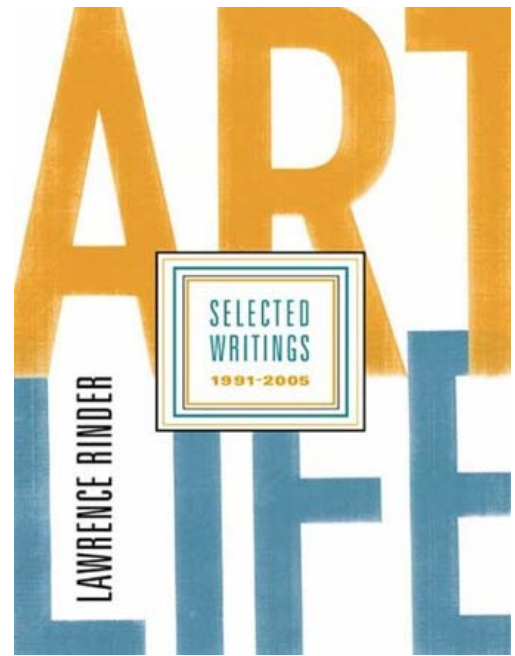


BOOK REPORT
by Abraham Orden

August 11, 2006

* * *

Now, dead white men are good and all that, but there is a certain sense of relief to be had in finishing Updike's collection and turning to Lawrence Rinder's new book, *Art Life: Selected Writings, 1991-2005* (Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2005, 160 pp., \$25). Rinder, as opposed to Updike, aims each of his texts at its present moment, at contemporary art, and that happens to land most of them squarely in the 1990s -- a time when the art world, like a country club, was experiencing growing pains.



"We have allowed the arts to become a kind of dumb show in which so-called values that would be considered discriminatory at best in everyday discourse take the stage to enact lingering myths of hierarchy," he writes in the book's first essay, a piece on the abstract paintings of a Papua New Guinean tribe called the Maisin. "There is more at stake [in this]," he continues, "than the success or failure of individual careers. The ways we define and categorize art say much about our society as a whole, about our willingness to accept difference, to welcome change and to find joy in the present. . . . For this very reason, these categories and definitions should not go untested."

For Rinder, who organized two U.S. exhibitions of Maisin paintings -- known as *tapa* -- their work is emblematic of the values he brings to his life as a curator. "These exhibitions, in museum contexts, called into question the boundaries between art and craft, between trained and untrained artistic practice, and -- because the *tapa* were made for commercial markets -- between so-called "high" and "low" art. Although [the Maisin's] practice, strictly speaking, fell outside the boundaries of art as I was taught to define it, I found greater formal skill, greater imaginative refinement and far greater social relevance in their work than in virtually any other visual material I have dealt with in the well more than one hundred exhibitions I have organized." This is quite a claim, especially coming from the curator who oversaw the 2002 Whitney Biennial. One wonders if, in the 16 essays to follow, such bold and lofty praise will be cheapened by promiscuity.

Rinder, thankfully, does not offer these accolades lightly -- though the Maisin aren't the only artists included in the book who, in their relatively unranked, wildcard status within the mainstream art world, would stand to benefit from the endorsement of a major curator like this one. Rather than simply voicing his commitments, Rinder enacts them, putting his gift for inventive thinking to work in support of his subjects. "Art essays that stick solely to the thing itself have a hard time being anything other than a user's manual: four legs, one top, eight screws -- a table. . . . I enjoy making far-flung connections, relating contemporary works to the art and thought of other times and cultures."

And so the reclusive quilter Rosie Lee Tompkins is paired with Hans Hoffman and the modernist, Anglo-European tradition -- not in order to legitimize her practice, but to "discourage a complacent view that delimits her work a priori because of her purported cultural heritage and chosen medium." Downtown queer-cinema auteur Jack Smith is paired with Edouard Manet, for related reasons, and the late conspiracy junky Mark Lombardi's schematic drawings are brushed past both Friendster and, most improbably, the paintings of John Currin -- all while Lombardi is posed as a kind of information-age John Henry battling single-handedly against the much more powerful database analysis system, the Defense Department's Total Information Awareness program.

This same strategy serves to refresh our eyes to some of the more thoroughly canonized artists in the book as well. Sophie Calle meets ancient Skeptic philosophy, for instance, and we are invited to consider Luc Tuymans in light of Julia Kristeva and Stephen King. As is evident, most of the materials Rinder works with in his texts are familiar to a college graduate. It's the arrangements that are original.

Rinder is a good writer, but his job is curating, and one of the book's shining points, the 1995 essay *In a Different Light*, lets us in on how he goes about his work. The text, which accompanied an exhibition of works expressing gay and lesbian sensibilities, offers a kind of step-by-step narrative of how he mentally conceives and structures a sizeable group show -- a process that comes off as rigorously intellectual, and a genuine labor of love. Moreover, in our 20-20 hindsight, evidence emerges in this ten-year-old text showing a curator helping to give shape to the ideas that would follow. "For many artists in their 20s and early 30s. . . the very definitions of sexual identity are in flux. . . . Queerness -- as opposed to gayness or lesbianism -- or, for that matter, straightness -- is becoming a term that subverts or confuses group identification rather than fostering it. . . . So, while the present moment seems to mark an historic watershed for gay and lesbian art, this extraordinary creativity may be happening not because of a solidifying of gay and lesbian identity, but precisely because of a crisis in that identity." Queer has been all the rage in identity theory for some time -- it's all but old-hat -- but in '95 the author was working at the edge, experimenting with novel ideas, fulfilling in practice his earlier promise to push at the categories and definitions we bring to art.

The book, then, will teach its reader about a few unfamiliar artists and a few theories and ideas, but when it's all said and done, what lingers is a sense that Rinder's voice -- clear, plainspoken and even, in a way, brave -- is one to be trusted, and is thus worth our attention -- now where can I get my hands on one of those *tapa*?

ABRAHAM ORDEN writes on art from Chicago.