

Bahr, Hermann. "Expressionism." Trans. R. T. Gribble. *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1992. 116-21. Print. Originally published as *Expressionismus*, Munich, 1916.

16 Hermann Bahr (1863–1934) from *Expressionism*

As one might expect from an account of Expressionism published in Munich, though Bahr broadens the field of reference of the term, his book shows the influence both of Worringer's ideas and of that concern for the spiritual functions of art which was associated with Der Blaue Reiter. It provides a vivid repository of themes and tendencies which were to remain implicit in much modern art theory and criticism for the next thirty years, to resurface in explicit form in the New York of the 1940s: recourse to sweeping anthropological generalization; belief in the superior philosophical wisdom of the East; disparagement of Impressionist painting for its supposed passivity as a form of representation; association of modernity with dehumanization; and consequent (neo-romantic) conviction that recovery of a form of 'presocial' state is the precondition for recovery of critical virtue and authenticity. Written in 1914, and published as *Expressionismus*, Munich, 1916. English translation by R. T. Gribble, London, 1920, from which the present extracts are taken.

Without Precedent

The various sayings and proclamations of Expressionism only tell us that what the Expressionist is looking for is without parallel in the past. A new form of Art is dawning. And he who beholds an Expressionist picture by Matisse or Picasso, by Pechstein or Kokoschka, by Kandinsky or Marc, or by Italian or Bohemian Futurists, agrees; he finds them quite unprecedented. The newest school of painting consists of small sects and groups that vituperate each other, yet one thing they all have in common. They agree only on this point, that they all turn away from Impressionism, turn even against it: hence I class all of them together under the name of Expressionists, although it is a name usually assumed only by one of the sects, while the others protest at being classed in the same category. Whenever Impressionism tries to simulate reality, striving for illusion, they all agree in despising this procedure. They also share in common the passionate denial of every demand that we make of a picture before we can accept it as a picture at all. Although we may not be able to understand a single one of their pictures, of one thing we may be certain, they all do violence to the sensible world. This is the true reason of the universal indignation they arouse; all that has hitherto been the aim of painting, since painting first began, is now denied, and something is striven for which has never yet been attempted. At least so the beholder is likely to think, and the Expressionist will fully agree with him. Only the beholder maintains that whatever nature does not sanction, but that on the contrary deliberately goes against nature, can never be true Art, while the Expressionist insists that just this *is* Art, is *his* Art. And if the beholder retorts vehemently that the painter should express nothing but what he sees, the Expressionists assure him that they too paint only what they see. And on this point there is a continual misunderstanding. Each of them when he speaks of 'seeing' means something totally different. What is meant by 'seeing'?

Seeing

The history of painting is nothing but the history of vision – or seeing. Technique changes only when the mode of seeing has changed; it only changes because the method of seeing has changed. It changes so as to keep pace with changes of vision as they occur. And the eye changes its method of seeing according to the relation man assumes towards the world. A man views the world according to his attitude towards it. [...]

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Two influences work on each other, an outer one and one from within us; each at bottom equally unknown to us. Neither alone suffices. Experience is born from their co-operation. They differ for each individual according as his own share is stronger or weaker, the capacity of his eye more or less independent; according to the degree of his attention, the extent of his experience, the power of his thought, the range of his knowledge. As any one of these conditions changes, necessarily every appearance will change with it. A man is

usually unconscious of these various conditions. But it may happen at times that he feels them strongly, and then it may also happen that he wishes to change them. As soon as he realizes that his seeing is always the result of some external influence, as well as of his own inner influence, it depends on whether he trusts the outer world more – or himself. Every human relation finally depends on this: once he has arrived at the stage where he can differentiate between himself and the rest of the world, when he can say 'I' and 'you', when he can separate outer from inner, he has no alternative but that of flight from the world into himself, or from himself into the world – or a third choice is possible, that of halting on the boundary line between the two. These are the three attitudes man can assume towards the phenomena of appearance.

