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The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline by Harry F. Gaugh

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losser, Vossler and Croce were so opposed.

He and Schlosser seemed to hold each other in high personal regard. Schlosser admired Wölfflin's *Dürer* and Wölfflin's work was never the object of Schlosser's attacks on systematic art history; Wölfflin wrote to Vossler that he had thought of dedicating to Schlosser's memory the volume of collected theoretical papers, *Gedanken über Kunstgeschichte*, which, in fact, outline theories that had been unacceptable to Schlosser. This would become intelligible as more than a personal gesture if what both Schlosser and Wölfflin felt uncomfortable about was the systematicity and exclusivity of critical descriptions. Schlosser avoided the issue of devising descriptive concepts, while Wölfflin accepted it as involving treating the individual work within a system.

Toward the third member of the anti-systematic trio – Croce – Wölfflin was dismissive. After receiving Croce's criticism of the *Grundbegriffe* he asked Vossler to convey thanks saying that it would be hard for him to write as Croce had clearly neither time nor inclination to engage in dialogue and utterly misunderstood him. He wrote that Croce's insistence that only particular works exist is about as informative as saying only individual creatures exist, when there is still a science of biology. 'I attempted to achieve for art history a sequence of visual forms within which works of art took shape, independently of the individual form of a work, and he talks about aesthetic concepts [i.e. criteria of beauty]... Just as modes of thought [in philosophy] have developed, so has the capacity of perception and formulation.' Wölfflin was surely right. Croce had become, well before 1920, dogmatic, repetitious and incapable of dialogue.

From the volume as a whole, stray remarks and anecdotes stay in the mind. Wölfflin writes with unflinching stylishness and personal delicacy, but he remains remote.

MICHAEL PODRO

The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline. By Harry F. Gaugh. 192 pp. + 70 col. pls. + 100 b. & w. ills. (Cincinnati Art Museum, Abbeville Press, 1985), \$22.95. ISBN 0-89659-571-4.

Franz Kline died in 1962, just as the bells began to toll for the Abstract Expressionist movement in which he played such a crucial rôle. The sounds made on his behalf during the rest of the decade in slender memorial and retrospective exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues were drowned out in the din created by the loud acceptance of Pop art. Instead of heroic figures, people wanted artists who would play with them, creating disco décor and images with which

they literally felt at home. After the profound introspection of Abstract Expressionism and its passionate transcription of emotion into brushwork, people seemed to want a more impersonal, public art like that on billboards, in magazine ads and supermarkets. They put Kline behind them. Supportive voices were heard upon occasion in the seventies, but they tended to tout the little-known Klines, the early works and the late colourful canvases. What was needed instead was a full assessment of Kline's achievement, an analysis of his *œuvre*, qualitatively, formally, iconographically (where applicable) and of his rôle in the development of Abstract Expressionism's history and aesthetic.

The heavy guns of scholarship had been brought to bear on Jackson Pollock (a four volume catalogue raisonné being the major salvo in his defense), on Willem de Kooning (who had three major monographs by 1973), on Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman (who was not even taken seriously as an Abstract Expressionist in the heyday of the movement), and on Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still, and just about everyone else who was involved with Abstract Expressionism except Kline. When a major retrospective exhibition of his work was announced for 1985-86* Kline fans were elated, at least until they heard that this once-in-their-lifetime event was not going to be shown in New York, but they continued to hold their breaths in anticipation of Harry Gaugh's Abbeville monograph, *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline*, praying that, finally, their man would get his due. I wish it were possible to say without qualification that he has.

The book is just about big enough to hold its own on a coffee table, but the print inside is also large, so there are about half of the words and reproductions needed to do minimal justice to the subject. Gaugh's doctoral dissertation on the pre-1950 work, his essay on the colour abstractions in the 1979 Phillips Collection exhibition catalogue and his two articles on the mature work would not have done so either, even if they had been incorporated into the essay more or less intact. The problem lies in Gaugh's lack of interest in (or inability to make) formal analyses, qualitative judgements, or contextual assessments. Gaugh seems primarily concerned with categorising Kline's abstract pictures according to a typology established in the representational early works; resemblances to the clown images and portraits, to the train, bridge, landscape, and architectural paintings determine their grouping, rather than chronology, which Gaugh distrusts. Gaugh's approach is generalising and biographical. He is particularly good at ferreting out facts about Kline, such as which floor he lived on in what building between which dates in 1949, but he does not correlate these facts with the paintings as carefully as he should, nor has he double checked his facts with other witnesses, many of whom challenge them. Some of Kline's closest friends – Herman Somborg, for instance, who saw him daily for

many years, Ray Hendler and Budd Hopkins who knew him very well (Hopkins even wrote a lengthy reminiscence of Kline in *Artforum*) – were never even interviewed by Gaugh.

