

Timothy Hyman

Pictorial space and  
subjectivity in the  
twentieth century.

# Space for the **a New Self**

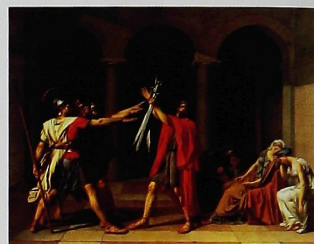
About four years ago I set out to write an essay on Bonnard, whose title would be 'A New Space for the Self'. It seemed to me that the originality of his art, especially after 1920, lay in its radical subjectivity – the presence of Bonnard himself as a kind of authorial presence within the image. 'Let it be felt that the painter was there', he wrote in 1937. Sometimes he is present in person; more often, we are led by the construction of the space to experience the world through his own eyes, more explicitly than in any painter ever before.

But I became entangled in the philosophical issues that surround current notions of 'the Self'; in the way, for instance, that much recent Theory argues against the very existence of 'the Self'. Fredric Jameson writes of 'the end of the autonomous bourgeois ego', of 'the decentering of that formerly centered subject or psyche'. Post-structuralism has been said to portend 'the death of the private self'. After several months of circling around this impasse, I found I had lost not only my sense of Bonnard, but my sense of the validity of any kind of subjective stance. This setting-in-question of the self was in some ways exhilarating, but it meant that I had to abandon my essay. When, however, a few months later, I received an entirely unexpected letter from Thames and Hudson, inviting me to write a monograph on Bonnard, it was as though that whole very painful process – literally, a self-questioning – fell into place, and I could find a way through. Bonnard's focus on the heightened moment, and the way he used space to make evident a

sudden raising of the emotional temperature, became a thread that could guide me through the labyrinth.

What kinds of spatial representation have twentieth-century painters inherited? What have we done with space in the past hundred years? One of my earliest decisive experiences of painting was when, at seventeen, I entered a room in Siena, and saw Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco of *The Well-governed City*; a 44-foot-long wall, on which a whole world had been spread. In 1340 the possibilities of painting seemed immense; Lorenzetti promised us an almost limitless spatiality – moving us up onto the rooftops, or down into the valley, yet never losing the monumentality of the wall. It was John White who made the attractive suggestion that, some 200 years later, Pieter Brueghel would have passed through Siena as a young man and seen the Lorenzetti room. Certainly, more than any Italian, Brueghel invites us to make the same kind of itinerary.

Both Lorenzetti and Brueghel have been essentially rediscoveries of the twentieth century; perhaps neither could be fully appreciated until the authority of systematic perspective had begun to slacken. The gains and losses of different kinds of spatial representation is a constant theme of James Elkins's excellent book *The Poetics of Perspective* (Cornell, 1995); as he points out, 'the eye never wanders as freely and inquisitively through a perspective picture as it can, for example, through a crowd painted by Brueghel, or a trecento townscape'. Many possibilities were suppressed by the conven-

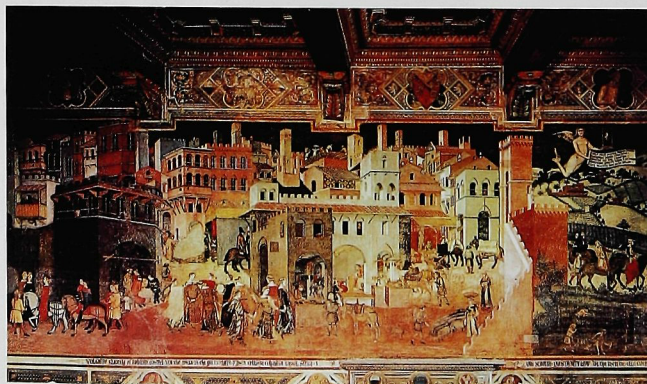


Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, canvas, 330 × 425 cm

tions of systematic perspective, and an even more repressive spatiality appeared in eighteenth-century neo-classical painting, eloquently evoked by Thomas Crow when writing of David's *The Oath of the Horatii*:

The space of the picture is not an imaginary continuation of the viewer's own; it is *another* space, and a somewhat daunting one. It does not transform the space where the viewer stands, providing alternative spatial paths for him to follow into the picture; it confronts him where he stands and denies the pleasure of play within a symbolic order.

