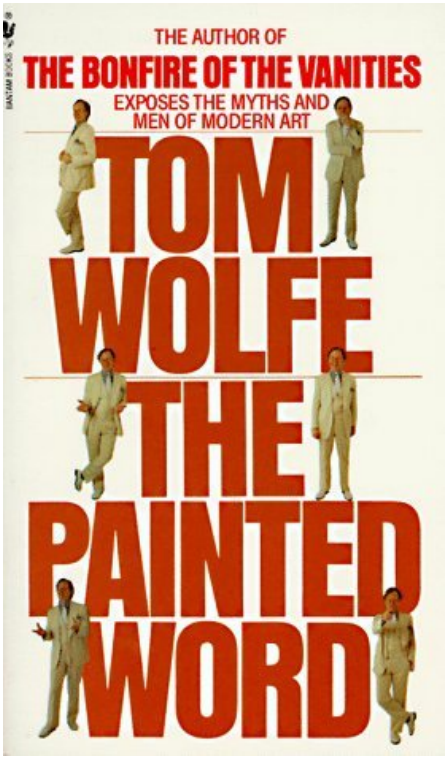

The Painted Word

Tom Wolfe

The Painted Word

Tom Wolfe

The Painted Word Tom Wolfe
From the fuliginous flatness of the fifties to the pop op minimal sixties, right on through the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't seventies, Tom Wolfe debunks the great American myth of modern art in an incandescent, hilarious and devastating blast. "The Painted Word" is scandalous!

The Painted Word Details

Date	:	Published February 1st 1982 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group (first published 1975)
ISBN	:	9780553273793
Author	:	Tom Wolfe
Format	:	Mass Market Paperback 128 pages
Genre	:	Art, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, History, Criticism, Art History, Culture, Society

From Reader Review The Painted Word for online ebook

Mark Taylor says

Tom Wolfe takes on the art world! Tom Wolfe critiques the leading theories in contemporary art! Tom Wolfe tells you all about the different stages of being an artist, from the Boho Dance to the Consummation which ensures critical success! Tom Wolfe takes on the mysteries of abstract art! You can imagine him, can't you, in his pristine white suit, squinting close at an abstract canvas up on the wall of some Seventh Avenue gallery uptown, one of those galleries that doesn't want to look like they're trying too hard, that serves cheap box wine at show openings and has little cheeseballs on platters, and those little one-bite brownies that the receptionist ran out to get at Whole Foods on her lunchbreak. Delicious! The receptionist is one of those girls you see at practically every gallery, the fine-boned, sleek, mini-skirt wearing type, just out of college with a B.A. in Art History; ready to conquer the art world! Wolfe has her sized up right away-she flirts a little with the male customers, but just enough to make them confused as to if she's actually flirting or not. They can never tell, so they keep coming back for more! And she's eagerly solicitous of the female customers, dropping little tidbits from her daily life into her conversations with them to make her seem "relatable," "friendly," and not a "husband-stealing bitch." Wolfe keeps staring at the painting, and suddenly, WHOMP! He sees it! He wonders to himself, why is it so damn flat? Why isn't there any pigment visible on the canvas? I'm looking at a painting, but why can't I tell that it's a painting? It's the damnedest thing! So he walks out of the gallery, with his hat and his walking stick, and he ponders. He makes his way to the nearest bookstore and finds their art section. He starts reading criticism. He reads Clement Greenberg, the patron saint of Abstract Expressionism. And then he learns about flatness! The sacred integrity of the picture plane! Wolfe becomes determined to peel the layers of the onion that is contemporary art.

That's not actually the way it happened, of course.

In his 1975 book The Painted Word Tom Wolfe, America's favorite white-suited New Journalist, examined the New York City art scene and the leading critics of the past 30 years. The Painted Word is a slim little volume, just 100 pages in my Bantam reprint paperback, but the book packs quite a punch. In the opening pages of the book, Wolfe tells us how he got interested in writing about art theory. He was reading The New York Times on April 28, 1974, when he read an article by Hilton Kramer that basically said, in Wolfe's words, "In short: frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting." (p.2) Wolfe naturally wondered how modern art had arrived at this point. Wolfe focuses most on the theories of the three leading art critics of that era: Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Leo Steinberg. Greenberg was the most influential of the three, and his mantra about the "the integrity of the picture plane" led to his endorsement of Abstract Expressionist painting. And not much else, at least, not until Post-Painterly Abstraction came into vogue in the mid 1960's. Greenberg didn't have much time for art that didn't conform to his formulas about what great art should be. Pop Art? Meh, it was too figurative, too literal. And those artists were getting their ideas from pop culture and comic books! It couldn't be serious art! Serious art came from deep inside your soul! And the way they made their art-using commercial art techniques like silk screening! Horrors!