Although Kline consistently worked on a very large scale during his mature years, only twenty-four large size works are reproduced full-page in Gaugh's book; fifteen additional full-page illustrations are given over to works of very modest dimensions. Gaugh seems to have a preference for the studies over the finished paintings, perhaps because of their fresh, messy spontaneity, but this bias has resulted in a book lacking reproductions of many of the artist's finest and best known canvases. *Cardinal*, *Dahlia*, *Shenandoah Wall*, *Sabro IV*, *King Oliver*, the Chicago Art Institute's *Horizontal II*, the Philadelphia Museum of Art's *Torches Mauve*, and the Museum of Modern Art's *Chief* are among the more than two dozen important mature paintings that are not reproduced – a sizeable percentage of Kline's 1950-62 work. Some of the blame for this unfortunate situation can be laid on the book's double function as a museum catalogue, but the problems of logistics and reluctant lenders ought not to have taken precedence over the book's rôle as a definitive monograph. Only if there were another major Kline exhibition or book in the foreseeable future, would one not be upset about these inadequacies.

As an example, Gaugh fails to reproduce six of the eleven major paintings in Kline's pivotal first exhibition at the Egan Gallery in 1950. Then – salt in the wound – his critical analysis of these paintings, the crucial works that established Kline's position in the forefront of the Abstract Expressionist movement, is all but exhausted in the following three sentences:

Color rarely surfaced in the eleven abstractions: brown underpainting near the bottom of *Nijinsky* and traces of green in *Leda*. The paintings displayed a variety of images and moods: the geometric austerity of *Wotan*, the tentative, weblike balance of *Giselle*, the taut sharpness of *Cardinal*. In spite of this range, the canvases shared one feature that they proclaimed openly, if not in all cases loudly: they were black and white.

After this less than probing statement of the obvious, Gaugh is back to biography – to what people said about the pictures and what Kline said about being type-cast as a black and white painter – to technical information about his work procedures, featuring a lengthy discussion of a photograph of Kline's current studio, and, finally, to a detailed digression on Kline's titles. Gaugh has unearthed a great deal of information as to the possible sources of Kline's titles – it is one of his strong suits – but he sometimes gets carried away with their importance for the work's meaning, forgetting how much of a factor the input of others in the painting-naming sessions was. That Harry Gaugh has an instinct for the capillaries, not the

jugular, is evident throughout his book. Franz Kline's profound paintings deserve much more.

APRIL KINGSLEY

*Now on view at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** from 17th April to 8th June; then at the **Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia** from 26th June to 28th September.

Kurt Schwitters. By John Elderfield. 288 pp + 30 col. pls. + 240 b. & w. ills. (Thames and Hudson, 1985), £30. ISBN 0-500-23426-4.

The genesis of this book, published to coincide with the exhibition of Schwitters's work which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York last autumn and is currently touring Europe, goes back to a visit John Elderfield paid, twenty or so years ago, to the Lake District, where he saw Schwitters's third and last *Merzbau*, still *in situ* in a stone barn on the hillside overlooking Elterwater. Elderfield was, he says, puzzled then by 'the irreconcilable difference between the organic forms of the last *Merzbau*, in its rural setting, and the crisp, cubist-derived structures of the earlier collages with their urban materials'. The contradiction between urban geometry and organic form was, in a sense, not to be resolved, but to take its place among the other polarities Elderfield perceives as governing Schwitters's work and imbuing the best of it with characteristic tensions and reciprocities. It is a part of the achievement of this beautifully lucid, intelligent and expansive book that, while never smoothing over the inconsistencies, overlappings and occasional weaknesses in Schwitters's work as a whole, it gives such a clear account of his development, the ideas that informed it and the contexts that contributed to it.

The centre of Elderfield's interest is Schwitters's visual work, and though he devotes a chapter to 'Poetry, Performance and the Total Work of Art', he does not try to give equal weight to the poetry and prose writings, nor is he as concerned with the verbal/visual interplays as Werner Schmalenbach in his 1967 monograph on Schwitters. What Elderfield does is to allow the structure of the book to follow Schwitters's own rhythm of development, with the Hannover and Elterwater *Merzbau*, which Schwitters himself saw as his life work, providing successive climaxes to the story. (The second *Merzbau*, under construction at Lysaker in Norway when Schwitters was forced once again to flee following the German invasion in April 1940, does not even survive in photographs.) The book is divided into two main sections: 'The Invention of *Merz* 1918-21', and 'The Development of *Merz*, 1922-48'. The first three years of *Merz*, therefore, receive a measure of attention proportionate to their importance. Elderfield also takes the opportunity to unravel the complexities of Schwitters's

relations with both dada and constructivism, themselves of remarkable complexity and internal contradictions. There is no better single account, I think, of the diverse currents of thought animating these two 'movements'; constantly borne in mind too is the pictorial dialogue with cubism, both analytic and synthetic, and the spiritual dialogue with Expressionism.

