IN THE ENCOUNTER with an artwork one cannot escape the sense, as Gabriele Guercio writes, "that someone is there." Orthodox art history and art criticism have no language for such an experience, focused as they are on the what, the how, and why rather than the who. In his history of the monograph, *Art as Existence*, Guercio contends that art history has discredited the study of an artist’s life and works because it cannot “afford to deal with the instability produced by considerations of someoneness and singularity.” In the twentieth century the monographic discourse, “drained of its powerful imaginary and utopian elements,” lost its “fluency.” According to Joachim Pissarro, the singular artist emerges only out of dialogic interaction with other artists. And yet the prevailing accounts of modern art rule out the possibility that art might be a form of communication between persons, again because communication, if genuinely intersubjective, is open-ended, risky, and difficult to capture in historical or philosophical schemata. Pissarro’s examination of such conversations in *Cézanne/Pissarro, Johns/Rauschenberg* shows how artists communicate simply by “being” and “doing” together, in and through and around their artmaking. The intimacy and sympathy, the presence of the one to the other, are captured in works of art that then become the catalysts for an infinitely ramifying network of communication, from beholder to beholder, subject to subject.

For two such independent-minded, passionate, and unexpected books one can only be grateful. Although both grew out of dissertations, they are marvelously original, unbothered to the doxa, unmarred by academic posturing. Guercio’s book should not be mistaken for a simple contribution to the history of art history, though it is also that. Nor is the pertinence of Pissarro’s book limited to the special fields of late nineteenth-century French and postwar American painting. Both studies develop ambitious arguments about the very nature of art and artmaking. Art in these accounts is neither an ornament to life, nor a token of status, nor a collective dream; art is neither an instrument of critical reason, nor the organizer of space and time, nor the framework for ritual; art is neither gift nor sacrifice, neither diagram nor treatise. Before it is any of these things, art is a form of living itself, a mode of existence, an event that drives, not merely registers, a process of self-becoming. Not all readers will embrace such openly Romantic axioms. Many, however, will be left with the uneasy sense that academic writing on art, imprisoned as it is within historical thinking, might somehow be missing the point.

Pissarro has written an animated, fast-paced, opinionated, eccentric book that is essentially about freedom. It navigates by a small cluster of philosophical landmarks, not all of them so familiar as they once were: Immanuel Kant’s notion that we think (and, by extension, create art) only “in community with others”; his follower Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s theory of individual subjecthood as a “plural” and “reciprocal” concept; and Jürgen Habermas’s hopeful model of a “discourse ethics” involving mutual sympathetic comprehension, through social interaction, of expressions of need. For Fichte, the condition of possibility of freedom “is that it be recognized by somebody else.” This is not the version of freedom favored by, say, Clement Greenberg, who was quite interested in the topic; autonomy, after all, is just a synonym for freedom. For Greenberg, modern painting required freedom in order to carry out its historical program of self-criticism, a program modeled on the rational self-critique of reason envisioned by Kant. Pissarro is obsessed with showing that Greenberg was a poor Kantian. Over many forceful pages he chips away at the monument, pointing out that Greenberg ignored Kant’s insistence that truths are only validated when they are “represented” in such a way that other minds can recognize them. Critique, for Kant but not for Greenberg, was an intersubjective process. Like most modern students of art, Greenberg was little concerned with the puzzles of identity, the boundaries of the self, and interpersonal communication.

The first art historians and art theorists to challenge the orthodox modernist indifference to questions of personhood, as both Pissarro and Guercio acknowledge, were those speaking in the name of a politics of identity. Works of art, such scholars have argued, are the traces of real existences in the world. By performing a subjectivity, the work permits the expression of a self that is socially or politically marginalized or excluded—a self that is then once more silenced by a critical establishment dogmatically skeptical of biographically oriented approaches to art. Pissarro and Guercio, in effect, generalize that position of protest into an affirmative theory of art.

Pissarro’s accounts, full of anecdote and warmth, of the affectionate symbiosis between Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s, and of the more troubled and unbalanced friendship between Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne in the 1870s and 1880s, read like dramatic compressions of what he imagines artmaking is really like all the time, for every artist. In his study of the monograph, Guercio quotes the novelist Émile Zola, writing about Édouard Manet: “What touches me, what delights me in human creation, in works of art, is to find deep within each of them an artist, a brother, who shows me nature under a new aspect. . . . A work of art tells me the history of a heart and flesh.” Pissarro’s book reveals that Johns and Rauschenberg are still talking — continued on page 80
about art, in their own updated idiom, in more or less the same way. Art is love, Pissarro is in effect saying, an open project that demands from creator and recipient alike “a paroxysm of mutual trust” and openness to the other.

It is never quite clear how this eroticism of creativity could ever be captured in art-historical discourse. At times Pissarro carries out an anthropomorphized version of a traditional analysis of intertextual or work-to-work links, the repetitions, citations, recombinations, and erasures that make meaning possible. He relates, for example, how Rauschenberg’s spontaneous use of a paint-jar lid as a stamp—during one of Allan Kaprow’s happenings—led to a proliferation of circle motifs in Johns’s works. At other times Pissarro seems to be dreaming of an impossible art history that would recover all the lost conversations, the millions of winged words that envelop the making of artifacts.

