Are Remarks History? Gertrude Stein as Conceptual Artist

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Abstract:
Although critics typically characterize Gertrude Stein as a modernist, it is at least as useful to approach her as an antecedent for language-based conceptual art emerging during the late twentieth century. Conceptual artists pose questions rather than make assertions. With her penchant for estranging familiar words from their association with common ideas, Stein challenges readers to think in more abstract terms, to challenge conventions of statement, to contest the constraints of artistic and literary formulas, and to question traditional assumptions about what is good, usual, natural, beautiful, true, or memorable. Stein's work, with its distinctive properties—brazen self-referentiality, preoccupation with mass culture and ready-mades, deformation of narrative strategy and voice, and bold explorations of the edges and interstices of both the body's senses and the mind's symbolic systems (such as images and words), anticipates many of the themes that would later fascinate conceptual artists, including claims to monumental or immutable truths.

> Most of you know that in a funny kind of way you are nearer your grandparents than your parents [. . .]. I created a movement of which you are the grandchildren.
>
> --Gertrude Stein

1 Although critics typically characterize Gertrude Stein as a modernist, it is at least as useful to approach her as an antecedent for language-based conceptual and activist artists emerging during the second half of the twentieth century, such as Barbara Kruger and the Guerrilla Girls. As critic Tony Godfrey explains, "Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings. It cannot be defined in terms of any medium or style, but rather by the way it questions what art is" (4). Conceptual artists pose questions rather than make assertions. In particular, they challenge viewers to revisit their notions of what traditional measures of merit (whether artistic, literary, or historical) imply. With her penchant for estranging familiar words from their association with common ideas, Stein challenges readers — both in her day and in ours — to think in more abstract terms, to challenge conventions of statement, to contest the constraints of artistic hierarchies, literary formulas, and historical methods; to question traditional assumptions about what is good, usual, natural, beautiful, true, or memorable. Stein's work, with its distinctive properties — brazen self-referentiality, preoccupation with mass culture and ready-mades, deformation of narrative strategy and voice, and bold explorations of the edges and interstices of both the body's senses and the mind's symbolic systems (such as images and words)—anticipates many of the themes that would later fascinate conceptual artists, including exclusionary

language practices and claims to monumental or immutable truths. Therefore, while Stein's career and life concluded before much of the work that would eventually be characterized as language-based conceptual and activist art took shape, she, along with other avant-garde figures of her era such as Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso engaged in climate- and precedent-setting work for conceptual art emerging decades later. In this way, Gertrude Stein helped set in motion a "movement" sustained and extended by language artists and activist artists now working, both in the United States and elsewhere.

2 Two conceptual art pieces form the bookends around this investigation. The first is a 1974 work by sculptor Claes Oldenburg, entitled "Picasso Cufflinks." This sketch for an installation (or "colossal monument," as he calls them) adapts Picasso's Chicago sculpture (elsewhere immortalized by Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "Chicago Picasso"), as a distinctive pair of cufflinks. The second is a 1994 work by contemporary artist Janine Antoni, entitled "Tender Buttons," not coincidentally the title of one of Gertrude Stein's most critically acclaimed books of poetry. In a black crushed-velvet jeweler's box rest two round brooches, each about 1 1/4 inches in diameter. The accompanying label tells us that the pins are 18-carat gold castings from the artist's nipples.

3 These pieces — part homage, part parody — threaten to commodify works of the modernists referenced. One is a send-up of a public monument, the other the record of a private moment. Both pieces recall the past as a means to inhabit and interpret the present. The manner of doing so suggests a gendered and bifurcated practice of historical memory, in which men have monuments (history as overstatement) and women have moments (history as understatement). Depending upon one's perspective, they either render Stein and Picasso's legacies as ritual objects, or reduce their visions to trinkets (accolades or accessories). Either way, the pieces dramatize the extent to which the earlier artists such as Gertrude Stein continue to shape the interventions of contemporary conceptual and activist artists.

4 As such tributes attest, there can be little doubt that the influence of Stein's notions of interdigitation among systems of language, gender, and history continues to be felt as much as, if not more than, during her lifetime. Her ways of interrogating language and culture, which frequently found expression by means of a writing practice that embodied (rather than explicated) her theories, still have deep resonances for subsequent forms of conceptual art, especially those of feminist, language, and activist artists. In turn, contemporary conceptual artists extend Stein's project with their irreverent commentaries on androcentric thoughts, re-figurings of exclusionary historical narratives, and reframings of gendered speech.

