Writing the Apocalypse

Voicing Silence Through Time

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Tadeusz Rózewicz, *new poems*

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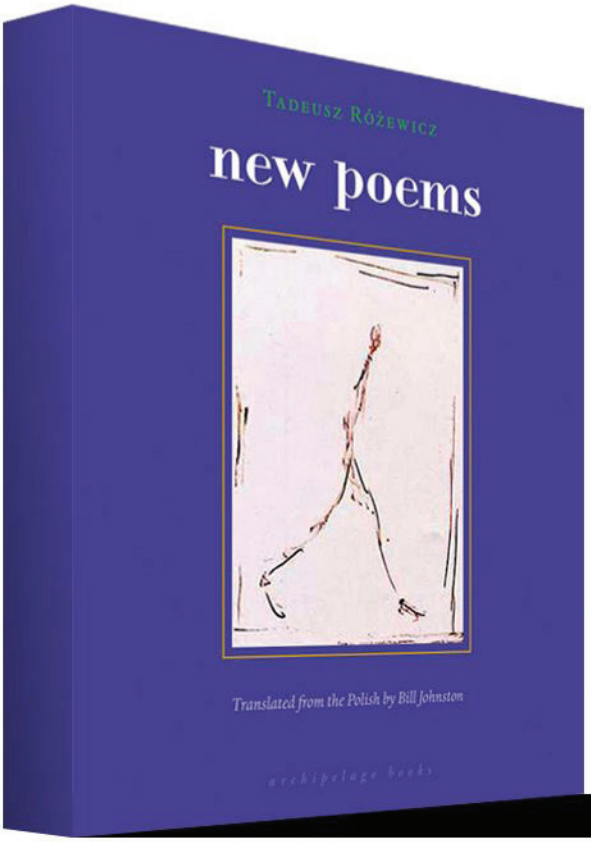
HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

Writing the Apocalypse



Voicing Silence Through Time

a review of
new poems
Tadeusz Różewicz
Translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston
Archipelago Books, 2007

by Rainer J. Hanshe

> . . . let us abolish the images, let us save immediate Desire (desire without mediation).
> —Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

> We seek the poem of pure reality, untouched
> By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
> Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
>
> At the exactest point at which it is itself,
> Transfixing by being purely what it is,
> A view of New Haven, say, through a certain eye,
>
> The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
> Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
> Nothing beyond reality.
>
> —Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

> How can we write or think about disaster when by its very nature it defies speech and compels silence—when, moreover, it consumes thought and rips books apart? We cannot: but writing is the patient response of this helplessness.
> —Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

Tadeusz Rózewicz is recognized by critics and writers in Poland as one of the most exemplary Polish poets of the 20th century and some claim in the world. He is said to be in the same league as Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Wislawa Szymborska. His first volume of poetry, *Niepokój* [Anxiety] (a seemingly farsighted title, prefiguring the character of his future work), was published in 1947 and ten years later, *Poezje zebrine*, an edition of his collected poems was published in Krakow. In 1966 Poland awarded Rózewicz the State Prize for Literature, Class I, bestowing upon him its highest distinction, while most recently, in 2000, he received the NIKE, the most eminent Polish literary award, for *Matka Odchodzi* [Mother Departs]. Szymborska confessed that she could not imagine what post-war Polish poetry would resemble without Rózewicz' work and, revealing the true enormity of his influence, that *everyone* owes "something to him, though not all of us are able to admit it." Clearly, Rózewicz has made a considerable impact upon Polish literature.

On the Polish Culture website Rózewicz is portrayed as “a disturbing writer who resists definition, a poet of silence who rejects poetic trappings,” searching instead for modes of expression alert to the perils of writing in the twentieth and now twenty-first century. The first English translation of his work was made by Milosz and published in his 1965 volume, *Postwar Poetry*, and *Faces of Anxiety* (London, Rapp & Whiting, 1969), translated by Adam Czerniawski, was the first edition in English of Rózewicz’ poems, but it was not widely available in America. Two other poetry books would follow in 1976, with Czerniawski translating a third in 1982, *Conversation with the Prince and Other Poems*. Lamentably though, all of these books are out of print and Rózewicz, who is also a novelist as well as a playwright some critics consider equal to Beckett in his revolution of dramatic form, is not as well known in America as Milosz and Szymborska. In *new poems*, a collection published by Archipelago Books that combines the last three volumes of Rózewicz’ poetry, *the professor’s knife*, *gray zone*, and *exit* (each not previously translated into English) as well as five “recent poems,” Rózewicz’ disturbance is keyed to an exceedingly high degree, but that condition is inevitable, an indication of one who is acutely sensitive to the traumas of history. Yet, the most tragic figures are also truly comedic, and Rózewicz is not incapable of Aristophanic exultations, though they are often tinged with woe.

To be disturbed is to be agitated, to be in a state of turmoil; it is a sign of sensitivity, proof that one *feels*, that one’s nerves are receptive, for they shudder when overcome by horror, and that is to know the sublime. There is nothing altogether exceptional in this, it is natural one might protest, but man is no longer natural, far from it, and sensitivity of Rózewicz’ order is rare in an era in which most humans have become anesthetized and are insensate to horror, if, at all, they are even cognizant of it. To be remotely aware of the horrors of the world is one matter, but to live with or be disturbed by them is yet another. What most of humanity prefers is the serenity and harmony of the beautiful. Few live with history as Rózewicz does and even fewer tremble before it continuously. From *new poems*, it is apparent that history is a regular presence in his life, one which, like a specter, haunts his memory and prods him into thought, and this is the poetry of one engaged in rigorous thought. When writing of the traumas of history though, they are not merely ‘past events,’ but living currents experienced again and again, evidence of ‘history’ as an ever present presence in consciousness. Time’s borders, as is well known, are amorphous.

In one of the numerous untitled poems in the book, Rózewicz declares that “we have to relive everything/from the beginning” (68) and concludes the poem questioning whether or not the past will ever end, the lack of an answer presupposing that it will not. The refusal to close the poem, even in the most marginal sense, such as with a period after its concluding word (in fact, not one of the poems in the book has any closing punctuation), indicates the persistent force of a past that will not and cannot end, not even through the event of death:

> Mr. Turski in a strange
> fragrant cloud
> exotic and mysterious
> for an elementary school
> in a provincial town
> between Czestochowa and Piotrkow Trybunalski
> smiles
> and takes his mystery
> to the grave
> when will the past
> finally end (70)

Like Giacometti's fragile, wraithlike but essentially courageous *Walking Man* (the drawing which adorns the cover of *new poems*), Rózewicz clearly wonders what it is we are walking towards and *how* we have been and *are* walking there, whatever that *there* is. The poet continues walking, but weighted by a climacteric thought: *how does one live in/with a ceaselessly unfolding apocalypse*? How does one *write* the apocalypse?

