REVEYESED I'S

by Pat Perrin

The poet Apollinaire, who wrote newspaper reviews of art exhibits during the years from 1902 to 1918, was an interpreter and supporter of the cubists and other artists of the changing paradigm. He quoted a "bourgeois" as saying to his wife "loud enough for everyone to hear: 'Obviously, the people who like this stuff don't have eyes constructed like ours.'"

"I LEFT HIM very soon after that," Marie is saying. She speaks with a pronounced French accent which we will not attempt to reproduce here. The thin white-haired woman is sitting with several other people in an art studio classroom. The room is . . . oh, I have been there many times, but it is difficult to recall precisely. The room is nearly square. Several large tables occupy the center of the floor. Tall windows fill one wall. The ceiling is high. Two sinks are set into counters. Tonight, sketches in black and white are pinned up on the walls.

At one side of the room, there is an arrangement, a conglomeration of items—several chairs, some draped fabrics, three colorful gourds, two clay pots, a mannequin dressed as a Gypsy woman, or perhaps it is a human model.

"You left your husband?" asks Karen. She is middle-aged, plain, and practical. But her expression implies that she might have considered the same thing.

"Yes, it was something of a scandal at the time. But then I just didn't care. Later, he divorced me as quietly as he could."

"You left him because of his eyes."

"Because he was right. His eyes weren't constructed to focus on certain things and neither were mine."

A well-groomed man, Roger, looks impatiently at his watch. "The teacher is ten minutes late," he says. He opens a wooden box and begins to lay out tubes of acrylic paints in a neat row on the table. "Do you suppose that we are expected to work from that?" He gestures toward the array of miscellaneous items.

"Probably just from some part of it. I hope," Rose Ellen answers, ducking her head shyly. She also begins to unpack her art materials.

Roger smoothes his graying hair with one hand. He takes charcoal in the other hand and begins to sketch on a canvas covered board.

"You left him because he couldn't stand to look at the cubist work?" Karen persists.

"If that's a problem, I'm afraid that I share it. Not liking cubism, I mean," says Kay, a college student, speaking up for the first time.

The other man in the group stands up restlessly and crosses the room to one of the windows. His name is Paul. Outside, he sees the campus displayed in shades of gray. He looks down on several miniature scenes isolated by the light from lamps on poles, separated by the dark. A couple appears in one of the patches of light, fades into the gray, and reappears under another lamp. The two people seem changed, somehow. Above, the sky is black. "How long do we wait for this teacher to show up?" he asks no one in particular.

Inside, this building is quiet except for a soft medley of distant murmurs. All the other classes have already started. Professors are lecturing, showing slides, demonstrating new techniques. Here, where the evening classes meet, voices are speaking of literature, science, philosophy, various kinds of history. Overlapping words flow out of room after room, down the long hallway, throughout the first and second floors.

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Atoms, Niels Bohr reminded his student ...

Bicycles, radios, telephones, roads, and automobiles ...

The poet Apollinaire, who wrote newspaper reviews ...

Only in the studio art class do students chat idly, waiting for a teacher to appear.

Marie is still talking. "There I was, don't you see?—staring directly at a completely different vision of the world—things broken down to their essential geometries, bits of things from the real world all mixed together. I had absolutely no . .

She struggles for the right word. Finally she shrugs and simply says, "I had no mechanisms for understanding it, none at all."

In 1923, Virginia Woolf identified a cultural change: "On or about December, 1910, human character changed .... All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature."

"What did you do after you left your husband?" Karen asks.

Marie smiles. "I lived for some years with an artist, a painter, there in Paris. I wanted to be around those people who were seeing things so differently. I wanted to learn how it was possible that they could conceive of the things they were painting."

"And did you find out?" asks Rose Ellen.

"Well, I had to revise my eyes," says Marie, with a mischievous grin. I get the impression that she has told this story before, don't you? "But that accomplished what I wanted to do, you see, when I left my first husband." She tilts her head back. In the overhead light her eyes glitter as though they each have a dozen facets.

"I was so very young when we married. But my father had been a teacher. I could

read and do numbers, although I knew very little about the sciences. When I watched those young painters at work. .

"Did you know them?" a new voice asks breathlessly. "Did you know Picasso and Braque and all those people?" Dark-skinned Olivia is also a college student picking up extra credits at night. She is trying to do the math—could this old lady actually have been alive back then?

