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PAINT BY NUMBERS

Who are the six greatest living artists? This provocative, perhaps unanswerable question is worth asking for what it reveals about a cultural arena in which money and fame often seem to be the paramount obsessions. Surveying the results from *V.F.*'s poll of top artists, academics, and curators, MARK STEVENS creates a portrait of the art world today and identifies the values that really preoccupy its best and brightest

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, BY JENS MEYER/A.P. IMAGES; RIGHT, © GERHARD RICHTER, 2013

GERHARD RICHTER

Richter with *Strip (930-2)* (2013, digital print on paper, 78 ¾ in. by 393 ¾ in.). *Opposite*, his *Betty* (1988, oil on canvas, 40 ⅛ in. by 28 ⅛ in.).

RICHTER AND JOHNS

ARE HIGHLY PERSONAL—SO SLIPPERY YOU CAN FIND THEM ONLY IN LOSING THEM.

Is the art world a flashy suburb of Wall Street? You might think so, to listen to artists talking among themselves about money and career. Russian oligarchs lavishing millions, personal styles touted as "brands," the globalization of the marketplace—*Have you been to Dubai?*—museum curators joining commercial galleries for serious money, art fairs opening tomorrow, auction records set only to be set again. Oh, that bubbly air. That celebrity perfume. Such a shiny-faced world cries out for resistance, but it also begs for something else. A portrait.

In that spirit, *Vanity Fair* decided to conduct a straw poll. Or maybe it should be called a silk poll. Ask 100 art-world worthies—mainly artists, professors of art, and curators (but not dealers, who must look after their own)—to name whom they consider to be the six most important living artists. Then ask a writer to sketch a portrait of the results. The intent was not to identify once and for all the six most important living artists. No one can know that. The point was to picture contemporary taste and capture the reflection off the sheen of the period. (More Van Dyck, in short, than Rembrandt.) And to ask, as one always does with portraits: Is the dress all that matters? What lies behind moneyed eyes?

And the envelope, please . . .

The German painter Gerhard Richter is today our most admired living artist, having received 24 votes. Jasper Johns comes next with 20 votes, followed by Richard Serra with 19. Bruce Nauman (17), Cindy Sherman (12), and Ellsworth Kelly (10) complete the top six. John Baldessari, Jeff Koons, William Kentridge, and Ai Weiwei each received five votes. David Hammons, Brice Marden, Ed Ruscha, James Turrell, and Kara Walker received four votes.

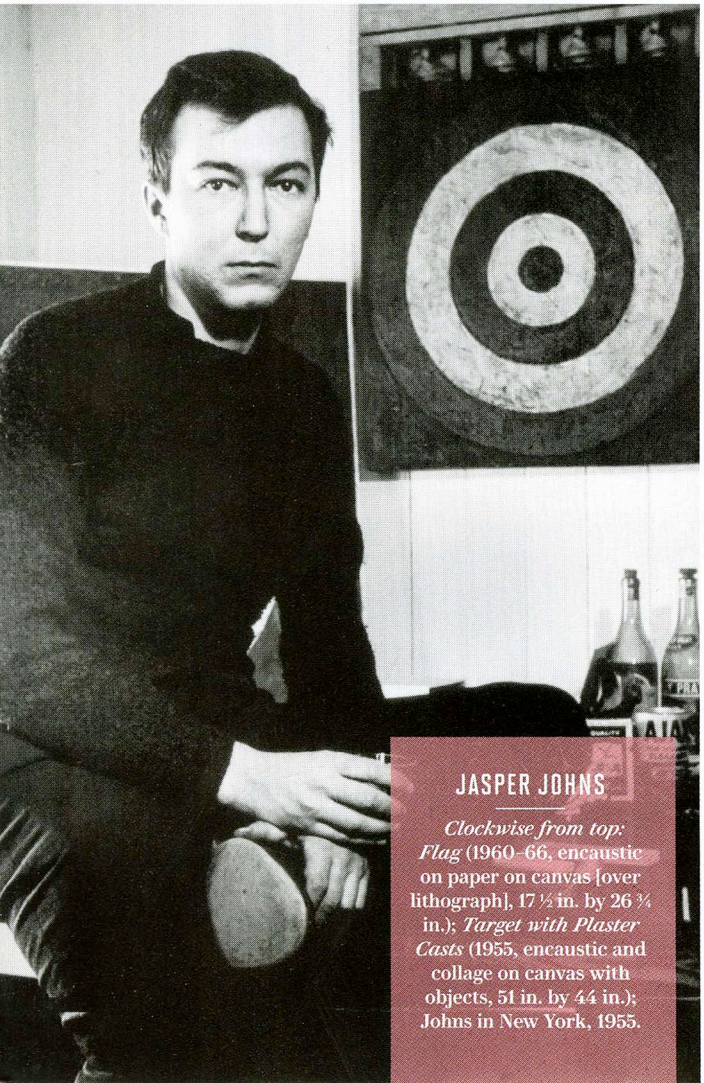
A different group of voters, of course, might have picked different artists. (The voter pool selected by the *Vanity Fair* editors tended toward the older, American, and mainstream.) Of the roughly 100 asked to vote, more than half (54) did so. That's more than I would have expected. It's natural not to want to "judge" artists; Mark di Suvero responded by explaining, "I do not believe in ranking artists. Art is for life." It's also natural to arch an eyebrow at the low pop appeal of lists. (Jasper Johns offered an elegant demurral, writing "Regrets" on the editor's invitation to participate in the poll.) But compiling lists can also be a useful parlor game, forcing one to make difficult distinctions and clarify murky values. I admired those with the courage to make a call. Besides, they risked making six friends now—and a thousand enemies forever.