The effect of this space is, Crow concludes, 'to deny freedom to the play of the imagination'. But in many respects it is this neo-classical space which is inherited by twentieth-century painting, mediated by Cézanne. Elkins comments interestingly: 'I consider that it is still largely a mystery what Cézanne put in place of the academic ideals he abandoned'. In the classic Cézanne still-life, the space is a kind of narrow shelf, parallel to the picture plane; and what we inherit from Cézanne is a diminished or vestigial spatiality, a vertical/horizontal grid that puts a lid on any more active spatial thrust – those deep explorations in which we participate as we stand before a Brueghel. The sequential idea of 'Modern Art' starts out from that Cézanne shelf; the sequence goes then to a Cubist still-life, where despite the fragmentation, any spatial illusionism or penetration is again shut off; then, to Mondrian; and finally (about the time I arrived at art school in the 1960s) to Barnett Newman, standing in front of *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government: Effects of Good Government in the City and the Country* (portion), 1338–9, fresco, Sala della Pace, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena

And this was a *disappointment*, right at the outset of my encounter with 'modern' painting: it seemed to consist in *not* moving around in space. If I was indeed 'afraid', my fear was not, I think, at the power of pure colour, so much as the loss of painting's spatiality. It was as though, in entering the world of 'modern art', a door had slammed shut behind me, as though all the windows in art's room had suddenly disappeared. It took me many years to accept that if you wanted to move figures around, you would have to carve out a deeper space than mainstream modernism allowed for. I would have to find some alternative tradition, even if that meant searching out artists that canonical modernism had bypassed, such as Beckmann or Bonnard, both of them widely regarded as 'reactionary' or 'retrograde', or at least 'irrelevant'. I would have to become a *revisionist*.

Like many other London painters, I was tremendously impressed by the recent exhibition of late Braque at the Royal Academy. I am fascinated by the way he often placed the outline of his easel in front of the image, as a kind of surrogate self, buried within the space of the Atelier pictures are layer upon layer of selves. But Braque still kept his imagery very close to the surface. He had a particularly virulent hatred of perspective, which persisted even into the 1950s:

The invention of mechanical perspective was a catastrophe, a ghastly mistake which it has taken four centuries to redress... simply a trick, a bad trick – which makes it impossible for an artist to convey a full experience of space, since it forces the objects in a picture to disappear away from the beholder, instead of bringing them within his reach, as painting should... we, following Cézanne, have implanted a perspective that brings objects within reach of the hand, and that describes them in relation to the artist himself.

That sounds terrific, but is it true? I think in practice even the most complex of the Atelier series are closed off spatially. And similarly, when one turns to contemporary painting and examines the very complex and often fascinating imagery of Sigmar Polke, one finds he also is operating within a kind of compromise spatiality: a 'post-modern' space that offers a multiplicity of elements, yet is still kept as shallow as possible. Polke's space is (like that of the early R B Kitaj) essentially a graphic arrangement, which marvellously conveys the sense of ideas floating in a depthless mind-space.

In the twentieth century, the artist who has most completely explored the relation between the self and the world is Pierre Bonnard. He seems to have associated the first conception of each picture with a sudden involuntary heightening of experience. He writes: 'The emotion surges up, the shock is instantaneous and often unforeseen'. A note of 1936 reads: 'Consciousness, the shock of feeling and of memory'. It is Bonnard's concentration on such moments – ecstasies, or 'epiphanies' – that brings him so close to Marcel Proust. We know that he read *A la Recherche* before 1925, and again after 1940. There may be a component of Bonnard in Proust's artist-character Elstir, but I think

the real identity is with the narrator, 'Marcel'. Just as Proust writes the book of himself, so Bonnard will paint the picture of himself.

Bonnard's self, like Marcel's, is not that fixed and continuous character of our usual social being. What he has to record is a sudden and involuntary vision of things, and of his place among them. Jean Clair writes of Bonnard's being 'giddy in the astonishment of the relived moment'. 'At such a moment', according to Marcel,

our true self which had for long years seemed to be dead, but was not altogether dead, is awakened and reanimated by the celestial nourishment that is brought to it. A minute freed from the order of time has recreated in us, to feel it, the man freed from the order of time.

