Alice Neel and Others
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Column: The Art Scene

Alice Neel and Others

By Charles Molesworth

The history of the contemporary is not an oxymoron, or even a conundrum. It's more complicated than that. Obviously our desire to tell the stories of our recent lives doesn't have a twenty-five or thirty year "delay" mechanism. It's an ongoing impulse, and so we begin narrating before the chain of events has concluded, even if, Penelope-like, we will have to rearrange things later on. In fact, rearranging might be what those deep impulses are ultimately concerned with; getting the emphasis absolutely right, or leaving out certain details, is the only way we can obtain a taste of justice. If people seldom trust one another's memoirs, they nevertheless always renew the vow to tell their own as truthfully as they can. So the history of the contemporary launches us into the flow of history like a missile sent into deep space; one or two mistaken degrees of variation at the start and we won't even know what galaxy we're in. Our hunger for vindication runs so strongly that we rejoice when we see the people and causes we admire come to enjoy their "rightful" place in the large account of things. Living well is a decent revenge, but hearing the stories of good people told well is even sweeter.

This is doubly true for the stories we tell about artists. Many artists' biographies borrow a redemptive template from hagiography: early commitment to an ideal, marked by a "sign"; overwhelming odds and bitter defeat, occasioned by or leading to ostracism; eventual reversal, with

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just the right mixture of chance and inevitability. The triumph of an achieved style or the esthetic rightness of subject matter serves as the signifying agent in the matter. (For formalists, the style and subject matter justify the life; for others, the life validates the style.) These are all hallowed intellectual and discursive structures, and are seldom questioned. But occasionally — as in the recent press treatment, the celebration, really , of Alice Neel—the predictability of the approach raises some suspicions.

The main episodes of her remarkable life were widely reported: early years in a small Pennsylvania town, with a fairly standard art-school training and middle class background; the marriage to a Cuban and the death of her first child; the arrival in New York and the start of a Bohemian existence complete with love affairs and political causes; the nervous breakdown and affair with a sailor, Kenneth Doolittle, who destroyed a great many of her paintings (for reasons never spelt out); time spent on WPA projects; the neglect and threadbare existence during years in East Harlem raising two sons in the 1940's and '50's; the eventual reemergence into the art world in the 1960's; and the final lionizing as the portraitist of fellow art-world figures, from all strata and sensibilities. Feminism played a significant part in the reemergence, but a fierce commitment to a style and subject allows those who embrace formalist values to appreciate her work as much as those who see in her life a social fable of our times. No doubt, contrasted with ambitious but shallow artists in the eighties, or more recent bright but brief careers, Neel is an exemplar of tenacity and courage.

But the facts remain: her style tends to be more derivative than driven. Placed against the benchmarks of high modernism, it looks altogether tame. Many of the people she paints are far from psychologically revealed, again if compared to the highest standards of portraiture through the ages. Often the depictions of her subjects are closer to those of a society portraitist than a social activist. Referring to her, as some in the press did, as "making some of the 20th century's best paintings," seems so overblown that some will blush and others will wonder what they are missing as they wander through the Whitney Museum's retrospective of seventy-five paintings, and a dozen or so works on paper.[1]

That said, however, the show has much to offer. The Whitney mounted a one-woman retrospective of Neel's portraits as far back as

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1974, just a few years before her election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the bestowal of a medal from a national woman's group by President Jimmy Carter in 1979. It was her portraiture that secured her fame, during the last two decades or so of her life, and then after her death in 1984. The most famous of the portraits is that of Andy Warhol (1972). Again, the story is familiar: Warhol decided to strip to the waist and thus reveal the horrendous scars that he bore as a result of Valerie Solanas's then-recent assassination attempt. The post-surgical topography, so to speak, is complicated by a girdle, worn to help support his weakened stomach muscles—altogether a Warhol-like representation, not so much in the visual sense, as in terms of the social and media mentality he had labored hard and inventively to foster. Celebrity meant hidden pain, but its glory entailed revealing that pain as a way of converting the horrific into the mundane. What we see on the canvas is the picture that is worth a thousand issues of *Interview* magazine.

But we can also make out much of what Neel mastered as she painted her portraits, for the placement of the hands and the bodily gestures and facial expressions convey enough personality and worldliness to repay study. In the case of Warhol his eyes are closed and his face is tilted upwards, rather beatifically; the pigment that renders the facial skin recalls Renaissance *putti*. He's seated on a couch that is barely depicted, and his hands are crossed on his lap, while his feet, shod in brown shoes, dangle down. His chest shows two breasts that are both prominent and somewhat shriveled, rather like those of a thin, elderly woman. He seems like an angel of death, and the angel's victim. That campy combination of weariness and innocence that marks his art has remade his body.