"Not very well," Marie answers. She sees that she is losing Karen's interest now and that Paul is gazing at her skeptically. But the two young women, Kay and Olivia, are sitting across the table from her, staring. Marie is flustered. She pulls a handkerchief from her bag and wipes her mouth. She feels, as often happens, somewhat at odds with the wrinkled, veined, and spotted old hands that perform her actions.

Now Marie smiles faintly, in reverie. What is she dreaming of, this woman adrift so far beyond her own time? Is she telling us the truth? She begins to speak again, but gradually her voice grows distant, and then trails off, "During those years, artists of so many kinds began to disregard the time and space that we had known... They were trying to bring something quite different into focus... sometimes I felt that we all stood on an edge ... of new definitions ... of everything. .

> *Atoms, Niels Bohr reminded his student, Heisenberg, were not things—atoms were connections and relationships.*

"Do you mean to say that the cubists were basing their work on physics?" asks Paul, walking back from his window. He is a slender man in a turtleneck shirt. No, that's not quite right. He wears something more current—a sweatshirt with some kind of slogan on the front.

Marie looks up with a start. She isn't entirely sure what she has been saying. "On physics? Oh no. I don't think that the artists, the cubists or any of the others, knew anything about physics." Her voice becomes distant again, "It was more like they were... asking the same kinds of questions. But it was in those paintings and sculptures—the new physics, although we didn't know it then. Things inhabited various kinds of space and different moments of time, seen all at the same time, seeming fragmented, but connected in some different way." Marie sits up straighter and speaks pertly, "I don't think I ever heard any of them talk about science—painters aren't usually very good explainers, anyhow. But they said, 'that's the way it is.' They believed that."

> *Heisenberg pointed out fundamental uncertainties about the nature of reality. But he said that we have "not found the correct language with which to speak about the new situation." The difficulty, Heisenberg pointed out, was that "the ordinary language was based on the old concepts of space and time .... Yet the experiments showed that the old concepts could not be applied everywhere."*

"I'm quite familiar with the notions suggested by quantum physics. At least from a layman's perspective. But how could artists arrive at the same ideas? About reality? Not

on their own." Yes, that sounds like Paul. That is just how he talks, in those short, clipped phrases.

"And, no matter what those scientists discovered by their experiments and their mathematics, that's all theory," Kay says firmly. She catches the disapproval on several faces. "What I mean is—it's all microscopic or something like that. It's not the way the world looks."

> *Braque said that he no longer believed in things. "Objects do not exist for me except in so far as a rapport exists between them and between them and myself. In other words, it is not the objects that matter to me but what is in between them."*

"Are you saying that art should only deal with the way the world looks?" asks Roger.

"What about self-expression?" asks Olivia. "What about emotions?" asks Rose Ellen.

"What about dreams and nightmares?" asks Karen.

"Well, I'm talking about visual art and the visual world," says Kay.

"I'm going to check the office. To see if anybody can tell us anything about this class. I want to know if the teacher is going to show," says Paul. He walks rather stiffly out the door and down the hail. Do you suppose that his casual and contemporary attire may be something of a disguise?

"There is a book out now about art and science. I remember reading something about it. I guess the author says that artists have a special connection to some greater intelligence, so they know what's changing in the world," says Rose Ellen.

> *Bicycles, radios, telephones, roads, and automobiles—miles of telegraph wires—all made and symbolized connections. People came to realize that more things were happening, all at once, in more places, than they had ever thought about.*

"I never thought so," Marie laughs. "They just lived in the world. Things were happening. Maybe they were more sensitive to it." She hesitates and thinks for a moment. "Actually, it wasn't anything that other people didn't know. But at that time, no one could seem to put it into words—the changes we were feeling. It wasn't long before some of the writers did, of course. But the painters could work with the images before they had the words."

"I know there is a powerful inertia in language," says Roger.

"Yes, visual arts can mean new things before we know it," says Marie.

"We're still trying to explain it in words, I guess," says Rose Ellen.

"Lots of people don't like anything they can't explain. And lots of people still don't understand the cubists," says Kay.

"Lots of people haven't given any thought to modern science, either. Except technology," says Roger.

"Technology is what we have," says Karen. "I mean, telephones, automobiles. That's what affects our lives."

"And computer networks," adds Olivia.