One of Wolfe's theories that he posits in The Painted Word is that artists, consciously or unconsciously, begin to change their styles to conform to what is popular with art critics. This theory did not exactly endear Wolfe to artists. But was he right? It's impossible to say, since no artist would probably own up to being overly influenced by the critical mood of their time. But, as Wolfe points out in the book, many of the leading Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman all started out as figurative artists before moving to abstraction in the late 1940's. Was that just the

way their work was naturally headed, or did ideas from critics like Clement Greenberg influence the direction of their work?

Wolfe was quite right to focus his book on Clement Greenberg's influential role in the criticism of this period. Back in college when I was taking an Art History class about Contemporary Art from 1945 to the present, I thought that it could easily be retitled, "Clement Greenberg's Influence on Art and the Reaction to it." Most of the "important" American painting of the 1945-1975 period was either clearly expressing his theories about art or rejecting them. Of course, it's not as though artists were sitting around saying, "How can I express my rejection of Clement Greenberg's ideas?" Pop Art was certainly a reaction to the dominant strain of Abstract Expressionism that was then fashionable. Abstract Expressionism was deeply serious, and scornful of any kind of pop culture influences. But artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, two artists whose works were important precursors to Pop Art, started to create work in the mid 1950's that was clearly influenced by the outside world. Johns and Rauschenberg seemed to be saying, we're not ascetic monks locked away in our downtown lofts working away at our version of an illuminated manuscript. We're real people who drink Coke and read the newspaper. Even Johns' seemingly simple paintings of flags and targets were painted over newspapers, leaving traces of the writing visible underneath the surface image. Johns and Rauschenberg were important influences on Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, who both started creating paintings based on comic strips and newspaper photographs. Warhol and Lichtenstein married high and low culture in their Pop Art paintings and silk screens in a way that was abhorrent to most of the Abstract Expressionists.

The Painted Word follows American art through the dominant movements from 1945 until 1975: Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimalism, Op Art, Color Field Painting, and Post-Painterly Abstraction, to the beginnings of Earth Art. Wolfe shows how art critics constantly shifted their theories so that the new work would still fit into Greenberg's obsession with flatness. Leo Steinberg had to do some rhetorical backflips to make Jasper Johns fit into the flatness box. He basically said that it was all okay because Johns had picked objects to paint like flags and targets that were already flat to begin with! Perfect!

In one of the most brilliant parts of the book, Wolfe writes about how critics had to be constantly ahead of the game: "In an age of avant-gardism, no critic can stop a new style by meeting it head-on. To be against what is new is not to be modern. Not to be modern is to write yourself out of the scene. Not to be in the scene is to be nowhere. No, in an age of avant-gardism the only possible strategy to counter a new style which you detest is to leapfrog it. You abandon your old position and your old artists, leaping over the new style, land beyond it, point back to it, and say: 'Oh, that's nothing. I've found something newer and better…way out here.'" (p.68)

What Wolfe correctly sees is that if you have to keep moving farther and farther out to be on the leading edge, eventually you're going to fall off the edge. And that's what happened to painting during the time period he examines. How flat can you get? How abstract can you get? How many traditional pictorial elements can you completely eliminate from your work and still have a painting? Robert Rauschenberg beat the Minimalists at their own game a decade before they came on the scene: he was painting all-white canvases as early as 1951! You can't get more Minimalist than that! The only thing you can see on those all-white canvases of Rauschenberg's is the reflection of the gallery: he's really letting the outside world in, as you focus on all those other people who are absorbed in the act of looking at art.

