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Toward Impalpable Transformations: On *Plural* by Christopher Stackhouse

Plural, by Christopher Stackhouse. Denver, Colorado: Counterpath, 2012.

While almost all of the cave frescoes at Lascaux depict activities necessary to survival, the few quadrilaterals, parallels, points, and curves painted alongside them strike some visitors as undetermined; for some residents of our own perennially uprooted landscape, abstractness likewise portrays a process, rather than a collective. Christopher Stackhouse is a visual artist whose poems address art's condition as a passage drawn and written among the crystalline chambers of matron-thought:

As a mark is made it becomes an image
as you make a mark you become the image
of an image making a mark— ("Mark")

Late-twentieth-century American poetics has loosed a consciousness that drifts between engagement and disinterest; a draftsman like Stackhouse, who doesn't soar aloft in such thin air, and yet takes up poetry all the same, might well give his new compatriots pause.

Evading gamesmanship, he rebukes an anonymous detractor, satirizing him:

Your drawings carry the traces of something personal,
interesting, the kinds of things people will want to see
when you're dead, tapped into, exhumed, a delight really . . .
("The Critic Loves . . .")

The poet's target, this taxidermist, wields a proprietary arrogance, covering for his own laziness with "criticism" he's swiped from the style guides. Keywords bob in a bath of journalese. Stackhouse responds in the only way possible: "I read your book and it was the

same book / that that other asshole wrote." ("Fabrication") Too bad for people who think poets shouldn't draw!

These poems confess their author's skepticism about the temporal nature of poetry, in a way one imagines would amuse Gotthold Lessing:

This is a new page, thusly a new idea or
at least a different one than one on the
preceding (preceding?) page. ("Untitled")

The prescription *Ut pictura poesis* (Horace: "As in painting, so in poetry") sometimes yields a shorthand which comes unhinged from the way people really talk to each other in daily life. We value that approach for its mystique, and for its eccentric perspectives on periods in art history. By contrast, Stackhouse's lines sustain a tensile energy. "The 'the' madame, *the* article, a type of scarf, perhaps one parasol in a sun of parataxis" ("Caucus")—this might be the most droll remark one has ever read about the commonest word in English. The mystery which an atemporal art like drawing transmits to the onlooker is the fact that certain kinds of knowledge are instantaneous: "Bearing leave from dimension, we know, hand in hand, another / interior by name." ("The Channel") The poet's syntactic decisions in writing provide a reliable index of his feel for communication in the social world.

It can seem to the practicing artist as if he is merely looking on in a custodial way, while the art gathers all else up into itself:

of Blackness
some light
upon such
to center
each step
encounters
sadness open,
screech, flutter,
luxuriant ecstasies ("For One")

In some books, Culture wears poetry like a tight shirt; reprieve from grandstanding arrives in *Plural* with lines like the above, an implicate order whose real music can be discerned under and around the written words. Other poems address the question of heritage explicitly:

Af-am contribution to Abstraction, variation
Pattern making, smallness versus the typified
'Grand gesture,' to write as one draws, geometric
lines, subsets confined and confirmed by points ("Description")

If the Stumblebums and Mandarins are paying attention, this should put them off course and en route toward an art that's a lot closer to home.

Several pieces in *Plural* take the form of notes jotted down at lectures and panel discussions. In these poems, Stackhouse's paratactic phrase-clusters result from hurrying to catch up with what he hears and thinks within the social environment, and that's something not a lot of writers are brave enough to do—and what's more, observing the rules of the genre, he's even left several names written incorrectly, just as he'd recorded them in the moment. Then, from outside the gallery, and outside the art world altogether, there is this extraordinary stanza:

an old woman black as coal.
Gray hair, pupils clouding, mouth pursed
proud, she carries four black plastic bags.
Each filled with plastic bottles, with the other
hand full of a handlebar to a cart she pushes,
the black bags' handles impress upon the skin of
her forearm. Her sense of gravity must be different
than mine, and yet here we are in this neighborhood
together, passing, as people all over the world
pass each other, by sandal, by luxury car— ("Each Bird")

These lines testify to a tenderness not much in evidence recently. Instead of haranguing the non-viewer or non-reader, the poet discreetly tries to understand where she's coming from. In this light, the term "passing" resonates across contexts. What might an artist offer such a person? "To conjure something happy for you, but unfamiliar." ("Wet") The "something" is bodiless, of course, but it's likened to ordinary things: "Efficient and particular as the wind / Isolated and generous as a mailbox." ("Efficient and Particular") This shows special consideration for any life lived, no matter how distantly, around the creation of unnatural wonders.

