

Provocations: Three Letters to Promising Young Painters

by Elias Friedensohn

(The three "Provocations" which appear below were written to graduate students in a painting class at Queens College, CUNY, during the spring of 1975. We organized our weekly four hour sessions around slide-talks in which students (individually or in pairs) examined their own work and their history as artists. My letters were intended to suggest points of departure for the presentations and open discussions which followed. Had we our wits about us we would have taped the sessions, for the letters cannot adequately reflect the energy, the passionate exchange, and the rich texture of exploration and discovery which they seemed, miraculously, to generate.)

VIOLENCE

18 April

3 p.m.

Dear Sandy and Phil,

Surely your paintings are about many complex issues but just as surely there is a frenetic quality in your work like unto other frenetic artists we all know...and surely some of that thrust of energy and delirium is violence. It is perhaps a central theme that might lead us to all the rest that you are pursuing. So I have singled it out for you to consider for us. Work together or separately, as you will.

Space, time, realities, appearances, snares and delusions I have not specifically mentioned --- the

formal languages you use, that is --- leaving that to you both to deal with as you see fit. You share some things and are very different in others ... different orders of image. Perhaps those images, compared, will produce some insights.

Picasso, Goya, Ensor, Soutine, DeKooning, Medieval and Renaissance crucifixions and martyrdoms, are all graffiti inscribed on the inside wall of our skulls as artists. How do you read them for yourselves?

"The works of art we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide. A work of art should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us."

----- Kafka

A parable:

"A man was hammering a nail and hit his thumb by mistake. The pain was so excruciating that he shouted and leapt about. The people nearby were full of admiration: 'How beautifully he sings and dances,' they said."

Are your paintings violent? or are they about violence?
Are you creating images of violence, or violent images?

Violence is rage unleashed.
About what are you enraged?

Violence is an assault, an attack. An attack on the viewer? or do you want the viewer to attack with you? Do you do it for pleasure? Why do you want to attack the viewer? Do you do it out of hatred? What are you attacking? Who?

What is the precondition for violence?

Does the release of feeling, any feeling, mean disorder, disarray, anarchy? Or does each feeling have a form and flow for which we can create a visual embodiment? What

is the order and flow of violence?

Must we show the precondition as well as the violence to make sense, or is the sensation of violence enough? Because you assume that we all know the cause or precondition?

Violence is an extreme manifestation. Extremes must produce extreme reactions and require extremes for resolution. Extremes must produce effects that are themselves extremes: exaltation, despair, terror, revelation, fervor. What effects do you want to generate, provoke?

Violence is not an extreme. It is the norm. What's all the fuss about? There is no Paradise. There is only the jungle --- and man is the cruellest of beasts. So what else is new? So why all the fuss?

It's all grey, an undifferentiated grey, and I can't stand it. It's death. Therefore revolt! Black and bloody! Scream and rage! At least I can think me alive! I bomb, therefore I am!

