

ANNA OSTOYA

Ben Lerner

I read about Anna Ostoya's paintings *The Kiss (1)* and *(2)* (2013) in the *New York Times* before I saw them; the two men depicted kissing are the art historian and critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and the Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner; the *Times* review of her New York gallery exhibition said that in her paintings "Ms. Ostoya cheekily satirizes alpha male bonding and an unholy alliance between criticism and the art market"; I googled "Buchloh Weiner Kiss" and found there was a snapshot on which the paintings were based; I was not optimistic about these works; here was a critic celebrating the "cheek" of an artist who criticizes the unholy alliance from within it; I was weary of commodified critiques of commodification; I was tired of an avant-garde reduced to the mild impudence of ironic detachment, tired of a postmedia pluralism that so often valorized puerility; in fine, I was tired of a cheeky criticality; I assumed *The Kiss* would be an easy sendup of the economy of prestige from which it sought to benefit, that it would be conceptual primarily in the cynical sense that the quality of its execution would be irrelevant; but I'd told a friend in common that I would visit the gallery, and she'd told Anna to expect me so I felt obliged to go, to sign the guest book; it was late May and there was a heat wave; I remember stepping over a man who had passed out on the platform when I transferred from the D train to the C; inside the gallery it was freezing; I didn't pay attention to anything on the walls until I found *The Kiss (1)* and *(2)* hanging opposite each other in the second room; that these paintings overcame my suspicions is clear since I'm writing this now, but I think it's important to acknowledge suspicion as the encounter's initial ground; *The Kiss (2)*, which I saw first, abstracts the photograph into

circular forms; *The Kiss (1)* abstracts the photograph through diagonals; the effect of the former is comic and has a vaguely fun-house feel—makes the subjects a little clownish—but the comparative severity of the diagonals is dignifying, demands a more rigorous response; *The Kiss (1)* is to me the better painting, but I was glad there were two versions: the doubling acknowledged and mimicked, however laboriously, the reproducibility of the photographic image and thereby declared the paintings' unoriginality; I was glad there were two paintings because the circular *Kiss* exorcises the diagonal *Kiss* of anything cheeky; do you know what I mean if I say that these two works were painted so masterfully that their accomplishment struck me as anachronistic; today the deskilled often functions as orthodoxy—a legacy of Duchamp, Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and the ongoing recoil against the discourse of medium specificity; of course, this is a tendentious, reductive statement, but the highest quality of execution is no longer assumed to be crucial or even desirable; quality signifies, and the bid for quality itself has conceptual content and demands to be interpreted; so my first impression of these canvases in Chelsea was of the untimeliness of their technical brilliance, and my experience of the work unfolded from the way that formal accomplishment interacts with the paintings' conceptual resonances; its ambition ironized easy irony and dissolved my suspicion; it made it impossible for me to see the work as merely mocking the critic and the artist; I noticed, for example, how, for *The Kiss (1)*, Ostoya ignored the drab institutional lighting of the photograph and rendered the image instead with strong backlighting, producing a kind of *contre-jour* effect; an Annunciation-style shaft of light emerges from the space

