



## ILLCIT EVENTS

Richard Shiff

*Modern objects are eroded by time. The permanence of the law gives way to the fluctuation of the norm.*

### Time

Terry Winters makes "modern objects." Whenever I question him about procedure, he replies with a degree of ambivalence. Something like, "it could also go this other way." Perhaps *bi-directional* would be the better qualifier to characterize his typical response, because he often holds more than one position with equal assurance. Taking two sides of an issue is not the same as being uncertain which way to go. Just go both ways. Imagine committing to antithetical directions while reasoning through a dilemma. For an academic, such abuse of logic yields only confusion and consternation. For an artist, it heightens awareness, inducing the mind to operate with the inflective fluidity of the senses. We see more than our words can name or concepts categorize.

Which way to go? Engaged in his studio, Winters is always going (somewhere). He values the movement more than a foreseeable end, which usually, though not always, remains inapparent.<sup>1</sup> Rather than experiencing the stasis or

inaction of ambivalence, he fluctuates. Like the image-bearing objects he generates, his mentality projects no normative state other than one that varies.

Accordingly, Winters speaks of maintaining options, for himself and for each of his works. His rough-edged painting technique allows him to alter colors and forms substantially as he proceeds, without introducing annoyingly alien textures and pentimenti. Material evidence of shifts in mind and vision become elements of a going composition. Winters wishes all layers to preserve an aspect of their time of currency, as if their past moment could be perceived in every succeeding present. Imperfectly layering one color over another is a forgiving method, tolerant of urges lacking full outcome. A halo-like circumference to a disc-like form results when Winters alters the surface color while leaving traces of its antecedent visible at the edges (see detail of *Bismuth One*, 2018 [cat. p. 32]). Somewhat

paradoxically, indeterminate movement within multiple dimensions of illusory "space" may mark the completion of his work, even as the surface manifests signs that the process could continue: "I want my paintings to remain open."<sup>2</sup> He finishes not when he has resolved a plan, but "when there's no way back into the painting."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps at that moment, the surface ceases to be receptive to the sensory and emotional fluctuation within Winters, all the while continuing its transit, still going (somewhere).

If Winters's art offers lessons in perception, they never coalesce around a rigorous teaching, a regulative doxa. To be "eroded by time" (see the epigraph) means to be subject to the attraction of alternatives to the present standard, introducing them here and there. Winters has stated that he "stresses" his materials.<sup>4</sup> Imposing his will on his pigments, binders, and supports, he induces their unorthodox performance. Though informed by accumulated experimentation, his practice is more happenstance than system; to apply stress is to risk failure, venturing directions never tested. No standard remains as a guide.

"Modern objects are eroded by time": the epigraphic statement belongs to Bernard Cache, a designer whose theoretical writing has stimulated Winters's thinking. "Permanence of the law" refers to the timeless regularity of mass production, which holds standardization as a value.<sup>5</sup> But within a post-industrial society, with its electronic networks, consumer goods that are "non-standard" (Cache's term) prevail. They answer to the impulses and desires that align with transient norms.<sup>6</sup> Winters paints from a performative impulse, out of sensory desire. His results are non-standard. Easy enough to assert—and, one would think, equally relevant to many other contemporary artists. But precisely how are Winters's works non-standard? Has mainline contemporary art been affirming a new standard that Winters nonetheless violates?

Winters states that in painting, "the ground is always shifting."<sup>7</sup> His remark could be read metaphorically as referring to "fluctuation of the norm" (Cache). But he meant something

more prosaic, that the base layers of a painting participate in whatever image appears. This effect stems from his layering, with each color inflecting its predecessor as it also becomes—if only at a certain stage of the process—the vaguely visible ground for still another color. Rather than covering a planar surface of linen laterally, Winters projects deposits of paint forward, frontally, as if the physicality of his process were mimicking qualities of the spatial illusion deriving from the same process—a curious admixture of process and image. Yet he also includes features that evoke elements of conventional pictorial structure: painted edges that turn the corners of the stretcher bars; rectilinear borders near the outer limits of the composition; vertical divisions just beyond a central image; a central oval or other geometric form that circumscribes detailed compositional motifs within itself.

Among Winters's new works, *Bismuth Two* (2018 [cat. p.43]) "frames" its verticality with dark bands at its left and right margins—a counter to the implied spiral rotation of, or within, the central oval. *Above, Below* (2018 [cat. p. 53]), a potentially more complex composition, has an internal rectilinear frame of black (superimposed over red, its "shifting" ground), a deep gray border outside this frame, and the delineations of an oval and a circle that encompass analogous forms—two conic or spherical geometries that vie to control the implied spatial inflection of a central pattern of discs of various sizes and orientations. At a finer scale, numerous dark dots evoke incompatible alternatives: appearing at once as recessive perforations and projective nodules, their gridded pattern conforms to an elliptical warp.