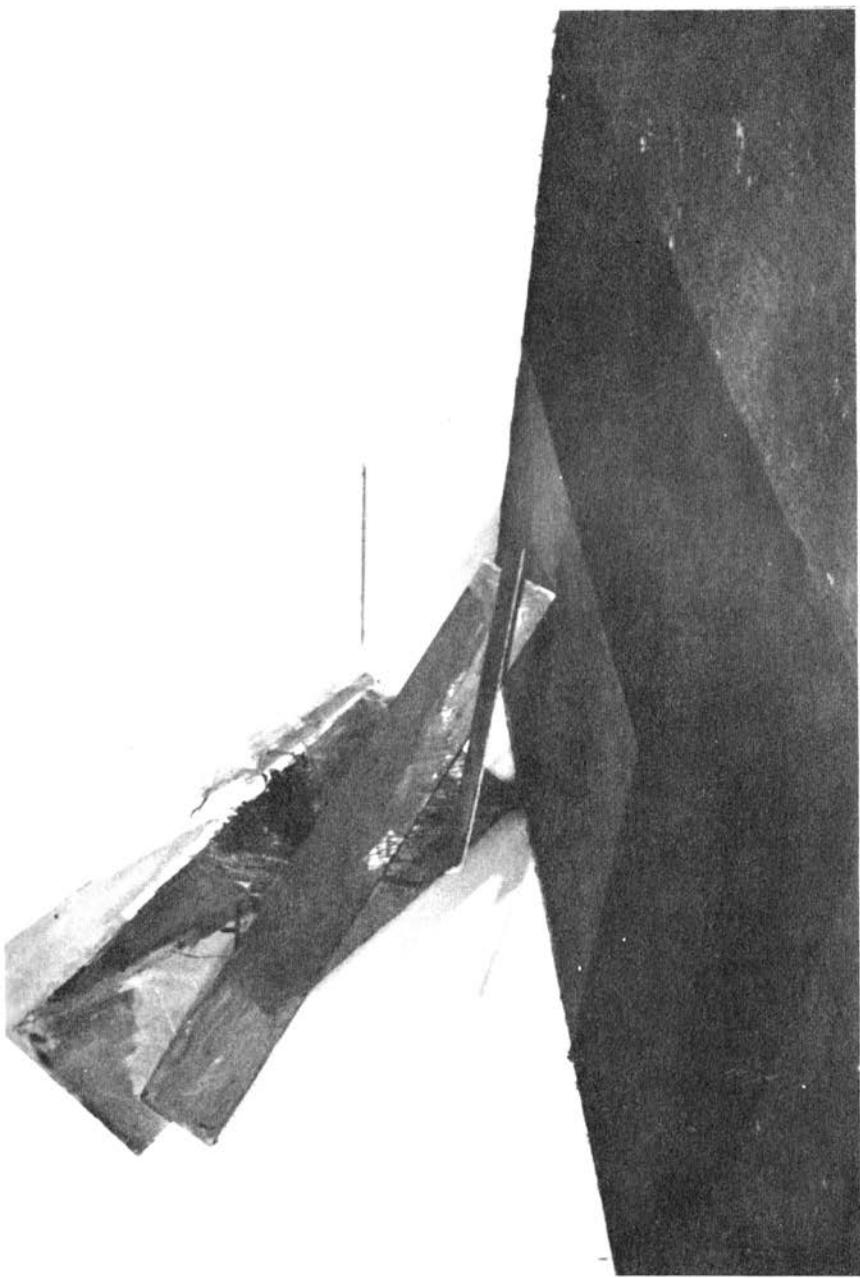
"My drawings expressed my despair, hate, disillusionment. I had utter contempt for mankind in general. I drew drunkards; puking men; men with clenched fists cursing at the moon; men who had murdered women, sitting on their coffins playing skat, while within the coffins could be seen their bloody victims; a suicide with a body covered by swarming flies."

---- George Grosz

Do you think we have settled for the twitch of the eyeball instead of the tremor of the soul?

The beautiful is the harmonious. The harmonious is the unified, the resolved. A painting must be unified, resolved. Therefore your violence must be beautiful. Is violence beautiful?

Or is it that by chance, the pattern of violence is beautiful? The movement, color and space of violence,



and not violence itself?

All impositions of order are a lie...a self-serving rationalization of the true state of things. Only the truth is beautiful and the beautiful is, therefore, terrifying. The truth is chaos, the jungle, noise, the bomb, filth, stench, contradiction, decay, corruption. Therefore these things are beautiful. Terror is beautiful. In terror I join my aliveness to the beautiful absurdity, irony, meaninglessness of the world...

"...It is Boredom! That monster smoking his houka, who in one gulp would swallow the world. You know him, hypocritical reader, my image, my brother!"

---- Baudelaire

How wide is the cast of your net? How broad the range of your violence?

Violence is and must be made to be seen as ugly. You are a moralist? People are violent. They are pigs, toads, crabs, spiders, scorpions, guts and genitalia, orifices for chewing, swallowing, spitting, defecating...We are born inter faeces et urinas.

"Eating comes first, morality afterwards."

---- Brecht

Tell us then about the order of violence, if you think we will believe you. Tell us about other artists of violence, how they did it and why? Tell us, then, since we are your victims and you owe us at least that.