between Weiner's beard and Buchloh's neck; between their foreheads and the bridges of their noses, the brilliance of the light is almost blinding; it is like a Cubist Caravaggio, a Cubist Georges de La Tour; (the doubling of the paintings also evokes a more traditional painter's reworking of the same topic or religious scene); I am trying to make an illuminating overstatement about how the expertly handled lighting elevates the scene from that of a humorous snapshot into the historical context of ambitious oil painting; (the most commonly depicted kissing men in the history of art must be Judas and Jesus, even if it is only a kiss on the cheek); or consider the careful division of the canvas—how Buchloh and Weiner's kiss takes place where two triangular forms make particularly visible contact; (in her painting, Ostoya has elided Buchloh's surprised half-smile that can be detected in the photograph); the emotional center of the canvas is also a point of intense geometric abstraction; let this stand for the strange tone or tonelessness of the painting more generally: Ostoya is depicting a kiss but her own affect is unreadable, analytic; there is nothing gestural, nothing about how she handles paint that helps us determine whether or how she feels about the scene; as I stood before the canvas with no sense of its tone beyond its formal foreclosure of trivial ironies, the significance of Buchloh and Weiner as figures began to open up for me; (the text on the wall did not name the two kissers but simply referred to them as "two older men kissing . . . considered masters of articulation for vanguard art"); Buchloh: influential postwar art historian whose writing has centered on the persistence of vanguard strategies and whose mix of theoretical credibility and active participation in contemporary art writing has made him a kingmaker; he has the power to confer legitimacy on an artist's resistance to the market in a way that then increases the artist's marketability; for a young artist like Ostoya, here are two possible coordinates: first, his short but powerful review of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the November 1984 issue of *Art in America*, in which he argued against Bürger's often brilliant but breezily totalizing dismissal of all avant-garde art since World War II as the empty repetition of the "historical" avant-gardes of the early twentieth century; Buchloh's review helped clear the ground for a variety of artists to imagine their relation to the legacy of the avant-garde as something other than regressive or doomed; but a second coordinate for Ostoya might be

Buchloh's more recent, melancholic "Farewell to an Identity," in the December 2012 *Artforum*; there he appears to have arrived at a radical pessimism about the contemporary in which "artistic practices have become totally dependent on a neoliberal subjectivity for which the entire spectrum of once-radical avant-garde legacies is now available as gratuitously exchangeable devices"; I believe he appears in the *Kiss* paintings as a figure for the possibilities and dead ends of criticality generally; to place him *in* the painting is both to acknowledge how dependent on a critical supplement contemporary art has become and to place him, by incorporating him into the most traditional of artistic media, in uneasy relation to historical representatives of religious authority, royalty, and patronage; (Buchloh has been painted once before from a photograph—by Gerhard Richter, about whom the critic has often powerfully written: Ostoya would know Richter's soft-focus self-portrait with his adherent in front of the Court Chapel in Dresden from the year 2000); it is also worth mentioning that Buchloh's status as link to the European left, to its promises and failures, evokes what was possibly a significant antecedent for the *Kiss* paintings; Ostoya, who was eleven and living in Poland when the Berlin Wall fell, would also know the iconic photograph of Leonid Brezhnev kissing the East German leader Erich Honecker on October 7, 1979, when Brezhnev was visiting East Germany to celebrate its founding as a communist nation; the Brezhnev-Honecker kiss went on to inspire the Russian painter Dmitri Vrubel's satiric 1990 graffiti painting on the remains of the Berlin Wall; (in yet another doubling Ostoya would appreciate, the deteriorating painting was destroyed and repainted by Vrubel in 2009); then there is Weiner: a major figure in the development of Conceptual art, a friend and interlocutor of Buchloh's, he is perhaps best known for his statements in 1968 initiating a move from the art object to the textually presented conditions of its (optional) making: "(1) The artist may construct the piece. (2) The piece may be fabricated. (3) The piece may not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership"; whatever else the figure of Weiner evokes in the *Kiss* paintings, he represents the historical movement from painting to objects/actions in real space and, further, to the dissolution of the object altogether; (although, of course, the Conceptualists' production of