Ruling out a lot of working methods, Stackhouse states several basic assumptions about art—positive ones, in the philosophical sense, that are meanwhile qualified by circumstance:

Thinking about what

Art should speak (say) to a position from a position of an artist. The artist takes a position based on how s/he sees itself in contextual dialogue (art historical?) with the human condition. The artist interprets his/her world to create meaning, or/and, comment on the way meaning may be transmitted.

("Notes from Panel Disc. @ the Fish Tank Gallery")

Commitment entails follow-through, so elsewhere, an epistolary personist address takes up the question of what art and the artist should do, as an issue specific to visual art, over which there can be no compromise:

I have been thinking increasingly about what you were saying
with regard
to Richter, intimacy and the public address/space/exchange
that paintings foster,
intimacy
public address
space
the exchange paintings foster
this distinction that Arthur Danto makes
between pictures and paintings,

the former being transparent representations of
something identifiable (what is pictured) the latter being material entities
that represent, but whose purpose, so to speak, is their presence, materiality,
there-ness.

The distinction is
fascinating. ("Extractions")

Not too many artworks possess the self-consciousness to place themselves according to their stations in such a public zone as this. It's hardly secret knowledge that a visual representation which depends upon optics condemns itself to borrowing from spectatorship certain attitudes about the viewer, ones native to all types of illusionism—juxtaposition and symbolism, among others—losing tension and exposing itself to the influence of commercialism. Optical contexts

ought to be what an illusionistic picture presents, but then it would have to portray its subject matter without recourse to optics, in such a way that we'd see the differences from what a photograph could show—but then this would be a very different kind of representation. Stackhouse seems to have chosen Richter for commentary in "Extractions" because that artist has not observed Danto's distinction between "paintings" and "pictures", but instead has made both. And then again, thinking further about Danto, it simply isn't true that the viewer relates to a "painting" (as opposed to a "picture") without mediation: in Danto's terms, what makes "painting" unique is the special sorts of mediation which take place between itself and the painter, on one side; and between itself and a viewer, on the other—these interactions with the artwork are what we refer to as Technique and Interpretation, the domains of choice. Fortunately, those are complex and densely mediated relations—the more so, the less they appear to be; and that's why painting is difficult sometimes.

Where required, Stackhouse's texts dismantle habits of thought formed by institutional patterns of behavior. Here is a complete poem:

EXTRACTIONS

Addendum Section III

Actually,

how daring is clinical faithlessness?

Beguiling.

"Historical context" the culmination of "art about making art"
 (the present event, (photog, painting,
 movies, etc.)
 or set of)

What one argues is his/her own position, so when we discuss
 individuality/authenticist
 (as in having an original idea or novel approach to a
 given subject)

thought 'mobilized' then is perhaps the 'authentic position'

informed by what? Surfing. And what isolates your 'state
 of being'

of such)

Imparting whose ideas to what end.

The ideal argument.

The model survival.

And so after that what? Par instance

Technology/techno-
tronic fetish.

A system of audiences.

"I" as a culmination of exclusivity, which is about
privileging inheritance and theft some would
call appropriate

so in sequence—

Warmly and patiently, so that it reminds us how enjoyable a companionship of the imagination can be, this poem in the guise of an informal talk strips contemporary art's negative reflection of bourgeois individualism down to first principles. "Extractions" exposes a paradox: personal individuality doesn't exist in art, but instead is transposed onto the system of art, where it must be made among discrete traditions, rather than being found among social hierarchies, which don't exist there. In art, individuality is only revealed through the artist's mature technique as achieved over a long process of relinquishing individuality, and technique is only manifest in the instance of an artwork. Technical subtleties are the very thing that invites an adherent of conventional individualism to participate in art by the means available to him: self-identification with an object—which sometimes leaves the satisfied little mister and the cursed artist standing too close for comfort. Measuring a potentially uncomfortable distance, "Extractions" relieves readers and writers alike of the temptation to act out prefabricated roles.

As for what's yet to come from Christopher Stackhouse, one thinks of Michelangelo and Blake, in whose poems the chisel and burin become figures for an impalpable transformation. For now, with its byways of thought, this work assumes a lean bulk when the mind's body goes near it later.