Neel's art was seldom in full control of spatial arrangements or anatomical details. From her early days, with her roots in social realism, she struggled with rooms and furniture. There is an early group portrait from 1933 of several members of the Russell Sage foundation around a table interviewing a homeless woman, and a "Well Baby Clinic" (1928-29) that depicts women tending babies on hospital beds. Neither is much better structured than a folk-art painting. Neel's inability or reluctance to render accurately human fingers gives an expressionist air to some of her portraits. (One thinks of the bony digits in a Schiele.) This combination of realism and expressionism becomes the basis of her style, but their fusion

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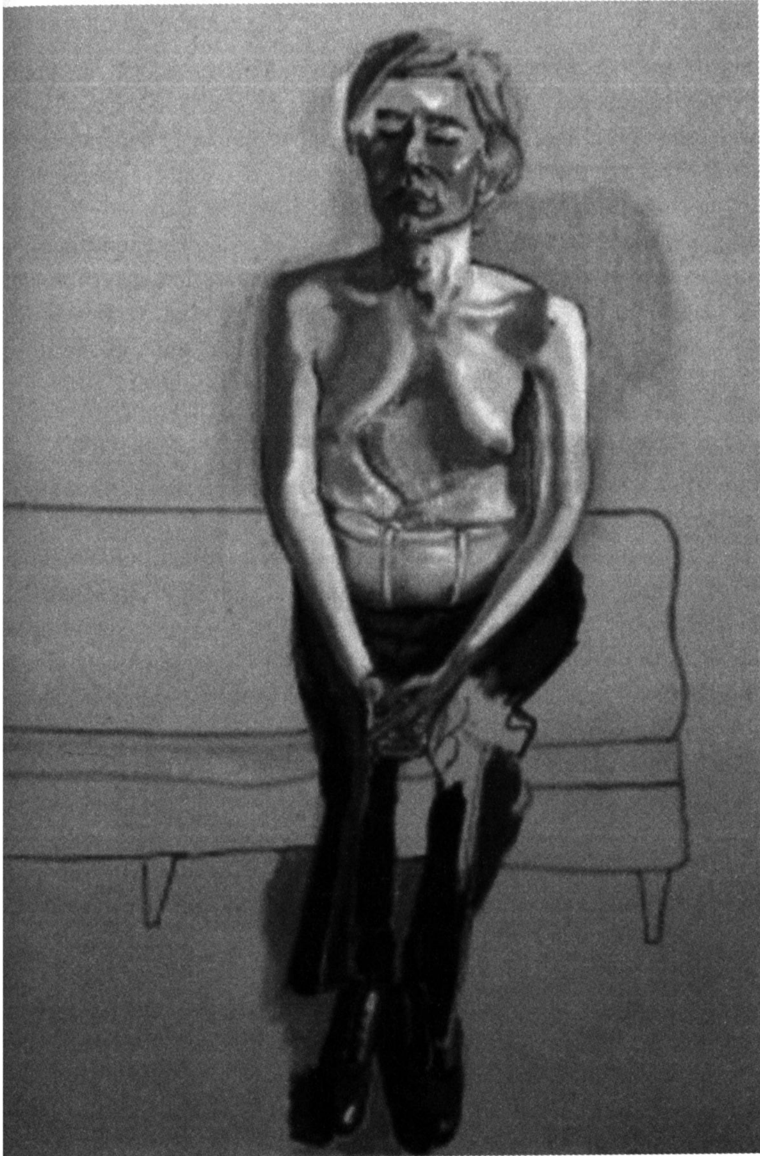

Andy Warhol
Alice Neel

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can be seen as a necessary compromise rather than a brilliant breakthrough. However, she put her limitations to capacious use. A 1931 watercolor portrait of Kenneth Doolittle shows him in an undetailed one-piece orange outfit. His face is quite demonic, especially if we recall his pyrotechnic proclivities, and his interlaced fingers have something decidedly sinister about them. Neel obviously worked on his hands and face with an art student's care, but one suspects with a certain psychological obsessiveness as well. Her gift for portraiture was present very early. She exercised it over many years, often on members of her family. I found these works not nearly as moving as those of people from the art world. One exception is a late portrait of one of her sons, in a green beret, holding her grandson, and both wearing striped shirts. It has a naturalness of pose and effect that was often missing even from those domestic portraits of family members.

