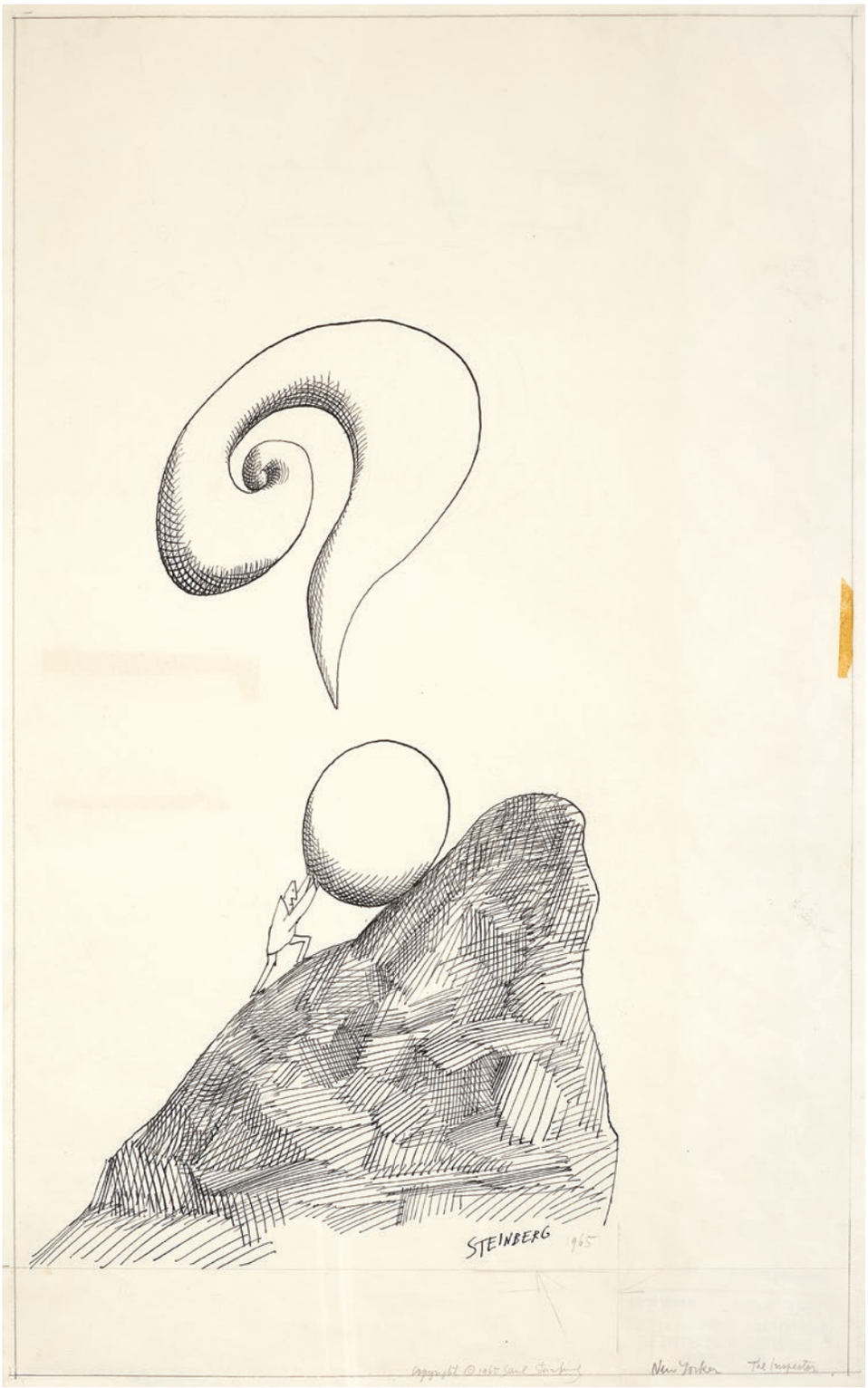
Between the Lines

Anne Montfort-Tanguy



Discursive Figures

"Steinberg is to be read," insists Roland Barthes, "not only because there is a meaning (it is legible) but also because this meaning is multiple, extending beyond the letter: there is an overflowing of meaning, the image (albeit slight) is packed with connotations."[1] Saul Steinberg himself appeals to the complicity of his "reader," "who will transform the line into meaning by using our common background of culture, history, poetry."[2] And if the artist refers here to the reader rather than the viewer, this is not only because his images were to be seen more often in pages of magazines than on gallery walls, but also because his work seems to have more to do with rhetoric than with contemporaneous preoccupations in the visual arts.[3]

1. **Saul Steinberg**, *Up Hill Question Mark*, 1965
Ink on paper, 57.5 × 35.5 cm (22 5/8 × 14 in.)
Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence
Reproduced in *The New Yorker*, March 19, 1966

2. **Saul Steinberg**, *Dragon, Hero, and Ball*, 1968
Ink on paper, 55.6 × 35.6 cm (21 7/8 × 14 in.)
Private collection
Reproduced in *The New Yorker*, December 28, 1968

Overdoing It

I offer, as an example, a series of drawings which take as its subject the myth of Sisyphus. In Greek mythology, the cunning Sisyphus, punished for defying the gods, is condemned for eternity to push a heavy rock up a mountain, only to reach the summit and see it hurtle down the slope again. The punishment of the gods is, of course, only affective if Sisyphus is fully aware of the futility of his actions; for Albert Camus, it is this very lucidity that finally makes him master of his destiny and enables him to triumph over the gods.[4] In the first of these drawings, *Gravity Reversed* (1963),[5] a man runs up a hill pursued by a gigantic boulder. This paradoxical image seems all the more absurd in that it rekindles the memory of the original myth, proposing a kind of antithesis. In the second drawing, *Dragon, Hero, and Ball*[fig. 2], published in *The New Yorker* on December 28, 1968, Steinberg depicts, with the same economy of means, a crocodile/dragon fleeing in front of a man on horseback, armed with a lance (or at least an enormous arrow) and displaying his banner, in turn pursued by the same gigantic boulder rolling down the slope. Our attention is drawn here not so much by what we see — even if the drawing's intentional simplicity, reducing the figures to almost childlike caricatures, is already amusing — but by the questions it raises. Is the dragon fleeing the man or the gigantic boulder? Is the man courageously pursuing the dragon, unaware of the fate awaiting him, or, united with the creature by a common fear, fleeing their shared plight? Is this really an ironic variation on Sisyphus, hero of the absurd? In a third drawing, *Up Hill Question Mark* (1965,[fig. 1]),[6] there is the same gigantic boulder, the same slender silhouette, but now in a stance more respectful of the initial myth: the man is pushing a sphere which is in fact merely the dot of an enormous question mark. If the myth of Sisyphus frequently illustrates the human condition, the rock's metamorphosis into the punctuation mark for a direct interrogative makes the image a literal representation of man enslaved by (his) uncertainty.

1. *All Except You*, text by Roland Barthes, drawings by Saul Steinberg, *Repères: Cahiers d'art contemporain* (Paris: Galerie Maeght-Lelong, 1988), p. 18; translated.
2. Saul Steinberg, quoted in *Saul Steinberg*, introduction by Harold Rosenberg, exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 22.
3. Steinberg again affirms: "I am a writer. I draw because the essence of a good piece of writing is precision. Drawing is a precise mode of expression." In Pierre Schneider, *Louvre Dialogues*, trans. Patricia Southgate (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 82.
4. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955). Steinberg liked the French writer, describing him to Aldo Buzzi as "handsome, interesting, intelligent, full of life." Published in Saul Steinberg, "Portraits and Landscapes," *Paris Review*, no. 195 (Winter 2010): p. 30.
5. The drawing was published in *The New Yorker,* April 6, 1963, then again in Saul Steinberg, *The New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 37.
6. The drawing was published in *The New Yorker*, March 19, 1966.

To the Letter

Uncertainty, perplexity, and — once more — indecision are constants within Steinberg's universe, affecting not only humankind but also contaminating its creations. The letters in *Colors* (1971, plate p. 62)[7] form words contradicting their colors: "BLUE" is written in red, "RED" in blue, "YELLOW" in green, and "GREEN" in yellow. The image is again intriguing. "One must build attractive traps,"[8] Steinberg explains. The collage refers both to the beginnings of printing — to the objects constituted by lead type — and to the virtual image produced by cathode-ray tubes, in which the addition of red and green produces yellow. Trapped between two eras, these capital letters cut out of Chromolux paper are stereotyped — like the writing in comic strips — but can also evoke the artist's personal memories: the glossy papers his father used in the family's small decorative box business, the lettering on signs drawn by his uncle Moritz,[9] etc. The break between signifier and signified thus testifies to an ultimate emancipation of language. Steinberg's words and letters undergo existential crises like human beings and, in the same way, are irreparably led to project themselves into what they would like to be or what we would like them to be: as in the "NOWHERE," whose three-dimensional letters are nevertheless firmly set on the ground, on which stands a precariously balanced "NOBODY," from which emanates an ephemeral "NOTHING," the ensemble forming a new kind of trinity (*Nowhere, Nobody, Nothing*, 1970, fig. 3).[10] Although these drawings have the apparent spontaneity of a flash of wit, their creation is the result of a slow process.

Steinberg quite often sticks with an idea from one drawing to another, developing and transforming it until it attains another significance. Pursuing the logic of the preceding drawing in a sketch for the *New Yorker* cover of July 31, 1971, he places the words "I HAVE" as a kind of foundation, on which stands "I AM" in smaller letters. He then uses the same text but the other way round, thus inverting its meaning: "I AM" is now the solid base on which stands a makeshift clothesline forming the words "I HAVE," while in the sky a traffic light, a disk, and a semicircle in motion trace a victorious "I DO." In the final cover, the image becomes a virtuous, peaceful landscape fig. 4. Ultimately it is the "clothes" worn by the letters, their appearance, that gives the drawing its meaning. For Steinberg, writing can lose its instrumental essence and literally become an object truly indecipherable by nature (because it has no codified connection with language), yet still make sense fig. 7. To convince oneself of this, one only has to look at *La Cantatrice chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*) plate pp. 94 – 95, a 1958 drawing for an edition of Eugène Ionesco's play: in a rudimentary stage set, four figures seem embroiled in speech bubbles whose florid or sloppy calligraphy says as much about their respective characters as their difficulties in communicating. In this sense, Steinberg's image is didactic and perfectly matches Ionesco's play. Ionesco described his initial project for *La Cantatrice chauve* — copying out phrases in an English-language phrase book end-to-end — as "specifically didactic." He continued, "An extraordinary phenomenon took place, I know not how: before my very eyes the text underwent a subtle transformation, against my will. After a time, those inspired

