**Slow (fast) modern**

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A friend of Mondrian's once asked him to suggest a title for a new "little magazine" he was planning to publish. "Stop!," the painter proposed, "because everything goes too fast." This is wholly in character, at least for the Mondrian of 1921–31, a period during which one of his aesthetic goals in painting was to freeze time, to reach utter "repose," obtain a static "universal" equilibrium in which everything would be neutralized, every force cancelled out by its opposite. (From 1932 on, on the contrary, starting with his adoption of the "double line," he reversed course and sought to exalt dynamism in his work, complaining that the canvases of his so-called "classical" neo-plastic period did not have enough "jazz" in them.)

Stop or, at least, slow down. Very few forces within contemporary life ever demand that we do so. And when they do, it's only for a very short time: just enough for us to notice the change in pace and then go on with our busy existences. Filmmakers long ago ascertained the efficacy of slow motion as a form of emphasis. They make use of it much as a writer places a word in italics. Right from the start, even in the most experimental forms of cinema, slow motion sequences have always been brief accents interrupting a staccato continuum of discontinuous shots. (Films shot in real time remain scarce and continue to be perceived as bordering on the sadistic. Long takes have become an ever rarer treat. More and more films are conceived as extended trailers.) Barely two minutes of slow motion are assigned to the funeral march in René Clair’s 1924 *Entracte* (one of the longest such film segments ever); less than a minute for the childrens’ procession after their pillow fight in Jean Vigo’s 1933 *Zéro de conduite* (*Zero for Conduct*). The exception would be Warhol’s *Empire*, but there slow motion is perversely unnoticeable. Adding insult to injury, the eight-hour single take film in which (almost) nothing ever happens was shot at twenty-four images per second and projected at sixteen. And even Warhol allowed his viewers to leave their seat. (How many ever stayed for the whole projection? Perhaps on a dare?) As for the countless videos exploiting the spectacular/sentimental effect of the super-slow (e.g., the slo-mo sublime—or is it a form of kitsch?—of Bill Viola’s works, with their New Age overtones), we are rarely subjected to them for extended periods. We glance at them in passing, hopping from one gallery to the next in a city’s art district, paying an occasional


2. Ibid., 39.
visit to the media wing of a museum, racing through the hubbub of a Biennale. Designers of television ads know this well: slow is excellent, but only in small doses. Speed is a necessary corollary to the monitor's flatness, to the binary reduction of anything visual to a common denominator: the digit of the pixel.

Can an artwork rebel against the fast flow of art tourism? Can an artwork force us to alter our viewing habits? I would like to make a plea for a venerable practice declared dead every twenty years or so during the past century: namely, painting. Certainly any picture is vulnerable to the mad rush of the average museum-goer, encouraged in his or her haste by a commercial strategy aimed at the infinite growth of ticket sales. And certainly, there too, the rules of the game can undergo change in exceptional circumstances, to very powerful effect.

Leo Steinberg once told me that, during World War II, the treasures of the National Gallery in London had been moved to a secret warehouse in the countryside but that, responding to complaints on the part of a frustrated public, the powers that be decided to dig out and bring back to London one painting at a time. Each work remained on view, in splendid solitude, for a full month. It is then and there, no doubt, that Steinberg, determined to make the most of the slim pickings that were on hand, acquired his phenomenal visual prowess. More recently T. J. Clark submitted himself to the daily routine of looking at two paintings by Poussin during a six-month period, offering us, in the formidable diary of his quotidian observations, the most exacting confirmation that patience pays off. Read Clark's remarks about the miniature figures in Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake: on how, barely visible, they continue to register once they have been seen.¹ Or this, about a particular passage of Landscape with a Calm:

Poussin is among other things the painter of the unnoticeable: and the ethics of this has to do with precisely not using the unnoticeable as a place in the picture where mere illusionism can stop and a demonstration of power or facility take over . . . The hillside is insignificant, and that's what has to be painted.²

It is evident that in order to notice Poussin's Lilliputian creatures or to end up musing about the "accurate likeness of the unnoticeable" in his work, Clark had to decelerate his gaze. A self-imposed constraint, just as Steinberg's was in part prompted by historical circumstances.


2. Ibid., 39.
I dubbed such feats of prolonged attention exceptions. But what if slowness were to become the rule? What if the standard limit of one-minute-maximum per canvas that is forced upon us in today's museums were to become its monstrous violation?

