



The Moment of Power

by Mark Daniel Cohen

I is someone else.

—Arthur Rimbaud

Ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων

—Ἡρακλείτου

(Character is fate. —Heraclitus)

It was a moment of appropriate inappropriateness—a moment of precisely turned anomaly, of a perfectly tuned maladjustment, of a relevant impertinence. There are times when one is in the wrong place at the right time, when one makes the wrong move in exactly the right situation, when one turns an accidental corner and a larger logic than any we can construe and by which we can calculate kicks in—things just fall into place.

It was at the end of June. A number of the people I know in the business of art criticism and art history, and many whom I don't, were making the excursion of the year, the trip to see the showcase of all-star art, of what's breaking ground and making waves, of what's measuring the state of the industry at this moment and setting the pace for at least two more years. They were off to the Venice Biennale. I did not go. No one offered to finance my journey, and I was not certain that I shouldn't just have picked up and taken myself there, for the progress of personal responsibility, for the purposes of the edification.

But it lay elsewhere, the illuminating experience, at a moment of odd conjunction, a conjunction of stars, but of stars of a different order. One day late in June, at the very moment all I know who had gone to Italy were winging their way home from their travails, I caught a brief news story on morning television and found myself within a couple of hours in my car, having blown off everybody who was expecting me that day, heading for Beacon, New York—to take advantage of a three-day window to see a monumental sculpture of a horse designed by Leonardo da Vinci, the only chance to see the work before its journey to its permanent site in Milan.

The significance of the moment was in more than just the opportunity to see the work without crossing the ocean. It was the opportunity to see the 24-foot-tall bronze statue for the first time in history.

The story is this: In 1482, Ludovico Sforza, the duke of Milan, commissioned Leonardo to create the largest equine statue in the world. Leonardo worked on the sculpture for 17 years. By 1499, after drawing up numerous sketches for the sculpture, Leonardo produced a 24-foot-high clay model from which he intended to cast the finished bronze. However, it never was poured. The duke went to war with France and the bronze that Leonardo would have required was needed for the cannons. On September 10, 1499, the French army entered Milan and the artist fled the city, to return ultimately to Florence. The French soldiers used the mammoth clay model for target practice, leaving it pocked with holes and open to the ruination of the weather. Before long, it was a pile of formless clay, and until now, this was the last that was seen of it.

The construction of the horse, finally, was effected by Charles Dent, a commercial airline pilot, art collector, and amateur sculptor. In a 1977 *National Geographic* article, he saw reproductions of some of Leonardo's sketches for the project—sketches that were rediscovered in Madrid's Biblioteca Nacional in 1966—and he decided to erect the bronze work and donate it to Italy. Dent established the Leonardo da Vinci Horse, Inc., consulted with scholars, enlisted the aid of other artists, built a studio for the work, and financed the effort by contributions and, in large measure, with his own resources. Dent died in 1994, but the work was continued and completed under the direction of sculptor Nina Akamu. Casting was done this year at Tallix Art Foundry in Beacon, where the sculpture was displayed for the three days before being flown to Milan. The work was dedicated there on September 10—500 years to the day after the first clay model was destroyed. (Information and photos can be obtained on the web at <http://www.leonardoshorse.org>.)

The presentation of the bronze horse on the grounds of Tallix was spectacular. The sculpture was mounted in several sections with the seams still open—to be disassembled for transport and finished in Milan—and stood at its full 24-foot height, weighing over 10 tons, cast in silicon bronze with a stainless steel internal armature. The brilliant surface, only partially patinaed before transport, glistened in the purified power of a blinding sun in a cloudless sky, towering above the swimming crowds of people who eddied and marveled at something that struck them as like a miracle. They were there with quiet attention and good grace, something shared by Tallix, which kept the matter simple, unadulterated and unabused by commerce. Little was there for sale. There were no models, no medallions, no plaques, no ice cream, no souvenirs—just posters and T-shirts for the sake of fund-raising. Everything about the event was quiet and dignified—tents and chairs were set up to protect against the nearly 100-degree sunlight, an information booth offered the background on the project, and a small table for donations was positioned away from monument. Every person and every detail seemed infused with the aspect of the moment.