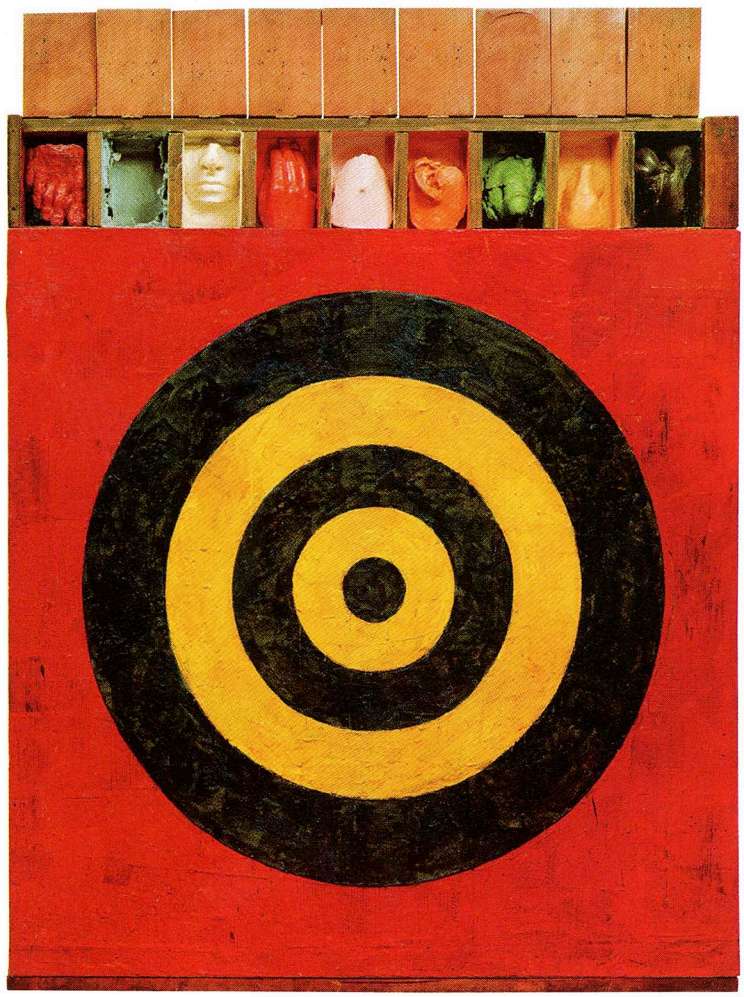
What portrait emerges? There is no single look to the art or common countenance to the sensibility of the artists who top the list, each of whom can be viewed in a variety of ways. But there is a powerful shared preoccupation with, to put it as nakedly as possible, "I." In a period whose presiding spiritual disease is narcissism, the artists we most admire play, seriously, with what we can know about who we think we are. Me, myself, and I—the modern trinity—has rarely seemed less fixed or certain.

