

## “The Scene Changes,” *The New England Review*, 2006

I was around for almost none of the period and place that's the subject of Jed Perl's *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, \$35). In fact, the first time I saw the metropolis in concrete flesh was in the summer of 1960. A college buddy and I (age 19 and junior-to-be at Southern Cal) were doing a low-budget imitation of the television program *Route 66*: a 12,000-mile circumnavigation of the U.S.A. in a tiny 1953 MG-TD. A day or two before we limped into the Big Apple with a leaky water pump, a tattooed female carny worker we'd met in Lake George took us to a field in Bolton Landing where some crazy artist had left all these weird, abstract metal sculptures standing out in the sun. Although I'd just declared myself an art major, I didn't know squat; I had no idea I was looking at the work of David Smith. In Manhattan, my friend and I stayed at the YMCA for a couple of nights and mostly went to bars—one could drink legally in New York at 18—before heading south to D.C. Two and a half years later, I was back, with a Volkswagenful of fellow Syracuse University graduate students. After we all went to the benchmark Pop art exhibition “The New Realists” (Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, et al.) at the Sidney Janis Gallery, I thought I knew *more* than everything.

From then until I finally moved to Manhattan in 1985, I made maybe 30 short trips to New York, mostly to update myself on the galleries and check in with *Artforum*, to which I hustled most of my early art criticism. The city always seemed to me to be hard, intense, colorless and scary. The Texas art critic Dave Hickey, in residence there for a while, cautioned me to regard New York as “*la ville occupée*” when I went out on the street. After one boozy night at Max's Kansas City in the '70s left me without sufficient cash for a cab, I walked all the way from that downtown bar to John Coplans's place on 86<sup>th</sup> Street, where I was staying. I cleaved to the middle of the street and, wearing a leather jacket and stocking cap, tried to look as little as a muggee and as much like a mugger as I could.

Today, most of us artsies carry around in our subconsciousnesses a similarly gritty vision of New York, albeit tarted up a bit with festive, rippling banners on the façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the ready availability of lattés in gallery neighborhoods. The mean streets so ugly and threatening to red-staters are bee-yoo-tee-ful to people like Perl and me. Of course, Perl wasn't around back in the day, either. He's too young. But he is a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker. He's also an aesthetically conservative critic with enough self-confidence to bandy about (in a recent denunciation from his regular pulpit at *The New Republic*, of the new Museum of Modern Art) such phrases as “the hopes of many of the New Yorkers who care most passionately about twentieth century art” and “the heart and soul of artistic New York,” as though he were their sole appointed counsel. Not surprisingly, his *New Art City* is a keeper-of-the-flame's account of a brief golden age in New York, “a fifteen-year period that began roughly with [Willem] de Kooning's first one-man show at the Charles Egan Gallery in 1948 and

ended when Pop Art was the darling of the news media.”[[5]] Artists—Perl argues in essence—started out that brief-but-shining moment private, poor and pure, and—at least those who don’t make his roster of neglected favorites—concluded it ruined by fame, funds and fun.

Perl, a dependably mellifluous writer, is especially good on New York’s irresistible ability to turn culture—i.e., the man-made environment—into nature (what surrounds you, what you take as the absolutely given environment in which you have to live). In a New York steadily hemorrhaging manufacturing jobs, the “many young men [who] ...came to Manhattan and gave painting a couple of years”[[270]] could, as artists, “catch afterimages and echoes of the working man’s struggles, of those struggles that had been the very lifeblood of New York, in the worn wooden floors and creaking elevators and stained façades of all the buildings full of lofts and cold-water flats where the painters and sculptors were now making their homes.”[[56]] They also might run into one or another of the grand artistic personalities of the day—say, Hans Hofmann, the legendary German emigré teacher of the “push-pull” doctrine of modernist painting and the only Abstract Expressionist ever, really, to conquer the space of full-blown color. Or the wickedly witty, devilishly handsome and outrageously talented de Kooning. Or perhaps even Jackson Pollock himself, when he was in town from The Springs in the Hamptons, drunk and stirring up shit at the Cedar Tavern. “It’s not surprising,” Perl writes, “that the New York artists, addicted as they were to the hardest-to-define ideas, should have created a freewheeling, decade-long seminar-cum-party whose full significance nobody has ever really been able to explain.” [[143]]