"In the earthquakes to come it is to be hoped I shant allow bitterness to quench my cigar's glow."

---- Brecht

Do you think you can deal with your desperation by turning it into art?

Is your violence external or internal? Psychic or physical?



Is it not any of that but merely the swift? The staccato rhythms, city noise, trucks, planes, subways, dissonant and modern --- and you merely react, describe, document our lives, confusions, joys, sorrows, loves, O Baby?

If you want to attack shall it be general and all over? Or honed to a razor's edge, well-aimed, on target --- beautiful in its cold, ruthless precision --- professional! Or do you want it hot and raging, indiscriminate and overwhelming by sheer force and weight? Or should it be coldly, precisely hot and raging? How do you pick your field of battle? How do you array your forces?

Does your violence predicate a hero? What about heroes? Or is your violence abstract because there are no heroes? Are you the hero/martyr of your violence?

Avanti, Capitano!

STILL LIFE

24 April

11 p.m.

Dear Linda and Pam,

This impromptu letter is directed at both of you. You can deal with it in any way you wish ... together or separately one after the other. You can respond to any part of it, all of it, none of it. If the last, pose your own questions and give your own answers ... so we can know you, where you come from, where you want to go. It is directed at the issue of still life which has been a preoccupation for both of you for some time now.

What is the mystery that resides in things --- objects? Is it that they are alien? Separate? That they have that "strangeness" that physicists ascribe to the unpredictability of certain particles? Do they defy in some way our ability to know them?

Or is it that they remember ourselves --- Because we have made them, or used them, or worn them, or that they have

served us? And in our remembering of them become like people, like actors, like pawns, and live by our laws? Suffering our calms, our storms?

Or is it because, no longer using them, wearing them, no longer functional, that in painting them we know them differently for qualities we now perceive but did not before? What qualities?

Or is it not any of that but the light in which it sits? Or the space? Or is it not that but the light and space it shares with other objects (other memories?) and how it shares with them?

Or is it really only the light and space that the objects reveal and it is in the light and space that the mystery truly resides?

Or is it time? Recorded in the object --- how it was made or formed, or how it was used and worn? Its history?

Would you paint its sound? Its smell?

Or is it all of these and how we are joined through them to some vague, shadowy sense of the meanings of existence that we cannot otherwise know? Of what are they the metaphor?

What artists have touched that mystery and therefore touched you deeply? How did they touch it? What would you take from them to make your own? What would you add to them to make your own? Because this is 1975. What do you know that they did not? What do you have that they did not? Because this is 1975.

Why still life?

Is it more pure? More distilled and therefore the more tense metaphor? The more secret tragedy or joy? The more mysterious narrative? The more disguised. Because it does not move? Because objects are discreet, blind, dumb?

Or, because discreet, mute, eyeless, are they more poignant to contemplate in their dumb distress, or silent, unvoiced joy, or because we cannot read into their containment?

Or are they just frames on which to hang the red, the orange, the shock of blue? Just carriers of the silvery dust of the light that pretends to reveal them but only reveals itself so that they, the objects, are merely caesuras, stops or pauses in a journey --- breaks in a flow that tell us where we are?

If the objects have "strangeness" why must they sit (or stand? or be?) on a table? Why must they obey the laws of gravity? Why must their color stay on their skins? Within the confines of their contours? Why cannot they dance and sing in the space? Spread and obliterate the space? Become their own space? Why must they have weight or mass or volume?

What does the geometry of the design we impose upon them have to do with them? Is that our order? What is their order? How would they dispose themselves if we turned our backs to them?

Are we afraid that we cannot know their order? Their rhythm? Their will? Does the random disarray of their immobility dismay us, offend us, frighten us with intimations of nihilism, arachny, helplessness, death?

What geometries, what laws have you chosen? Who gave them to you? Where did you find them? Are you content with them or are they your prison too? And with them you imprison the objects to make them like yourself?

Is random cruelty and decay worse than planned, ordered cruelty and decay?

Whose eye looks out at us from inside the object?