Living in and with silence, Rózewicz is concerned with what it means to speak and to write during such an epoch. "The work of Rózewicz and many other European poets of his generation" noted eminent Hölderlin translator Michael Hamburger in *The Truth of Poetry*, "is the answer of those who agree with [Adorno's statement that] after Auschwitz poems can no longer be written." Rózewicz, says Hamburger, has "made himself at home in the silence" that Adorno's statement prescribes. Like some of his contemporaries, his "anti-poetry does not contradict it" but is an altogether different kind of poetry—it is not that poems cannot be written, only certain *kinds* of poems. To be silent is not necessarily to refuse to write; as Lacoue-Labarthe noted, "poetry occurs where . . . language gives way." To be silent is to refuse to write *barbarically*, which, interpreting Adorno's statement, meant to Rózewicz metaphorically and mythically.

After Auschwitz, traditional language had been rendered inoperable. One mode of silence was to refute traditional language, which was no longer meaningful, and create if possible new poetic discourses. For Adorno, as he elucidated some years later in another essay, that was still not permissible: "The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. Through aesthetic principles or stylization . . . the unimaginable ordeal still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims." The disquiet Adorno felt seemed to be not only with the possibility of experiencing aesthetic pleasure from such art, thereby committing an ignoble act and potentially reducing its horror; it was also with shaping it into

something that might be considered beautiful, thus giving rise to serenity and harmony instead of strife.

Uneasiness before the potential artistic rendering of the Holocaust was a grave concern for others such as philosophy professor Michael Wyschogrod. In a book on Elie Wiesel, echoing Adorno but speaking of art in its entirety, Wyschogrod proclaimed that since "art takes the sting out of suffering" to make fiction of the Holocaust must be forbidden—fiction pertaining to any aesthetic rendering whatsoever. But as an event forever beyond meaning and outside comprehension, no art could ever justify the Holocaust through imposing order and bestowing some potential meaning upon it. The apocalyptic event would always render such work absurd. Out of our helplessness though, we can patiently respond to it, knowing all the while that our response would always be forever limited, partial, fragmented. And it is only perhaps through the fragmentary that any work on the Holocaust could be made, only through the sublime, wherein there is a confrontation with that which surpasses our imagination and is beyond our control.

What Adorno and Wyschogrod were fearful of, and with grave necessity, was stripping an apocalyptic event of its horrific character through its transformation into the beautiful. Yet, despite the many modes of art, they either chose not to or refused to consider those, or *that* other mode—the ugly. With Adorno, this is especially peculiar, for in his *Aesthetic Theory*, the ugly is of crucial importance; in fact, it functions as a subversive force which can disrupt the tyranny of the classical mode. At the turn of the century, or perhaps even earlier with Van Gogh (whose paintings aren't necessarily works of beauty), art's concern was no longer with the rendering beautiful of things. Art shattered its bond to beauty, thus liberating itself from that mortifying constriction.[1] Instead of transfiguring a horrifying event into something beautiful, the artist could transfigure it into something ugly, or sublime, which would not at all be pleasing, but *cruel*. Such work would not be entertaining; it would retain its sting, if not sting and prick even more. In it, there would be no reconciliation, no serenity, no harmony. There would be stress, anxiety, and discord. When defining sublimity in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche appeared to be closely aligned with the Aristotelian conception of catharsis, or what he considered it to be. The sublime was the "*taming* of the horrible" via artistic means, which results in tragedy, and the comic was the "artistic *discharge* of the nausea of absurdity." Yet, while Aristotle noted that tragedy brings about catharsis, Nietzsche seemed to imply that the taming happens *before* it even enters the poem. In this, there is a transformation of the overwhelming suffering or of the horror of the world—it is tamed and, in the renowned formulation, existence is justified through art. Despite the ceaseless reiteration of this assertion, Nietzsche would abandon the position quite early—existence no longer needed justification. It was justified in and of itself—that was tragic wisdom. From *Human, All Too Human* onward, the impulse to tame was criticized and in *Twilight of the Idols*, the Dionysian figure is portrayed as one capable of displaying courage before the "horror and terror of existence," able to "affirm life even in its strangest and sternest problems." The Aristotelian

[1] In 1966, Adorno would alter his viewpoint, stating that "the enduring suffering has as much right to expression as does the tortured man to scream; therefore it may have been wrong that after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written." It was clear to him that the voices in the abyss must express their experiences and utter their truths, yet, his statement isn't absolute, but qualified with that cautious "may."

conception of catharsis as Nietzsche understood it was surpassed, or overcome, and thus the need for serenity and redemption—horror was no longer to be tamed, *but revealed in all its intensity*. Strife would rule, not harmony. Tragic wisdom discloses that redemption is not only out of reach but undesirable. It is difficult wisdom to bear, but the sublime is as searing as lava and as hard and as lacerating as a diamond.

Art now has to demand of itself the greatest courage. Its concern is not with beauty, but truth, with the truths of the world, as much as we are able to know and express them. With the Holocaust, this test reaches the most strenuous and exigent pitch and the trial of the eternal return comes to its ultimate apogee. Far from taking the sting out of suffering, instead, art-—tragic art—would *intensify* the sting, such as through 'expressionistic' paintings, like those of Otto Dix—even more so than Van Gogh, *hardly* beautiful painting—, or as in Artaud's theater of cruelty, which sought not to pacify, comfort, or appease the spectator, but to startle, provoke, and *awaken*.[2] Artaud wanted to make the spectator live with suffering, not to be distant from it, contemplating the plague as if it could be an aesthetically pleasing event. It is art as *contagion*, *not* purification. One is to leave the theater of cruelty trembling, not in rapturous awe of beauty—one is to leave the theater infected, and to be infected is to live with horror. It is to know the sublime, and the sublime, not as defined by Kant, but Longinus and Nietzsche, is the aesthetic mode proper to plagues and apocalypses, for it immobilizes rationality and is as Longinus said a "power and irresistible violence [which] reigns supreme over every hearer."

Rózewicz didn't utilize Artaud's principles in his poetic discourse but, like Giacometti and Beckett, developed a spare and whittled but equally potent mode of expression. In it, he recognizes the most inexplicable horrors and remains, continuing to laud life. It is an art of the sublime. To him, the image is a detour that disrupts the immediacy of sensation, which the metaphor, acting as a mediating device, does not permit to appear in its 'unambiguous entirety.' Instead, it protracts "the reader's encounter with the true meaning of a poetic work." It is direct intimacy that is at stake and Rózewicz refuses to let that contiguous communion between him or the poem and the reader be protracted let alone disrupted. As an encounter with an-other, Rózewicz wants in his words to be close enough to turn towards the other who embraces his work; also, for that other to be close enough to embrace, internalize and, *possibly*, be changed by him, even if that depersonalization is temporary, a mere instance of obliteration and incorporation. The poetic encounter is a silent encounter with things and with others. It is, as Celan proclaimed, a gift to those who are mindful of it.

