

Works of Art and Mere Real Things

Let us consider a painting once described by the Danish wit, Søren Kierkegaard. It was a painting of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Looking at it, one would have seen something very different from what a painting with that subject would have led one to expect, were one to imagine, for example, what an artist like Poussin or Altdorfer would have painted: troops of people, in various postures of panic, bearing the burdens of their dislocated lives, and in the distance the horsed might of the Egyptian forces bearing down. Here, instead, was a square of red paint, the artist explaining that "The Israelites had already crossed over, and the Egyptians were drowned." Kierkegaard comments that the result of his life is like that painting. All the spiritual turmoil, the father cursing God on the heath, the rupture with Regina Olsen, the inner search for Christian meaning, the sustained polemics of an agonized soul, meld in the end, as in the echoes of the Marabar Caves, into "a mood, a single color."

So next to Kierkegaard's described painting let us place another, exactly like it, this one, let us suppose, by a Danish portraitist who, with immense psychological penetration, has produced a work called "Kierkegaard's Mood." And let us, in this vein, imagine a whole set of red rectangles, one next to the other. Beside these two, and resembling each as much as they resemble one another (exactly), we shall place "Red Square," a clever bit of Moscow landscape. Our next work is a minimalist exemplar of geometrical art which, as it happens, has the same title, "Red Square." Now comes "Nirvana." It is a metaphysical painting based on the artist's knowledge that the Nirvanic and Samsara orders are identical, and that the Samsara world is fondly called the Red Dust by its deprecators. Now we must have a still-life executed by an embittered disciple of Matisse, called "Red Table Cloth"; we may allow the paint to be somewhat more thinly applied in this case. Our next object is not really an artwork, merely a canvas grounded in red lead, upon which, had he lived to execute it, Giorgione would have painted his unrealized masterwork "Conversazione Sacra." It is a red surface which, though hardly an artwork, is not without art-historical interest, since Giorgione himself laid the ground on it. Finally, I shall place a surface painted, though not *grounded*, in red lead: a mere artifact I exhibit as something whose philosophical interest consists solely in the fact that it is not a work of art, and that its only art-historical interest is the fact that we are considering it at all: it is just a thing, with paint upon it.

This completes my exhibition. The catalogue for it, which is in full color, would be monotonous, since everything illustrated looks the same as everything else, even though the reproductions are of paintings that belong to such diverse genres as historical painting, psychological portraiture, landscape, geometrical abstraction, religious art, and still life. It also contains pictures of something from the workshop of Giorgione, as well as of something that is a mere thing, with no pretense whatsoever to the exalted status of art.

It is what he terms the "rank injustice" in according the classy term *work of art* to most of the displayed items in my exhibit, while withholding it from an object that resembles them in every visible particular, which outrages a visitor, a sullen young artist with egalitarian attitudes, whom I shall call J. Seething with a kind of political rage, J paints up a work that resembles my mere rectangle of red paint and, insisting that his is a work of art, demands that I include it in my show, which I am happy enough to do. It is not one of J's major efforts, but I hang it nevertheless. It is, I tell him, rather empty, as indeed it is, compared with the narrative richness of "The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea" or the impressive depth of "Nirvana," not to mention "The Legend of the True Cross" by Piero della Francesca or Giorgione's "La Tempesta." Much the same epithet would characterize another of J's works, what he regards as a piece of sculpture and which consists, as I recall it, in a box of undistinguished carpentry, coated with

beige latex paint applied casually with a roller. Yet the painting is not empty in anything like the way that mere expanse of red-painted canvas is, which is not even empty as a blank page might be, for it is not plain that it awaits an inscription, any more than a wall of mine might were I to paint it red. Nor is his sculpture empty in the way a crate would be, after its cargo is taken out or unloaded. For “empty” as applied to his works represents an aesthetic judgment and a critical appraisal, and presupposes that what it applies to is an artwork already, however inscrutable may be the differences between it and mere objects that are logically unsusceptible to such predications as a class. His works are literally empty, as are the works in the rest of my show: but literalness is not what I have in mind in saying, in effect, that J's achievements lack richness.

I ask J what is the title of his new work, and predictably he tells me that “Untitled” will serve as well as anything. This is a title of sorts rather than a mere statement of fact, as it sometimes is when an artist neglects to give his work a title or if we happen not to know what title he gave it or would have given it. I may observe that the mere thing in whose political cause J created his work also lacks a title, but this is by dint of an ontological classification: mere things are untitled to titles. A title is more than a name; frequently it is a direction for interpretation or reading, which may not always be helpful, as when someone perversely gives the title “The Annunciation” to a painting of some apples. J is somewhat less fantastic than this: his title is directive in at least the sense that the thing to which it is given is meant not to be interpreted. So predictably too, when I ask J what his work is about, I am told that it is about nothing. I am certain this is not a description of its content (chapter two of *Being and Nothingness* is about nothing, about absence). For that matter, “Nirvana” may be said to be about nothing in the sense that nothing is what it is about, a picture of the void. His work, J points out, is void of picture, less a case of the mimesis of vacuity than the vacuity of mimesis: so he repeats, about nothing. But neither, I point out, is that red expanse in defense of which he painted “Untitled” about anything, but *that* is because it is a thing, and things, as a class, lack aboutness just because they are things. “Untitled,” by contrast, is an artwork, and artworks are, as the description of my exhibition shows, typically about something. So the absence of content appears to be something rather willed in J's instance.

Meanwhile, I can only observe that though he has produced a (pretty minimal) artwork, not to be told by naked inspection from a bare red expanse of paint, he has not yet made an artwork out of that bare red expanse. It remains what it always was, a stranger to the community of artworks, even though that community contains so many members indiscernible from it. So it was a nice but pointless gesture on J's part: he has augmented my little collection of artworks while leaving unbreached the boundaries between them and the world of just things. This puzzles J as it puzzles me. It cannot be simply because J is an artist, for not everything touched by an artist turns to art. Witness Giorgione's primed canvas, supposing the paint to have been laid on by him: a fence painted by J is only a painted fence. This leaves then only the option, now realized by J, of *declaring* that contested red expanse a work of art. Why not? Duchamp declared a snowshovel to be one, and it was one; a bottlerack to be one, and it was one. I allow that J has much the same right, whereupon he declares the red expanse a work of art, carrying it triumphantly across the boundary as if he had rescued something rare. Now everything in my collection is a work of art, but nothing has been clarified as to what has been achieved. The nature of the boundary is philosophically dark, despite the success of J's raid.