"And they still don't like modern art," Kay finishes.

"It's been a hard century to get used to. There's been a lot to absorb," says Marie. She takes off her glasses and rubs her multifaceted eyes.

"Is he well known? Your artist, I mean," asks Rose Ellen. I know I have said very little about this woman. Do you wonder about her age, her appearance? Probably not. Wistful and romantic, Rose Ellen tends to go unnoticed.

"No. He's pretty much forgotten, poor man. He worked very hard at it—at being a genius and all that," says Marie.

"Were you an artist, too?" asks Rose Ellen.

"No, not I. I was not intense enough. And we were still living with the Renaissance tradition of genius, believe me! The members of the avant-garde were quite old-fashioned in that regard," says Marie.

"What do you mean?" asks Olivia, leaning forward intently.

"The Renaissance tradition? Do you mean the discovery of individuality?" asks Kay.

"It was more a definition than a discovery. And some people were thought to be more individual than others," says Marie.

Olivia laughs abruptly. "We still do that. The special ones surrounded by the less special—to whom they accord less reality," she says.

"It's the star system. Kings and geniuses, actors and athletes and CEOs," says Roger.

"And if we're all individuals?" asks Karen.

"That's what got to be a problem. When we say this, that, and the next person is an individual in one way or another, well, if the genius is an individual incapable of maintaining personal relationships with other *individuals,* then the sense of separation becomes acute, painful," says Marie.

"Is that what happened to you?" Karen asks.

"Oh, yes. After we spent several years together, he found that he couldn't get away from me fast enough. He had to find someone less real," Marie answers. For a moment she seems about to wander off into her reveries again. Then she says firmly, "Dichotomies. We still have a problem with them."

A voice from the other side of the room startles the entire group, "Science/superstition; objective/subjective; intelligence/emotions; rational/irrational; conscious/unconscious; object/symbol; reality/art."

Their heads all jerk around. The model steps down from the composition of subjects. "Self and not-self, the viewer and the viewed, participant and observer," she intones mournfully.

Kay and Rose Ellen both look as though they might get up and run. But at that moment, Paul returns.

"The office is locked up. All the other classes are in session. I don't even know who to call at this time of night. I guess this class is a bust," says Paul.

He begins to gather his belongings together, but the rest of the group ignores him. The model has taken a seat at the table, opposite Marie. Finally, Paul comes and sits down at the table, too.

"That's right. And genius/not-genius, creative/non-creative, individual/non-person. It's an attitude problem they all had. In the end, they suffered terribly from it," says Marie.

"Don't great artists always suffer? Don't they truly have a superior gift of some kind? Doesn't he—or she—reach things the rest of us can't? Don't ideas break through suddenly in creative explosions, and carry the genius into whole new universes?" asks Rose Ellen.

> *Poincaré described his experience of working repeatedly on a problem without results: "I was then very ignorant; every day I seated myself at my work table, stayed an hour or two, tried a great number of combinations and reached no results. One evening, contrary to my custom, I drank black coffee and could not sleep. Ideas rose in crowds; I felt them collide until pairs interlocked. . ."*

"That's our definition. Do you think it's final—an absolute of some kind? I mean, maybe that explosion of ideas happens because the flow of ideas has habitually been blocked. Maybe there's another way to do it," says the model in the Gypsy dress.

"Or a lot of other ways," says Olivia, thoughtfully.

"But Marie, if the artists were working on things the rest of us still have trouble seeing doesn't that mean they were somehow different?" Rose Ellen persists.

"Well, they were eager to look. That's something. They clung ferociously to their avenues of creative insight. They took terrible risks. They were willing to throw themselves into conflict with their culture," Marie answers, tentatively.

"There is a limit, I suppose, to the degree of revision any of us can do on our perceptions all at once," says the model, looking inquiringly at Marie.

"Oh, I don't blame them. I'm sorry for the pain it caused them. After all, it's a cultural definition of creativity that has not changed so very much since then," says Marie.

"Because we have not been able to imagine other possibilities? Are there other possibilities?" asks Rose Ellen.

"How can we tell? Anything that doesn't meet our definition of a creative act might go unnoticed," says the model.

"Maybe that's why there have never seemed to be many really creative women. Because we don't like to hold it all back until it breaks out suddenly," says Karen.

"And if we change our definitions?" asks Roger.