In order for the 'unambiguous entirety' of his poems to appear unimpeded, Rózewicz forged a poetic discourse out of the detritus of speech, eschewing metaphor, dispensing with originality, and writing in what is considered the most literal, direct manner. It is poetry that, as haiku, is terse and pithy yet remains imaginative. In the poem "the professor's knife" this terse, seemingly flat style is evident, but it conceals a formal complexity that is not as simple as

[2] Adorno would probably extol Grotowski's *Akropolis*, surely the most tragic aesthetic confrontation with the Holocaust, and find Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* reprehensible. One is a work of truth, the other, of beauty, if that.

it appears:

> the rails run
> parallel
> the trains
> fly past
> like black birds
> they end their flight
> in a fiery oven
> from which no
> song rises
> into the empty sky
> the train ends
> its journey
> turns into
> a monument
>
> across fields meadows woods
> across mountains valleys
> it races ever more quietly
> the stone train
> stands
> over the abyss
>
> if it is ever brought to life by cries
> of hatred
> from racists nationalists
> fundamentalists
> it will crash like an avalanche
> onto humanity
> not onto “humanity”!
>
> onto people (8)

The use of *enjambment* here is dexterous, as well as his *caesuras* and what word and blocks of words make up a line, evidence of a highly skilled poet who isn’t simply writing direct and literal poems that employ the ordinary language of a peasant.[3] While *enjambment* is quite common in free verse and not necessarily that complex, it is often executed without careful thought, the degree of stress in each line therefore lacking tension, reducing the apprehension and anxiety which *enjambment* can produce. Rózewicz’ knowledge, understanding, and use of language is however far more complex, nuanced, and deliberate, as is evident from his distinguishing between humanity, “humanity”, and people, or in “so what if it’s a dream”, a poem from

[3] The Christian and Marxist ennobling of the peasant, proletariat, or the humble is an utter naïveté that demands to be criticized and rebuked. Far from pure, honest, trustworthy, etc., the aforementioned are as capable as all humans of the grossest impurities, the most deceptive lies, and the most frightening atrocities.

exit wherein he longs of saving something from the apocalypse, though he knows what an impossibility that is:

> I write on water
>
> from a few phrases
> a few poems
> I build an ark
>
> to save something
> from the flood
> that takes us by surprise
> wipes us off the face
> of the earth
> when full of joy
> we turn our faces
> to the god of the sun
> and to that God
> who
> "does not play dice"
> we know Nothing
> of cracks in the innards
> of old mother earth
> we raise towers
> of sand
> we build
> on the verge
> of life and death
>
> . . .
>
> I write on water
> I write on sand
> from a handful of salvaged words
> from a few simple phrases
> like the prose of carpenters
> from a few naked poems
> I build an ark
> to save something
> from the flood
> that takes us by surprise
> in broad daylight
> or in the middle of the night
> and wipes us from the face of the earth
>
> I build my ark

a drunken boat
a little paper vessel
under red
black sails

so what if it's a dream (241)

While Rózewicz may find rhetoric distasteful, there is no zero degree in writing. It doesn't exist; it is a linguistic illusion. "There is no such thing," Nietzsche proclaimed, "as an unrhetorical 'naturalness' of language to which one could appeal: language itself is the result of spoken rhetorical arts." The "prose of carpenters" isn't as simple as Rózewicz purports. "Language," Nietzsche realized, "is rhetoric, for it can only convey a *doxa* and never episteme." Hemingway is as stylized, if not more so, than Lautréamont. Sontag knew this too when she stated that zero degree writing is "as selective and artificial as any traditional style of writing." The idea that a style-less, transparent mode of writing may exist "is one of the most tenacious fantasies of modern culture." While the poems may be free of masks and costumes, while they may be impartial, bare expressions of Rózewicz' experiences and more direct than Rilke and Pound, in their own right they remain complex, are multi-layered, and are at times elliptical. Like Beckett though, Rózewicz pares language to its simplest proportion. In this distillation, there is a demythologization not only of man and culture but of language itself, and that is hardly simple. Through that refinement, and it is a refinement, Rózewicz approaches his readers as intimately as possible, reaching out to touch and encounter them as he encounters the world. In "the last conversation" the question of whether or not life has meaning because we must die is answered, and this is one of our ultimate encounters with the world:

"

instead of answering
my question
you put a finger to your lips
said Jerzy

does it mean
that you won't
that you can't answer

it's my reply
to your question
"what meaning does life possess
if I have to die?"

placing a finger on my lips

> I answered you in my thoughts
> "life possesses meaning only because
> we have to die"
>
> eternal life
> life without end
> is existence without meaning
> light without shadow
> echo without sound (144)

In *new poems*, history is active through memory and imagination, and Rózewicz' crossings with friends who have died or were murdered, as well as a host of political, religious, and literary figures, are always personal encounters wherein he relates how he lives with them, how they have become part of his consciousness. There are encounters with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, with God, Boehme, Jesus, and Pascal, with demagogues like Mussolini and Hitler, and artists such as Pasolini and Kafka. In "farewell to Raskolnikov" Rózewicz encounters the infamous outsider in a café. After confessing that he "wanted to become a Napoleon . . . but only killed a louse," Rózewicz wryly observes that on the table before them there is "a glass of cloudy tea" and "a squashed/stale napoleon" from which "greenish cream" oozes "from the pastry/like dried pus" (246). The encounter provokes in Rózewicz a feeling of kinship, though not with Raskolnikov's murderous instincts but "that strange uncommon/feeling" which he reveals to be "the excitement" of seeing one's "name in print!" (247) Yet, Rózewicz is not concerned merely with famous personages or with fame; no character, subject, or thing is without interest to him. He makes no moral valuations; the 'base' is as worthy of being written of as the 'noble'—what is important here is experience, what he experiences everyday, of how the world comes alive to him through his senses. Whatever those experiences may be, even if seemingly mundane, it is vital material and worth transforming into poetry.

Rózewicz' *new poems* is a dark and lively book that speaks as if the poet were sitting before one. It is a testament not only to the intimate tone of Rózewicz' poetic discourses, but to Bill Johnston's consummate translation, which gives sensuous life to Rózewicz' voice. The only misfortune is that, considering Rózewicz' relative obscurity, the book lacks an introduction. Since all but one of the translations, and they are few, of Rózewicz' poetry are out of print, it would have been of enormous benefit to the reader unfamiliar with his work to have an introduction. For that, the avid reader can seek out Adam Czerniawski's now out of print translation of *Conversation with the Prince and Other Poems*. Otherwise, this is a book whose publication should be celebrated and which will hopefully rectify the relative obscurity of Rózewicz here in America (the Poet's House directory, which boasts a collection of over 20K poetry books, has not one of Rózewicz' books,[4] though two of Herbert and five of Szymborska); his work deserves far wider readership and with

[4] Jill Schoolman of Archipelago Books informed me that she actually sent a copy of Rózewicz' new poems to Poet's House—it will then be the first Rózewicz book they own. The impetus to acquire it however was not their own.

this translation, he should in particular be embraced by poets and his work more prominently enter the canon. Once again, Archipelago has made an attractive volume one not only wants to read, but savor with one's eyes and hands. Giacometti's drawing *The Walking Man* could not be more fitting a cover: bare, fragmentary but sensual and determined, it is an image of one in whom the past continues to live as a present reality, and to whom the present and the future continue to beckon, always awaiting the next day, always ready to greet the sun as the moon looms in the distance, absent but present, a specter whose light comes from afar. There is a darkness which often engulfs the world, but the light remains, and without tragedy, there can be no *incipit comoedia*. . .

