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THE THIRD PERSONA

Amanda Schmitt on Ben Lerner and Anna Ostoya's "The Polish Rider"

Uber (the taxi service) has given birth to its fair share of stories, no doubt, but none like the one told by the painter Anna Ostoya, whose anecdote was subsequently used as the starting point for two stories by the decorated young American writer Ben Lerner. Together, Ostoya and Lerner recently collected these in book form, which now, inversely, serves as the starting point for a series of paintings by Ostoya that have just gone up in New York on the heels of the book's launch.

Writer and curator Amanda Schmitt charts the genealogy of this spider's web, and offers a consideration of the rascally twists of language and image therein. While Lerner and Ostoya's book is certainly not the first to chart this territory, the playful bewilderment they mount might turn out to mean something very serious in the end.

"Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book."
Stéphane Mallarmé

"The Polish Rider" is a 1655 painting disputably attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn. Its authorship has been contested by historians due to the scarcity of Rembrandt's experience with equestrian themes, the abnormal costume of the subject, as well as an absence of clues toward ascertaining the identity of the young man featured in the painting. Owing to these doubts surrounding Rembrandt's authorship, both historians and the current owner (The Frick Collection) suggest that it might be interpreted as an allegory, albeit an unknown one. What is allegorized is as unknowable as the true identity of the hand(s) that painted it. The painting's title, the fruit of this inconclusive scrutiny, was utilized for the title of a short story authored by Ben Lerner, originally published in the *New Yorker* and now reproduced inside of an eponymously titled book made in collaboration with the Polish painter Anna Ostoya.

Lerner's story recounts the events surrounding a true incident from 2016, in which Ostoya accidentally left two of her paintings in the back of an Uber (on the eve of the artworks' debut), and her subsequent search to recover them. Departing from this anecdote, the remainder of the details narrated throughout this work of witty, exceptional prose (in which Anna's name has been replaced with the generically Eastern European-sounding name "Sonia") are replete with fictionalized events, characters, and dialogue, showcasing Lerner's uncanny ability to weave complex parallel universes out of a mere granule of factual truth. Ostoya, as the real person who inspired Lerner's transposed Sonia, is thrown into the precarious position of becoming Lerner's muse – a comically tragic incident in her life, cleverly reinterpreted in the realm of autofiction. However, as co-author of this collaborative work, Ostoya's role hovers somewhere between willing model, artistic conspirator, and reluctant subject, creating a feedback loop of mutual appropriation.

Any ability to absorb the story as a simple parable is foreclosed on by the book, which is constructed as a paradoxically fragmentary Gesamtkunstwerk. It blatantly throws back the curtain to reveal the scheme: the story's opaque timeline of events and cheeky clues is further complicated through a second text by Lerner, titled "Late Art," and by reproductions of Ostoya's compositions. These include both the paintings that inspired the story and those (painted *ex post facto*) that were occasioned by Lerner's diegesis. Because so much of the narrator's role (situated as that of an intimate friend) within the story seems plausible (and, alarmingly, real), it is all too easy to assume that Lerner enacts a form of autofiction in which names have been substituted and details



Anna Ostoya, „The Kiss“, 2011/2013

subtly tweaked, approaching the territory of New Narrative and its tendency to read as appropriated gossip. In reality, Lerner has ingeniously mobilized a remarkable fictionalized anecdote as a form of criticism derived from his avowed interest in ekphrasis. In previous novels ("10:04" and "Leaving the Atocha Station"), Lerner opted for ekphrasis over mere illustration or representation, emphasizing that art is, in the end, a lived experience. In "The Polish Rider," the reader thus becomes both voyeur and sleuth, entwined in a labyrinthine game between text and image, fact and fiction, and past, present, and future. The boundary between literary prose, criticism, and art catalogue becomes indiscernible: *ut pictura poesis*.

