

In many ways, John Tomlinson's evolving work, **1991+/- : A Continuous Work**, is inescapably linked to its origins in the last decade of this century. Certainly the scholars of the distant future-present will find it a gleeful and widely shared sense of release from the two constrictive ideologies that plagued visual artists and critics of the decades in which he thrived. *1991+/-* defies both the mid- and late-Modern obsession with the reduction of form. It defies as well the determined referential reduction of content that characterized what became to be called "Post-Modern" in the 1980s, summed up in Sallie, Schnabel and Sherman, and most of all, Sherrie Levine, who, by rephotographing the photographs of Walker Evans and redrawing De Kooning's drawings, narrowed all this aesthetic pedantry down to the scale of the thumbnail. Barely five years later, in the "last" decade, art exploded into maximal scale and content, multiple media and multiple modes of address, emboldened at once by the absence of the Cold War, by access to a larger, more diverse audience than ever before, and by a set of rich philosophical and metaphysical ideas yet to be properly examined.

In harmony with all these tendencies, Tomlinson is expansive, personal, open-ended. He reminds me most of all of the lines in the magnificent Russian novel, *The Master and Margarita*, in which the circumscribed heroine, Margarita, takes off from the ground and flies, nude but unnoticed, over Moscow: Invisible and free! Invisible and free!

In any sense his decision in 1991 to give up compression, perfection, and the idea of "singularity" for a work that knows no end (only a beginning) is as liberating as Margarita's flight or the Information Highway, whose lust for infinitude he plainly shares. Finally, he speaks directly to us in these proliferating panels, even if his voice is often soft and modulated, down to a whisper level. Indeed, his pitch and message varies with the mood of the day in which of each of these 4-foot-high panels is completed. Though the methods he employs are precisely the methods he has rigorously cultivated - in himself and in his students - over the years, *1991+/-* is in no sense a captive of tradition. He employs the mediums of oilstick, graphite, pencil, wax-oil crayon, etching, acrylic paint, and collage on masonite (a refugee material from Early Modernism). He makes drawings always from life ("I do not conceive in advance," he says), whether it be figure, object, or his own reflection. But the breathtaking scale and endless goal of his work set it apart from the past and fuse it into this time.

Scale, frequently misunderstood in traditional criticism, is a sticking point here. To whom does Tomlinson address his work and how does he expect him or her to see it all? My instinct is that he at once cares and does not care at all. Aristotle's notion that one thousand miles is simply an impossible scale is a notion Tomlinson - and many of us - no longer scale. For most of us the final refutation of Aristotle is the camera, which can provide us from above a totally integrated view of immense scale - indeed scales far beyond a mere thousand miles, incorporating time as well as space. So he doesn't worry about the length he finally reaches in *1991+/1*. Nor does he worry that you and I will be overwhelmed by the conception itself - that we'll be stressed if we only see the work in part, not knowing where it began or where it leads, or in another gallery or space.

No, in Tomlinson I sense a different form of post-Aristotelian refutation, which evidences his at-ease with our eyes and ears, that is, with his audience. He surely senses that we will read his work, panel by panel, page by page. We move through his work slowly, stayed by the density of facture and elaboration, by the need to listen for what the voice is saying to us now, as opposed to what it was saying two panels ago. For me it is the transitions between exuberant, flowing brush work in the Panels 16 and 17, interrupted by his own contradictory figurative presence, that sums up this marvelous complexity. It is a move from instrumental music to voice, from poetry to prose, from ease to anger.

Derrida asks, over and over, in company with our heightened attention to the many-layered meanings of language, *Who is it that speaks?* Confident because he knows we will listen as we proceed through his work, stopping at each panel, embracing the diversity and decentralization of his work, seeking ends, not an end. Which is in itself a beginning.

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