It was an atmosphere and a general comportment different from the New York art world and, very likely, much different from what my friends were lavished with in Venice. As was the work different—not just in its capability but in its essential nature—from much of the art we have become accustomed to. The sculpture was something of a marvel. It is a recomposition—Leonardo's drawings are largely lost and there are none extant that give his exact intentions for the work. Akamu has designed the horse from the drawings that are available, in consultation with other sculptors and with Renaissance scholars, among them Charles Avery and Anthony Radcliffe. Despite the ultimate and inescapable inauthenticity, there is a distinct quality of Renaissance art to it, a living sense of the aura that we receive from such work, of what we go to it to

obtain, refreshed and revived by the tangible fact that this work is, in the end, new. It has not just been resurrected from the accidents of history, but inaugurated, done by local hands, gleamingly bright with its creation, and endowed with the public wonder of something great being unveiled. When Duccio completed his altarpiece and had it moved from his studio to the Duomo in Sienna, crowds of people followed it and celebrated. The same occurred when Michelangelo finished the David and it was wheeled to its position of honor before the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. We once had to imagine what such moments of honor and general pride were like, because we no longer encounter art like that, or art that is like that. Now, however, we know first hand.

It is not quite an irony that I found in Beacon the quality and aspect of the art with which Italy imbued the world, while according to what they've told me and what I've read, my colleagues found in Venice the kind of art we have been seeing in New York for what is now decades. It is not quite an irony, for it is a matter of being in the wrong place at the right time. It was the right place, for the horse revealed in its principal aspect, in its most salient characteristic, the correct calibration of the art we have now got, and the correct estimation of what we have been missing.

What the Leonardo horse brings to the point of startle—not only for its intrinsic capacity to overwhelm but for the shuddering suddenness of its appearance, like water springing up in a desert—is artistic energy. This is energy notched up to a degree to which we have grown so unaccustomed that it seems a revelation. There is to the horse a density of power, a concentrated capability to invoke dreaming. The sculpture seems a work more of fury than of bronze, more of condensed anger than of an artist's hand. This work of art, this deliberate creation, seems to be hurling itself into being, into creation. It seems to renew itself as a made thing, as a real thing, moment by

moment, and each moment is made through it into something anomalous, something uncanny, as if an event that should be impossible is in fact happening before your very eyes. It has the anger of willful creation, the fury of the will to make something and to be dissatisfied until it is done exactly right.

This is the quality of the *terribilità*—the name given at the time to the expression on the face of Michelangelo's David, to acknowledge its look of sheer rage, a look of monumental art itself, an implicit quality brought to the surface and embodied in the young Michelangelo's proxy. Here, it is Leonardo's, and it has been fully regained in the re-creation. This horse is not a sign; it is an instigation. You don't have to come to it, you don't have to interpret it or brood upon it—it comes to you, it seeks you out, it will have its way with you. This is not an image of a horse, not a metaphor, not a study—it is *extremely* a horse. It is a horse intensified, a horse raised to a higher power, a power of vision, of conception, of apprehension. It is precisely the opposite of a simulacrum. This is the real thing by the merest proxy, the real thing as an apprehension, as reality is known to us, the observers of reality—only more so. This sculpture is a work of art as a point of total focus. It is a horse as though there were nothing in the world but this horse—nothing, not even us. In short, it is art as pure passion and as the ability to instill it—not a fashion of art, and not art after a fashion, but an erotics of art.

And it is a lesson for the moment. For the art we have today speaks of a quality of the spirit. Regardless of the intentions of the artist, regardless of the nature of the artist, there is a quality that is internal to it, that is to be found within it. Whether it is deliberate or not, the quality is there. If we like, we may call it the spirit of the time and blame no one. The art we see so much of today speaks of a fear of power. Through many of the experiments with new media and new materials, through much of the work

in the traditional media of painting, sculpture, and drawing, we discover a reluctance to the flourish of feeling and thought, a tentativeness, a diffidence. We see it everywhere around us. The theory-riddled habits of art as well as of criticism, inculcated in many of the art schools and promulgated by many of the art journals, is an external symptom of the hypertrophy of the intellect, and the dousing of the feeling part of ourselves. And the excessive reliance on the intellect is itself a symptom of a rampant anti-intellectualism. It is not quite an irony, for it is natural that we try to control what we fear. The resort to received theory, to unoriginal thought, is a control of the intellect, for intellectualism means one thing only—originality of thought, creativity of thought, and that too is a passion.

