

## On Morton Feldman (1967)

by Philip Guston

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I was on a panel once, sort of a popular panel, and someone asked the question about artists in society and so on, talking about support. I mean, real support, moral support. Would Van Gogh have painted if he'd been all alone, if he had nobody to support him? And I answered that he couldn't have done. He had to have Theo, his brother. It occurred to me that it would be impossible, I mean, you'd have to be insane, like the man who says he's Napoleon. So I had Morty. I guess there are some other people, but I don't know about a lot of other people. But, in this sense, I need Feldman to tell me I'm not insane. He has a way of seeing which always more than fascinates me. I mean, it really involves me, how he sees. So that when I finish a painting, I call immediately. Or if I break down during a painting, I call him to come over. Not to hold my hand but to hear what he says.

I remember one time when I was beside myself – I'd destroyed a painting I don't know how many times. He lived at that time near me, a block away. And I was practically in tears and I called him. He said, "I'll be right over." And he came over and he looked at the painting. He didn't say anything. It was a painting I had destroyed a lot of. I'd been going on it for weeks, and in desperation I'd done some things, very spontaneous things, almost automatic, like you do when you destroy a painting. And so I told him all my troubles, and we went out and ate and saw a movie on Forty-second Street. And then he went home, and I went back to the studio and painted all night and did it. I called him the next day, at his factory where he was then working, and said: "You better come over. I did it. I really did it this time." So he said, "I'll be right over." He looked at it and he was quiet for a long time. He usually is. And he said, "You know, it's a marvelous painting. It's terrific." He says, "Last night when I saw this destroyed thing I had a feeling, as if I saw you on the street from a distance and you were with a woman that I never knew you to be with. But as I got closer and closer it turned out to be your wife, Musa."

Well, that kind of criticism, it may be elliptical, but it's very important to me. Who wants someone to tell you they like the red or they like the blue or something like that? Or it's better than the one you did before, or worse. And this winter Feldman was in Texas and I was in Florida, and again I'm going through some kind of changes and so on. I was doing a lot of drawings and I was really distressed. I was down to a line, a couple of lines. And he called from Texas and said, "I'd like to come and visit you." And I said, "Oh, I'm going crazy, I'm down to one line." He said, "Hold that line. I'll be right there." He was in Houston and he was on his way home, but he came to see me down there on the Gulf of Mexico. I picked him up at the airport, and all these drawings were on the walls and he didn't say anything. After dinner we went walking along the seashore in the Florida moonlight. And I said, "What do you think of these new things?" And he said, "You know, the last trick of Houdini was that he locked himself up in a trunk, they threw away the key and then threw the trunk off the Brooklyn Bridge, and he got out." And then there was a long pause. We walked another five minutes and he said, "But you haven't thrown away the key."

So you can tell what I feel about Feldman. He's a remarkable man. Cage is different. I don't know why I should bring that in, except that in the early fifties we were kind of a trio for a while. I met Feldman through Cage. I had known Cage some years earlier, in the late forties or so. John used to come to the studio and talk. Anyway, in the early fifties, John was enthusiastic about my painting. So, I think it's important, if not crucial, to have one person. If you have one, you can have a million, it doesn't matter. But you need that one. One you can talk to. He gets on the stage in your theater, your drama. And one time I remember, it was very hard with Morty. About the mid-fifties or later fifties, he didn't care so much for what I was doing. I was working with very heavy forms. And he implied that he didn't recognize me. He said, "It's such a beautiful land you created, so how can you leave it?" He was still in that land and I was going away. I was working with very heavy solid forms and, well, I was doing what I had to do. But I remember feeling very distressed that he didn't seem to be as enthusiastic as previously.

Now Musa, my wife, who is very close to my work, is a kind of whipping post for me. I wake her up in the morning and say: "Look at this, look at that." And she'll say, "Well, it's beautiful." And I say, "What do you mean, it's beautiful? Why don't you say it's lousy?" But I have to see a look. She says nothing, but I have to see a look in her eye. And Mercedes Matter, also, was in my drama on the stage. Those three people. And she didn't care so much for the new development of things.

But it's a good source of energy to have these two or three people who are with you suddenly not reacting. And the reason it's a source of energy is because I remember feeling that you develop an "I'll-show-them" attitude, which does give you a lot of energy. Because you can fall asleep with the other too. I remember thinking: "These few people who are the closest to me and think they know me well, they don't know me at all." And that became the most important thing, that the people closest to you don't really know you. Because if you're doing something that you're absolutely compelled to do, and they've been with you up to that point... I mean, my life hung on a thread over some precipice. Well, they don't know who I am. The hell with them.

I think that relates very much to teaching and everything else. You're all painters and I, or another teacher, or your friend, tell you something. You want confirmation in what you do, but what if you don't get it? Well, that stage is a very important stage. And then when they start liking what you do, you think there's something wrong with it! I'm going to react again. I think you need a protagonist. Absolutely. I'm sure this protagonist is a subjective creation, but that's the way it has to be.