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THE MARGIN MOVES TO THE MIDDLE

"An artist is a precious vessel who should preserve himself alive," said Motherwell. Was a real man talking like this? What was a real man. Wasn't Motherwell real? My blond friend from California, who looked as he had just come off a tennis court, might have been the ideal American male of the time: self-possessed, firm and practical, a business man or at least a professional. Red, white and blue corpuscles reacted and my starred and striped conscience was troubled. Art for whose sake? Goering had said, "When I hear the word Culture I reach for my revolver," and Hitler, resentful over his failure as an academic watercolorist, had coined the name Degenerate Art for all his unreachable pinnacles.

The image of my blond friend went spinning on his pedestal, and my thoughts about masculinity, America and the arts started to rearrange themselves.

It was the spring of 1942 and we had been discussing whether it was proper for us not to be in the army helping our contemporaries to rid the world of Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito.

Numerous precious vessels from Europe had reached safety in New York and André Breton, their major spokesman, was spreading the word that art might be a peculiar ego trip but it was in any case a spiritual rather than an artisan activity. Oratorical and evangelical he took it for granted that art required a priesthood of theorists and critics like himself. Mind and heart were the issues, rather than eyes and hands.

Out of Old World darkness, escorted by that unlikely guardian angel, Peggy Guggenheim, had flown a whole plane load of artists and writers. New York was now an outpost of Europe instead of a bridgehead toward European culture.

Peggy Guggenheim, on the run from her proper well-to-do New York family, had been active in London and Paris as a gallery owner and collector. Her particular mentor was the critic Herbert Read, who introduced her to the art world, and with her first husband, Lawrence Vail, she frequented writers like Kay Boyle, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett and James Joyce.

In the United States the arts were still suspect, and like sex were considered a private affair. The émigrés tended however to ignore the dominant Anglo-Saxon strain in American life and to single out the Indians and the Blacks for attention. Jacques Lipchitz and his wife Berthe discovered Father Divine. On arrival in New York their first goal was an evening in Harlem chez Fazère Deveen whom they had heard about in Paris. The black preacher, the chanted responses of his congregation and the convivial platters of fried chicken and yams were the acme of exoticism.

Somewhat like colonists in imperialist days, the surrealists settled around Washington Square, in Greenwich Village. The native artists had not been ignorant of what was going on in Paris and the new arrivals were seen as rather heroic protagonists of the arts. Though Mark Rothko later remarked that their legend scarcely survived their arrival in person on the streets of New York. But the Village at the time was cheap, and seemingly European in atmosphere. In fact that is why it was already populated by American artists and writers. The notable mosaicist, Jeanne Reynal, prominent among the native residents, was a close friend of the painter Gorky and his American wife, whom he had exotically renamed Magouche - from Agnes. And they were among the first to create a social life that included the newcomers.

The Village also had its attraction for young uptowners, like Motherwell and myself who were studying at Columbia University and were in our twenties. The complement of foreign males who had arrived from Europe averaged around forty or more.

The dominant personality was Breton, a full-bodied man with a big head banked with wavy hair, who had a deliberate histrionic manner. He would stand up, put one foot forward and declaim -

statements or lines of poetry - accompanying himself with elocutionary gestures. I imagined this repertory as going back to sessions of the States-General during the French Revolution. It seemed appropriate that we should meet at the Lafayette cafe. The Brevoort, with its Dutch associations, cast us even further back into American history.

The group, which quickly found a reason for being in the launching of a magazine called VVV (for Victory! Victory! Victory!) included only four native Americans. Besides Motherwell and myself there were David Hare, a wonderful looking dry-faced sculptor with Struwelpeter hair and a piercingly distracted expression, and Bernard Reis, a cordial certified public accountant, lawyer and patron of the arts. It was Reis who put up the money for the magazine and explained that in wartime the editor-in-chief had to be an American citizen.

Breton undoubtedly thought that a youthful window-dressing editorial team of Motherwell and myself could not give him any trouble, so we were made joint editors. Our surrealist glory did not last for even one issue of VVV but the months of preparation opened horizons on the imagination, the war and masculinity.

