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Book Review

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**Matthias Krüger: Das Relief der Farbe. Pastose Malerei in der französischen Kunstkritik 1850-1890**. München, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2007. 400 S., 16 Farbtafeln, 41s-w-Abb. ISBN 978-3-422-06636-6. EUR 68,-.

André Dombrowski

Matthias Krüger's inspiring book Das Relief der Farbe, adapted from his 2004 Hamburg Ph.D. dissertation, builds on a phonetic pun more easily expressed in English than German (and acknowledged by the author in his dedication): the famous "painting quickly" in mid to late 19th-century French painting has here, provocatively, become "painting thickly."[1] This book sets out to explore in practical, aesthetic, philosophic, social and political terms what this seemingly simple shift means for our understanding of the art and art criticism of this crucial moment in the history of painting. A painting's impasto, so the author claims, has implications both for the depiction, as well as for the painter – both ethically and physically. What might seem, therefore, a neo-formalist endeavor centering on painting's material properties and conditions – that painting quickly in the late 19th century conditioned and necessitated a painting thickly, say – proves inaccurate. Krüger's broad social and conceptual history of a painting's material depth rather than its pictorial speed, the book's evocation of a different pictorial imagination and rhetoric in the age of Impressionism, is certainly its greatest strength. It joins, among others, Michael Fried's famous discussion of the status of the tableau in Manet's Modernism (Chicago, London, 1996) as among the most provocative and in-depth analyses of the period's art critical dogma.

The book's main premise is that impasto, as well as a perfectly smoothed pictorial surface, are more meaningful components of artistic practice in the age of modern painting than they have heretofore been understood by scholars of the period. As the author emphasizes, however, his text is not about painting per se, and only in part about the various ways in which the material of paint can rest on canvas; there are in fact only a handful of actual and detailed descriptions of pictorial surfaces scattered throughout the text. The book, instead, takes as its subject the period's art criticism, the rhetorical maneuvers and ideological catch phrases with which critics sought to bolster or counter an overtly impasto style. Even if we have previously encountered many of the critical tropes under consideration here in other circumstances, to see them analyzed on such an unprecedented scale moves Krüger's project to a different order. Rarely has criticism been shown to be so deeply vexed, so steeped in the most pressing concerns of its day, and so marked by ideological contradiction – expressing everything from irony to earnestness – in the face of the same paintings. Some of the criticism today may seem utterly absurd. Paint here can stand for, at once and the same moment, pâté, make-up, face cream, mor-

tar or blood. Krüger is to be commended for never pushing even the most ridiculous critical construction out of sight, or shrugging his shoulders at it, but for analyzing each with equal astuteness and scholarly distance until he reveals its full spectrum of underlying social patterns, privileges and prejudices. Impasto here emerges as one of the most sensitive of aesthetic and social registers, laden with inter as well as extra-pictorial signification.

What is refreshing about Krüger's account is the fact that it treats only in part the usual suspects. True, Charles Blanc and Émile Zola are among the most prominent and oft-studied critics of 19th-century France, but hardly – especially in the case of Blanc – have their rhetorical maneuvers been so thoroughly and convincingly been put to the test by contemporary scholarship. Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet and Vincent Van Gogh play a large role in the book as well, but they are the only "modernist" artists given any substantial space. Claude Monet is barely mentioned, neither is Camille Pissarro, and the author is to be lauded for leaving to future study the material iconography and rhetoric of Impressionist painting, a subject, rather surprisingly, which hardly figures in the book at all.[2] Painting thickly is thus from the outset uncoupled from the period's most prominent examples of painting quickly, which proves a productive methodological choice. An odd omission is certainly the early work of Paul Cézanne, among the most "material" of 1860s and 1870s impasto painters, but since we have hardly any contemporary responses to his early body of work, the exclusion makes sense even if it could – perhaps even should – have been rationalized within the text itself. What we have instead is a whole array of figures not very often treated in the secondary literature: Ribot, Bonnat, Cabanel, Gérôme, Bonnegrâce, to name but a few. Krüger is thus able, powerfully, to make the question of impasto not merely an avant-garde concern, but one that filtered through all ranks and geographies of late 19th-century French painting. This move alone allows us to redefine – even if Krüger does so mostly implicitly – our often rather rigid boundaries between avant-garde and academic practice. That Bonnat, for instance, would come out on the side of impasto is only one of the book's surprising revelations.