At the end of the book, Wolfe shows us the only logical conclusion to these theories: there's not even an art object anymore, it's just a set of instructions about how to make an art object. In this way, Wolfe says, the game has come full circle: by trying to rid itself of "literary" references like people and landscapes, modern art has ultimately become literary, as there are only words to describe it, and not an actual physical object

like a painting or sculpture!

The Painted Word caused a great critical furor when it was released, and critics of all stripes attacked Wolfe. He discussed the reaction to the book at length in his 1991 interview in The Paris Review:

“It was the most vitriolic response I’ve ever had anywhere, much more so than Radical Chic or Bonfire of the Vanities. The things that I was called in print were remarkable. In fact, there were so many, I started categorizing them. One was ‘psychiatric insults’—the usual thing, this man is obviously sick. Then there were the ‘political insults’—usually I was called a fascist but occasionally a communist, a commissar. And then there were the curious round of insults I called the ‘X-rated insults,’ all taking the same form which was, This man who wrote the book is like a six-year-old at a pornographic movie; he can follow the motions of the bodies but he cannot comprehend the nuances. I always thought it was a very strange sort of insult because it cast contemporary art as pornography and I was the child. In various forms this metaphor was repeated by several different reviewers. Robert Hughes used it. He had the full image, the six-year-old, the grunts and groans, the pornographic movie and the rest of it. In the Times John Russell referred to me as a eunuch at the orgy. I think he was afraid that too many of his readers would be overstimulated by the thought of a six-year-old at a pornographic movie. So I became a eunuch at an orgy. Because of the similarity of the sexual metaphors, I was curious about this and was told later on that there had been a dinner in Bedford, New York, shortly after The Painted Word came out . . . a number of art world figures, including Robert Motherwell, in somebody’s fancy home. The subject of The Painted Word came up and Motherwell supposedly said, You know, this man Wolfe reminds me of a six-year-old at a pornographic movie. He can follow the motion of the bodies but he can’t comprehend the nuances. If it’s true, it shows what a small world the art world is. Actually that was one of the points I was trying to make in The Painted Word—that three thousand people, no more than that certainly, with roughly three hundred who live outside of the New York metropolitan area, determine all fashion in art. As far as I can tell, it was Motherwell’s conceit; he is an influential, major figure, and it spread from this dinner table in Bedford overnight, as it were.”

Wolfe coined the term “Cultureburg” to refer to the denizens of the New York art world, and he estimates that about 10,000 people around the world make up the art world. (p.21) In the same Paris Review interview, Wolfe explains why he thought the book made them so upset:

“Now maybe I’m flattering myself, but I think what made a bigger impact than the usual diatribe was that what I wrote was a history; there’s not a single critical judgment in the piece. It’s a history of taste, and I think that approach—it’s pitted on the level of a history of fashion—was infuriating. The art world can deal very easily with anybody who says they don’t like Pollock or they don’t like Rauschenberg, so what if you don’t. But to say these people blindly follow Clement Greenberg’s or Harold Rosenberg’s theories, which is pretty much what The Painted Word is saying, and that a whole era was not visual at all but literary, now that got them.”

Wolfe probably should have anticipated some of the criticism he received, since he was essentially an outsider to the fields of art history and art criticism. Wolfe didn’t establish his bona fides for being an art critic, and I think this was a big reason why critics were so hostile to the book. Wolfe appeared on William F. Buckley’s television show Firing Line in July of 1975 to discuss The Painted Word, and in his introduction of Wolfe, Buckley hit upon a major flaw of the book:

“Some of the critics have sworn an eternal hostility to him. In their criticisms they would appear to score on one point. I say they would appear to score because it is true that there is no internal evidence in The Painted Word that Tom Wolfe is himself a connoisseur of art or that he has read deeply into art history, though he may have done so and decided for editorial reasons not to encumber his thesis with that knowledge.”

(Conversations with Tom Wolfe, p.73)

Like Wolfe's later book on architecture, From Bauhaus to Our House, which I reviewed last year here, The Painted Word commits a cardinal sin for a non-fiction book: it has no footnotes and does not cite any of its sources. As Buckley said, we don't know what Tom Wolfe has read about art history and art criticism. We don't even know where the quotes he's using are coming from! It always amazes me that an editor or publisher wouldn't demand to have quotations cited in a non-fiction book.

