

what is painting, what can painting be?

In some sense, any painter is asking these questions whenever they make a painting. As Kosuth suggested: every artwork is a *definition of art*. There is a parallel between this reflexivity of art – and its inherent historicity – and that of philosophy.

Jean Hyppolite makes the case that philosophy comes to question itself by interrogating the very basis of metaphysical thinking (à la Wittgenstein). This is not to say that it loses touch with questions of being and meaning, but that it thinks its way through to the good stuff in an indirect fashion. It never stares straight at the sun but becomes faintly aware of light at the edges of its vision.

Artists must also interrogate their artwork's roots in non-artistic factors (its existential conditions) at the same time as they explore its content. If we take Badiou seriously and consider art to be an autonomous domain of truth-production (as I think someone like Richter does), then we must question *the nature* of its truths, and the relationship between its objects and its means.

What is confusing is the plurality of these domains' truths. Rauschenberg suggested that any aesthetic will always challenge someone else's, implying that we might consider any painting – in the light of Kosuth – as a prescriptive assertion of what painting *should be*. This might be a confusion arising from the cross-pollination of art and philosophy; their 'suturing', as Badiou would put it. When we conceive of philosophy as an a-historical discipline (*pace* Hyppolite) then we might import the apparent linearity of its thinking into art and assume that paintings are incompatible rival doctrines.

According to Hyppolite, metaphysical questions are as indeterminate as artistic ones, and opposing accounts of being are as sustainable as opposing accounts of beauty. The question is: are there artistic 'truths' that sustain but reappear among different truth conditions (capturing the slide between eternity and temporality that Badiou recognises), or does art function differently? We can safely say it isn't like mathematics, whose truths collapse into a given present, but is it akin to Hyppolite's philosophy; weighed upon by its history to the point that it is always in a process of becoming – its thinking through of its history being an integral part of its function?

If so, then both the story of art history and the story of philosophy are ones of *becoming*, of complex dialectics without resolution, and of infinitudes made temporarily finite – not ones of linear progression, superseded theories and transient forms.

Each new painting becomes, then, not a novel definition of what painting is (or what painting can be) but an attempt to gesture at something eternal by giving it a temporary glance.

Its newness is not total, but relative.