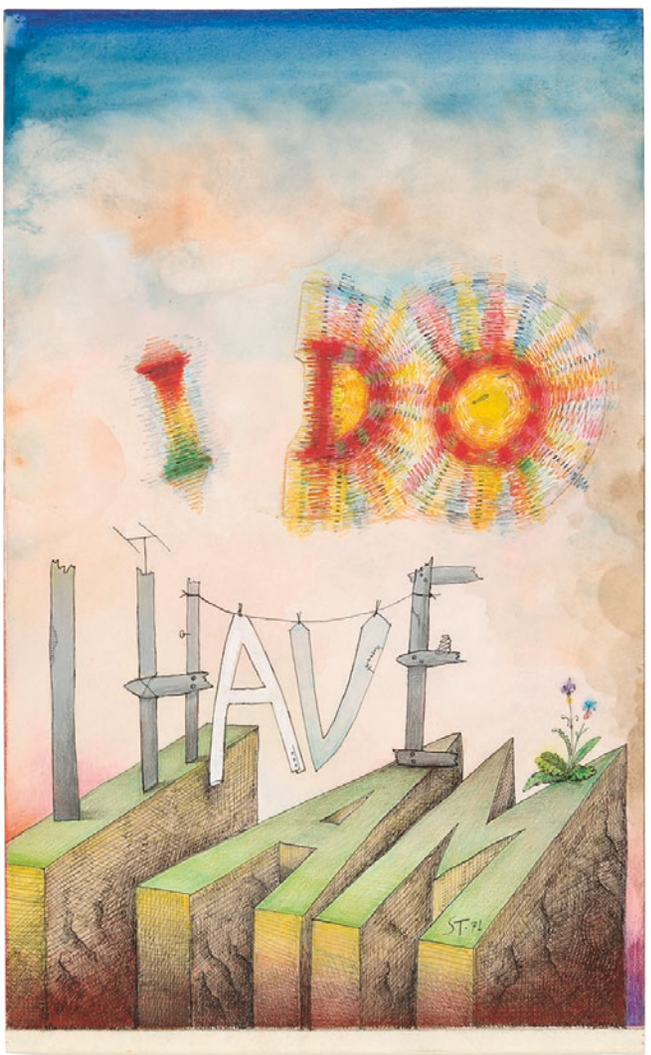
7. The drawing was reproduced on the cover of *The New Yorker*, October 21, 1972.
8. Saul Steinberg, in Schneider, *Louvre Dialogues*, p. 83.
9. See Saul Steinberg with Aldo Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, trans. John Shepley (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 14 – 16.
10. Fig. 3 is a study for the drawing reproduced on the cover of *The New Yorker,* March 7, 1970.
11. Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes* [1962], trans. Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964), p. 184.
12. Saul Steinberg, conversation with Jean Frémon, in *Steinberg, Repères: Cahiers d'art contemporain* (Paris: Galerie Maeght-Lelong, 1986), pp. 17 – 18; translated.
13. Steinberg, conversation with Jean Frémon; translated.
14. Barthes, *All Except You*, p. 64; translated.
15. For a complete analysis of these false documents, see the website of The Saul Steinberg Foundation, https://saulsteinbergfoundation.org/essay/false-documents/.
16. Barthes, *All Except You*, p. 64; translated.
17. Saul Steinberg, letter to Aldo Buzzi, August 12, 1985, in Saul Steinberg, *Lettere a Aldo Buzzi, 1945 – 1999*, ed. Aldo Buzzi (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 2002); the unpublished English translation is from The Saul Steinberg Foundation.

yet simple sentences which I had so painstakingly copied into my schoolboy's exercise-book, detached themselves from the pages on which they had been written, changed places all by themselves, become garbled and corrupted."[11]

Emblems of Unreason

Forgery and Fraud

Saul Steinberg was multilingual. As he confided to Jean Frémon, he first discovered "Anatole France in Italian, Hemingway in French (quite funny), *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] in English, and, in Bucharest in 1927 [... Molière's] *Les Précieuses ridicules* [*The Affected Young Ladies*] in Yiddish."[12] As previously in *Colors*, he is again playing on paradox because, thanks to his great facility with languages, he admits to having read emblematic authors in translation, which is of course all the more absurd because he spoke French, Italian, and English. Paradox serves not only comical ends, since it also allows Steinberg to insist on the fact that, no matmatter where he finds himself, in essence he will always remain a foreigner. And if he describes his native Romania as "a country of child prodigies" who speak "two or three languages," he cannot help adding, "it's already a good way to begin learning to doubt."[13] This opacity of language also explains the reduction of its visual counterpart — writing — to calligraphy, as I mentioned earlier. But here again, the choice of form is not incidental. As Roland Barthes notes, "The graphism of the (illegible) scripts is heavily loaded. It refers back to a very precise moment in graphic history. The power of the bureaucratic state (in the second half of the 19th century) was reflected in the growing importance of its clerks, and this importance expressed itself in the broad, sophisticated flourishes of their signatures."[14] Steinberg also uses this ornate cursive writing to produce false official documents[15] — diplomas, certificates, inventories, and passports plates pp. 90 – 91 — or rather, the fantasy of these documents when, written by hand, they derive their preciousness from their rarity. "Furthermore, these past scripts very simply speak the past," Barthes continues.[16] In this precise case, they refer to the time when the young Steinberg found himself trapped in Fascist Italy. Two anecdotes seem particularly telling here. The first concerns the diploma in architecture he received from the Politecnico in Milan in March 1940 fig. 5, on which, after his name, is specified "de razza ebraica" (of the Hebrew race) which, in the context of the racial laws then in force, made this document completely useless as soon as it was issued. In a letter to his friend Aldo Buzzi, Steinberg later said that this diploma was "printed in excellent taste, handsomely set in Bodoni, which rendered it even more sinister."[17] He paid dearly for this tragic administrative absurdity when he sought to leave Italy for Santo Domingo via a ship departing from Lisbon. Despite valid visas obtained with great difficulty, he was turned back at Lisbon airport and forced to return to Italy on September 6, 1940 — Salazar's Estado Novo took a dim view on the influx of "undesirables." Nevertheless, he again pursued the administrative procedures to obtain the required visas. No longer benefiting from student status, he was now obliged as a "foreign Jew" to leave Italy but was incapable of doing so because the Romanian legation in Rome refused to renew his passport. He eventually had to give himself up to the Milanese



3. **Saul Steinberg**, *Nowhere, Nobody, Nothing*, 1970
Ink and pencil on paper, 58.5 × 37 cm (23 × 14 5/8 in.)
Collection of Jules Maeght, Paris

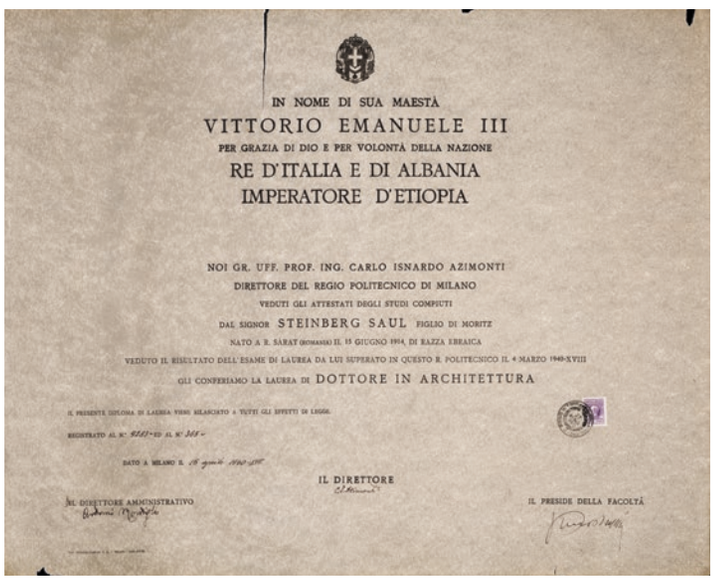
4. **Saul Steinberg**, *I Do I Have I Am*, 1971
Ink, felt-tip pen, ballpoint pen, pencil, gouache, watercolor, and collage on vellum paper, 57.6 × 35.3 cm (22 5/8 × 13 7/8 in.)
Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of The Saul Steinberg Foundation
Reproduced on the cover of *The New Yorker*, July 31, 1971

authorities on April 27, 1941.[18] He was imprisoned in Milan and then sent to one of Mussolini's internment camps, Villa Tonelli, at Tortoreto on the Adriatic coast. The second anecdote is linked to his release from the camp in June 1941: his fellow inmates organized a party in his honor and presented him with a kind of diploma, "A ricordo di Tortoreto. Cordialmente dedicato al signor S. Steinberg dai suoi camerata" (A souvenir of Tortoreto. Cordially dedicated to Mr. S. Steinberg from his comrades), with the signatures of his fellow inmates, on the back, framing a drawing of the villa fig. 6. Years later, Steinberg recalled, "We are all there, I am in the title. And the signatures seem to be from the XIX century, signatures that give an idea of the importance, of the dignity of man, to the very last one."[19] Illegible handwriting can therefore be a sign of oppression but also resistance to oppression … For Steinberg, nothing is simple or unambiguous.

Larger than Life

Steinberg sometimes pushes the logic of the fake as far as using trompe-l'oeil effects. The papers of *Rimbaud Document* (1953, plate pp. 92 – 93) and *Diary* (1954)[20] are artificially aged and stained with watercolor — an effect compounded by the inscriptions in black and sepia ink. Dore Ashton writes that when she was still a young critic, Steinberg lured her to his studio to view the works by implying that they were pages from a previously lost manuscript that Arthur Rimbaud had written in Africa. But seeing her confusion, he hastened to admit that they were his creations, adding, "You see, people who like relics usually don't understand their significance. They get excited not about the saint, but the bone. What they want from Rimbaud is not the poetry, but a button from his jacket."[21] The two drawings are strewn with traps and obviously *forged fakes*. As soon as one looks closely at the details of *Rimbaud Document*, the artifice is evident: the wax seal is merely a red spot, the photo ID is a thumbprint decked out in a beard and suit. It is not the verisimilitude that captivates us in these works but the fact that we have been "almost" fooled, and we finally take the same pleasure in Steinberg's tricks that we would if we knew the hidden workings behind a magic trick. How could one not appreciate the effectiveness of the conflation of a figure and a thumbprint into one image which, as Ernst Gombrich observed, irremediably leads us to interpret it not "as a face so much as the photograph of a face"?[22]

In the same way, the realism of the landscapes and postcards Steinberg produced from the late 1960s onward are based on pretense. Despite the occasionally evocative titles from Steinberg's distant travels (*Anatolia, African Postcards, Egyptian Landscapes*, etc.) and the many stamps seemingly attesting to the authenticity of both the image and the memory, their compositions are strangely similar: horizontal bands of blending colors, often modulated by textural effects, depicting land and sky, sometimes separated by a stretch of water. In fact, these are not descriptions of specific places but a type of codified representation, in this case landscape painting. Steinberg explained, "These postcards represent not the reality, not the truth — they represent our convention and our idea of what nature looks like. So in a sense, the greatest influence [on] landscape has been Poussin, [one of] the inventors of landscapes, who have also been the inventors of the postcards. So that now nature looks to us like imitating art."[23]


IN NOME DI SUA MAESTÀ
VITTORIO EMANUELE III
PER GRAZIA DI DIO E PER VOLONTÀ DELLA NAZIONE
RE D'ITALIA E DI ALBANIA
IMPERATORE D'ETIOPIA

NOI GR. UFF. PROF. ING. CARLO ISNARDO AZIMONTI
DIRETTORE DEL REGIO POLITECNICO DI MILANO
VEDUTI GLI ATTESTATI DEGLI STUDI COMPIUTI
DAL SIGNOR STEINBERG SAUL FIGLIO DI MORITZ
NATO A R. SARAT (ROMANIA) IL 15 GIUGNO 1914, DI RAZZA EBRAICA
VEDUTO IL RISULTATO DELL'ESAME DI LAUREA DA LUI SUPERATO IN QUESTO R. POLITECNICO IL 4 MARZO 1940-XVIII
GLI CONFERIAMO LA LAUREA DI DOTTORE IN ARCHITETTURA

