



**The art of painting
and the work of the spirit**



This is where I wrote...
and what I wrote about was the art of painting and the spirit, and what
would be a spiritual work...



What would be spiritual work like day labor is work,
or intellectual work is work, or clerical or financial or farming work is work...



All those kinds of work are named after the material the worker works on; so, what is the material of spiritual work? The word in English refers to "The principle of conscious life; the vital principle animating the body or mediating between body and soul... the incorporeal part."



And the French esprit: you know, "She (or he) has "esprit," that is, is "lively" And the German geist: source of our English word "ghost" for an invisible being, that "conscious, incorporeal being as opposed to matter," except, ghost is the scary one



Or pneuma in Greek: air, when it's gone from you, you're dead because it's the very air you breathe is "pneuma," spirit, invisible, mysterious, weightless Or the prajna of the Hindu tradition, that power rising as a kundalini serpent from the pelvis through the spine to flower, a thousand petaled lotus, above the head.



Or the qi of the Chinese, an invisible energy, the breath of life



It's the life force is what spirit is, because when it's not, when there's no spirit, there's death. Spiritual work is, then, working for the life force, the breath of life. It is working against the boredom, the ennui, the melancholia, the depression, the emptiness of getting and spending that lay waste our lives.



And spiritual work helps us in our last hours of life in time to know the sunset.
How I've always loved the sunset: Don Juan said it's the crack between the worlds; the Egyptians knew it was the call to Eternity. As I worked on this lecture, I looked each day at the deepening distant sky.



What is the art of painting?

Our Profession—

I thought of the professions: doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief -- the purposes of those professions, their traditions and famous people... I thought of their media, their audiences and ways of addressing the world, and I thought of our profession, the profession of painter—

The physician's purpose is to heal; the lawyer's purpose is to protect the innocent and punish the guilty; the merchant's purpose is to provide goods that are wanted; the chief's purpose is to lead society and foster growth... and our purpose, the painter's purpose, is to see and show what is, what has been and might be.



Michaelangelo Buonarotti



Artemisia Gentileschi

I thought of our famous people who have showed us the way as Galen and Harvey, Avicenna and Maimonides did for the physicians, so the Greeks and Romans whose names and works are lost have done for us, so the Medieval illuminators and workers in stained glass have done for us, and so also the Michelangelos and Gentileschis have done for us— And then I thought of how every list reflects the needs and knowledge of the list maker, and how it is the glory of our profession that we each, straight or gay, male or female of every culture, every time, can seek and find in our profession our own community of friends.

