
Manet-Caravaggio : the Tentative Object

Eric Darragon

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2284>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2284

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2000

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Eric Darragon, « Manet-Caravaggio : the Tentative Object », *Critique d'art* [Online], 16 | Automne 2000, Online since 07 March 2012, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2284> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2284

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Manet-Caravaggio : the Tentative Object

Eric Darragon

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Berne-Joffroy, André. *Le Dossier Caravage : psychologie des attributions et psychologie de l'art*, Paris : Flammarion, 1999, (Idées et recherches)

Fried, Michael. *Le Modernisme de Manet ou Le Visage de la peinture dans les années 1860 : esthétique et origines de la peinture moderne*, III, Paris : Gallimard, 2000, (NRF Essais)

- 1 Berne-Joffroy's book, published in 1959 by Les Editions de Minuit, is one of the handful of important books on art history written in French. The originality of the method, the scope of the theoretical issues raised, and the critic's style guaranteed it a readership well beyond the circle of specialists who make up the actual object of the *Dossier*. At that time, Caravaggio represented the supreme figure of an overlooked, scorned artist, in the process of being brought back to life, highlighted at the Milan exhibition, in 1951, and a series of writings, those of Longhi in particular, covering half a century of discussion. A trained literary critic who organized the 1969 *Mondrian* exhibition, with a profound and nimble mind and wit, the author had the extremely bright idea of adopting a viewpoint that consisted in observing a creative process by regarding it not as an accumulation of positive elements, the sum of which would give a state of the issue—a customary art historical practice—but rather as what he calls a "stirring of ideas".
- 2 Without trying to overlap with the field of picture expertise, he decided to stick intentionally to the texts, showing by a thousand and one comments that the eye, ear and writing hand form a formidable unit for blinding, revealing and grasping the object x assigned to a name: "Let us take from the depths of libraries the arguments from which Caravaggio has emerged". The subject matter is especially critical. Publishing a book of quotations—the whole theoretical challenge of this undertaking—would scarcely have

been possible without the vigilance of the leading lights of the *nouveau roman* and the *nouvelle critique*: Butor, Robbe-Grillet, and Francis Ponge. Berne-Joffroy ushered in a logic running counter to humanist rhetoric; he claimed an interest in scholarly quarrels, illuminating them with a philosophy of knowledge stretching from Bacon to Valéry. In the exacting attribution of prominent qualities—qualities always on the alert, and on the edge—the author was keen to see that “tentative” function whereby the eye, which is “impure” if it anything, knows and recognizes. Everything, give or take, then becomes significant, be it the most absolute prevention or the flash of intuition. All the methods of reasoning are revealed by the wonderful capacity of words to betray their truth, and this in a comparative textual work, as in a 17th century argument. Of the leading figures Berne-Joffroy forcefully declares: “One would say that they have been cornered by avowals”, to such a degree that the arguments and judgements unmask what he calls the Idols, the idea of evolution, naturalism, and composition. A whole mythology incorporated in science. History is released, in fits and starts, through changes and surprises, and by virtue of a poetics—the poetics of the relationship to Caravaggio. In 1906-1907, the astounding Kallab wrote of this artist that he had “the gift of treating the subjects of his pictures as if they had never been treated before, as if he were the first person to have painted them”.

- 3 The *Caravaggio Dossier* stops at a crucial moment. Forty years on, there have been many responses, and the archives have yielded decisive information. More than a dozen works have been found. The book hasn't aged. Given the scale of studies devoted to interpretations, another logic would have to be constructed. In connecting and disconnecting ideas and facts, Berne-Joffroy was essentially intrigued by what he saw. The age of great summaries tends to reverse this relationship. It is pictures that are nowadays supposed to be part and parcel of an order of values, when they do not illustrate them in an altogether catholic way. After ignorance, knowledge produces another mythology which will one day have its own dossier. “Our minds are so made that the true can scarcely be separated from the intelligible”. A fine formula for painting.
- 4 After publishing a controversial article on Manet's sources in *Artforum* in 1969, and after two theoretical works, *La Place du spectateur* and *Le Réalisme de Courbet*, Michael Fried had a duty to broach the issue of Modernism, considered as act III of a project titled “*Esthétique et origines de la peinture moderne*”. The specific object is indicated by a more original subtitle than might appear at first reading: “*Le visage de la peinture dans les années 1860*”. The book actually deals with a face and an “envisaged” painting, absorbed by a face-to-face—that of an intensity and a strength which challenges the onlooker, postulating him directly at the price of a denial. A Manet picture is “this gathered intensity almost staring at us and strangely striking our sight”, as is excellently noted with regard to the *Vieux Musicien*.
- 5 By keeping his distance from Matisse, Greenberg and the Impressionist intent, Fried stresses the historical input of the generation of 1863, such artists as Fantin, Legros and Whistler, who tackled the problem of theatricality. In passing, he touches on the matter of the subject (specifically in relation to Millet), but he shrinks from embarking on a path that might lead him more or less towards social history, preferring to probe a realism which, after Courbet, raises the issue of the picture: “So what lay at the bottom was the challenge of the concept of the picture for Manet”. What is clearly involved is an issue whose unity and radicalness the author is keen to demonstrate. Based on somewhat schematic and awkward ideas, he manages to bring to the fore certain simple ideas, formulated by the critics of the day,

Astruc, Duranty, Carle Desnoyers, and Duret, which take on a new accent. The nub is being able to follow this update like a formulation shifting from one complexity to another.

- 6 Over and above a plan and thoroughly explicit goals, the deepseated and at times underlying order of the book is based on a logic of division which both validates and invalidates in a very odd intellectual mix of hunches, observations and disappointing reasoning, as is the case with the *Exécution de Maximilien*. But the crux does not lie here; it is not in the response, it is in the movement that prompts the author to discover what cannot be comprehended. It is, if the truth be told, the actual story of Manet. From this viewpoint, Fried says something fundamental about a painter deemed to be expressionless, intolerable and even incomprehensible. In this approach to the negativity of a portrait-painting focused on the painter-painting-model relationship, we may say that the (relative) failure is as interesting as everything else. The whole thus puts forward a “hard” Manet forcing a return to this rough idea of a painting that has been seen, seen like no other painting, with words and ideas which it is uncommonly difficult to get across. A proto-history that is the whole story. How to attribute to these pictures a viewer who, more than any other these days, claims to understand and to know. For Manet as for Caravaggio, modernism is a matter of words, “true” words, the words of argument.