salable traces of their experiments becomes one vector of rematerialization, and Weiner himself has worked in many media); Ostoya expertly executes a portrait of the artist famous for rejecting skillful execution—for making execution itself beside the point; I believe Weiner and Buchloh function here as two distinct figures representing the rise of discourse in the arts, wherein criticism and Conceptualism (and so language) trump the artwork or are at least inextricable from it; let's say Buchloh represents a critical impasse for Ostoya by imparting a sense that avant-garde strategies have themselves been spectacularized and that neither the antiaesthetic nor the "resurrection of skills"¹ offers art the opportunity to be other than affirmative; in such a condition, all that remains is to articulate repeatedly the conditions of art's impossibility; let's then say Weiner represents a similar impasse for Ostoya on the side of the artist: the disavowal of the art object and the displacement of technique imply that to make your art is already to betray it; and yet both these figures, like the rest of us, are implicit in the economy they critique; they are both important presences, for instance, at Marian Goodman Gallery, where Weiner shows his work and for which Buchloh has written; I don't believe *The Kiss (1)* merely derides or pretends to magically solve the positions and contradictions these figures embody; I believe Ostoya's painting presents two powerful elders and their prohibitions with a skill and strength that are more than mockery or renunciation; part of the power of the *Kiss* paintings is their tremendous quiet; I remember hearing it as I stood before the canvases; after all, a kiss represents a formal limit to verbal exchange;² a kiss can silence; Ostoya has depicted these two critical (in more than one sense) patriarchs of postwar art, these "masters of articulation," in a suspended instant of exuberant speechlessness, their dialogue arrested; the brilliance of her painting (and painting's stillness, its muteness) takes over eloquence from these two men;

I was glad there were two paintings because the doubling acknowledged and mimicked, however laboriously, the reproducibility of the photographic image; six months after first seeing the *Kiss* paintings, I read that Ostoya was part of the "New Photography 2013" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art; I remember it was raining heavily when I emerged from the train at Rockefeller Center and that my cheap umbrella kept reversing in the

wind as I walked to the museum; I arrived soaked but everybody else in the lobby of the museum appeared perfectly dry, as if I'd arrived from some private climate or another time; I was eager to see how Ostoya used a camera; the answer was very little or not at all; her included works were all photomontages, compositions with found images (although she often photographed those photographs), sometimes combined with other compositional elements; most were small, their dimensions and structure evocative of books, perhaps family albums; she called these works *pseudomorphisms*, a term I looked up on my phone; in mineralogy: a mineral that has the crystalline form of another mineral rather than the form normally characteristic of its own composition; in paleontology: petrified wood and various fossils would be examples of pseudomorphs—mineral matter has replaced the remains while maintaining the original external structure; marine biologists describe the (cephalopod-size) cloud of ink that cephalopods release to confuse predators as a pseudomorph or "false body"; I suppose any photograph is a kind of metaphoric pseudomorphism: a chemical replication of patterned light or that pattern digitized into pixel values; and more generally the term can stand for a spectacularized culture where life is often replaced with its manipulated image; but does Ostoya's diptych *Pseudomorphism of a Political Event I* (2010)—which depicts, on its left panel, a 1968 student antiwar and antiracism protest at New York University and, on its right, a 1968 anticensorship protest in Warsaw—imply that one event is a "real" political event and the other its emptied form or imitation, East imitating West or West imitating East, a struggle against capitalist imperialism or a struggle against the censorship of "actually existing socialism"; or does the title describe Ostoya's construction of a new single image out of two photographs, one crowd melding into the other as the result of her intervention, so that we're encountering an image of a composite event that never actually happened; as I stood (slowly drying) in a quiet corner of the gallery looking at this small but to me powerfully troubling work, I kept trying to decide whether I was beholding one image or two images, one or two events, one or two crowds;³ this pseudomorphism produces—both visually and conceptually—a deliberate indeterminacy regarding the historical singularity or repeatability of the events in question; there is much in these two photographs that makes them feel like a single image: first and foremost,

