FOUR MODULATIONS

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1. Remnants

Every element in FM's work is there at the service of representation at the same time as it is there as itself.

FM seems to be speaking in perfect seriousness when he says things like 'Two years ago I began to research the problem of isolating new relationships in the language of painting', but he must realize that the results of this research are highly unserious, unserious as the laughter of the young French historian as he read the Argentinean's account of the categories of animals in a certain Chinese encyclopedia.

EF's description (quoted by G at the beginning of Pierrot Le Fou) of how towards the end of his life V became interested only in painting the spaces between people; I also think of Hopscotch where JC continually calls into question all conventional connections. By inviting the reader to jump from point to point in his book, C focuses attention on the space of transition.

The painting is at war with itself and will use any means available - this is what is meant by betrayal.

The first point in their favor: they sidestep most questions of taste. And yet, they are not non-paintings. FM does not abdicate the task of painting, like _____ or _____.

FM speaks eloquently about his own work. He invents and reapplies terms and concepts by the dozen. These include: double and multiple captures, involution of ornament, mutual betrayal, vicious readymade, interpainting. Just as the expanding number of 'captures" is meant to be somewhat overwhelming (to both artist and viewer) so too is this self-invented jargon meant to confuse, to unbalance, to disorient.

If FM can be called baroque it is certainly not because of any stylistic traits; he is baroque because he is fascinated by the possible, of which the impossible is a subcategory.

"Betrayal takes two."

2. A (poem bearing all the characteristics of a) poem

Foreseeing the false posture may be admirable
But who will there be to admire it
If all that such self-policing cultivates
Are explanatory legends whose map was never
                                        drawn?

Should we look forward then to a tomorrow
Of vacation from punctilious demeanor,
To an unshaven embrace, a sloppy kiss,
A song we can count on being remembered?

Better perhaps to gain neutral ground,
Adopting a lingua franca whose forthright
                                cadences
Rule out both distrust and trust,
A face never widely known.

Days pass in a proliferation of visas
As something insists on slaying visible,
Infiltrated into the dissimilar world
It had once shadowed at a different distance.

3. The history of a brushstroke

Physics and linguistics are examples of disciplines that proceed by attempting to identity and isolate the smallest possible component of the matter under study, they then construct fuller accounts of the field according to the observable properties of this component. Since Impressionism, painting has located its basic element in the brushstroke, most explicitly in the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism when an ethic and aesthetic was constructed around the belief that the brushstroke (and generally any not immediately representational mark on canvas) was evidence of irreducible reality, and that as such it was the only and proper concern of painting. As attention passed from the gesture (the individual) to the stripe (the world), there came into being an ideology of the actual encapsulated by Frank Stella's remark that 'what you see is what you see". Like Stella's tautological formula, this ideology was difficult to undermine. By restricting itself to apparently verifiable visual "facts" it sought to place art on a par with science. It believed that a brushstroke could not be argued with, that a mark could not be denied, that a stain was sufficient proof of its own existence. (Such ideas were the broad target of Roy Lichtenstein's ironic 'brush-stroke' paintings.) The elaboration of this empirical essentialism can also be seen at work in areas outside abstract painting. It is at the heart not only of minimalism but also of a good deal of conceptual art which sought a similar zero-degree of production. For such artists, creating a work or an oeuvre became a matter of reiterating, often through grids and stripes, whatever basic unit had been isolated, an approach which gave birth to what one critic called "an extraordinary decade in which objects proliferated in a seemingly endless and obsessional chain…in which everything linked to everything else, but nothing was referential".