Wolfe does not tell us what art he likes and what art he doesn't like in The Painted Word, and on Firing Line he explains why:

"The book is really a social comedy…and to me it really wasn't necessary to like or dislike a single work of art or a single artist in order to point this out. And I think in a way this is what has gotten under the skin of more critics and art historians than anything else. The one thing they're not prepared to deal with is the process by which art becomes serious, the process by which it becomes praised, and so on." (Conversations with Tom Wolfe, p.74)

Wolfe's signature flamboyant writing style is evident throughout The Painted Word. The first exclamation point comes at the end of the second sentence in the book. Wolfe's engaging style makes the book a pleasure to read, and I enjoyed it more than From Bauhaus to Our House. I think Wolfe makes some valid points about art critics of that time being too influential. If you're interested in American art from 1945-1975, The Painted Word will no doubt bring forth strong emotions.

Lee Razer says

Highly enjoyable critique of the origin and content (Flatness!!) of Abstract Expressionism and other Modern Art schools. No more trouble to read than a lengthy essay.

Sara says

This was a very interesting read - Tom Wolfe talks about how modern art moved away from being a visual experience and started to be a reaction of what the critics were saying and it all culminated with conceptual art (I happen to like conceptual art, but I agree that it is less "artistic" in the classic sense of the word). Among the many artists he grills, Wolfe practically skewers Jackson Pollock and says that his art was a mere creation at the request of what the galleries wanted and that leads to one of the more interesting points in this book - that art is the art form that is least influenced by the general public's demand. There is a very tiny group of people that patronize art (unlike movies and music) and so it is their whims that dictate the creation, popularity, and sale of it.

Jenna says

I'll need to hear other perspectives before I can decide whether I'm wholly convinced by Wolfe's argument. His main argument is that Modern Art sucks because it is fueled more by Art Theory than by the spirit of Art itself. He directs most of his satirical ammunition at the time period from Abstract Expressionism onward,

arguing that during this epoch the Artists unwittingly became adjuncts of the Art Theorists, rather than the other way around (the way it should be).

Wolfe also tries to better delineate the shifting relationship between Art and Literature. He describes how artists used to be content to *depict* literary matter on their canvases (as in the case of Millet and the 19th-century realists). Then, during the 20th century, artists increasingly tried to *imitate* literature (as in the case of an unnamed conceptual artist whose "artwork" consisted entirely of a written description of what she wanted her artwork to be). In other words, Wolfe thinks modern artists, in their self-loathing, began to worship---and to try to imitate---literature of a sort: what Wolfe calls "the Word."

I can see why Wolfe is an acclaimed writer, anyway: he has a gift for hyperbole. He sets a phrase down on the page, then tries to one-up himself with the next phrase, and then the next, until his sentence is a looong ascending staircase composed of increasingly outrageous phrases... His is a crowded writing style (and one that draws heavily on the scientific vocabularies of our day), but it is also entertaining and clear. Wolfe also strikes me as one of those iconoclastic people who entirely too much *loves* being a troublemaker, a self-appointed gadfly (a la, say, Ezra Pound).

Brent M. Jones says

If you approach Tom Wolfe’s book, The Painted Word, skeptical as to why an accomplished writer would write a critic of Modern Art, then your likely to still be asking that question when you finish. Wolfe’s premise is that Modern Art or Abstract Expressionism, which became popular after World War 11, is incomprehensible, hard to look at, and produces anxiety. He says the essential principal of this art is flatness and that three-dimensional effects are pre-modern having been around since the Renaissance. He says that flatness becomes a goal diluting meaning and message.

Wolfe claims his righteous indignation was the result of what was his reading in the Sunday New York Times in April 1974 when he was surprised to find this paragraph:

“Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with the works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial- the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify.”

This may be the reason he wrote the book, but it looks a lot like a bandwagon that came by and he jumped on to tell the world that the modern artists really don’t have anything to say and, of course, the best and meaningful message is from the writers.

Wolfe refers to the well-educated people who appreciate the arts, saying this smug elite group have made the decision as to what art is for everyone. This is disturbing to him because he sees it changing a world order that he prides himself in understanding, and believes that the contemporary artists, conspiring with the elites, are changing things for no definable reason.