This 'cult of the moment' has consequences for Bonnard's pictorial language; we can imagine him as a myopic spectator, moving through a floating world, until arrested by a sudden focus – and the transition from blurred to focus is an essential component in his language. As is the transition between movement and stillness: Bonnard once defined painting as 'a stilling of time'. That could sound like an 1890s aesthetic quest, yet after 1910 Bonnard, along with others of his generation (not only Proust, but his British contemporaries such as Yeats and John Cowper Powys), was able to transfer, and in a sense *redeem*, that aestheticism, in the harsher world of modernism, and to explore the epiphany through the medium of self. Perhaps it is helpful to place beside one of Bonnard's table-tops (such as *The Dining Room in the Country* or *The Bowl of Milk*) some lines from Yeats's *Vacillation*:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop,  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table top.

While on the shop and street I gazed  
My body of a sudden blazed,  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

In a marvellous photograph by Bonnard of 1908, the entire lower half asserts his own presence, from the band of darkness at the base, rising to what may be his own blurred hands. This looming foreground self is dramatically juxtaposed to the diminished and vulnerable nude woman, thrown up by the steeply tilted plane of the patterned floor. Marthe half kneels as she sponges herself within the tub's dark circuit, head lowered, and one nipple sharply silhouetted against a bright patch of light.

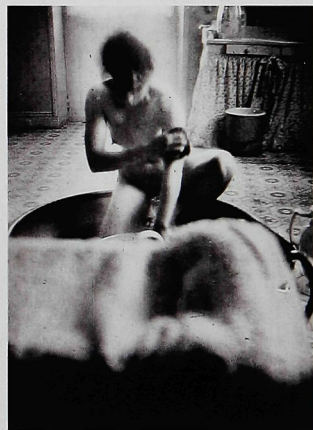
Photographs of this kind may have been among the factors that led Bonnard to the possibility of including the self within his later sequence of bathroom paintings. Certainly from 1920 he is pioneering a radically new kind of spatial representation – a space quite different from any systematic perspective (the Albertian window or stage-set) as well as from empirical naturalism. The presence of the self renders everything charged with subjectivity, with emotional ambiguity and psychological complexity.

Bonnard made explicit, more than any artist before, that space extends between the self and the world. He was acutely attentive, especially in later life, to the mechanics of seeing. A note of 1 February 1934 reads: 'Painting, or the transcription of the adventures of the optic nerve'. These 'adventures' increasingly set in question all received conventions. Artists have traditionally limited representation to the sharp-focused central area of the visual field. Yet the totality of our gaze is much wider; if the focused area is 90 degrees, peripheral vision extends to at least twice that. And since our everyday viewing is not a steady gaze, but a mobile scanning, the kind of seeing we normally experience will be nearer to 250 degrees. Kepler complained that, by linear perspective, painters had been 'educated into blindness'. Bonnard set himself to unlearn the kinds of seeing associated with one-point perspective, the fixed stare of the art school life room. 'The eye of the painter', he wrote,

gives to objects a human value and reproduces things as the human eye sees them. And this vision is mutable, and this vision is mobile.

His art could not operate within that vestigial spatial formula inherited by most twentieth-century painters. In the previously uncharted territory of peripheral vision Bonnard discovered strange flattenings, wobbles, shifts of angle as well as of colour, and darkenings of tone, penumbral adventures and metamorphoses. It was as though the central area of fact were surrounded by some much less predictable, almost fabulous margins – where imagination and reverie could be asserted in 'impossible' intensities of colour.

