

12

The Diagram

The diagram in Bacon (traits and color-patches)¹ – Its manual character – Painting and the experience of catastrophe – Abstract painting, code, and optical space – Action painting, diagram, and manual space – What Bacon dislikes about both these ways

We do not listen closely enough to what painters have to say. They say that the painter is *already* in the canvas, where he or she encounters all the figurative and probabilistic givens that occupy and preoccupy the canvas. An entire battle takes place on the canvas between the painter and these givens. There is thus a preparatory work that belongs to painting fully, and yet precedes the act of painting. This preparatory work can be done in sketches, though it need not be, and in any case sketches do not replace it (like many contemporary painters, Bacon does not make sketches).² This preparatory work is invisible and silent, yet extremely intense, and the act of painting itself appears as an afterward, an *après-coup* ("hysteresis") in relation to this work.

What does this act of painting consist of? Bacon defines it in this way: make random marks (lines-traits); scrub, sweep, or wipe the canvas in order to clear out locales or zones (color-patches); throw the paint, from various angles and at various speeds. Now this act, or these acts, presuppose that there were already figurative givens on the canvas (and in the painter's head), more or less virtual, more or less actual. It is precisely these givens that will be removed by the act of painting, either by being wiped, brushed, or rubbed, or else covered over. For example, a mouth: it will be elongated, stretched from one side of the head to the

other. For example, the head: part of it will be cleared away with a brush, broom, sponge, or rag. This is what Bacon calls a "graph" or a *diagram*: it is as if a Sahara, a zone of the Sahara, were suddenly inserted into the head; it is as if a piece of rhinoceros skin, viewed under a microscope, were stretched over it; it is as if the two halves of the head were split open by an ocean; it is as if the unit of measure were changed, and micrometric, or even cosmic, units were substituted for the figurative unit.³ A Sahara, a rhinoceros skin: such is the suddenly outstretched diagram. It is as if, in the midst of the figurative and probabilistic givens, a *catastrophe* overcame the canvas.

It is like the emergence of another world. For these marks, these traits, are irrational, involuntary, accidental, free, random. They are nonrepresentative, nonillustrative, nonnarrative. They are no longer either significant or signifiers: they are asignifying traits. They are traits of sensation, but of confused sensations (the confused sensations, as Cézanne said, that we bring with us at birth). And above all, they are manual traits. It is here that the painter works with a rag, stick, brush, or sponge; it is here that he throws the paint with his hands.⁴ It is as if the hand assumed an independence and began to be guided by other forces, making marks that no longer depend on either our will or our sight. These almost blind manual marks attest to the intrusion of another world into the visual world of figuration. To a certain extent, they remove the painting from the optical organization that was already reigning over it and rendering it figurative in advance. The painter's hand intervenes in order to shake its own dependence and break up the sovereign optical organization: one can no longer see anything, as if in a catastrophe, a chaos.

This is the act of painting, or the turning point of the painting. There are two ways in which the painting can fail: once visually and once manually. One can remain entangled in the figurative givens and the optical organization of representation; but one can also spoil the diagram, botch it, so overload it that it is rendered inoperative (which is another way of remaining in the figurative: one will have simply mutilated or mauled the cliché...).⁵ The diagram is thus the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes and color-patches. And the operation of the diagram, its function, says Bacon, is to be "suggestive." Or, more rigorously, to use language similar to Wittgenstein's, it is to introduce "possibilities of fact."⁶ Because they are destined to give us the Figure, it is all the more important for the traits

FRANCIS BACON

and color-patches to break with figuration. This is why they are not sufficient in themselves, but must be "utilized." They mark out possibilities of fact, but do not yet constitute a fact (the pictorial fact). In order to be converted into a fact, in order to evolve into a Figure, they must be reinjected into the visual whole; but it is precisely through the action of these marks that the visual whole will cease to be an optical organization; it will give the eye another power, as well as an object that will no longer be figurative.