Of the names near the top, I was first intrigued by Serra and Sherman. It's no surprise Serra did well. He is the world's most celebrated living sculptor. But he struck me as somehow different from the others. A declarative artist with a dominating and assertive eye—and "I"—Serra was one of only two respondents in the poll to vote for himself. (The other was the New York–based collective known as Bruce High Quality Foundation.) I would have been disappointed if Serra hadn't voted for himself. He can be subtle but is no pussyfooter, and his monumental scale, masculine bravura, and capture of the space between the dangerous and the fine seem to recall another, less ironic day than our own. The man who made *Tilted Arc* and *Snake* seems close to Jackson Pollock and the boys at the Cedar Bar in the 50s. Before a Serra, I imagine Andy Warhol going, "*Wowww,*" and Roy Lichtenstein painting *Pow!*

At first glance, Serra might seem an ideal poster boy for a solipsistic age. But his art—on second glance—takes on a very different aspect: It appears steeped in richly disturbing reflections about human scale. Its edgy weight actually offers a dramatic counterpoint to the loose and airy inflations of contemporary culture. Some Serras are overweening and threatening, as if their rusty metal mass might muscle in upon you; some squeeze viewers into a labyrinth. They cut down to size all the little "I"s who busily strut and fret their hour upon the postmodern stage. On the *Vanity Fair* list no other artist has this bold stance. Instead, most prefer the elusive and filtered, cultivating something conceptual, ironic, and distant. What they share with Serra, however, is an equally uneasy and provocative quality of "I."

Cindy Sherman, at 59, is younger than all of the others in the top six and the only woman (about which more in a moment). If Serra seems all boy, Sherman's all girl. But, much like Serra, she makes work that puts enormous and sophisticated pressure on our sense of the individual "I." She's always playing dress-up, and her art really is about the dress. But not in an old-fashioned way. Sherman portrays a society that can see individuals only through rapidly shuffled forms of stereotype, performance, and disguise. The dress-up is all the more pointed—existentially—when Sherman uses herself as her own model or doll. In her early "Untitled Film Stills," she did not just copy an actress or celebrity, the way teenagers do; she seemed to capture the soul in a role. (She would understand those tribesmen who, fearing that their souls will be