Peggy Guggenheim's plane load of protagonists of the arts and intellect had included her second husband, Max Ernst, who was generally silent during Breton's meetings but visually present. He looked like the American bald eagle on the Great Seal of the United States, flown in somehow from Europe. At the Guggenheim house on the East River, where the VVV group frequently spent their evenings, Ernst sat enthroned in an armchair with a theatrically high back that gave him an odd dimension, as if he had undergone the shrinking process described in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Among the younger 'Europeans' was the Chilean, Matta Echaurren, who had studied architecture with Le Corbusier in Paris, but then had become a painter. He was the liveliest member of the group, galvanically in movement as he spewed torrents of words. Taking Breton's appeals to 'magic' literally, he went on about astrology and the black arts. But it was his political stance that subsequently embroiled us with the F.B.I.. Out of foresightedness or perhaps contrariety he was anti-Stalinist, and vociferously partisan for Trotsky's Fourth International. As we were allied with the U.S.S.R. in the war against the Axis, that position was considered subversive and all of us who were involved with VVV found that our friends and neighbors were being questioned to ascertain our loyalty.

Ernst and Matta were the extremes of temperament in the group. Marcel Duchamp always preferred the role of quiet observer or direct conversation with one or two interlocutors, whereas Nicolas Calas, the Greek art theorist and writer who had lived in Paris, was a highly verbal participant with a penchant for coining phrases. It was he who said: "Marcel Duchamp is Picasso's guilty conscience."

These members were always present. The rest of the panorama shifted occasionally to include the poet Duit, the painters Baziotes, Gorky and Yves Tanguy, the display-case master Joseph Cornell, the gallery men Pierre Matisse and Julian Levy, the sculptor Alexander Calder and Frederick Kiesler. Pocket-sized but full of brilliant personality, the architect Kiesler designed the gallery Peggy Guggenheim opened in New York. Art of This Century was the most unusual space of its kind in the city. The paintings shown against curved walls were held out on the ends of baseball-bat shafts.

In the company around Breton the men predominated as protagonists. Of course Peggy Guggenheim played a leading role, but also had a family life revolving around Max Ernst, her daughter Pegeen Vail and her Junoesque sister Hazel McKinley. Art of This Century made an impact on the New York art world with the exhibition of Jackson Pollock. Successive shows launched William Baziotes and Motherwell and a group of women artists. The notion of categorizing artists as women was criticized. If artists could be grouped by sex, why not by skin color or geography, some asked ironically.

Peggy Guggenheim, though, was not the only art patron and hostess on the scene. Becky Reis, Bernard's wife, migrated from her Venetian salon - on Central Park West - complete with striped gondola mooring poles, where the Reises had concentrated on American representational painting,

to a moderne house on the East Side with a collection that ranged from Campigli to early Dali, Tanguy, Brancusi, Giacometti and imposing African and pre-Columbian sculpture.

Bernard, as I've said, was the practical propellant behind VVV, and the Reises' daughter Barbara, an alluring contemporary of ours, had introduced Motherwell to Kurt Seligmann, the Swiss surrealist, in whose studio on Bryant Square she was an apprentice painter. Motherwell joined her there after Meyer Schapiro, our professor of art history at Columbia Graduate School, advised him to leave Academe for the practice of art. Indeed his early paintings showed metaphysical-surrealist street scenes, and some of his portraits made his friends look like Venetian senators of the Renaissance. Nothing makes a group cohere better than an enemy. Stalin had Trotsky, among others, and Breton had Dali, among others. Former friends make the greatest enemies and Dali, precipitated from surrealist star to fallen angel, had been expelled from the movement long before his great success in New York.

For the press at the time the arts were minor back-page news, but Dali made front-page headlines by throwing a bathtub through a show window at Bonwit Teller's department store on Fifth Avenue. One of the first artists to bridge the great divide that then still separated commercial art from high Art, he had aroused the indignant scorn of Breton, who labeled him Avida Dollars, an anagram of his name calculated to insult. And Calas pronounced that "Dali is the authentic falso Vermeer." Dali, having acquired a court of his own, and living with his wife Gala in a luxurious uptown hotel, did not noticeably regret his past life as a bohemian Breton groupie. Bonwit Teller commissioned him to design a surrealist display, but staff window dressers altered his composition, which included plastic mannequins and a bathtub - an echo of his rainy taxi with passenger and snails at the Paris surrealist exhibition in 1938.

In his rage over the tampering with his creation he crashed the bathtub through the plate glass and became even more of a celebrity than his exotic garb, walking stick, theatrical expressions and comically oratorical nonstop talk had already made him. His showmanship anticipated Performance and Body Art by an entire generation.

In Breton's group Leonora Carrington and Catherine Yarrow were among the few women protagonists, though everyone was married or mated. They spent much of their time, however, on householdry, as did Jacqueline and Pajarito, the wives respectively of Breton and Matta. In Matta's sitting room in an old house in the Village, his wife had varnished the floorboards in chrome yellow, and that set off a wave of floor painting, creating memorable images such as that of Carrington and Yarrow on their knees chanting that they were a coven of witches doing women's work, as they swung their paint brushes.

