



Barry Schwabsky

I. Our subject is "Lacan and Visual Art," but I should immediately say that the subject I can make some contribution to is the reverse – "Visual Art and Lacan." Unfortunately, I suspect mine to be a much smaller subject. "Lacan and Visual Art" is a big subject not just because it is very clear that Lacan personally had an intense interest in visual art, in painting, but because his discourse is hungry for images – even though it is also, as Martin Jay has recently pointed out, an intensely anti-ocularcentric one. Any reader of Lacan immediately notices that his is not an abstract discourse, but one that forwards itself by means of images, pictures, diagrams, and so forth. It's not a case of there being, here, some concepts in need of images and, there, some images in need of concepts. Art may already have more concepts than it knows what to do with.

[...]

III. A more direct (though still parenthetical) use of Lacan occurs in my review of Row's 1994 exhibition, and it is one that also retrospectively illuminates what I had been thinking of three years previously. The more recent paintings show a marked shift in Row's work. It is clear that, as I wrote, "color, while far from an afterthought, is a recessive element in the new paintings, giving way to more broadly structural – or better, logical – concerns."¹ Here the arcs of the earlier work have yoked themselves together to form ovals – the numeral zero, in fact. As I pointed out, zero is what the logician Gottlob Frege called "the number which belongs to the concept 'not identical with itself.'"² Lacan himself writes that "what specifies the scopic field and engenders the satisfaction proper to it is the fact that, for structural reasons, the fall of the subject always remains unperceived, for it is reduced to zero."³ Perhaps this very non-self-identity is what called for the doubling of the zero in each painting. The mathematical use of the symbol zero is surely, as Brian Rotman calls it, "a self-absenting move,"⁴ but for that very reason it continues to refer to a subject capable of this self-removal. Whereas Row's previous three-panel paintings, as I pointed out, "seemed to designate a dispersed and non-totalized subjectivity, his conscription of this representational abstraction – this figure which is not one – and particularly its specular doubling through the abutment of panels, seems to invoke the empty specularity of the (Lacanian) Imaginary ego yoking its fragmentary impulses into a closed, self-reflecting totality around a primordial lack."⁵ I was somewhat disturbed by Row's apparent assumption of what, in his famous essay on *The Mirror Stage*, Lacan had referred to as "a form of totality that I shall call orthopaedic... the armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development,"⁶ especially since I had identified elatedly with the assumption of a fragmented, untotalized subjectivity traversed by uncontrolled flows of desire I had discovered in the 1991 paintings. Why this newly closed, totalized, rigorous, and monumental identity?

[...]

VII. My next image is [...] a painting by Brenda Zlamany. Here the subject is [...] clearly female [...], and this is [...] clearly marked by the roundness of an oval – [...] the pregnant belly. And another oval as well: the painting being hung at its usual level, our gaze is met not by the woman's eye, but rather by her nipple. In fact, our impression might be that her gaze occurs through the nipple, that she looks at us with her nipple. Further contemplation of the painting reveals this as a ruse, however. The nipple is, so to speak, a fetish this woman projects as bait for our gaze, but her face reveals the vulnerability of one who imagines that her subterfuge will be easily discovered. She is studying the viewer, as it were, from behind the nipple. And what about the ear? She is not listening, [...]. Her ears are hidden, she has her own intervening apparatus. The earrings she wears are by far the brightest spots on this canvas, and, like the breast, they serve the function of displacing attention from her eyes, which would otherwise have been the points of brightest light. Where the men [in Zlamany's portraits] revealed the gaze of the painter through the aggressiveness of their retaliatory listening, this woman reveals it through her propitiatory offering of certain lures. In this we see, not (as it might appear) a representation of a difference between the genders, but a difference in identification between portraitist and subject. In one of his most astute passages on painting, Lacan has this to say:



To resume again...

