

# The Breath of History

## 1. History Painting

HISTORY painting has by definition turned itself almost exclusively toward the past. It risked going into the present late in its development and only on rare occasions. When it did, it was with Romantic and revolutionary ardour, before congealing again into an academicism soon to disappear under the repeated assaults of modernism.

History painting, whether directed to the past or to the present, has always been a painting of events: So-and-so confronting such-and-such, X lamenting over the body of Y. The painting of an essentially factual history, it wants to be didactic and moral, trying to elevate the "soul" of the spectator. It is also a painting of theatricality (in the sense of Michael Fried), which distinguishes it radically from modernism, which for its part stresses literalness and self-referentiality.†

The painting of Carol Wainio is also illustrative, turned toward history. It is even didactic. As with history painting, Wainio's painting displays her erudition, even proposes a moral judgment, for what this painting represents is implicitly accompanied by a "no". One doesn't find here the self-referential neutrality which has often taken on — notably with the help of structuralist theories — a pseudo-scientific character. Nor does Wainio's painting, being illustrative, follow the circular movement, creating its own theory, that characterizes many aspects of self-referentiality. It is not to that modernism, or to that modernity, that this painting belongs. It belongs to a thought which, even if fragmented, seems to come from somewhere else, or rather from an elsewhere other than the field of painting (or the pictorial "given").

If Wainio's painting is first and foremost history painting, there is nevertheless an appreciable distinction: Wainio's painting is about history *itself*. In other words, what is represented is the dynamics of the historical process itself. These paintings do not relate a past event but show how the past has produced the present. Thus it is no longer the singular event which is considered, but rather, as we will see, the manner in which events are linked and precipitated.

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History painting, especially in its modern forms (think about Socialist Realism), always raises a certain anxiety: how, we ask, can we make history painting that is not propagandistic, simplifying, painting which, on the contrary, will provoke reflection, that will be in itself an act of reflection, that will affirm its preference for a specific interpretation of history without becoming trapped? Like all history paintings, Wainio's paintings are confronted by this question. In fact, the work of Wainio can be interpreted as an interrogation of the possibilities of continuing to do, after the advent of modernism, history painting.

It seems to me that here the artist is looking for a solution by creating or imposing on herself supplementary difficulties, and that these are immediately communicated to the reader of the painting. This is in itself paradoxical, for history painting must in principle be transparent in its enunciation. The reading of Wainio's paintings, unlike that of academic history painting, is not immediately offered like a scene and a moment unified according to the rules of classical narrative. The paintings are difficult to read, especially if the figures have not yet been identified; and even when the vocabulary has been established, the articulation of the figures that we discover does not facilitate the deciphering: on the contrary, it complicates the reading. There are several reasons for this difficulty which we can summarize for now as follows: these figures are either represented in disintegration, or submitted to a bulging of the media (television) image, or else are split in two under the assault of a too great accumulation of information. Is it an effect of modernism? The transparency has been replaced by a confusion obstinately maintained which, paradoxically, still remains faithful to the task of illustrating a "thesis", that is, a specific interpretation of history. So at the same time there is, and there is not, a transparency of the sign to its referent.

Wainio's paintings are difficult to read, but they are ultimately readable. One does not find here an ambiguity maintained in order to suggest or produce an openness to meaning, or a feeling of equivocality that constitutes the "message" of the work. We are here as far from an interrogation of the nature of the poetic as from a search for literalness. In the same way, one does not find a more narrow circularity where the "onlooker", or the reader, becomes the "true" subject of the work in the perspective of a theory of subjectivity. No. The exteriority here alluded to is at the same time distinct from the artist and the spectator, and it has not merged with the work that would have, as it were, phagocytized it. The "referent" which imposes itself in the act of reading is none other than history itself. It is not in fact a referent, but rather in its turn an interpretation (history is not a thing), but this interpretation is not generated by the work itself:

it "acts" inside the work at least in equal measure to how the work "acts" on it.

Wainio's paintings avoid the trap of an essentialist quest for the functioning of the poetic mode as well as the strategy (which we call postmodern but which in fact pursues the modernist tradition of collage) that consists in appropriating images, very often from the media, in the mode of parody or pastiche, a strategy which has made the present generation of artists a generation of eternal debtors. In relation to these two modes of artistic practice (in painting or in other genres) Wainio's work adopts a polemic position.