The women dressed in keeping with the men's ethnic interests, so they tended toward leather skirts, drndls and barbaric jewelry-bear-claw necklaces and heavy Indian or African bracelets and anklets. They were so distinctive that Catherina Yarrow, ceramicist, when she went uptown to see her dealer or her analyst would speak about putting on her disguise, which meant any kind of conventional attire.

In Breton's apartment around the corner from Washington Square, his wife Jacqueline, who it was said had been an équilibriste in a circus, arranged a swing and trampoline for her exercises, in the midst of a plethora of luxuriant house plants that filled the place from floor to ceiling. Probably there was nothing personal in Breton's fantasy, which recurred during the various meetings, of an ideal woman without a head, arms or legs - une femme tronç - that could be kept on a stand like a useful esthetic object. It was hard to understand why he wanted to do without arms and legs. Breton's intellectuality and creativity evidently did not spare him from coinciding with familiar American macho attitudes.

Women seemed to have a more equal standing at William Stanley Hayter's engraving studio, the Atelier 17, where André Masson, Mirò and many of the émigrés gathered convivially to work on their plates. But Bill Hayter, who was married to the American sculptor Helen Phillips, was an all-around egalitarian. The arts are solitary occupations, but recluses like Pontorno and the Paris—rejected Cezanne have been rare. Some artists have held princely court, like Raphael, Velazquez,

Rubens, Reynolds, Whistler and Dali. Most others have found support in groups or movements, flying off in their own direction when success has come their way.

The artisan camaraderie at Atelier 17 was more in the contemporary American spirit of the arts, as a kind of manual labor than the climate of inspiration, magic and high prestige the émigrés had brought with them.

Exceptions were Leger, who posed as a rough peasant from Brittany; Gorky with the literary claims of his adopted name reinforced by a reiterated appeal to the 'poetry' of bread, wine and trees; or De Kooning who was apt to see himself more as a house painter and merchant mariner than as an artist - until he had had a few drinks.

Gorky had a special position between the two currents. Of all the artists Breton met in the United States he was most impressed by the Armenian transplanted in New York where he had worked out a personal expression based on forms acquired from Picasso. The result was something familiar but also new, and his influence was overwhelming on the surrealist painters, in particular Matta, but also on the American artists who were ready to open new horizons. At the same time he steered clear of the surrealist salon polish and playfulness and kept to his part of the simple man with simple tastes. Hayter also made something of a mystique of the common touch, and would explain how his carpenter had responded immediately to one of his abstract prints or paintings, and this at a time when middlebrow people often asked, "Do you understand Picasso?"

After evenings listening to Breton holding forth or playing *Cadavre Exquis*, the surrealists' round game where the company takes turns adding to a drawing concealed after each contribution by folding back the paper, and then at the end unfolding the sheet to reveal the collective random composition, a few hours at the Atelier 17 seemed closer to reality.

Motherwell and I in mid-December thought to make prints to use for Christmas cards. We were pleased with the results which were surrealist in inspiration, and on Christmas Eve presented them to Breton. To our chagrin he flew into a terrible declamatory rage, flung the prints to the floor and shouted that he had been battling the bourgeoisie all his life. And there was nothing more bourgeois than Christmas celebrations. He had nourished two vipers in his bosom, vipers with a bourgeois mentality. He pointed to the door with a dramatic gesture, decreeing our expulsion.

Cast as middleclass crocks rather than precious vessels, we were stripped of our unreal joint editorship, and only after a quarantine interval were we allowed to continue frequenting the group. David Hare took over as editor, and my concern about the artist as outside or above mundane issues become a preoccupation.

Motherwell had a dispensation from the Army because of his allergy to certain foods, like sardines. None of the others seemed to be the right age for soldiering - or had wives and children - except for the poet Duit. He was advised to grow his hair long and seem odd enough for the draft board to reject him. I consulted my friends Kiesler and Héliou, the heroic painter who had escaped from a Prussian prisoner of war camp after the French defeat by the Nazis. When they spoke about the war and what the fighting was about they sounded as if they were addressing reality.

I decided to join the Army because I could not think of any good reason why I should stay out. The evening I told Breton that I was going into uniform, he looked at me with an ironic expression and said, "Vous voulez participer a cette bêtise, mais je dois dire que ça c'est con".

As Yeats put it, "Was there ever dog that praised his fleas?" It was Yeats, in a celebrated poem that expressed one of the main concerns of our century, who was troubled that the center might not hold. He need not have worried: the margin often moves to the middle.

Milton Gendel