> he waits for the end of the world
> the end of history
> the end of the end
> but the world refuses
> to end ("labyrinths")

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The Rise of the Good-Enough

A Meditation on the Drawing as a Work of Art

by Brian Robert Hischier

Drawings In Dialogue: Old Master Through Modern

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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

The Rise of the Good-Enough

A Meditation on the Drawing as a Work of Art

Drawings In Dialogue: Old Master Through Modern
The Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection
The Art Institute of Chicago
June 3 to July 30, 2006

(Curators: Suzanne McCullagh, Anne Vogt Fuller and Marion Titus Searl, Curator of Earlier Prints and Drawings)

by Brian Robert Hischier

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition here under review was the result of a Collector bestowing the contents of her collection upon a certain house of Art, wherein dwell curators and students and perhaps even a few artists. The exhibition, "Drawings in Dialogue: Old Master Through Modern" is intended to honor her gift, and as a monument to her, it is magnificent. The collector is Dorothy Braude Edinburg, and the recipient of her generosity is The Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition is composed of 166 drawings, selected out of the 250 drawings which will eventually compose the Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition tells many fine anecdotes about the care, excitement and thrill with which Ms. Edinburg built her collection. For fifteen years she has been working with The Art Institute to perfect the collection, and the result is a delight to behold. It offers everyone a chance to look at some very fine drawings that otherwise would never be seen. This is good and this is bad.

The exhibition's title is a quaint personifying metaphor: drawings in dialogue. One can imagine it opening a poem about two drawings hanging alone in a room, discussing their provenance, their futures, the fools and philosophers who have commented on their being, on what they might have been had their artists not died or fallen in love or gone mad and forgotten them. A poem would have been the perfect place for the trope, for it might have facilitated a new engagement with the concept—one that might inspire exploration into deeper, more interesting ideas. As the informing trope for an exhibition, though, it is slightly comical.

Postulating a dialogue between drawings is too simple. *Modus Operandi: hang two drawings side by side, and out of sheer proximity they will strike up a[n ostensibly interesting] conversation.* It's a nice idea, but the result of such a pairing will more likely be an infection than a dialogue, for when a Person engages with two works of art, the one artwork will infect the other, and the two will become indelibly associated with one another in the Person's mind. I doubt the curators of the exhibition under review would have even considered naming the exhibition "Drawings Infecting Each Other: Old Masters Through Modern," rightly assuming that the public would misconstrue its subject as being about the sex lives of artists, thereby fostering disappointment with the actual subject matter.

So the drawings chat with each other, and we have to engage them within the metaphor of the exhibition title. The 166 drawings are paired up according to Borgesian similarities in subject, filtered through the spurious associative abilities of the individual curators involved. The stage lights are set low, gently

illuminating each drawing and its description. The identification plates direct the Person reading it to the sister print so that the dialogue can commence with verve. This breeds a quiet excitement. “What will they say to each other?” the Person thinks to himself, staunching engagement. Unfortunately, there is only the illusion of potentiality when two drawings are said to be in dialogue with one another. Ultimately, this can only disappoint the aware or thrill the naive. Furthermore, “drawings in dialogue” is an interruptive trope, one that was intended to introduce a presence but has the effect of hindering a Person from engaging the artworks in front of him. The Person merely looks, listens, scratches his ear and moves on.

Perhaps the curators saw more promise in the exhibition’s title. Their own experiences as hosts may have been harbingers of its potential. At social gatherings, a host, when finding himself trapped with one guest for too long, will frantically attempt to facilitate a meeting between his guest and another who has similar, yet tenuous, interests, all that he may extricate himself from the conversation in order to attend to the proceedings of the night. As the two strangers converse, others may listen to them, and if the eavesdroppers are in the frame of mind to do so, they may critically examine the words of each speaker as if they were watching a televised debate. The dialogue takes its course, and, in order to be interesting to the listeners, ought to be about more than sports or the weather or how one bends one’s knees. It must have an agon, full of particulars and life. If two drawings are in dialogue with one another, one can assume that they are either complementing one another mercilessly, or they are examining one another on technique, subject matter, and strength of execution. At some point, one takes advantage of its superior rhetoric and begins to dominate the other. Or, the less vocal one may take the subtle tack and goad the other into making a fool of himself. Whatever the outcome, we spectators, we gallery-goers, we mus’um-lubbers expect a spectacle.

Drawings in Dialogue may be flawed in its basic conceit, but that doesn’t mean an internal artistic engagement can’t take place. Knowing that two artworks are side by side, the Person can willfully enter the engagement merely to see how chance works its magic on the so-called dialogue: for the Drawings, normally incapable of action, desire, sin or pleasure, will now misbehave. The Drawings mumble to one another in the buzzing stillness of the exhibition spaces. One Drawing is embarrassed by another’s technical prowess, feeling dumbed down and stiff and absolutely devoid of interest. One Drawing loathes the lack of color between its lines (which in isolation may not have been perceived as a lack), and grows to hate the watercolor swathes of its neighbor. One hastily drawn sketch wonders why its Artist was willing to send to it to a consignment house when its fragile strokes could barely bear the weight of its subject. Contempt, envy, ardor and ire are in the air, and as we break away from each pair, disoriented, we look for the next couple to entertain us.

THE READYMADE IS OLDER THAN DUCHAMP

Through diligence and passion, Dorothy Baude Edinburg amassed a collection of drawings that will easily charge the mind of anyone that engages its contents. It spans the 14th to the 20th centuries and gives a stunning overview of the development of the drawing as a work of art, from the cartoon to the collectible and from the experiment to the statement. Many acknowledged greats are represented with individual specimens of their style. Others are nearly given a sub-exhibition of their own: Degas and Picasso each have eight drawings on display; Matisse has five. Only rarely do their drawings speak with one another in the terms of the exhibition.

The exhibition is ordered chronologically according to loose art-historical time frames: *Renaissance to Romanticism* (includes pieces by Giulio Romano, the Circle of Tintorretto, Carracci, Gainsborough, Prud'hon, Blake and Whistler), *Realism to Symbolism* (includes pieces by Manet, Gauguin, Seurat, Redon and a warren full of Impressionists), and finally, in telling seclusion, *Modernism* (includes pieces by Mondrian, Gris, Kandinsky, Grosz, Picasso and Matisse). Modernism alone occupies over a third of the exhibition space and its internal chronology is widely disrupted, presumably for the sake of conversation between the participants (Renoir and Picasso (cats. 103, 104) are from 1895/97 and c.1920 respectively, while the two Mondrians (cats. 105, 106) are from 1899 and 1940/41). Yet in terms of the history of drawing, "Modernism" occupies a relatively brief time span. An enormous diversity of artistic visions is present, and significantly the artist who will become the keystone for the construct of this essay is represented in the exhibition only by his portrait, and not by any of his works or theories: Marcel Duchamp, with his conspicuous absence of art, drawn by his brother Jacques Villon, in the final pairing of the show.

