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Socrates:
— To which is painting directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or of appearance as it appears? Is it in an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth?

Glaucon:
—Of a phantasm.

Socrates:
—Then the mimetic art is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantom ...

Σωκράτης:
— Τίνος ἄρα ἡ ζωγραφική; τοῦ μιμουμένου τῶν ὄντων ὡς ὄντων, ἢ τοῦ μιμουμένου τῶν ὄντων ὡς φαινομένων;

Ἀδελφῶν:
— Τῶν φαινομένων.

Σωκράτης:
—Ἔστιν ἄρα ὁ μιμητὴς πολύ πόρρω ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, καὶ ἃν βούληταί τι ποιεῖν, ὅτι ἂν ὀλίγον ἅπται ἐξ αὐτῶν, ἐκείνόν ἐστιν εἴδωλον· ὥστε ἔστιν εἴδωλον ἐκ τοῦ εἰδώλου, καὶ λέγοιτο ἂν εἴη τρισσὰ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας...

— Plato, Republic, X — 598a–b

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"The fundamental architectural problem becomes visible only in the house on fire."

— Giorgio Agamben

As Prometheus gave fire to humans, we now seek to give fire to machines. Humanity at risk – be it from our creations or from the Earth reclaiming herself – what becomes of painting? An end looms while paintings are made, shipped and sold as though we could print the sun in gold. Is painting at the end of the world ethical? Was it ever?

Plato exiled painters from his Republic for seducing citizens with copies of copies, three steps from the Real. However, as Iris Murdoch argues in The Fire and the Sun, Plato's concern was not art itself, but the moral effect of mimesis. Plato surmised that a complete shift in ideology can take place within three generations. Without history, weave threaded down from the past, our amnesia is total. Can a painting exist ethically, as a site of ontological presence beyond our mimetic drive? And if so, can it still bear meaning over time? Is painting's ambiguity its strength, weakness, or is it irreducibly both?

I believe that painting can carry stories essential to our sense of civilization, moving beyond mimeses without abandoning our natural codes of perception. The mid-century American painting I admired as a child exemplified this possibility : issued from both the tradition of iconoclasm and the transgressivity of modernism, the first paintings I encountered were forbidden depiction, yet divine. Art theory, at that time, insisted on the absence of narrative. We now understand the narrative was maintained, but displaced from the picture plane. Against perception flattened by speed and screen, painting returns to the trace, to the mark made in time.

That art must be progressive is a modern myth. The myth persists, and is underwritten by capitalism (not just money: image & idea, too: semeocapital). We live in an economy of images untethered from bodies. Painting inherently rejects this rift. In a world dominated by simulation, where images no longer represent but replace, painting is a resolutely humanist act of refusal. It is in this line of thinking that I intend to initiate a series of symposia gathering artists and thinkers in critical inquiry of painting.

— Richard Höglund

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