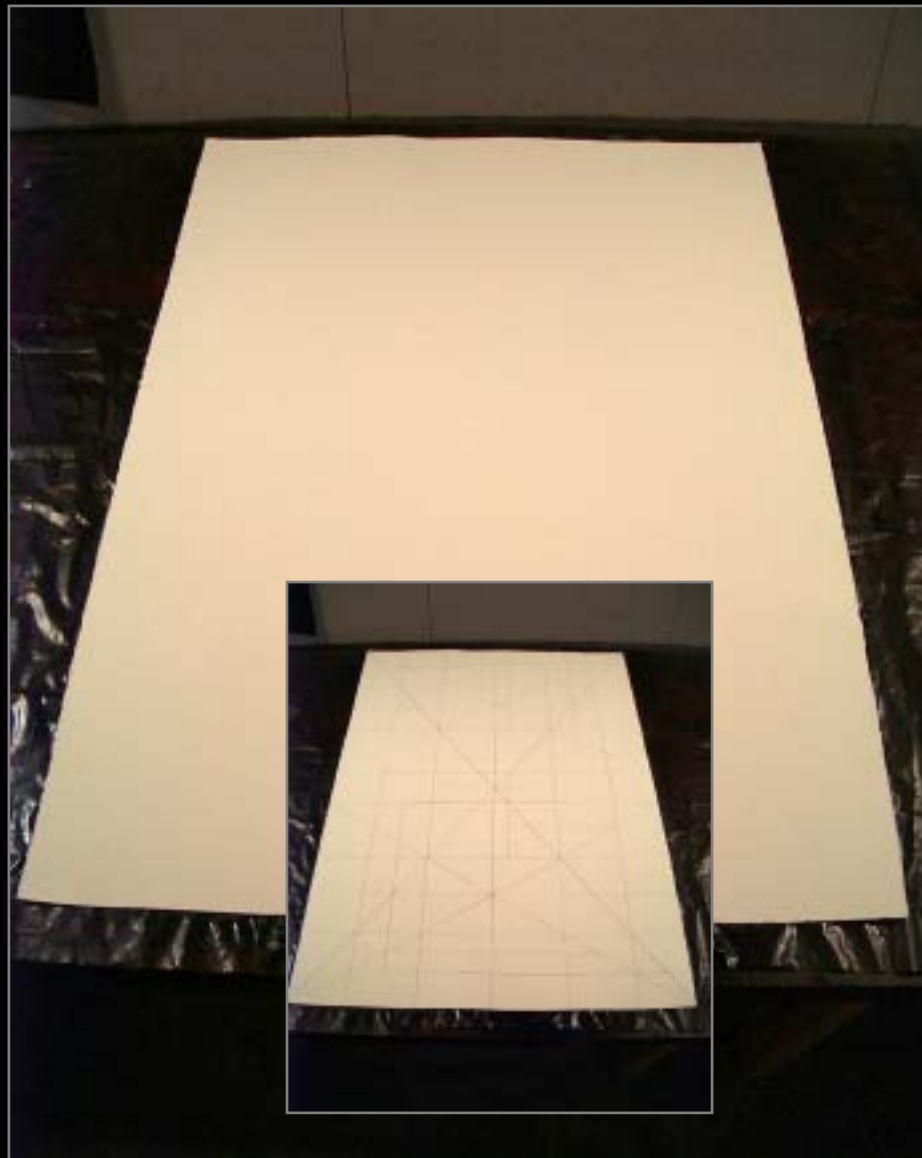


And as I thought of so many artists that might not be on my list but would be on someone else's list, and then thought of many other artists that might be on no one's list, I remembered one of my jr. high school art teachers whose name I have forgotten—and then in my heart I praised those thousands and thousands like our selves who century after century have carried forth with little fame but the greater honor our work for clarity and depth of vision. It is they and every famous one and you and me who are our exemplars.



Our Training—

Every profession has a training for its medium. Musicians begin their study with "ear training." From that first teaching, that training of the hearing to discriminate among sounds and their relationships, comes the study of harmony and then counterpoint followed by composition until the student becomes a composer who can make a symphony. For painters also comes first a training, a making precisely aware of the sensations of sight and of the body reaching into distance and light, eating color as ripe fruit (or green or rotting fruit, every taste of color, of sight, is savored and remembered), wandering a landscape, touching a face, fading in a cloud, moving with the lift of a line, the pull of a mass, a seeing that is not only by the eye but also by feel in torso, arms, hands, the very reach and twist of fingers silently grasping an image and all the flood of memory and desire streaming with it like a counterpoint in the mind.



Every painter who has worked a long time knows without knowing of the invisible channels within the apparently empty space of the format. The empty format before one begins is a continent of invisible rivers and oceans, valleys and mountains, villages and cities, waiting to be the staff upon which the painter writes the music of painting. It is these invisible presences that await revelation, and it is their harmonic resonance with the format which brings about in the viewer the sensation of wholeness, power, expansion and health.

Our Forms—

Three spaces have been traditional to painting: the portrait, the still life, the landscape...



The portrait: the space of a single object before a ground... as in this portrait where the lines of an old man's face trace the memories of his youth's ambition: ecstasy, apocalypse, utopia, lines of color, light and fire carved in flesh and blood, lines of hope and fear cut in mind and soul, lines of dark and lines of flame -- then, now, always, forever.



The still life: the relationship among a few objects in a closed space... Things chosen and kept from the alleys, bazaars and curb side tables of other lands, from flea markets, attics and basements at home, from dump heaps or ditches by the road, a thing or two, a dish or odd unreadable book in language you do not know, a piece of a broken column's capital, a cracked tile from a fallen tower... so one day to paint a still life of travel, always containing complete in itself the light which shone then, shining now, always.



The landscape: many objects in multiple relationships in an open space... Travel far: distant cities, strange lands, forests, deserts and mountains, streets, people, places, sound and sight and scent, touch and taste the breath of life within them all.--- hold in mind the light on leaves and clouds, the touch of air breathing in space and in your lungs, and hold in mind the sound, the sound of distance. Remember Hokusai, his ink pot big as a bucket, his brush big as a mop. Remember Shanghai: glooming, dark, old brick, old ships, rust, night.



So, three spaces have been traditional to painting: the portrait, the still life, the landscape -- But I have learned there is a fourth that they didn't teach where I went to school. It is the space of the human body, landscape of pain and pleasure, wonder, mystery and glory: tower of the unknown, pillar of solitude, the flesh of the breath of the spirit. Thinking so, I made one more try for Tintoretto (I was painting a series in homage to my Venetian painter forbears): Christ carrying the cross, the Centurion holding the flag of blood and glory: flesh transfigured in the sunset from disgust to beauty, from lust to love, from sin to salvation. Christ and the Centurion: our souls, ourselves.