Forgetting for the nonce that the author spends 641 pages *trying* to explain it, Perl’s diagnosis of the demise of those halcyon days—when Abstract Expressionism came to rule the art world as America’s first home-grown avant-garde movement—is public success. As Michael J. Lewis’s judicious review of the book in the January issue of *Commentary* notes, Perl is mostly interested in “the private lobe [of the art world], where dozens of individual painters and sculptors, laboring in the solitary outposts of their studios, struggle to give aesthetic expression to personal feeling.” So to Perl, when “artists were beginning to sell, and they were well aware that among the architects and designers and and people and their friends in the business world were potential buyers,”[[49]] the end was nigh. Contemporary art in the 1950s and ‘60s rapidly became bigger and bigger business. Johnny-come-lately Abstract Expressionists, then Color Field painters, then Minimalists, and worst of all Pop artists figured out that viable careers—in which they’d regard viewers less like hermits regard tourists, and more like novelists regard readers—could be had among the lofts and galleries of Manhattan.

And they were indeed had. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg got richer than de Kooning ever dreamed of. Don Judd came to own a building in SoHo in which he could devote an entire expensive storefront to a Zen-like (O.K., *Comme-des-garçons*-like) display of his work and favorite antique furniture. Then he bought a big chunk of Texas where he could display, in hoped-for perpetuity, the art of his friends. The Andy Warhol Foundation—the money didn’t come from his mother, you know—gives grants to artists who are probably better off than Jackson Pollock was at the peak of his short

career. And let's not even mention the fortunes of Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, Kiki Smith and anybody who shows more than once at Mary Boone, PaceWildenstein, or Larry Gagosian.

Though this geometric burgeoning of the market for new art over the last 40 years does have its problems (e.g. the carbuncle of a reality TV show called "Art Star," in which, judging from an exhibition of the finalists I saw, unbelievably shallow young artists compete for a solo show at [Jeffrey] Dietch Projects in SoHo), its consequences certainly aren't all bad. Maybe they're mostly good: artists address an audience and patrons (just like in the Renaissance, or in Rembrandt's time!) instead of their own bellybuttons; artists don't count absolutely on living off the government or teaching jobs or their parents or a few mercy purchases from dermatologists they happen to know; artists don't *have* to walk around looking like Rasputin or Lotte Lenya in *Threepenny Opera*. Only a hidebound moralist could give an emphatic, overall thumbs-down to the improvement in artists' living standards in post-mid-century Manhattan. I've always called that phenomenon in life-in-general The Problem of Your Father. "Son," your father says to you when you're a kid, "I'm going to see to it that you never have it as hard as I did coming up." When you're an adult, your father says to you, "Son, the trouble with you is that you've had it too soft."

Perl is indeed such a moralist, but in *New Art City* the chronological turf bids him less to scold what he sees as the coddled, pandering-to-trends newcomers who've had it too soft, than it moves him to try to rehabilitate the unjustly (to Perl) neglected "counter-expressions" artists he loves. "These...ranged," he writes, "from the painterly realism of Fairfield Porter and Robert De Niro and Nell Blaine and Earl Kerkam to the geometric abstraction of Burgoyne Diller and Ilya Bolotowsky and Myron Stout—and the work of these artists ought to be counted among the signal achievements of the School of New York." [[64]] All of these artists are good artists; a few of them are even near-great (to my mind Porter, Diller and Stout). But "signal achievement" of that era, as measured against de Kooning, Pollock, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Louise Nevelson, William Baziotos and Adolph Gottlieb? Please. Grade inflation in modern art history these days is not, apparently, confined to the classroom.