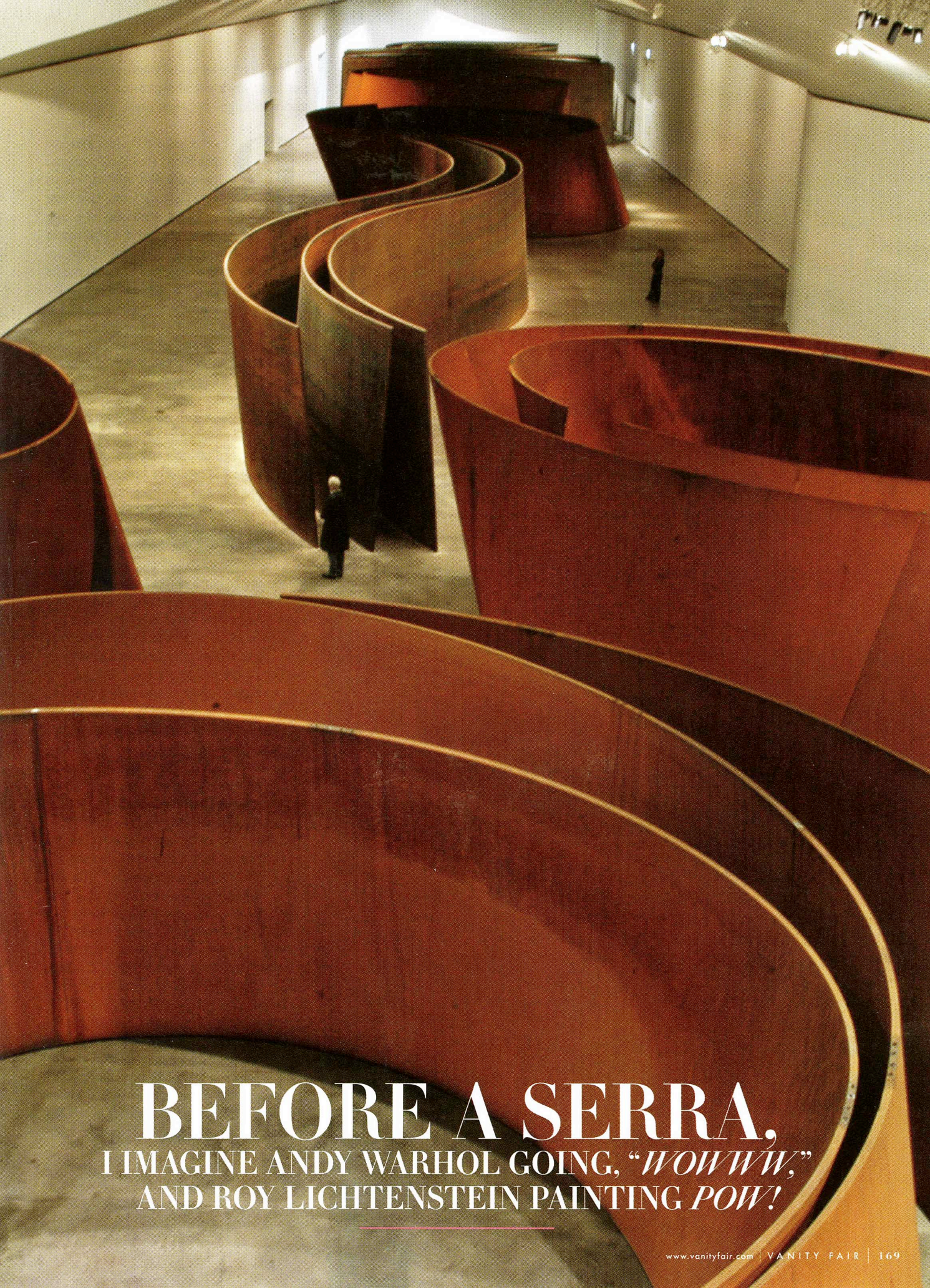
JASPER JOHNS

Clockwise from top: Flag (1960–66, encaustic on paper on canvas [over lithograph], 17½ in. by 26¾ in.); *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 51 in. by 44 in.); Johns in New York, 1955.

RICHARD SERRA

Serra in Los Angeles, 1998. *Opposite,* his installation *The Matter of Time,* at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2005.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, BY SIDNEY B. FELSEN; RIGHT, FROM GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM BILBAO