This does not mean that the artist does not work on "language", but that the way this question is addressed does not proceed in the direction of an analysis of materials or of their potentiality, poetic or otherwise. Rather, the emphasis is put on the social nature of language, on its instrumental power to serve as a means of exchange and transmission; or, if one prefers, the interest lies in what Saussure, in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, called *intercourse*, that is, the physical movements, the exchanges, commercial or otherwise, that have allowed the constitution of a *langue*, a natural language. However, in Wainio's paintings, the *intercourse* is not represented in continuity with a present, in a synchronic fashion: the exchanges are telescoped through time, a time that at first appears homogeneous but then is disintegrated under the effect of a kind of break (the interpretation of which, in pictorial terms, is the object of constant innovations, each painting making us experience differently this break) which perturbs, even renders impossible their reception. These exchanges are not so much received as they are lost or badly received, in a kind of end-of-the-line scenario which takes on the attributes of a catastrophe.

The question of language is actually present in the work of Wainio, but it is considered essentially from two angles: the properly historical of transmission (of a mode of experience or of traditions); and the critical, which puts into perspective the present disintegration of the function of communication caused by the omnipresence of the electronic media.

The tonality of the paintings is tragic and it is imposed by the type of interpretation of history which "informs" this pictorial practice. It is a tragedy that we are witnessing, that of a loss, of a radical social transformation which nothing in the human experience has escaped. The articulation consists in a simple comparison: two times are measured one against the other, two ways of experiencing time, of experiencing or making history. Once this relation is stressed, we are more able to grasp the passage from the non-reflexive to the reflexive which marks the advent of modernity. Thus there is no postmodern theme unless we define it as a reflection on the nature of modernity and not the promise of a "new mode of thinking". The tonality which reigns over Wainio's

paintings is, however, devoid of the despair tinged with cynicism which characterizes so much of the production of the "postmodern" period. The meaning given here to this tragedy, omnipresent inside modernity, runs counter to the exploitation of the cheap thrills of the cynical vein.

Wainio refuses the imperatives of modernism, she returns to illusionism, forgets the necessity of taking into account questions of site specificity. She returns to a mode of painting which is essentially narrative, with the mission of recounting a story, or rather "History". But as this story can only be guessed at through a deciphering of the figures used to tell it, we now have to do a bit of iconography.

## 2. Hallucinated landscapes and their figures

HALLUCINATED landscapes, to paraphrase the title of a book by the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren published in 1893, *Les Campagnes hallucinées*, is an apt description of how the "synthesis" of the figures appears, where diverse times and diverse modes of experience are telescoped. For if landscape painting is first an attempt at a synthesis of the various elements that are offered by the referent, here the synthesis unfolds through the medium of history. The landscape represented unfolds at an incredible speed, crossing more than two centuries in the time taken by the gaze to cover the painting.

### Ground, surface and technique

The ground, the surface and the technique in these paintings are not, properly speaking, figures, but they are nevertheless invested with a meaning which confers on them an essential role in the narrative. These elements no longer obey the formalist system. On the contrary, the lessons of formalism are diverted from their original intent and become subservient — an ironical fate — to a narrative where ground and surface lose their purity as structural elements to become in turn invested with meaning. The push-and-pull effect is used to signal the modern tragedy in that it pushes us to the surface of the image. For it is from the ground to the surface that the articulation is deployed, transforming the structural elements that are the ground and the surface into metaphors. The metaphor of the surface is, however, very rich: site of the illusory, it does not affirm itself as the triumphant norm of two-dimensionality but rather signals the advent of the one-dimensional. The polysemy of the word "ground", which can also signify the land, the contact with reality, the motivations for an action, and especially the fact of being in harmony with his/her surroundings, indicates how the ground is used as a standard by which to measure the dimension of the tragedy.