After an introduction that outlines the conceptual parameters of the book, its sources and evidence, as well as the existing scholarship, the book proceeds in five chapters. Chapter one discusses the conceptual interrelations between subject matter and paint – and the period's varying ideas about how to make the latter behave appropriately vis-à-vis the former. Such discussions – focused primarily on still-life and religious painting on opposite poles of the ideological spectrum – lead the author naturally and convincingly to the philosophical underpinnings of impasto painting. The chapter's final conclusions surprise little: that a smooth surface lends itself better to conveying an idealist conception of art's transcendence from the real, while an impasto surface indexes that a painting is nothing but material itself and thus implicated in a materialist and positivist world-view. Chapter two, for this reader one of the most fascinating chapters of the book, analyses over a wide range

of portrait practice the class implications of paint handling, from aristocratic finesse to day-laborer crudity, embedded in the period's art criticism. Ranging from Cabanel's to Van Gogh's portraits, the chapter outlines the deep-seated class conditions underlying different choices in style. Chapter four, to some degree, continues the work of chapter two, analyzing Van Gogh's conceptions of work and the ouvrier, as they emerged in his artistic practice, and augments close readings of two of Van Gogh's paintings with a discussion of the valuation of handicraft as against industrial production.

In chapter three, Krüger analyses the physiological connotations of impasto painting, including the most phenomenological critical reactions that operated with analogies to the texture of flesh and the circulation of blood, to sickness, and even to life and death itself. The chapter also includes one of the most thorough discussions of Zola's conception of "temperament" and contextualizes the term within the larger critical discourses of the period. And, before a brief conclusion, chapter five shows how the critical concerns over impasto painting were influenced by the rise of photography, arguing convincingly that the depth of the picture surface became, on the one hand, a vehicle to countermand the general flattening of imagery in the age of mechanical reproduction, and on the other, a means of commercializing the trend toward smooth, seemingly easy to reproduce surfaces.

As the variety of conceptual frames just mentioned shows, Das Relief der Farbe is impressive in its wide-ranging treatment of the problem of surface over some forty years of staggering pictorial innovation. The book sets a benchmark for future studies and creates an opportunity for scholars to perhaps treat some of the problems it touches within chapters, or even just parts of chapters, in more exhaustive fashion. I am now eagerly anticipating a study that would untangle the complex and often contradictory overlaps between materialist philosophy, materialist aesthetics and the material properties of painting, a topic – even though touched on by the author – that deserves a more lengthy treatment. It is surprising that a conceptually rigorous book about the materials of paint takes rather minimal time to introduce the reader to the nineteenth-century's philosophic and scientific understandings of matter and materialism; the same holds true for idealism and positivism (which the author merely defines as an understanding of the real based entirely on "positive" facts, p. 57). Some inroads into these problems have been made by scholars in the past decade (I am thinking of T. J. Clark's and Kathryn Tuma's work on the late Cézanne, for instance), and their work, not referenced here, may have been helpful in formulating more nuanced definitions of these key terms and their implications for artistic practice.[3] The result may have produced a slightly less predictable ending to chapter one, where Krüger rehearses a rather strict opposition between idealist and materialist aesthetics.

The same holds true for the book's propositions about the relation between class and paint handling, which seem, at times, employed in a framework not as nuanced as the period under consideration may demand. When Zola, for in-

stance, in 1878 speaks of the "bourgeoisie enrichie," he does not mean, as Krüger paraphrases, the "general" or "wide" middle-class ("der einfache Bürger," p. 74), but the very upper-middle classes of new wealth. These terms are of course notoriously hard to translate, from French to German to English. Still, at times it seemed that the book, while operating with a convincing if slightly simplifying understanding of the differences between aristocracy, bourgeoisie and worker, could have been more careful at cataloguing the vast differences within middle-class existence and aspiration itself (and their traces in the art criticism of Krüger's concern).[4] The book takes, that is to say, a little too much at face value the critics' ideological operations, and their sometimes crude class simplifications and stabilizations.

As Krüger states, a study that would face these concerns fully would have demanded more of a sociological approach than the author is willing to employ, and he is correct in making that distinction (p. 27). But for a book that postulates throughout how interwoven art practice, language and the social truly are, an introduction as to how these terms relate to one another, and how reliable criticism is when it is taken as the only real evidence under consideration, would have been essential. True, there are occasional acknowledgments of the fact that criticism is notoriously partisan, repetitious, inconclusive and ridden by the traditions and falsifications of its genre (Krüger calls this "uneins" or "topisch," pp. 21, 245), but a few overarching and systematic propositions at the outset about the operations (and limitations) of criticism may have been useful to the reader. Then it would have also been clearer that what Krüger is after are ideologies firmly implanted (or in the process of implanting themselves) in discourse, and it would have mattered a little less that it is not all too hard to identify counter-examples to his argumentations (and to the oddly rigid tabulation of contrasts between impasto and academic painting on p. 282). Take, for instance, the following statement by Hippolyte Babou about Manet during his one-man show opposite the 1867 World's Fair, an artist who Krüger – via the critical voices chosen by him – heralds as one of the painters most capable of imbuing his figures, through his brush, with liveliness and "life force":