"Definitions change," says Marie, shrugging.

> *In 1909, John Dewey wrote: "The conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge fey two thousand years, the conceptions that had become the familiar furniture of the mind, rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality."*

The model laughs. Scornfully, she says, "In one period, religion gave our culture an image of reality within which to live. In a later time, mind defined the universe, or promised to, and then science showed us how the answers could be found. In our time, without any scheme for determining final answers, we revert to defining our terms."

"What are you talking about? Do you think that all those definitions were wrong?" asks Kay.

"Not wrong. Insufficient. Not absolute, as they would have had us think. And we always try to turn a definition into a dichotomy—making everything that or not-that—noticing nothing in between."

> *Light behaves like a wave and like a particle, Bohr said. Both views are necessary—that's just the way it is.*

"If you redesign your eyes enough times, absolutes are hard to come by. The cubists pulled back to include both versions of some things in the same view," says Marie.

"What you're talking about can make a culture, or a life, very unstable, very complicated," says Roger.

"Maybe it would be less of a problem if we just didn't insist on defining everything," says the model.

"How Zen you sound," says Paul. That doesn't sound exactly like a compliment. But Olivia nods and agrees.

"Traditionally, the Japanese believe that words and explanations are, themselves, detrimental to understanding. They use illustrations, stories and sayings, and they teach skills. But not definitions or directions," says Olivia.

"A conception is not a reality. And words are likely to lead one away from the experience of reality... and into the unreality of a conception," says the model.

"Their art was more a way of achieving a certain state of mind. Or, an indication that it has been achieved," says Olivia.

"Traditionally, we pursued skills and a state of mind in order to accomplish art, while the Japanese pursued skills and art in order to achieve a state of mind," says the model.

> *When Eugen Herrigel had worked persistently over a period of years, but was still not able to grasp the frame of mind necessary to a master archer, his teacher made an effort to find other ways to communicate the ideas to him. Since Herrigel was teaching philosophy at the University of Tokyo, the master archer had "tried to work through a Japanese introduction to philosophy in order to find out how he could help me from a side I already knew. But in the end he had laid the book down with a cross flue, remarking that he could now understand that a person who interested himself in such things would naturally find the art of archery uncommonly difficult to learn."*

"And the Japanese tradition didn't include the same concept of the superior individual, of the separated genius," says Olivia. Roger grimaces and says, "Maybe that's why their CEOs only make twenty times what their line workers do. So, I guess that's it! A Renaissance hangover led us to glorify our CEOs and reward them with a hundred times the pay of our workers."

A sudden babble of voices in the hallway announces that some of the other evening classes are taking a break.

"I'm going to see what I can find out," says Paul.

"I'm going to get a drink of water," says Kay. She and Olivia wander out of the room. Roger and Rose Ellen strike up a conversation and go out, too. As they leave, we can hear him saying, "I needed some kind of hobby, something to help me relax."

The model wanders around the room, rearranging things. Looking at the sketches on the wall, she reaches out and puts her hand on a red brush stroke that defines a human form. Then she touches a blue slash that indicates a table. She nods. She goes to the group of objects at the side of the room and begins adding new items.

Karen moves over where she can sit closer to Marie.

"What did you do, then? When your artist friend left you," she asks.

"Oh, I became a governess. The people were gallery patrons and they were happy to take me on. Later I married a young physicist, and began to find out all the incredible things that scientists were looking into. Eventually, we moved to this country. It has been an exciting time," Marie answers.

"My goodness, from artists to scientists."

"It wasn't such a big change."

"It can't be the same in art and science. One has to do with reality. The other is just imagination. Scientists are working with real data, with facts," says Karen.

"Facts, yes. That's not what was exciting," says Marie.

"A lot of facts are trivial," the model says, considering a vase that she holds in her hands. Is it ceramic or plastic? Shall we test it? Shall we count the numbers of each we find within the room?

Kay and Olivia have just reentered the classroom. Kay laughs. "You mean all those statistics I've been gathering won't do any good?"

The model sighs deeply. "We've sure bought that whole story—in the humanities. We got on the reality bandwagon. We started measuring everything in sight."

"What?" asks Kay.

"Before long, we were only thinking about things we could measure." She sighs deeply. "The whole scramble for justification through explanation, validation through data, recognition through whole vocabularies—code-words, in-words. Focus on analyzable processes, evading everything else."