But there is not only one surface in the paintings of Wainio, there is, instead, a series of surfaces. "Series" is probably not the correct word. There are *several* spaces that do not "hold together", that do not compose a united surface. For what is represented here is in fact the loss of a unified space, the advent of a break. The whole is almost impossible to maintain under one's gaze: its synthesis can only occur with the help of a "theoretical view". This surface on occasion will bulge, inciting us to interpret it as the symbolic expression of the modern media experience. It imposes itself thus as the most radical site of the break. Other surfaces, those that are produced by scraping or are dispersed, signal on the contrary the (lost) sites of the experience of continuity.

It is difficult to describe the technique used in these paintings. At a time when "success" demands a more and more finished product, with neat surfaces, Wainio executes her paintings with roughness, often using "muddy" colors. Her paintings, in common with those in the expressionist style, appear violent and awkward, representing individuals and things without idealisation. But we cannot say that she is an expressionist painter, which would automatically make her work a manifestation of neo-expressionism. For it is not an "interior vision" which pushes the artist to adopt a technique full of violence. The distortion is not the product of an anguished subjectivity: instead, it is the product of the violence she borrows from history itself, the real "referent" of the painting. The motivation which underlies this technique resides entirely in the perception of this reality. We are not witnessing a personal account of the loss of interiority or any other ontological anxiety afflicting the "subject", but rather the destiny of a collectivity.

The paintings always give the impression of having been executed with great rapidity; in fact they represent this impression of speed. This "rapid" technique is in itself a sign, for if there is one word which can summarize the history of these two centuries of modernity, it is *acceleration*.

### Ruins

The nineteenth-century French critic, Roger de Piles, distinguishes two types of landscapes: the rural and the heroic landscape. Heroic landscape is represented by spectacular sites, such as temples in ruins, and is granted the power to "elevate the imagination". The landscape in Wainio's work also takes on heroic dimensions, but since there is today no hero capable of condensing by himself (and the masculine is certainly not innocent) the meaning of history, we are rather confronted by the collective destiny of peoples. Another difference: the rural dimension is not excluded from these spectacular representations but, on the contrary, plays an important role. Without it, the tragedy would remain incomprehensible.

Rural ruins, detail from  
Listening Area No.3, 1990



The ruins are essentially rural. The "ground" upon which these ruins lie is sometimes produced by a scrape of paint, at the same time the trace and the support for an individual experience still intact. Through a laborious application of minute brush strokes that recall the meticulousness of the painters of the past, houses, often churches, are painted. They appear like so many miniature visions of the past, of the rural landscapes whose disappearance will be accelerated all through the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries until modernity triumphs. But there is another ruin, an active one, that these landscapes only serve to underline: that of a "subjectivity", of a mode of experience or of living which is still disintegrating today.

### Machinery

This essentially rural landscape, which for a long time has remained more or less static, is soon occupied by bulldozers, steamshovels and also invented machines whose mobile parts are animated with a repetitive movement which always points to the surface. These are the agents of modernization, the "active" figures of the historical transformation of the landscape. The machinery sometimes becomes a factory or an industry, and then it turns into a background, an industrial background full of animation and noise.

The beginnings of pictorial modernism have been the site of a constant negotiation between the agrarian countryside and the industrial universe. The more landscape became formal, the more it tended to mask industrial reality with atmospheric effects. Through this emphasis on the pictorial value of atmospheric effects, to the detriment of industrial reality, a choice, an exclusion, was made which is perhaps more significant than the details of the theories which gave it birth. If history painting is too often a pretext for idealization, it contains in itself a germ of "realism" which, as a genre and as a theory, prescribes the accurate description of historical events, even if too often this history belongs in the realm of myth. Realism wants above all to get rid of myth, and this is why it will have a difficult relationship with history, preferring generally the immediate account.

Wainio tries to reconcile history painting and realism as a genre. Of course the treatment and the

Machinery (Bulldozer pushing toward the surface), detail from *Steady State*, 1990



technique used in her paintings have nothing realist about them. Rather, they make one think of surrealism. But to see in realism only a formal treatment is to forget that it is also marked by the desire to be the witness of a tragedy. There is the realism of Chardin and there is the realism of Courbet. And it is in the spirit of Courbet that one must understand the "realist" nature of Wainio's paintings.