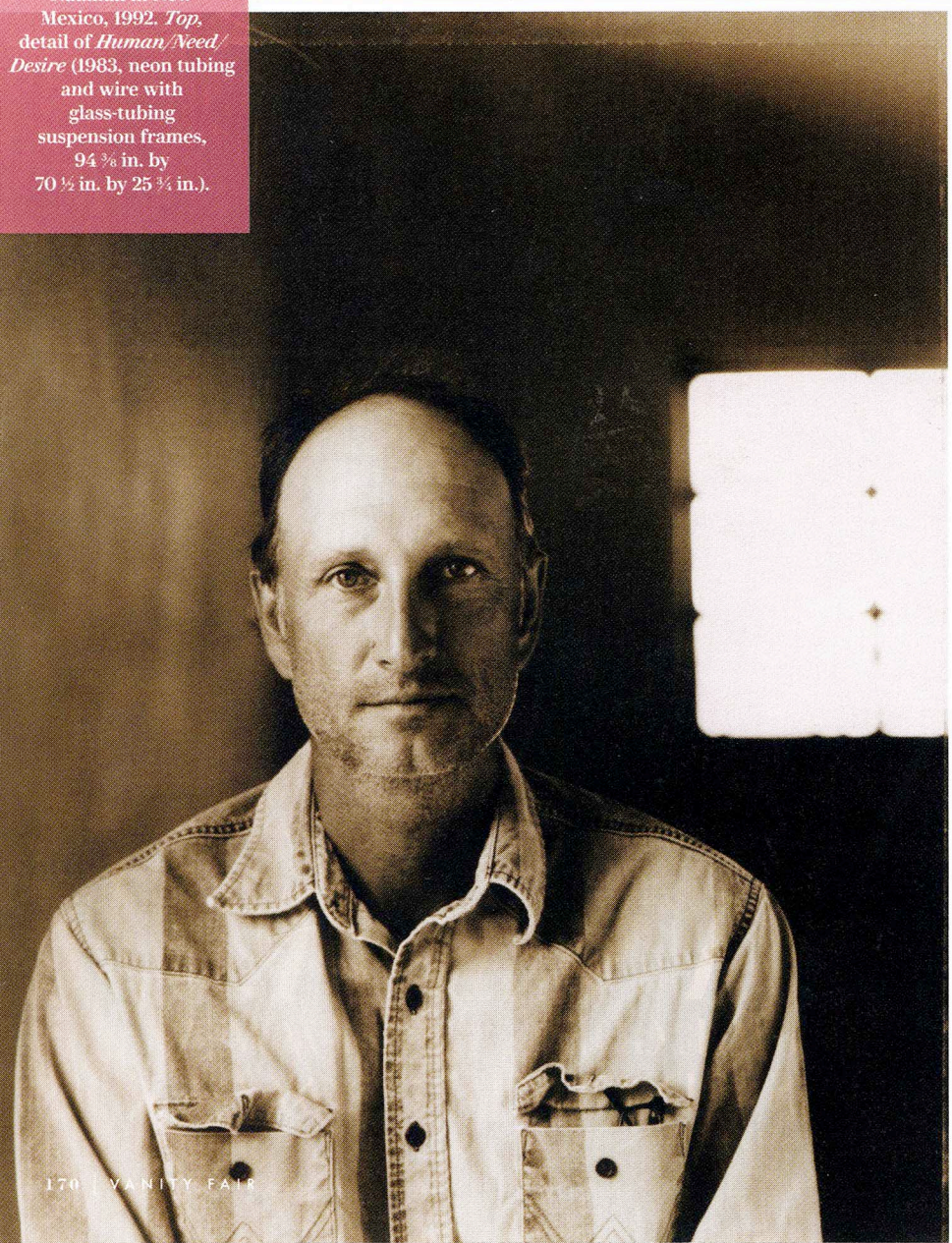


BEFORE A SERRA,

I IMAGINE ANDY WARHOL GOING, "*WOWWW*," AND ROY LICHTENSTEIN PAINTING *POW!*

BRUCE NAUMAN

Nauman in New Mexico, 1992. *Top,* detail of *Human/Need/Desire* (1983, neon tubing and wire with glass-tubing suspension frames, 94 ⅜ in. by 70 ½ in. by 25 ¾ in.).



stolen, don't wish to be photographed.) In her later work she shows more slippage—and wreckage—between mask and model.

Both Gerhard Richter and Jasper Johns are highly personal painters, but with selves so seriously slippery that you can find them only in losing them. Richter is a chameleon who, like Sherman taking on a role, can enter into any style of painting and assume its essential character. He can be a calm realist or, if he wants, an explosive Abstract Expressionist. He can be a public painter with political intent or an *intimiste* fascinated by private detail. Among the many remarkable things about Richter is that, taking his work as a whole, he does not seem to play any easy conceptual game with his shifting styles. He does not diminish any of his approaches by suggesting that he's engaged in parody or pastiche or dress-up or braggadocio. He contains contraries, as if no single net can capture the whole truth. Richter's art is so wide that its center is hard to locate, or, more interesting still, not necessarily there.

Johns is no less distinctive—and elusive. His painterly hand is typically commented upon and admired. His touch is unusually personal; the brushwork suggests he's right there with you. Touch itself is often described as the earliest and most essential sensation, our first connection to the world. But Johns is not sentimental about connection. The Johns hand enlivens but does not possess whatever it touches. It never holds down a meaning or thought. A word is not only a word; a flag is not only a flag; a map is not only a map. You are not only you, and I am not only me. In the 1950s, Johns's American flags turned Stars-and-Stripes certainty into a question. His subsequent work, marinated in personal symbols and iconography, makes a question of himself. Over time, in a culture that can hardly remember yesterday, Johns, at 83, has become the master of the revisited. He enjoys the momentary touch of memory, but knows it changes even in the remembering.

Johns makes puzzles of the self. So do other artists on the list. John Baldessari, who is sometimes called a conceptual artist, is more precisely a conundrum artist. He's a philosophical joker, blessed with a fine cynicism, slipping joker-like between the playing cards of statements, mediums, and genres and using them together to leave you—leave you what?—hanging on a question. (*What Is Painting* is a Baldessari painting.) Like Johns and Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, who did particularly well in the vote, also likes to de-stabilize

CINDY SHERMAN

Sherman in her photograph *Untitled Film Still #13,* 1978.