the improbable symmetry of the crowds (did Ostoya alter the images to amplify their similarity?), as if the crowd on the right were a shadow cast by the crowd on the left; the park path on the upper left seamlessly becomes the street corner on the right; in the center of the construction, the density of the crowds makes it difficult to distinguish an internal border between the images; the literal shape of the construction—how the panels are set inward toward the gallery corner—implies a single vanishing point within the image; and so on; I mean to emphasize how my experience of standing before this pseudomorphism entailed a process of forgetting and then recovering detail, forgetting and then recovering difference; I see it first as one crowd and then my eye seeks out distinctions: the faces are clearer in the American crowd, the clothing more distinct, the racial composition of the gathering more diverse, etc., but then the formal symmetries reassert themselves and the details dissolve; my point here is less that the particular differences make a difference (although one could certainly argue that they do) and more that the experience of looking is to move from the abstract (the formal unity of the two crowds) to the particular (individual details of the respective events) and back again; the artwork seems to ask: if two spontaneous crowds can assume such startlingly similar formations, are they spontaneous at all; or is the political content of a crowd—like the content of a pseudomorph—exchangeable within a persistent form; depending on your temperament, you might find the collapse into a single image inspiring (these protests are both struggles for freedom in 1968, their formal similarity is emphasized here as a sign of their commonality, and they are, despite local differences, on the same side of history) or ominous (particulars and individuals are liquidated within the expanding mass); regardless, on a very intimate scale, this pseudomorph evokes the category of the mass—mass movements and mass culture (inseparable from the technology of photography itself)—a category central to thinking about politics and art and their intersection in the twentieth century; perhaps it is useful to juxtapose *Pseudomorphism of a Political Event I* with *Mixed Pseudomorphism of a True/False Cry* (2010), a work for which Ostoya cut in half and recombined two portraits, one by photographer Germaine Krull of the model Wanda Hubbel in tears (1931) and the other a self-portrait by the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader, a still from his film *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*

(1971); (the squiggly line below Ader's wrist is a fragment of the title, which he handwrote on the image); just as Ostoya's images of crowds in 1968 are made to evoke crowds from earlier in the century, she here collapses into one emotional instant/image 1931 and 1971; this, as does *The Kiss (1)* and *(2)*, links earlier avant-garde strategies and their political moments to the rise of Conceptualism, with which Ader is often associated; for me, a central question is whether there are two distinct emotional states depicted here or one interchangeable pose; is crying a powerful index of internality—the literalization of emotional expression, a moment of irreducible individuality—or is it an empty form whose content can morph without outward alteration; I googled the “original” photographs while I stood before this composition, and what was notable to me was how little their affect changed when they were cut and mixed; maybe this was because Ostoya has positioned the sections of Hubbel's face on the outer panels in such a way that I can still connect the two halves with my eyes, a process encouraged by the accordion shape of the mounting, which looks as though it could be closed so as to restore her face and hide Ader's, a structure shared with certain altar-pieces; regardless, an experience of the divisibility and interchangeability of faces is, like the experience of the interchangeability of the crowds, disturbing because it abstracts from a particular subject to a subject position and shows how little we can trust that tears are an index of unique internality; (it's a recurrent avant-garde motif: the plaintive “woman” in Man Ray's *Tears* [1930–32] is a mannequin weeping glass beads); even the sculptural form of the construction—how the faces come out from the wall to create an empty space behind the images—encourages us to experience the possible disconnect between image and (empty) interiority; the fusion of Krull/Hubbel with Ader exemplifies how Ostoya's pseudomorphic photocompositions dramatize the tension between the singular and irreducible and the abstractable and recombinatory, and attune us to how those tensions are built into the medium of photography and its reproducibility;

some weeks later, in unseasonable warmth, I walked across Brooklyn, from my apartment in Prospect Heights to Ostoya's apartment and studio in Bushwick, to see the first of the ten new large *Transpositions* she was making for a show at La Kunsthalle Mulhouse; her railroad