The "realism" of the machinery, here, consists in its acknowledgment of its historical role in the accelerated transformation of the dimensions of the human experience; and one must understand by this the transformation of sense perception, that which is turned toward the world of objects as much as toward the perception of self. Machinery has also deeply modified the relation that humanity has with work and non-work. Through machinery, it is the industrialization and the radical transformation of cities that is evoked. The modern landscape is urban, and modernity becomes a reality for the majority once the population of the cities exceeds that of the country (which has been emptied out to the profit of the cities). However, machinery appears perhaps above all as the image of work, of its tenfold increase, of the continual revolution of the experience of work characteristic of capitalism. In turn this modification/ metamorphosis of the forms of work alters all other forms of human experience.

### The human figure of modernity

I have already said that Wainio's work avoids a formal use of the notion of language in its relation to the pictorial. In fact, it shifts the interest in language to that of communication. For the language here evoked is that of a collectivity. It is truly "la langue", a natural language, in the sense in which Saussure, relegating the analysis of its singular usage (of its performance) to the domain of psychology, said that language (or la langue) was necessarily a collective phenomenon. But the collectivity of which Saussure was thinking is a collectivity which can find support in an ancient historical ground, a ground which has allowed it to develop a language with its own unique characteristics. The collectivity that Wainio is trying to represent does not have, as we have seen, this stable historical ground. So it is on the conditions of its disappearance that she insists, either that those conditions belong to this continual revolution to which I have alluded, or that they are the result of the loss, pure and simple, of the traditions and of the distinct cultural universes that once defined those communities. Natural language has ceased to respond to this living continuity where it formed one body with a community; it has become this halted breathing which recalls for us the unbelievable violence that media reality has inflicted upon it.

The manner in which Walter Benjamin interprets this violence done to a



Figure of modernity  
(the left side of the face  
is being split in two),  
detail from **Untitled (Assembly Line/Moment  
to Moment)**, 1985

natural language, using the example of the newspaper article, shows how one must understand the transformation of our mode of experience: the reader is/ lives a break between the moment of reception of information and the moment when it is integrated inside his/her own individual experience, in order to find the resonances in his/her private sensitive and cognitive universe. The increase in the flux of information provokes paradoxically a diminution of the capacity to integrate the new data into his/her experience. One does not have to look further for the reason Benjamin proposed the mysterious notion of "aura". The disappearance of the aura (of things) is but another name given to the disappearance of the historical ground of the modern collectivity. The traditional landscape offered us the image of a harmonious and integrated collectivity. Wainio shows, on the contrary, a collectivity in crisis.

The fate of communication is at the same time its incredible expansion at the level of production and consumption, as well as the increased concentration of the organs of distribution. Ideas, information and attitudes have never been transmitted with such intensity, and have never had such a homogenizing effect. Since the world of communications has fallen under the sway of instrumental reason (with the help of, especially, the concept of "the masses"), the way it functions has taken the form of a vicious circle: trying to satisfy the taste of the masses that it wants to serve, it tends, on the contrary, to (de)form those tastes and to subjugate the masses, producing the homogeneity that it believes it is simply reflecting. The figures which, in these paintings, have the task of incarnating this transmission turned into a homogenization of ideas and behaviors are figures without substance or in complete disintegration. They no longer serve to transmit a heritage or to produce exchanges: they rather present themselves as a "simulacrum" whose essential purpose is to mask other exchanges or to prevent their appearance. In this sense, communications are the most apt "medium" to represent modernity as, caught in constant reevaluations of the present and furiously projecting itself into the future, it tries to forget history. This is perhaps why the role of

