

Letters

GREENBERG VS. KRAUSS

To the Editors:

One has to wonder about the purpose of Raphael Rubinstein's "Critical Overhaul" in the May issue of *Art in America*. Clement Greenberg, who figures large in the accompanying article [a facsimile of Rosalind Krauss's 1974 critique of the powerful critic for removing paint from several David Smith sculptures after the artist's death], died 19 years ago. I still remember Mr. Greenberg's refusal to condemn a colleague: "Don't speak ill of the dead," he said. "They are not here to defend themselves."

And yet Mr. Rubinstein made a cowardly attack against Mr. Greenberg, culminating with, "For many readers, Greenberg's recourse to sexism and patronizing 'wit' (what Krauss, in her subsequent reply, referred to as the 'sliminess of his learning') simply confirmed that his social manners were as outdated as his critical position."

How can learning be slimy? Since this remark doesn't have a clear meaning, it is merely an insinuation, a slur by a writer who doesn't have the courage to come right out and say someone is "slimy." It's disheartening that Mr. Rubinstein thinks this is a really sharp remark.

Mr. Greenberg was, in fact, a brilliant man with tremendous intellectual range: he wrote not only about art but about Franz Kafka, T.S. Eliot and Immanuel Kant. In fact, his first credit as a writer was translating Kafka's "Josephine the Singer" from German to English.

Where are Mr. Greenberg's 1978 letters of retort? It's surprising that Ms. Krauss's pejorative article was reprinted without these two responses. It would be normal, a matter of course, to publish Mr. Greenberg's riposte. What possible reason could there be for not doing so? I am requesting now that the entire correspondence be reproduced in full, as the Krauss article was.

Mr. Greenberg's legacy is a bright spot in American art history. Ms. Krauss's negative article and Mr. Rubinstein's recent endorsement of it tell us more about those who wrote these pieces than about the man they attempted to defame. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "A man cannot speak but he judges himself. With his will, or against his will, he draws his portrait to the eye of his companion by every word."

Pat Lipsky
New York

Raphael Rubinstein replies:

"How can learning be slimy?" Pat Lipsky asks. In fact, to my profound embarrassment, Rosalind Krauss never accused Clement Greenberg of any "sliminess" of learning. Her phrase, woefully misread by me, was "slimness of his learning." Mea culpa! I guess this slip calls for a little auto-analysis. Why, looking at a somewhat

fuzzy scan of the original magazine page, did I imagine an extra "i" in slimness? Because I needed a new pair of glasses? Or because I was shocked at how Greenberg used a Latin tag to draw attention to the fact that his accusers were women? Of what possible relevance was Rosalind Krauss and Elizabeth Baker's gender to the matter at hand? I suspect that Greenberg, *olav ha-shalom*, resorted to Latin, rather than making his weak joke in English, because he knew it was in poor taste, even in long-ago 1978, to insinuate that women were inherent nuisances in intellectual fields. The great man victimized by pestering females is also evoked in Greenberg's infamous comment (recalled, much later, by Krauss), "Spare me smart Jewish girls with their typewriters." Lipsky accuses me of a "cowardly attack" on Greenberg because I quote Krauss's condemnation rather than making it myself. Now it turns out that it was only me, not Krauss, who insulted the great critic. I offer my sincerest apologies to Krauss for my misquotation, yet I still feel that Greenberg's invocation of Classical learning was, if not "slimy," at the very least unacceptable.

March-April 1978

At the end of a letter on a separate topic, Clement Greenberg added the following:

P.S. I can't resist taking this occasion to correct another set of items that appeared in the pages of your magazine—in its Sept-Oct number of 1974. It was in an article by Rosalind Krauss about the white primer I had taken off five of David Smith's sculptures some time after his death. I quote Dr. Krauss, this time from her Smith *catalogue raisonné*, published in 1977:

There are three *Primo Pianos*, all originally painted white. Smith had intended for [*sic*] these sculptures to be polychrome. At the time of his death they were still in the fields at Bolton Landing near his house, sitting covered with their blank coats of white primer, waiting for Smith to visualize the appropriate colors for them.

"Primo Piano III" was among the five Smith pieces from which I had coats of primer removed (by the same hand that had put them on). The four others were covered with the same "blank" alkyd white. "Lunar Arc" of 1961 was among them; it had once had an ocher priming, but at the time of the artist's death it was found with a covering of alkyd white that, as in the four other cases, had started to rub off under your hand. What was brushed on all five of these sculptures after the removal of the primer & after their rust-scaling (following Smith's own procedure) was a transparent & colorless metal sealant of the kind Smith himself had used (taken from cans he'd left in his shop).

Dr. Krauss's prose in her 1974 article is of the kind that often goes along with bad faith ("flouting of our ignorance,"

“riot of color,” “impairment of integrity,” “heroic poet of steel,” a “dismay” that’s “Parallel,” etc., etc.).

Whoever did the editorial introduction to Dr. K.’s article suffered from the bad eyesight that likewise often accompanies bad faith. He or she refers to the “opaque brown paint” covering some of those primer-stripped Smiths. And also writes of the “crisp, assertive, light-reflecting white or yellow painted shapes & surfaces, etc., etc.”