apartment was pleasantly empty; there was nothing on the walls save for a few sketches and works in progress in the room that serves as her studio; I get nervous visiting studios because I feel that the social pressure to be polite to your host—especially if the space is also where the artist lives, a common condition given Brooklyn rents—combines with the pressure to offer a critical response in real time, so that praising the work becomes as obligatory as praising someone’s cooking; but there is nothing “culinary”—Adorno’s term for the art object that need only be passively consumed—about Ostoya’s work; even its occasional humor is serious, as I’ve already tried to indicate; the rigor of the new composition leaning against the studio wall immediately demanded a level of engagement that would have made polite praise an embarrassment; Ostoya describes the work as a collage because of the eclectic mix of painstakingly applied materials (paint, small scraps of printed pages from a book, scraps of brown paper, shellac, papier-mâché, some kind of metal leaf), but whatever you call the composition, it is largely *about* painting; the series of new canvases is organized around a complex engagement with the square, perhaps the most charged shape in modern art; beloved in part because it has been considered a form that might help purge painting of all symbolism, it became a symbol for the extremes of modernist ambition; Kazimir Malevich conceived of his Suprematist squares as the purest of shapes, and the square’s identification of figure and material support anticipated Clement Greenberg’s imperatives by fifty years; there are countless other examples, notably Piet Mondrian’s squares and grids, Joseph Albers’s homages of nested squares, and Frank Stella’s iconic square paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, which can be said to open into the Minimalist rejection of painting for (modular and often square) objects in real space; “Each generation,” wrote Alfred H. Barr Jr., “must paint its own black square”; suffice it to say that the shape is in a variety of ways the limit case of painting in twentieth-century vanguard art; part of the brilliance of Ostoya’s new composition is that the square is everywhere and nowhere, present and absent; we could ask—and I’m deliberately echoing my earlier questions regarding the pseudomorphisms—is there one square here, or two or three, or are there none at all; after a few minutes alone with the composition, I saw that the dimensions of the support could be divided into two squares, but then those literal

squares are made invisible by what I saw as the tripartite division of the composition’s surface, which offers up a kind of triptych that I experience as staging something like the historical progression (or, depending on your temperament, regression) of abstraction; if we “read” from left to right, we see that the left third or so of the canvas consists of more painterly, biomorphic, and irregular sinuous forms; no matter how Ostoya actually produced these curving bands (applying the small strips of paper must have taken forever), they imply something gestural, human, and subjective; in the central panel, these curves give way to more segmented bands, the dwindling irregularity still providing (at least the image of) a human touch, but as we move farther right, we feel the subjective line being pulled toward a rectilinear, harder-edge abstraction; the far right section of the work holds the pure geometric order of the square, evoking Stella’s multicolored square series (although the texture of Ostoya’s squares, their irregular width, and their color palette distance us from that association); it took me a while to notice that a photographic element, perhaps a fragment from an image of a crowd (is there a potential pun here, given her pseudomorphisms, between a square as a public space and as an abstract shape?), forms the fourth square from the center; only after recognizing this photographic line in the right panel was I able to tell that it had been used elsewhere in the composition but in such thin strips that the material wasn’t identifiable; perhaps the photographic element is made visible here to prohibit this shape’s association with a purely painterly abstraction, an association already troubled by Ostoya’s use of other heterogeneous materials; regardless, what I’m calling squares are in fact only implied, as the right edge of the composition cuts off or crops the shapes, rendering them incomplete; we only intuit the phantom extension of the squares in real space beyond the picture’s edge; in fact, the one true square in the painting is the white one, but if and only if you count the literal right edge of the painting as part of its shape; because the white square is bordered by a cropped black square, and because the left edge of the painting has taught us to see the sides as truncated, I found this productively difficult to do; the momentum of the other forms trains your eye to discern the right side of the shape as cut off by the composition’s literal edge; I found it interestingly difficult both to imagine the continuation of the implied squares beyond the right edge of the composition and to