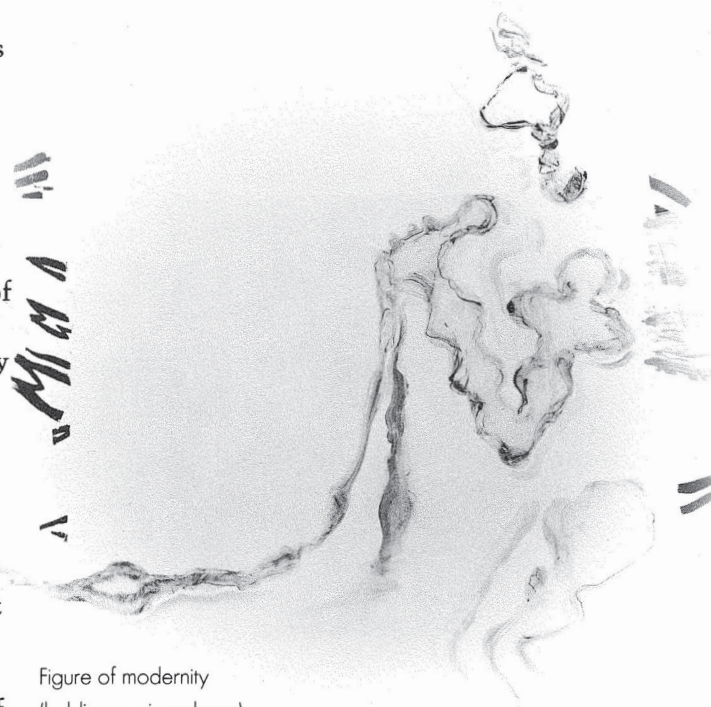


Figure of modernity  
(holding a microphone),  
detail of **From a Distance/Figure  
with Microphone**, 1990

history painting is to be opposed to modernity. It is perhaps also why a history painting undertaken inside the regime of modernity cannot but be haunted by the loss of historical consciousness.

The destiny of a collectivity submitted to such a treatment is to be "outered", (from the title of one of Wainio's paintings of 1984) in relation to its ground of historical experience. The announcer, who is in charge of producing a simulacrum of direct access to experience (and to symbolic exchanges in general) can be used as example/symbol to illustrate what happens to the consciousness of modern humanity. Of all the signs painted by the artist, the announcer is the most mutilated. It is the sign of human experience that is the most mutilated precisely because the announcer is reduced to being only a sign, he is only the image of himself, as we sometimes say of someone that he is only the shadow of himself. The announcer is merely image conscious, motivated uniquely by appearances. He is lifted up to the surface by the bulging of the media image, submitted to such a pressure that his skin comes loose, that he is split in two, producing a second "himself" which is only a shapeless and gelatinous mass, reflecting the schizophrenia of the modern experience.

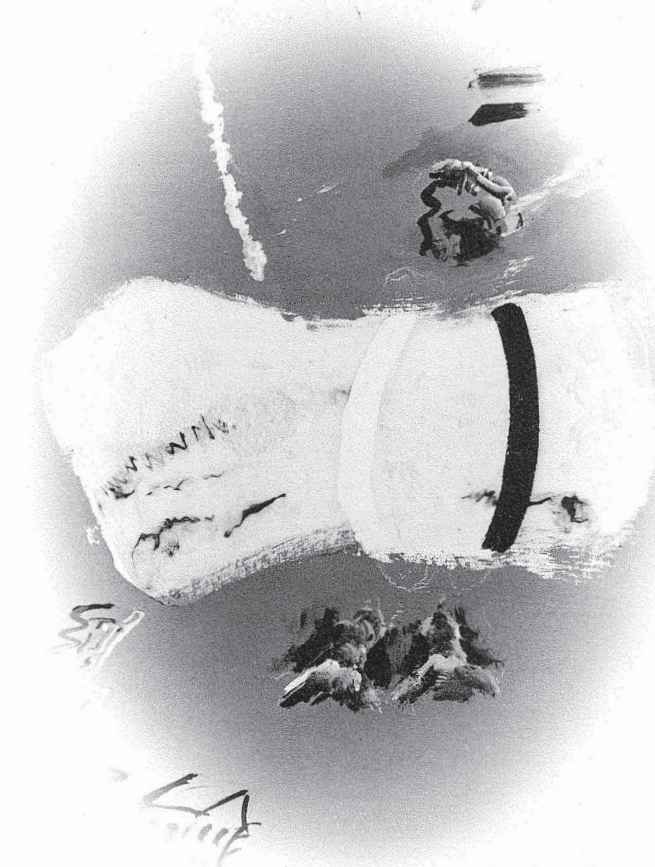
On occasion, other media figures appear who have taken on an iconic dimension in our culture: Brooke Shields, for example. These figures are extremely difficult to read in Wainio's paintings. The pictorial treatment to which they are submitted, even if it confers upon them the minimum of individuality necessary for identification, stresses at the same time their lack of substance as well as indicating the disintegration of the human experience, which has produced such epiphenomena.