The divisions as they are defined, though, do not satisfy. Time and again we see ages of art separated in terms of movements or concerns. But as I walked through the rooms, it wasn't movements and styles I saw so much as attempts and engagements with a subject. Underlying everything was the mystery of artistic intention and distraction. Drawings grouped together give one the unpleasant suspicion that much has been left unfinished in the world; and ironically, no matter how formally it is accomplished, matting and framing a drawing almost trivializes it. Placing all the drawings into notebooks for patrons to flip through would be impractical, but it would have seemed truer to the medium and its purposes. But I am disputing the indisputable: the drawings are mounted on the wall behind plates of glass and the three divisions are simple groupings, nothing more. Understanding this, I will reduce the divisions into two partitions of my own devising, which will better suit the theory here presented. The first of the two divisions is now called "The Rise and Fall of the Drawing," and it lasts until the time of Duchamp's *objet trouvé*. The second division will be called, "The Decay of the Drawing and the Rise of the Good Enough." The point at which the one ends and the other begins is debatable, and not explicitly seen in the exhibition, but I claim it to be 1913,

when Duchamp first exhibited his *Bicycle Wheel*. It would be a mistake to assume that Duchamp's readymades were simply sounding the coming blasts of Modernism. Rather, they should be considered to be the culmination of a system of art creation that had been in place since the Middle Ages, with Marcel Duchamp as merely the extreme logical conclusion of their system of production.

The first 100 or so drawings in the exhibition detail quite clearly the dominance of the readymade until the 18th century, when for a short time it was interrupted by the rise of the Subject-Self, which of course quickly became yet another type of readymade.

The subjects in the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were spiritually and humanistically utilitarian—they were the stuff of everyday psyches. They were stored for easy access in the Bible (or sermons), the Lives of the Saints, the works of the Ancients, the bestiaries, and elsewhere, offering plenty of opportunities for the artist to either reinforce their inherent mundanity or to infect the subject with his style and personality and ingenuity. It is evident from any historical overview that nearly all subject matter available for the artist was loosely codified, predestined, and all but executed for the artist (one could go so far as to argue that many details were likewise handled). According to the political, social and economic milieu of a particular time and place, the subjects would likely be of personal and societal interest to patron, public and artist alike. As with artists today, personal preference naturally influenced the selection of the subject, but only in so far as some subjects were avoided, while others were almost obsessively returned to according to the purpose of the piece, some being intimately important to either patron or artist. An artist showed no profound ingenuity in selecting his subjects and certainly showed no brilliance in titling them (if he bothered with such labels at all). Nearly all of their subjects were readymade, and the subject was merely the vehicle for a task of beauty or piety.

The style or personality (genius) of the artist was proved in his composition and in the selection of details. The care with which he attired the subject; the flora and fauna which surrounded or interacted with the subject; the expressiveness and variation in pose; the force of motion in the eyes or throughout the composition as a whole—this was where the artist applied his mind and his heart. If he was a master, his facility with the medium had been painstakingly developed prior to the act of thought. His skill was second nature to him. Naiveté and clumsiness would not interfere with the activities of his mind or dull his instincts with distraction. Likewise, years of practice had allowed the sketches and drawings to not only assist in the planning of a work, but to strengthen an otherwise plain idea before the artist ever reached the first stages of painting or sculpture. The High Renaissance was notorious for its obsession with humanistic perfection in form and content, whereby the artist could attain the highest recognition for his work. And if perfection was the goal, every influence upon the work would have been carefully considered and accommodated: the influence of technique, perception, development

and execution. Each could be mastered by the devoted human mind if developed over enough time. If anything was lacking or distracting, the end result would be unacceptable. However, regardless of the execution and application, beneath all the exterior flourishes and styles were the readymade subjects owned collectively by all artists and patrons.

Lest I mislead, it was not only classically approved subjects that fit the "ready-made" description. Each society responded to subjects that informed it in whole or in part, according to particular factions and needs and desires. For one society, the classical subjects were the preferred subjects. For others, a pleasant landscape or a finely arranged still life was more important. In fact, landscapes and still lifes were the purest type of ready-made: the artist need only have a refined talent for selection and framing in order to begin his work.

Zanino di Pietro (Giovanni di Francia). *Nativity in an Initial H*, 1430/40. Brush and gouache, heightened with gum Arabic, gold leaf, and gold paint, over brush and black ink, on vellum; 277 x 229 mm (10 15/16 x 9 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Dorothy Braude Edinburg to the Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection.

During the Italian Renaissance, a silent challenge was issued to artists to test themselves against and furthermore to transcend the high aesthetic standards of classical antiquity. They were to create the most beautiful and perfect art. Mere execution was not enough for the artist who was inclined toward greatness. Attention to form and beauty was as important as the subject matter; technique could only abet the Truth as the artist saw it (the readymade is the most honest subject, if not always the most dignified).

It is good to consider these things when entering an exhibition that is about to give you a gentle overview of the history of drawing. Unprepared, the mind, which has been told that the drawings are living and in dialogue with one another, is likely to mistake the drawings as the work of contemporaries. Ridiculous as that sounds, criticizing a 500-year-old drawing using critical standards of today is a difficult mistake not to make, and doing so relegates the old drawing to the present. Then again, criticizing a 600-year-old drawing against the standards of a 500-year-old drawing is just as ridiculous.

Bernardino Campi. *God the Father*, 1567/70. Black chalk, heightened with white gouache, squared in black chalk, on gray-brown laid paper, laid down on cream laid paper; 212 x 368 mm (8 3/8 x 14 1/2 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Promised gift of Dorothy Braude Edinburg to the Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection.

The first two drawings of the exhibition share a similar subject: the Christian God. The exhibition is entered through a large door, and immediately you are given the choice to turn left or right and look at the wall in which the door is set. To the left of the door is a Pietro, to the right is a Campi. If these two drawings are to converse, they'll have to do it across the expanse of the entryway, and they'll be interrupted by a stream of patrons throughout their discussion.

Pietro's *Nativity in an Initial H*, 1430/40 and Campi's *God the Father* (1567/70) are two of the commonest readymades: the nativity and the godhead of the holy trinity. The Pietro is Late High Gothic and the Campi is Italian Renaissance. The first has the appearance of a large miniature cut out of an illuminated manuscript. The colors are bold and striking, without much variation. The florals framing the right side of the drawing are ponderous with a slow, downward grace. The figures are stocky gnomes whose robes are as graceless as the expressions on their faces. What little perspective there is is restricted to whatever is being drawn at the moment, with no regard for the whole. The receding distance is depicted as a flat expanse similar to a puppet-show backdrop. Serenity pervades the nativity scene. The care with which the background is colored is surprising given the limited color palette employed. The flow of motion from the right-hand floral continues into the swirling dirt beneath the Holy Family's feet and rises around their forms into the deep background. To our modern eyes, it seems that the glum figures lack the essence of sanctity expected in a nativity; yet sanctity suffuses the drawing to such an extent that the peaceful whole seems right and good. However, because of its association with a general Late Medieval Period style, the modern viewer will remain somewhat disconnected, and the dialogue which is about to ensue with the counterpoint Campi is tainted.

The Pietro is a somber piece. We expect more of the same from catalog number 2 as we cross the entryway to where it hangs by the doorframe. Bernardino Campi (1522-1591) has given us a chalk cartoon titled *God the Father*, 1567/70, who is either blessing or creating or conducting the passage of time. Even without color, the drawing bursts onto our senses. Out of nowhere, in only the second drawing of the exhibition, we have an

excitement that we weren't expecting after the Pietro. The Campi clearly shows us Renaissance values in all their strength. It displays all the marvels of that "return to antiquity" that we have come to expect from the formless term "Renaissance." A careful drawing of a foreshortened torso and head, it revels in the care of its refined technique. The palms of God the Father are rendered very subtly with black chalk, and reach to either side of the drawing, book-ending himself. The highlights on the backs of his hands, cast by his own brow, are white gouache laid down in high contrast to the dark palms. The sheer physicality of his body is present beneath the folds of his garment. We know his hands are not detached from the rest of the body (a trait of the Pietro), and as he looks below, we know his eyes are beholding marvels below the frame, for they have a focus. The head is foreshortened with the greatest skill, a difficult aspect to reproduce for artists of any period. The middle-ground tonality provided by the paper on which the figure is drawn gives the whole a diffused consistency which makes it feel complete.