Tom Wolfe’s message is to critique Abstract Expressionism, which he says evolved to Minimalism and then to Conceptual Art. His real message may be just an approach to satire the social life and radical politics of the art world, and of course to tell us how smart he is. More on this book at www.connectedeventsmatter.com

Nick Gibson says

I don't have the education to review this from an art criticism or art history perspective, but Tom Wolfe's argument here meshes with and reinforces similar perspectives from Odd Nerdrum and Roger Scruton. And Wolfe does so in his own lightning prose style.

It's not the main point of the book, but it stood out to me that Wolfe attributes Modern Art - as a culture, as a religion, as a movement - to a kind of bourgeois guilt. That is, the shame of the Western secular elite over their own economic success and comfort in a world broken by two World Wars. Beginning in the 1920s these elites patronized the anti-bourgeois vanguard artists as an act of atonement, even though this bohemian vanguard sought to destroy anything (e.g. realism) comprehensible to the elites' bourgeois taste.

The idea is that people in a post-Christian moral economy are desperately seeking a release from guilt. The moral economy has retained a legalistic morality but has eliminated any mechanism of salvation, atonement, absolution, forgiveness. This is the same argument that some are putting forward to explain the rise of identity politics (with being a loyal ally to the victimized as the analog to supporting bohemian artists).

To see it here, in 1975, is evidence in support of Wolfe's prescience.

Barbara Martyska says

I love this book. When I read the last page, I returned to the beginning of the book and read it again.

I wish I had read this book years ago. It made very clear to me all the things that had always puzzled me about "modern art." Wolfe covers art movements starting with Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, and on through Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Op Art, Art Installations, Earth Art and Conceptual Art.

There is humor throughout the book, such as this quote from an art critic of the time: "Shards of interpenetrated sensibility make their way, tentatively, through a not always compromisable field of cobalt blue..." When the emperor has no clothes, Wolfe is delighted to point that out to the reader.

It's a small, easily readable book of around a hundred pages, some of which are almost empty or filled with illustrations and photos. No knowledge of art history is required.

John Orman says

I am writing a much longer and more detailed review than usual because I plan to attend a local book club's upcoming meeting to discuss this nonfiction book.

Tom Wolfe's small but potent book charts the course of Modern Art. The stylistic writing is as witty and provocative as Wolfe's earlier book "Radical Chic."

The genesis of the book's title stems from a revelation that Wolfe obtained from an art exhibit's 1974 review

in the New York Times. The critic had basically stated that to view art without a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial for art appreciation. Wolfe restated the argument as "now it is not 'seeing is believing', but 'believing is seeing,' for Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text."

Wolfe starts off by noting ironically that the Modern movement began about 1900 with a complete rejection of the literary nature of academic art. "Literary" came to refer to realistic paintings, while Modernism was "form for the sake of form, color for the sake of color." Paintings were no longer about anything in particular. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Jasper Johns are cited as examples of Modernist painters.

Again and again, Wolfe refers to the differences between the elitist Modernists with their hip followers, and the common folk perceived as the bourgeoisie:
"Today there is a particularly modern reward that the avant-garde artist can bring his benefactors ... the feeling that they are in the vanguard march through the land of the philistines."

Many artists become so dedicated to bohemian values, they are unable to cut loose ... they come to the black-tie openings at the Museum of Modern Art wearing a dinner jacket and paint-spattered Levi's."

And Wolfe believes the Modernist stronghold was not built by bohemians, but "founded in John D. Rockefeller's living room." The elite in America wanted to import the excitement of Picasso in Europe.

On into Pop Art, "a new order, but the same Mother Church." Thus, the arrival on the scene of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and of course, Andy Warhol.

Even a skewering of Op Art, in which "real art is nothing but what happens in your brain."

Eventually even the need for museums seemed absurd and bourgeois, hence the beginnings of Earth Art, such as Smithson's Spiral Jetty in the Great Salt Lake.

Finally, toward the end of the twentieth century, Wolfe believes that "Modern art was about to fulfill its destiny: to become nothing less than Literature pure and simple." And then "Art made its final flight, and disappeared up its own fundamental aperture ... and came out the other side as Art Theory." For Wolfe, that Art Theory is just words on a page, a literature without vision.