### The human figure before modernity

Whatever the fate of the pre-modern populations, they nevertheless had the advantage of a historical continuity. In the paintings of Wainio, the pre-modern figure is represented in relation to its own space of experience, to its own historical ground. Often rendered with the help of a scraping of paint (its "ground"), it is a figure which, contrary to its modern counterpart, stays whole, clearly outlined. It is sometimes represented in the act of accomplishing its task of transmitting or receiving the lessons of an intact experience. Sometimes it rises to the status of a guardian, the arms extended to form a cross,



Iconic figures of modernity  
(Walter Matthau, Dan Aykroyd  
and Donna Dixon;  
superposed on them, a modern figure  
being split in two),  
detail from *Language Arts*, 1988



Grounded figure,  
before modernity  
(resting on a scrape of paint),  
detail of *From a Distance/Figure  
with Microphone*, 1990

or it breathes "on" time to maintain its continuity.

This figure, even if it remains whole, is sometimes bent over in postures that recall work. Modernism, on the whole, has refused to depict work even if it occasionally has shown enthusiasm for its results. Work has probably been the greatest taboo of modernism, which has relegated its representations to a secondary position in history. But realism cannot forget work, and when realism is combined with history painting, history becomes the history of the transformation of the world and of human experience through work.

Although the figures of the modern experience never adopt the characteristics of the figures before modernity, the pre-modern figures are sometimes represented as making their entry into the media experience, submitting to the dissolving forces of their transformation into image. We see them penetrating the media image, slowly disintegrating, soon transformed into silhouettes made of sticks, losing their individuality to the benefit of a massive

homogenization, becoming, like so many Don Quixotes, pure graphic signs losing the battle against the sign mills of modernity.

### 3. Revolutions per minute

ONE could reproach this painting for its nostalgia for a long-gone era, its refusal of the progress generated by capitalist techno-science. If we were to believe Jean-François Lyotard, the postmodern era (the postmodern mode of experience) would be defined for us by the serene acceptance of the fragmentation of the social fabric, and of the destructuring of subjectivity. Postmodernism would in fact be the continual advent of modernity as a total reversal of modes of representation and of value systems. In art, this would be translated by a constant calling into question of the conditions of the production and of the presentation of the work of art. If we accepted this diagnosis, it would be evident that by rejecting the idea that the content of the work be defined solely as its calling into question as work, Wainio would practice an apparently conservative art, since she would refuse to participate in the continual revolution of the rules of art.

Transmission of authentic  
experience (the crenellated line  
represents the transmission),  
detail from **City of Dreams**, 1990



But we can see things differently. After a century of modernist-postmodernist practice, we can think that in fact there is nothing more conventional, and more conservative, than this continual calling into question of the rules of art. And it is here that we must introduce another definition of a postmodern practice: the refusal of the modernist practice of self referentiality, the return to figurative painting and free eclecticism. This definition has little in common with that of Lyotard. It is possible, if we stick to this last definition, and if we put aside her refusal of irony, her refusal of free eclecticism, to consider the work of Wainio as dependent on the aesthetics of postmodernism. But here we encounter a

profound paradox: as the practice of Wainio moves away from the modernist paradigm, it remains tied to it since it borrows one of its "great narratives": the critique of the advent of bourgeois and capitalist modernity, and of the power of techno-scientific thought.

One of the essential characteristics of the period that we should, it seems, call "postmodern" consists in the loss of our collective capacity to retain our own past. Maybe it is there that we should look for the reason behind so many pastiches, borrowings and appropriations of styles belonging to the past; as if the purpose of all this was to make us hear the swan-song of historical consciousness. We forget the past simply because it is disappearing, it is transformed, it is dissolved more and more radically and more and more rapidly. As the image of the record which has appeared recently in the paintings of Wainio seems to indicate, the

"revolutions" are accelerating and above all are never the same; producing the contrary of a "long playing", they carry us in their grooves.

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