These two drawings are perfect examples of readymade art featuring related subjects. They are given to one another in conversation because of God the Father (whom we can assume is theoretically watching over the birth of his son in the nativity scene) and because Fate decreed that they were the earliest dated works in the collection. Regarding the "dialogue," if you will indulge me to honor the metaphor, the One says to the Other, "You are a showboating exhibitionist." The other replies, "I don't see a problem here, return to your dust." For the person engaging the artworks, there is little reason to actively compare the style of either one to the other except as exemplum. Both are extraordinary specimens of their respective milieux; both graciously give the Person an engagement with art. But to assume that either one has anything to "say" to the other in some sort of "dialogue" is bold and, I believe, in error. They cannot engage one another: they can only infect each other in the mind of the Person simultaneously engaging them.

THE ACHILLES HEEL IS ON THE SHEET

Following the Renaissance, the artist was posed with a unique problem. Throughout history, every age has defined itself according to how far it could distance itself from the previous age. It sets its artistic values against prior artistic values, and the greater the contrast or improvement, the greater the divide between the two. It can be seen in how the artists of the Renaissance viewed the artists of the Middle Ages (see above dialogue), it can be seen in how the artists of the "Baroque" viewed the "Renaissance," and so on. During the 18th century, the readymade was under attack, but only nominally. Artists began to explore a new subject: the Self. The Subject-Self was fascinating to the artist, for within the Subject-Self were Thought and Idea, pure abstractions which were difficult to explore through the previous millennia's readymades. Likewise, standards such as perfection or beauty had very little relevance to the depiction of the Subject-Self, for where does one find the perfect forms on

Giambattista Piazzetta. *A Young Boy Wearing a Plumed Hat and a Young Girl*, c. 1730. Charcoal with stumping and black chalk, heightened with white chalk, on blue laid paper; 405 x 304 mm (16 x 12 in.) max. The Art Institute of Chicago, Promised gift of Dorothy Braude Edinburg to the Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection.

which to model them? The artist can only turn to other drawings, and in the 18th century, drawings were plentiful. The collectors market had opened up to drawings for a variety of reasons, and enterprising artists could sell their drawings as specimens of their unique style and craft. But the sale and collection of drawings can put the artist in an embarrassing position: others can see his work and critique what never should have been seen by the public. Worse, young artists can view his experiments and, instead of learning, can quickly copy without understanding and develop their abilities only as far as their eyes see the masters' development.

For the experienced draughtsman, every line drawn is a decision made and executed; every erasure is another decisive moment of rethinking. Areas of a picture which puzzled the artist are occasionally evident, while others give the impression that the artist was in such control of his powers that he was able to accomplish the effect in mere seconds. Neither scenario is an instance of pride or shame, but the effect of the whole may be. Even as he is cutting a detail out of the sheet, he is immediately aware of how this affects all areas of the picture, for the finished drawing will be an entire piece. If the drawing is a sketch, it ends up as a map of fossilized thought. The only value in the drawing worth considering is in the finished piece.

The exhibition offers ample evidence of artists experimenting with their style or mastering a particular problem. Alessandro Magnasco's *Study Sheet with Seated Figures*, 1705/15 (cat. 34) shows variation studies on a seated stoop-back theme (its partner in dialogue is Pier Leone Ghezzi's *Father Pepe Preaching to Sailors*, c. 1740 (cat. 33), the apparent link between the two consists of spinal similarities and "spirit"). Francesco Guardi's *A Capriccio with a Ruined Gothic Arch (recto),* (1770/89) (cat. 36) is a stunning array of forms washing over a landscape with ruins and silhouetted figures, yet never resolving itself into line. Each drawing has the quality of an instant: the artist was assured in his brush strokes, and the subject yielded quickly to his exertions.

Not so with Guardi's fellow drawing by Piazzeta. Catalog number 35 is the

Giambattista Piazzetta drawing *A Young Boy Wearing a Plumed Hat and a Young Girl*, c. 1735/40. It is a striking example of both precise thought and lurking puzzlement. Watch how the darkest shadows on the boy's left hand define the bones beneath the skin. The graceful terminating curve of the girl's face (her left cheek) produces three shades against the background, each of which praises the delicate highlight on her cheek, which in its own way draws attention to the lash-line of the closed eye. The cheek highlight is present in the opposite cheek with the same degree of luminance, except that the surrounding cheek accepts the light more gracefully, as it should. The darkness at the bottom of her right eye, the darkness in the corner of her mouth, the shadow on her neck: this girl is very delicately modeled out of the blue tone of the paper. The boy is likewise carefully drawn, but his left eye troubled the artist. The problem begins with the shadow just beneath the eyebrow. In place of a cast shadow from the orbit of the brow, the artist dropped in a highlight accompanied by a deep quick shadow atop the upper lid. The iris is cloudy and larger than its complement, which brings it closer to the picture plane than the other. The shadow cast by the bridge of the nose is frustrating, and there is virtually no indication of the lower puffiness caused by the natural bag of the eye. When compared to the other three eyes in the drawing, this eye is poorly drawn. One might claim that the faults lie with the sitter. Perhaps he had a deformation or some injury which caused the artist to choose to draw the features thus. While that may be the case, I would argue that if it were so, the injuries or deformities could either be softened or more accurately portrayed as such.

The implication is that Piazzetta is an inferior draughtsman, especially in relation to his partner in dialogue, Guardi. It's a rash assumption, which is excused only by the nature of the exhibition. It would require careful examination of all available specimens of both Piazzetta's art and Guardi's to make that statement. A more important issue than "who is the better draughtsman" is what it means to let one's drawings enter the public sphere. It may take more than a struggle on paper to denigrate one's ability as an artist (cover up the offending eye and it is clear how good Piazzetta was), but that the public should be given the opportunity to make the judgement in the first place is problematic. When a drawing is exhibited, the secret flaws of the artist are revealed. The artist is suddenly present, pencil or brush in hand, struggling with human limitations. The fact remains that within the borders of the Piazzetta drawing, there is a terribly drawn eye. The possibility that the original eye was damaged or rubbed away does not change the situation: the terrible eye remains. It will not go away no matter what the cause.

With the possibility of such a brute assessment of inability, it should come as no surprise that the artist began to leave the old, easily-critiqued readymade behind in order to create another whose limits were less easily espied. It would be difficult to subject the Subject-Self to such offensive assessments. With the Subject-Self, artists like George Romney (cat. 43) and William Blake (cat. 44) would be freed from the focused gaze of critical short-sightedness. However, even draughtsmen of the highly personalized Subject-Self created drawings in

preparation for their finished works, and the threat still remains that discovery of their drawings can do more harm to their reputation when out amongst the unperceiving crowds.