IL DIRETTORE

IL DIRETTORE AMMINISTRATIVO

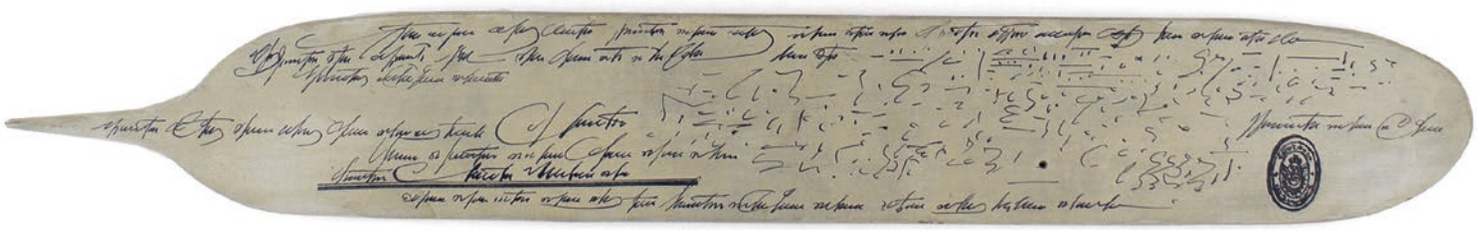
IL PRESIDE DELLA FACOLTÀ

5. Saul Steinberg's diploma in architecture, Politecnico di Milano, 1940
Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

6. Farewell gift to Steinberg from his fellow inmates at Villa Tonelli, Tortoreto, June 6, 1941 (verso). Signatures of the prisoners with drawing of the villa by Walter Frankl.
Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

Steinberg affirmed this with another one of his witticisms, recounted by Harold Rosenberg: "When I admire a scene in the country, I look for a signature in the lower right-hand corner."[24] And indeed, Steinberg did not hesitate to add his signature, several times in the very middle of the image, as in a 1969 watercolor plate pp. 88 – 89. Here, stamps are also used to emphasize the fake nature of the representation, serving as a poor substitute for the sun, as landscapes in the landscape, or repeating the anonymous silhouettes of supposed onlookers. As an ultimate fail-safe, a grid evokes the lines used for composition and refers us to one of the first drawings in this series, with the emblematic title *Government Regulation Landscape* (1966).

and until the end of his life he remained a staunch viewer of baseball games on television. Steinberg's ability to capture the spirit of American society soon became so well-known that he, the immigrant, was eventually chosen to create the monumental mural in the US Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. Entitled *The Americans* plate pp. 18 – 19 and more then 240 feet long, it is divided into eight thematic sections forming a panorama of the United States: *Downtown – Big City*; *The Road – South and West*; *Main Street – Small Town*; *Cocktail Party*; *Drugstore – Small Town*; *Baseball*; *California, Florida and Texas*; *Farmers, Middle West*. The expressive distortion of the landscapes and figures sometimes borders on caricature but never crosses the line. All in all, the image of the United States is still a very consensual one here,



Fictions and Autofictions

American Chronicles

Steinberg was interested in landscape only insofar as it reflects cultural, political, and social conventions. And when it comes to the United States, he was all the more attentive to local customs and habits because he found himself in the uncomfortable position of the immigrant trying to understand his host country, sparing no effort when exploring pillars of popular American culture such as baseball. The short introduction to the article "Steinberg at the Bat," published in *LIFE* magazine on July 11, 1955, mentions that the artist bought eighteen books on the subject and followed the Milwaukee Braves on a training tour like a fan, concluding, "Then, when he felt he had the subject in hand, Steinberg bought a catcher's outfit to get in the mood and wore it as he set down the all-American impressions on these pages" fig. 8; plate pp. 76 – 77.[25] Although the latter assertion should be taken with a grain of salt — a catcher's uniform would be particularly unsuitable for sitting at a drawing table — the fact remains that Steinberg's interest in the sport was genuine

especially because, as Rosenberg notes in a general sense, "His mythical landscapes are also the settings of collective myths, scenes and cities fabricated by the dreams of their inhabitants."[26] But Steinberg's drawings sometimes play on another register, reminiscent of the one Voltaire chose in his coming-of-age tale *Candide*. If Steinberg appropriates idealized American images — Uncle Sam, the bald eagle, Native Americans, the Statue of Liberty, Thanksgiving turkey, etc. — their associations are not always as innocent as they seem. In *The Chrysler Building* (1965, fig. 8), a Native

7. **Saul Steinberg**, *Phylactère pour Guiguitte*, 1971
Ink on wood, 7 × 41 cm (2 3/4 × 16 1/8 in.)
Collection of Adrien Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence

18. For a detailed account of the difficulties Steinberg encountered in leaving Italy, see the excellent article by Mario Tedeschini Lalli, "Descent from Paradise: Saul Steinberg's Italian Years (1933 – 1941)," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History, Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, no. 2 (October 2011), https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/descent-from-paradise-saul-steinbergs-italian-years-1933-1941.

19. Saul Steinberg, quoted in Tedeschini Lalli, "Descent from Paradise," p. 355.

20. The drawing is reproduced on the website of The Saul Steinberg Foundation, https://saulsteinbergfoundation.org/essay/false-documents/; and in Joel Smith, *Saul Steinberg: Illuminations*, exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), cat. 30, p. 129.

21. Dore Ashton, "What I Draw is Drawings," in *Saul Steinberg*, exh. cat. (Valencia: IVAM Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2002), p. 156.

22. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), p. 240.

23. Saul Steinberg, television interview from "Take 30 in New York," with Adrienne Clarkson, Canadian Broadcasting Company, aired January 1968, quoted in https://saulsteinbergfoundation.org/essay/postcard-style-landscapes/.

24. Saul Steinberg, quoted in Rosenberg, *Saul Steinberg*, p. 19.

25. "Steinberg at the Bat," *LIFE*, July 11, 1955, p. 57.

26. Rosenberg, in *Saul Steinberg*, p. 17.

American, recognizable by his headdress, draped in a flag, and brandishing a torch, embodies the Statue of Liberty. He is facing the Chrysler Building, whose Art Deco architecture is detailed with linear patterns, and standing in front of the Great Seal of the United States (also on the back of the dollar bill): a truncated pyramid surmounted by the Eye of Providence and the motto "Annuit cœptis." The image could be a summary of the success of the project of the Founding Fathers, with on one side the allegory of opulence and on the other that of liberty — if, of course, the figure personifying the Statue of Liberty was not one of the very people deprived of liberty by the Founding Fathers and their policies. As America was becoming embroiled in the Vietnam War, the themes of Steinberg's drawings — often scenes of urban guerilla warfare — became more ominous, an effect enhanced by his adoption of a new style influenced by the American counterculture's underground comix.[27] Echoing the atmosphere in the country, the artist's humor darkened and his drawings were sometimes fierce. As Arthur C. Danto notes, *Union Square* (1980, plate p. 85)[28] becomes a "diminishing and menacing space in which statues of the imposing dead — Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, Lafayette — preside over a human crowd that scatters like insects toward the dark holes of subway entrances, rushing to vacate the square for the outer boroughs and for the suburbs, leaving it free for the creatures of darkness to emerge from those same holes to take over the city."[29]

This Is Not … An Autobiography

Steinberg's art is autobiographical, if one is to believe Rosenberg, who hastens to add, "But whose autobiography?"[30] Except for portraits of family and friends and a few rare self-portraits, there are few direct references to the artist's life in his drawings.[31] Yet all assert and convey a totally subjective view of the world. Whether via the intermediary of a banal silhouette or an anonymous diagram or map, the artist invites us to share a personal sentiment. In a humorous vein, *Flight Map* (c. 1980 – 1984, plate p. 65) describes his experience of a transatlantic flight. Continents and countries, reduced to mere contours, are identifiable only by their names, their presence and size now depending solely on the importance Steinberg gives them. The United States and France have disappeared, replaced by their respective airports, linked by a dotted line retracing, like a flight map, the rise and fall of the artist's stress: coffee, danish, orange juice, catalepsy, hallucination, paranoia, hypochondria, coffee, cake, chicken, shrimp, drink. For this incorrigible traveler, maps naturally become a diary, as in *Autogeography* (1966, plate p. 137), in which the artist's life merges with the enumeration of the names of the cities he has visited. These cities are not situated in their geographical locations but according to the place they occupy in the artist's memories, making this landscape a kind of mental topography in which time and space become confused. For Steinberg, travel is also a

8. **Saul Steinberg**, *The Chrysler Building*, 1965
Watercolor, ink, and colored pencil on paper, 74.9 × 60.3 cm (29 1/2 × 23 3/4 in.)
Private collection

27. For a detailed analysis of the influence of American counterculture on Saul Steinberg's work, see Joel Smith's analysis in *Saul Steinberg: Illuminations*, pp. 63 – 64.

28. The drawing, in the Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, is a variation on the first drawing, dated 1979, in the Morgan Library and Museum, New York. It was reproduced on the cover of *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1981.

29. Arthur C. Danto, introduction to *Saul Steinberg: The Discovery of America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), p. xvi.

30. Rosenberg, in *Saul Steinberg*, p. 10.

31. There are also indirect references to his life in the *Drawing Table Reliefs* series. For more information, see https://saulsteinbergfoundation.org/essay/drawing-table-reliefs/; https://saulsteinbergfoundation.org/essay/art-as-autobiography/.

32. Saul Steinberg, letter to Aldo Buzzi, February 19, 1964, in Steinberg, *Lettere a Aldo Buzzi*.

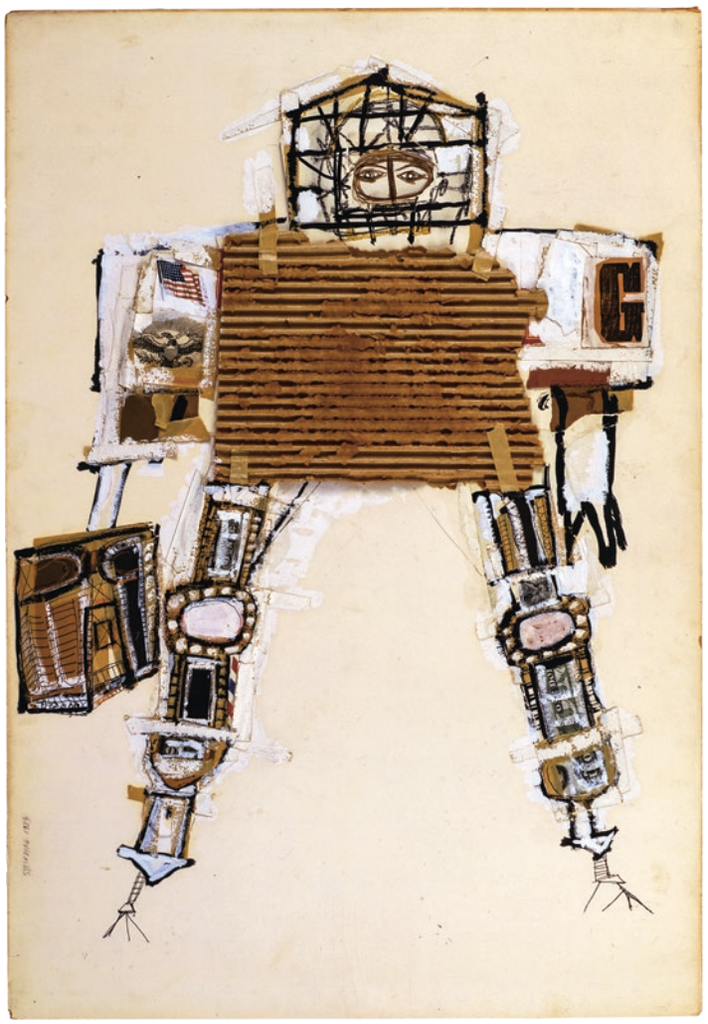
33. Saul Steinberg, quoted in Rosenberg, *Saul Steinberg*, p. 19.