5 While Stein's name may be highly recognizable today, she remains the modernist writer more often quoted than read, her words bandied about chiefly for their sharp wit and sententious quality. Who hasn't heard Stein's words invoked as soundbytes? Writer and critic Cynthia Ozick makes this point about Stein in her essay "Gertrude Stein: The Salonkeeper":

> As a writer she is defined for us by only four quotations — egoless catch phrases, her logo and trademark: "Pigeons on the grass alas." "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." (Four roses; heavier brew than the three commonly cited.) To Ernest Hemingway, after World War I: "You're all a lost generation." On her deathbed: "What is the question?" (95)

Although literary luminaries Oscar Wilde and Dorothy Parker may be better celebrated for their spoken repartee, Gertrude Stein's body of work represents an inordinately rich contribution to the aphoristic legacy. Given, as she was, to peppering her prose with one-liners and waggish remarks, Stein's barbs constitute more than a playful sense of humor; taken together, they frame a trenchant criticism of the assumptions underlying many of American society's truisms and pieties. Even those who cite her scornfully prove themselves susceptible to Stein's power as an epigrammatist. Her sharp turns of language help readers recast customs of remark, judgment, and narrative.

6 Full of fragments and jagged edges, Stein's works find their shape less from punctuation than from the pauses her ideas induce in the reader's headlong habits of perception and engagement. Where one may be tempted to read her briskly, Stein changes the reader's tempo in an otherwise hasty process with *bon mots* that halt the eye's movement, if only long enough to reckon the fierceness with which she savages conventional wisdom. Stein's aesthetic of interruption, which postmodernists would later claim for themselves in the name of 'intervention,' not only contests the tenets of literary realism, but also pierces the smooth surfaces of literature and, in so doing, ruptures consensus narratives of art, gender, and history.

7 Stein's educational background provides clues into the sources of her concerns with the interplay among language, human perception, gender, and history. Ever since her student days, Stein had cultivated some fairly eclectic interests in philosophy, metaphysics, and psychology. She was nurtured in these studies by some of the most prominent scholars of the era. As a college student at Radcliffe's annex, Stein had studied with many of Harvard's greats, from Josiah Royce to William James. She conducted her own psychology experiments, including some related to the theory of automatic writing. Stein was intrigued by philosopher Otto Weininger's theories of psychological differences between male and female characteristics, as articulated in his controversial 1906 book on the subject, *Sex and*

Character (1906). She inquired into the nature of history and the importance of its rendition. She had learned her metaphysics from no less than George Santayana, himself often quoted on the perils of insufficiently critical studies of history. To Santayana others frequently attribute such quips as, 'History is always written wrong, so always needs to be rewritten,' 'History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren't there,' and, perhaps most famously, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Like Santayana before her, Stein knew the power of a winning line or a withering retort. From this sensibility, she mounted an attack on the insistent voices of the status quo — literary, artistic, philosophical, and historical.

8 In so many of her works, Stein proceeds by first gratifying, and then confounding, the reader's expectation of a single, continuous narrative from a unified perspective. It is as if the music of her language somehow replaces harmony with dissonance. Stein's pithy remarks and incisive wit enable her to assemble multivocal texts in which voices and perspectives featured clash rather than join in chorus. In this way, dominant cultural scripts get disturbed, then halted, then overtaken and rewritten by dissenting voices and views.

9 By crafting memorable lines, and then embedding them within narratives where those ideas would seem to be at odds, Stein interferes with and troubles the process of thought/statement the text begins, much as feminist writer Susan Griffin does in her own experimental works of history/documentary, including *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* and *A Chorus of Stone The Private Life of War*. More than a stylistic device, this technique enables Stein to layer her texts in such a way as to render conspicuous the underlying assumptions of familiar cultural practices and/or writing conventions. This self-interrupting narrative approach has the effect of simultaneously disrupting the concepts upon which conventional conclusions depend. This same tactic lives on in works by subsequent artist/author/activists whose efforts to challenge dominant cultural scripts rely upon elements of surprise, contradiction, unresolved tension, and fracture already at work in Stein's writing. Contemporary figures such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson, Susan Griffin, Ann Hamilton, and the Guerrilla Girls use words to interrogate social orthodoxies: standards of etiquette and protocol, notions of objectivity and quality, paradigms of power and expertise, images of celebrity and infamy, icons of heroism and villainy, perceptions of legitimacy and taste, and so on. That — and how — they do so owes much to Gertrude Stein.