The diagram is the operative set of traits and color-patches, of lines and zones. Van Gogh's diagram, for example, is the set of straight and curved hatch marks that raise and lower the ground, twist the trees, make the sky palpitate, and which assume a particular intensity from 1888 onward. Not only can we differentiate diagrams, but we can also date the diagram of a painter, because there is always a moment when the painter confronts it most directly. The diagram is indeed a chaos, a catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm. It is a violent chaos in relation to the figurative givens, but it is a germ of rhythm in relation to the new order of the painting. As Bacon says, it "unlocks areas of sensation."⁷ The diagram ends the preparatory work and begins the act of painting. There is no painter who has not had this experience of the chaos-germ, where he or she no longer sees anything and risks foundering: the collapse of visual coordinates. This is not a psychological experience, but a properly pictorial experience, although it can have an immense influence on the psychic life of the painter. Painters here confront the greatest of dangers both for their work and for themselves. It is a kind of experience that is constantly renewed by the most diverse painters: Cézanne's "abyss" or "catastrophe," and the chance that this abyss will give way to rhythm; Paul Klee's "chaos," the vanishing "gray point," and the chance that this gray point will "leap over itself" and unlock dimensions of sensation....⁸ Of all the arts, painting is undoubtedly the only one that necessarily, "hysterically," integrates its own catastrophe, and consequently is constituted as a flight in advance. In the other arts, the catastrophe is only associated. But painters pass through the catastrophe themselves, embrace the chaos, and attempt to emerge from it. Where painters differ is in their manner of embracing this nonfigurative chaos, and in their evaluation of the pictorial order to come, and the relation of this order with this chaos. In this respect, we might perhaps distinguish three great paths, each of which groups together very different painters, but each of which

designates a "modern" function of painting, or expresses what painting claims to bring to "modern man" (Why still paint today?).

Abstraction would be one of these paths, but it is a path that reduces the abyss or chaos (as well as the manual) to a minimum: it offers us an asceticism, a spiritual salvation. Through an intense spiritual effort, it raises itself above the figurative givens, but it also turns chaos into a simple stream we must cross in order to discover the abstract and signifying Forms. Mondrian's square leaves the figurative (landscape) and leaps over chaos. It retains a kind of oscillation from this leap. Such an abstraction is essentially seen. One is tempted to say of abstract painting what Péguy said of Kantian morality: it has pure hands, but it has no hands. This is because the abstract forms are part of a new and purely optical space that no longer even needs to be subordinate to manual or tactile elements. In fact, they are distinguished from simple geometrical forms by "tension": tension is what internalizes in the visual the manual movement that describes the form and the invisible forces that determine it. It is what makes the form a properly visual transformation. Abstract optical space has no need of the tactile connections that classical representation was still organizing. But it follows that what abstract painting elaborates is less a diagram than a symbolic *code*, on the basis of great formal oppositions. It replaced the diagram with a code. This code is "digital," not in the sense of the manual, but in the sense of a finger that counts. "Digits" are the units that group together visually the terms in opposition. Thus, according to Kandinsky, vertical–white–activity, horizontal–black–inertia, and so on. From this is derived a conception of binary choice that is opposed to random choice. Abstract painting took the elaboration of such a properly pictorial code very far (as in Auguste Herbin's "plastic alphabet," in which the distribution of forms and colors can be done according to the letters of a word).⁹ It is the code that is responsible for answering the question of painting today: What can save man from "the abyss," from external tumult and manual chaos? Open up a spiritual state for the man of the future, a man without hands. Restore to man a pure and internal optical space, which will perhaps be made up exclusively of the horizontal and the vertical. "Modern man seeks rest because he is deafened by the external. . . ."¹⁰ The hand is reduced to a finger that presses on an internal optical keyboard.

A second path, often named abstract expressionism or *art informel*, offers an entirely different response, at the opposite extreme of abstraction. This time the abyss or chaos is deployed to the maximum.