Kay sits down and stares at the model. "The scientist's measurements are important," she says.

"Important, of course. But not always interesting," says Marie.

"Technology is exciting and essential," says Kay.

"Yes, in its pragmatic way. But creative science is just as blind and risky as creative art. In our culture, it's been a case of appreciating scientists for the wrong reasons," the model replies.

"The best of the scientists may work from an empirical base, but they also come back with new questions, find out things they weren't looking for, consider implications—they philosophize," says Olivia.

"Exactly. While philosophers and art educators and literary theorists have decided to measure and explain. And stick to what they can measure and explain. And accept those artists who know the terms, who fit the explanations," says Marie.

"Just defining our terms, defining our terms," says the model.

Paul comes back into the room. “I can’t find out anything about this class. I’m going home.” He gathers up his belongings and, this time, he leaves. He goes out of the building into the night, moving through the patches of light and dark, unchanged.

Roger and Rose Ellen also come back into the room and begin packing up their art supplies.

Karen leans over and asks Marie, “Why are you taking an art class now?”

“I became a poet,” says Marie. “I had a wonderful time searching with the words. My husband and I talked about everything. But he is gone now and I’m still here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are things I sense that I can’t put into words. Maybe it’s just that I can’t redo my eyes anymore. That’s all right, if that’s the way it’s going to be. But I thought that, maybe, the shapes and colors might lead me somewhere.”

Just as Roger and Rose Ellen are leaving together, Roger turns back and looks at Marie. “Why did they persist? Why do you?” he asks.

“What?” asks Marie.

“Why do artists insist on making art, without pay or recognition?” Roger asks.

“Why is art made, when the artist is no longer employed to fill the needs of church or king? Why, when there are no animals to be entranced, no hunting spells to weave by firelight deep beneath the earth? When images can more quickly be made by other means?” the model chants.

“When there is no clear use for what they do?” Roger asks.

“The artist needs to get the intuitions of the mind outside, and see what they look like. Or hear what they sound like,” Marie answers.

“Thoughts grow and change as they emerge. The process of getting the images down is a process of knowing them better. It’s a way of coming to terms with the shifting and expanding nature of reality,” the model says.

“What does creativity have to do with reality?” Kay asks.

“I think that the relationship of art to reality lies in the creative act itself. It’s not in the images or other results produced. The creation of images is part of the learning process, not something carried out after it,” says Marie.

“Just for themselves, then?” asks Roger.

“Oh, no. The response of others adds to the meaning. When readers and viewers make their own meanings, they are also involved in the process,” says Marie.

> *Sergei Eisenstein fit that a synthesis could be reached by the viewer. Meaning grows from the relationship of ideas. “It is precisely the montage principle, as distinguished from that of representation, which obliges spectators themselves to create, and the montage principle, by this means, achieves that great power of inner creative excitement in the spectator which distinguishes an emotionally exciting work from one that stops going further than giving information or recording events.”*

“But what does all of that have to do with living in the real world?” Kay asks.

“It is by focusing on the process of creating works of art, and by drawing the viewer

into that process, that our arts represent the real world. They reflect the way that we function in that world," says the model. She returns to her place among the still-life items.

The model sits still for a long moment, then shifts her position. She speaks slowly, " 'No longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work and the world—and thus to learn to invent his own life.' " She says nothing more. But that last, I am sure, was a quote from Robbe-Grillet. I shall have to look it up.

Marie nods. She gets slowly to her feet and gathers up her belongings. "My grandson is coming for me after class. But that's still a long time off."

"I'll give you a ride home," says Karen.

"Are there artists now, discovering?" asks Olivia.

"I hope so. I trust there must be," says Marie. Once more, we glimpse through her glasses the multiple lights reflecting off her eyes.

Karen and Marie go out together. Kay and Olivia remain for a short time, talking quietly. Am I mistaken, or do I see there a slight glitter, a hint of a change in the eyes?

Then they, too, go out into the dark.

> *As artists of all kinds have discovered, Woolf says that it is by working in the medium that the idea is completed: "From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art . . . ."*

(The "excerpts from lectures" (passages in italics) are taken from a 1986 dissertation by Pat Perrin—"A Change of Vision: The Emergence of the Systems Paradigm in the Visual. Literary, and Dramatic Arts," or from other papers by the same author.)

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