Destruction of the Sexual Thing
HERMAN RAPAPORT

"What is a Picture?"
Times Two
JAN AVGIKOS

Saturday Night Fever, or
"What is a Picture?"
CATHERINE LIU

Étant Donnés: Le Gaz(e)
d'Éclairage
ADRIAN DANNATT

The Rustle of Painting
BARRY SCHWABSKY

The Amateur Genius and
the Dog
RICHARD FOREMAN

The Newly Renovated
Opera House on
Gilligan's Island
JOHN YAU

Watching Things Work
BARBARA HENNING

What You Do
IAN GREY

"What is a Picture?"
PEGGY PHELAN

A Cameo
RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

Written/ Spoken/ Drawn



It might be thought at first that, like the actor, the painter wishes to be looked at. I do not think so. I think that there is a relation with the gaze of the spectator, but that it is more complex. The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus – You want something to see? Well, take a look at this! He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze.⁷

The woman who posed for this painting is posed as she is because she is doing what an artist does. The men who posed for the portraits, although for the most part they really are artists, are posed as they are because they are in competition with the artist who painted them. Perhaps she has used her art to transform them into critics – an artist's revenge on her fellow artists. (This point leads me to recall with satisfaction my prediction, when Zlamany was just beginning to venture into portraiture, that it could make her art "even more subtle, seductive, and cruel."⁸) In any case, we "lay down our gaze" on the artist's self-portrait as her own sister.

VIII. But although it would give me great pleasure to end in the contemplation of that remarkable image, the questions I had about David Row's painting have continued to vex me. Seen again in the orange afterglow of that pregnant oval, Row's ovals begin to look a little different. Perhaps I was being reductive – too much like a psychoanalyst – in my understanding of Row's recent work. Yes, those enclosed ellipses display a new reserve in comparison to the earlier paintings. But looking closer at the internal logic of the diptychs, I can see that the curved forms should rather be seen in dialogue with the grids that underlie and traverse them. In that case the zeros begin to take on an aspect that is more vulnerable, egg-like, sheltering what they encircle. The jubilation I felt on seeing Row's 1991 paintings begins to sound suspiciously like that of the child recognizing its reflection in the mirror – even though what I thought I saw reflected there was a post-specular subjectivity. My misgivings about the recent diptychs might have had something to do with their refusal to project this subjectivity, their way not of denying it but of holding it in reserve, protecting it. I ended my second review of David Row by noting a "choice [that] throws us back upon a judgement of taste such as resists any formalization,"⁹ and I sense that I am ending there once again. What I had forgotten in my earlier interpretation of Row's recent work is that after all, abstraction does operate in depth as well as laterally, and that if there are two figures inscribed on these paintings, there is also the triangulation with a third figure, namely the person who is looking. Row's earlier paintings had been structured with multiple points of access and egress, granting the viewer a pleasurable mobility, whereas the new ones implied a stereoptic fixity of viewpoint that could be uncomfortable. Yet as a friend of mine wisely observed in discussing the pair objects of the sculptor Roni Horn, "To experience the same thing twice puts the first under erasure and makes the second redundant. It creates a preclusion of hierarchy."¹⁰ This doubling faces us with a choice, and in the most extreme sense possible: a choice with no criteria to fall back on. That is why these difficult, unrelenting paintings keep sending me back to the effort of concentrated receptivity – of that listening rather than looking which is the fated role of the critic.

Notes

1. Barry Schwabsky, "David Row," *Artforum* XXXII 6 (February 1994), p. 88. [back up](#)
2. Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). [back up](#)
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978). [back up](#)
4. Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). [back up](#)
5. Barry Schwabsky, "David Row," *Arts Magazine* LXV 9 (May 1991), p. 76. [back up](#)
6. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977). [back up](#)
7. *ibid.* [back up](#)
8. Barry Schwabsky, "Brenda Zlamany," *Artforum* XXXI 6 (February 1993), pp. 99–100. [back up](#)
9. Barry Schwabsky, "David Row," *Artforum* XXXII 6 (February 1994), p. 88. [back up](#)
10. Meg O'Rourke, "The Weight of the Word: The Sculpture of Roni Horn," *Arts Magazine* LXVI 3 (November 1991), pp. 58–60. [back up](#)

Illustration: [Brenda Zlamany](#) Christina #2, oil on panel, 1994.

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