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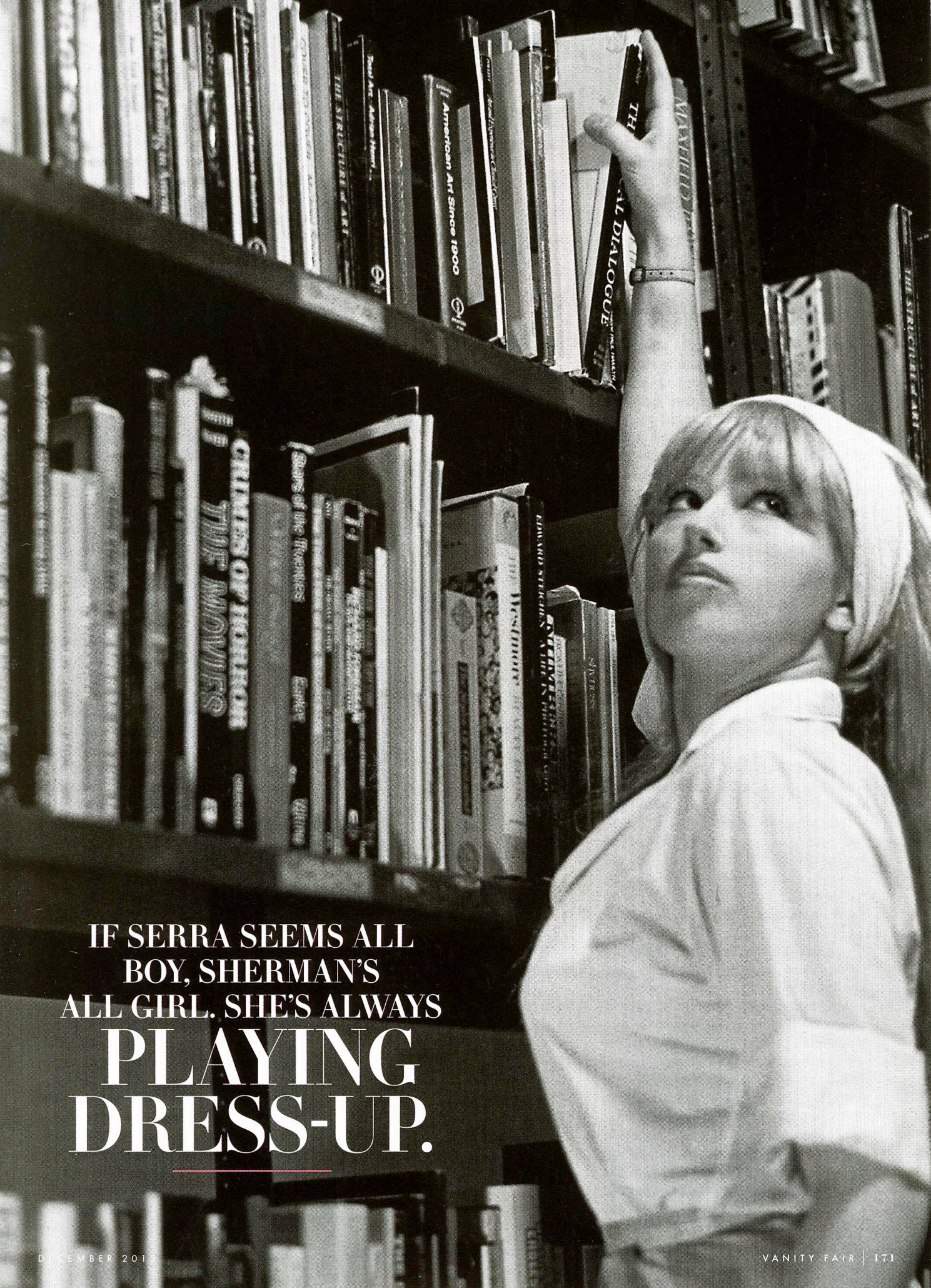

IF SERRA SEEMS ALL BOY, SHERMAN'S ALL GIRL. SHE'S ALWAYS

PLAYING DRESS-UP.

clichés and unsettle the settled self. For many people, Nauman has come to embody, I think, what artistic practice should ideally be in today's world. He is not confined to any medium, but adapts his methods to his meanings, shifting easily among performance, video, and installations. There is sometimes a nice American deadpan to his work—as in the neon *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear*—that keeps the solemn, sleepy, and pretentious at bay. And in his more recent art, he has emphasized with visceral power the fragmentary and partial, as if we were now torn and scattered across the landscape.

Some artists apply enormous historical pressure to the individual self. Historical memory here becomes more menacing and abstract than the personal reveries of Johns; the burden of the past threatens entirely to overwhelm and smother the capital "I." The dancing silhouettes with which the African-American artist Kara Walker works not only have a historical flavor but also tellingly represent the flattened, partial, and cut-up sensibilities of oppressed people. The figures in the rough-hewn charcoal animations of the South African William Kentridge appear pressed and twisted by invisible historical hands and smudged with guilt. The Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei and the African-American artist David Hammons hurl themselves—often in performance—into their cultures as if to show that the individual can and must confront the historical stereotypes of, say, racism or Communist conformity. But Hammons and Weiwei also attack both the shiny art world and consumer culture for suppressing the individual and imposing stereotypes.

There are a few artists in the top 15 who might superficially seem to have little or no interest in narcissism and the uneasy "I." And yet, one of the main desires today is to escape the solipsistic prison—through, to cite one example, meditation. A wish to escape does not necessarily imply any lack of me-me-me. T. S. Eliot was here first, with his celebrated observation "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." Ellsworth Kelly's abstract paintings offer precisely that escape, as do James Turrell's meditations on light. Brice Marden would never impose on silence. And I would argue that much of the pleasure we derive from Ed Ruscha comes from the way he empties out Pop America, leaving behind something innocent.