The quieter the art—in comparison to the big noisy painting ushered in by the headline Abstract Expressionists—the more strained and sentimental Perl's justifications become. "In the years after 1960, [Blaine] achieved a full-out lyricism rare in American art." [[274]] Moderate lyricism, perhaps. Full-out? I doubt it. Rare in American art? Hardly. To prop up Leland Bell, a pretty good figurative painter who's anything more than that only if you willfully ignore David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn in California, Perl hauls out the poet-critic John Ashbery. "Seeing him in his studio," Ashbery says in quotation, "vigorously at work on a number of canvases and meanwhile sounding off on his various pet peeves and enthusiasms, one has the feeling of coming upon an almost extinct variety of whooping crane, alive and well in its environment." [[240]] Very diplomatic, I'd say—praising the artist with no consequential mention of the *art*, in order to complete the assignment (this one for *Art News* in what

should have been for Perl the irrelevant year of 1970) and stay true to one's real taste without torpedoing a friendship.

To squeeze the likes of Blaine and Bell into a crucial chronicle like *New Art City*, some gratuitous diminishment of truly great artists is necessary. On de Kooning, Perl sics Louis Finkelstein, another pretty good figurative painter. For Finkelstein, de Kooning had foresworn "all discipline save the experience itself."[[118]] But at least de Kooning studied in a rigorous art academy, stayed broke for a long time, lived in a literal cold-water flat, and didn't turn a profit on his painting until he was pushing fifty—important artistic virtues for Perl. Jasper Johns presents him with a much bigger obstacle. Johns creates enigmatic, discreetly Duchampian, and ultimately very influential art as early as 1955. And he's slyly publicity-savvy from the git-go. On Johns, Perl drops his most lethal adjective: "clever."

For the frontal assault, however, Perl calls in help. Not Ashbery or Finkelstein this time, but Fairfield Porter. "[The] critic managed to suggest in the pages of a powerful art magazine [a 1964 issue of *Art News*] that Johns was not all that he was cracked up to be," Perl writes, "although the message would probably have gotten through only to those who were already attuned to the drift of Porter's argument." [[357]] Translation: For those of you who already hate this sort of art, this is the sort of art you'll hate. In Perl's summation, Porter's cat's paw verdict was that Johns was "a boy-man who had completed his lessons and put them together into an accomplished essay form that challenged his teachers, but just so much."

The thinly disguised anti-gay slur "boy-man" aside, what's remarkable about Perl's borrowed opinion of Johns is that, with another mode of art of which Perl approves—say, brushy figurative painting—this is exactly how Perl would have had artists comport themselves. For him, the ones who were to carry on in the immediate aftermath of Manhattan at mid-century would have completed the lessons of looking at de Kooning, studying with Mercedes Matter, and imitating Fairfield Porter, Nell Blaine or Leland Bell. Then *they* would have taught—less for livelihood than to serve and protect that "heart and soul of artistic New York"—younger artists who would repeat the process with slightly different personnel.

Perl is on semi-firm historical ground here. Late Cubists also thought, "We've trailblazed far enough; let's stop here and settle down." So did Neo-Plasticists and Constructivists. So did the Surrealists. So did a lot of guys who tiptoed into the Cedar Tavern as graduate students, eventually got jobs teaching painting in state universities, and tried to maintain a fellowship of brushy figurative painting and domesticated Abstract Expressionism. None of it worked. The art world went merrily on its own raucous, messy and amoral way: Pop Art, Op Art, Assemblage, Process Art, Eccentric Abstraction, Conceptual Art, Performance Art, Neo-Expressionism, Installation Art, Neo-Conceptualism, Patheticism, and so on and so on. Sure, most of it is bad art. But a little of it is very good, and a few pieces are genius. That's the way it is with modern art: A solid platform (which is to say an academy) under quality is always accompanied by a low ceiling, but a soaring vault overhead seems to require only the rickety remnants of a floor

underneath. Pedagogical genealogy is, at best, an erratic determinant of good contemporary art.

When the painter Vija Celmins remarked in the 1970s that what the art world needed was less Duchamp and more Cézanne, she didn't mean *no* Duchamp and *all* Cézanne. She didn't mean *all* dour aesthetic labor in those solitary studio outposts, and *no* irony at all, not even the smallest wink at the inherent pretentiousness of artistic sincerity in a society where all an artist has to do to know better is read the newspaper. Too many of the merely decent artists to whom Perl tries to deliver make-goods for their exclusion from the canon of Manhattan at mid-century seem unaware, or wish that, Duchamp had never been born. An in-joke every once in a while (maybe even all the time) helps prevent contemporary painting and sculpture from turning into the art world's version of model railroading: an earnest, labor-intensive and harmless pastime that keeps its practitioners off the streets except to hit Denny's for the early bird special.