10 The primary focus within this discussion will be on unorthodox representations of history within two 1930 works by Gertrude Stein, "We Came. A History" and *History or Messages from History*, and their implications within subsequent word-based works by

conceptual artists such as Barbara Kruger and activist collectives such as the Guerrilla Girls. This pair of Stein texts operates as a prelude to her later meditations on the subject of history, such as *Four in America* (1933) and *The Geographical History of America* (1935). While Stein's later writings engage in a fuller-scale subversion of historical master narratives, through such devices as impossible meetings among historical personages of different eras, the 1930 texts strike at the nature of history itself and, with it, the problematics of historical writing. Much as Stein tackled the paternalism of institutionalized religion's benevolence in "Lend a Hand or Four Religions" (1922) and the androphilic impulses enshrined by canonical literature in "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927), with these two 1930 texts, Stein seeks to recuperate the power and memory of history from its masculinist practices and accounts.

11 In his brief treatment of "History or Messages from History" in *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, critic and Stein scholar Richard Bridgman notes that, "the burden of her critique dealt with what history excluded" (204). Bridgman reads the piece as a response to the selectivity with which traditional historical accounts "filtered out the lyricism of life" (204). While history's exclusions indeed seem the focus within this text, Stein seems at least as concerned with the extent to which the principle of selection favors an androcentric history, presented in such a way as to venerate first, most, or exclusively male-coded expressions and endeavors. The elements Stein suggests have been denied historical status are not merely the lyrical, but more particularly the domestic, the everyday, and the gender-coded terms traditionally associated with female experience: flowers, herbs, baskets, dogs, and the like. Within Stein's formulation, the category status of history has instead usually been reserved for acts of aggression, contest and victory. In short, "[t]here is no history," Stein's text appears to lament, "in gentleness" (*History* 25). The simultaneous suggestion is that there is no history that records the lived-world experiences of most women, and no documents of their worlds of contribution and influence. What emerges from this discovery is a cautionary tale — a lesson about history's omissions, most especially as pertains to the wishes and will of women as historical agents. Stein writes, "The lesson of history so she says is that he will do it again but will he we hope not" (*History* 32). While men may be favored in historical accounts, women often enough make history. A male-centered version of history, however, would suggest otherwise. Such a warning still echoes in the gendered valences of image-word texts by Barbara Kruger, in which a female speaker (I/We) addresses a male authority (You): "You make history when you do business" (*Love* 68). Both for Kruger and for Stein, history is a contested field of meaning and narrative, in which women are readily forgotten or relegated to the realms of "endangered species" or "missing persons" *Love* 51). The heroic model of

history places men at the center of accounts, with women at the periphery ("We decorate your life," [*Love* 91). History's skew too readily becomes memory's shape ("Memory is your image of perfection" [*Love* 38]), until women are rendered absent from or silent within its record ["Your comfort is my silence" (*Love* 45)].

12 If Stein's *History or Messages from History* stands underexamined within Stein scholarship, still less has been written about its companion writing, Stein's seldom anthologized composition, "We Came. A History." While it does appear in Richard Kostelanetz's *Gertrude Stein Reader* (2002), there is little context for the piece even in that volume, except the editor's note about the uniqueness of Stein's use of the equal sign within this writing. Where elsewhere Stein makes use of white space to break segments within her text, as would customarily be accomplished with punctuation marks, in the six-page long "We Came. A History," she combines spaces and sentence-end punctuation with some 350 appearances of the equal sign [=], as seen within mathematics. Stein's use of this particular symbol seems both to employ and to ironize its meanings. Stein invokes the equal sign toward varied, and sometimes contradictory, ends: linking otherwise separate lines of the text, visually suggesting or rendering suspect equivalences among the assertions, and, often enough, creating a false line break within a seemingly continuous utterance:

> Historically there=Is no disaster because=Those who make history=Cannot be overtaken=As they will make=History which they do=Because it is necessary=That every one will=Begin to know that=They must know that=History is what it is= ("We Came" 121-122)

To the extent that a pattern emerges within the text's commentary on history, it would suggest that Stein wished to lampoon history's inequalities, as evidenced by the elitism and male privilege implied within the recitation of history. To this end, the piece begins by defining history in some rather stark terms:

> 1. *as the product of deliberate action*:
>
> "History cannot be an accident." ("We Came" 121);
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> 2. *as uncommon acts*:
>
> "history is not=Just what every one=Does" ("We Came" 122);
>
> 3. *as uncommon acts by uncommon people*:
>
> "History is made by a very=Few who are important=And history is what that=One says." ("We Came" 122)
>
> 4. *as an account of triumphs rather than misdeeds*:
>
> "History must be distinguished=From mistakes." ("We Came" 121)

5. *as something that transpired and concluded in the past*:

"History must not be what is=Happening." ("We Came" 121)

6. *as a record of events that are well-known and widely-regarded*:

"history must be=Something unusual and=Nevertheless famous and=Successful." ("We Came" 121)

7. *as evidence from the past about how current events have meaning*:

"History must=Be the occasion of having=In every way established a=Precedent" ("We Came" 121)

8. *as a rationalization of power asymmetry*:

"Those who make history=Cannot be overtaken." ("We Came" 121-122)

Within this calculus, history would seem merely to reinforce and reinscribe itself as a retelling of what matters most from the past, retold by those who most matter. Having defined history in this way early in the piece, Stein's "We Came. A History," proceeds to challenge such a definition or equation, both textually and contextually, such that history becomes recast as moments rather than as monuments. In this way, women's markers once excluded — here described with words from 'necklaces' and 'tube-roses', to 'peppers' and 'blushing pails' — find their way into the historical record, until, as Stein puts it, "All this has=Been a history of pleasantness" ("We Came" 123). Moving beyond *History or Messages From History* and its declarations that gentleness has no place in history, Stein uses "We Came. A History," to frame a tale in which a history defined by hostility, conquest, and exclusion gets displaced by one depicted in terms of hope, reciprocity, and inclusion.

13 Although it might not seem surprising to trace Stein's influences on later experimental writers such as Griffin, or even on word artists such as Kruger, the Stein impact becomes most noticeable precisely where readers who regard Stein solely as aesthete might least expect it — in the work of a cadre of artist/activists known as the Guerrilla Girls, who use language and word play to protest racism, sexism, and historical disenfranchisement, chiefly in the art world. The group announces itself on the Guerrilla Girls Home Page as:

> A group of women artists and art professionals who make posters about discrimination. Dubbing ourselves the conscience of the art world, we declare ourselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hoods, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. We use humor to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny.

In the (mock) tradition of fictive male egalitarians, they commence their work. The group had its inception after a 1985 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art bearing the ambitious title "An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture," in which appeared a curator's statement from Kynaston McShine that any artist not included in the show should rethink "his" career. The exhibit featured 169 artists. All were white. All were from the United States or Europe. Only 13 were women. In response to this affront, "the conscience of the art world" was born. Rather than merely picket or boycott (girlcott?), the Guerrilla Girls, attired in gorilla suits, engage in theatrical interventions and use mass-media forms such as posters, buttons, and stickers to showcase their dissenting views.

14 For the purposes of interviews and other situations where it becomes useful to distinguish among guerrilla girls, they adopt the names of dead women artists and writers. One such guerrilla girl, under the name of Gertrude Stein, took the occasion of a group interview, reprinted in *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, to quip that, "There's a popular misconception that the world of High Art is ahead of mass culture but everything in our research shows that, instead of being avant garde, it's derriere" (26). With their activist zaps, reminiscent in some ways of countercultural happenings, the Guerrilla Girls reclaim Stein, effectively renaming her as a figure whose agency, like that of the Guerrilla Girls, proceeds from a critical rather than judgmental engagement with cultural forms, both pop and serious, that tempers transgression with humor. Their taglines bear serious messages, though, much like the Stein-like mottoes of HIV/AIDS activist collectives Gran Fury ("This is to enrage you") and ACT-UP ("Silence=Death"). For example, in a poster displayed on their website, the Guerrilla Girls make a powerful challenge to the calendar of historical recognition implied within both the art world and the host society when their pop quiz asks, "Q. If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what happens the rest of the year? A. Discrimination." Just as Stein resisted a history that silenced or marginalized the contributions of women, so now do the Guerrilla Girls expose the tokenism, separatism, racism, and sexism that persist in museums, the keepers of art's history, and, by implication, the public history of creative achievements.