Our Methods and Materials—

Every profession has its methods, its ways of handling its materials—the doctor sets a fractured bone, the attorney prepares a brief, the accountant balances the books, the legislator passes a law... and for our profession also, there are methods.

In each of our beginnings there comes first the failure of our initial plan. Every pre-planning is only a sterile but necessary stirring of the pot before the true work breaks through. The real product, the useful one, comes after the exhaustion of all pre-existing ideas.



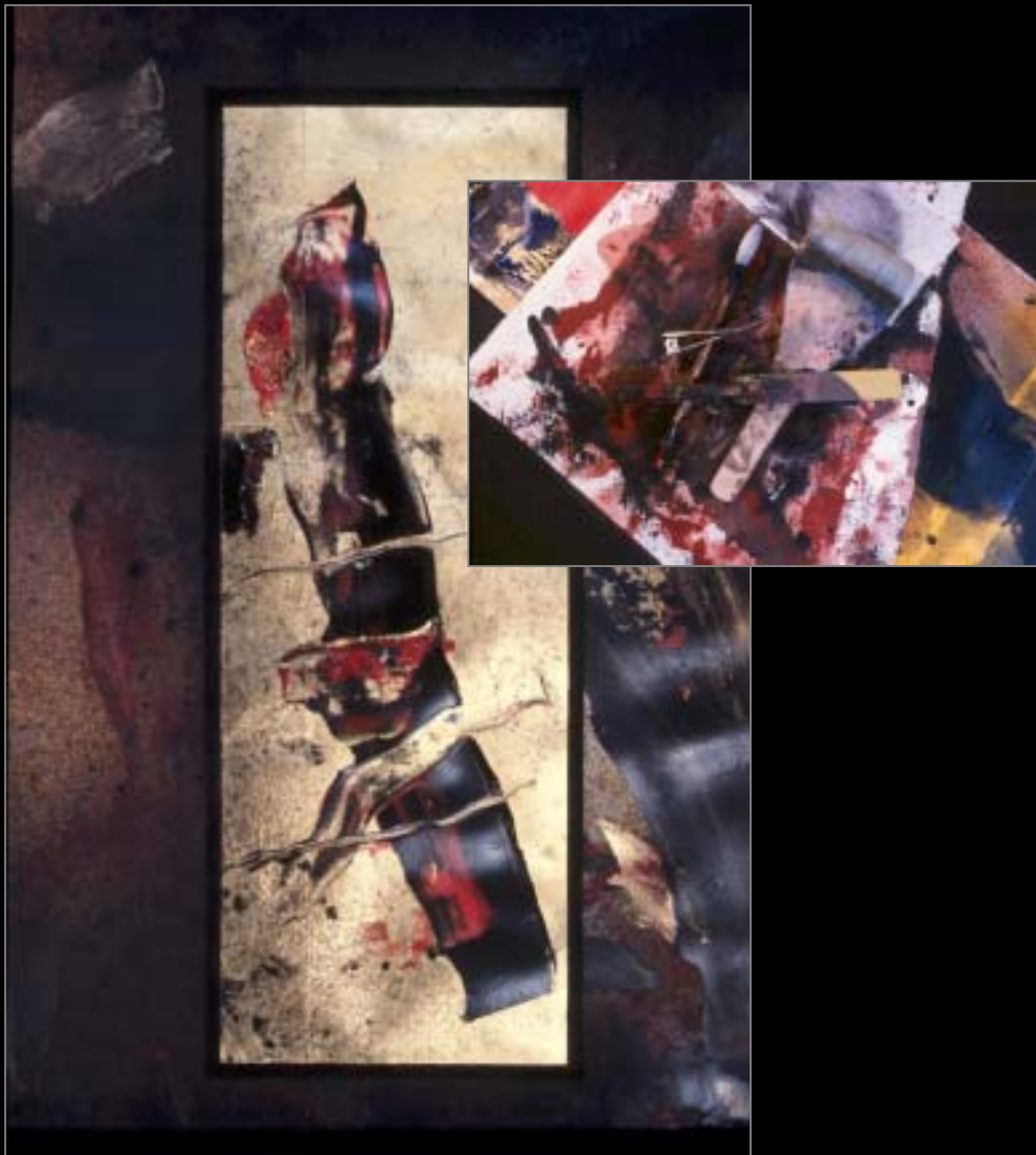
We are "sensual bastards"—yes, I think that's most painters. What else could we be, our hands trailing in rainbow mud, our eyes filled with the memories of sunrise and sunset today, yesterday and long to come. "Sensual bastards," with all the illicit qualities the word "bastard" suggests: beyond the pale, illegitimate, born from immoral couplings, living a life of indecency and self gratification—the bar sinister, the dark, dirty world of desire. Painting is eros and eros is the foundation of life. If the power of art comes from the intensity of internal contradiction held in stasis, what greater power than the erotic energy in us, cursed by the commandments, blessed by eternity?