*New Art City* is not, to be sure, exclusively an editorial on the injustice to certain artists of the standard accounts of the New York art world from the late 1940s to the early '60s. It's a well-researched history (I recommend buying it), chock full of facts, anecdotes and well-chosen snippets of the art criticism of the time. (Unfortunately, it's also stuffed with almost meaningless postage-stamp black-and-white illustrations, as if to recall the difficulty for non-New-Yorkers of trying to figure out what the hell was going on in Manhattan at mid-century from the similarly tiny photographs in *Art News*. The book's translucent dust jacket—wrapped over the hard cover's shot of a view out de Kooning's midtown studio window—is a cute facsimile of New York's everpresent grimy glass, but the production money should have been spent on a signature of color reproductions.) The book is as good a read as Mark Stevens's and Analynn Swann's 2005 Pulitzer-prizewinning *De Kooning*. I think many of its aesthetic judgments, however, are bad. For example, Perl writes, "I like the speculative mood of [Pollock's] *Cathedral* and some of the other works from 1946 and 1947; the drip technique has not yet become an end in itself. By the end of the 1940s, however, a lot of Pollock's effects feel overly regularized." So, Mondrian is better when we can still see a bit of the tree?

Ultimately, art (or certainly what R. B. Kitaj calls the "painting-drawing modernism" part of it) comes down to taste. Even though Perl and I share a general preference for low-tech art (Perl likes it, I practice it), our tastes in other people's art could hardly diverge more. I regard the French artist and wartime prisoner of the Germans Jean Hélion as an heroic person, a good (i.e., less than very good, better than pretty good) abstract painter early, and a mediocre hackneyed stylized figurative one later. Perl likes Hélion's work so much he put his godawful "Tk" on the cover of "Tk," a collection of the critic's reviews. I think the Studio-Schoolism—"Everybody out of the observational drawing pool and into the locker room for some still-life painting situps before we let you have free exercise!"—that Perl wishes were in the catbird seat of the contemporary art world is stultifying, predictable and, frankly, homely. Perl regards its current predicament as the Thermopylae of contemporary art.

He stands, of course, with the embattled Spartans. He stands a little too closely to them. In *New Art City*, he goes on and on about the merits of Leland Bell, whose daughter Temma is a painter who shows with The Bowery Gallery in New York. Perl's wife, Deborah Rosenthal, is also a painter who shows at the Bowery. It's a co-op gallery, meaning the artists are the owners and have a greater vested interest in the critical reputations of their stablemates than they would in a conventional commercial gallery. Perl has not been shy about plugging and reviewing exhibitions at, and artists connected to, the Bowery—about 20 times in *The New Republic* in the last ten years, according to my computer search.

Is Perl corrupt? No, not in the sense that Perl thinks MoMA director Glenn Lowry is corrupt in permitting the collection of a trustee's bank to be the first show in the rebuilt museum. To me, Perl's...let's call it favoritism...is a symptom of the old love-me-love-my-dog syndrome. Hélon is to be loved, so his art is to be loved. Blaine and Bell and the rest of Perl's *Salon des refusées de la mémoire* are to be loved—they're his kind of people and they've swum bravely against the tide of novelty. Therefore, their art should be considered at least a close second to that of the major Abstract Expressionists, and more deserving of critical attention than the merely strategically astute pre-Pop, Pop and post-Pop stuff that's somehow conned its way to art-world prominence.

This kind of member-of-an-embattled-small-circle mentality should be avoided by art critics, especially those with the moxie, erudition and forthrightness that Perl otherwise possesses. He just needs to realize that just because some artists are admirable or companionable or have looked really hard at Cézanne doesn't mean they're good artists. And just because some artists are good artists doesn't mean they're companionable or admirable. Some of the best artists I know are pretty much jerks. Hey, I'm one of 'em.