

Something of the Previous Day

Within Gerard Horenbout's contract drawn up in 1502, the painter and manuscript illuminator sets out what will be his obligations towards the young apprentice who will be working under his tutelage. Amongst other things, he pledges to "provide board and lodging in his house... and promises to teach him his profession, the art of painting, to the best of his abilities."¹

In addition to the fact that the contract would have been drawn up as a response to Horenbout being in demand as a teacher, it more broadly denotes a model of artistic education that was prevalent during the Renaissance.² Of course pedagogical models, for painters at least have radically changed to the extent wherein today any notion of artistic training, for many, seems at best oxymoronic, if not, highly problematic. Indeed, speaking to an artist recently about my alma mater, I claimed that I had originally been 'trained' in painting. It was at this point that we both looked at each other and recognized that whilst my three years at a London art school during the first half of the 1990s could arguably be described in any manner of ways, it couldn't legitimately be called a training as such – the term, at that moment at least seemed ill-fitting, awkward, overblown and quite simply erroneous.

Be that as it may, the fundamental act of teaching, of guidance, of passing on a set of understandings, approaches and arguably skills remains, within the context of teaching painting at least, steadfastly in place. Moreover, there is perhaps still to this day the possibility that bound up with the act of teaching painting is the potential for what has been shared, for what initially took place, be it within the context of a studio tutorial or a group crit to be carried over into a future moment wherein it marks, colours or informs the decisions, for example, the artist might make within the context of her studio some years after the exchange has originally taken place. Equally, although not necessarily causal but certainly iterative, the chain of influence might even extend to the individual, having applied what they were originally taught to the context of their studio practice, bring this knowledge or set of experiences to their own pedagogy. Certainly on an anecdotal level I periodically find myself providing tuition via the voices of those who I was privileged enough to be taught by. Given the fact that *Fully Awake* is aligned with and rounds upon the medium of painting, arguably the phenomenon of

¹ "Gerard Horenbout takes on two apprentices," in Carol M. Richardson et al (ed.), *Renaissance Art Reconsidered: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, Oxford; Milton Keynes: Blackwell Publishing in association with The Open University, 2007, p.12.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

what I describe can be, in one sense, likened to a term that originally emerged out of the Renaissance workshop, namely the pentimento.

A pentimento is a discernable trace that evidences some initial aspect of the design of painting's composition.³ Due to the point at which these are set down, they are invariably painted over by the artist as the composition is developed and reworked. Along with the aid of imaging technology such as x-radiography, some aspect of the painting's history can 'show through' as it were by eyesight alone where pentimenti (the plural of the term) become visible due to the increasing translucency of the ageing paint.⁴

Although certain trace effects within the context of art are often susceptible to and become aligned with the operation of chance, it would be erroneous to say that pentimenti are the result of mere happenstance; rather than being aleatoric, the pentimento, like teaching, is testimony to conscious intent. Indeed, as James Elkins asserts: "Though I think teaching can be many things, I also think there is an indispensable component to anything that could be called teaching, and that is intentionality. The teacher must *mean* to impart something at a certain moment, and must *intend* it for an audience."⁵

Moreover, whilst the pentimento equally foregrounds and is bound by a process of withdrawal, it is one wherein change is affected through the means by which the pentimento becomes gradually obscured and covered over. To this end, the artist gradually reworks or renounces the initial design through the process of making a series of subsequent revisions to the image.⁶

³ Although I am applying the term here to painting, it equally can be applied to and discerned with artists drawings.

⁴ Alexander Nemerou, in an essay that discusses the poetry of Emily Dickinson, draws the reader's attention towards Virginia Jackson's interpretation of Dickinson's poem 'On the World you Coloured' as a form of pentimento. According to Nemerou, Jackson sees the "aimless" new morning that Dickinson describes as replacing "the actions of the previous day, when the self had conquered realms with the Robin. Yet the poem makes us feel that something of the previous day shows through, the conquered orchards still apparent in the aimless new morning." Alexander Nemerou, 'Visual Arts: The Pentimento,' in *Emily Dickinson in Context*, Eliza Richards (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), unpaginated.

