

# Painting by Numbers

## Komar and Melamid's scientific guide to art

*study guide:* PART ONE & PART TWO

1. General strategies for reading a book will help you here. Take it slow. Read the book flaps, the back cover, the copyright page, the table of contents, and the introduction. Flip through the book; look at the pictures; read some text here and there. Examine some of the diagrams and other plates.

Write down some expectations that you have of the book.

- what you think it's about
- whether you expect to like it
- whether you expect it to be easy to read
- what you think you'll learn from it
- what you think it has to do with "citizen artist"

2. What does Vitaly mean by "democracy's virtual reality" (8)?

3. On page 13, Alexander is responding to the question on the right. In the last sentence he says, "I truly believe that the people's art is better than aristocratic art, whatever it is." Do you believe that a poll can reveal the "people's art"? What are the likely differences between the "people's art" and "aristocratic art"? Why would one be "better" than the other?

4. On page 14, they address the sticky question of whether the "public" is really capable of, in a sense, wanting the right kind of (or, good,) Art. This brings me back to one of the themes of *Lure of the Local*. In the context of Public or Community art (or Art with a "place ethic"), Lippard seems to envision a very specific, intimate relationship between artist and "audience" (if you can call it that), between artist and community (she imagines a time when the idea of public art wouldn't exist because it would be so natural, so given). Here, Alexander questions the assumption that we need special knowledge to judge or appreciate art, and proposes the need for a true popular art. In what ways do you see Lippard's vision on common ground with AM's & VK's, and in what ways do they seem at odds? Do we already have a popular visual art in commercials/advertisements?

5. Do you believe that the fine arts is "out of touch"? If so, what are the advantages and disadvantages of being "out of touch"? If the fine arts are out of touch with "the people" or the "masses," what are they "in touch" with?

6. Follow up to that.... on page 16, AM says, "We [artists] are a minority with no power and no belief, no faith. I feel myself, as an artist and as a citizen, just totally obsolete. I don't know why I am here, what I am doing. What is good about me doing this, or any other artist?" The poll is a way for him to pursue an answer to this question, a solution to this problem. In what ways do you think they can be successful? What's missing? How does this sort of questioning change art?

7. p 17: "Outsiders are the movers of history." & "art as entertainment that poses questions."

8. Page 18 has a bit of a divergent ramble, with mention of "political pluralism," "grotesque of democracy," and "Uncle Majority." This seems like the flipside of the previous reverence of the majority. Now, there is a sinister element, and in the pluralism (and mafias), the suggestion of something like multicenteredness. These ideas

seem to mock the hope that anything vital could come out of a poll, or that democracy could function to serve the interests of the people.

One of the challenges of interdisciplinary work is that, when going between texts, there is often no common vocabulary, no common context. Often, you just wish that the authors you are reading had at least read each other's work. Alas. It becomes our jobs as scholars to try to fill in the gaps, to try, as in a mathematical equation, to find some common denominators with which to begin adding texts together.

The two sections here on pages 18 and 19 are good place to begin finding some common grounds between "Lure..." and "Painting....." (notwithstanding, perhaps, the discussion of immortality...).

9. p21: "Making people hermits for a second—maybe that is the basic idea of art."

10. If find the description of the History of Art on page 22 very compelling. What is your connection to this "machine"? In what ways does this history function to "[impose] the culture on the people"?

11. At the bottom of the next paragraph, he discusses postmodernism, "Now we are in postmodern times, so we say that we repeat ourselves, and this criterion just collapsed, so then what? . . . there is no objective truth." (A little bit more of the history leading up to postmodernism is on p23.) What do you think this "postmodernism" thing is all about? It came up in Lippard as well. Where else have you heard about it? Do you have a sense that the things you hear about it are accurate descriptions of the world you live in?

12. On page 28, there's the suggestion that people felt very passionately about art but weren't sure how to express themselves. Do you see this comment as a contradiction of the earlier notion that people need not have any special training to appreciate art? Can you imagine some resolution to this difficulty? What is the value in making art which only people with a certain education (or sensibilities?) can understand? What's the value of making art which everyone can understand?

13. I like the blood sucking metaphor on page 30. It reminds me of the community based research process.

14. On page 32, bottom right paragraph: "That's the weakness of modernism actually. Everything exists in a line, and if you don't keep in mind the whole line, then you cannot understand, cannot comprehend any particular work; it doesn't exist." What does he mean by this? How is this notion relevant to work made for, or with, community?

15. Page 38: "fine art is the least important cultural thing in America." That's a mighty big claim. In what ways is it true?

16. On page 47, "The old romantic notion had this idea of a free spirit, the artist with a capital A; he's free, free of everything, and he imposes his will on society. . . . the rest are slaves." This "old" notion is not so old. To what extent does this vision drive your own myths about art-making? What are some ways of getting beyond this myth of the artist who imposes his will?

17. Page 49, "This is totally dissident art." because of the questions "Who are the viewers? Who is the audience?" Why do these questions lead to dissidence?