Some of the earlier canvases, not much present in the Whitney show, demonstrate a rather drawn out and uncertain development of her talents and opportunities. The Whitney doesn't show enough paintings to allow us to distinguish between false starts and lucky accidents. Something called "Symbols" (1933), a flat, otherworldly work with clichéd images that seem especially jejune, proves only that her sensibility moved more surely in the direction of the empirical. "Nayda Nude" (1923), which Neel jokingly spoke of as her version of Manet's "Olympia," is not redeemed by the art-historical reference. Even later on there were blunders. "Fall Flowers on a White Table"(1947) echoes Matisse in its handling of interior space, but is otherwise unremarkable. The unmodelled face of the "Woman in a Pink Velvet Hat" (1944) is completely lacking in charm and interest. The "Last Sickness" (1953) depicts her mother just months before her death, but its grim beauty is not often evident elsewhere, since Neel was not usually adept at combining disparate emotional tones. The notorious portrait of Joe Gould from the 1930's, with its *machina triplex*, is more a curiosity than an accomplishment, because its peculiarity was not replicated or explored.

So, to narrow the range of her successes, it is only, or at least chiefly, in the art-world subjects that she achieves something truly memorable. She doesn't offer the technical razzmatazz of Chuck Close, nor the insidious monumentality of Picasso's Gertrude Stein, nor the sly

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heroicizing of Man Ray's photograph of Duchamp's profile, but she registers both a vocabulary of visual gestures and a sensibility that tell us something affecting about the subculture of painters, critics, and scholars. A young Henry Geldzahler stares out rather pompously from his sitting position, and we're reminded that he omitted Neel from "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970," the famous Metropolitan Museum show which did so much to canonize the likes of deKooning, Stella, Johns, and forty others. But that pompous *sang froid* is completely absent from the rendition of the poet and curator Frank O'Hara (1960), shown in profile and framed by purple flowers, his gaping stare suspended between amazement and stupefaction. There's also a wonderful Meyer Schapiro (1983), caught in conversation it seems, and with his scholar's face bright with intelligence and sociability.

My favorite of the art-world pictures was the 1973 double portrait of the Soyer brothers, Raphael and Moses, who were the leaders of a certain style of representational, socially informed painting that Neel learned from and integrated into her work. With many of her art-world portraits, but especially with this one, Neel becomes a historian of the contemporary. The brothers, both in their late seventies, are seated on a sofa, neither taking particular notice of the other, and posed against a plain background. Raphael looks wary and quite sad, downcast to the edge of an almost gentle despair. The fingers of his left hand cover his mouth, while his right hand grips his left elbow. One can't tell if he has a secret he chooses not to share, or if he feels he has had his say and further commentary or conversation is simply not called for. Moses appears apprehensive, his hands clasped together, perhaps puzzled by Neel herself, who talked constantly throughout her sessions with her subjects. The two men look a bit like obedient but chastised schoolboys, and at the same time suggest wise old men whose social function or utility has been deeply questioned, if not eradicated. I found the overriding effect to be quite touching, but more than a little disturbing, too. As in many great portraits, one senses that the painter has actually crafted a covert self-portrait. But here we can see even more, for the painting serves as an allegory of the fate of American social realist painting in the last third of the twentieth century.

If that allegory parses, then we can read the "Self Portrait" (1980) as a sort of last will and testament. The nude Neel, at this point an

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The Soyer Brothers
Alice Neel

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octogenarian, rhymes with her Warhol portrait, since both show us a body clothed in skin with color like a baby's, but with the shape of old age. She has faced the acidic reductions of modernism's search for transcendence —her head cocked with just a touch of skepticism, her gaze unblinking— but only to end up with a trust in the truth of surface and gesture. For Neel, impasto has been a kind of oath: I will not deal with gloss, I will not mimic subtle deviations, but I *will* paint the human body. Here we can see how the blend of expressionism and realism finds an oddly satisfactory answering subject in art-world portraits. A formalist will want to say the work is about the nature of art; a historicist will argue that it tells the story of those people who came face-to-face with new senses of representation and fame. The story probably isn't finished, but we've seen enough of its signal events over the last few decades to realize it is taking shape. One historian of art has claimed that even though the avant-garde failed in its highest aims, it succeeded enough to make it impossible for any one style or school to claim universal validity. So now a sort of representational painting has gone to the margins in order to stay alive. The figurative is dead, long live the figure!