Any attempt to posit a gendered scrutiny of Lerner's "male gaze" in "The Polish Rider" is preemptively stricken, as the author has already covered his tracks with the second essay included in the book. "Late Art" reads as an afterword: the story (upon which "The Polish Rider" is based) is retroactively summarized, supplanted by a third-person perspective that seeks to distance Lerner both from the narrator's voice and, simultaneously, from any gendered associations. In "Late Art," Sonia's name reverts to Anna and the lost – paintings return (from a decidedly Slavic macho depiction of Honecker and Brezhnev enacting the Socialist Fraternal Kiss) to their true identity: the two paintings from Anna's "Slaying" series that depict dynamic, geometrically abstracted variations on Artemisia Gentileschi's "Judith Slaying Holofernes."¹ Lerner – while dissecting the fraught relationship between Ostoya and her lost Gentileschi appropriations – goes on to pull from Michael Fried's analysis of Caravaggio's version of "Judith Slaying Holofernes," affirming that "there is a strong symbolic relationship between

the depiction of beheading and the problem of the painter 'severing' him or herself from the finished painting." To wit, Lerner has severed his responsibility toward any gendered analysis of his narrative technique in the fictional story, positioning the writer of fiction as one with an artistic license to distance themselves from any liability for what is positioned through language. As the narrator explicates in "Late Art":

"For several years he had been obsessed with the relationship between fiction and the other arts, had started to think of fiction as a curatorial form, a medium in which you could stage encounters with other media, real or imagined; for him, fiction was fundamentally ekphrastic."

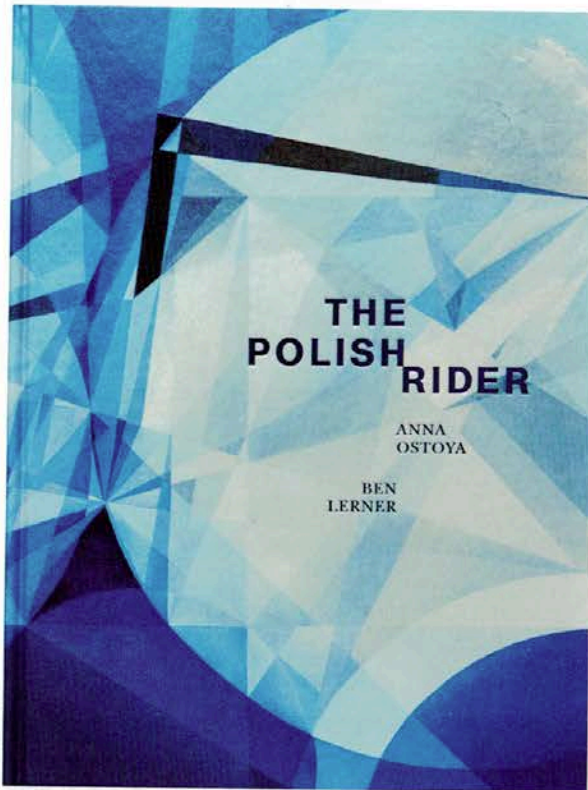
Lerner poses that criticism and historicism maintain a specific type of responsibility; art does not.² The third-person narrator continues:

"Sonia's fictional paintings were notional, but inextricable from Anna's actual work. Anna's paintings, not just her experience of losing them, largely inspired his fiction – the way her paintings silence or depict silencing through the kiss [...] while raising important questions about the relation between gender and discursive power."

As the story acknowledges, the notion of replacing (lost) paintings through language is both gendered and potentially paragonal – and not only because this particular story is about a male writer and a female painter, not only because the works in question – Anna's and the ones he made up – involve depictions of powerful men and the story of Gentileschi, but also because ekphrasis has often been associated with the male power to lend a voice to stillness or beauty that codes as feminine. Many critics have argued the tradition of ekphrasis tends to imagine aesthetic relations as a war of the sexes.