What did Plautus say? That *Mulieres duas peiores esse quam unam*.

Rosalind Krauss replied:

Mr. Greenberg’s postscript repeats in print the “explanation” he has given in public, over the last three-and-a-half years, to questions about why he authorized changes to be made posthumously in the work of David Smith. That explanation turns on the word “primer.” At the time of Smith’s death, eight of his large-scale sculptures were left in a condition that is assumed to be unfinished, since they were covered with a solid coat of white paint. Had the artist lived, this condition might have been modified in some way now impossible to determine. Judging, however, from finished examples of Smith’s sculpture, the options range from one solid color, to black planes contrasted with white ones, to a more elaborate kind of polychromy. The white primer is thus a stage on the way to the completion of a painted sculpture. As such it is an important step in the transformation of a raw steel surface into a surface of very different esthetic quality.

When Mr. Greenberg uses the word “primer” he seems to want to persuade his audience that the sculptures in question were left in some kind of unsightly state, like a bridge covered in red-lead before its final coat has been applied. Rather than leave the works in this condition of unfinish, he is implying, it is better to strip them clean. But stripping the sculptures, in the case of these Smiths, is to take them one step further backward in the process of finishing, *not* in some mysterious way to complete them. And worse, because it effaces the evidence that these works were meant to be painted, *were in fact already painted*—since primer, whether it is “alkyd,” or oil-base, or metallic, or whatever, is still paint—this action misrepresents the original esthetic intentions of the artist. To put it most simply, the issue is between paint and not-paint, rather than between primer and something else.

Although this has little to do with the esthetic and ultimately moral issues that are involved in changing, and thereby misrepresenting, the work of a dead artist, it is interesting to note that the lack of “finish” did not prevent the estate from selling, with Mr. Greenberg’s consent as executor, two of the works in “primer:” *Primo Piano I* to David Mirvish, and *Two Circles Two Crows* to Baron Lambert for the Banque Lambert.

In the original article on this subject, of which Mr. Greenberg was in no way the focus, I restricted my discussion to the esthetic and critical questions surrounding polychromed sculpture. These have partially to do with public taste (the business about “flouting our ignorance” is part of a laudatory description of Jean Luc Godard’s presentation of garishly colored casts of Greek sculpture in the film *Contempt*); and more importantly, they concern the formal distinctions Smith himself was making by dividing his

work into natural steel and painted metal sculpture. An action taken by someone other than the artist to blur or confuse those distinctions represents “an impairment of the integrity of the oeuvre of a major artist,” as I said in that article. In the context in which it was used, “integrity” obviously refers to the state of being whole, undiminished or intact. It does not carry the moral charge that Mr. Greenberg wishes to impute to it by the truncated quotation he puts in his letter. All of his quotations, including the one from the editorial introduction to my essay, operate the same way. But quoting out of context is an old and dreary practice that would be annoying if it did not also occasionally provide one with humor.

Mr. Greenberg’s final shot is one of those latter cases.

Plautus placed the remark, “two women are worse than one” (itself a misquotation from Aristophanes), near the end of his farce *Curculio*, in the mouth of a self-serving and cunning trickster whose machinations have just been unmasked—by a woman. But Plautus clearly meant for the audience to see through this character’s remark. It not only betrays the preposterousness of his outrage, but also the slimness of his learning. Plautus, it seems, knew a vulgar line when he quoted one.

[As to the editorial introduction to the David Smith piece, it said “*looks like* (itals. added) shiny, opaque brown paint”; it also said the coating looked like gravy. And it did. —Ed.]

May-June 1978

Clement Greenberg replied:

Dr. Krauss is a case. Why didn’t she mention, in her 1974 article in your pages, that the paint stripped off those five Smiths was a primer? And why didn’t she argue then, as she does now, about the “process of finishing”? The people who bought the two Smiths with the primer still on were told that it was primer, & that it would be left to their discretion what to do about that. Again, I’ll take it upon myself to speak for a dead artist: Smith would hate to know that those seven sculptures stayed covered with that alkyd white.

Dr. Krauss’s prose. It comes out the same in context as out of context. (How unscrupulous she makes me sound.) The past participle used as adjective is a good test of the appropriateness of a verb in relation to its object. Let’s try saying the “impaired integrity of the oeuvre, of the whole work, of the wholeness of the work.” Nor can any amount of context do much for “flouting our ignorance,” “riot of color,” “heroic poet of steel,” or “dismays” that are “parallel.” . . . The Plautus quotation: since when did the source or original context of a quotation “impair” its aptness. Dr. Krauss knows better.

I mustn’t forget the Editor & the acuteness of her vision. She says that the color of the primer-stripped, rust-scaled, & varnished Smiths looked like “gravy.” She would have to say the same of most of Smith’s unpainted steel pieces as he left them. I’ll mention again the “crisp, assertive, light-reflecting white or yellow painted shapes & surfaces” of which she wrote three years ago. Smith’s white primer—not to mention the other that got painted over before his death—is as crisp & reflects about as much light as chicken down.

Bad faith, bad faith. ○

Art in America welcomes correspondence from its readers. All letters are subject to editing and condensation. E-mail: aiaceditor@brantpub.com.