In a society portrait, who and what has been left off a list—or snubbed, or retired to a distant corner—is no less telling than who occupies the center table.

Most surprising to me was how few women received votes. Jeez Louise! In fact, if the two grand Louises were still alive (Bourgeois and Nevelson), they would surely have added to the numbers; the same goes for Joan Mitchell. As it stands, women artists received less than 25 percent of the total number of votes cast; only two women had a place in the top 15. This result comes 50 years after the postwar women's movement began in earnest in New York, which was the capital of the art world. Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised. Last spring, the Robert Miller Gallery staged an old-fashioned panel called "Gender Politics in the Arts," during which Laurie Simmons, a panelist and a veteran of the New York art world, suddenly veered off topic. Gender? Today, she said, artists talk about nothing but money.

At the same time, some big-name and ubiquitous postmoderns, never far from the discussion about contemporary art, fared poorly; perhaps too much love and hate lead, finally, to ho-hum. Damien Hirst, who aspired with his platinum-and-diamond skull to create the symbol of our age, received three votes. Dead meat? Kitsch-meister Jeff Koons received a respectable—respectability can be an affront—five votes. Richard Prince, one vote.

Papa Painting showed his age. Nowadays, painting is often not what those of us who love it think of as *painting,* but just another form of conceptual art. Many art critics do not focus upon this medium anymore, though it can still do well in the marketplace if it is well positioned (or hung). It's true that Richter, Johns, and Kelly were in the top six, with Brice Marden not too far behind. But you can feel the age and—sorry for this, but sports analogies are required when you talk about lists—there's not much depth on the bench. After Richter, other much-discussed German painters, such as Anselm Kiefer (3), A. R. Penck (0), and Neo Rauch (1), did not do well. And Robert Ryman was overlooked altogether. Exclude an abstract artist as gifted as Ryman? You can only imagine the situation of more traditional painters. Among those who take seriously what one usually associates with traditional painting, Antonio López García received two votes and David Hockney three. Perhaps painting is now moving to the side, as poetry has, to cultivate its private garden.

Frank Stella did not receive a single vote, which is astonishing CONTINUED ON PAGE 199

The Voters
in Vanity Fair*'s Poll of Greatest Living Artists*

The ARTISTS

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ
DOUG AITKEN
CARL ANDRE
JOHN BALDESSARI
ROSS BLECKNER
FERNANDO BOTERO
MARCO BRAMBILLA
CECILY BROWN
BRUCE HIGH QUALITY FOUNDATION
CHUCK CLOSE
WALTER DE MARIA (DIED 7/25/2013)
TARA DONOVAN
JIM DRAIN
MARLENE DUMAS
WALTON FORD
DOUGLAS GORDON
ZHANG HUAN
ALEX KATZ
ELLSWORTH KELLY
JEFF KOONS
BRICE MARDEN
TAKASHI MURAKAMI
SHIRIN NESHAT
CATHERINE OPIE
ENOC PEREZ
ED RUSCHA
TOM SACHS
DORIS SALCEDO
JULIAN SCHNABEL
RICHARD SERRA
JAMES SIENA
MARK TANSEY
ROBERT WILSON

The EXPERTS

RICHARD ARMSTRONG, *director, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.* CARLOS BASUALDO, *curator, Philadelphia Museum of Art.* DAVID BRENNEMAN, *director, High Museum of Art, Atlanta.* LYNNE COOKE, *curator, Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid.* SHARON CORWIN, *director, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.* JONATHAN CRARY, *professor, Columbia University.* JEFFREY DEITCH, *director, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.* HAL FOSTER, *professor, Princeton University.* GARY GARRELS, *curator, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.* JOSEF HELFENSTEIN, *director, and* TOBY KAMPS, *curator, Menil Collection, Houston.* GLENN D. LOWRY, *director, Museum of Modern Art, New York.* TRICIA Y. PAIK, *curator, Saint Louis Art Museum.* JULIA PEYTON-JONES, *co-director, Serpentine Gallery, London.* ANN PHILBIN, *director, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.* TIMOTHY POTTS, *director, Getty Museum, Los Angeles.* MARLA PRATHER, *curator, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.* BRADY ROBERTS, *curator, Milwaukee Art Museum.* MALCOLM ROGERS, *director, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.* ELIZABETH SMITH, *former curator, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.* GREGORY TENTLER, *former professor, Rhode Island School of Design.* EUGENIE TSAI, *curator, Brooklyn Museum.*