Anna Ostoya, „Judith Slaying Judith“, 2016



In the fictional account, Lerner replaces the actual lost paintings (the studies of Gentileschi's Judith) with a modulated adaptation of two other singular works that Ostoya did in fact paint but never lost: the image of an embrace enacted not by two socialist political leaders, but by Lawrence Weiner and Benjamin Buchloh. The photograph that the painting is based on (readily available online) depicts the two men locked in a compassionate kiss, as if they were playfully mocking the diplomatic socialist fraternal kiss, a propagandistic gesture used between two representatives of socialist states to outwardly display equality, fraternity, and solidarity. Thus, as the image of this kiss repeats throughout the book, anti-capitalism – as displayed by the ekphrastic

depictions of the paintings themselves, as well as through the fictional characters' shared disdain for companies like Uber (representing late capitalist labor's submission through technological fragmentation of time) – emerges as a dominant theme in this story. But Sonia is just a rider, one who is only passively in control. Even though she orders the car through her smartphone, she actually relinquishes control to the Uber driver as an instrument of the algorithm, the body behind the wheel and mechanically in command.

Lerner's ekphrastic drive is also an allegorical impulse. His narrative depictions of Ostoya's real – and Sonia's fictional – paintings allegorize through doubling, confiscation, and "a shift of attention and reading to the framing device."³ Lerner's second text, "Late Art," poses as a self-effacing supplement for the short story, "The Polish Rider," and Ostoya's forthcoming exhibition at Bortolami Gallery poses as a framing device for the MACK publication under review here. As Craig Owens famously argued, "allegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure," and it occurs whenever one text is doubled by another.⁴ We could continue to analyze and ascribe meanings to the story and images depicted in Lerner's "The Polish Rider," following in the footsteps of many who sought to decipher Rembrandt's painting, but there is no clear allegory to be defined in this infinite regress. It is in fact the metatextual contributions themselves that are allegorical in nature, as well as the orchestration in which the narratives and the images (a palimpsest of fact and fiction) have been framed.

As illustrated in "The Polish Rider," on that fateful night in February 2016, Anna Ostoya took the paintings home (aiding their transportation

by booking an Uber) because she desired for the image painted on the canvas to end at its edges, which she wanted to repaint so that they were “blank.” Ostoya quite literally wanted to fix the “frame” of the paintings. It wasn’t the painting she felt was failing, but the part of the canvas that reveals both the irrevocable objecthood that underwrites its market potential, and the interface between the image and the white cube of the gallery. Ultimately, this decision and its consequences led to the creation of this book, which acts as another framing device.

Within the texts, Lerner opens up a path for his own authorial vulnerability, which is, of course, itself a kind of authority. He provides hints that he may be threatened by Ostoya’s depiction of two men engaging in a kiss (both in the Honecker/Brezhnev and Buchloh/Weiner versions): he admits in “Late Art” that he “came to see how Anna’s paintings – the Buchloh/Weiner kiss, the variations on the Gentileschi – ‘speak’ directly to this problematic of speechlessness, depicting silencing, but the silencing of powerful men.” By publishing this catalogue and presenting the paintings in a solo exhibition this October in New York, Ostoya gets the last word (or is it the second to last?). Mallarmé provides closure for her undeniably modern impulse. The chance loss of the paintings was abolished by the book.

Ben Lerner/Anna Ostoya, “The Polish Rider,” London: MACK, 2018.

Notes

- 1 As a counterpoint to Lerner’s ongoing examination into whether or not the literary arts are capable of supplanting the visual: Gentileschi’s depiction of the biblical-fictional character Judith (more than any others, such as those of Caravaggio or Lucas Cranach the Elder) has come to stand as a symbol of female power, rectitude, and revenge. The

painting, and the female figure who painted it, has widely superseded the deuterocanonical written word (book) of Judith, to the point where a near abstraction of the image of “Judith Slaying Holofernes,” as depicted in Ostoya’s “Slaying” series, instantly manifests the entirety of the metaphor of the little (woman) overthrowing the big (man).

- 2 “Late Art” was actually authored early in 2017, before the widespread media advent of the #MeToo movement.
- 3 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” in: *Artforum*, vol. XXI, 1, 1982, pp. 43–56.
- 4 Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in: *October*, vol. 12, Spring 1980, pp. 67–86.