An artist might keep his drawings as a record of his thought, be it the thought of his youth or the thoughts leading up to the perfection of an idea. Drawings are a repository of artistic fact, personalized through the act of drawing. Unlike writer's diaries or journals, drawings are devoid of duplicity, arrogance or shame. A writer can edit a sentence until he has placed himself in the precise light he desires. But a draughtsman must hide his drawings if he wants his secrets to remain unseen. A writer can use the tools of psychology to mask or unmask his desires or fears. A draughtsman can only draw and redraw. His control is over his subject and over his craft, but not over himself. The writer controls everything. The draughtsman controls little except what he leaves behind: unpolished ideas which are usually insignificant and small.

The dangers that the draughtsman now faces are growing. Whereas before, it was merely imperfect execution of a readymade subject, it is now insignificant ideas born out of the Subject-Self, likewise imperfectly executed. The danger stems from this: the human mind is an idea machine, and the first idea is more often than not common to a great number of like-minded human beings; because the Subject-Self is rooted in an idea or perception, it is more susceptible to the danger of commonality in content (if not expression). It may be that the Subject-Self is more challenging than the dictates of either Antiquity or the Renaissance ever were. With the old readymade, there was no need to have a great idea: the idea was intrinsic to the subject, and variety was introduced by personality and genius. But drawings of the Subject-Self which were made early in the process of its development exhibit only mildly interesting ideas that often do not greatly expand on the initial idea or subject. As an artist wrangles with the idea, it is refined and strengthened, and there is a good chance that new thoughts will emerge from the process. But ideas are never born fully formed, and even if they arose out of an earlier idea, they too must be tended to with care. Like a newborn infant, an idea has very little in its features that set it apart from other ideas: eye color, hair color, complexion, body build, personality and temperament all need years of growth and influence before they can become identifying features. In the earliest stages, ideas are common and fragile, helpless and cute in an ugly way. If we claim them as our own, we will nurture them. Our preferences, our desires, our frustrations and our hopes will shape the idea, as will our talents, our tendencies, our skills and our goals. Given the fragile nature of ideas, then, the draughtsman must work an idea incessantly until it is ready—scattered behind him are all the imperfect drafts that he discarded as not nearly good enough. If he sells those imperfect drafts, he sells his mistakes, his accidents, his folly. If another sells them, it is to his discredit. This is fine for Piazzetta: the whole world has yet to hear his name and know it. But Vincent van Gogh is another story: he is the pinnacle of the Subject-Self, just before it is reborn as the new readymade.

The “imperfect draft” is a practical assessment of value made by the artist whose standards are both mercurial and strict. Dissatisfaction with a result is neither uncommon nor shameful—in fact, it is solely his right. It speaks of a judgement laid on a finished drawing by the artist himself, regardless of the value placed on it by the marketplace. To the artist, a drawing which is preparatory to a finished piece is potentially a traitor, for it gives away the secrets which lay hidden beneath the paint. If the “imperfect draft” preceded the final development of what eventually became a very strong idea, then it is even more of an embarrassment. If it reaches the marketplace, it can mislead. Catalog number 79 of the exhibition shows one of Van Gogh’s “imperfect drafts.”

Vincent van Gogh. *The Carrot Puller*, 1885. Black chalk with stumping and erasing, on cream wove paper; 525 x 422 mm (20 5/8 x 16 5/8 in.; sheet). The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Dorothy Braude Edelnburg to the Harry B. and Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection.

Vincent van Gogh’s chalk drawing is titled *The Carrot Puller*, 1885. This faceless drawing depicts a peasant woman in the act of prying a carrot from the ground with a long-handled spade. Her posterior takes up the bulk of the drawing, turned politely toward us non-carrot pullers while the woman does her work. Our eye-level is at her mid-thigh, her child’s eye, perhaps. The dress of the woman is shaded carelessly, for the artist is shaping a mass, rather than clothing it. The hatch-lines are primarily 45° parallel lines with variation in their individual widths rather than along their length. Where a cross-hatch is used, it forms a corner. The extreme vertical hatching down from behind the right buttock rings the first bell of complaint. It creates a shade which does not lie across the fabric of the dress, for even though the parallel hatches on the rest of the dress are unpleasant, their consistency shows their strength of purpose, and we understand them and are unoffended. The vertical curved hatches across the upper left buttock likewise fit the form in the sense that the upper part of the dress is composed of a different material or another weave from the lower part. The hatch-work on the end of the handle of the spade seems to be as much an afterthought as the vertical hatches that so offended earlier.

Regarding the form of the woman, it goes without saying that Van Gogh was studying the pose, weight and point of view of the woman, not her anatomy.

There is no regard for muscle or bone; there are no details. The flesh is consistent, as is the headgear and the blouse. The footwear belongs to the dress stage of the drawing, and seems ridiculous in its treatment. The ground is shadowed nicely. One can rarely go wrong with a ground like that; one can also rarely go right.

The Carrot Puller is obviously an observational sketch, accomplished for the artist's personal needs as a painter, and as such should not offend the eye regardless of what seems mean and unaccomplished in it. Should a sketch be held accountable for a little inconsistency in the hatching, when the spirit of the artist infuses it so fully? Well, in the summer of 2006, The Art Institute of Chicago mounted it in a public place, gave it a catalog number, hung a description by its side, and gave us all the opportunity to muse about a little hatching sitting artlessly on a woman's cornered rump.

The catalog tells the curious ones that the provenance of this drawing began when it was sold by Ambroise Vollard in 1906 to Adrien Hebrard. Prior to that, it is likely he obtained the drawing in the usual fashion, via the widow of Theo van Gogh, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. "May I have this?" he asks the holder of the estate. "Of course, take it, it is only a drawing. Here are thirteen more." Vincent van Gogh's attitude toward the drawing, while personal and beyond our knowledge, most likely would have been expressed with even more bluntness, for the attitude is not unfamiliar. For him, the drawing was the means to an end that was possibly realized, possibly not. Of course the drawing is imperfect, it was never intended to be a paragon of perfection. In fact, it is likely that he did not think of himself in terms of the masters (viz. Renaissance), so perfection would not have been a concern (Truth, perhaps, but not perfection). Ambroise Vollard, using the techniques of the critic and the salesman, sold the drawing, and the purchaser now had a relic of the great crazy artist, and to the collector it was beyond reproach. The drawing is the fingernail of the saint, salving the soul that needs something. The entrance of the drawing into the public arena gives birth to the potential of an engagement with art. It is interesting to note that the companion drawing in the exhibition is Edgar Degas' *After the Bath*, 1900 (cat. 80). It, too, is a study of a woman bent at the waist with her hand at her toes. Instinctively, I loathe the drawing, and find none of the same charm that was in *The Carrot Puller*. Degas' drawings should rarely be exhibited.

Enter today the young artist with no name or style to call his own, who walks into the house of a man who has hanging on his wall, mattted with care, this drawing scratched out by good old what's-his-name. The young artist looks at it and snorts and thinks to himself, *I can draw that, and I can draw it better*. Then, being savvy, he says to himself, *Actually, I can draw that just as well, and clearly I needn't draw any better. Van Gogh's technique obviously wasn't the reason this drawing was purchased. I must take advantage of this situation.* It is the secret dialogue one artist has with another's work. A sickness enters his mind in that instant: the lure of the good-enough.

