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Books Reviews

Working Through the End of Art



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July 19, 2012



When the wide-eyed young painter Jim Holl came to New York City in the mid-1970s to study and make art he was shaken by the news that painting, according to the critics, was dead.

Holl spent the next 20 years venturing outside the frame to find his place in this post-apocalyptic art world. His memoir, *The Landscape Painter: 1974 through 1994*, documents his journey from two perspectives, shifting between the satellite vantage of the academic critic

(professor at Marymount College) and the reflections of a painter, sculptor and performance artist seeking a genuine voice. The dual narratives create an insightful critical portrait of the late 20th century art world, and makes an edifying read for art students, to whom he directs this well designed photo-essay/memoir.



Holls' "Civic Plots" (1983) as part of Creative Time's Art on the Beach. (all photos courtesy the artist unless otherwise noted)

These polarities — of critic and artist — are also apt writing devices as they mirror Holl's early struggle to make art. This was a time when aesthetic discourse centered around the critic and philosopher Arthur Danto's (quoted liberally in the book) interpretations of Hegel's End-of-Art thesis. Art was no longer meaningful as imitation of nature. It was no longer just about ideas. And it sure wasn't enough that it just look pretty. So what was art — and who was he as an artist? Hyperconscious and academically informed, Holl ventured into earnest inquiry of different art movements — from anti-art to relational aesthetics — which he went at in a direct way that was

critically serious and sometimes humorous.

In the early 1980s, Holl engaged in a political critique of corporate culture and consumerism with performance pieces at the seminal 1980 Times Square Show (*Preacher's Principles*), The New Museum (*The World Toy Company*, 1981) and Creative Time's Art on the Beach (*Civic Plots*, 1983). He ultimately rejected irony, realizing that it “... demonstrates that the concept of art as an authentic creative inquiry is defunct.” He moved beyond the traditions of painting and sculpture into a neo-conceptual pop art style that he called “display art.” Display art combined cultural symbols and objects with a cool detachment, which Holl eventually saw as a “strategy, not a vision.”



Left, Marcel Duchamp, “In Advance of the Broken Arm” (August 1964), fourth version, after lost original of November 1915, (via [MoMA.org](https://www.moma.org)) and, right, Jim Holl’s “In Advance of A Swept Room” (1991)

By the late 80s and early 90s, the AIDS epidemic and his disillusionment with the cultural zeitgeist had collided, prompting a move to a faux-naive style that used primitive materials, such as assemblages of characters in a coffin to represent the death of art. Still conceptually driven, Holl began to dig himself out of the ashes with work that rejected the idea of anti-art, a term generally attributed to Dadaist Marcel Duchamp who framed and titled found objects (known as readymades) to create art that questioned the meaning of art. In direct reply to Duchamp’s readymade shovel, “In Advance of a Broken Arm” (1915), Holl created a similarly-dimensioned “anti-anti-art” broom, “In Advance of A Swept Room” (1991).

After years of putting concept before art, Holl had come to a point of liberation, realizing that he’d been making cultural statements over personal investment. “Over the decades, I followed one path then another looking for the quintessential definition of art. Each journey ended in doubt.” He concludes, looking back with the insight of time and experience, that “Everything is impermanent. In all its variety, everything made reflects a passing moment.” He ends the essay with a eulogy to those moments.



Holl's "Let's Talk About Art" (2009) installation at the Figment Festival on Governor's Island, 2011.

Where did he go from there? I saw one of Holl's recent installations called "Let's Talk About Art" (2009) at the Figment Festival on Governor's Island last June. Though still conceptually driven, he seems ready not to give up his decades-long search to define art, but to give it over to the world. Structurally, it's a church-like meditation space/gallery made up of rough-hewn pews and altar. Blank canvases and markers are available. Participants are asked to "paint" their ideas about art on small stretched canvases, and their work is hung up for display. The simplicity of this piece belies its conceptual complexity. The church-like setting gives a philosophic nod to Hegel's concept of art as expressing the "Divine." From a critical perspective, the installation articulates the argument behind relational aesthetics — by inviting the viewer to talk about art, the art becomes all about the interaction (making the populist Figment Festival a perfect venue.) In the end, though, "Let's Talk About Art" does what it says: invites people to think about art and to find their self-expression.

Let's Talk About Art



Danto quotes Hegel as saying that “The universal need for art ... is man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self.” Holl’s installation promoted this inquiry. And the search for self-knowledge through art propels the narrative of *The Landscape Painter*. He writes, “My journey as an artist began and returned to (finding) out how to be true to the self.” (It’s interesting to note that Holl has returned to painting over the past few years.) It is Holl’s exposed urgency to define himself as an artist, and his place in the continuum of history (“we are a dot, a spot on the line”) that makes his excursion so poignant and expansively meaningful.

[The Landscape Painter: 1974 through 1994](#) is available on [Amazon](#) and other online booksellers.

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