Attempting description, I think of multi-channel communication, as if Winters's various inflections and frames amounted to a system of waves of pulsing polyphonic sound, given visual form within a containing structure, an architecture, a body. A pulse is both spatial, projecting in and out, and temporal, establishing a rhythm. Pulse is, of course, a figure of life. Winters's title for *Bismuth Two* refers to color, whereas the title

*Above, Below* provides a spatial reference for the endless indeterminacy of this configuration. It could also be called *Body and Soul*. Or *Matter and Mind*. What makes Winters's paintings non-standard is the unusual degree to which their analogous forms (such as circles and ovals of various perspectives and dimensions) establish rational associations only to contradict or undo these same associations. The situation of his art is antithetical to making a statement, having a point of view, asserting a principle.

In *Bismuth One*, for example, a sequence of dark blue ovals of increasing size (increasing proximity to the viewer?) appears to spiral out from the right side of a much larger, yellow oval, like particles emitted from a nucleus or rational thoughts emerging from a complex mind. Increasing in size while rotating, these relatively small forms exceed the boundary of the central oval. Were they ever contained in any respect? When related geometric forms at divergent scales share an area of material ground, how many spatial illusions do they generate? I find little support for firm conclusions as I seek the optical dimensions, real or imaginary, of Winters's figure-ground. How the pattern of ovals fits with the rest of his composition only he would know, having witnessed its emergence. He causes my analytical mind to operate like my sub-rational senses, immersing me in unfamiliar, unintegrated dimensions of thought.

I could say that Winters's art has granted me numerous novel experiences. But all "experience," worthy of the term, is novel. A less anodyne conclusion: Winters's art constitutes an "event." Charles Sanders Peirce provides the missing definition: "What, then, is a real event? It is an existential junction of impossible facts. ... Though the two inferences cannot be *combined*, they can be *joined*. ... An event always involves a junction of contradictory inferences in the subjects existentially the same."<sup>8</sup> Another way of saying this: change occurring in an entity, which nevertheless remains itself, signifies the passage of time; the moment of change is a genuine event in the history of existence, in universal evolution. Yet the

changes I observe in Winters's images are ones I feel that I re-live; they become events in me. They are my time. The multiple frames and perspectives of works like *Above, Below, Bismuth One*, and *Bismuth Two* present "impossible facts" that cannot properly be combined as one, though they may be joined, that is, pass through time in experiential sequence.

By this course of speculation, Winters's paintings become effective images of time as well as of the event. His event, however, is illicit, an irregularity or warp in time outside the law of a standard progression already established.<sup>9</sup> Peirce implies that every "real event" must be illicit because it resists the accelerating tendency to habit, regularity, and law.<sup>10</sup> The figuration, space, and time of Winters's art is hardly habit-forming.

## Tendencies

A question of procedure led me to ponder Winters's technical choices—more broadly, his governing aesthetic psychology. The issue arose as I sought to identify the pigments used for *Bismuth One*. Because Winters allows his various layers of paint application to remain discernible, I wondered whether he preferred transparent pigments to opaque—an earthy, malleable red lake instead of a bright, brittle cadmium. In *Bismuth One*, the layering of reds and blues appears relatively transparent, facilitating the visibility of one surface through another. Transparency compounds perception: blue over red yields a sense of the two colors while casting fugitive violet over the whole; blue over yellow generates fugitive green.

Yes-and-no was Winters's response to my query concerning choice of pigments. He indicated that he could always apply a transparent color thickly, producing a contradictory opacity—just as, with solvents, opacity might be thinned to transparency. One way or another, he would achieve the quality of layering to which his immediate instinct led him. He is always going (somewhere). All possibilities should

remain open, never foreclosed by initial decisions. The possibilities oscillate. What seemed to be a logical use of transparent pigments to extend the evidence of layering in *Bismuth One* was superseded by a more flexible alternative—to leave each pigment the option of exhibiting every tendency. Stress it, stretch its resources, as the need arises.

Layering aside, it seemed at first glance that the color of Winters's new paintings was strident—at any rate, the antithesis of harmoniously mellow. *Patchwork* (2018 [cat. p. 51]) may be the least aggressive of Winters's new series of works, for its chromatic colors have been tempered by a generous use of neutral gray surrounding, or rather delineating, its central oval. Winters applied the gray over preexisting areas of rectilinear form, converting them to segments of an ovoid with curved edges. The same gray mutes the effect of the complicated pattern of discs, which appear both as floaters hovering in a forward plane and as punctures through this plane to a fictive backside of the ovoid projection. But even in the relative restraint of *Patchwork*, brilliant near-complementaries predominate, red against green, blue against yellow. At the upper right, a blue-green "patch" settles between a red and a yellow. The heightened contrast veers now to blue, now to green—a case of bi-valence, not ambivalence.