While filing away some pieces of paper I have been saving for ten—more like twenty—years, some sketches, some smears, some examples and trials of this and that, I thought suddenly, what would happen if I threw them away? What would happen if I let them all go as an old life that is over in the blaze and freedom of our work today and tomorrow and on to the end?



Remember: every work of art is only a stepping stone toward the next, and every work "completed" today may be just the raw material for something to be made tomorrow. Only a few works remain as permanent monuments to the time they were made. The others are the always ongoing, the raw material waiting for the builder.

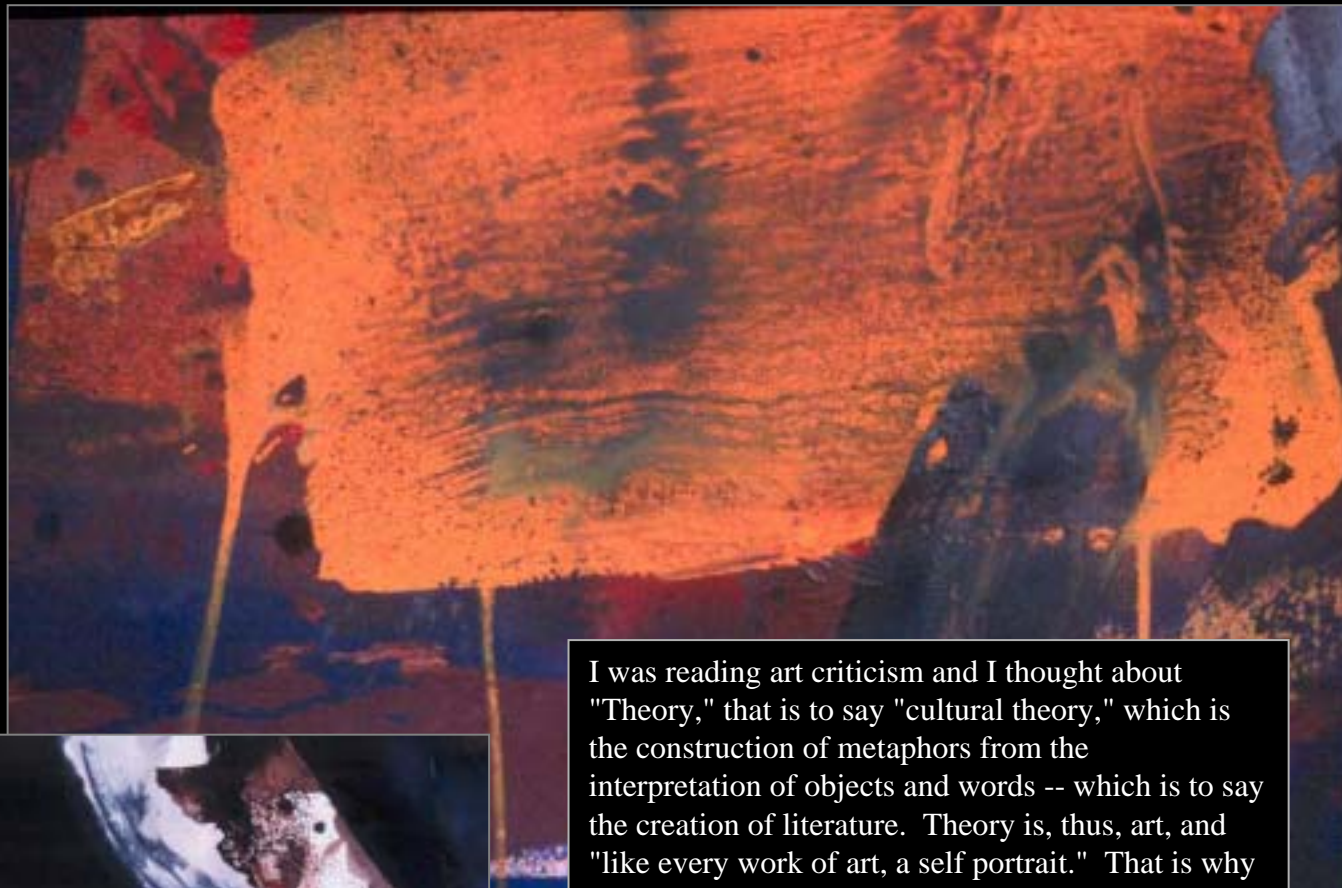


Art is the exaltation of the sense of time in the movement of a stroke, a stain bleeding, a drop falling, a wash spreading, paper tearing in this instant, now. The brush, the fingers, the knife, the paint -- whatever the implement of the moment -- is the instrument of body and soul to share in the breath of life. So to the painter in the act of painting, the rhythm and harmony of the body is a deep satisfaction, and the picture the soul sees of itself is a deeper one.



Because the heart and body, the mind and soul always seek to flow out into the world, seek everywhere in things out there the representation of their wholeness in here, the artist's studio and tools become precious, personal, private.





I was reading art criticism and I thought about "Theory," that is to say "cultural theory," which is the construction of metaphors from the interpretation of objects and words -- which is to say the creation of literature. Theory is, thus, art, and "like every work of art, a self portrait." That is why we should read theory as we listen to music or look at works of art: for the food they give to us. No food? Don't bother.

Do not read what writers say, only look at what the artist left—blots and stains, smears and clumsy lines, the thick and thin of paint, its glow and darkness, the obscure white of old paper, the weave of canvas, and lines and dabs like the creases of a face or the touch of a hand—time and stillness, ruin and beauty.



Once we showed the world how to see, and what, and what to think of it. Now, television does. And there is left for us to reach across the years, from one of us to another, a community of solitaires speaking to one another, affirming a life that does not die.

Do not read what writers say of art except they say facts of subject or biography, facts forgotten to common knowledge in the passage of place and period. Only look at what the artist left --- knowing that's what you see, not what the artist saw.

See all the world and what its artists have made for you to see and make what you will. Respect the past, see the present, create the future

.What we would express has no story nor melody. It cannot be told by a picture of it.