I ran across this recent segment in an interview of Wolfe:
"Chester Gould (drawer of Dick Tracy comics) had more skill than Roy Lichtenstein. There is a line I love in Tom Stoppard's play Artist Descending a Staircase (1988), when one of the characters says, 'Imagination without skill gives us modern art'. And I think it's quite true. Someone like de Kooning couldn't draw a cat on a fence; but he was considered to have true genius because he painted like a child – a very young child, I'd say."

Clement Greenberg famously said, regarding Pollock: "All profoundly original art looks ugly at first." Wolfe claims that Pollock art looks ugly because it is!

Barbara Rose in the NY Review of Books:
"Tom Wolfe is an attractive writer because he makes hard things easy. He equips one for intellectual name-dropping, the very discourse of the upwardly mobile cocktail-party society of arrivistes for whom Wolfe

reserves the greatest measure of his contempt."

Ms. Rose also writes: "When he deals with pop culture, Wolfe's inability to grapple with ideas of any complexity is no disadvantage; the pop world can indeed be plumbed to its depth by scratching the surface."

So Tom Wolfe, a very skilled polemicist, effectively skewers most of the major 20th century artists and their famous art. Quite a tour de force!

Glenn Russell says

Jack the Dripper, the king of Abstract Expressionism, an art movement author Tom Wolfe didn't hold in high regard

You will be hard-pressed to find a more lively, wittier book on the phenomenon of modern art than Tom Wolfe's "The Painted Word," a 100-page romp through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s where the author jabs his sharp satirical needle with signature debunking flare into Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Op Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art. And that's 'Painted Word' as in Wolfe's epiphany whilst reading an article in the Sunday New York Times Arts & Leisure section containing these words: "Modern Art has become completely literary: the painting and other works exist only to illustrate the text."

To put it another way, Tom realized, regarding modern art, all his previous trips to museums and galleries to view the work of painters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were uninformed since he neglected a critical first step – understanding the theory revealed via the text, those oh-so-important words. Oh, rats, Tom fumed, all my hours squinting and starring at unintelligible paintings and I never comprehended those massive cutting-edge, avant-garde canvases were based on ideas and philosophies outlined by hyper-perceptive, authoritative art theorists.

For the Abstract Expressionists, Clement Greenberg was the first to expound the theory. Wolfe writes, "In Greenberg's eyes, the Freight Train of Art History had a specific destination. . . . It was time to clear the tracks at last of all the remaining rubble of the pre-Modern way of painting. And just what was this destination? On this point Greenberg couldn't have been clearer: Flatness." None of that old-fashion 3-dimensional representation – paintings of portraits, landscapes, bowls of fruit, even if painted in cubes or dots, no, no, no, no. "What was needed was purity – a style in which lines, forms, contours, colors all became unified on the flat surface." Now, attending an art event armed with Greenberg's theory, all those Pollocks and Rothkos make abundant sense.

Then as Tom Wolfe points out, a second major theorist, Harold Rosenberg, added another dimension. "Rosenberg came up with a higher synthesis, a theory that combined Greenberg's formal purity with something that had been lacking in abstract art from the early Synthetic Cubist days and ever since: namely, the emotional wallop of the old realistic pre-Modern pictures." And then Wolfe quotes Rosenberg directly: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an area in which to act. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." Oh, Wolfe proclaims, now I get it – understood as pure action painting, all those Pollocks really, really make sense!

As Wolfe continues: "A Promethean artist gorged with emotion and overloaded with paint, hurling himself and his brushes at the canvas as if in hand-to-hand combat with Fate. There! . . . there! . . . there in those

furious swipes of the brush on canvas, in those splatters of unchained id, one could see the artist’s emotion itself – still alive! – in the final product.” And after Abstract Expressionism, its Warhol and Pop Art, Bridget Riley and Op Art, Frank Stella and Minimalist Art, Lawrence Weiner and Conceptual Art, all on the receiving end of the author’s cynical, caustic barbs.