15 When members of the Guerrilla Girls, engaged in direct action for artistic inclusiveness, don fake fur and assume the names of specific women artists, including Gertrude Stein, there can be little doubt that the reference to Stein is strategic and intentional. Does this mean figures such as Kruger are alluding to Stein through their pieces? Chances are, the debt is a somewhat less direct one. Does this mean that Stein, as the writer so frequently accused of repeating herself, in fact persists (finds herself repeated) wherever we find her concepts and

contexts recurring in others' work some seventy-five years later? Likely it does. Are artists the only ones profiting from attention to the legacies of effrontery left behind by such precursors as Picasso and Stein? Surely not, when America's rapacious consumer culture co-opts yesterday's outrage to make today's bric-a-brac. An observant tourist in Chicago would now see that souvenir bracelet charms of the Chicago Picasso make Oldenburg's sketched cufflinks a near-reality and a vintage button boutique there named for Stein's "Tender Buttons" presumably stands poised to make of Antoni's brooches something like a logo. That which mass culture cannot make to conform, it seeks to absorb. This same history lesson first reached me as a youngster, when I realized that a television commercial for skin cream had appropriated the rhetoric of civil rights as it proudly proclaimed, "Finally — equal treatment for hands and nails."

16 Ultimately, it is in this very tension between confrontational art and its commercial assimilation, critical accolades and public notoriety, that Stein found herself wrapped as an innovator. Robert Bartlett Haas quotes her as saying:

> You see it is the people who generally smell of the museums who are accepted, and it is the new who are not accepted [. . .]. [I]t is much easier to have one hand in the past. That is why James Joyce was accepted and I was not. He leaned toward the past, in my work the newness and difference is fundamental. (46)

Denied the stale yet honorific home of the canon, literature's version of the museum, Stein developed an ability her male counterparts never needed to cultivate: what some have termed the art of speaking truth to power. That message still sounds — because it still needs to — in the epigrammatic works of today's conceptual artists and activist artists. Stein's interrogations of language, gender, and history inform these contemporary efforts. When Barbara Kruger writes that "We will not play nature to your culture" (qtd. in Wells 282), and when the Guerrilla Girls ask and answer a corresponding question ["Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female."], it seems clear enough that not all that much has changed.

17 In the face of that knowledge, is it any wonder that Gertrude Stein was a life-long champion of a verb tense located outside temporality and history, something she called the 'continuous present'? As Stein expressed the predicament in "History or Messages from History," "A famous wife is married to a famous poet both beloved. This is what history teaches" (*History* 33) . Within this formulation, remembrance, whether in art or history, remains reserved for men. Women achieve such recognition only as helpmates to famous men. When viewed within this context, Stein and Kruger's twin humanifestoes — 'When this

you see remember me' and 'Remember me' — demand attention for women within the historical record. With their insight, wit, and Stein-like sloganeering, women continue to call for a more accurately told and equitably unfolded history. Remarks may not, as Stein warned, be history, yet backtalk of the kind these women summon — crafted with equal parts impertinence and concision — carries with it the power to redirect history.

18 If these recent campaigns to reinflect history's words and change its ways seems to have taken on a militant — even military — overtone, that may not be coincidence. In one of her last works, "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), reprinted in Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman's anthology, Stein anticipated the information revolution and the ways our very immersion in messages might compromise our clarity with its undertones and insinuations. In this short text on a timely subject, Stein juxtaposes the very public accounts of scientific advancement with the notion of a secret weapon. While she professes a lack of interest in "death rays and atomic bombs," her piece nonetheless betrays a fascination with the language surrounding atomic research, and how publics respond to such official accounts of stealthy weapons of mass destruction ("Reflections" 823). She writes: "Everybody gets so much information all day that they lose their common sense" ("Reflections" 823). She foresaw people bombarded more by words than atoms, and at a peril through language that, once discerned, can be more readily resisted than can the deployed force of an A-bomb. Stein enters the fray, armed with powerful phrases and penetrating insight. She marshals an arsenal of words and ideas that contest the usual narratives of human history as a march of progress, with its claims to opportunity, justice, and manifest destiny. Therefore, when Jenny Holzer's online fans beg her for a 'text bomb' or Gran Fury's members describe themselves as involved in 'poster sniping,' it may well be that they have detected what Stein long ago understood: that cultural wars are often waged, and so may best be won, at the level of subtext. May moments shape our memories as forcefully as monuments ever have.

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