focus on the right edge as forming the fourth side of the white square; the former requires imagining the disappearance of the right edge and the latter requires seeing it as constitutive; the former requires illusion or projection and the latter requires attending to the canvas as object; if you are in the former mode, then it is easy to see the white area as the empty, cropped interior of the black square and not as an independent form; moreover, adding to the ambiguity of the white area's status within the composition is the fact that it isn't painted, that it's the only territory of primed canvas left exposed; it is therefore a square's absence as much as a square's presence; Malevich: "the [black] square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling"; I found it a little dizzying standing there in Bushwick feeling how efficiently Ostoya had gathered and narrativized the significance of the square as a zero degree of abstraction, as the symbol of modernist identification of figure and ground or, following Michael Fried's extension of Greenberg, as the tension between a framing edge and a painting's internal "deductive structure," between its literal and illusionistic limits, between its status as mere object and its status as an abstract artwork; there are three squares present in this composition if you divide the support and count its right edge as completing the white one, but there are zero *depicted*; a condition of seeing them is that you disregard the shapes formed on the surface of the canvas (since they divide the canvas into three and since the right edge of the support seems to truncate the white square it actually completes); thus the composition structurally enacts the tension between depicted and real space, a tension heightened by the comingling of flat paint and more textural materials even as its tripartite structure tells the story of the movement from the latter to the former as a movement from the subjective and painterly to the rational and mechanistic; Ostoya has figured modernism's unfulfilled dream of a purified, absolute formalism as a void, a negative space with four equal sides;

in the works I've been discussing, which I saw in Chelsea and midtown and Bushwick, in a variety of media, and in weather patterns of increasing extremity, Ostoya has powerfully thematized the border or seam, the division between East and West, the space where two crowds or faces or genders or discourses meet (or fail to), where we might say two images kiss, where a discrete

historical event threatens (or promises) to dissolve into abstract form, where an edge flickers between two orders of perception; Ostoya offers no false consolations, no easy syntheses; she refuses both the spectacularized repetition of avant-garde techniques and the fantasy that we're posthistorical, post-everything; she refuses both nostalgia and amnesia; to be sure, Ostoya's seams are visible, historical scars, but she will not settle for the gentility of a safe left melancholy; I believe the force of her work as a mode of critical reflection on the politics and the history of twentieth-century art revitalizes for our moment the ambition of the movements she confronts; her art propounds a rigorous dialectic between material construction and conceptual intervention that cuts through art-world cynicism and has cut through my own cynicism about the art world.

Notes

1. "Inevitably, one then asks, Why not return to the more solid ground of artistic skills, mobilizing what seems to provide a warranty against these forces? After all, a resurrection of skills, a reskilling, has worked very well for reinstituting mythical forms of painterly identity. But the problem, of course, is that what is at stake in the desire for returns of any kind, be they artistic or art historical, is an implicit and explicit restoration of privileged forms of experience, a quest whose reactionary implications are instantly plausible." Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," *Artforum* 51, no. 4 (December 2012): 261.
2. In a discussion about dialogue in his novel *The Mandarin*, Aaron Kunin remarked, "In Erasmus's colloquy on marriage, the speakers, Pamphilus and Maria, are unable to kiss because they need their mouths to keep the dialogue going. In *D'Alembert's Dream*, when Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse says something so brilliant that it makes Dr. Bordeu want to kiss her, the kiss becomes a huge technical problem." Aaron Kunin, in conversation with Ben Lerner, *Jacket Magazine* (2009), <http://jacketmagazine.com/37/iv-kunin-ivb-lerner.shtml>.
3. In fact, I did not see this particular pseudomorphism at the MoMA show, although I misremember encountering it there. I'll let my pseudoencounter stand, as I think it arises from the spatial and temporal crossings enacted by the series itself: in my memory, I've conflated two experiences of viewing Ostoya's images just as *Pseudomorphism of a Political Event I* conflates New York and Warsaw or *Mixed Pseudomorphism of a True/False Cry* conflates 1931 and 1971.

TRANSPOSITION X, 2014 (detail)

Archival pigment print, acrylic, enamel, shellac, paper, and aluminum ribbon on canvas; 39 ³/₈ x 78 ³/₄ inches (100 x 200 cm)