II.

Another chapter in the history of the contemporary was written —in at least one version —by the recent show at P.S. 1, "Around 1984: A Look at Art in the Eighties," curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. It is, I'm sure, totally coincidental that 1984 was the year of Alice Neel's death. P.S. 1 doubtlessly referred instead to the symbolic meaning of the year that George Orwell's novel gave it. This reference was given a bit of drive by statements such as Christov-Bakargiev's:

> To look at art in the '80's implies observing one of the last periods during which the "center" was both the platform for and the object of discussion. At the same time, much of what is happening today has its roots in the work of the 1980's. Postmodernist relativism in fact was a theoretical legitimization for opening Western art historical narratives to other possible narratives and "histories."

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Some will hear in such claims the sort of relativism and manufacture of truth that Orwell was prophesying. Any time there is talk of a "last period" one thinks of dire diremptions, unbridgeable gulfs. But that is to succumb too readily, or too soon, to the melodramatic. Yes, the '80's had its fair share of postmodern relativists (but perhaps no more than did the '60's and '70's?), and its share of more destructive villains as well. But what the show illustrated was how good some of the art of the recent past can look, especially when displayed with the curatorial wit marshaled by Ms. Christov-Bakargiev.

The exhibit featured over forty "international" artists, which means predominantly American and European, and is the first in a series of future shows that will be devoted to specific decades. Many, in fact almost all, of the names are familiar, from the now deceased but still lauded Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, to active (and activist) feminist artists like Mary Kelly and Adrian Piper, to the notorious Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons, and including newer people whose impact seems to be gathering strength, like Robert Gober, Sophie Calle, and Ashley Bickerton. The overall impression here was that new media were definitely beginning to attract nodes of energy, that questions of representation and sexual identity were fully open, and the "social imaginary" was being scrutinized if not redefined. The issues of the "art world hustle" and the Reaganomics of the decade, with its deformed offspring of bloated reputations and obscenely bidded-up prices, were for the most part (and thankfully) shelved. The coolness of curatorial retrospect was responsible for much of this effect, though one vitrine did hold copies of the more famous publications of the decade, reminding us all that theory and artspeak flourished, and at times seemed driven to outstrip the inflationary economics of the time. But for the most part it was good just to look at the art: much of it smart, even polished, some of it still a bit edgy (more of an accomplishment than it might at first appear), and all of it modestly vying for a place in one or more of those "possible" histories.

Any single exhibit that tried to formulate and defend a thesis that articulated the politics and culture of the decade into a unified historical vision would be attacked unmercifully. Still, we want and need *some* history and so one is coming into view, however fitfully. It often sounds like an anti-history, a skeptical and sometimes exhausted non-narrative

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that pays grudging respect to the French idea of *mentalities*, or history from the least elevated viewpoint. P.S. 1 is an institution ideally suited for such a history; according to many, it is the once alternative space now embraced by the ideal hegemonic power, the MOMA that smothers. Its history of the contemporary is nevertheless likely to be worth attending to. What this show suggests, indirectly for the most part, but explicitly in some instances, is that the period of the '80's divided people into two camps: those who accepted that art had an inescapable semiotic dimension, with representation as the catch-all category for art's problems, and those who held to the tenets of high modernism, or even more established cultural idioms and styles.

Haim Steinbach's piece, "Supremely Black" (1985), put the dilemma as clearly as anything else. Why would such mundane objects as ceramic pitchers and soap boxes on a glossy shelf —almost less than Duchamp's "found objects," which had at least taken on a *bit* of nostalgic patina—be considered art? They lacked even Pop Art's insouciance, while partaking of that style's worst passive attitude towards transforming or

Supremely Black
Haim Steinbach

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transcendent values. That the boxes bore the brand name "BOLDÓ," that the shelf had what is now called a "retro" look, both in its materials and shape, that the serial nature of the objects suggested the vagaries of both production and consumption in a capitalist society: could all this *mean* something even remotely analogous to the art of the past? And Richard Prince's "Untitled #8"(1980-84), with its Marlboro cigarette image recycled as just another overly monumentalized snapshot: what did it have to tell us? What many works in this show displayed, as well as a certain semiotic polymorphism, was a high level of polish. Display was on the way to displacing play as the central cultural act.

