everyone knows that Plato had little sympathy for art and not simply because poets had tended to represent the gods performing actions which were not worthy of imitation. As Lacan stated, Plato objected to painting, not because painters gave an illusory equivalent of objects, but rather because they were competing with the world of ideas, of forms.

When you are in a state of self-consciousness the character who resembles you is said to be your representation in this other space. If painting and other art forms function according to something that stands in for the representation, the first thing we may say is that you will not be seeing yourself in the work of art. It is in the absence of this representation that you will seek what is standing in for it. This idea should be extended to the point of saying that the painting is not representing even the model that it resembles. In the painting by Velasquez the function of representation is present in the King and Queen we see in the mirror. But the key as Lacan sees it and as we have said is not the recognition of this image, but rather the object in the painting that is

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standing in for the painting itself. And that object is the disembodied look on the back of the canvas. So the back of the painting represents the missing representation of the painting—the painting is not represented in the painting—and the figure, the stain in that space represents the look of the spectator as it is present in the painting within the painting. A representation, Lacan said, is seen, and anyone can see it. The painting, however, is about the fact that you do not see where the painting is looking at you.

As far as the question of looking in on the scene is concerned, Lacan said that that function is represented by the open window on the right of the painting. It is from there that the scene is looked at. The window correlates with the back of the canvas and its look, coming in from the outside, represents the eye of the spectator in the wish to throw some light on the scene, to understand it, to see. This is not the same as the supposed look of the royal couple to whom the child is beckoning, because their look is within the scene. So the light coming in through the window, taken to be a look, is the look of the eye becoming normally fixated on the luminous presence of the child Margarita. The child as object captures the look of the spectator, dazzles that look by feeding and pacifying the eye, the better to distract you from the disembodied, terrifying, ghostly look on the canvas.

It is surely important that the spectator be moved by the work of art. The question is of what constitutes that movement? How does the position in which the spectator finds himself approaching the work differ from the place he finds himself when he has been caught by its gaze? How he changes from being a seer avid to feast his eyes on something to being a picture beheld by a look that is irretrievably outside of himself? \*

\* For an extensive Lacanian study and new interpretation of the creation and of creativity, see Stuart Schneiderman, *An Angel Passes: How the Sexes Became Undivided* (N.Y.: NY Univ. Press, 1988).

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