

Art History and the Place of the Viewer since 1968

To sight belong only planes, paintings, figures of one plane, but bodies and shapes of bodies belong to touch.

JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER¹

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People are bodies and eyes.

SVETLANA ALPERS AND MICHAEL BAXANDALL²

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1 The “Idea of the Spectator”: Theorizations of the Audience, c. 1972

Leo Steinberg’s celebrated 1972 essay “Other Criteria,” a revision and extension of a lecture that he had first given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, is now usually remembered for two primary reasons: for its inventive assertion that certain works by Robert Rauschenberg suggested a flatbed picture plane (rather than a conventionally upright view of the world), and for its sustained and intelligent assault on Clement Greenberg’s teleological account of modernist painting.³ Juxtaposing works by Old Masters and Abstract Expressionists, Steinberg repeatedly pressured Greenberg’s well-known claim that the history of modern painting involved an increasingly frank awareness and recognition of the flatness of the material support of painting. Did Rembrandt really,

1 The passage is taken from Herder’s *Plastik*; the translation is that of Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art, 2: From Winckelmann to Baudelaire* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 166.

2 Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 160.

3 Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55–91. For a consideration of the essay’s subsequent reception and reputation (and for the claim that the essay was “the manifesto that marked the end of the era of Clement Greenberg’s formalism”), see David Carrier, “An Extraordinarily Suggestive Revisionist,” <http://www.artcritical.com/2011/03/16/steinberg/>, posted March 16, 2011, and accessed December 28, 2018.

wondered Steinberg, dissemble his medium? And could a painting by Rothko not be seen as an evocation of a landscape? “Greenberg wants,” Steinberg contended, “all Old Master and Modernist painters to reduce their differences to a single criterion, and that criterion as mechanistic as possible – either illusionistic or flat.”⁴ To Steinberg, however, such an approach could hardly accommodate the sheer variety of approaches discernible in the history of art. He thus began to suggest other possible approaches: other criteria, that is, through which the history of art might be considered. These depended, he noted, on the art itself rather than on an imposed and absolute scheme, and they did not lend themselves to easy qualitative judgment. Nevertheless, suggested Steinberg, they could prove valuable. And then he offered a possible example. “I suspect,” Steinberg wrote, almost offhandedly, “that all works of art or stylistic cycles are definable by their built-in idea of the spectator.”⁵

The wording of Steinberg’s suggestion – at once tentative (*I suspect*) and absolute (*all works of art*) – has the quality of a spontaneous realization: a hypothesis, in formation. And certainly it is easy to understand why his willingness to emphasize the role of the spectator must have seemed both fresh and contemporary. For one thing, contemporary artists had articulated a range of distinct ideas involving the viewer in the years that immediately preceded Steinberg’s claim. To be sure, some evinced little interest in elaborate theorization (one thinks of Frank Stella’s droll claim that “What you see is what you see”). Others, however, embraced and explored diverse possibilities. Some drew on the findings of perceptual psychologists in generating specific effects: as William Seitz put it, in such cases the spectator was effectively reduced to the “area between the cornea and the brain.”⁶ Some adopted instead a phenomenological approach, construing the viewer in terms of embodiment, space, and the passage of time – and, sometimes, added a Foucauldian twist by subjecting that body to a range of coercive and disciplinary forces.⁷ Some conceived of the viewer as a sort of open-ended partner, creating interactive environments and situations in which outcomes were determined at least in part by the decisions and gestures of the spectator.⁸ And some stressed the political potential of the viewer in attempting to offer an antidote to passivity:

4 Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 74.

5 Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 81.

6 William C. Seitz, *The Responsive Eye*, exhibition catalog (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 9.

7 See, for example, Robert Hobbs, *Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 82.

8 See, for example, Marcia Tucker, “PheNAUMANology,” *Artforum* 9/4 (December 1970), 38–43: 38.