FRANCIS BACON

Somewhat like a map that is as large as the country, the diagram merges with the totality of the painting; the entire painting is diagrammatic. Optical geometry disappears in favor of a manual line, exclusively manual. The eye has difficulty following it. The incomparable discovery of this kind of painting is that of a line (and a patch of color) that does not form a contour, that delimits nothing, neither inside nor outside, neither concave nor convex: Pollack's line, Morris Louis's stain. It is the northern stain, the "Gothic line": the line does not go from one point to another, but passes *between* points, continually changing direction, and attains a power greater than 1, becoming adequate to the entire surface. From this point of view, we can see how abstract painting remained figurative, since its line still delimited an outline. If we seek the precursors of this new path, of this radical manner of escaping the figurative, we will find them every time a great painter of the past stopped painting things in order "to paint between things."¹¹ Turner's late watercolors conquer not only all the forces of impressionism, but also the power of an explosive line without outline or contour, which makes the painting itself an unparalleled catastrophe (rather than illustrating the catastrophe romantically). Moreover, is this not one of the most prodigious constants of painting that is here being selected and isolated? In Kandinsky, there were nomadic lines without contour next to abstract geometric lines; and in Mondrian, the unequal thickness of the two sides of the square opened up a virtual diagonal without contours. But with Pollack, this line-trait and this color-patch will be pushed to their functional limit: no longer the transformation of the form but a decomposition of matter, which abandons us to its lineaments and granulations. The painting thus becomes a catastrophe-painting and a diagram-painting at one and the same time. This time, it is at the point closest to catastrophe, in absolute proximity, that modern man discovers rhythm: we can easily see how this response to the question of a "modern" function of painting is different from that given by abstraction. Here it is no longer an inner vision that gives us the infinite, but a manual power that is spread out "all over,"¹² from one edge of the painting to the other.

In the unity of the catastrophe and the diagram, man discovers rhythm as matter and material. The painter's instruments are no longer the paintbrush and the easel, which still conveyed the subordination of the hand to the requirements of an optical organization. The hand is liberated, and makes use of sticks, sponges, rags, syringes: action painting, the "frenetic dance" of the painter around the painting, or rather in the

painting, which is no longer stretched on an easel but nailed, unstretched, to the ground. There has been a conversion from the horizon to the ground: the optical horizon reverts completely to the tactile ground. The diagram expresses the entire painting at once; that is, the optical catastrophe and the manual rhythm. The current evolution of abstract expressionism is completing this process by realizing what was still little more than a metaphor in Pollock: (1) the extension of the diagram to the spatial and temporal whole of the painting (displacement of the "beforehand" and the "afterward"); (2) the abandonment of any visual sovereignty, and even any visual control, over the painting in the process of being executed (the blindness of the painter); (3) the elaboration of lines that are "more" than lines, surfaces that are "more" than surfaces, or, conversely, volumes that are "less" than volumes (Carl André's planar sculptures, Robert Ryman's fibers, Martin Barré's laminated works, Christian Bonnefoi's strata).¹³

It is all the more curious that the American critics, who took the analysis of abstract expressionism very far, could have defined it as the creation of a purely optical space, exclusively optical, peculiar to "modern man." This seems to us to be a quarrel over words, an ambiguity of words. In effect, what they meant was that the pictorial space lost all the imaginary tactile referents which, in classical three-dimensional representation, made it possible to see depths and contours, forms and grounds. But these tactile referents of classical representation expressed a relative subordination of the hand to the eye, of the manual to the visual. By liberating a space that is (wrongly) claimed to be purely optical, the abstract expressionists in fact did nothing other than to make visible an exclusively manual space, defined by the "planarity" of the canvas, the "impenetrability" of the painting, and the "gesturality" of the color – a space that is imposed upon the eye as an absolutely foreign power in which the eye can find no rest.¹⁴ These are no longer the tactile referents of vision, but, precisely because it is the manual space of what is seen, a violence done to the eye. In the end, it was abstract painting that produced a purely optical space, and suppressed tactile referents in favor of an eye of the mind: it suppressed the task of controlling the hand that the eye still had in classical representation. But action painting does something completely different: it reverses the classical subordination, it subordinates the eye to the hand, it imposes the hand on the eye, and it replaces the horizon with a ground.