*Bismuth One* is especially bright, both because warm yellows and reds predominate and because the pigment known as Bismuth is the brightest yellow available. The forms of this painting project far more than they recede, regardless of what spatial array the composition may suggest. Winters's disc-like shapes are conceivable as geometric variations of one another. But he sets them to different scales, which implies a difference in projective distance—an illusion of spatial depth for those who might interpret it so. Just as his colors sally forth, his patterns appear to round all receding surfaces and edges. The nodes of color map those surfaces as grids of spherical geometry. The imaginary space of Winters's constructed surfaces remains ambiguous,

both flat pattern and multidimensional illusion. His composition offers to perception an accumulation of directions—or something less than that, a collection of *tendencies*—which drift to their finish without establishing definitive orientation. They are questions left hanging, short of resolution, alive with a pulse.

### The life between death and death

A fully inflected line, like a bow drawn tight, sends out a tendency, an extension in the form of a vector, like an arrow. A vector requires a destination—the arrow needs a target—a contextual order that will fulfill its mission and secure its function. But it has no function until it happens on a context to provide one. Any object offers a target to the fluctuating vectors of our line of sight. If the object is a painting by Winters, it becomes a target moving through various levels and dimensions of surface and depth. Cache writes: "Our perception is that body of images whose variable horizon expresses our potential for action."<sup>11</sup> By this definition, Winters's painting, which amounts to many images in one object, expands our perceptual possibilities. We participate in the multifaceted *event* of the work by actively viewing it. As I have implied, it becomes the viewer's time, meaning that it cannot be prejudged by identifying its category, because nothing sufficiently analogous has yet been encountered. The dimensional array of the painting is too fluid to be comprehended through a structure, a fixed frame. At best, it oscillates among positions, some well-formed, others amorphous.

In 2008, Winters created a suite of drawings with the collective title *Inflection Vector Frame*. He derived this and other terminology from Cache's *Earth Moves*, which he read shortly after its publication in 1995. Crucial references to Cache in Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold* had piqued Winters's curiosity, for his attitude toward "the generation of form" had already been affected by Deleuze's various writings. His recourse to such theoretical texts has

been more poetic than analytical, geared to "mis-using the thinking around computational and visualization technologies to complicate [the inherited] language of painting"—to move beyond Paul Cézanne's cone, cylinder, and sphere, and Wassily Kandinsky's point, line, and plane.<sup>12</sup> In brief, it seems that Winters's art adds dimensions, both spatial and temporal, without indulging in the characteristically modern conceits of rendering time as a "fourth dimension" (relativity) or reveling in the indeterminacy of direct observation (the uncertainty principle). With Cache's ternary terminology—inflection, vector, frame—available to spark Winters's imagination, his visualizations become non-standard.

Imagine inflection as a curve. Any curve has the potential to generate a vector of direction, either as the tangent or the perpendicular to any of the infinite number of points along the inflected bend or swerve, which establishes both concave and convex surfaces in mutual inversion. Cache imagines the folds and loops of concavity and convexity as the germinal sites both of "body"—an expansion or extension of primal substance that becomes "object"—and of "soul"—a concentration or condensation of the same substance that becomes "subject." He writes: "Here and there [along an inflection], the line of variation of the center of curvature turns back on itself and oscillates, at least for a while; in these recesses, an embryo of body and soul is formed. ... There is no concavity, no matter how slight, that does not harbor a convexity, and vice versa; there is no body without an intercalated soul, nor a soul without a body that is inserted into it."<sup>13</sup> The hourglass-like configuration evident in Winters's *Yellow Ground* (2018 [cat. p. 47]) and *Persian Red* (2018 [cat. p. 49]) makes an especially vigorous show of inflected form by mirroring its own convexities and concavities. In both paintings, secondary warps of discs either echo or interfere with the central compound inflection. They suggest the "oscillations" between order (framing context) and chance (inchoate feeling) that for Cache characterize organic life; he enlists dualities only to

deny their fixity with fluctuation. Body and soul acquire a temporal, historical context, yet their frame remains a loose confinement as they drift back into chance configurations: "Alea [chance occurrence] and crystal [regularized structure] are the boundaries of life, the maximum oscillation between the two figures of death."<sup>14</sup> Life oscillates between two extremes, risking collapse into one zone of death or the other.

Cache's theory locates organic existence in the gap between two deathly conditions that would fail to sustain it—absolute chance (alea, spontaneity), totalized regularity (crystal, law)—formlessness so chaotic that no developmental relations emerge from it, form so rigidly structured that no change can occur. Life is development, whether progressive or regressive. Its direction is not at issue; life's vectors assume no reliable direction. Life is oscillation, fluctuation, change. Winters's painting-events occupy the space and time of "life."