34. Italo Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person" [1977], in *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1986).

means of inner exploration, as he explains in a letter to Aldo Buzzi: "Returning to New York, I feel as though I'm in Romania or who knows what place in the distant past. Impossible to recount things, we'll see each other and in speaking of other things the story of the trip, including Abyssinia, the wild animals in Kenya, the Turkish baths in Japan etc.etc. will all gradually come out. As always, I was more interested in myself (that is, trying to understand what sort of man I am) than in seeing outside things. It's a fine game and I imagine even explorers experience it. Also coming home and finding myself no longer the same."[32]

This faceless man (because when Steinberg draws himself drawing he becomes a figure with no distinctive character and he sometimes wears one of his paper masks when posing for photographers) takes pleasure showing in his drawings the interaction between a subject and its setting — even sometimes emphasizing that it is not so much humans who shape their environment but the opposite. In his works focusing on the art world, the viewers (mostly women) adopt codified poses and, "after a fashion," are dressed for the role both literally and allegorically. But in return, this well-regulated world is upset by the works they are looking at, whose style eventually rubs off on their own physique. The women in the mural *Art Viewers* (1966, plates pp. 24 – 27) lose themselves in contemplation of pictures until they too become an abstraction, to the extent that they sometimes seem to find their own — more realist — reflection in the picture they are looking at plate pp. 28 – 29. For Steinberg, is this not the very nature of art that it functions like a monad from which it is impossible to escape?

The affirmation, "What I draw is drawing [and] drawing derives from drawing. My line wants to remind constantly that it is made of ink,"[33] is illustrated by the many images of an artist whose line, after numerous twists and turns, becomes a table, a table that becomes the artist, whose line becomes a table, etc. plate p. 59. And then, in 1971, Steinberg began making life-size replicas of the objects surrounding him, creating a kind of impossible, sculpted wood snapshot of his worktable plate p. 55. The boundary between the fiction of the sheet of paper and the real world has been crossed, and Italo Calvino welcomes it: "The drawn world has an aggressiveness of its own: it invades the desk, captures anything alien to it, joins all lines to its own line, overflows the page. … No, it is the outside world that enters and becomes part of the page. The pen, the hand, the artist, the desk, the cat — everything is engulfed by the drawing as if by a whirlpool […] No, it is the substance of the graphic sign that is revealed as the true substance of the world, the flourish or arabesque or thread of dense, feverish, neurotic handwriting that replaces any other possible world."[34]



9. **Saul Steinberg**, *Corrugated Catcher*, 1954
Mixed media on card, 73.7 × 50.8 cm (29 × 20 in.)
Collection of Jason van Dalen
Reproduced in *LIFE*, July 11, 1955

Beware of the Artist
Saul Steinberg's Warning

Jean-Pierre Criqui

On March 28, 1966, the art critic Pierre Schneider took Saul Steinberg to the Louvre to record his reactions to various works, as he had already done with several major figures of contemporary art, including Alberto Giacometti and Barnett Newman (both of whom Steinberg knew personally). Ironically, this visit gave the artist an opportunity to virtually join the droves of *Art Viewers* plate pp. 24 – 25, also the title of the large mural he was then showing in Paris in an exhibition of his work at the Galerie Maeght. To Schneider's great relief, the man he was accompanying was no practitioner of the ineffable and made things clear from the outset: "I am wary of people who remain dazzled, exalted, silent in front of a painting. They believe in miracles. But it is we who must make our paradises. The true mystics have always been talkative. To honor a picture, you must tell it to yourself with every possible detail."[1] No salvation for the viewer, therefore, other than a genuine labor of the mind: "Interpretation probably does not give us the truth, but the act of interpretation saves us."[2] Nothing less! And Steinberg adds, somewhat enigmatically, "I am a writer. I draw because the essence of a good piece of writing is precision. Drawing is a precise mode of expression."[3]

Does that last remark go without saying? Nothing is less certain. If one can eventually agree that precision is generally beneficial to all forms of writing (but precision in relation to what?), in what way should drawing be, by nature as it were, a "precise" art? Are there not vague, approximate drawings, devoid of the slightest concern for accuracy yet appreciated exactly for that? As for his claim to the status of writer, it clearly stems from the idea of an origin common to all graphic gestures and from praise of the hand as a civilizing instrument.[4] Yet it is also clear that Steinberg is situating himself within a *literary* tradition, on an equal footing with Gogol or Saul Bellow in terms of means and ambition. He himself said that "he was a writer who drew instead of writing," recalls his friend Aldo Buzzi in his foreword to Steinberg's memoires which he helped complete.[5] This is the Steinbergian leitmotif par excellence, regularly returning in his remarks and in studies of his work. In response to the survey conducted by Grace Glueck for *ARTnews* magazine in 1977, in which a hundred artists were questioned about the works they admired and that influenced them, Steinberg began, "The artist is an educator of artists of the future — of artists who are able to understand and in the process of understanding perform unexpected — the best — evolutions. In this sense James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov are our great teachers."[6] Even if Steinberg's drawings often comprise linguistic elements (letters, words, short phrases), although many do just as well without them, as soon as one pauses for a moment this literary analogy inevitably plunges us into a bewilderment impossible to dispel. *Ulysses* or *Lolita* drawn? A tedious prospect, even if rebaptized as "graphic novels," as comic books exceeding more than just a few pages are now known (a genre that Steinberg kept away from, no matter what length). Clearly, this is not the case. So, how do we account for this insistence on calling himself a writer, when everything suggests counting him among the most brilliant draftsmen? *Better Call Saul?* But he is no longer with us, and what is more, one can wager that he would have applied himself to perpetuating the ambiguity, remorselessly leaving us to hypothetical presumptions of allegory. Very well. It is therefore necessary to deduce the rules of the game.

Leafing through issues of *The New Yorker* magazine from the 1950s is a disorientating experience, probably more so if one is not American. The respective editorial domains (texts and illustrations) and advertising seem to mingle to such an extent that it takes a real effort to extricate one from the other without entirely abandoning oneself to the mere deciphering of this bygone commercial world whose innumerable advertisements astonish, amuse, and overwhelm us. This is the world in which Steinberg rapidly made his mark when he left Europe in 1941 and to which he largely owed his fortune in every sense of the word. Roger Angell, a writer for *The New Yorker* for many years, noted in a tribute to Steinberg in 2005 that during his American career Steinberg produced eighty-nine covers for the magazine and contributed more than a thousand times to its inside pages, ranging from single drawings to sequences over several pages.[7] One can entertain oneself leafing through *The New Yorker* as if it were a subset of Steinberg's catalogue raisonné, sure of discovering eloquent proof of his genius at regular intervals. A drawing on page 24 of the February 27, 1954, issue, inserted amid columns of text with which it has no explicit link, brought me to a halt fig. 2. Reproduced on a small

1. **Irving Penn**, *Saul Steinberg in Nose Mask, New York*, September 30, 1966
Reproduced in *Vogue*, September 1977

1. Saul Steinberg, in Pierre Schneider, *Louvre Dialogues*, trans. Patricia Southgate (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 81.
2. Steinberg, quoted in Schneider, *Louvre Dialogues*, p. 81.
3. Steinberg, p. 82.
4. "There is no writing without the hand and everything that lies behind the hand, all the architecture that weighs on it, moves it — biology, geology, man's history. Writing is the tip of an enormous inverted pyramid." Steinberg, p. 93.
5. Aldo Buzzi, in Saul Steinberg with Aldo Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, trans. John Shepley (New York: Random House, 2002), p. vii.
6. Saul Steinberg, quoted in Grace Glueck, "The 20th-Century Artists Most Admired by Other Artists," *ARTnews*, vol. 76, November 1977, p. 78, and quoted in the recent book by Jessica R. Feldman, *Saul Steinberg's Literary Journeys: Nabokov, Joyce, and Others* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021) at the beginning of the first chapter, "Thought Images: Steinberg Praises Joyce and Nabokov."
7. Roger Angell, "Map of Saul," *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2005, p. 56.

scale (hardly more than 3 inches high, less than a third of the page), it shows a human figure — man or woman, it does not matter — engendering him- or herself graphically. From the oval of the face reduced to an absolute physiognomic minimum to the tip of the pen between the thumb and forefinger of a hand reduced to its five digits, runs a single line swirling in curves and loops (how long would it measure if it were unwound horizontally or vertically?), which creates not a body but its possible aura, the cloud of an indistinct individual. Taking a closer look, this stoic figure seems to be both canceling and materializing itself. An ornamentalist has self-generated through a demonstration of virtuosity, and in doing so also effaces himself. (A drawing included that same year, 1954, in Steinberg's book *The Passport* shows an artist drawing an x over his own face.)

Is this strand suggesting both presence and absence envisaging us from near or far? Is it anthropomorphism that prevails in it, or the tangles of a line referring to nothing other than the gesture from which it proceeds? Steinberg infinitely explored the motif of *autography*: echoes of modern, even modernist, reflexivity of which he gives us an ambiguous, deadpan version. "What I draw is drawing, [and] drawing derives from drawing. My line wants to remind constantly that it's made of ink," he declared.[8] Ernst Gombrich, who has the honor of having praised Steinberg's oeuvre earlier than many others (in his much celebrated book *Art and Illusion*, a 1960 publication of lectures given in 1956), quotes these words in a subsequent article in which, while elegantly analyzing the subtle workings of Steinberg's creativity, tends in his conclusion to present him as a denigrator of the avant-garde and particularly abstract art, a well-known Gombrich bête noire.[9] Although certain drawings can seemingly give rise to such an interpretation (but this would also be to neglect the principle of satire, which presupposes that we can also mock what we respect),[10] Gombrich takes a far too simplistic path, lacking the powers of ambivalence constantly at work here, in considering an artist who profoundly admired Mondrian and was a friend of Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, and many other established avant-garde artists.

Ogni dipintore dipinge sé, a maxim originating in Italy and widespread since the Renaissance, says that "every painter paints himself." Yet it was not an artist but the banker and statesman Cosimo de' Medici who coined it when praising the singularity of Filippo Lippi. The idea goes hand in hand with the then increasing primacy of the artist over the artisan, of style as "artistic personality" over craftsmanship; and Leonardo da Vinci was one of those who employed it most frequently. Yet in his examination of this maxim and its many resonances, Daniel Arasse remarks that artists, fearing that it denied them the freedom of will that could moderate a so-called "mechanical" self-mimesis, were sometimes reserved in their view of it, and that writers on the other hand, who posed the question of imitation differently, adhered to it more resolutely.[11] Which brings us back to Steinberg proclaiming himself a writer and to the drawing, published on February 27, 1954, which most recently reappeared on the cover of an anthology compiled by Gérard Macé of the thoughts of some twenty poets from Baudelaire to Jacques Réda on poetry, the forms it takes, its effects, and its milieu.[12] If need be, this is what posthumously justifies Steinberg's literary claims, noting in passing that this also extended to the means of dissemination he considered best suited to his work, running counter to the uniqueness of the original and closer to that of books and the printed word in general:

2. **Saul Steinberg**, *Untitled*, 1954
Ink on paper, location unknown
Reproduced in ***The New Yorker,*** February 27, 1954

8. Saul Steinberg, quoted in *Saul Steinberg*, introduction by Harold Rosenberg, exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 19.