One of the most profound tendencies of modern painting is the

FRANCIS BACON

tendency to abandon the easel. For the easel was a decisive element not only in the maintenance of a figurative appearance, and not only in the relationship between the painter and Nature (the search for a motif), but also in the delimitation (frame and borders) and internal organization of the painting (depth, perspective ...). What matters today is less the fact – does the painter still have an easel? – than the tendency, and the diverse ways this tendency is realized. In an abstraction of Mondrian's type, the painting ceases to be an organism or an isolated organization in order to become a division of its own surface, which must create its own relations with the divisions of the "room" in which it will be hung. In this sense, Mondrian's painting is not decorative but architectonic, and abandons the easel in order to become mural painting. Pollock and others explicitly reject the easel in a completely different manner, namely, by making "all over" paintings, by rediscovering the secret of the "Gothic line" (in Worringer's sense), by restoring an entire world of equal probabilities, by tracing lines that cross the entire painting and that start and continue off the frame, and by opposing to the organic notions of symmetry and center the power of a mechanical repetition elevated to intuition. This is no longer an easel painting, but a ground painting (true easels have no other horizon than the ground).¹⁵ But in truth there are many ways of breaking with the easel. Bacon's triptych form is one of these ways, very different from the two preceding ways. In Bacon, what is true of the triptychs is also true of each independent painting, which is always, in one way or another, composed like a triptych. In the triptych, as we have seen, the borders of each of the three panels cease to isolate, though they continue to separate and divide. This uniting-separating is Bacon's technical solution, which brings his entire set of techniques into play, and distinguishes them from the techniques of abstract and informal painting. Are these three ways of once again becoming "gothic"?

The important question is: Why did Bacon not become involved in either of the two preceding paths? The severity of his reactions, rather than claiming to pass judgment, simply indicate what was not right for him, and explain why Bacon personally took neither of these paths. On the one hand, he is not attracted to paintings that tend to substitute a visual and spiritual code for the involuntary diagram (even if there is an exemplary attitude on the part of the artist). The code is inevitably cerebral and lacks sensation, the essential reality of the fall, that is, the direct action upon the nervous system. Kandinsky defined abstract painting by "tension," but according to Bacon, tension is what abstract

painting lacks the most. By internalizing tension in the optical form, abstract painting neutralized it. Finally, because it is abstract, the code can easily become a simple symbolic coding of the figurative.¹⁶ On the other hand, Bacon is not drawn to abstract expressionism, or to the power and mystery of the line without contour. This is because the diagram covers the entire painting, he says, and because its proliferation creates a veritable "mess." All the violent methods of action painting – stick, brush, broom, rag, and even pastry bag – are let loose in a catastrophe-painting. This time sensation is indeed attained, but it remains in an irremediably confused state. Bacon will never stop speaking of the absolute necessity of preventing the diagram from proliferating, the necessity of confining it to certain areas of the painting and certain moments of the act of painting. He thinks that in this domain of the irrational trait and the line without contour, Michaux went further than Pollock, precisely because he remained a master of the diagram.¹⁷

Save the contour – nothing is more important for Bacon than this. A line that delimits nothing still has a contour or outline itself. Blake at least understood this.¹⁸ The diagram must not eat away at the entire painting, it must remain limited in space and time. It must remain operative and controlled. The violent methods must not be given free reign, and the necessary catastrophe must not submerge the whole. The diagram is a possibility of fact – it is not the fact itself. Not all the figurative givens have to disappear; and above all, a new figuration, that of the Figure, should emerge from the diagram and make the sensation clear and precise. To emerge from the catastrophe. . . . Even if, as an afterthought, one finishes a painting with a spurt of paint, it functions like a local "whiplash" that makes us emerge from the catastrophe rather than submerging us further.¹⁹ Could we at least say that during the "*malerisch*" period the diagram covered the whole painting? Had not the entire surface of the painting been lined with traits of grass, or variations of a dark color-patch functioning as a curtain? But even then, the precision of the sensation, the clarity of the Figure, and the rigor of the contour continued to act beneath the color-patch or the traits – which did not efface the former, but instead gave them a power of vibration and nonlocalization (the mouth that smiles or screams). And in his subsequent period, Bacon returns to a localization of random traits and scrubbed zones. Bacon thus follows a third path, which is neither optical like abstract painting, nor manual like action painting.