
3 CHAPTER 1

I had the opportunity to visit Russia in 1989, when I was a student at the Institute des Hautes Etudes en Art Plastiques, in Paris, and in 1990 I traveled to Poland. In these countries, the ghosts of history and the sense of the future were dramatically different than in the West. It was as if time stood still or was elongated in these post-Soviet countries. Each day was like walking in a de Chirico painting. Every street you walked down offered a memory you never had, yet understood; the feeling of a future that was supposed to happen, but never moved forward, and could only remain the same as when it ceased in 1945. Dreamlike and slow, perhaps this was a living memory of what time was like before late capitalism. Experiencing this landscape untouched by capitalism was seminal. It forced me to see my personal environment from a non-essentialist viewpoint and to understand it as both the fragile and violent construction that it is.

Analogue photography inserts itself as fact in the vast archive of this construction. It is the nightmare of an infinity of pictures seen through a socially inscribed filter—an equivalency that creates repression and amnesia, gazing at anonymity and fame equally. Painting does not automatically insert itself into the index

of our common history; only a photograph of a painting can. Paintings tend to resist this kind of equivalency. Photography is the shadow of light developed in darkness. It is as if some things can only be communicated via shadows. Photography turned out to be the perfect tool for the work that was to come—work that was about common history, but also an invented genealogy.³¹

In 2000, I was invited to take part in three exhibitions, one in Poland, one at the Queens Museum, and one in a New York gallery. During this period, my father, Harvey Quaytman, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Notably, he was a painter, working in geometric abstraction. He had an enormous influence on my work, representing both a foundation and something I perpetually need to destroy symbolically. “Every father is a figure who failed to live up to his mandate, and thus left to his son the task to settle his symbolic debts.”^{ix, 32}

One evening when Harvey was four, his father and grandfather were driving back from the 1939 World’s Fair, when a railroad light malfunctioned and they were both crushed to death by an oncoming train. They were immigrants from Lodz, Poland. My father knew next to nothing

about what happened, exactly when, where, why, etc. He also knew next to nothing about what his family's life was like in Lodz and why they left. He actively did not want to know, like most first generation immigrants of that era. Looking into these lost histories became my passion for the next five years. Remembering what he chose not to remember seemed to be my way to express love and, at the same time, a critique. Digging through microfilm in the New York Public Library, I found the notice of their death in the newspaper. I vividly remember how difficult it was to show him these artifacts. Since the Queens Museum is at the site of the 1939 World's Fair, I decided to use this Warholian disaster as my starting point for the work in my exhibition. I called the series *The Sun* partly because this was the name of the newspaper in which I found the tiny article. Because they were anonymous—it was not an obituary, but news. The son, of course, was also my father, Harvey.³³

During my visit to Poland, I made a one-day trip, alone, to Lodz on a train. I took some photographs of the train tracks and my compartment. The train felt as if it was from about 1950. It had a mirror over the headrest on each side of the facing seats—another shallow

box with a mirror in it. It was an eerie experience, riding the train tracks of Poland. I used the resulting photographs of Poland as armature on which to develop eighty paintings comprising two sets of forty paintings each, with one set to be hung in a grid for a gallery space and the other to be hung for the Queens Museum in one straight line extending one hundred and fifty feet. Though no single narrative tied them together, each set could be seen as multiple singularities grouped together like cells of filmstrips. For *The Sun*, I made a poster that looked like a train schedule.³⁴ In the paintings I used a system of metric uniformity to support an extended meditation on history, projection, and geometry. Some of the paintings were silk-screens of photographic images and some were painted by hand. The dimensions of all eighty paintings were a golden section: 20" x 32.36". Each painting was legible both in isolation and in context; together they constituted an ambivalent grammar of repetition, visual rhyme, and rhythm. I studied book design and layout, becoming interested in the idea of making paintings as if I were designing a page in a book. I noticed in my research how powerfully photographs are affected by different rectangles of white space. I looked a lot

at Max Bill and Richard Paul Lohse. Each picture was, in some way or another, drawn out of itself into the surrounding context.

Right before *The Sun*, another series of works was produced for the exhibition in Poland, *Construction in Process*. Here again I wanted to make a group of paintings that existed within a tripartite schematic: the thing pictured relating to the site, the picture plane, and the place of the viewer. Since the location of where the paintings would be hung was unknown, the site was approached via history rather than architecture. In researching Lodz for the Queens Museum proposal, I was reminded of an extraordinary Polish artist named Katarzyna Kobro.³⁵