I have written before of the difference between symptoms and symbols, and the matter remains of the moment. In art today—in the abundance of installations, in the unending disposition of pop imagery, in the conceptual art formulations that seem chocked full of everything but concepts, in the amusement-park gallery atmosphere that was thoroughly lacking at Beacon—we celebrate symptoms as if they were symbols, we portray the symptomatic signs of the surrounding culture as if to portray them were to dissect them, as if to see them again—to see them in a new context, an artistic context, “recontextualized”—were automatically to see into them. And strangely, we do, if we know what to make of them, for art always reveals the nature of its creator.

Contemporary art makes clear in its brandished symptomatology that we see ourselves as symptomatology. The entire edifice of postmodern theory and the art that is born of it argues us to be the results of social forces, and the reason for its appeal is inescapable—we feel ourselves to be the powerless results of social forces. It must be so, for art and the thoughts that attend it are always diagnostic, they are always

a confession. Art cannot lie; it is a pure sincerity. Our art is diagnostic, and it is not meaningless, and it is not a joke. But it is also not necessarily an answer.

For the answer to powerlessness is not the complaint of it—for who is there to complain to?—but rather the enhancement of personal power, which means personal capability, the only form of power that is not a species of domination: personal strength, the capacity to direct oneself and one's life, the capacity to create. And that is the *terribilità*—artistic capability carried to the ninth power. We see it in the face of the David, in the face of Leonardo's horse, now that we have it to see, and to remind us. And we can see such power in the face of the Mona Lisa, for that matter, or in a Giacometti figure, a Cézanne landscape, a Rothko painting, a Duchamp conundrum. It is power that does not specify attitude or tone. It may be encountered in a delicate portrait, or in the gravitational beckoning of a perplexing abstraction. It is an anger that does not feel like conscious rage—it is sheer force of presence.

And I saw it over the course of this last year in New York—not very often, but too often to list here in full. I saw it in the mental terrains of Susan Hartnett at Danese, in the figures that looked to be emerging from some underworld of Manuel Neri at Charles Cowles, in the bristling drawings of David Rabinowitch at Peter Blum, in the sensitively crafted and distorted images of Judy Glantzman at Dactyl Foundation, in the abstract penetrations of space of Pat Adams at Zabriskie, and in many other instances. There actually are a remarkable number of instances of an art of power, but none of them is the dominant mode of the moment.

Nevertheless, if art is diagnostic by nature, if it is intrinsically a sincere response to the time, then there can be nothing to worry over in contemporary art. There can no more be something wrong with contemporary art than there can be something wrong with contemporary society. If art is diagnostic, then it is itself a

symptom of the time, and thus a reflection of our present sense of ourselves and our situation. And it will change as these things about us change, and as we change. Art will develop into new forms with continually enhancing aesthetic capabilities. It is an inevitability, for art is as natural to us as breathing—we cannot have done it for this long, for hundreds of thousands of years at least, only to see it go off the rails now. That simply is not probable. It has been observed by many commentators that we live in a time of dizzying fragmentation, that the speed of change in our social circumstances is beyond our capacity to cope, and our art reflects our dislocation. Postmodern art is the art of the fragmented self, the self-imagery of people beset by the aggressive onslaught of cultural signs. Very likely, but this will change of itself. It will dissipate as we become inured to the changing situation. The heightened self-consciousness, or narcissism if one likes, of the present moment—the hyper-sensitivity to ourselves and our cultural predicament as the only possible subject for art—is the by-product of the current shortfall in our abilities to conceptualize our cultural environment. This, too, will dissipate by itself. We will speed up to catch up with the rapid information flow and the beating acceleration of history. As we become used to it, we will begin to see the patterns in the information and the intrinsic organization of events. They will increasingly appear inherently organized. They will increasingly make their own sense.