9 E. H. Gombrich, "The Wit of Saul Steinberg," *Art Journal* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1983): pp. 377 – 380, reprinted in *Topics of Our Time: Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 188 – 194 .

10. In any case, it is difficult not to satirize, as Juvenal opportunely reminded us: *difficile est saturam non scribere* (*Satires* I.30).

11. Daniel Arasse, *Le Sujet dans le tableau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), pp. 7 – 9, with notes giving a valuable bibliography on the subject.

12. Gérard Macé, *La Pensée des poètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021).

13. Steinberg, *Reflections and Shadows*, p. 88.

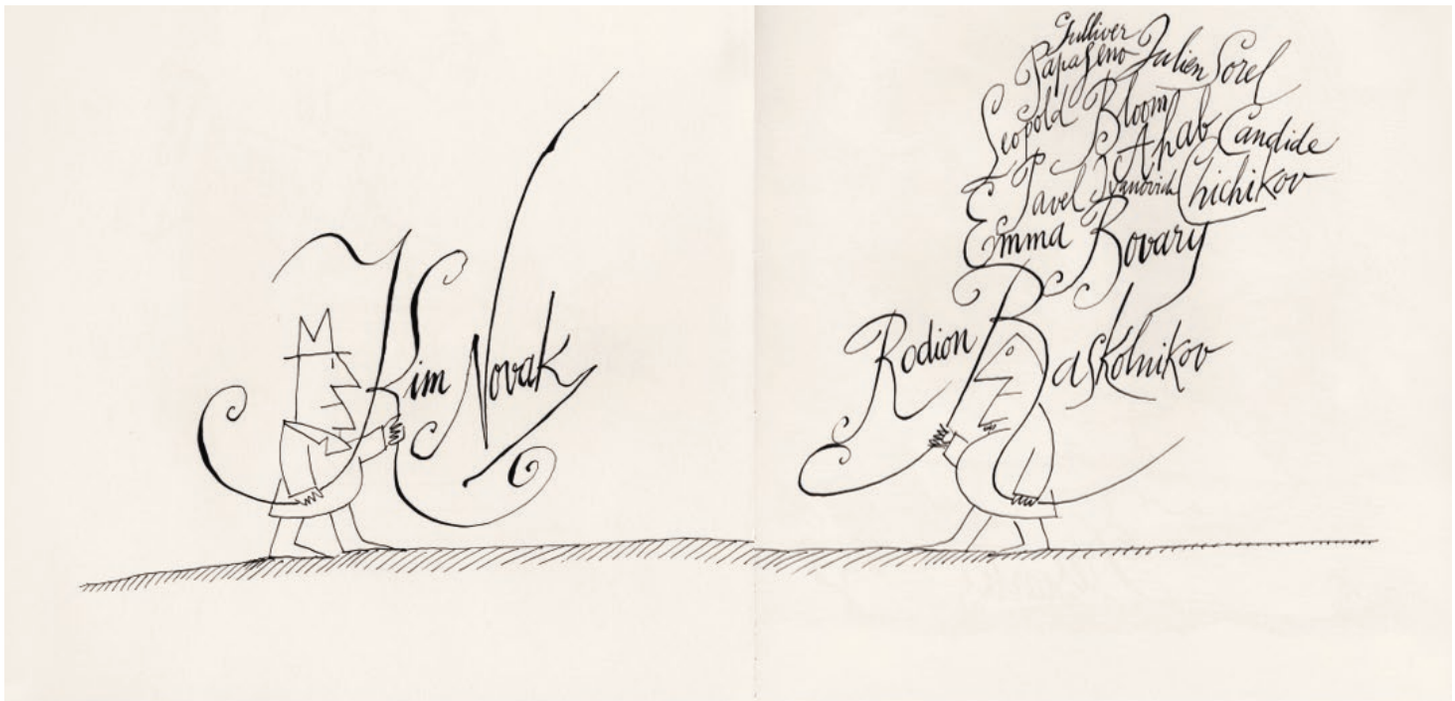
14. Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

"I never like to sell my work. I enjoy selling the rights of reproduction."[13]

The multi-faceted abundance of Steinberg's oeuvre is not conducive to overviews, especially not within the confines of a simple catalogue essay. Better then to rely on chance encounters, gambling on a kind of fractal principle — there is always an element of wishful thinking in commentaries — according to which any sample, no matter how small and as long as it asserts itself as a kind of epiphany, reveals a constitutive property of the whole from which it has been obtained. So, let us continue to leaf through *The New Yorker* until ten years later, on November 7, 1964, where, over four pages, Steinberg drew what one is tempted to call a pantheon. It begins with Descartes. In a landscape beneath a dramatically turbulent sky, the proper noun Descartes thinks about itself thinking. The subject of this short series is names, names as metonymic, emblematic substitutes for the personalities and figures to which they refer. As would be expected, the six letters of Darwin suggest an evolution: from the D emerging from its aquatic origins to the W perched on the branch of a tree, and the N comfortably installed in an armchair in front of a teapot placed on top of the I [fig. 3]. Freud interferes with this order. It is the initial F that is enthroned in an armchair, whereas the R and E are immersed in water (*Acheronta movebo!*), leading us to a tree in which a bird, perched on the U, is imagining or dreaming the final D, delineated in the same copperplate script as the D of Descartes on the facing page. Between Darwin and Freud, the X of Marx has crossed out yet another armchair. (Another Saul — Kripke, a surname as sonorous as it is graphic — could have perhaps been included here if, a few years earlier, he had already written and published *Naming and Necessity.*)[14] The same unifying element, Gog (itself a proper noun, with a rather mysterious referent, as the Book of Ezekiel testifies), forms the core of a communal monument to Gogol and Van Gogh, both with their birth and death dates duly provided in brackets. The sequence, in which Newton, Mondrian (affectionately referred to only by his first name), Klee, Proust, and Verdi also appear, ends in a face-to-face confrontation between two men carrying names like banners [fig. 4]. Above and around the man on the right floats a world of pure fiction, composed notably, in order of increasing size, of Gulliver, Leopold Bloom, Emma Bovary, and Rodion Raskolnikov. The onomaphore, if one can call it that, advancing on the left, heralds only a single name, that of a very real person, Kim Novak, gripped by the initial K like a convoluted wrought-iron scroll. The Old World and America, in other words. Or two versions of the modern individual who, as the artist knew only too well, can sometimes be one and the same.

3. **Saul Steinberg**, *Darwin, Marx, and Freud*, 1964
3 drawings, ink on paper; *Marx*, location unknown; *Darwin* and *Freud*, 36.8 × 58.4 cm (14 1/2 × 23 in.) each,
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven
Reproduced in *The New Yorker*, November 7, 1964

The world is an unrepentant gossip that never stops talking to us in a more or less loud voice. It spins a web of gigantic words around us, sneaking into our heads at every moment, making all those freewheeling vocables, which constitute its very substance, resonate. Steinberg invented a thousand visual translations of this slightly troubling state



4. **Saul Steinberg**, *Untitled*, 1964
Ink on paper, location unknown
Reproduced in ***The New Yorker,*** November 7, 1964

of affairs — as one says when not wanting to alarm. Seen in profile or from above, the urban environment and the entire territory spell out predictions and verdicts. The superlatives crisscrossing city façades throw "Terrific! Sublime … Divine! WOW!!" in our faces, but the alphabet of their buildings, whose physiognomy escapes us from street level, can be summed up by a single word: TRASH (*Broadway*, 1986).[15]

Anything and everything, this is the enigma that provides the setting for the drawing *Riddle* (1960): the word's six letters dispersed on and in the ground, and in the air, a *New Yorker* drawing from August 20, 1960, republished in the inexhaustible and very aptly titled book *The Labyrinth*. A 1983 drawing plate p. 71 postulates a possible and at the same time demoralizing form of man-made construction: on the two superposed buildings of Love and Hate stands the imperious tower of Nonsense; two buildings further away articulate Remorse and Revenge. To the left of the same drawing there are three juxtaposed edifices: Artists, then slightly larger, Models, and, larger than the other two together, Philistines. But, of course, the never-ending words of the world stem solely from our own nature as speaking beings. A derisory privilege whose meagerness Steinberg measured daily. Without us, the situation would fall back to the one described in a 1970 drawing fig. p. 34, of which there are several variations: on the foundations of *Nowhere* stands a *Nobody* whose "thoughts" are *Nothing*. Such is the loquacity given to appearances through a kind of mad extension seeking to conceal the obvious from us, as restated by Maurice Blanchot: "In everything we say there is a thickness of language, a sediment of words always supplied in advance, in which ours establish themselves comfortably and almost silently. We hardly ever say anything; we just move like fugitives into a prearranged communication system, speaking a language that is already spoken, not even speaking it, but letting ourselves be spoken in it or simply letting it speak in our stead. This substitution is the primary feature of all language, not only of mythical language."[16]

In 1969, Steinberg gave us an image of a museumgoer prey to a torrent of internal utterances in front of a Cubist painting fig. 5. The man is merely a grey, Pointillist silhouette in the bottom left corner of the drawing, but the flux of his "free" associations — which is to be understood as something that comes to us without our being able to escape it — fills almost the entire gallery space, leaving only two pairs of feet and

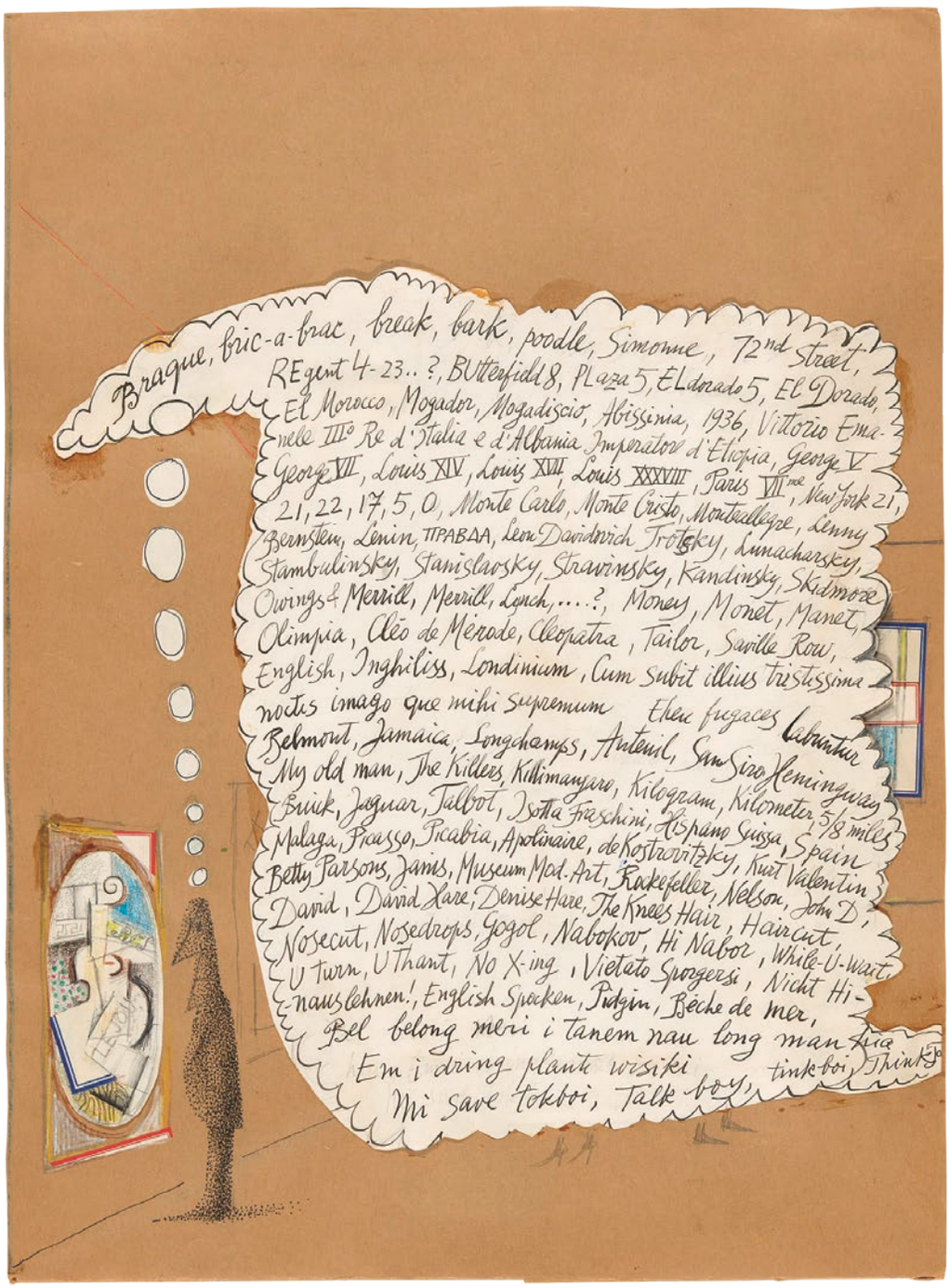
15. The drawing is in the collection of the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, https://www.themorgan.org/drawings/item/404746/.