I am speaking of secret things here; such talk is dangerous. The individual artist may not care where his drawing ends up—but he should, especially if he wants to avoid needless criticism such as I bestowed upon the little Van Gogh. The criticism is needless precisely because the artist who is constantly working already knows that his work is not perfect. This is why he is always drawing another picture, always painting another scene. It is needless criticism because the criticism serves others, not himself. However, that is not the only unfortunate possibility that arises when his drawings are in the public. The artist should be wary of releasing his "imperfect drafts" into the world because of how they always influence the young and the stupid, who know countless ways to thrill the old, and will employ the easiest means to do so.

Vincent van Gogh likely drew hundreds of drawings after drawing the relic under observation. He was not thinking about this particular sheet when he cut off his ear. But the artist who saw it hasn't forgotten it (I haven't forgotten it) and now he has the master's permission to make a mediocre drawing and seek out the wall upon which it must hang. Barely given a chance to flourish, the Subject-Self became the new readymade.

THE APOCALYPSE OF THE READYMADE

Most of Van Gogh's oeuvre was created out of the Subject-Self. He was one of the first great artists of whom it might be said that all their works were directly about the Subject-Self. I don't think it's an exaggeration to claim that he might be the apotheosis of the Subject-Self. However, it is crucial to understand that even as the "apotheosis of the Subject-Self," this is no indication of value or worth. Before Van Gogh, the Subject-Self was already becoming readymade, leveling all subject matter to this basic state. Artists had quickly consumed the human brain, which even at its most complex is shared by all. Madness is merely the newest nativity scene.

The works collected in the exhibition under the title "Modernism" have an interconnectedness that goes beyond the "dialogues" to which they are subject. Prior to 1913, we saw the readymade as the springboard for artistic creation, the vehicle for artistic vision and style. The Subject-Self allowed the idea as a subject to become critically acceptable, manifested primarily as the depiction of thought or mental state. At the beginning of the 20th century, schools and styles began to flourish and spawn, until the miasma of art revolted and coughed up Marcel Duchamp. When Duchamp exhibited *Bicycle Wheel* and other readymades, the entire history of art was gathered up in his mischievous apocalypse. He did not usher in the modern age. He was the prophet who closed out the previous one.

When the readymade was officially recognized, art was left primarily with the idea as the object of fascination, and the notion that anything could be art. While the schools of painting during the first World War were concerned with the interactions of the artistic medium with itself, those which followed

had at their core Idea and rhetoric, and occasionally pure mathematics or science. The exhibition pairs two drawings together which mark the modern post-apocalyptic state: Fernand Léger's *Study for The Ball Bearing*, 1926 (cat. 111) and Francis Picabia's sublime *Spirit of a Young Girl*, 1918 (cat. 112). Still life and portraiture collapsed into one, or the abstraction of the living as the non-living, or form and dimension vitalized by the menial nature of human consciousness: any penned description will do, for the drawings defy description in the old manner.

When there is no readymade subject, the artist must work with his ideas and emotions. The only problem with drawings about ideas is that regardless of the technique and skill, ideas are inherently uninteresting in their early states. The drawing itself is admirable, if without value. The drawing records the thrill of the creative act: executed in private (the face of the page turned to the eye of the draughtsman only), the practiced hand quickly formulates the initial idea with the strokes of his pen. Drawings are the first-fruits of thought, the first formulations of a visual idea on paper. There is a delightful frailty to a drawing that is lacking in canvas or board: the paper is disposable, but never disposed of (without reason)—the paper is cheap, the ink or graphite cheaper—the drawing can be made anywhere. Facility with the tools came at great cost. As a record, the drawing is like no other piece of art. It is the rare embalming of potentiality: it says, "This is my early grapple with the Idea. I have lost, but not without increase. There will be another fight."

Good scholarship demands that the romance be taken out of the technical description of art and be replaced with dry humor. Thus, in the case of drawings, we now discuss the doodle. One should never forget the vital relationship between the doodle and the idea. Pencil in hand, the artist begins to draw fancies and unimportant things. He doodles until the lines begin to collide in an interesting way with the thoughts that have been concerning him of late. Fascination takes hold of him (some might call this inspiration, others might call it the decisive perception of gestalt, it does not matter) and the doodles become sketches and the sketches mature into drawings and eventually they may become the seeds of finished works of art (painting, sculpture, whatever) or else languish in a folder collecting age.

But does the doodle have value or does the doodler? When we have no readymade subject, we have to admit that it is the doodler and not the doodle that will first be examined. While not covered by the exhibition, a study of post-modern drawing reveals that the latter half of the 20th century is filled with doodles and doodlers. The drawings of the first half of the 20th century, with the absence of the readymade and the predominance of the idea, gave rise to a new school of drawing: the Good-Enough. The idea begins to come to life as the artist works, but it is not wrestled into strength. It is not fought with until it is stronger than the artist. When drawings have exchange value and subjects do not, artists are free to stop developing ideas as early as they like.

When the end of art was the exploration of the idea, the artist turned inward

and found that all of his major and minor internal machinations had an external exchange value. Advancements in painting in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, etc) coincided with advancements in cataloguing introspection, which accidentally coincided with looser standards in the marketplace. The late 20th century result is that the artist is content to produce what the market is content to buy: the Good-Enough.

It is clear from the exhibition that in the past the public was eager to see how an artist transformed the nail-filled reality of life into a thing of beauty or horror. They appreciated the interpretations of the readymade into an insubstantial yet visible reality. Through the works of artists upon society's most precious subjects, an internal engagement could take place, and a person could find themselves disoriented in such a way that they might now grow. Interest in drawings is natural: the display of secret, hidden labors is tantamount to deconstructing a reliquary. Even so, people generally had little energy to know intimately the occult workings themselves. On display was the fruit of passion, the Masterpiece or the Failure or worse the Mediocrity—but for the most part it wasn't just another idea that everyone shared. The subject was pulled from tradition and chance, but it was recognizable and powerful.

Today, after a long decay, we are more interested in the artist's rhetorical abilities. Until ideas lose all value in themselves, art will continue its descent from the apocalypse ushered in by the man who gave up painting to prove that the readymade was depleted and encompassed all. Now we are mildly interested in the ideas of the artist, who interprets that interest as having Value: *the idea has value, therefore the Idea is the commodity, therefore it is the end of my labor.* Unfortunately, all ideas are common unless they pass through strenuous refinement. And what is wrong with the common? Nothing is wrong with the common. But the common is as exciting here on earth as streets of gold would be in heaven. Now that there is no subject, we have only our common untransfigured ideas.

"Drawings in Dialogue" closes with a dialogue between two portraits. A drawing of Marcel Duchamp sits directly across from a drawing of the French Surrealist poet René Char. Duchamp is drawn in a sketchy, black cubist style by his brother Jacques Villon in 1953 (cat. 165). Char is drawn by Giacometti in a well-formed classically refined sketch in 1964 (cat. 166). Their right legs are crossed over their left knees. Duchamp looks vaguely impatient. Char has a bored expression on his face. Their lips are tightly sealed.

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