When at the dawn of time man first awakened, he was startled by the world. To recover himself, to 'come to', he had to sever himself from nature; in his later memory this event is echoed and repeated in the impulse to break away from nature. He hates her; he fears her; she is stronger than he; he can only save himself from her by flight, or she will again seize and devour him. He escapes from her into himself. The fact of having the courage to separate from her, and to defy her, shows him that there must be a secret power in himself, and to this power he entrusts himself. From its depths he draws his own God and sets him up against nature. He requires a stronger power than himself, but stronger also than the world; enthroned above him, and above her, it can destroy him, but it can likewise protect him against her. Should his offering find favour, his God will banish the terrors of nature. And thus primeval man draws a magic circle of worship round himself and pricks it out with the signs of his God: Art begins, an attempt of man to break the grip of appearance by making his 'innermost' appear also; within the outer world, he has created another world which belongs to him and obeys him. If the former frightens him into mad flight, alarming and confusing all his senses – the eye, the ear, the groping hand, the moving foot – the latter pacifies and encourages him by its calm, by the rhythm and consonance of its rigid, unreal, and unceasing repetition of form. In primitive ornament change is conquered by rest, the appearance to the eye by the picture in the mind, the outer world by the inner man, and when the reality of nature perplexes and disturbs him because he can never fathom her depths, because she always extends further than he can reach, so that beyond the uttermost limit there stretches something beyond, and beyond this extends the threat of yet further vastness – Art frees him by drawing appearance from the depths and by flattening it out on a plane surface. Primeval man sees lines, circles, squares, and he sees them all flat, and he does so owing to the inner need of turning the threat of nature away from himself. His vision is in constant fear of being overpowered and so it is always on the defensive, it offers resistance, is ready to hit back. Every fresh outer stimulus alarms the inner perception, which is always armed and ready, never concedes entrance to nature, but out of the flux of experience he tears her bit by bit – banishing her from the depth to the surface – makes her unreal and human till her chaos has been conquered by his order.

It is not only primeval man who shows us this determined reaction of repulsion to every stimulus experienced. We recognize this attitude again in one of the highest phases of human development, in the East. There too man, now mature and civilised, has overcome nature. Appearance has been seen through and recognized as illusion, and should the deceiving eye try to entice him into this folly, he is taught by knowledge to withstand. In the East all beholding is tempered by an element of comprehending pity, and wherever the wise man gazes, he sees only that which he knows: the eye takes in the outer stimulus, but only to unmask it instantly. All seeing, for him, is a looking away from nature. We, with our eyes, are still incapable even of imagining this state, for we still see everything, as far as the circle of our civilization reaches, with the eyes of the Greek.

The Greeks had turned man about: he stood against nature, they turned him towards her: he hid from her, they taught him to confide himself to her, to go with her, to be received by her, to become one with her. It must have been a great moment. [...]

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In fact, the Impressionist is the consummation of classic development. The Impressionist, in visualizing, endeavours as much as possible to rule out every inner response to the outer stimulus. Impressionism is an attempt to leave nothing to man but his retina. One is apt to say of Impressionists that they do not 'carry out' a picture; it were better to say, they do not 'carry out' visualization. The Impressionist leaves out man's participation in appearance, for fear of falsifying it. [...]

Expressionism

This is the vital point – that man should find himself again. Schiller asks: 'Can man have been destined, for any purpose whatever, to lose himself?' It is the inhuman attempt of our time to force this loss upon him against his own nature. We would turn him into a mere instrument; he has become the tool of his own work, and he has no more sense, since he serves the machine. It has stolen him away from his soul. And now the soul demands his return. This is the vital point. All that we experience is but the strenuous battle between the soul and the machine for the possession of man. We no longer live, we are lived; we have no freedom left, we may not decide for ourselves, we are finished, man is unsouled, nature is unmanned. A moment ago we boasted of being her lords and masters and now she has opened her wide jaws and swallowed us up. Unless a miracle happens! That is the vital point – whether a miracle can still rescue this soulless, sunken, buried humanity. Never yet has any period been so shaken by horror, by such a fear of death. Never has the world been so silent, silent as the grave. Never has man been more insignificant. Never has he felt so nervous. Never was happiness so unattainable and freedom so dead. Distress cries aloud; man cries out for his soul; this whole pregnant time is one great cry of anguish. Art too joins in, into the great darkness she too calls for help, she cries to the spirit: this is Expressionism.