He learnt to register in his art an intense consciousness of spatiality – of the vertiginous gulf that appears at a tub's edge, of diagonal thrusts deep into space, of the various atmospheric effects that emphasise the wrench between near and far – while yet keeping his Nabi faith with the flatness of the picture surface. An extreme tension develops in the early 1920s between this almost anarchic spatiality and the sonorities of flat decorative colour. The effect is often of a



Bonnard, *Nude in the Tub*, 1908, gelatin print, 8.5 × 6 cm



Bonnard, *Large Blue Nude*, 1924, oil on canvas, 101 × 73cm

sudden compression, rather like a zoom lens, yanking the eye into space, bringing the distance close. Bonnard's art, centred on the exceptional moment – on moments that detach themselves from the flow of everyday living – now found weird structures to convey some of the shock of each epiphany: a heightened space to signal a heightened state.

When Bonnard in so many of his bathroom pictures signals his own presence within the image, he marks out a special region of experience which still awaits depiction. These images locate the spectator within Bonnard's own space; we are made to stand where he stood, to move as he moved. I suppose we are all familiar with the experience of seeing a part of oneself intrude into the visual field: the tip of one's own nose, the edge of one's own spectacles, a knee or a hand. Our snapshot may be 'spoiled' by this. But Bonnard saw a possibility there.

In *Large Blue Nude*, Bonnard's pale leg obtrudes; the image resolves itself into a relationship. Bonnard sits, holding his knee, gazing at the object of his contemplation – not so much at Marthe, as at the dazzlingly illuminated patch on her back, isolated from the rest of her body, and rendered in thick impasto. In several other bathroom pictures, we see at the margin an area of undefined forms, which may be read as a chair draped with patterned towels and gowns, but which may also indicate the presence of the artist, edging into the scene. In the preliminary drawing for *Getting out of the Bath*, a form billows up from the lower right, and the rim of the bath suddenly changes direction. In the painting, the rim has stabilised, but now it is the base of the bath which expands – while on the right a vertical patchwork, like a patterned totem pole, establishes where Bonnard is standing. In another scene, we see of Marthe only her purple legs, suspended upside-down from the lower corner. Along the centre of the canvas, the pale rim of the bath rises vertically, like a white column: implicitly, the spectator stands directly above. Yet Bonnard has inserted himself as a small distant figure in dressing-gown and slippers – according to David Sylvester, he holds a

palette – and cut off at chest level, as Marthe is at the hips. They could be seen as polarised opposites (not unlike the reversed fishes of the Pisces sign). Or should one say, rather, that out of these two headless fragmentary persons, a whole can somehow be made?

In all these bathroom images, the essential subject is the exchange between self and other; sometimes a merging, the breaking of the barriers between them; sometimes the sense of a rift, of their separation. Such elusive areas of feeling may be better expressed in images than in words, where they demand a difficult language. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, touches on the presence of the self in our seeing:

As soon as I see, it is inevitable that vision is doubled within a complementary vision. Myself seen from without, such as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible.

And through this objectified or 'doubled' self, Bonnard articulates a new relation between the viewer and the world.

In his late *Large Yellow Nude* Marthe is now a near-caricatural figure, as yellow as a canary, tapering down to her blue high heels; and overlapped by an indeterminate foreground shape, usually described as a patterned bath wrap flung over a chair. But Eric Fischl has suggested an alternative reading – a cloth, possibly bloodied, held forward to our gaze by the artist's two hands.

Bonnard's mode of seeing might be characterised not as that of the hunter – acute, focused – but of the hunted: wide and peripheral, fugitive and vulnerable. And the space that results registers the experience of weakness. I would argue that this is the special potentiality of Bonnard's art – to speak for the weak. As has often been recognised, there is in his use of space, in his lurking peripheral presences, a dimension of fear. (One of the few other twentieth-century painters to employ peripheral vision, E L Kirchner, described his own work as 'the life-story of a paranoid'.) But here one might ask: is Bonnard telling of his own fear and weakness, or is he entering into Marthe's? His seeing embodies an attitude towards the world less willed and concentrated than in any previous Western art. His vision is not about 'capturing' or 'imprisoning' the object of his gaze. Whether we call it 'diffuse' or (too loaded a word) 'feminising', the result is a seeing that attempts to lose the self in the other – in the still-life, the landscape, or in Marthe – by an act of submission.