Compressed within this new sense of display, just waiting to exfoliate, was the swelling current of oppositional art and installation works, as well as the flood tide of interest in video and the new photographic media, formats, and techniques, from Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger to Jeff Wall, Sophie Calle, and Adrian Piper. But in each of these cases a certain level of polish indicated that, though the hand was no longer present in much art-making, the surfaces were still being worked. Again, this sensation may have been heightened by the cool curatorial gathering at work. One might be forgiven for thinking there was even an impulse—albeit a weak one—to restore that lost aura Benjamin ambivalently discussed. Many new works were altogether reproducible, but some of them had such a gloss that they appeared to come at us from a distance. The question remained, was this distance the same as alienation? Or was it the sign of some sort of perverted majesty?

At least three other works deserve comment in this context. "Bus Shelter" (1984) by David Adams, a model of an outdoor installation (whether it was ever built or not I couldn't tell), slipped away from precise meaning. One of its surfaces featured a large photograph of the Rosenbergs, while another bore the Barbara Kruger-like slogan, "Recover Imitations." Did the verb in the slogan mean to say that imitations should be rescued from oblivion, or should they be once again hidden from view? What would the social world be if historical figures like the Rosenbergs adorned the public spaces of mass transportation? Was Adams showing us the limits of public art? Then there was William Kentridge's imposing charcoal drawing, a triptych called "Dreams of Europe" (1984), in which an autopsy seems to be taking place in a Belle Epoque restaurant or casino.

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Untitled #8
Richard Prince

The body in question had odd puncture wounds, possibly an allusion to Saint Sebastian, though the surrounding circumstances looked to be functioning normally. Also striking was Tony Cragg's "New Figurations" (1985), assembled of smallish plastic fragments glued directly onto the wall and shaped into a ten foot high, cursive, elongated humanoid figure with a large loop in the middle. Each of the three works had something like a crime or a grievous distortion at its center, rendered in media not traditionally used for so-called serious subjects, yet each was almost begging for our attention; their rhetoric seemed to say, "yes, look, this too is part of it." The works seemed less interested in being stylish (with the exception of the Kentridge, perhaps) than in bearing some message that couldn't be delivered other than cryptically.

There were, however, stylistic considerations to be pondered in the show, but most were structured by a dialectic of placement and juxtaposition. Perhaps this sort of discourse is the best one available at the moment. Some versions of high modernism saw it as a style based on

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refusals: the refusal of ornament, or of an imperious self, or of easy reassurances. Postmodernism goes it one better, refusing to make refusals look heroic. This leaves only the possibility of placing styles and problems in a temporary frame. For example, there was a witty high/low showdown, as the cartoonish figures in a large Keith Haring ("Untitled [September 14, 1986]"), dominated by a headless figure in the middle of its expanse, hung across the room from an equally large and brooding Anselm Kiefer, filled with ghostly absences. Jeff Koons' glass container with the three basketballs suspended in liquid was across from Rosemarie Trockel's display case ("Untitled," 1986), filled with seven clumps of metal hanging from a rack that looked like it should have held kitchen utensils. David Salle's glibly surreal "Birthday Cake with one eye" (1986) had a right hand panel that echoed Balthus, and it jostled with a Basquiat that was almost sweet, as it thrice repeated the advertising logo for a product named "Ideal." The curator's wit freshened the pieces, bringing out a wry humor that I suspect would not have been there if the works were regarded singly.

The show succeeded in its own terms, but largely because the terms were fairly open-ended. It's clearly true that there are now many possible histories, but this doesn't solve the problem of which ones are likely to prevail. All of the artists in the P.S. 1 show will not continue to be shown together or with the same sense of possible canonization. Some, like the dreadful Julian Schnabel, already seem to be sinking under the drag of their own wasted celebrity, while others, like Jeff Koons, live on chiefly as negative examples. Barbara Kruger, once an edgy artist, has a show at the Whitney that has received very little favorable press; perhaps histories of feminist art will reserve a place for her even when the avant-garde stories exclude her. The future shows on the art of specific decades will be interesting to watch, even if some viewers are likely to find them tendentious or old fashioned. Curators who do this sort of work have great opportunities, but considerable obligations as well.

They might proceed best if they would emulate the historians in ancient China, whom Ezra Pound praised for leaving gaps in the narrative where they couldn't determine what actually happened. But given the pressures of telling one's story quickly, before the urgency and brilliance of the contemporary is turned over to others, this advice is easier to give than to follow.

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Note

1. The quotation is from Roberta Smith in the *New York Times*. The show will travel later this year to the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass., and then, in 2001, to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Denver Art Museum.

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