Never has any period found a clearer, a stronger mode of self-expression than did the period of bourgeois dominance in impressionistic Art. This bourgeois rule was incapable of producing original music or poetry; all the music or poetry of its day is invariably either a mere echoing of the past, or a presentiment of the future; but in Impressionistic painting it has made for itself such a perfect symbol of its nature, of its disorder, that perhaps some day when humanity is quite freed from its trammels and has attained the serene perspective of historic contemplation, it may be forgiven, because of these shining tokens. Impressionism is the falling away of man from spirit. Impressionism is man lowered to the position of a gramophone record of the outer world. Impressionists have been taken to task for not 'carrying out' their pictures; they do not even carry out their 'seeing', for man of the bourgeois period never 'carries out', never fulfils life. He halts, breaks off midway in the process of seeing, midway in the process of life at the very point where man's participation in life begins. Half-way in the act of seeing these Impressionists stop, just where the eye, having been challenged, should make its reply: 'The ear is dumb, the mouth deaf,' says Goethe; 'but the eye both perceives and speaks.' The eye of the Impressionist only beholds, it does not speak; it hears the question, but makes no response. Instead of eyes, Impressionists have another set of ears, but no mouth, for a man of the bourgeois period is nothing but an ear, he listens to the world, but does not breathe upon it. He has no mouth, he is incapable of expressing himself, incapable of pronouncing judgment upon the world, of uttering the law of the spirit. The Expressionist, on the contrary, tears open the mouth of humanity; the time of its silence, the time of its listening is over – once more it seeks to give the spirit's reply.

Expressionism is as yet but a gesture. It is not a question of this or that Expressionist, much less of any particular work of his. Nietzsche says: 'The first and foremost duty of Art should be to beautify life . . . Thereupon she must conceal or transmute all ugliness – and only after this gigantic task has been achieved can she turn to the special so-called Art of Art-production, which is but the appendage. A man who is conscious of possessing a superfluity of these beautifying and concealing and transmuting powers, will finally seek to disburden himself of this superabundance in works of Art; the same under special conditions applies to a whole nation. But at present we generally start at the wrong end of Art, we cling to her tail and reiterate the tag, that works of Art contain the whole of Art, and that by these we may repair and transform life . . . simpletons that we are!' Under this bourgeois rule the whole of man has become an appendage. Impressionism makes a splendid tail! The Expressionist, however, does not throw out a peacock's wheel, he does not consider the single production, but seeks to restore man to his rightful position; only we have outgone Nietzsche – or, rather, we have retraced our steps and gone further back beyond him and have arrived at Goethe: Art is no longer only to 'beautify' life for us and to 'conceal or transmute ugliness', but Art must bring Life, produce Life from within, must fulfil the function of Life as man's most proper deed and action. Goethe says, 'Painting sets before us that which a man could and should see, and which usually he does not see.' If Expressionism at the

moment behaves in an ungainly, violent manner, its excuse lies in the prevailing conditions it finds. These really are almost the conditions of crude and primitive humanity. People little know how near the truth they are when they jeer at these pictures and say they might be painted by savages. The bourgeois rule has turned us into savages. Barbarians, other than those feared by Rodbertus, threaten; we ourselves have to become barbarians to save the future of humanity from mankind as it now is. As primitive man, driven by fear of nature, sought refuge within himself, so we too have to adopt flight from a 'civilization' which is out to devour our souls. The Savage discovered in himself the courage to become greater than the threat of nature, and in honour of this mysterious inner redeeming power of his, which, through all the alarms and terrors of storm and of ravening beasts and of unknown dangers, never deserted him, never let him give in – in honour of this he drew a circle of guardian signs around him, signs of defiance against the threat of nature, obstinate signs of demarcation to protect his possessions against the intrusion of nature and to safeguard his belief in spirit. So, brought very near the edge of destruction by 'civilization', we discover in ourselves powers which cannot be destroyed. With the fear of death upon us, we muster these and use them as spells against 'civilization'. Expressionism is the symbol of the unknown in us in which we confide, hoping that it will save us. It is the token of the imprisoned spirit that endeavours to break out of the dungeon – a tocsin of alarm given out by all panic-stricken souls. This is what Expressionism is.