There is no reason for pessimism about this. People have become inured to all historical periods until now and have retained a serious measure of their humanity through it all., and have continued to make works of art of real power. It seems reasonable to think we will do so again. We have become inured to the dizzying vastness of space that boggled Pascal, and we will become inured to the dizzying speed of world-wide change that is the present-day corollary in time. And arts of new materials, methods, and formalisms, and with the same capacity for sympathies and

intuitions, with the same power, will well up, too. There is nothing to worry about, except for what there has always been to worry about. There is nothing new to worry about.

Which is as much as to say that art criticism is meaningless. Artists proceed according to their impulses, and impulses educate themselves and develop by their own power. They braid themselves upward inescapably, until they stop, and then there is a period of fallow, and the cycle begins again. They come in waves, the periodic surges of creative power, and they will continue to, regardless of what we say. Ongoing criticism judges too early, it is the business of tasting the soup before it is fully cooked. Ayn Rand wrote in *The Fountainhead*: “I know what is to come by the principle on which it is built.” But if the principles of development are themselves under development, if they are in flux, one cannot reliably foresee. And if one cannot foresee, one cannot judge, for one cannot estimate the entire story.

But criticism is epiphenomenal, like all rational thought—it is a by-product of deeper psychological processes, which are the real agencies of change, the true causal agents. Criticism, a reasoning procedure, causes nothing to happen (the definition of an epiphenomenon—it floats like a vapor above the real causes, the real phenomena), even though it may sometimes appear to. What it is, is a sampling, a litmus test, of how we feel about ourselves and what we are doing, but it does not direct what we do. What we do directs itself, and it is fine. It takes care of itself. There is nothing new to worry about.

Which is to say that art criticism is inevitably a reflection of the moment, much like art, but with a great deal less power. It hovers above the impulses, it is directed by them—it is something like a song, only a great deal less powerful. We should perhaps try not to judge so quickly, but in the end, it does not matter. This

business of criticism, too, is inescapably sincere, and it plays out the game of our enacting our moment in history. It is a piece of the ambient tapestry of time.

As are we, in everything we do and everything we are. It takes care of itself, and to say that is to say that we are powerless in the flow of history, that we are leaves captured and pulled on the surface of the rushing current—that we too are epiphenomena. Yet, we do not feel it. We feel that we make ourselves, that we determine freely the things we determine to do. These are two truths we know about ourselves. As the French nineteenth-century poet Rimbaud told us, the “I” is someone else—behind us, beneath us, there is someone else, something else, that determines everything, and we are illusions in comparison, we are dreams that someone or something else is having. And as the antique Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, character is fate. What each of us is, is fundamental, it is inexorable, character cannot be argued with—we will, each of us, do what we will do, and that is all that counts.

In truth, we are somewhere in between, in between power and powerlessness, in between being enactors of our wills and being ghostly observers and sufferers of our destinies. And it is this situation that the greatest art has always spoken to, and that Leonardo’s horse addresses.

For the solution to the conundrum of power is to ride the horse. We are neither free to choose our future, nor helpless in the face of it. But we are in the position to direct the forces that drive us along, to take the reins of a power that we have no power to create, the power that must be provided us from a source we do not comprehend. We are neither helpless nor free. We are in history, and history is in our hands. Wisdom has always known this, and the wisest artists have always dealt with it, and Leonardo brings the matter to us across the chasm of five centuries. His horse seems self-creating because it is a concentrated moment of the power of creativity itself,

and creativity is about more than just the making of art, or of cultural observations, or of anything else. Creativity is about the possibility of human life itself. It exists in the interstice, in the place between logical alternatives—in the place of passion, of the *terribilità*. It is the natural home of art, and the site in which Leonardo began what, it turns out, could only be completed at a later moment. And we cannot help but feel that his eventual success was guaranteed, it took care of itself, though it depended ultimately on his power to create. He was required to take care of it.

That horse is not now in Milan. It is in the gap, the place between, the place from which it came and to which it carries its riders—all who give themselves up to it. I witnessed hundreds of people taken by it, and they palpably viewed the moment as not only momentous, but natural, as if in it they found what they expected should be possible, what they thought should naturally occur, what they believed art should be capable of creating. And if you were in Venice, you missed it.

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