Sigmund Freud casts no shadow on Pissarro’s argument. By leapfrogging back two centuries to recover the basically optimistic model of intersubjectivity of the German Idealists, Pissarro has canceled out a whole baleful tradition of modern thinking about the self. The enthralment of the rational ego to the drives of the id; the mendacity of memory; the incessant deferral of meaning that poisons all real communication; the circular structure of understanding; the futility of identifying any ground at all for selfhood outside of language; the hegemonic authority that compels the self to realize itself in a condition of mimetic opposition—none of these possibilities is permitted to interfere with the vital argument that drives the book. Pissarro’s amnesia, or ingenuousness, is his strength.

Pissarro is careful to distance himself from the scholarly format of the monograph, calling it “a thing of the past.” He is more interested in allowing the artistic subject to split into multiple selves and inhabit such binary dualisms as teacher and pupil or lover and beloved. Guercio would respond that the split self was always the topic of the monograph. His paradoxical and original thesis is that the monograph, the very idea of a traditional and unadventurous art history, in fact submerged the idea of the autonomy of art and the “separateness” of artworks “as isolated objects made by isolated subjects.” The monograph, for Guercio, was from its inception a kind of laboratory where the complex interplay between art and life could be tested and assessed under controlled conditions. The vanishing point of the monographic project is the total breakdown of any distinction between living and creating, doing and dreaming: a nightmarish loss of bearings for some, perhaps; for Guercio, the condition for a utopian rethinking of self and society.

The book begins with a perceptive chapter on the foundational text of modern art history, Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Artists (1550, 1568). In his biographical essays, Vasari submitted art to a “double articulation,” trapping it between “who the artist was and what he did, his genetic datum and his personal destiny.” The model proved robust and flexible, the basis for a tradition of artist’s biographies extending to the present. The career of the monograph peaked in the nineteenth century, and the bulk of Guercio’s book is dedicated to careful readings of tomes thick and thin, remembered but little read, such as Gustav Friedrich Waagen on the Van Eycks (1822), Carl Friedrich von Rumohr on Raphael (1831), Johann David Passavant on Raphael (1839), Herman Grimm on Michelangelo (1860), Carl Justi on Velázquez (1888), and Bernard Berenson on Lorenzo Lotto (1895). In Guercio’s analyses, the monograph did not stabilize the artistic author as the preexistent source of the works, so much as re-create him in the “web of relationships between the [catalogue] entries,” a virtual constellation of works spanning space and time and held together by memory, cross-references, and formal rhymes. In this way the nineteenth-century monograph registered the self-production of the subject through art just as Idealist philosophers like Friedrich von Schelling had envisioned it.

Guercio changes gears when he arrives at the twentieth century, cognizant as he is of modern art history’s disenchantment with the monographic format. He makes the case that even within the framework of a dominant Kunstwissenschaft, or “scientific study of art,” as conceived by (mostly) German art historians contemptuous of the bourgeois cult of genius and the art market’s fixation on attribution, the monographic idea has nevertheless persisted, a phantom that cannot be dispelled. He focuses, for example, on the critical literature surrounding the mythmakers Picasso, Duchamp, and Beuys, which has to deal with such statements as this by Picasso: “No doubt there will some day be a science, called ‘the science of man,’ perhaps, which will seek above all to get a deeper understanding of man via man-the-creator. . . . That’s why I date everything I make.”

The monographic idea must persist, in Guercio’s view, if not the monograph itself, because the problem of art’s relation to life has not been solved. In sketching his own model of that relation, he calls upon a diverse company of theorists, and not always the predictable ones: Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, Peter Sloterdijk, D. W. Winnicott, Antonio Negri, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and most important, Jean-Luc Nancy, whose writings on the “plural” manifestation of the subject through a series of attestations and recognitions are in fact equally relevant to Pissarro’s concerns. There is a significant difference between these two books, however. For Pissarro, art is a medium of communication permitting subjects to represent themselves to one another. The reality of the self emerges in art so that it can connect with some other self’s reality. For Guercio, by contrast, the monographic idea reveals that the very distinction between art and reality is a fallacy. He envisions an art history that no longer considers the work of art “the double of a subjective or objective datum situated before or after artistic creation,” an art history therefore no longer compelled “to translate from art to reality and vice versa.”

The monograph of the future as Guercio imagines it is indeed a “methodologically threatening” prospect. It grasps the “epiphanies” of the “innumerable advents” of the subject, providing “flashes of recognition and awakenings.” One wonders who will write it. His book is in some ways a hymn to an era when art history was still art, not a science. And yet Guercio’s account is anything but nostalgic; on the contrary, it burns, like Pissarro’s, with emancipatory promise. Both books hint at what art and art history might be able to contribute to a new and still-undeveloped philosophy of experience. □

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