And what do I myself think of Tom Wolfe on the subject of modern art? Permit me to answer by way of an experience: When I was 12-years old I accompanied my mother when she took a summer workshop at a local college for Sunday school teachers. She took me to the college bookstore and told me I could pick out any book I wanted. Ah, my very first book, ever! I scanned the bookshelves; there was a series of small books on various types of art and I chose a book with a cover that fascinated me on two counts: first, the picture – a combination of colors and shapes arranged geometrically - orange circles, black half circles, purple and cream rectangles, large dark green squares and a black square in the middle; second, two words on the cover: Abstract Art. ‘Abstract' resonated with me, a word starting with that bold ‘A’ and having such an otherworldly sound, a word with an ‘A’ matching the ‘A’ in art.

Back at the dormitory where I was staying, I turned the pages, both fascinated and mesmerized by all the paintings. The next day I played sick so I wouldn't have to go to the kid’s workshop class. I remained in my room with paper and crayons doing my best copying the art in the book. By the end of the day, when one of the Sunday school teachers returned to the dormitory, I proudly showed her my drawing and my book. She promptly belittled my efforts: "You don't have this black spot in the right place." “Your colors don't match what's in the book at all." She was furious I did what I did. My response to her fury was not to be upset, but to be pleased. I enjoyed being transported to this special, new world of art and how this art could trigger such a violent emotional reaction in an adult.

In retrospect, I can only smile at the encounter - a boy's entering into the world of abstract art and communicating his love to a Sunday school teacher. Now wonder she was so mad! And, predictably, she countered with all the judgment and outrage she could muster as spokeswoman for the conventional, average, bland, mundane world. On reading "The Painted Word" I can't help but wonder how much Tom Wolfe has in common with this Sunday school teacher.

Kathe Umlauf says

A clear and concise easy to read book about why much contemporary art has become the vast wasteland that it is. Why is dumb, empty, meaningless, talentless art esteemed in certain galleries? There is a war of values and wills taking place in a culture that has lost it's philosophical moorings. Contemporary cultural values have been influenced by the Existentialism and relativism of the 1960's and art follows. The now subjective world of art making, selling and buying has become the playground of those personalities in NYC who can bully, persuade and posture the most convincingly. Visual art no longer speaks for itself, but needs an interpreter and justifier to speak for it, something like the Emperor'S New Clothes fable. A must read for any thinking artist.

Herb says

Wolfe's argument in this short, entertaining, and completely wrong-headed polemic is based on the idea that the non-representational art of the last 100 or so years is a hoax because it can only be appreciated by those

who have learned and agree with various abstract theories.

Wolfe is much more supportive of various flavors of representational art of the same period and the preceding centuries because he thinks this art can be appreciated without depending on theories.

The basic fallacy of this argument is that Wolfe doesn't admit (or perhaps he is really unaware) that the "realistic" nature of the art works he champions is no less dependent on a variety of theories that have either been absorbed into modern Western culture but are by no means universal throughout the world (like perspective and other 3-D modeling techniques) and/or are no longer central to the culture most of us live in and must be learned in art history classes (like the iconography of saints, etc).

The book is, as I mentioned earlier, entertaining. Wolfe is almost always fun to read. But that doesn't mean that he knows a lot about his subject here.

James says

If your interest is writing or art, you'll enjoy The Painted Word by Tom Wolf. If you like both, then this irreverent, little book will make you laugh, nod in agreement, or cry out in protest. You definitely won't be bored. This is Wolf at the top of his game and you'll find yourself constantly reading passages aloud to anyone within earshot.

First published in 1975, Wolf decomposes modern art movements in a way that is both enlightening and entertaining. His clever style provides the reader with an inside look at the art world and illuminates the follies of our cultural elite. Even if you have only a cursory understanding of modern art, Wolf's insightfulness will prompt numerous "oh yeah, now I get it" moments.

The Painted Word will make your next visit to an art museum more discerning and a heck of a lot more fun.

Jeff says

Wolfe's basic premise here is that Art critics/theorists single-handedly devolved modern art and made a gorilla like Jackson Pollack's paintings worth millions. Ugh!! You see, unlike say a book or movie, art doesn't need the common man's approval in order to be "good", "worthy", or popular.

When I lived in New York, I liked to take dates (including the future Mrs. Jeff) to the Modern Museum of Art. I would bone up on modern art with this book, so I could dazzle my dates with shallow insight, and forced humor; not unlike my reviews, except the reader has the option of clicking elsewhere, my dates (unless they called security) were a captive audience.