Years earlier I had come across Kobro's work in Yve-Alain Bois' book *Painting as Model*. However, due to the obscurity of her work in the West, I only came across it again by accident while doing research on the Internet. Since that time Poland has opened up a lot, and Kobro is not as obscure as she was when I did the project. Kobro was a modernist artist working in Lodz, whose utopian ambitions and career were cut short, first by the Nazis and then by the Communists. In the '20s, she made a series of

sculptures called *Spatial Compositions*, in which she invented ways for sculpture to break out of autonomous objecthood into the realm of architecture and time. When I started studying Kobro I was struck by how her ideas about sculpture echoed many of my own ideas about how to proceed with painting. These ideas involved abolishing the objectness of sculpture in favor of its architectural integration into the space around it. As Bois has written, "The radical idea that Kobro had about sculpture was that it should sculpt space around it and direct your body's movement."³⁶ In Kobro's own words, "The solid is a lie to the essence of sculpture. It closes up the sculpture and separates it from space. It exists for itself and it regards its inner space like something completely divorced from the outer space."³⁷ These ideas paralleled thoughts I had about painting's status as an isolated target hanging detached from its surrounding and the bodies moving by it. Kobro realized sculpture in space/time, as I wanted to with painting. Another of my favorite quotes of hers is, "I like to have fun by correcting what was not finished in any former artistic movement."³⁸ She and her husband Wladyslaw Strzeminski opened the Muzeum Sztuki, the first museum of modern

art in Europe, which is still extant to this day.^{36,37}

For my Polish paintings, I had the idea to make an exact reconstruction of Korbo's painted steel sculpture *Spatial Composition 2* (1928, 50" x 50" x 50"). After producing the replica, I photographed it in various states: unpainted, painted, on a black backdrop, with other paintings around it, etc. In some of the photographs, I tried to collapse, by coordinating geometries, the surrounding architecture and the sculpture. The resulting images took the failure of photography to adequately represent three-dimensional form to an almost comic extreme. Panels were built in three different sizes, the dimensions of which were determined using the Fibonacci series, the same mathematical principle used by Kobro. Depicting this sculpture provided a temporal telescoping into the context of a contemporary art exhibition, not only bringing the construction of deep perspectival space back to the picture plane, but also reintroducing historical time.³⁸

This series marked the beginning of the archival methodology mentioned earlier, which I have resolved to continue indefinitely. I decided to think about my exhibitions, my writing, and my paintings as one, and to structure

my work as an ongoing book. Each new chapter would be an exhibition or vice versa. Since much of the work is silk-screened, if a painting sells, it can be reprinted so the chapters are always complete. However, it's a very fluid situation that can be reshuffled: individual paintings can be extracted and shown out of the original context. As I mentioned in the beginning, I like the idea that the literal storage of the paintings is taken into account. Rather than old painting racks, they are carefully organized on bookshelves. The archiving is the goal, not the selling. I originally came across this idea curating an exhibition at P.S.1 Museum of the Swedish visionary painter, Hilma af Klint. Of her ideas that resonated for me, the most important was that she thought of her entire body of work as one, stipulating that nothing could be sold and it all must remain together. Due to this resistance of af Klint's work, like Kobro's and Strzeminski's, it has never entered the market and thus remains comparatively obscure to this day.

After 9/11 I was emboldened to leave the gallery that had represented me for two years, because it seemed disassociated from my context and ideas. For the next two years I worked without having any exhibitions.

While working on *The Sun*, I began to read a huge amount of writing on Poland and a lot of general literature on the 1940s. My reading followed a network of footnotes. At this time I happened upon two more women, who, like Kobro, inspired me to make paintings. One of these was Anne Tyng, whose work and life I became interested in after reading *Louis Kahn to Anne Tyng: The Rome Letters*. The scope of Tyng's influence on Kahn came as a revelation, as did the many similarities of her ideas to Kobro's. Both women had constructed their own methodologies based on geometry, the golden section, and Fibonacci numbers to create radical approaches to sculpture and architecture. They had each slipped into relative obscurity outside of their respective circles. However, this obscurity afforded me freedom to use aspects of their thinking as a medium. My consideration of them wasn't dominated by any art historical or theoretical viewpoint, as, for example, with Eva Hesse or Agnes Martin. In the case of Anne, I looked up her name in the phone book and called her. We set up a meeting in Philadelphia where I visited her in her home, which she had designed herself.^{39,40,41}

The other key influence of the time was Dorothy

Norman. After accidentally stumbling upon a photograph taken by her of an exhibition being deinstalled at the gallery she worked at, I began to research and make work based on her. Norman, (1905-1997), was, with Alfred Steiglitz, a founder of New York's first gallery of modern art, An American Place.⁴² Also noteworthy was the fact that Norman started a magazine called *Twice a Year*, which combined the arts, writing, and civil liberties. I am interested in how Norman was and was not an artist; how she was an activist and facilitator who also took photographs. She was able to make work in ways more advanced than her mentor and lover Stieglitz because she rejected the role of artist. It got me to think about practices outside of the four-sided box of self-expression, the gallery and the art world, critical attention, and marketability. Researching Norman may have been a premonition of my current work as the director of Orchard Gallery, which is also run by artists just as was An American Place. In fact it's productive for me to think of many of my paintings as small premonitions. It's a way to incorporate the subjective at a distance.^{43,44,45}

In 2004, I was again invited to Poland, this time by Lawrence Weiner, to take part in the Lodz Bi-

ennial. In it I attempted a dialogue-in-pictures between Kobro and Strzeminski's Unistic theory and my own paintings. This dialogue was "Chapter 2, Lodz Poem." I again used a photo-based silkscreen depicting a replica of Kobro's *Spatial Composition 2* in my New York studio, intermixed with two small hand-painted pictures called *Captions* and two striped paintings, whose intense opticality reverberated into the visual experience of the surrounding paintings. Once again, as Kobro aimed at the destruction of the solid, I aimed at the destruction of the picture's iconic status or singularity.