⁵ James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students*, University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 92.

⁶ Although pentimenti entail a measure of contiguity with what are a series of subsequent iterations, the extent to which such iterations differ can be notably marked. This is certainly the case with Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* (1903). Painted whilst the Picasso was living in Barcelona and during his so-called blue period, the figure within the work appears partially distorted through the decision to elongate his appearance, a decision that perhaps functioned as some form of acknowledgement of El Greco's influence upon an artist who had only recently embarked upon his own artistic career. Studies with ultraviolet radiation have provided evidence to suggest that *The Old Guitarist* actually contains two earlier compositions, an older woman with her head bent forward and a young mother with a nursing child kneeling at her side. Moreover, x-rays have revealed that the support of the painting, which is a wooden panel, might originally have been used as a cutting board for bread. When Picasso primed the

Such change, and the necessity for the pentimento to acknowledge or to bear witness to what the artist has renounced is in keeping with the fact that, etymologically, the word comes from the Italian *pentirsi*, which means to repent.

Nevertheless, to renounce necessarily entails some form of acknowledgment of the past; to repent is to acknowledge past deeds and through their acknowledgment, to cast them to memory. To this end, the pentimento, in addition to being bound up with a measure of felt regret, if we can call it this, of a past action, is acted upon to the extent wherein the subsequent layer of paint is, in one respect, an attempt at reversing or affecting that which has occurred. In both principle and in deed, the pentimento remains and works to retroactively re-mark the work. In so doing, it recovers and instantiates a past that the painting is indelibly bound up with.⁷

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support the paint nestled within the various grooves that presumably had originally been scored by a knife. When x-rayed these white lines become visible.⁶ X-Radiography," Art Institute Chicago, <http://www.artic.edu/collections/conservation/revealing-picasso-conservation-project/examination-techniques/x-radiography>, date accessed 24.02.17

⁷ Although the pentimento carries with it a certain affinity with the palimpsest, this term usually applies to documents that carry textual as opposed to visual information. Nevertheless, the pentimento, like its scriptive counterpart betrays the proclivity to confer onto the work of art the condition of being in a state of flux. And it is perhaps this quality that one can at times discern within both historical painting and modernist practice alike. As David Batchelor notes: 'What is noticeable about both the erased De Kooning and the *Untitled (Gold Painting)* (as well as the black paintings) is how in each case the monochrome is such a *laboured* achievement of erasure or covering-over. In both instances there is a sense of there being something either physically beneath or temporally prior to the finished work. Removal or cover up. Neither is anything like Rodchenko's *reduction* of painting; rather, here the monochrome is a *corruption* of some other work. A palimpsest. Not a tabula rasa. Neither singular nor clean nor clear, palimpsests are always already marked by the world, by contingency. They are not beginnings or ends but continuations.' David Batchelor, 'In bed with the monochrome.' *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, Peter Osborne (ed.) (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), 157-58.

something of the previous day shows through, the conquered orchards still apparent in the aimless new morning.”⁸

With this, namely the idea, contained as it is within Dickinson’s poem, of the possibility for something that has passed or, equally, something of the past to ‘show through,’ the conditions of possibility might be such that the pentimento, as an interpretive lens, can be likened to the knowledge that one acquires and that one is invested with through pedagogies that to this day continue to form part of a painter’s education. Margot Singer, in an essay about...

“I want to believe we don’t forget, that memory is inscribed on these long-lasting cerebral cortex cells of ours like...traces of a painting covered by a more recent artist’s paint. I want to believe the hidden pigments remain there, shadowy as ghosts, waiting for the conservator’s x-ray to bring them back.”⁹ Only hidden pigments is now construed as the act of teaching, and for the conservator, those who, if not trained, were certainly taught.

⁸ Alexander Nemerou, “Visual Arts: The Pentimento,” in *Emily Dickinson in Context*, Eliza Richards (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, unpaginated.

⁹ Margot Singer, “Afterimage,” *River teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative*, vol. 9, no. 2, Spring 2008, p. 74.