

Scratching at Gesture

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In the mid-twentieth century, the handmade mark of the artist rose to the greatest height of artistic authority that it had ever achieved. Artists of all media looked inward to their own agency, psyche, and emotional rawness in pursuit of artistic and human truth. They used personalized approaches to both traditional and new materials, restlessly seeking new forms through experimentation.¹ The generation of artists in the 1960s, however, unseated the authority of the gesture by using innovative hands-off manufacturing procedures and replicating machines. Now, more than half a century later, the gesture continues to be of recurring formal interest to the artist Ben Rak in his exhibition *Pictures of Scratches*, which places the gesture on a minimalist steel slab, ready for dissection.

The cult of the gesture is a hypocritical one. On the one hand, gestural fetishism comes out of an earnest pursuit to connect a viewer to an authentically human artist. On the other, the cult of the gesture is a product of the world of high art, which has known for more than half a century that the gesture is not the site of an authentic creator but is a potent *symbol* for artistic genius, even though gesture does not and cannot harbour such genius.

The fetish of the gesture can be dated back to the sixteenth century, with the introduction of the term *spezzatura*. Translated by art theorist Deanna Petherbridge as “lively nonchalance,” *spezzatura* refers to an artist’s capacity to execute one’s work without the *appearance* of effort, concealing one’s skill and labour.² Taking this to its logical conclusion, Petherbridge reminds us that “if apparently effortless art signifies greatness, then by association the genuinely reductive sketch is a symbol of genius.”³

Since the sixteenth century, when the artist’s hand was in the service of religious art, the gesture has followed a steady semiotic trajectory despite substantial shifts in intellectual and artistic circles and resultant changes in attitudes toward the role of the human author in art and society. Gestural mark-making pervaded as a sign of genius throughout the humanist developments during the Enlightenment and in modernist projects.⁴ However, in post-modernism, artists and philosophers have shown that dreams of connecting to an authentic self or author were a bourgeois fantasy. Nevertheless, the gesture has survived as a relic from a time when human ingenuity was invaluable.

¹ Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*, 2nd ed. (California: University of California Press, 2012). 13.

² Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010). 36.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Achim Hochdörfer, "How the World Came In," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, ed. Achim Hochdörfer, David Joselit, and Manuela Ammer (Munich: Museum Brandhorst, 2016). 15.

Roy Lichtenstein's attack on the cult of the gesture was loud and clear. In 1964, in the wake of abstract expressionism, Lichtenstein painted *Yellow and Green Brushstrokes*, a representation of two abstract expressionist brush marks rendered in a comic book vernacular and using stencilled half-tone dots and bold black outlines to emphasise the artificiality of the gesture depicted.⁵ Commenting on Lichtenstein's method of painting, celebrated critic and art historian Robert Hughes stressed the manufactured connotations of Lichtenstein's process: "The enlarged printer's dots, which were the basis of Lichtenstein's style, were a way of distancing the image, making it seem both big and remote, like an industrial artefact."⁶

The 1960s saw a shift from hot expressionism to cool pop, minimalism, and conceptualism, which rejected any pretensions to the authority of the gestural mark.⁷ Philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes wrote influential essays denouncing the value of the author as an authentic voice.⁸ According to art historian Terry Smith, no style of art has succeeded pop, minimalism, or conceptualism.⁹ Instead we only build on the ideas presented in these movements.

In contemporary practice since the '60s, painterly gesture has come to act as a *signifier* equivalent to authenticity. *Pictures of Scratches* attacks the legitimacy of conflating gesture with authenticity. Each of Ben Rak's series—*Pictures of Scratches*, *Paintings of Scratches*, and *Scratches*—systematically undermines any pretence to authenticity by procedurally and mechanically reproducing gestural marks, reversioning the tropes of the pop, minimalist, and conceptual artists.

Scratches is a series of prints made from recycled and cut etching plates. After trimming the pieces into shards of zinc, Rak coated the micro plates with hard ground and used several randomizing procedures to scratch the plates, camouflaging artistic intention. Next, Rak aquatinted the plates, providing tonal modelling to render illusions of ambiguous three-dimensional forms. They appear as quasi-Platonic solids that reference the rationalism of Renaissance geometry and the proto-digital geometries produced by minimalists and conceptualists; for example, Sol Le Witt's *Pyramid* gouache paintings from 1989 could well have found their way into Rak's ammunition. The installation of Rak's work in a grid further alludes to the minimalist movement.

Pictures of Scratches and *Paintings of Scratches* continue to spin the categories of reproduction and original by bringing the artist's touch back into the foreground

⁵ Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today* (London: Phaidon, 2009). 13.

⁶ Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1980). 353.

⁷ Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence Kind Publishing, 2011). 17.

⁸ See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston MA: Cengage Learning, 2004); and Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in the same work.

⁹ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009). 245.

of production. While *Pictures of Scratches* uses the vocabulary of mechanical offset printing (so loved by Lichtenstein), the process is a product of fierce gesture - the artist must drag a squeegee boldly down the screen to push thick acrylic paint through the pores of the silk and onto the paper. *Paintings of Scratches*, on the other hand, returns us to the painterly gesture, with the scratches deceptively announcing themselves as the final step in gestural sophistication—as high art.

What Ben Rak has done in *Pictures of Scratches* is critically revisit the capacity of the gesture to serve as a site of individual agency and as an authentic representation of the self. Following on from Rak's master's research into perceived identity, the scratch is a new development for the artist as he continues to mine important issues of self and identity in art today.¹⁰ What better way is there to describe a gesture than as an act of performing one's identity, on a flat surface, for aesthetic contemplation?

Pictures of Scratches demonstrates that the abstract expressionists' obsession with gesture and the pop, minimalist, and conceptualist artists' subsequent rejection of it were both needlessly reductive. This exhibition argues that gesture has a potent and complex capacity to symbolize artistic intention without conflating it with human agency. Gesture can be contradictory, illusory, just like everything else in art. Combining organic forms of gestural abstraction with the hard rigid aesthetics of minimalism and conceptualism creates a paradox between two contradictory structures of human expression. The rigid and the wobbly are best served on the same plate.

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¹⁰ See Ben Rak, "Performance Anxiety" (master's of fine arts thesis, University of New South Wales, 2013).
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