Almost immediately upon my return from Lodz, I mounted a show at Momenta Gallery in Williamsburg. Here, because of the quickness of digital photography, I was able to make two silk-screens related to the Lodz trip and combine them with a photograph of a derelict building directly outside the window of Momenta.⁴⁶ I use photography to depict a site in reference to where the paintings are shown, but also to develop and expand a network of images to reference. This, in turn, becomes a path to the image and facilitates a way to make a painting that is not arbitrary. I called the Momenta group *Chapter 3, Optima*.⁴⁷ Optima was the name of the type-

writer that was in the office of the curator of the Muzeum Sztuki.⁴⁸ Three of the paintings picture an obsolescent industrial time with the chapter title dialecticizing both optimism and opticality.⁴⁹

It should be noted that op paintings, being totally non-hierarchical, are the exact opposite of perspective. The perspectival in a picture shows what is *known*, providing as it does an object and a subject—optical or op is the opposite—it is about the *unknown* because there is no object. You don't know where IT is. Op works the way humor does by pressing the yes and no buttons at the exact same time. So it seemed natural, as a third position or approach, to orchestrate groupings of different kinds of pictures, each one leaving mnemonic traces on the next painting or the painting across the room from it. Dave Hickey writes in his essay "Trying to See What We Can Never Know," "Op artists take up a notch the tradition that begins with Antoine Watteau—of making paintings that resist interpretation—by making paintings that resist being seen at all and that, by resisting our efforts to see them literally move us around the room in the hope of seeing what we cannot."^{xiii} Op paintings start a ripple between the hope of seeing what we

cannot and the literal seeing of what we also cannot in the remove of the what is depicted by the photo-based image.⁵⁰

On a very few occasions I have had the feeling of being another person in another place with a past and future entirely separate from my own. An inexplicable sensation—as if by accident I had slipped into someone else's life, a life defined by place rather than culture. It might be a memory from infancy, being aware of an instant in time with its distinct light, temperature, and smell. It is also accompanied by a sensation of the fullness of an unknown future or time. When I complete a painting I hope it gives me something similar to that feeling of the fullness of an unknown future, separate from my own. Perhaps it's the way paintings lend the viewer surrogate authorship. It's my experience that photographs don't provide that feeling. Like a story repeatedly told, photographs are evidence of a cultural inscription. Anchored by the specter of the photographer and the photographed, they are at a permanent remove from the viewer who assumes a role not unlike a tourist. Photographs are evidence of a culturally inscribed life, not that uncanny and sometimes terrifying simultaneous understanding of your own finiteness and speci-

ficity.^{51, 52, 53, 54}

Of course the nightmare is always is the oblivion we fear awaits our work. The relationship of equivalency of other artwork to our own is photographic, the hope of singularity, a painting. However, with regard to this hope, my work is essentially pessimistic. I have tried to invent a structure based not on the ideal of one painting. I tried to invent an itinerary using Kobro, Tyng, and Norman as guideposts, but found that these paths kept getting overgrown. I also see how I deliberately and repeatedly short-circuit painting's future and photography's past, and realize that perhaps all that can be done is to ask what this overgrowth and these short-circuits mean, and try not to think of history as a photograph.

ⁱ Rhea Anastas, "Not in Eulogy not in Praise But in Fact, Ruth Vollmer and Others: 1966-70," *Ruth Vollmer: 1961-1978, Thinking the Line* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 73.

ⁱⁱ Joseph Strau, "The Non-Productive Attitude," in *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne* (Philadelphia: ICA, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrea Fraser, *Works 1984-2003* (Hamburg: Dumont, Kunstverein, 2004), 266.

^{iv} Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 240-41.

^v Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 323.

^{vi} Annette Mitchelson, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," *On the Future of Art* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 55.

^{vii} Weislaw Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska, Mariusz Tchorek, "An Introduction to a General Theory of PLACE," (Warsaw: Foksal Gallery Documents, 1966). Reprinted in *October* vol. 38 (1986).

^{viii} In Conversation: Dan Graham & Michael Smith, *Artforum* May, 2004.

^{ix} Slavoj Zizek, "A Letter Which Did Arrive at its Destination," *Lacanian Inc.* 28 (2006): 82

^x Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting As Model* (Cambridge: October Books, MIT Press, 1990).

^{xi} Katarzyna Kobro, "Sculpture and Solid," in *Europa 2* (1929).

^{xii} Katarzyna Kobro, *Katarzyna Kobro 1898-1951* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999).

^{xiii} David Hickey, "Trying to see what we can never know," *Optic Nerve, Art of the 1960's* (London, New York: Merril, 2007), 13.