The tragic dimension in Bonnard's art emerges from the inevitable failure of such an attempt. That failure had always been part of the subject-matter of Romanticism: Caspar David Friedrich, for example, could best achieve his landscape vision by inserting a *Rückfigur* – a figure seen from behind, embodying both yearning and solitariness. Bonnard also is forced to observe himself, as that which is inescapable and almost imprisoning: as that which *surrounds* our vision of the world. (We see the world through two apertures in a bony structure.) When he employs curved space, this space must wrap itself around some core, must proceed from some central consciousness.

Yet the disadvantage of wide-angle or

'fish-eye' seeing in painting is that it will tend to present unstable forms, more or less comical in this distortion, and thus to be destructive of dignity, gravitas and monumentality. More generally, there is a loss of materiality, all forms risk being swallowed up into the artist's subjective emotion. As early as the fifteenth century, Piero della Francesca wrote eloquently of trying to peer out from the very limits of the 90-degree visual field:

The eye will no longer distinguish men from animals, and everything will be reduced to flecks.

One recalls Bonnard wanting 'to show what one sees on first entering a room, what the eye takes in at first glance; one sees everything, and at the same time, nothing'. The paradox is that Bonnard's closeness to sense-data, to perceptual truth, results in the extreme subjectivity of his later work. It is through being based on the facts of vision that his work becomes 'visionary'. Yet it ends by opening, rather than closing, the world. Through the subjectivity of Bonnard's wide-open space we are shocked out of the narrowness of our normal seeing, overwhelmed anew by the power and beauty of the visible.

What links Bonnard to Beckmann is partly their use of space, and a questioning of the self through spatiality. As Beckmann wrote in *Letters to a Woman Painter* in 1948,

Remember that depth in space in a work of art is always decisive. The essential meaning of space or volume is identical with individuality... [yet] we must observe what may be called the law of surface, and this law must never be broken by using the false technique of illusion.

Recalling his actual experience while working on a painting, he says:

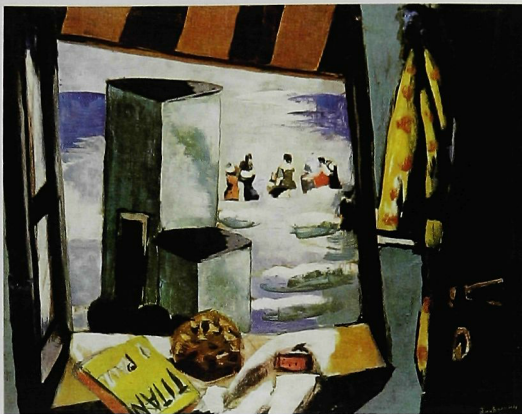
To transform height, width and depth into two dimensions was for me an experience full of magic, in which I glimpsed for a moment a fourth dimension which my whole being was seeking.

If the self was 'the great veiled mystery of the world', then the creation of space in painting was a way of articulating the self, and making it visible.

In Beckmann, as in many of his German contemporaries, one finds a curvature of space, often associated with compression. Not many previous artists had registered that when we go to the seaside we see the horizon as a curve, not a straight line. In another image, we look out from inside a bathing cabin at another of those strange wheeled contraptions; and in front, on the ledge, he places various objects – his shaving-tackle, a sponge, but also his favourite novel, Jean Paul's *Titan*. We are looking out of the self, as it were.

One of the most interesting sections of Elkins's *The Poetics of Perspective* deals with what he calls 'curved foundations' – the tradition, running from Leonardo to Helmholtz, which took note of spatial curvatures. He quotes a letter to Kepler in the seventeenth century, about how, if one looks at any long wall, 'it appears to swell up in the middle like a belly'. And in the nineteenth century

Max Beckmann,  
*The Bathing Cabin*,  
1928,  
oil on canvas,  
70 x 85 cm



there appeared in Germany the strange figure of Guido Hauck, described as 'mathematician and subjectivist', who created a system of curved perspective that was apparently taught in German art schools between about 1840 and 1910. Elkins does not go on to make the links that seem to me to be begged, not only with Beckmann and Kirchner, but with Ludwig Meidner in a picture like *Me and the City*. I would suggest a much earlier lineage for the use of curved space, ranging from Sienezen landscapes and Altdorfer, to the little Fabritius *Lute-shop in Delft* in the National Gallery. Such works help me to hold on to what might otherwise seem 'distorted' or eccentric perceptions; in their company we become not the Flat Earth but the Curved Horizon Society.