16. Maurice Blanchot, "La grande tromperie," *La Nouvelle NRF*, no. 54 (June 1957); translated as "The Great Hoax" by Anne Smock, in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), pp. 163 – 164. Blanchot was reflecting on *Mythologies* (1957) by Roland Barthes.

17. Ludwig Binswanger, *Über Ideenflucht* (Zurich, 1933). To this "evasion" or, quite literally "flight of ideas" can also be added the idea of a loss of content (as one would speak of a leaking container), which also suits the phenomenon currently under consideration.

5. **Saul Steinberg**, *Untitled (Braque, bric-a-brac …)*, 1969
Collage of cut-and-pasted papers with ink, colored pencil, graphite with erasing, and gummed labels, on brown wove paper, 51 × 37.4 cm (20 1/8 × 14 3/4 in.)
The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of The Saul Steinberg Foundation

part of a Mondrian visible. Like the mask Steinberg made and wore for his portrait by Irving Penn in 1966[fig.1], the artwork here is a surface onto which, following the moment of identification ("Braque"), a host of derivations immediately project themselves (in the artist's handwriting): "bric-a-brac, break, bark, poodle, Simonne, 72nd Street ..." Numbers, proper nouns, and snatches of various languages ensue in a high-speed pursuit evoking the obsessive flight of ideas, as studied three decades earlier by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger.[17] For the cover of the October 18, 1969, issue of *The New Yorker*, Steinberg proposes another version of this theme. Our museumgoer is now faded even more: the front of his body seems on the verge of disappearing completely. The two other figures from before, indicated solely by the bottoms of their legs, have vanished, while a woman with her back to us now stands in front of the Mondrian, which has increased slightly in size. The most notable changes, however, are in the long chain of thoughts, contained in an equally cumbersome thought bubble. There is the same catalyst as before ("Braque"), but the modulations diverge with the second word: "baroque, barrack, bark, poodle, Suzanne R., 68th St.?" Toward the



center of this constellation, the letter K is subjected to a series of graphic variations followed by a colored passage of flags, geometric shapes, and a play on the names of various colors, as well as a novel sequence that follows this chromatic thread before branching off toward animality: "Greenberg, Monteverdi, Verdi, Rossini, Leoncavallo, Catfish, Ratfink, Schweinehunde, Dragonfly …" It is the primordial bric-à-brac jumble from which all subjects are spawned and develop at sixes and sevens, as Ray Johnson showed in 1972 in the small two-dimensional totem he created as a tribute to Steinberg[fig.6].

"Few will suspect how sad one had to be to undertake the resuscitation of Carthage," wrote Flaubert, one of Steinberg's favorite authors, about his historical novel *Salammbô*.[18] The Steinberg we see and hear in the Italian and American television documentaries made about him exudes a certain sadness, a disenchantment mixed with a pedagogic form of exactness, and undoubtedly a good share of this was needed to undertake the portrait of America — ultimately of humanity — that he bequeathed to us. But this very productive, non-melancholic sadness was bound up with an intractable elation (first and foremost in the act of *doing*), both cancelling themselves out to some extent to produce a highly ambivalent kind of humor provoking a smile or laugh but at the same time a sigh or some pang of sorrow. Reflecting on what lightheartedness can signify in art, Adorno noted in the late 1960s that "Precisely by virtue of its edifying lack of cogency, art is to be incorporated into and subordinated to bourgeois life as its antagonistic complement." And, in the role of contemporary artists, he discerned a greater contradiction, suspending the dichotomy of joy and despair: "Even in Beckett's plays, the curtain rises the way it rises on the room with Christmas presents. […] What is lighthearted in art is, if you like, the opposite of what one might easily assume it to be: not its content but its demeanor, the abstract fact that it is art at all, that it opens out over the reality to whose violence it bears witness at the same time."[19] The drawing on the cover of *The New Yorker* on March 27, 1971,[fig.7] seems to me to exemplify this condition, and I see it as Steinberg's *modern warning*, to borrow the title of the novella by Henry James.[20] Unperturbed, the painter-dog smeared with the colors of his labor is urging us to beware of artists (of their apparent lightheartedness or sadness, and the network of meanings in which they willingly or unwillingly end up). This is the very substance of his oeuvre, which is also directed at himself. *Mondo cane*.

Pierre Schneider had an independent mind and knew how to recognize a good conversation partner when he found one. In the fall of 1973, he had a few more questions for Steinberg, then in Paris for another exhibition at the Galerie Maeght. Steinberg reaffirmed his literary vocation straight out: "In short, the things that I exhibit are my

6. **Ray Johnson**, *Saul Steinberg*, 1972
Assemblage of painted paper, printed paper, colored paper, and simulated animal skin, with ink and gouache on cardboard on printed paperboard, 76.2 × 34.3 cm (30 × 13 1/2 in.)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift

18. Gustave Flaubert, letter to Ernest Feydeau, November 29, 1859, quoted in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1857 – 1880*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 24.

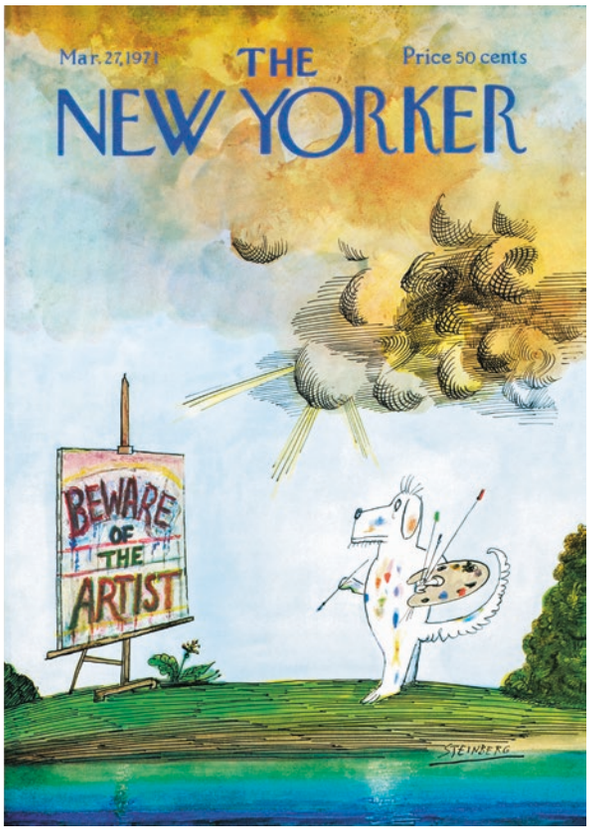
19. Theodor Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" [1967], printed in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, vol. 2 (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 247, 248. The original German title of this article is "Ist die Kunst heiter?". A lengthy debate has ensued on art and *Heiterkeit* (gaiety tinged with serenity): see the transcript of the lecture by Harald Weinrich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der Heiterkeit* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990).

20. Henry James, *The Modern Warning* (1888).

21. Saul Steinberg, in Pierre Schneider, "Les vertiges de Steinberg," *L'Express*, October 22, 1973, reprinted in the author's collected articles *Le Droit à la beauté. Chroniques de "L'Express" (1960 – 1992)* (Paris: Hazan, 2017), p. 103; translated.

22. Steinberg, in Schneider, "Les vertiges de Steinberg," p. 105; translated.

biography. [...] When I was a child, my secret was that when I grew up I would be a novelist. Drawing came later, by chance. But I've always kept the novelist's spirit."[21] Faithful to his desire for precision, Steinberg reminds us, "In my drawings, I talk, I explain, I take a stand." But a significantly more disconcerting development follows: "To do something that is called a work of art is to direct to people's attention to something that they can understand without explanation. When I explain, I appear to be denying my idea of art, but my explanation is a fake. My work and the explanation I give it are both works of art. I explain in such a way that I make myself understood only to people who do not need explanations to understand. People who need explanations will never understand, neither my work nor the explanations."[22] Understand what you can, but no one can dare pretend that we were not warned.



7. **Saul Steinberg**, cover of *The New Yorker*, March 27, 1971

Steinbergian Melancholy

Valérie Loth

Little and Big History(s)

Saul Steinberg was born in Romania in 1914. His father, Moritz, a bookbinder by trade, had a small decorative cardboard box business with "the smell of an artist's studio."[1] Bucharest was then a city where "the avant-garde cohabited with primitivism" and where, in the heart of the Balkans, influences intermingled. Steinberg never ceased to regard Romania as a "Dadaist" place. After secondary school, he attended lectures in philosophy and literature, then chose to pursue studies in architecture. Romanian society was then increasingly prey to anti-Semitism, however, and when he was refused admission to the architecture school in Bucharest, he decided to leave for Italy to study at the prestigious Politecnico in Milan. Steinberg spent five very happy years there from 1933 to 1938, making lasting friendships and embarking on a career as a cartoonist for the humor newspapers *Bertoldo* and *Settebello,* in the latter as a member of the editorial board. He published nearly two hundred fifty drawings[2] and developed his own style. In September 1938, as racial laws tightened, his situation became more precarious. His passport expired in December 1940, and he was forced to give himself up to the police in April 1941. From the camp in the Abruzzo region where he was interned, he sought to leave Italy. In the steps he took to find a country that would admit him, he benefited from the aid of an American cousin and Cesar Civita, former general manager of the Mondadori publishing house, exiled in New York since 1939. Civita became his agent and circulated his drawings widely in the American press (*Harper's Bazaar*, *LIFE*, *Mademoiselle*). Steinberg finally obtained a visa for the Dominican Republic, where he spent a year, and then in July 1942, he reached New York City from Miami by bus. His naturalization as an American citizen was accelerated when he received a commission in the US Naval Reserve.[3] Due to the influence of Harold Ross, editor-in-chief of *The New Yorker*, he was assigned to naval intelligence and then to the Office of Strategic Services, for which he took part in pro-American propaganda missions in China, Algeria, and Italy.