### Death and life in contemporary art

What do we expect from contemporary visual art? Duality, the generator of deathly extremes, has been defining mainstream practice. Duality without oscillation. The absorption of contemporary art into social critique during the 1980s and 1990s demanded dualistic choices, taking political sides, as Thierry de Duve notes retrospectively: "Identity politics as a genre of artmaking transformed artists into standard-bearers for a group and their works into tokens of whatever identity that group wished to project."<sup>15</sup> "Standard-bearers" are purveyors of a standard. In the heat of late twentieth-century political transformation, Joan W. Scott expressed what had become the canonical, yet extreme view promoted by interpretive critics: "Subjects"—as necessarily social subjects, identities—"are constituted discursively and [their] experience is a linguistic event ... Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment."<sup>16</sup> Implication: we feel only the sensations and emotions that our concep-

tual language, historically determined, already allows us to articulate. From "all experience is novel," we shift to "all experience is prefigured."

At the start, I stated that "we see more than our words can name." I have also claimed that Winters's painting has no proper category. As an academic, I have been indoctrinated to conclude otherwise on both counts. A position that gives cultural credence to extra-linguistic feeling is inconsistent with the inherited and still current doxa. To grasp the significance of an image, I must, presumably, construct its historical context, identifying not only its origins and differential values but also its exclusions. Were I of more academic mind, I would set Winters's qualities into analytical discourse—a licit framing of his illicit events. But this would deny his art its non-standard possibilities.

Excuse the romanticism: in Winters's art, what we lose in historical order and logical entailment, we gain in sensory intensity and emotional profundity. Habituated to the standard law, I benefit from experiencing Winters's non-standard norm. The oscillation is invigorating.

#### Notes

1. In line with Winters's bi-directional inclinations, he allows exceptions to his typical practice; a limited number of his works follow closely the configurations established by other works. For example, the drawing *black&white3* (2018 [cat. p. 9]) nearly matches the composition of the painting *Cinnabar* (2017); and a smaller drawing of the same image preceded both. Here differences develop because of a change in medium or scale, as opposed to an open search for a configuration of elements. I thank Terry Winters for generously sharing his thoughts about his art and the place of aesthetic experience within contemporary culture. For essential aid in research, I am grateful to Gilles Heno-Coe.
2. Winters, "Conversation with Adam Fuss," in *Terry Winters: Computation of Chains* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1997), 9.
3. Winters, in conversation with the author, Ancram NY, 21 March 2019.
4. On "stress" in Winters's practice, see Richard Shiff, "Evolution," *Terry Winters 1981–1986* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2004), 4–14.
5. Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, ed. Michael Speaks, trans. Anne Boyman (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), 96. Cache completed this text in 1983. It appeared first in English translation, with the French edition two years later: *Terre meuble* (Orléans: Éditions HYX, 1997). *Terre meuble*, translated literally, is friable or unstable ground. Cache's statement (in paraphrase) constitutes a central element of Gilles Deleuze's analysis of subject and object in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [orig. French ed., 1988]), 19: "Fluctuation of the norm replaces the permanence of the law."
6. See Cache, *Earth Moves*, 88–98.
7. Winters, "Drawings are the data used to drive the system...": Terry Winters in conversation with Isabelle Dervaux," *Master Drawings* 48 (2010): 243.
8. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Logic of Mathematics; an attempt to develop my categories from within: Triads" (c. 1896), *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958–1960), 1:263 (original emphasis).
9. Deleuze would call Winters's style mannerist as opposed to classical. He writes that the modern object derives from a "temporal modulation that implies as much the beginnings of a continuous variation of matter as a continuous development of form ... The object here is manneristic, not essentializing; it becomes an event" (Deleuze, *The Fold*, 19). "Essentializing" generates the standard; anything "manneristic" is non-standard.
10. See Peirce, "To Christine Ladd-Franklin, on Cosmology" (1891), *Collected Papers*, 8:214–15; and compare Cache, 114–15. In *Earth Moves*, Cache invokes Peirce as well as Deleuze.
11. Cache, 147.
12. Winters, in conversation with the author, Ancram NY, 21 March 2019; email to the author, 6 April 2019. On Cache and Deleuze, see note 5. Cache's thinking figures prominently in Deleuze, "The Folds of the Soul," *The Fold*, 14–26. Compare Cache, 102–31. On Winters and Deleuze, see Richard Shiff, "Manual Imagination," in Adam D. Weinberg, ed., *Terry Winters: Paintings, Drawings, Prints 1994–2004* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 18–33.
13. Cache, 123, 126.
14. Cache, 113–17.
15. Thierry de Duve, *Aesthetics at Large: Volume 1, Art, Ethics, Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 68.
16. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 793.