CHAPTER 10

Alley Art

Can We ... See ... at Last, the End of Ontology?

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Last year our village’s Downtown Council commissioned an artist, Michael Brown, to paint a mural on the full wall of one of the buildings adjoining a narrow alleyway just off the main street. The wall is roughly the length of an ordinary Manhattan apartment building that faces either north or south, which makes the mural nearly half the length of an uptown–downtown Manhattan block. Cream and black on a gray wall, the mural that Brown designed and painted, along with his apprentice and local school children, depicts the joie de vivre of a procession, whose participants are towners and gowners, from the past and the present. Its catalogue name for the purpose of town records is Mural #12, but villagers call it “Parade.”

Most of the academicians are puffed up with cheerful pomposity, just as some shopkeepers give the air of great importance. But, really, the whole town is there: political activists, clergy, football players, cheerleaders, cops, firefighters, city officials, kids (some with spiked hair; others with baseball mitts; one with a violin), dads with strollers, homeless regulars, and students—blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians. It is an affirmative monument to the villagers, but I also detect some irony: that our unity is more apparent than real and our pluralism stands up only at public ceremonies.

Do we know that it is art, that is, in the sense that art is an institution? In the lower corner of “Parade,” at the end furthest from the main street is a drawing of a sink, an old double sink, dating from about the 1920s. As the casual passer-by might say, “This mural has everything and the kitchen sink!” On the sink is painted, “R. Mutt,” the signature that Duchamp sprawled on his 1917 urinal (Fountain). Although I was pleased with myself that I recognized this reference—a credit to my art history professors—I missed others, including one to Judy Chicago, prominent feminist artist and craftsperson. (She is in drag, so to speak.) The giveaway, Brown told me, is that she wears a baseball shirt with a Cubs logo, suggesting perhaps that public roles and public display trump conviction; or if the allusion is to Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe it might suggest that feminists are more authentic than commercialized sex goddesses. (Whatever. The joke provokes.)

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