It gets a bonus star 'cause Mr. Wolfe helped git me a woman.

If you said the average pre-schooler could equal Jackson Pollock, I'd have to say you would be right.

Kevin Tole says

Tom Wolfe rips the pish out of art critics using their own chosen weapon - the word.
This was probably about round 6 of a 12 rounder between painting and theory. Up to this pont Theory had been winning every round and it looked like painting was going to have to throw in the towel and abandon the title. Wolfe stepped into Painting's corner and this round was a decisive winner.
Nobody seems to know what the final outcome of the Championship bout was..... but Painting is still alive and going from strength to strength if not at the cutting edge of lard-'n'-feathers, sharks-in-tanks, used-tampaxes-in-tents that , **IS** the current leading edge of a few sychos in White Cube land. And as for Theory and Critics? Well, they are still there underpinned and supported by the whole government-supported Art establishment and Art School hegemony attempting still to usurp the work of art for the description of the work of art - that is to hijack the artist by intellectualising something that is not - fundamentally - an intellectual process.

Dfordoom says

A glorious hatchet job on modernist art. Wolfe's main point is that most schools of modernist art cannot be appreciated unless you first understand the theory behind them, which makes the art itself pretty much irrelevant. It's all about the theory. Wolfe is delightfully vicious and highly entertaining.

Timothy Urges says

I could not get into Wolfe's style.

David Gross says

Liked it lots, but I always feel a little gypped when a publisher puffs up what amounts to a magazine feature’s worth of words with a big font, generous line-spacing and margins, and some illustrations, to make it just big enough to put legible text on the spine so they can sell it as a book.

Kate says

Tom Wolfe has mastered the art of being shocked and horrified at the mundane and obvious. This book has the character of a child that has discovered some new situation and, misconstruing it, lets forth a torrent of outrage without insight. His assault on 'theory' only demonstrates the necessity of substance to fill out style.

Elizabeth says

Wolfe does have a zounds-slap-lightning way with phrases! I liked these: "the Uptown Museum-Gallery Complex," and, referring to deKooning and Pollack: "furious swipes of brush on canvas, ... splatters of unchained id."
You have to appreciate Wolfe for his bluster and charming if irritating and irascible ability to simplify everything to the level of the five-year-old, which is about the age of his persona as an essay writer, esp. circa 1974, when he wrote this. Nevertheless I was inspired to read this after loving John Updike's take-down of Richard Serra in the NY Review of Books. Writing in 1974, Wolfe seems to have already had the similar smart insight about contemporary art in the Serra vein, which is that it is fundamentally about consumption, abstracted from the essence of visual experience. Updike might say this more elegantly. Confession: Wolfe's essays are among my guilty pleasures as a reader.
I thought this was a smart insight about capitalism and art, about the 1965 Op Art show at MOMA: "By the time the Museum's big Op Art show opened in the fall, two out of every three women entering the glass doors on West Fifty Third Street for the opening night hoopla were wearing print dresses that were knock-offs of the paintings that were waiting on the walls inside…. The Seventh Avenue garment industry gad cranked up and slapped the avant-garde into mass production."

Cheri says

Wonderful little witty book about a specific moment in art history. I'm normally not a great Tom Wolfe fan, but the book does ring true, even though it does simplify things greatly.

If one likes the art that Wolfe takes apart, you might find yourself inclined to dislike the book without giving what he's saying enough consideration. He makes some absolutely valid points and more importantly, he hints at a broader trend - the rift between the public viewer and the insular art world. Here, I think he really was prescient about what has come to pass. One only has to look at the decline of the importance of the visual artist in society to see some of the effects of that rift. If you asked the man on the street in the 50's and 60's to name a few great living artists, you were likely to hear the names Picasso or Dali, even Pollack after his Time magazine cover. Try and do that now.

His inference that critics are afraid of being the guy who thought Renoir painted from the ash can, or called Turner's paintings a mess, is a reality, (having heard some contemporary critics say just that). Wolfe's funny, easily read book touches on some real and vital issues in the art world.

And this from someone who studied Art History, loves Jackson Pollack and a great deal of "Manifesto" art.