When he returned to New York in October 1944, he could at last devote himself entirely to his career. During the same period, he married Hedda Sterne,[4] a Romanian artist with close ties to the New York avant-garde fig. 2, who introduced him to the gallery owner Peggy Guggenheim and artists such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Barnett Newman. In 1946, he was one of the artists shown in the *Fourteen Americans* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.[5]

1. **Saul Steinberg**, *Giant Postcard*, 1967
Watercolor on paper, 71 × 56 cm (28 × 22 in.)
Galerie Claude Bernard, Paris

2. **George Platt Lynes**, *Hedda Sterne and Saul Steinberg*, c. 1944 – 1945
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 14 cm (4 3/4 x 5 1/2 in.)
Collection of Daniela Roman

Steinberg remembered when, as a child, his "American uncle" came to stay in pre-war Bucharest and how he was fascinated by his cousins' odor of "chewing gum and shampoo." He also remembered his shame in feeling born into a "primitive peoples."[6] Later, as an American himself, he produced his vision of the fantastic "decorum" of the postwar United States in acutely observed drawings. In New York, he was surprised by the influence of what he called "decorative" Cubism in the forms of buildings, textile designs, and even taxis.[7] Several of his drawings are infused by this Art Deco architectural style figs. 5 and 6. In his conversations with his Milanese friend Aldo Buzzi, he spoke about his fascination for steel and diners: "The aluminum is stamped in shapes often derived from Cubism, and symbolizing the speed of the train and the poetic or worldly or modern qualities of the setting. For a restaurant it's perfect: it's hygienic and easy to keep clean; it reflects without blinding you the neon lights decorating it; and gives prominence to the jukebox, which

1. Saul Steinberg, in Saul Steinberg with Aldo Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, trans. John Shepley (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 6.
2. In October 1935, Romania banned sending currency to Italy following Mussolini's declaration of war on Abyssinia. Until then, Moritz and Roza Steinberg had regularly sent their son money. The quantity of drawings Steinberg produced for these publications was undoubtedly also due to his financial difficulties.
3. See the article by Mario Tedeschini Lalli, "Descent from Paradise: Saul Steinberg's Italian Years (1933 – 1941)," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History, Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, no. 2 (October 2011), https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/descent-from-paradise-saul-steinbergs-italian-years-1933 – 1941.
4. Hedda Sterne (1910 – 2011). On December 27, 1944, she wrote to Victor Brauner, "Victor, my friend, what a joy! [...] I've been working constantly. I've shown several times in group exhibitions (once in 1942 with the surrealists) and once on my own. I'm married now to Saul Steinberg. He draws cartoons. He comes from our city, which he left a long time ago. He's a navy lieutenant at the moment" (Centre Pompidou, Kandinsky Library, Victor Brauner Archives); translated.
5. *Fourteen Americans*, September 10 – December 8, 1946.
6. Saul Steinberg, quoted in Deirdre Bair, *Saul Steinberg: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2012), ch. 4.
7. Steinberg, *Reflections and Shadows*, p. 56.

is built according to the laws of the Catholic or Chinese or Hindu altar, a magical object to be worshiped"[8] plate pp. 126 – 127. Steinberg was surprised by a country where everything is rationalized: a restaurant is not chosen for its cuisine but for the use to be made of it (a quick meal, dining out with the family, picking up a girl, etc.).

He signed annual contracts with *The New Yorker* (a collaboration which endured for over half a century) and where, as an artist, he obtained the status of "reporter at large." He produced eighty-five covers for this magazine, which he considered "the only publication to be more intelligent than its time."[9] He transformed the magazine's cartoon genre, doing away with gag lines to make the drawing alone a metaphor of an idea. Steinberg went to the four corners of the United States to produce numerous drawings of the "American dream," published by *LIFE* and *The New Yorker*, traveling by bus to discover the "Hillbillies" in Kentucky, to the depths of Virginia to watch baseball matches in wooden stadiums (a "philosophical, psychological sport"), and to the "concentration camps for [well-to-do] old people" in Florida. Living on the Upper East Side, he moved in New York's elite artistic and intellectual circles, a mixture of Hedda Sterne's friends and artists and novelists contributing to *The New Yorker,* such as Joseph Mitchell, whose short stories he admired. In 1967, he was made artist-in-residence at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. There he frequented "polite society," a world of "courtiers," exemplary households and women educated to be perfect wives, where he learned to use an array of cutlery and "not to drink the water in the finger bowl," noting, "It was against this world that the hippie revolution of nudity, and especially of violence, took place."[10] This societal revolution is manifest in his drawings.

Sociological and political dimensions are indeed omnipresent in Steinberg's work. From his first drawings, in which he established a language of signs (the Native American fig. p. 38, the figure of George Washington plate p. 85, the Masonic pyramid on the dollar bill plate p. 72) and forms (the architectural relief creating light effects on the Chrysler

3. Drawing by **Lica Roman**, Strada Palas, Bucharest, 1960s
Collection of Daniela Roman

Building fig. 6, crisscrossing avenues and streets plates pp. 78 – 79), Steinberg's point of view evolved toward a kind of detachment from a consumer society based on social conventions.

The French cartoonist Cabu,[11] a great admirer of Steinberg,[12] noted that his compositions changed over the years. Several of his early drawings depict dense crowds and urban scenes, but in the series of postcards he began in the late 1960s, the dimensions changed. Steinberg's spaces become wider, flatter, devoid of human presence fig. 1 or visited only by solitary figures plate pp. 88 – 89. The *Postcard-Style Landscapes* series is composed of landscapes that are often superposed or each contained in autonomous, unlinked compartments, like lengths of film from a movie in which

8. Steinberg, p. 67.
9. Saul Steinberg, letter to Aldo Buzzi, January 26, 1946, published in part in *Lettere a Aldo Buzzi, 1945 – 1999*, ed. Aldo Buzzi (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 2002); the unpublished English translation is from The Saul Steinberg Foundation. My thanks to Daniela Roman for giving me access to this correspondence.
10. Steinberg, *Reflections and Shadows*, pp. 46 – 49.
11. Daniela Roman and Thierry Fontaine, *Saul Steinberg's Line* (Paris: Productions AAPA, 2008), documentary film, 26 min.
12. Cabu, like an entire generation of French editorial cartoonists (Sempé, André François, Jean-Michel Folon, etc.), was greatly influenced by Steinberg's work, which he discovered in Steinberg's books (*All in Line*, 1945; *The Art of Living*, 1949; *The Passport*, 1954).
13. John Updike, "On Saul Steinberg," posthumous tribute published in *The New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1999.
14. Harold Rosenberg, in *Saul Steinberg*, exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 10.
15. Harold Rosenberg, in Harold C. Schonberg, "Artist Behind the Steinbergian Mask," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 13, 1966, p. 50.
16. Steinberg, *Reflections and Shadows*, p. 84.
17. Most notably, see Enid Starkie, *Rimbaud: A Biography* (New York: New Directions, 1961), which discusses in detail the poet's time in Abyssinia (and which Steinberg read shortly after its publication). Steinberg seems to have been interested in Rimbaud's multiple lives: his poetry and his drawings ("excellent at drawing," letter to Aldo Buzzi, September 10, 1997), but also his interest in the Paris Commune, his career as a merchant in Aden, etc.
18. Steinberg met Aldo Buzzi (1910 – 2009) while he was studying architecture in Milan. Buzzi was a writer, screen writer, and film director, and, notably, collaborator with Alberto Lattuada.
19. Steinberg, *Reflections and Shadows*, p. 82.

people wander, trapped within the limits imposed by the lines. Using flat washes of watercolor or gouache to create more liquid and blurred effects, these series of landscapes depict a dematerialized world in which human beings are isolated and imprisoned plate pp. 98 – 99.

Steinberg's oeuvre succeeded in grasping the contradictions during the "glorious" postwar economic boom between consumerism and the quest for existentialist meaning. It subsequently becomes a reflection of a postmodern vision in which the individual is fragmented and the truth multi-faceted. From the 1980s onward Steinberg's art also represents an observation of a certain America, that of Ronald Reagan, fractured, more vulgar and garish. The writer John Updike, a friend of Steinberg, wrote, "Something subversive remained in his art, undermining the intuitive connection between what we see and what we know, calling into question, like a good metaphysician, the bases of our experience."[13]

The Question of the Self-Portrait: A False Melancholy

The critic Harold Rosenberg described Steinberg's art as autobiographical, yet posed the question, "But whose autobiography?"[14] That of the modern man seen through the Steinbergian prism? That of the foreigner in permanent exile? In his imagery, History (*historic truth*), just like those things which could seem to be autobiographical, always appear to be truncated: "There's that Steinberg drawing of a man with a rabbit in his head, and the rabbit is looking at the world. That's a self-portrait. All of Steinberg's drawings are masquerades of himself."[15] But is a mask a self-portrait? The mask protects against and avoids all contact with reality, enabling detachment, keenness, irony: "To clothe reality so that it will be 'forgiven.'"[16] His series of masks plates pp. 112 – 117 is also one of pretenses, of false semblances, the roles we adopt to satisfy a social posture very different from what is hiding behind the smiling or grimacing paper bag. But these masks also cast doubt: Who is real? The grimacing mask or the face hiding behind it? Steinberg, an admirer of Rimbaud, is saying, "I is another."[17]

Steinberg's use of rubber stamps and "serious"-looking, although fake, writing lend his document works their air of legitimacy, as does his use of thumbprints in his drawings (an organic signature but also the oval form of the human face). All these practices are intricate amalgams of truth and fiction, reality and illusions plates pp. 90 – 91.

Reflections and Shadows, the title of Steinberg's memoirs compiled by Aldo Buzzi from a series of conversations,[18] symbolizes well his view of his artistic practice: what matters is showing the shadows that one casts oneself or those of the objects surrounding us; reflections, on the other hand, are mirrors providing a vision that is truncated because it inverts reality: "The reflection in itself is a second-degree reality, because it is not real but only produced by the real object. What interest me here are the differences between first-, second-, third-, and fourth-degree realities."[19] The very essence (origin) of the objects/bodies/sensations that create these reflections and shadows remains silent, hidden.

Steinberg's drawings showing a man drawing a man drawing a man, a principle he reused in the *Table* series, in which he invented false wooden objects, which were then reproduced as drawings in false sketchbooks, enabled him to create an endless game of mirrors.