Poussin seems a good place to start. And here another anecdote comes to mind. In 1994, stunned by my friend Rosalind Krauss's admission that she had never really liked Poussin, I organized a visit with her to the mammoth retrospective of the painter then being held at the Grand Palais in Paris. Upon entering the first gallery, we found that it was very dimly lit and inferred that the weak lighting had something to do with the fact that the museum was closed to the public. The second gallery, by contrast, was bustling with a crowd of photographers and TV reporters whose blinding projectors were flooding the paintings with light. "Help!" one was bound to exclaim, but we did not and, instead, quickly bypassed this anomalously bright room. Our eyes had already adjusted to the subdued lighting: the harsh, incandescent rays cast on Poussin's canvases by the technical crew felt like an act of aggression.

For several hours we wandered through the exhibition, looking at each painting at considerably greater length than we could have during an ordinary day when the museum was open. Little by little we came to understand that our anomalous pace had little to do with the privileged circumstances of our visit. Rather, it was Poussin's works themselves, for once seen in the faint (mostly natural) light for which they had been painted, that had forced us to accommodate our gaze: to fully experience the amazing subtlety by which the artist modulates speed in his paintings, harnessing various degrees of perceptual velocity to narrative ends. We realized, that is, that Poussin constructs his scenes with an acute sense of how our eyes react to variations of hues and values. More often than not he sets up two extreme speeds—very fast and very slow—with few gradations in between. We are first struck in a flash by an assortment of planes of saturated color (usually bright, usually primary). Then, once this first pictorial assault has subsided, we come to gradually appreciate the gentle invitation of the darker browns and greens filling the rest of the picture, from which emerge, slowly decanted, first one, then another, then yet another figure; and it is this last character who surfaces from the dissipating darkness who sometimes emerges as the key to solving the riddle of the obscure tale the painting purports to tell. It would have been no exaggeration to say that my faith in Poussin was redoubled if it hadn't already reached a pinnacle; but, more importantly, my companion too had become a convert. A week after the
visit I found out, upon reading a review of the show, that the dimming of the lights at the Grand Palais had nothing to do with our being there on a day of closure. On the contrary, it had been a deliberate choice on the part of the curator, Pierre Rosenberg, for which he was routinely panned in the press. I sent him a fan letter.

The point of this anecdote? Some paintings demand that we slow down. They put us in an either/or situation: either you proceed at the speed they require, or you’ll see nothing that is specific to the works in question, nothing specific to their medium. Sure, you might perceive the images they contain, but at such a low level of differentiation a photograph would do just as well as a painting. Nothing much happens if you slow down in front of an art book’s glossy page or a screen on which is projected the pixelated reproduction of, say, an “ultimate” painting by Ad Reinhardt.

How do some paintings deflect the ever-growing demand for speedy consumption? What forces you to go at snail’s pace when looking at a small genre scene by Edouard Vuillard, a still-life by Giorgio Morandi, a monochrome wax painting by Brice Marden, a penciled grid by Agnes Martin, or certain Rothkos? (Of course you can ignore the injunction: it’s a free country, you are free to proceed as you please. But zoom by these works and you’ll get very little out of them. Swines like pearls too, but what a waste.) In what way do such paintings post a speed limit sign upon their surface? Do they have something in common? Pousson provides a clue: they incorporate the duration of perception into their aesthetic structure. Low hue and value contrasts dictate subdued lighting conditions—a 1965 “black” Reinhardt under floodlight is nothing much more than a black square—and weak light, in turn, dictates slow adjustments on the part of our gaze. Rothko always turned out the lights whenever he ventured in a gallery or a museum showing his work. (They were inevitably put back on by the dealer or curator as soon as he had left the premises.) Distance too, or, rather, the lack thereof, plays an important role: all of the works mentioned entreat us to come close (and this is true even of Rothkos). One has to be able to sniff the wax of a Marden in order to perceive the glacial pulse of the underlayers and feel their effect on the unnameable epidermic color; one must be on the verge of touching the matte surface of a Vuillard in order to hear its murmur; one must notice the many inflections of Martin’s penciled lines in order to witness the transformation they enact of a cloud into a grid.9

I have suggested that some paintings demand that we slow down. As a matter of fact, most do, at least implicitly. (This makes the rare exceptions all the more striking: Steinberg long ago noted that

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Kenneth Noland’s pictures of the late sixties—those elongated horizontal canvases striped edge to edge with bands of colors—were the fastest he knew; and one could, of course, add many Warhols from the same period. But perhaps it would be better to say that some paintings explicitly force us to decelerate. In this day and age, I consider them among the strongest agents of resistance against the growing desensitization of human subjectivity promoted by the so-called digital revolution. It is not by chance that their singularity, long ignored, has now come to the attention of conservators and prompted historians to seek the advice of colleagues whom they used to ignore. These works are fragile, but their very fragility is one of the very few monkey wrenches left at our disposal for purposes of defending a sensibility and sensitivity to the fine-grained.