Hans Belting, the medievalist art historian, has written interestingly on Beckmann. He wants to revive the term *Selbst-Kunst* (Self-art) which was used quite widely of Beckmann and other artists in the Weimar years. For example Paul Westheim wrote in 1923:

That is the catchword, his art is *Selbst-Kunst*, the man always steps in front of his work.

And Carl Einstein (among the most perceptive of all twentieth-century critics) writes in 1931:

Beckmann attempts not to avoid conflict between self and world, but rather to deepen that conflict to an almost tragic confrontation.

Hans Belting suggests that, in the post-war period,

critics have tended to shy away from this theme, for fear of afflicting visual art with the stigma of the literary... Art criticism thus lacks the categories to do justice to the authorial dimension of visual art. The author of a text is allowed to tell of himself. The painter is supposed to restrict himself to depicting the world.

Hans Belting was writing in the late 1970s. Of course in Germany within a few years there would indeed be a renewal of *Selbst-Kunst*. But whereas in the imagery of Kirchner and Beckmann the spatial component is all-important and subjectivity is explored *through* their treatment of space,

in the generation of neo-expressionism space tends to be more rudimentary. The much larger scale of Baselitz and Kiefer results in a less tense or compressed kind of spatiality.

My anthology of contemporary *Selbst-Kunst* in Britain might include, for example, work by Jeffery Camp, Howard Hodgkin, Anthony Green, Ken Kiff and Jiro Osuga. But I would also want to bring in some of the Indian painters I came across in Baroda in the 1980s, such as Bhupen Khakhar and G M Sheikh, with their compartmented panoramas, fusing certain Indian traditions (the complex serial views of the Udaipur court-painters) with Lorenzetti and Brueghel and Kitaj. I believe it will be out of cultural collisions and conjunctions of this kind that a future painting will emerge, with new resources of spatial representation.

As soon as we isolate the *Selbst-Kunst* vein, we realise how pervasive it has been throughout this century. In 1995, to mark the centenary of the Venice Biennale, an enormous exhibition was mounted by Jean Clair. Its English title, 'Identity and Alterity', might be better translated as 'The Self and

the Other'; it assembled, among much else, over one hundred self-portraits. In his introductory essay, Clair asks: 'What if the twentieth century had been, more than any other, the century of the self-portrait, not of abstraction?' *Selbst-Kunst* could certainly be extended to a very wide range of painters – from Chagall to Guston, from Spencer to Bacon; but the two painters with perhaps the strongest presence at Venice were Beckmann and Bonnard, whose *The Boxer* was for me the most poignant image in the show. Here he has caught sight of himself squaring up to the bathroom mirror with puny fists, in play, or impotence. From the battered pulp of the head – a red lump of raw meat, set atop the naked torso – there emanates a terrible pathos, eyes lowered in shame, in defeat. And yet, the picture triumphs, after all: a kind of tragi-comic clowning is transformed, by the exquisite violet line along the shoulder, by the magically shimmering yellow-and-blue field on which the figure is embedded, into an image of unforeseen beauty.

Almost all Bonnard's late self-portraits are linked formally by his use of *contre-jour*, his rendering the self in shadow; he draws out of each head a nocturnal or dreamlike range of hue, unavailable to daylight flesh. *The Boxer* confirms how Bonnard's sense of himself is more searching, more unstable, than the bourgeois self would allow for. Freud downgraded ecstasy, writing it off, along with daydreaming, as an aberration – as atavistic forms of mental life, and regressions to 'primary-process' thinking. But Bonnard's first-person art could be seen as a sustained argument for the validity of such modes of being. In the self-portraits, but perhaps even more in those extraordinary spaces that register his presence, I find the most convincing evidence for a necessary subjectivity in art: for the discontinuous self, to be rediscovered only in the exceptional moment.

This essay is an edited and abbreviated version of the 1997 Peter Fuller Memorial Lecture.



Pierre Bonnard, *The Boxer*, 1931, oil on canvas, 53.5 x 74cm. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998