Schwitters's first foray into the European avant-garde was to affiliate himself with Walden's *Der Sturm* and expressionism in mid-1918. Without realising it, he thereby ruined his chances of admission to the Berlin Dada Club. Schwitters was therefore excluded from key dada events and publications, and forced to find a new name for his art. He chose *merz*, and from the chance fragment of a word on a collage gave his one-man movement in Hannover a title every bit as provocatively resonant as the original nonsense vocable, 'dada'. In fact, he remained in fruitful contact with the Zurich dadas, above all with Arp, whose work was an undoubted influence on him, and whose ideas about the flux of nature, and of a natural order to be sought within a cosmic chaos, provide many parallels with Schwitters's own. (Although the formal parallels between them are discussed, more might, perhaps, have been made of Arp's rôle as a whole.) For the rest of his life too, he remained in friendly contact with the Berlin dada Raoul Hausmann; however, it is probably just as well he had his own *merz*, because, for one thing, it helped to highlight the real differences, on which Schwitters himself continued to muse, between his art and dada.

His art was, he later said, not dada, but 'the result of it'. In 1918-19, certainly, his use of extra-pictorial materials was immediately understood as part of the dada revolt against the conventional modes of painting, and yet Schwitters used his junk in a way that was far from anti-art. Schwitters's first pronouncement on *Merz*, 'Die *Merzmalerei*', was published in *Der Sturm* in July 1919. A clear and coherent text, it deserves quoting at length (Elderfield usefully gives a translation of virtually all of it):

... A perambulator wheel, wire netting, string and cotton wool are factors having equal rights with paint. The artist creates through the choice, distribution and metamorphosis of the materials.

The metamorphosis of materials can be reproduced by their distribution over the picture surface. This can be reinforced by dividing, deforming, overlapping or painting over. In *Merzmalerei* the box top, playing card, and newspaper clipping become surfaces; string, brushstroke and pencil stroke become line; wire netting becomes over-painting or pasted-on grease-proof paper becomes varnish; cotton becomes softness.

Merzmalerei aims at direct expression by shortening the interval between the intuition and realisation of the work of art.

Schwitters believed that the materials he used, in the assemblage-paintings and in the collages, should lose their specific, individual character, what he called their 'Eigengift', but not their quality in so far as this enabled them to function in formal terms as purely pictorial elements. Elderfield provides a detailed analysis of the *Merzbilder*, the assemblage-paintings, and of the collages, and reveals the extent to which Schwitters held to traditional pictorial values. The resistance of the materials to incorporation in the *Merzbilder*, though, was a source of productive tension; it was also the source of one of the central differences from dada assemblages, in which there is no struggle, because there is no attempt to incorporate or transform the original material. The heterogeneous in a dada assemblage remains just that. Dadaism, Schwitters said, poses antitheses, *Merz* reconciles them. Elderfield suggests that the large assemblages Schwitters began to make in the winter of 1918-19 might be the greatest of all his works, and they were certainly among the most impressive works in the recent retrospective organised by the Museum of Modern Art, New York (and subsequently seen in London and Hannover).

In the collages, which Schwitters made with diaristic persistence throughout his life, in various, sometimes overlapping styles, there is never the sense, as there almost always is in a cubist collage, of materials being added to or combined into what remains essentially a painting or drawing. The structure and pictorial logic is entirely that of the materials used: sometimes the papers remain thin, as separately visible distinct colour planes, sometimes they are thick, 'dense sandwiches of found matter'. Elderfield quotes a marvellous description of Schwitters at work:

He spread flour and water over the paper, then moved and shuffled and manipulated his scraps of paper around in the paste while the paper was wet. With his fingertips he worked little pieces of crumpled paper into the wet surface... In this way he used flour both as paste and as paint.

Although, in spite of his insistence on abstract formal qualities, there are often iconographic themes and specific topical references in his pictures – one of the many instances of the ambiguities in his work – *Das Kotsbild* (Fig.50) is more specific than usual. It has much in common with Berlin dada photomontage (and is rightly classified as such by Elderfield). Here, the 'fashion drawings', themselves a reference to the relationship between fashion cutting and the act of collage itself, are gathered about the name Anna Blume and gently satirise her. Anna Blume was the eponymous heroine of the poem of 1919 which brought Schwitters instant notoriety and became almost a popular hit. The poem is itself an assemblage of clichés from romantic love poetry, echoes of expressionist nature poetry, apparent nonsense and impossible grammar. However, although it is ironic,