The Most-Voted-for Artists

TOP SIX	NUMBER OF VOTES
GERHARD RICHTER	24
JASPER JOHNS	20
RICHARD SERRA	19
BRUCE NAUMAN	17
CINDY SHERMAN	12
ELLSWORTH KELLY	10

RUNNER-UP	NUMBERS OF VOTES
JOHN BALDESSARI	5
WILLIAM KENTRIDGE	5
JEFF KOONS	5
AI WEIWEI	5
DAVID HAMMONS	4
BRICE MARDEN	4
ED RUSCHA	4
JAMES TURRELL	4
KARA WALKER	4

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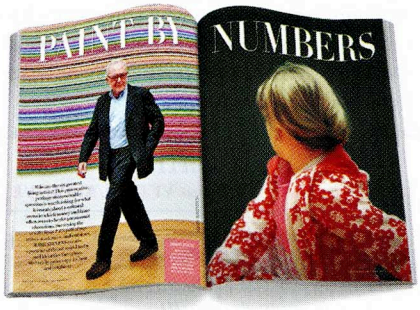

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 172 if one has any institutional memory. In the 1970s, Stella was top fella at the Museum of Modern Art. He was widely regarded as the anointed successor—in the grand, art-historical narrative of progressive modernist painting—of Pollock and Barnett Newman. Some would say the waning of his reputation stems from weakness in his later work, but I disagree. (Many have also grumbled about Johns's late work, but he did well in the poll.) Stella is a victim of the collapse of confidence in a modernist narrative that emphasizes a this-begat-that progression of style. Had he continued to make the sort of art he made in the 1960s and 1970s, he might now be perceived, as Donald Judd is, as one of the last great moderns in that story. A celebrated period piece. I admire Stella for moving on.

What has happened to Stella—cut out from today's portrait—suggests that you should remain wary of shifting fashions in taste, particularly in a period like ours that does not have powerful convictions about how best to measure art of enduring value. (Imagine if Richter were to strike out in a *Vanity Fair* poll 30 years from now. Impossible? Well, Stella's reputation in 1975 was as strong as Richter's position now.) Another example: some of the reigning artists of the 1980s and 1990s did poorly. There was a time when you could not escape the names of Julian Schnabel (0), David Salle (1), and Francesco Clemente (0). However, if taste is fickle, it also makes sense to prepare for reappraisals. Perhaps Stella will be a hit at the Museum of Modern Art once again, in 2025.

Apart from painting, other genres also aroused less excitement than I would have anticipated. Few people who specialize in photography were asked to vote in the poll, but, even so, the lack of mainstream enthusiasm for photography is noteworthy. (Is photography a woman?) Robert Frank, the Swiss who did so much to define postwar America, did not get one vote. Nor did many talented American photographers who came of age in the later decades of the 20th century. Recently, some Continental photographers have emerged—such as Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth—who deftly capture the strangely warm/cool, vacant, and surreally disconnected character of many postmodern places. They received few votes. Indifference toward performance art is more easily explained, since it's an idealistic genre that's not easily seen or collected. (So much in the doing, so little in the done.) But its evanescent spirit, together with its emphasis on the body and role-playing, does offer a brilliant platform from which to address and critique a narcissistic culture. Nauman, Hammons, and Weiwei are social performers, to be sure, but I would have guessed that Marina Abramović—recently the subject of a wildly successful retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—would have received more than three votes.

No doubt many respected artists who received few or no votes would have done better if the voters had been asked to name 10 rather than 6 artists. But establishing a cutoff was the point: it forced voters to define this moment's priorities. The rather weak showing of artists who can be easily defined—as a "painter," for example, or a "photographer"—is a defining part of the portrait. (Those artists would have done better in a larger sampling.) What, after all, would you call Nauman, Sherman, or Hammons? What is Weiwei? Or Kentridge? Are Baldessari and Ruscha only painters? Conceptual art doesn't cover it. The phrase is a meaningless catchall. The preference for artists who are not tied to one genre or another, or who move among genres, reflects an impatience with customary boundaries and scales, perhaps because staying within the lines seems an insufficient response to today's world. Floaters—and Richter and Johns, despite being painters, have a lot of "float" in their sensibilities—can more easily piece together a postmodern "I" that seems to fit the moment.

Several people indicated that they would have liked to vote for artists who died young or who have died recently—but whose work remains a vital part of this moment. They're right. Certain ghosts are necessary to complete the society portrait. Two in particular. Cy Twombly, whose quixotic line always seems to escape. And Andy Warhol, our particular mirror. □

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