Told in the music of art, no one will ever know our secret, yet its truth will ring forever as a message to the world.

And of the Life of the Heart—

The only value this side of heaven is one society confers. And since no one knows where heaven is, society's the only value we've got.

Mama cared, and Daddy too, but they died. Who's left? The nameless Them, all watching TV. And so it all goes to dust and TV actors too.

Rilke said, "Who if I cried out...?"
and thought an angel would answer. Don't wait.

That a life must have value—be worth something is an idea one may have—
or have not.

Mass killings in far off places—500,00 dead in a tribal war—No person worth more than
another, all of them worthless weeds in abandoned lots.

But the solitary soul before society... did it matter that you lived or did not?

The single soul before God... why were you born, why did you die?

Then comes the question... What was your life worth? Why did you live? Did it matter you
died?

Stay with your friends—and your family who care—whatever the circle of sharing, they
want you to live, they regret that you die. Alone, at the edge—you do not know, did your life
have value—were you worth something? or were you not?

The only value anywhere is one you make yourself. Test and think in your own experience—
love and see, act and know, promise and work, do and care—out of the root life flowing in
you, out of your own source deep in all that has been, creating all that may be—Must a life
be worth something? It will.



And as the forest surges -- I made these selections from my studio notes and wrote this lecture in an early May in a studio deep in a forest returning to life after almost six months of frozen darkness...



And as the forest surges with all manner of plants from trees to grasses, from flowering to not, from deciduous to conifer, from living to dying, from just born to old rotted and all rising and streaming in spirit the breath of life



So all people are spiritual workers whether they know it or not—even, every artist is—and like plants in the forest, although every one is different, unique, the forest is whole.



One artist will make decorations for over the sofa, another will image the horror of killing that never stops.

One artist will make "political art"... and another will make formalist art.



One may paint the Buddha, another will copy yet again a thousand year old image of Christ. One paints a mural on a neighborhood wall, another scrawls "fuck you" on a broken side walk.



Like plants in the forest, every individual artist is different, and like the forest, human society is whole, whole with itself and also like the forest whole with the world... for all things are one in the spirit, the breath of life.



Mind and Body are inextricable. Sense, emotion, and thought feed each other. Painting is poetry and art is the breath of the spirit. And of the great themes of life and death there remains always from our work only a sail passing in the sunset, only a painting shining after we are gone.