Take-Home Final Exam Submission

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ARHS 111: Introduction to Western Art

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Part I

The artistic term for dramatic and, oftentimes, religious lighting in a composition is *tenebrism*, which serves to establish a hierarchy of subjects or signal divine intervention. Caravaggio's oil on canvas painting, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (c. 1599–1600), exclusively uses tenebrism to overstate the subject matter: a summoning of one of the seven men huddled around a circular table in a dark room. While a window is present, no light emits from it; instead, a dramatic ray shines from the top-right corner as if streaming in from the heavens. Here, the lighting serves three purposes: illuminating the pitch-dark space, alluding to divinity, and establishing the single-most important subject. The farthest-left man points to the man with a bushy beard at the table, which, coincidentally, aligns with the ray of light; by the title, we are to assume this figure, who points to himself, is Saint Matthew. Caravaggio denotes who is unimportant by which faces remain shrouded in darkness or otherwise hidden. Tenebrism is unique in that even if a viewer is unaware of who Saint Matthew is, or unaware of the title, the lighting is so strikingly unnatural and evocative of biblical iconography that one can deduce this piece has religious undertones, even if not fully realized.

One of the major art movements of the 20th century was established in the United States and named *abstract expressionism*, which attempted to capture the universal, primal, emotional, and psychological human values on grand canvases usually devoid of recognizable imagery. While art movements typically are not associated with a specific gender, critics regarded abstract expressionism as a heavily masculine style since it valued the physical labor involved in creating the piece rather than the final product. Take Willem de Kooning's oil and charcoal on canvas painting, *Woman V* (c. 1952–53). While a recognizable woman is present (both in title and subject matter), this painting heavily leans into the primal and emotional human values in its use

of color and brushstrokes. Kooning's use of charcoal deliberately obfuscates the woman, making her a caricature rather than a specific person: the frantic, jarring, and thick lines formed deforms her face to look unnatural and more of a servant than human. This painting is an act of gender bias since Kooning and his contemporary abstract expressionists viewed the canvas like woman, thereby enacting violence on it. The physicality required for this 154.5 by 114.5 cm canvas, alongside the main subject being a generalized form of a woman, makes *Woman V* a victim of abstract expressionist values in a style heavily dominated and overshadowed by men.

As artists began questioning if a physical product is a requisite of this abstract term "art," the movement known as *performance art* grew, in which the art is an ephemeral experience. One advantage of performance art over traditional canvas, sculpture, or building projects is that the artist can comment on social issues—in novel ways unattainable in the aforementioned paradigms—and interact with their audience(s), even if the moralizing message is not fully realized in the moment. For example, Yves Klein's *Anthropometry of the Blue Period* (1960) only has two tangible products: performance stills, and dry pigments and synthetic resin on paper; however, the one-time performance from 1960 was the true and unrecoverable artistic output. Wealthy patrons—here meaning visitors of an establishment, not an artistic financier—watched engrossed while nude women painted themselves and rolled around on paper on Klein's command. Prior to the event, the artist had no piece yet; the physical follows the performance as does form follows function. In doing so, the byproduct is completely random and in extremely rare quantity, which skyrockets the value of the remaining physical results. Unlike other performance art experiences, *Anthropometry of the Blue Period* does not comment on a societal issue; ironically, it's a prime example of one: obscene pornographication of women for enjoyment of wealthy (and most primarily) men.

Part II

The two subjects standing on the hill have an implied power balance parallel to the physical line demarcating the hill from the lake and pier. The hill's placement in the bottom-left corner forms a triangle, as do the two subjects on it with the distant stranger, which further emphasizes the few subjects depicted: this scene is not a metropolitan area, rather an escape into nature. The rich dark green enlivens the foreground's grass and tree leaves to an otherwise muted piece in color and vibrancy. The highlights and shadows on the hill indicate the light source emits from the top-right corner; though, the exact placement is difficult given the cloudy and moody atmosphere. The light serves not to brighten the composition, but rather increases contrast between elements. We are given a scale of the subjects in reference to the environment by the unsightly charred-looking tree and poles linearly extending into the background; the implied lines produced lead our gaze to the innocuous factory tower, which spews smoke to the overcast sky in juxtaposition to the scenic landscape. This painting is extremely realistic; one can imagine visiting this exact space in a European countryside. Most strikingly is the stippled-like texture of the piece composed of thousands of overlapping little dots to give the illusion of a blended composition. Stippling is a lossy technique compared to traditional painting and blending, which adds a layer of anonymity to the location and subjects: keeping this idyllic landscape sequestered reserves this escape to these subjects.

I predict that this piece's medium is oil on canvas given its visual similarity to paintings by Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Berthe Morisot in terms of depictions of landscapes, anonymity in human subjects, and similar moody and overcast skies. By association, this painting was likely created c. 1872–90 in Paris, France. The lurking factory tower and smoke is indicative of Pissarro's *Factory Near Pontoise* (1873), in which the artist critiques how industry

invades the countryside and pollutes all that is natural; these sentiments were rising among Pissarro's contemporaries, which lends stronger credibility to the era and medium this piece originates.

Part III

Art critics quickly condemned the invention of photography upon the revolutionary advent of the camera since they believed the photographer had no real craft in the production of their works. This strong conviction, particularly voiced by Joseph Pennell, is naïve since photography offers a new medium (albeit more accessible than perhaps these critics would prefer) in which an artist can comment on social issues in an effective and captivating manner. Pennell argues that the photographer, unlike the artist, is not concerned with rules of accuracy of which the latter spent their lives devoted to achieving.[1] Consider Charles Marville's photograph, *Rue St. Nicolat du Chardonnet* (c. 1853–70), a depiction of a narrow alleyway tucked between dilapidated buildings; the photographer is commenting on the wealth inequality in Paris by candidly capturing the reality that lower-class citizens face daily. Advancing nearly a century later, the *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) by Andy Warhol uses an image of his iconic portrait of Marilyn Monroe repeated 45 times in a grid format on a diptych. The significance of this piece is twofold: Warhol's use of a diptych—a distinctly religious canvas style—elevates the subject, Marilyn, to a God-like level; and the repetition of this same image, along with the faded-ink style, alludes to capitalist overconsumption and mass production as well as the general population's tendency to forget major figures and events. Both Marville and Warhol used the medium of photography to critique the inequalities and other issues of their times. In fact, their prints still comment on today's issues on crumbling infrastructure, neglect of wealth disparity, and the commercialization of everything and every famous person. As if in direct objection to Pennell's thesis, if photography challenges societal norms—even hundreds of years after the capture of it—who can

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1. Joseph Pennell, ""Is Photography Among the Fine Arts?"," in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg, 3rd (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 212.

diminish its impact much like its traditional painting, sculptural, and architectural counterparts?

Part IV

While discussing artists Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin's relationship—one that art historians take great interest in—Anne Higonnet focuses on how Claudel's sexuality eclipses her accomplishments, whereas Rodin was celebrated on his merits.[2] Throughout the semester, we have raised questions on if the artist's gender should be a factor when viewing their works, and how women artists have been severely disadvantaged in this male-dominated space. How have women artists contest the scholarship on male ego in scenes where men are eliminated altogether from the composition, such as in Berthe Morisot's *On the Balcony* (c. 1871–72), *Lake in the Bois de Boulogne* (1880), or Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun's *Self-Portrait with Her Daughter* (1789) to list a few?

2. Anne Higonnet, "Myths of Creation: Camille Claudel & Auguste Rodin," in *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 19.

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