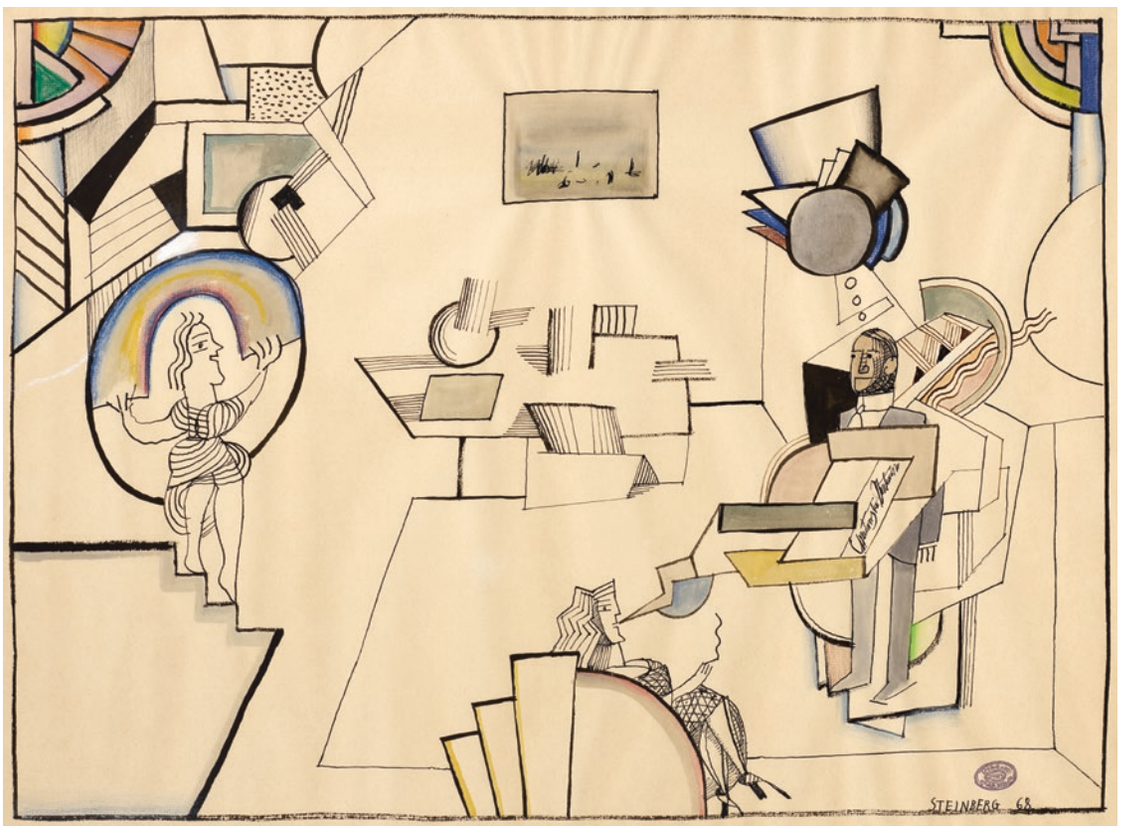
Steinberg himself admitted the autobiographical aspect of his work: the tables are "a representation of an autobiography. They appear to be a museum. Of course, I always have satire in mind, a caricature of a museum, but at the same time, I'm quite serious about the fact that it's a Steinberg museum."[20] At first sight, these tables and wooden objects created from the early 1970s fig. 8; plates pp. 97, 101 do indeed resemble self-portraits in which he assembled fleeting memories and sensations on a confined surface (chocolate boxes, envelopes and flowers, all of wood) in an attempt to

4. **Evelyn Hofer**, *Steinberg with His Six-Year-Old Self*, 1978

establish a museum of Steinbergian sensations. Nonetheless, as in the *Postcard-Style Landscapes* series, the aim of these poetic "sensations," exuding a certain melancholy, is not to be *reproductions* of moments but *counterfeits*, recalling events experienced by Steinberg but always reworked, revisited. Rosenberg characterizes the tables as anti-*Boîte-en-valise*: "The feigned nostalgia of Steinberg's tables is less melancholic than the real melancholy of Duchamp's *Valises*, therefore less sentimental and more modern."[21]

But the figures in Steinberg's drawings are not merely humans buffeted by the whims of a changing society. They are not lacking in ingenuity. In the drawing *Galerie Maeght* plate pp. 124 – 125, the viewers become what they see but can also be perceived as having more powerful imaginations than what they are looking at.

Rather than being autobiographical, Steinberg's oeuvre resembles a form of autofiction: "I do not draw the visible resemblance but the probable resemblance."[22] Vladimir Nabokov, another exile and a great admirer of Steinberg's work, considered calling his own autobiography *Speak, Mnemosyne!*[23] Steinberg also seems to be exercising this command when he uses his pencil, demanding that his memory delivers what remembrances it wants, those memories it accepts to give back to him.



5. **Saul Steinberg**, *Untitled*, 1968
Colored ink on paper, 51 × 66 cm (20 1/8 × 26 in.)
Private collection

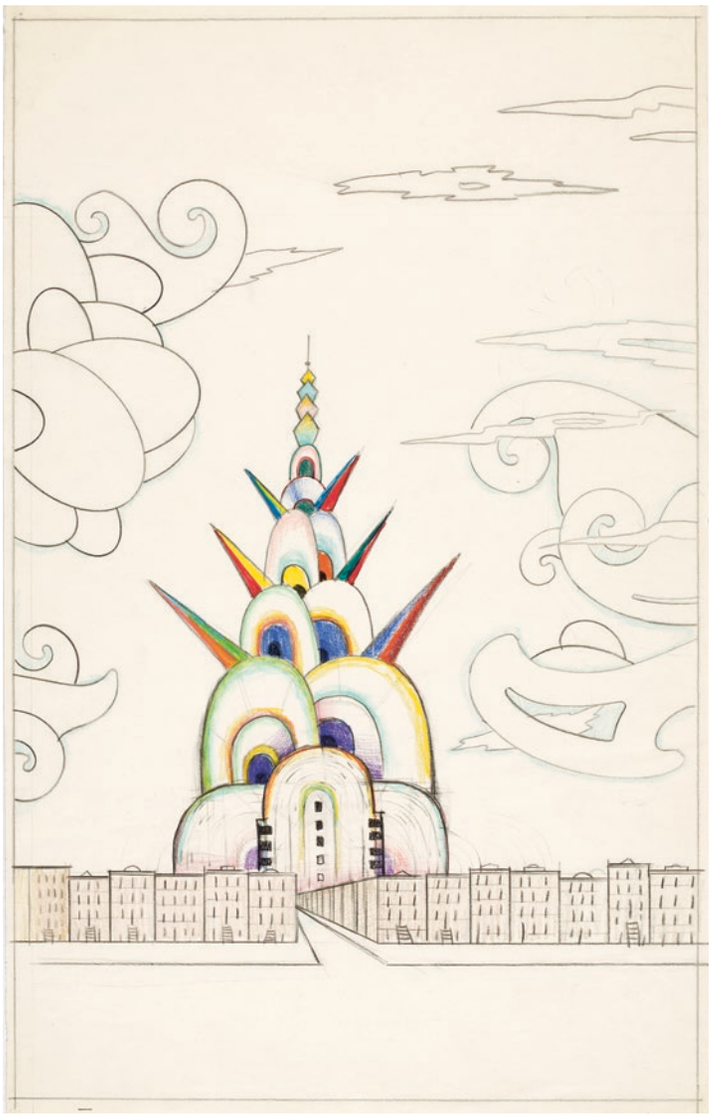
20. *Du côté de chez les Maeght*, reportage by Pierre Dumayet, ORTF, program broadcast on July 10, 1973; translated.
21. Rosenberg, in *Saul Steinberg*, p. 31.
22. Saul Steinberg, conversation with Jean Frémon, in *Steinberg*, Repères: Cahiers d'art contemporain (Paris: Galerie Maeght-Lelong, 1986), p. 6; translated.
23. Nabokov's autobiographical memoir was finally published as *Conclusive Evidence* in the United States (1951), *Speak, Memory* in the United Kingdom (1951), and in French translation as *Autres rivages* (1961; "other shores").
24. "When I was working on those gigantic panels for the World's Fair (where I invented Pop Art) amid the coldness and discouragement of the presence of assistants and workmen, technical problems, glue that didn't glue, and all the other things that leave a very bad memory of my public works." Steinberg, letter to Aldo Buzzi concerning the show in Brussels in 1958, February 20, 1986.
25. Saul Steinberg, conversation with Jean Frémon, in *Steinberg*, pp. 17 – 18; translated.
26. Kurt Vonnegut, "Requiem for a Dreamer," *In These Times*, October 15, 2004, https://inthesetimes.com/article/requiem-for-a-dreamer/. Vonnegut also used a system of "masks" to express himself, notably here the fictional character Kilgore Trout who conducted the imaginary interview.

Steinberg's delicate and subtle oeuvre offers itself to our viewing, but what underlies it always seems to evade, elude categorizations. Steinberg regarded himself as a precursor of Pop Art,[24] but a Pop Art to which he would have added a purely metaphysical dimension. Covering his tracks, keeping his distance, he advances masked. The perception of Steinberg's oeuvre, regarded more as the work of a cartoonist than that of an artist, has probably suffered due to his colossal output of drawings and his diverse, often commercial activities (designing objects and textiles, advertising work).

Nonetheless, the fantasy and imagination inherent in Steinberg's works are also those of a tireless, cosmopolitan, multilingual traveler. He told Jean Frémon in 1986, "I read Anatole France in Italian, Hemingway in French (quite funny), *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] in English, and, in Bucharest in 1927 [. . . Molière's] *Les Précieuses ridicules* [*The Affected Young Ladies*] in Yiddish."[25] All his life, Steinberg traveled constantly, as shown by *Autogeography* plate p. 137, a map in which he invents the world according to the places he has visited.

Inquisitive about everything and forever on the move, as revealed in his more than forty-year-long correspondence with Buzzi, Steinberg was a gourmet who loved cooking, fine wine, and dinners with his neighbors in the Hamptons. He learned to play the violin and speak Yiddish and was also a voracious reader, especially of Russian authors — Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov — their heroes dumbfounded by the absurdities of their human condition, but also Flaubert and Colette, whose descriptions of village market scenes he admired. Steinberg also frequented and maintained long-standing friendships with the painters, writers, and architects of his time: Richard Lindner, Charles and Ray Eames, Costantino Nivola, William Gaddis, Alexander "Sandy" Calder, Willem de Kooning, Italo Calvino, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Inge Morath, and Arthur Miller, to name but a few of those close to him. In a fictive interview, the novelist Kurt Vonnegut stated that the most intelligent person he had ever met was Saul Steinberg and recounted one of their conversations. To the question, "Saul, are you *gifted*?" Steinberg growled, 'No. But what we respond to in any work of art is the artist's struggle against his or her limitations.'"[26]

Steinberg's final years were difficult, marred by deep depression, partly due to successive losses of friends and family. Acclaimed but always alone, a renowned commentator on the "American way of life" but always a foreigner, a polyglot who lost the subtleties of his mother tongue, Steinberg may also have been frustrated by having always been perceived as an observer, an *outsider*. The *mise en abyme* had become smoke and mirrors. In the last weeks of his life, Steinberg worked on a drawing of his district in Bucharest, based on a very old map found in the New York Public Library fig. 7. Lica Roman, his sister, had also done a drawing of their childhood house in a courtyard at Strada



6. **Saul Steinberg**, *Untitled*, c. 1974
Graphite and wax crayon on paper, 58.5 × 36.9 cm (23 × 14 1/2 in.)
Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris. Gift of The Saul Steinberg Foundation to the Centre Pompidou Foundation. Long-term loan from the Centre Pompidou Foundation, 2017

7. **Evelyn Hofer**, *Bucharest street map next to Steinberg's drawings of his Bucharest neighborhood, found on his desk at the time of his death*, photo taken in July 1999

Palas, 4[fig.3]. On May 11, 1998, a year before he died, he wrote the following observation to Aldo Buzzi: "I don't see people because I have to put on a show of normality, man of wit, eloquent. That's not what I am anymore, an illusion from the past."[27] Forever the illusion. But where is the truth? In the mask worn or the face it conceals? Ultimate illusion or true pretense?

27. Steinberg, letter to Aldo Buzzi, May 11, 1998, in *Lettere a Aldo Buzzi*.

8. **Saul Steinberg**, *Sketchbook Table*, 1974
Wood, paper, pencil, watercolor, ink, 73 × 59 × 5 cm (28 3/4 × 23 1/4 × 2 in.)


STEINBERG
STEINBERG
1974