Pax vobiscum

FORMALISM

14 May --- the deadly noon hour in between everything.

Dear Barbara,

The function of this is to scratch you and provoke responses for or against anything that seems to have to do with you and your work. Some of the wanderings which follow come either directly or tangentially from a sense of play. You are invited both ways:

"To find something interesting you merely have to look at it long enough."

---- Flaubert

Those are the words of a writer speaking about the problem of what to write about. Any painting, no matter how minimal, if looked at long enough, becomes interesting. But that interest rests in the observer's willingness to supply a literature and usually has very little to do with the fact of the painting.

Isn't Brice Marden after all, a really dull painter? Aren't his paintings, as Kenneth Evett described them,

"...the ultimate realization of the conception of painting as mere harmless decoration."

Are they not

"...in essence, both iconographically and formally as safe and secure as the grave."

Rothko is dull. Albers, a fancy dishrag, ironed. Noland stupid. Olitski a bore. Newman a fake (the only reality of Newman was his mouth). Their formal inventiveness is the single, dumb thought of the obsessive cretin. Their safety is absolute. The literature written about them is what they illustrate - nothing more than clouds of gas written by people who, in looking long enough, only found yet another good excuse for their usual blind

pandering to their own egos. Having abdicated, having given up responsibility, it remains only to sanctify the passive abnegation and apply for sainthood. (You have to be dead to become a saint.)

Are you applying for sainthood?

"All that passes is raised to the dignity of expression; all that happens is raised to the dignity of meaning. Everything is either symbol or parable."

---- Claudel

If you are not to be iconographically and formally safe and secure as the grave, tell us how you would imbue with meaning, with expression, with dignity, with symbol or parable.

The canvas is both a fact and void, is it not?

Paint is the substance of the universe
the substance of the void
the formless forming
the strings of random particles out of which
living facts are built.

But it is true that the living fact of paint is a lie, an illusion, a momentary covering of the void, a cosmeticked escape from the truth we cannot face.

The birth of a living fact is a point in the void, is a perturbation of the nothingness, a fragile seeming, a delicate hesitation, a flaw in the perfect continuity, a flicker of resistance, a muffled scream.

By what tokens do we know of its presence?
What signs?
Is it matter or energy?
Do you celebrate its emergence?
Or merely observe?
Do you foster its growth?
Does it grow by itself? Do you assign it
volition?
Do you preside over its death?

Is it a becoming? What does it become? Is it a becoming because it is incomplete? Is "being" complete, or because complete, is "being" death?

Time: How long does it take to appear, to become, to be, to die? Is there any movement?

What are edges? Edges of what? Of movement? Of change? Are your edges anxious enough? Fearful enough? Imminent enough?

The rectangle of the canvas is a framing of the void. How is the void reconciled with the fact of the canvas? If the rectangle frames the void it is an ordering of the void. It is the beginning of the grid. How dare you grid the void? How dare you lie like that?

The grid takes over total possession and control.
A key gives us the particular sense of the essence.
Why not give us a key instead of the grid?
If you divide in thirds, what do you mean?
Something about threeness? What?
What does the void care about three?

If you put down a tone (substance signifying void?) it manifests your energy, your decision. Or is the tone put down by no hand? An "is" or "is not" divorced from yourself? Like the cosmic void which is not yourself?

Any move you make is an intrusion. How can you not intrude? How can your surface be created by a condition outside of your meddling self?

You are a mystic?

Then there must be signs, symbols, keys.

Signs are strong. They are irritable. The symbol acquires its autonomy and takes over the thing symbolized. The crossbearer becomes the crucified, does he not?

What about light? Energy? God?
What about color? Light? Energy? Life? Substance? Space?
What about grey? What is grey?

Time is signalled by movement. Rhythm makes movement clear. Rhythm is a key. Grids block intervals, ordering time, area, distance --- democratically, machine-like, clocklike. Life resents it. Is the grid death? What about that?

Are you proposing a dialogue between life and death? Or are you just serving up weak tea? Grey perfume?

"If death is the ultimate banality and art is the infinitely varied, idiosyncratic human gesture of defiance against that fact, some artists are simply calling attention once more to the old, existential, individual, cultural and creative choice that must always be made, though provisionally, between the two."

----- Evett

You?