On répète autour de moi que cet artiste a des tics et des manies renouvelées de Velasquez et de Goya; […] qu'il ne voit, en outre, le monde extérieur, hommes et choses, que par plaques ou taches comme s'il regardait avec des yeux éblouis; […]. On ajoute encore, avec raison, que cette manie de voir par taches conduit nécessairement à une sorte d'impression uniforme qui rapetisse, efface ou avilit la figure humaine; ce qui explique pourquoi, dans tous ces tableaux, les têtes sont presque toujours jaspées ou écaillées, ébauchées ou confuses.[5]

At times a quote such as this (it is not at all singular in its claims), proposing that individuality and "life" itself are in fact lost and not gained in Manet's elegant pictorial abbreviations and uniformations, may have offered Krüger the opportunity to insist more explicitly on the contradictory impulses in any critical response

to painting. But Krüger, perhaps rightly so given the mostly uncharted terrain of his study, seeks to extract the more main-stream, common and perhaps dominant critical tenors, and leaves nuance and a fuller contradictory picture to future scholars.

The problems and rhetoric surrounding "painting quickly" – of painting's temporality and phenomenology (i.e. the seeming instantaneous overlap between visual experience and pictorial expression) or its ontology (i.e. finish/sketch vs. tableau) – are also likely not going to yield to even such a convincing material iconographer as Krüger. In part, of course, the book is not meant as a displacement of such long-standing scholarly concerns, but, I believe, it would have proven productive for the book to mirror itself against them more expressly. Against what kind of art history and against what kind of methodological concerns Krüger sees himself is never stated in systematic fashion though it perhaps needed saying. Much of the book's methodological frame – and the author's self-proclaimed alignment with Monika Wagner's "material iconography" – needs perhaps little introduction in the circle from which the book and dissertation emerged. But for readers outside that circle – and certainly for readers outside Germany – a more explicit methodological premise might have emphasized the true re-direction in scholarship of the period which this book has to offer.

And, lastly, just one smaller point: Molly Nesbit will now unfortunately be known in German academic circles as "Moly," an error that is, of course, excusable. However, the text--written in fluent, lovely and very readable prose throughout--also has its unnecessary ticks and rhetorical flourishes that at times detract from its content. The least successful of its writerly conceits, it seemed to this reader, was the constant pointing forward and backward within the text itself, and an endless array of "wie erwähnt (as mentioned)," or "wie anfangs bereits gezeigt (as previously shown)". These are accompanied by several repetitive passages in which similar arguments get re-rehearsed, sometimes in the same wording, and even several footnotes that do no more than point the reader to the previous or following passages within the text itself.

None of the above, however, takes away much from the formidable achievement of Das Relief der Farbe which, without doubt, will set new standards for a critical social history of the materiality of images and their ideologically vexed discursive framing.

Notes:

I am profoundly indebted to Jonathan D. Katz for his assistance with this review.

[1] See, for instance, exh. cat. Impressionism. Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1890, ed. Richard Brettell. London: The National Gallery, et al., 2000-2001.

[2] It is also surprising that Anne Lecomte-Hilmy's detailed analysis of Impressionist criticism does not figure in Krüger's bibliography: La formation du vocabulaire de la peinture impressionniste. Toronto, 1994.

[3] See, in particular, T. J. Clark, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Cézanne," in Tom Cohen, Material Events. Paul de Man and the Afterlife

of Theory. Minneapolis, 2001, pp. 93-113; and Kathryn Tuma, "Cézanne and Lucretius at the Red Rock," Representations, 78, 2002, pp. 56-85. Also, one of the most important histories of positivist thought in France is curiously also missing from Krüger's bibliography: D. G. Charlton, Positivist Thought in France During the Second Empire 1852-1870. Westport, 1959.

[4] T. J. Clark's The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers. London, 1984, cited by Krüger, would have provided a good model here.

[5] Hippolyte Babou, "Les dissidents de l'exposition. M. Éouard Manet," Revue libérale (June 25, 1867), pp. 284-289.

[6] I wish, too, that Krüger had consulted a wider range of journals (listed are Art, Artiste, Gazette des beaux-arts, and the Revue des deux mondes), not for the entire forty year period under consideration, but for certain emblematic years. A wider range of newspapers of various political leaning may have possibly opened onto a more contradictory critical landscape, such as the one we find in T. J. Clark's famous analysis of Manet's Olympia in which he mentions having consulted 87 reviews of the 1865 Salon (Clark, 1984, op. cit., p. 281).

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