While it was in fact only a minority who held such positions, they exercised a hegemonic control over art discourse, particularly over questions of genealogy. Even today the remnants of this ideology continue to exercise a certain power over abstract painting. This dominance may be one of the chief reasons why abstraction, despite repeated claims to the contrary, has turned into a largely trivial exercise, seasonally recycling its tired categories of gesture and geometry. Given this background, it is no accident that the three things Fabian Marcaccio sets out to ridicule in his paintings are the brushstroke, the grid and the stripe. Obviously, Marcaccio is not the first to make fun

of modernist abstraction but unlike his predecessors he does so without resorting to stylistic quotation. More importantly, he does not make such satire the end point of his work. Still, after getting to know his paintings it is almost impossible (if it wasn't already) to take a stripe painter seriously. In fact, the disruptive energy of Marcaccio's work is so infectious that for a while it is hard to take any painting seriously. They all start to look as ridiculous as Margaret Dumont trying to hold on to decorum in the anarchic company of Harpo, Chico and Groucho. (In this film let us imagine the roll of Dumont played by Clement Greenberg, wearing a dress designed by Sean Scully.)

Greenberg said that the cardinal law of modernism was that "conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized".   Marcaccio reminds us that this rule gave rise to a number of new conventions. He demonstrates this by satirizing them. Humor is always a result of misbehavior, of things not going according to plan or convention and so it is with Marcaccio's paintings. A brushstroke traverses the canvas, then suddenly it is truncated, like an unfinished or collapsed highway, yet rather than ending completely a few of the while ridges created by bristles of the brush slip past as stringy white lines. These lines can then do any number of things: they might dangle like loose threads, or curl into similar decorative shapes, or push on to reattach themselves to another brushstroke or be woven into a patch of thickly woven raw canvas. All this happens amid a confusion of logic-defying drips, brushstrokes composed of decorative stripes and curves, unexpected perspective, eruptions of weirdly distorted stretcher bars, impossible interchanges between spilling fields of color and ground patterns gone awry. The laughter in these paintings is so pervasive that many fail to hear it. In the last year Marcaccio's catalogue of "double" and "multiple captures", as he calls this network of events swarming through his paintings, has grown in both size and complexity as each new invention is brought into contact with the preexisting ones. One of the reasons - in addition to his abundant visual imagination - Marcaccio is able to create such complex systems is that he has brought the art of "printerly painting" to a new level. By this technique he is able to avoid becoming ensnared in the conservative aesthetic of the touch white still being free to make things with his own hands. Clearly be understands that this practice of printing patterns and gestures onto the canvas has historical resonance.

A certain tendency of art in the 1980s laid great stress on the fact that it was not the product of the artist's hand. Artists went about avoiding the hand in various ways. Some borrowed already existing images, some employed industrial materials and processes, others created their work from ready-made objects, while still others were careful to create their work in such a way that their own hand was superfluous - their paintings were best made by assistants. In contrast, and perhaps reaction to these artists, we have seen a resurgence of more traditional abstract painting which stresses the physical contribution of the individual artist. Marcaccio has also sought to distance himself from the hand but not by expelling it altogether. There are moments (as when he prints the canvas weave ground of his paintings) when he must himself make what more traditional painters already possess. Similarly the stretcherbar, another element which is generally accepted as given, pre-fab and properly invisible, becomes in Marcaccio's hands a highly variable and visible component. This is an artist who seems to have taken all the established rules of painting and turned them around. It is not by chance that he favors the process of printing in which things appear reversed, as if in a mirror. More strikingly, he has performed this reversal with a combination of precision and delirium that achieves a 'systematic derangement' of painting. Within the precincts of his paintings all natural laws are suspended. Fascinated by the collision of contradictory orders, Marcaccio does not recognize anything as impossible, hence his paintings are what we might call oversubscribed: so many potentially conflicting phenomena are granted entry that the painting becomes a virtual battleground, an episode in a civil war. In the promising uncertainties of our post-ideological era, this intentional confusion and internecine strife seem wholly appropriate, corresponding to a world overrun with forces of instability.

1. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'LeWitt Progress' (1977), The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, (New York 1986) p. 258.
2. Ct. Fabian Marcaccio, 145 Cases of Double and Multiple Captures tor Painting In Spite of itself, (New York, 1992).